

Summer 2017 Exam Series Report



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Introduction

Every summer we monitor exam boards' preparation for and delivery of exams in GCSE, AS, A level and similar alternative regulated qualifications, such as level 1/ level 2 certificates, International GCSE, Cambridge IGCSE[®], Cambridge Pre-U and International Baccalaureate's Diploma.

These are provided by a small number of exam boards: AQA, Cambridge Assessment International Education (Cambridge International), International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO), OCR, Pearson and WJEC.

Our priorities during any exam series are that:

- exams are delivered to plan
- results are issued on time and are accurate so that users can rely on them
- standards in the same qualifications are aligned between exam boards in each qualification subject and over time

The summer exam series is the largest of any single exam series we regulate. Summer 2017 was especially critical with the first award¹ of GCSEs (9 to 1) in English language, English literature and mathematics. It was also the first award of 11 reformed AS and 13 reformed A levels.

During summer 2017, 2,196 GCSE, AS and A level exams were taken over a period of seven weeks. This generated 14.1 million scripts, which were marked by approximately 63,000 examiners. Overall, there were over 6.6 million certificates issued in England. We require the exam boards to manage effectively the risks and issues associated with the delivery of this large-scale operation.

We require the exam boards to notify us of any issues² that could potentially have, or have had, an adverse effect on candidates, qualification standards, or public confidence; and to tell us how they are dealing with them.

We expect exam boards to manage issues quickly and effectively to minimise any impact on students. During the exam period we intervene only where we feel it is necessary to protect standards, public confidence or to mitigate any impact on students. After the exams are finished, we analyse the issues that occurred during the summer and evaluate the root cause, the impact and how effectively issues were managed by each exam board. At that point, we decide what, if any, regulatory

¹ Full details of the subjects for first award in summer 2017 can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/get-the-facts-gcse-and-a-level-reform/get-the-facts-as-and-a-level-reform>

² See Condition B3 of our General Conditions of Recognition for a definition of an Adverse Effect and reporting requirements: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/529394/general-conditions-of-recognition-june-2016.pdf

action is required and/or how the information gathered over the summer should feed into our ongoing monitoring of the exam boards.

This report summarises the key issues that arose in the lead up to, during and immediately after the 2017 summer exam series and the actions we took. The bulk of the delivery of the exam series can be divided into five phases: exam planning; exam administration; marking; setting standards; and post results. We have structured this report to reflect those phases.

Our infographic³ illustrates the scale and key stages of this summer's exam series and provides useful context for the report.

Delivery of summer 2017 exam series

Context and overall performance

This summer was the first with the new GCSE grading scale, which applied to new qualifications in English language, English literature and mathematics. Eleven reformed AS and 13 reformed A levels were also awarded for the first time. Resits for legacy qualifications, in the same subjects, as the new reformed qualifications were also available. Overall, we found that exams were carefully planned, effectively managed and successfully delivered. Results in England for 16-year-olds in English language, English literature and mathematics were stable at grade C/4 when comparing combined GCSE and international GCSE outcomes last summer, with GCSE outcomes this summer. Centre variability for reformed qualifications was similar to that seen in previous years⁴ and teachers seemed to have responded well to teaching the new qualifications.

We conducted an extensive communications and public engagement campaign to help candidates, parents, teachers and employers understand the reforms, including the new 9 to 1 GCSE grades. We produced a range of resources including films, which have been viewed more than 10 million times, sets of postcards and posters⁵, which were sent to every school in England, and regular blogs⁶. We measured our impact over time, and achieved significant improvements in awareness and understanding of the new grading scale and other aspects of the reforms.

