

Forty fifth meeting of the Ofqual Board

Public minutes of the meeting held at 10:00 on Tuesday 19 August 2014 at Ofqual, Spring Place, Herald Avenue, Coventry

Present: Board Members

Tim Balcon
Mike Cresswell (by telephone)
Philip Fletcher
Maggie Galliers
Anne Heal (by telephone)
Barnaby Lenon
Dana Ross-Wawrzynski
Amanda Spielman (Chair)
Glenys Stacey
Roger Taylor (by telephone)
Tom Taylor
Neil Watts
Julius Weinberg

Ofqual

Jeremy Benson Director of Regulation
Mike Bird Interim Chief Operating Officer
Kate Howell Project Manager
Cath Jadhav Deputy Director of Standards and Comparability
Michelle Meadows Director of Research and Evaluation
Dennis Opposs Director of Standards
Natalie Prosser Head of Legal
Julie Swan Head of Regulatory Development
Alison Townsend Board Secretariat Manager

37/14 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence had been received from Ray Coughlin.

38/14 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

39/14 **Setting grade standards for the first award of the new GCSEs**

The Board considered a paper that presented proposals for the setting of grade standards for the first award of reformed GCSEs. The Board had previously agreed that new GCSEs would be graded 9-1 in place of the present A*-G system. The Board noted that the recommendations before it were only for the award of the first three new GCSEs in summer 2017; English language, English literature and mathematics.

Setting the standard for grade 4

The Board had previously agreed that the new grade 3/4 boundary should be aligned with the present grade C/D boundary. The paper proposed that in 2017 grade 4 should be awarded in line with the earlier decision and using statistical predictions. Consultation responses had shown good support for this proposal and respondents had commented that this approach would enable a clear link between the two grading systems. The Board discussed the proposal including the potential impact of the cumulative reforms taking place on the grade 4 boundary; the Board noted that there was a possibility that there may be a drop in performance when new qualifications are first introduced but that as teachers and students became more familiar with the new curriculum and examination arrangements then the pass mark would be likely to rise.

Setting the standard for grade 7

The consultation document had sought views on the alignment of the new grade 7 with the present grade A. The proposal had received positive responses from the consultation and the Standards Advisory Group had strongly supported it.

Setting the standard for grade 5

The Board was reminded of the Secretary of State's policy steer contained in his letter of 6 February 2013:-

“at the level of what is widely considered to be a pass (currently indicated by a grade C), there must be an increase in demand, to reflect that in high-performing jurisdictions.”

To achieve this the consultation had proposed that the standard of performance for a grade 5 should align to the expected standard for similar qualifications or exams taken in high-performing jurisdictions. Only 35% of the respondents agreed with the proposition and the Board noted that it was not proposed to make grade 5 a judgemental grade but to align the 4/5 boundary at a position two-thirds above the current C/D boundary through to the bottom third of the marks for the current grade B; this meant that grade 5 could be seen as being of greater demand than the present grade C.

Setting the standard for grade 1

The Board noted that the current awarding process set the grade F/G boundary judgementally based largely on statistical predictions and that the G/U boundary was set arithmetically. The Board also noted that the equality

impact analysis considered the issues associated with setting this grade in detail. The paper recommended that the Grade U/1 boundary should be aligned with the current grade G. The Board discussed the merits of aligning the U/1 boundary with the current grade F but acknowledged that Setting the U/1 boundary at an F would conflict with the policy steer from the Secretary of State:-

“the reformed GCSEs should (be) accessible, with good teaching, to the same proportion of pupils as currently sits GCSE exams at the end of Key Stage 4.”

Setting the standard for grade 9

The Board noted that the consultation document had proposed three options for the setting grade 9. The option preferred by consultation respondents was that 50% of those currently awarded a grade A* should be awarded a grade 9 (the 50% rule).

