

# **Further analysis of GCSE, AS and A level enquiries: a summary of the key points**

Summer 2015 enquiries about results



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# 1 Introduction

In December 2015 we published official statistics on the volume of enquiries about results in GCSEs, AS and A level in summer 2015.<sup>1</sup> The number of enquiries and the number of grades changed were higher in 2015 than in previous years.

Enquiries about results data is not a proxy for a measure of marking quality. Concern about quality of marking is only one reason that schools and colleges submit enquiries. School accountability measures are another reason. Schools tell us that they routinely submit enquiries for all students who are within a few marks of the D/C boundary at GCSE, regardless of the marking quality.

Nevertheless, given the concerns expressed by stakeholders about marking quality, we asked the exam boards to provide the original data for all enquiries made in summer 2015, and additional data for those where the grade had changed by two or more grades. We have now completed our analyses of these data and the reports are published separately.<sup>2</sup> This report highlights some of the key findings from those analyses.

The first report looks at differences by subject and by type of school or college. We have not looked in detail at all subjects in these reports, in order to keep the findings manageable. In future years, we will consider how best to report on the full range of subjects.

For GCSE we have focused on those subjects which count towards the English Baccalaureate (Ebacc)<sup>3</sup>. These also tend to be those with higher entries than many other subjects. At AS and A level we have focused on the subjects referred to by the Russell Group as 'facilitating subjects'.<sup>4</sup>

Across all enquiries we have also looked at how the volume varies between different types of school/college. Overall, independent schools tended to submit a greater percentage of their qualification entries for an enquiry relative to other school types, at both GCSE and A level. Independent schools submitted enquiries for 1 in 11

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/enquiries-about-results-for-gcse-and-a-level-summer-2015-exam-series>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/marking-reviews-appeals-grade-boundaries-and-code-of-practice>

<sup>3</sup> The Ebacc performance table measure consists of English, mathematics, history or geography, the sciences, and a language. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-baccalaureate-ebacc> for more information.

<sup>4</sup> English literature, geography, history, modern and classical languages, mathematics and further mathematics, and the sciences. See <https://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/for-students/school-and-college-in-the-uk/subject-choices-at-school-and-college/>

GCSE entries and 1 in 8 A level entries, compared to figures for all schools and colleges of 1 in 16 GCSEs and 1 in 13 A levels.

The second report looks in more detail at the small number of enquiries which resulted in a change of two or more grades. These are relatively rare. In total there were 639 individual qualification grades in this category, which represents less than 0.01 per cent of the 8 million qualifications awarded in summer 2015. In many of these cases, the change resulted from a clerical error being corrected. The most common reason, where exam boards were able to provide the reason, was a misapplication of the mark scheme.

## **2 Analysis by subject**

The subject level analysis report looks at the percentage of grades challenged, and changed, for GCSE AS and A level. It provides an overview of the percentages for all subjects (see Figures 1, 2 and 3), which shows that the percentage of grades challenged in each subject varies considerably between subjects. The percentage of grades changed is more consistent across subjects and in all cases is no more than 3 per cent of the total number of qualifications awarded.

The report looks in depth at a selection of subjects. At GCSE we have focused on those subjects which are part of the Ebacc performance measure for schools in England. At AS and A level we have focused on the so-called 'facilitating subjects'.

### **Number and percentage of enquiries**

The report provides details of the number and percentage of enquiries received and grades changed for these subjects (see tables 3, 4 and 5). In general, there is a higher percentage of grades challenged in English, modern languages and humanities subjects. This is not surprising, as these are the subjects which make greater use of extended response questions and where there may be more likely to be legitimate differences of professional opinion between two equally competent markers. These subjects also tend to have a higher percentage of the overall total grades that are changed following an enquiry. The picture is very similar across GCSE, AS and A level.

### **Original grade**

We have also looked at the original grade when an enquiry is submitted (see figures 4, 5 and 6). There is more variation here, both between different subjects and also between different qualifications.

In GCSE English and mathematics, schools challenged far more D grades than any other grades. This is likely to be more a reflection on the pressure to achieve a grade

C in these subjects, for individual students and also for school accountability measures, than specific issues about marking quality at that grade. Other subjects have a different profile of original grades. For example, in science and additional science nearly half of the original grades were D, whereas in the separate sciences there is a more even spread, with B the most common grade to be challenged. These qualifications share the same exam papers and so the differences are very likely to reflect differences in the ability profile of the cohorts entered for science/additional science and the separate sciences, rather than issues about marking quality.

At A level, in all of the subjects we looked at, with the exception of further mathematics, the most common original grade challenged was B. There was a similar picture at AS but the trend was less distinct.

### **Size of mark changes**

We looked at the size of the mark changes at enquiries about results (see Table 6). We considered the change in terms of the 'raw' mark – the mark given by the marker.<sup>5</sup> At GCSE, AS and A level, over half of the enquiries (52 per cent) had no change in the marks awarded. Three quarters of enquiries (75 per cent) had either no change or a change of plus or minus one mark. In some cases, these will have been marking errors that should always be corrected (a mark not given for a correct answer, for example) but in many cases these will have been reasonable marks, reflecting legitimate differences of professional opinion between markers. In these cases, there is far less justification for replacing one legitimate mark with another at the enquiry stage.