These new qualifications have been designed from first principles and evaluated by Ofqual and subject experts before they were accredited. For example, in setting the design rules for the new 9 to 1 GCSEs we considered a number of issues including whether assessment in each subject should be tiered and whether the curriculum set

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofqual-2017-summer-exam-series-report>

⁴ More information on centre variability for thirteen subjects at GCSE can be found here: <http://analytics.ofqual.gov.uk:3838/2017/GCSE/CentreVariability/>

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/report-cheating-malpractice-or-wrongdoing-ofqual-urges#posters-for-schools>

⁶ <https://ofqual.blog.gov.uk/2017/08/01/our-journey-changes-to-gcses-as-and-a-levels/>

by government meant that there was a need for non-exam assessment. We carefully considered the new grading scale before it was introduced. The exam boards were required to design their new GCSEs so they would differentiate students' performance across nine grades. For the new linear AS and A levels, we considered the implications of separating the qualifications and moving to a linear structure. We reviewed all of the specifications and the sample assessment materials before the qualifications were accredited. In all cases, we required the exam boards to make changes to their original proposals before we accredited the qualifications.

In early 2017, we conducted an in-depth review of each of the four⁷ GCSE and A level exam boards' readiness for the 2017 summer exam series. We reviewed the extent to which they had identified and were managing the risks to the safe delivery of the series and looked, in particular, at exam boards' governance and structural arrangements, their ways of working and resources. We also focused on steps they had taken to prevent the types of incidents that occurred in 2016 being repeated in 2017. We were reassured that exam boards were prepared for the summer series and, following the reviews, we presented our observations to each exam board for their consideration.

International GCSEs are not subject to all of the same regulatory requirements as GCSEs. International GCSEs are not included in school accountability measures from 2017, and so maintained schools have generally opted to take GCSEs instead. Cambridge International has announced that its IGCSE® qualifications will cease to be regulated and that this will be the case for exams from 2020 onwards. The last examinations for regulated IGCSEs® will be in the 2019 November series.

We have seen increasing use of social media by candidates in recent years to express their feelings about exam papers, or questions within papers. It has become common for the mainstream media to identify and highlight these posts. We actively monitor social media so that we are aware of any potential areas of concern and can react accordingly if necessary. Exam boards also monitor social media. This year, as in previous years, we saw comments that led us to take action, and many that did not.

⁷ AQA, OCR, Pearson and WJEC

Phase 1: Exam planning

Exam entries and writing assessment materials

Schools and colleges are responsible for submitting entries to the exam boards for each exam or assessment to be taken by their students. In summer 2017, over 18 million entries⁸ were made on behalf of over 1.4 million students for GCSE, AS and A levels. There were 5,135,075 GCSE certificates awarded in England for June 2017. This represents a 3.03% increase on last year.

At GCSE, the largest increases were in EBacc subjects, particularly English language and English literature. The removal of level 1/level 2 certificates (such as International GCSEs) from performance tables has encouraged centres to move students back to GCSE qualifications in these subjects. This, coupled with the way in which Progress 8 measures are calculated, explains the increased uptake of English literature. Progress 8 measures count the higher grade from English language and English literature, and this is double weighted provided a student has been entered for both.

Total entries in the reformed AS qualifications taken this year fell by about 39% from 487,283 in 2016 to 295,622 in 2017. New AS qualifications are fully stand-alone qualifications in England. Students do not have to take an AS in order to take an A level in these reformed qualifications.

Exam boards typically write assessment materials for upcoming exam series, including question papers, stimulus materials, and mark schemes, a year or more before the relevant exam series occurs. We require the exam boards to produce assessment materials that are clear, appropriate and fit for purpose. The exam boards produced 3,233 standard question papers and supporting materials for summer 2017 to facilitate 2,196 GCSE, AS and A level exams that took place over a seven-week period.

Adjustments to exam arrangements

Disabled students are legally entitled to reasonable adjustments. The Equality Act 2010 defines disability. The exam boards are required to make reasonable adjustments to remove or reduce the disadvantage that would otherwise be experienced by a disabled student taking their exams e.g. to provide a modified paper so that it is in a larger font or to allow them to have extra time in which to complete the exam.

In November 2017, we published statistics on access arrangements for GCSEs, AS and A levels during the 2016/17 academic year⁹. The number of approved access

⁸ This does not include data for IBO qualifications or Cambridge Pre-U qualifications. This is for England only.