The three options had been modelled and the outputs were annexed to the paper; these had been considered by Ofqual’s Reform Technical Advisory Group and its Standards Advisory Group. The Board noted that the 50% rule was not generally favoured by the groups as there were concerns that it was too closely tied to the current A* awards. The 20% rule (20% of those achieving at least a grade 7 are awarded a grade 9) had been considered the best option by both groups. The Board also noted that the 20% rule model would have implications for those subjects in the later phases of reform and considered the modelling of this. The Board discussed the potential implications of the approach including on subject choice and emphasised the need to keep this matter under review and proposals back to the Board for the remaining subjects.

The Board went on to discuss aspects of the proposals more generally including the potential impact on the appeals system. The Board noted that work was under way to look at revisions to the Enquiries After Results and appeals system and a paper on this would be presented to its next meeting.

Setting the standard for other grades

The paper proposed that the grade boundaries for those grades that are not set using statistical rules are set arithmetically. The Board discussed this proposal including:-

- the process for setting grade 8 half way between grades 7 and 9 the setting of which had been previously discussed;
- the potential for the number of students achieving a certain grade to be distorted in this system. The board noted that modelling carried out by exam boards had not identified this as a potential problem;
- the effect of exam paper design; and
- the potential to set all grades statistically. The Board noted that this option had been discounted for practical reasons.

The Board, having had full regard to the outcome of the consultation on and the equality impact assessment agreed, for the awarding of the new English Language, English literature and Mathematics GCSEs in summer 2017, that:-

- (i) awarding should be based primarily on statistical predictions – a development of the method currently used;**
- (ii) predictions should be used to ensure that in each subject there was a statistical alignment between the new grade 3/4 boundary and the present grade C/D boundary;**
- (iii) predictions should be used to ensure that in each subject there was a statistical alignment between the new grade 6/7 boundary and the present grade A/B boundary;**
- (iv) predictions should be used to ensure that in each subject there was a statistical alignment between the new grade U/1 boundary and the present grade G/U boundary;**
- (v) the 8/9 boundary should be set in each examination so that 20% of those candidates awarded at least a grade 7 are awarded a grade 9; and**
- (vi) grade boundaries that are not set using statistical rules will be set arithmetically.**

The Board particularly noted that:

- (a) by positioning the new grade 5 in the top third of the marks for the current grade C and the bottom third of the marks for the current grade B, it can be seen as being of greater demand than the present grade C. If students presently achieving grade Cs were to achieve grade 5s, that may be broadly in line with what would be required to match the average performance of 16 year olds in England with the PISA mathematics performances of countries such as Finland, Canada, the Netherlands and Switzerland;**
- (b) outcomes from the national reference tests will not contribute to awarding in summer 2017. Ofqual will make arrangements for the use of national reference test outcomes in summer awarding after that time; and**
- (c) regulatory documents (such as conditions of recognition) to give effect to the Board's decisions will be drafted for consultation. The consultation will be technical and targeted primarily at exam boards.**

40/14 **Other Business**

(i) Update on summer 2014 awarding

The Board received a short update on summer 2014 awarding. A level awarding had gone well the previous week and GCSEs would be awarded the following Thursday. The Board noted that increased centre variability was likely with GCSEs and communications work was taking place to develop commentary for use on results day.

(ii) Update on accreditation

The Board received a short overview of the ongoing process to accredit new GCSEs. The Board noted that second submissions were now being received and Ofqual was applying the same level of scrutiny to these as at first submission.

(iii) Policy statement from the opposition on recoupling A levels

The Board noted that the Shadow Education Secretary, Tristram Hunt had publicly indicated that if the Labour party were successful in the 2015 general election they would recouple A levels. The Board noted that the Chief Regulator had since informed him of the timescale required to make this change. The benefit of speaking to the regulator before making this kind of statement had been emphasised.

41/14 **Date of Next Meeting**

The next meeting of the Board would take place at 10:00 on Wednesday 24 September 2014, and would be held at the Ofqual Offices, Spring Place, Herald Avenue, Coventry.