

Ofqual Board

Paper 8/15

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Title:

Awarding reformed AS and A levels

Report by:

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Responsible Director:

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Paper for decision

Open paper



Issue

1. The Board has previously agreed that the comparable outcomes approach should be applied to the reformed AS and A levels. This paper considers how that approach should be put into practice so that standards are maintained in the new qualifications.

Recommendations

2. The Board is invited to agree the recommendations below.
3. In the first year of new A level awards in a subject:
 - a. awarding should be based primarily on statistical predictions derived from GCSE prior attainment, as now¹;
 - b. the key grade boundaries should be A and E, as now;

¹ The current awarding process for setting grade standards is set out in the GCSE and GCE Code of Practice. This requires that standards for key grade boundaries are set judgements by each exam board's awarders. The other grades are set arithmetically. There are grade descriptions or performance descriptors for the standard of work expected for the award of key grades to guide the qualitative judgements, but statistical modelling based on the ability of the cohort plays a major role. The assumption underlying the process is that if the cohort taking this year's exam is similar to last year's then the results should be broadly the same.

- c. awarders should be asked to review scripts around the grade A and E boundaries to provide a plausibility check;
 - d. the A* boundary should be set using statistical predictions and not adjusted;
 - e. other grade boundaries should be set arithmetically, as now, but reviewed against statistical predictions.
4. The first new AS awards in a subject should follow a similar arrangement to the first A levels so that awarding is based primarily on statistical predictions, the key grade boundaries are A and E, and other grade boundaries are set arithmetically with a statistical review.

Background

5. At its meeting on 29 January 2014 the Board considered proposals for setting grade standards in GCSEs and A Levels in England. The Board agreed that the comparable outcomes approach should continue to be used when awarding current GCSEs and current A levels until they are phased out; and that, subject to further evaluation of the impact of the change in nature of the AS, the comparable outcomes approach should be used when awarding new A levels.

Awarding reformed AS and A levels

6. Our chief aim for the first reformed A level awards in 2017 should be to use the comparable outcomes approach so that, all other things being equal, a candidate awarded a grade B one year would also be awarded a grade B the following year. That is consistent with one of the purposes of new A levels: to permit UK universities accurately to identify the level of attainment of students.
7. We are already faced with two years in which new and old A levels will be awarded alongside each other in different subjects. One principle we may want to adopt for that period is that the way the grades are awarded across reformed and legacy A level subjects (and across all AS qualifications) in a summer series is as similar as possible and that the relationship between standards in different subjects is maintained.
8. A new rule is required for the award of the A* grade as the present rule is dependent on A levels being made up of AS and A2 units that will not feature in the new A levels. Beyond that it would be possible to continue with the current arrangements: A and E being the key grade boundaries² with others being set arithmetically.³
9. We have been discussing with the exam boards what arrangements should be put in place for the reformed AS and A levels. In their own

² “Key” (or “judgemental”) means that candidates’ work is scrutinised but there is normally an expectation that the statistical prediction should be met.

³ ‘Arithmetically’ means that the boundary is set by dividing up the mark range between key grade boundaries as equally as possible.

discussions, we understand that the exam boards had expressed interest in:

- a. A* being a key grade boundary alongside either D or E;
 - b. other boundaries then being either set statistically or set arithmetically and subject to a statistical check⁴. Where the difference between the outcome and the statistical prediction exceeds a pre-set tolerance, the boundary mark is adjusted.
10. At present A and E are the key grade boundaries so those are the ones where awarders have experience of the quality of work produced by candidates. The challenge is that if we want to keep the proportions achieving grade A* steady from 2016 to 2017, the new linear structure of the examinations will mean that the attainment standard may well be different from now and anyway it is one with which the awarders have no familiarity. It is therefore hard to see how, short-term, A* can be a key grade boundary and so subject to awarder script scrutiny.
 11. However, having better control over the award of the A* grade would be good. Before grade A* can be used as a key boundary though, awarders have to have a good script archive to which they can refer. At its earliest, the archive would not be available before the second awards. Given the likelihood of a dip in attainment when the new specifications are first introduced, using the grade A* performance achieved in the first year as the reference point for future years risks lowering expectations.
 12. If A* were to be used as the upper key grade boundary, there is also a risk that with different mark distributions, grade A may not be set appropriately. In these circumstances, at least for an interim period it would seem wise to keep A as the upper key grade boundary. To ensure that the proportions achieving grade A* are steady over the transition period, the A* boundary should be set using statistical predictions and not adjusted
 13. We have considered whether E or D should be used as the lower key grade boundary. Grade E has problems as the lack of candidates at that part of the mark distribution typically leads to a wide range of marks that are very close to the statistical prediction. It is thought that may contribute to fluctuations from year to year in the proportions of candidates awarded the intermediate grades (B, C and D).
 14. D though may not be ideal because if E is set arithmetically it would be by extrapolation and that may lead to a different grade E (A level pass) grade standard. Additionally, as with A*, expecting awarders to provide good advice as to whether scripts at the bottom of grade D look sufficiently similar to the qualities shown in legacy grade D borderline

⁴ 'Statistical' means that the boundary is set so that the statistical prediction at that grade is met as closely as possible, with no scrutiny of candidates' work.

scripts is optimistic when the experience they have from the bottom of the grade scale is at grade E.

