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Summer 2016 exams

I am writing to you ahead of the half-term break about GCSEs, international GCSEs, AS and A levels this summer. This letter covers new AS qualifications, exam boards' approach to awarding this summer, changes to the post-results review process and some advice about exam paper security.

Today we have also published provisional entry statistics for these qualifications. We collect these data so that we are aware of any changes in entry patterns between qualifications and/or subjects. It is important both for us and for schools to understand summer results in context: being aware of how the entry patterns compare with previous years can aid you in interpreting the overall results published in August. The statistical bulletin can be found [here](#).

Awarding in summer 2016

As per their longstanding practice, exam boards will use data from the cohort's performance in previous years to predict how they are likely to perform in this summer's exams. If this year's cohort is similar, in terms of their previous performance, to last year's cohort, then we would expect their overall results to be similar at the national level. This means that, in general, we would expect a student who would have achieved, for example, a grade B in 2015 to achieve a grade B in 2016.

For AS and A level, exam boards will use predictions based on students' prior achievement in GCSE, and for GCSE they will use predictions based on students' prior achievement at Key Stage 2. Key Stage 2 data for the cohort is also one of the pieces of evidence used by exam boards when they set standards in international GCSEs.

New AS qualifications

As you will know, students in England are taking the first reformed qualifications in 13 AS subjects this summer: art and design, biology, business, chemistry, computing, economics, English language, English language and literature, English literature, history, physics, psychology and sociology.

As this is the first year of awarding these new qualifications, we expect that performance standards will be lower because students and their teachers will be less familiar with the new qualifications. Exam boards will take account of that during awarding. This approach, known as 'comparable outcomes', minimises any unfair disadvantage for the first cohort of students to sit a new qualification, and is particularly important where this year's students may be competing for further or higher education places with students who took AS last summer, or those who will take it next year.

Variability in results at school level

While nationally results may remain steady, we know that schools and colleges can see variability in their results year to year even when qualifications do not change. But we also know that when qualifications do change, schools and colleges can typically see more variability in their results. As a result, we expect this summer's changes to AS levels will mean that individual school or college results will be more variable than in recent years. We will publish more information on this when results are publishedⁱ.

Other qualifications

GCSEs and A levels

There are no major changes to these qualifications this summer. This will be the last summer that the outgoing specification in GCSEs and A levels in the first phase of reform will be availableⁱⁱ. We have recently published details of the arrangements for re-sits in all AS and A levels, as well as in GCSE English, English language and mathematics. There is more detail on our websiteⁱⁱⁱ.

A levels in French, German and Spanish

You may have seen that we are surveying all schools and colleges with students taking A levels in French, German, Spanish, Italian and Russian this summer. This is to understand how many native speakers might be entered for these qualifications. Currently, this information is not readily available at the national level. We also want to explore how native speakers perform on the assessments. If you are one of these schools or colleges, you should have received a letter from Ofqual with questionnaires for your students. If you haven't already asked your students to complete the questionnaires, please do. This won't affect students' results this summer but it will give us a better picture of the proportion of native speakers that

currently take each of these qualifications so that we can see whether any action needs to be taken.

CIE IGCSE® First language English

Entries for this qualification have quadrupled since 2013. We have recently published additional information and analysis about the awarding of this qualification last year^{iv} in which we concluded that the grading was carried out appropriately. We continue to hold that view. We will of course monitor grading closely this year.

Changes to the post-results review service

As you may know, we are making changes to the process for marking reviews and appeals. This year, as in any year, our starting position is that the marks students receive first time should appropriately reflect their performance. But, if they believe an error has been made in the marking of their assessments, schools will be able to request that the mark is reviewed. We expect marking errors to be corrected when they are found. But, we do not expect an already appropriate mark to be replaced with an alternative mark. You can see the detail of our decisions and some further proposals in the documents we have [published today](#).

Media stories about exams

I am sure you will already have seen media stories about particular exams sparked primarily by students' social media posts. We monitor closely reactions and comments about exams. Where necessary, we follow up with the relevant exam board before results are issued. We will not normally comment on specific incidents during the exam period so that we do not distract students during the rest of their exams, but you can be assured that, where necessary, we follow them up to make sure exams are fair for all students.

Security of exams

Lastly, I would just like to remind you and your staff to be vigilant about the security of exam papers. Increasingly we are being made aware of attempts by individuals to obtain copies of secure question papers. Exam boards will not ask you to email copies of secure material to anyone, nor will they ask you to confirm your secure login details by email or over the phone. If you are in any doubt about a request, please check with the exam board concerned. You should follow at all times the procedures outlined in JCQ's Instructions for Conducting Examinations^v or the equivalent documents issued by non-JCQ boards.

We have also issued a set of posters and postcards encouraging anyone who sees or suspects cheating, malpractice or exam fraud this summer to report it. You can download the posters from our [Pinterest page](#).

I do hope you find this information helpful. We provide regular updates to schools and colleges on our regulation of GCSEs, international GCSEs, AS and A levels via our 'Exam Matters' newsletter. I would encourage you to sign up via our website [homepage](#).

Yours sincerely,

Sally Collier
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ⁱ See similar analyses published in previous years here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/variability-in-a-level-results-2012-to-2015>

ⁱⁱ GCSEs in English language, English literature and mathematics and A levels in art and design, biology, business, chemistry, computing, economics, English language, English language and literature, English literature, history, physics, psychology and sociology

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/students-wont-miss-out-on-majority-of-legacy-resits>

^{iv} <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/cie-igcse-first-language-english-summer-2015>

^v <http://www.jcq.org.uk/exams-office/ice---instructions-for-conducting-examinations/instructions-for-conducting-examinations-2015-2016>