



Grading GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2021

Setting out Ofqual's decision on grading in 2021 and the rationale for that decision

Executive summary

Grades in summer 2020 were more generous than previous years, and to an unprecedented extent. At A level, the proportion of candidates awarded A* or A went up 12.9pp, from 25.2% in 2019 to 38.1% in 2020. At GCSE, the proportion awarded grade 4 and above went up 8.8pp, from 67.1% to 75.9%. Individual subjects saw differential increases, with those increases accidental rather than by design, given that they were not based on performance in exams. Replicating the 2020 grade distribution, subject by subject, in 2021 would hardwire those differences, advantaging some students over others depending on their choice of subjects.

In 2021 we will carry forward the overall level of generosity from 2020, recognising disruption and lost learning at an overall, national level. The likely result is that students will not need to demonstrate the same level of knowledge as in previous years to get a particular grade. In general, students in 2021 will have as much chance of getting a grade A or a grade 4 as they did in 2020.

We will nevertheless smooth the differential generosity between subjects, so as not to bake in these accidental differences. This means every subject will receive the same level of generosity. Overall, we expect results in 2021 to look very similar to the 2020 grade profile.

This is generosity at a level never before contemplated, given the known inflation of summer 2020. It will, though, need to be balanced by careful consideration of the acceptability of grade boundary positions in 2021, to avoid damaging public confidence in the credibility of grades.

We monitor awarding closely in any year. For 2021, we will put in place even closer monitoring of awarding. During awarding and before results are issued, we will be able to identify subjects where results might not be in line with expectations and take action to address this.

Background

Ofqual has statutory objectives to secure that standards are maintained and that regulated qualifications give a reliable indication of knowledge, skills and understanding, and to promote public confidence in regulated qualifications.

The purpose of GCSEs, AS and A levels is to give a general indication of what students know and can do. Strengths in one area of content can balance out weaknesses in other areas, with the balance differing between students, but overall, the grades awarded give users of qualifications a sense of what a student with a particular grade is capable of. This is particularly important in some subjects (languages, maths and sciences) where students with the very top grades are assumed to have acquired specific knowledge and/or skills.

GCSE, AS and A level results in 2020 were universally higher than in 2019, with differential increases between grades and between subjects. At A level the percentage of grades that were A* and A increased from 25.2% in 2019 to 38.1% in 2020, an increase of 12.9pp. Many high-volume subjects had similar-sized increases, but some subjects increased by much more - the percentage of grades that were A or A* increased by 16.9pp in further maths, 18.5pp in computing and 22.3pp in music. Such differences are hard to explain in terms of student attainment.

At GCSE, there were similar differences between subjects. Of note, the percentage of year 11 students awarded a grade 4 or above increased by 9.7pp in GCSE English language but 5.6pp in maths. These differences are unlikely to reflect changes in attainment. Instead, the reliable [evidence we have from the annual National Reference Test](#) shows that year 11 students had improved very slightly in maths but not in English.

Government policy is that exams will go ahead in England in 2021. However, the Scottish Government has decided that National 5 qualifications (equivalent to GCSE) will be assessed by a combination of portfolio and teacher assessment. Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications (equivalent to AS and A level) are still to be assessed by examination. In Wales, GCSE, AS and A levels will be assessed in new ways rather than predominantly by exam. We can expect that these changes will mean more generous outcomes in Wales and Scotland than would be expected with exams. Northern Ireland maintains its commitment to exams.

Analysis

The impact of the pandemic is very likely to mean that students taking exams in 2021 will, at an overall national level, demonstrate a lower level of knowledge, skills and understanding than students in previous years, through no fault of their own.

Where this has occurred in other circumstances, most recently in the transition to reformed GCSEs and A levels, we have compensated students for their likely lower performance. We intend to take a similar approach in the context of the current pandemic.

Our approach to standard-setting in 2021 will compensate for lost learning at a national level. It will not, however, address individual, differential lost learning - that is a separate issue under consideration, and where alternative steps are required (not covered in this paper).

In evaluating the options presented below, we have been particularly mindful of the implications of each for our relevant statutory objectives - maintaining standards and promoting public confidence. In that context, we considered the following options for grading in 2021.

1. Carrying forward the grade distribution from 2019.

This would allow some generosity and would compensate for lower levels of student performance overall. On average, it would mean that a student who would have achieved a particular grade in 2019 would be likely to achieve that grade in 2021 (despite a lower exam performance).

2. Carrying forward the grade distribution from 2020.

This would allow notably more generosity, to compensate at a cohort level for the disruption to teaching and learning that students have experienced. On average, it would mean that a student who would have achieved a particular grade in 2019 would likely achieve a slightly higher grade in 2021, by about two-thirds of a grade (despite a lower exam performance).

3. Aim for a position which is somewhere between 2019 and 2020.

This would allow for slightly more generous outcomes than aiming for 2019 but would reduce some of the larger increases seen in 2020.

4. Carry forward a 'smoothed' 2020 grade distribution.

This would mean that the generosity in 2020 would be spread evenly across subjects.