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/access-arrangements-for-gcse-and-a-level-2016-to-2017-academic-year>

arrangements has risen 5% on the 2015/16 academic year, continuing the upward trend over the last five years. The number of approved requests for modified question papers rose, by 26% from 38,000 to 48,000. This was in the context of more papers available this year but may also be because of the introduction of new types of modified question papers in recent years and better information being available to schools, students and parents. Modified papers account for a very small proportion of papers overall (0.3% in 2016/17 compared to 0.2% in 2015/16). We have included more information in this year's statistical release about the number of schools and colleges whose students received access arrangements.

The most frequently used form of adjustment for GCSEs, AS and A levels is the provision of an extra 25% of the time allocated to students to complete the exam. The use of this form of adjustment has been increasing. We have been closely monitoring this trend. We have reviewed the number of approvals achieved by individual schools and colleges in England this year and found a broad range. Some have relatively high numbers of approvals compared with the average, and some have very few. We believe those with particularly high or low numbers compared to the average should consider whether their practice is appropriate. We are working with exam boards to achieve this.

Exam boards also adjust the way exams are taken by students, for example, who are ill or injured at the time of the exam such that, without an adjustment, they would not be able properly to demonstrate their knowledge, skills or understanding in the assessment. The exam boards tend to refer to both reasonable adjustments for disabled students and to adjustments to the way assessments are undertaken by students who have an injury or illness at the time of the assessment as 'access arrangements'.

Adjustments to marks

Exam boards can adjust the marks a student has been given to compensate for their absence from an exam or to take account of the impact of their absence on their performance in an exam. In both cases, the student must have been affected by an event outside of their control, such as illness, injury or bereavement at the time of the assessment. This is a form of special consideration¹⁰.

Where a student is absent from an exam for a reason beyond their control, the exam board will determine the grade for the qualification based on the student's performance in their other assessments for the subject. GCSE and A level exam boards refer to this as an 'assessed grade' or a 'calculated grade'. The exam boards require a student to have taken a minimum percentage of the overall assessments for the qualification before they will award an assessed/calculated grade.

¹⁰ <https://www.jcq.org.uk/exams-office/access-arrangements-and-special-consideration/regulations-and-guidance/a-guide-to-the-special-consideration-process-2017-2018>

We encouraged the exam boards to amend their approach to the minimum percentage of the assessment that must be taken, to reflect the fact that exams for GCSEs, AS and A levels are now all taken at the end of the course and there is less non exam assessment. Therefore, a student who suffers disadvantage or illness is more likely to miss more of the overall assessment if they are absent at this time.

For summer 2017, the GCSE and A level exam boards reduced the amount of assessment a student must have completed from 40% to 25%. They were prepared, in the most exceptional cases, to reduce this to 20%. The change meant that some students, including some who were affected by terrorist incidents and the Grenfell Tower fire, which happened during the exam series, were able to receive a grade, despite having missed some of their assessments for reasons outside their control.

We have published separately¹¹ statistics about special consideration in GCSEs, AS and A levels. In summer 2017, the number of applications for special consideration increased by 19% on summer 2016, although this was in the context of more assessments being taken this summer. The number of special consideration requests was 607,110 and the number of approved requests was 567,793 (94%). This represents 3.1% of all assessments taken, up from 2.5% in 2016.

The GCSE and A level exam boards have committed to reviewing how the arrangements work, ahead of the summer 2018 exam series.

Major incidents during the exam period

This summer, there was a small number of major incidents during the exam timetable. Following the terrorist attack in Manchester early in the exam series we issued advice on exam arrangements¹²; and following the Grenfell Tower fire we issued guidance to students and parents¹³. In both cases, we liaised with the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) to ensure consistent messaging¹⁴.

The GCSE and A level exam boards checked their forthcoming exam papers for any questions that might have appeared insensitive or could have been upsetting for students. A small number of exam papers were re-issued where there was time. In other cases, schools were pre-warned that students who had been seriously affected might need support during or after the assessment, or might need to be advised to answer an alternative question where that was an option.