Figures 7 and 8 in the report show the average mark differences broken down by subject. It is not surprising that the more subjective subjects where there is more use of extended response questions, such as English and the humanities, show larger average mark differences.

Across all of the subjects and qualifications, none had an average mark change greater than two marks.

### **School/college type**

We looked at enquiries submitted as a percentage of the entries by school/college type (see figures 12 and 13). Overall, independent schools tended to challenge a greater proportion of their overall entries than other types of school or college. However, when we look at the percentage of grades challenges that were actually

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<sup>5</sup> In modular qualifications, after grade boundaries have been set, the raw mark is converted into a UMS mark, and UMS marks are added to generate the overall grade.

changed, secondary selective schools had the highest percentage, at both GCSE and A level.

### **3 Changes of two or more grades**

Following the summer 2015 exam series, we asked exam boards to send more detailed data on enquiries which resulted in changes of two grades or more. In particular, we asked exam boards to provide information about the reasons for these large changes. Currently not all exam boards are able to provide that detailed information and so we only have a partial picture of the reasons for these mark changes. In future, we will require exam boards to categorise the reasons for mark changes, so we will be able to report in more detail in future years.

Across all qualifications there were 639 individual qualification grades that changed by two grades or more. This is less than 0.01 per cent of the 8 million qualifications awarded in summer 2015. Most of those 639 changed by two grades, with only 69 changing by more than two grades (see Table 7). Nevertheless, we know that these large changes undermine public confidence in the marking system.

Of these 639 individual qualifications, 269 were AS, 267 were GCSEs and only 92 were A levels (see Table 3).<sup>6</sup> In summer 2015, there were over 5 million GCSEs awarded, 1.4 million AS qualifications awarded and 850,000 A levels awarded. Therefore, it appears that AS is over-represented, relative to the overall number of qualifications. However, the numbers are relatively small compared to the overall entry and therefore we cannot draw meaningful conclusions on the basis of one year's data.

We looked at these large grade changes by individual subject. They are more common in English, art & design, history, religious studies and sociology, although this differed by qualification type (see Table 6).

The mark changes that led to these grade changes varied considerably, with most changes between 0 and +40 marks. On average the raw mark change was +18.5 marks. Figure 1 provides more detail of the range of mark changes.

At A level, two-thirds of the grade changes went from a grade B to A\*. The current requirements to achieve an A\* mean that very small marks changes on A2<sup>7</sup> units can mean a grade B changes to A\*. To achieve an A\*, students must achieve an A grade

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<sup>6</sup> The remainder were GCSE short course and A level double awards

<sup>7</sup> The second half of an A level

overall and at least 90 per cent of the UMS<sup>8</sup> marks available at A2. A student who has achieved a very high grade B overall might need only a very small number of additional raw marks to move to an A\*. In the summer 2015 data there was one example of a student gaining one additional raw mark and then moving from a B to an A\*. Such examples are unlikely to be due to errors in the system; they are a combination of legitimate differences in the views of professional markers, the position of the students relative to the grade boundaries, and the A\* rules. In reformed A levels in England, there will be no need for the current rules around A\* and such anomalies will be fewer.

We also asked exam boards to provide reasons for the large grade changes. Not all boards were able to do that, and so the data we have are not complete. In future they have told us they will be able to provide reasons for grade changes of two grades or more. Table 11 provides a breakdown of the different categories of reasons. More than half (53 per cent) were due to a misapplication of the mark scheme. These are therefore likely to be marking errors rather than legitimate differences of professional opinion. Such errors should always be corrected.

## **4 Conclusions and next steps**

The reports we have published provide more detailed analysis of all enquiries about results broken down by subject and the type of school/college, as well as a more detailed analysis of the small number of enquiries that results in changes of two or more grades. The latter are relatively rare – just 639 qualifications were changed by two grades or more, out of more than 8 million qualifications awarded in summer 2015. Nevertheless, these changes generally reflect marking errors where examiners have not applied the mark scheme properly; such errors should always be corrected.

The subject level analyses showed that the proportion of qualifications challenged through the enquiries process, and the proportion of grades changed, is higher in English, modern languages and humanities subjects. This is not surprising as these subjects typically make greater use of extended response questions and the marking is more subjective.

We also found that the original grade for enquiries varies by subject and by qualification. At GCSE, more enquiries are received for grade D results than for any other grade. This is likely to be as much a reflection of the importance of a grade C to students and schools/colleges as concerns about quality of marking at this particular grade.

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<sup>8</sup> Uniform mark scale – for unitised qualifications, the raw marks (the marks given by markers) are converted to uniform marks before being aggregated to calculate the overall grade

The report also shows that just over half of enquiries do not result in a mark change, and a further quarter saw a mark change of plus/minus one. Some of these will be marking errors, but many will be differences of opinion between equally competent markers.

The proportion of GCSE and A level entries varies by type of school or college, with independent schools submitting enquiries for a greater proportion of their entries.

This is the first year that we have collected more granular data, and we intend to continue to collect similar data for 2016 and beyond. That will enable us to establish a baseline ahead of reformed qualifications in 2017, 2018 and beyond. Collecting data annually will also enable us to report on trends over time and evaluate the impact of the changes we are making to the review process.



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Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation

Spring Place  
Coventry Business Park  
Herald Avenue  
Coventry CV5 6UB

Telephone 0300 303 3344

Textphone 0300 303 3345

Helpline 0300 303 3346