Under Option 1 - carrying forward the grade distribution from 2019 - we would maintain grade standards using statistical predictions, as in any other year, and so it would be the easiest approach to operationalise. However, having heard a wide range of stakeholder views, and in the context of developments in Scotland and Wales, we discount it. It would be more generous than 2019, because it would compensate at a national level for lower performance, but it makes no allowance for the greater disruption experienced by the 2021 cohort relative to the 2020 cohort, and potentially puts students in England at a disadvantage compared to others in the UK. In reality, only a small proportion of English students compete for higher or

further education places in Wales and Scotland, but a strong perception of unfairness would likely prevail. In our view, this approach would not command public confidence, or the confidence of Government or Parliament.

We find option 2 - carrying forward the 2020 grade distribution - problematic because it bakes in the 2020 differential increases between subjects which were not intended. This would be unfair, and very few if any stakeholders make a case for it. It would arguably not meet our objective to maintain standards, since there was no single standard set in 2020.

Option 3 was to aim for a position mid-way between 2019 and 2020. This is technically more difficult but could be done. However, the issue is this: where exactly on the spectrum would we aim for? It would inevitably be an arbitrary point that would be difficult to justify, and with the pandemic still washing through the system, there is no right answer. It is likely that it would not command public confidence.

There is a good deal of support among stakeholders, however, for option 4 - an approach that would, overall, be as generous as option 2, but also smoothed out across subjects so that generosity (when compared to 2019) would be distributed evenly and fairly between subjects. This is the approach we favour. Given that we saw these differences between subjects in both GCSE and A level (as well as in AS), we propose to use the same approach for GCSE, AS and A level.

In adopting this approach, we recognise that we are having particular regard to Ofqual's public confidence objective, over our standards objective. In our view, that is appropriate in this exceptional year.

To be clear, this will also mean that some subjects - those that saw much larger increases in 2020 - will see results in 2021 that are lower than in 2020 but still notably higher than in 2019. Conversely, those that saw lower increases will see higher results in 2021, to bring subjects back into balance.

We have considered a variant on option 4 which would aim for a smoothed 2020 distribution, where subjects with an increase greater than the overall increase in 2020 would receive the overall (average) increase) but where no individual subject saw a further increase on the 2020 results. This would, in effect, introduce a cap, for some subjects, at the level of the increase seen in 2020.

In our view, such a cap would be seen as arbitrary and unfair and would not be defensible. There is no reason to believe that the outcomes in 2020 for subjects with increases below the level seen overall, are any more correct than those where the increases were much larger. This option would not command public confidence and would not maintain any meaningful standard. We therefore discount it.

Delivering option 4 is technically complex. It has to be done equitably across the exam boards, and it has to be able to take account of changes in the entry for an

individual specification. We plan to model potential outcomes early in 2021, with the benefit of experience from the autumn 2020 series.

Nevertheless, we know there is concern now about the possible impact on grade B at A level if exam boards follow usual practice in setting grade boundaries. This means grades A*, A and E are set to meet predictions and B, C and D are set at equal mark intervals between A and E. As a result, the percentage of B grades might vary more than A or A*. Initial modelling suggests that differences are generally within a few percentage points, and are in line with the sort of normal variation seen at grade B.

It will be more important than ever in 2021 that we are able to review the outcome of awards during July and early August. This is a regular part of our annual monitoring and it will be a key part of our monitoring of exam board delivery in 2021. Early sight of award outcomes will give us the opportunity to identify any subjects or grades where outcomes are not as expected, and intervene if necessary.

Stakeholder views

In evaluating the options set out above, we have listened to the views of other interested parties through a mix of workshops, focus groups and individual conversations with ministers, school and college leaders, teachers, the unions, students, exam boards, parents and the wider public, and higher and further education. In those discussions, no-one has argued for a more severe standard than 2019 or more generous than 2020.

We have been particularly interested in the views of higher education, given the role A level results play in admissions. We have found that views vary (as between admissions officers and leaders/academics, and between universities). Admissions officers tended to take a relaxed approach to the options.

More broadly within the sector, some selective institutions favoured something closer to 2019, but overall, higher education representatives appeared willing to accept more generous outcomes in 2021. We appreciate that other factors, other pressures within the sector may influence views.

Within the school and college sector, views clustered more towards a 2020 grade profile. Those school and college leaders we have spoken with directly are generally at or near the 2020 end of the spectrum, although again, views vary.

Exam boards see the imperative that results in 2020 command public confidence. Like us, they appreciate that this is a question of judgement.

We have spoken with a small number of students and parents in focus groups.¹ Their views differed from others we have spoken to. They generally expressed a preference for the 2019 end of the spectrum, albeit we cannot assume they were representative of their peers, or that those views are a reliable proxy for public confidence in summer 2021.

We collected these views ahead of decisions in Wales to move away from examinations, and appreciate that some views (including those of parents and students) may differ now, because of those decisions.

We cannot claim that any of these views are reliably representative or definitive, but overall they suggest - at this stage - that public confidence is more likely to be maintained if standards are set at the generous end of the 2019/2020 spectrum. We appreciate that public confidence can fall at any stage, of course.

Implications for 2022 and beyond

Any decision about the approach to 2021 has implications beyond 2021. The effect of the pandemic is likely to be ongoing - but diminishing, we hope - and so there could well be a case made by students preparing to take exams in 2022 that they should be afforded the same level of generosity as their peers in 2021. However, given the current uncertain situation, we do not propose to take any decisions now about grading in 2022 and beyond.

¹ Those taking part are inevitably a small and self-selecting group, but they included 12 year 13 students, 12 parents of student in year 11 or year 13, and 14 teachers from 5 different centres.