15. At least for an interim period, it looks right to keep E as the key grade boundary at the bottom of the grading scale.
16. In the first year of new awards, at both grades A and E awarders would have to recognise that the level of attainment shown in scripts in linear exams would not necessarily look the same as at the same grade boundaries in the legacy unitised specs. The expectation would be that the grade boundary mark selected is the one closest to the statistical prediction. Boundary marks could only be moved away from a statistically predicted mark when there was a strong justification. Awarders would be asked to carry out a plausibility check by answering a question like “can you live with this mark being the boundary given the script evidence you have considered?”
17. We have been thinking through the implications of possible changes to the A level cohort for the 2017 awards. On the one hand if the AS at the end of the first year acts as less of a filter, more weaker candidates than now may continue into the second year of the courses. On the other hand schools and colleges may think that some students will find linear A levels too challenging and guide them on to other courses. It is difficult at this time to see how that may play out but it does raise questions about the reliability level of statistical predictions that will be available. Further work is planned for the coming year and once entry data for the examinations becomes available to ensure that statistical predictions will be able to be used in the new awards with as much confidence as possible.
18. There are also issues with the predictions that will be available for the first awards of new AS qualifications in 2016. Indications at present are that subject entries may be around 70% of present levels, some schools and colleges not entering students on two-year courses for the AS exam half way through. That also raises questions about the reliability of statistical predictions that will be available for the awards. Again further work is planned to ensure that statistical predictions will be able to be used with as much confidence as possible.
19. Statistical predictions for grades A and E for specifications with low entries will have wider confidence intervals. In those circumstances we would want to allow the awarders’ judgements of scripts to play a more significant role, as they do now.
20. It is likely that at least some of the new A level exams will produce mark distributions that are different from now. That might, for example, markedly change the proportions awarded a grade B if it is just set arithmetically. Such a change is unlikely to be welcomed by schools, colleges and universities, particularly if the proportions fall.

21. At present the arithmetically-set grades are mostly stable year-on-year with perhaps some evidence of rising proportions awarded grade B in places. That suggests we should continue to set grades B, C and D arithmetically but, where reliable predictions suggest that may create problems (such as serious changes in grade B proportions over the transition period or very narrow grade widths) having in place a mechanism that allows changes to be made.
22. Whatever system is used at A level should be replicated at AS although with no A* grade, the upper key grade boundary for AS has to be grade A.
23. The Board is therefore recommended to agree that in the first year of new A level awards in a subject:
 - a. awarding should be based primarily on statistical predictions derived from GCSE prior attainment – the method used at present but extended so that there are predictions available for all grades in all awards;
 - b. the key grade boundaries should be A and E, as now;
 - c. awarders should be asked to review scripts around the grade A and E boundaries – a plausibility check;
 - d. the A* boundary should be set using statistical predictions and not adjusted;
 - e. other grade boundaries should be set arithmetically, as now, but should be reviewed against statistical predictions.
24. Following their introduction, we will appraise the new A level awarding arrangements annually.
25. The first AS awards in a subject should follow a similar arrangement so that:
 - a. awarding should be based primarily on statistical predictions – the method used at present but extended so that there are predictions used for all grades;
 - b. the key grade boundaries should be A and E and awarders will be asked to review scripts around these boundaries– a plausibility check;
 - c. other grade boundaries should be set arithmetically, as now, but should be reviewed against statistical predictions.
26. A similar process should be used in the second awards (although we might use reporting tolerances for key grade boundaries) and, from those, script archives for the key grade boundaries should be constructed.
27. In the third awards (at least if this appears appropriate after the second awards) the main difference should be that using the archives,

awarders' judgements of scripts could be given a stronger emphasis where the statistical predictions are less reliable.

28. By this time, or soon after, it might be possible to move to having grade A* as the upper key boundary with grade A either as a third key grade boundary or awarded arithmetically. Whether that would be a beneficial change to make will be clearer once we have real mark distributions from the new exams to evaluate.

Finance and Resource

29. The costs of this work are included within the Business Plan.

Impact Assessments

Equality Analysis

30. Ofqual took equalities considerations into account in the design of the new specifications and their assessments. DfE took equalities considerations into account in the design of the content for new AS and A levels.
31. The only equality consideration at the point of awarding should be the level of knowledge, skills and understanding which has been demonstrated on what should be as level a playing field as possible. The proposals here involve a continuation to the existing approach to awarding AS and A levels.

Risk Assessment

Risk	Impact	Mitigation
1. First examinations raise concerns about unexpected outcomes, for example, school level variability in A levels between 2016 and 2017.	May be damaging to public confidence. Doubts about using the same awarding arrangements again.	Evaluation arrangements in place providing early lessons learned that we can implement for second awards.
2. A level mark distributions in a subject vary markedly across exam boards in the first awards.	Where marks are bunched there is greater scope for grade misclassification.	Introduce statistical checks for AS and A level grades B, C and D. Take necessary action to reduce problems ahead of second awards.
3. The prediction methodology is subject to strong critique.	Could damage confidence in the awarding system and in grades issued.	Make sure that we maintain and update strong research evidence about the methodology.

Risk	Impact	Mitigation
4. There are unexpected outcomes for the highest A level grades	Could disrupt progression of students to higher education and thereby damage public confidence.	We oversee the new awarding system by reviewing data prior to and immediately after awarding and take necessary action.

Regulatory Impact Assessment

32. There are no significant additional costs for adopting the preferred options (adapting the current approach to awarding for new AS and A levels) over and above business as usual costs.

Communications

33. We should announce the Board’s recommendations as soon as practicable so that schools and colleges are aware of its position. A technical consultation of the Conditions that would make the decisions binding should be held in the autumn.

External Stakeholders

34. We will share the recommendations with the exam boards and with DfE as soon as possible. The other main stakeholders, particularly the teacher associations, will be contacted through our usual channels.

Paper to be published	Yes
Publication date (if relevant)	At the same time as, or after, a public announcement of the decisions.