¹¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/special-consideration-in-gcse-and-a-level-summer-2017-exam-series>

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/manchester-incident-advice-for-schools-and-students>

¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/kensington-fire-ofqual-statement>

¹⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/exam-system-contingency-plan-england-wales-and-northern-ireland/what-schools-and-colleges-should-do-if-exams-or-other-assessments-are-seriously-disrupted>

Question paper and material errors

We expect exam boards to produce assessment materials that are free from error. Errors are rare, but where errors occur, they can affect students' ability to answer the questions as intended; and errors in mark schemes can lead to students being awarded incorrect marks.

Where the exam boards detect an error before the exams are taken, they can usually minimise the potential negative impact by replacing the assessment papers or issuing a correction (known as an 'erratum'). Table 1 shows how the exam boards have dealt with errors identified before the exam was taken. The figures in this table also include a small number of clarification notices that were issued, for example to clarify instructions to exams officers/invigilators.

Some errors may not be detected until after an exam has started or been taken. We require exam boards to notify us of these errors and we then monitor the mitigations that the exam board puts in place to reduce the potential for an adverse effect.

We also require exam boards to tell us about errors in modified assessment materials (such as large font, or braille exam papers) as well as those in standard versions.

We categorise errors in both standard and modified papers by their potential level of impact before any mitigation has been applied. The categories are as follows;

Category 1 - errors which could or do make it impossible for learners to generate a meaningful response to a question/task

Category 2 - errors which could or do cause unintentional difficulties for learners to generate a meaningful response to a question/task

Category 3 - errors which will not affect a learner's ability to generate a meaningful response to a question/task.

Table 1: Mitigations put in place by each exam board to reduce the potential impact of reported errors found before the exam in standard¹⁵ and modified papers.

	Errors found before examination taken. Addressed by:		Error found post-exam	Total number of errors identified
	Replacement paper	Issue of erratum/notice to accompany paper ¹⁶		
AQA	8	13	12	33
Cambridge International	0	2	4	6
IBO	0	2	3	5
OCR	3	10	16	29
Pearson	2	5	5	12
WJEC	1	12	3	16
Total	14	44	43	101

¹⁵ Includes GCSE, AS, A level, level 1/level 2 certificates and level 3 general qualifications

¹⁶ A small number of notices were to clarify instructions rather than to correct errors

Table 2: Total number¹⁷ of reported errors in standard and modified papers found post-exam¹⁸ in summer 2017, as well as 2015 and 2016.

	Reported assessment material errors in standard and modified papers found post-exam											
	Total			Category 1			Category 2			Category 3		
	2017	2016	2015	2017	2016	2015	2017	2016	2015	2017	2016	2015
AQA	12	19	4	2 ¹⁹	6	2	9	11	2	1	2	0
Cambridge International	4	4	0	3	4	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
IBO	3	2	1	0	0	0	3	2	1	0	0	0
OCR	16	9	3	2	6	2	14	3	0	0	0	1
Pearson	5	1	3	0	0	2	4	1	0	1	0	1
WJEC	3	2	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	2	1	0
Total	43	37	11	8	16	6	31	18	3	4	3	2

The number of errors must be seen in the context of the volume of materials produced in total and produced by each exam board. For summer 2016, there were 2,888 standard question papers and support materials developed for GCSE, AS and A levels and 29 errors identified post-exam (1%). For 2017, there were 3,233 standard question papers and materials developed for GCSE, AS and A levels and 40 (1.1%) errors identified post-exam.

Not all students will have been affected by the errors, or affected to the same degree, as some questions will have been optional, some students will not have noticed the error and some will have recognised the error without it being distracting. We monitor the exam boards' handling of all cases to make sure they are considering and addressing, as far as possible, any disadvantage to students. Exam boards can minimise the impact on students in several ways. These include adjusting the mark scheme to take account of different possible responses, or discounting the affected question and awarding the mark or marks to all students. For example, eleven errors were in questions worth one mark. In some of these cases, the exam boards credited all students with a mark. Although this will not always completely remove the disadvantage and negative impact experienced by students – as some might have spent a disproportionate amount of time trying to answer the question – it is often considered the fairest approach to take.

¹⁷Includes GCSE, AS, A level, level 1/level 2 certificates and level 3 general qualifications.

¹⁸ 2016 figures may include errors found pre-exam, mitigated by the issue of an erratum/notice to accompany paper

¹⁹ One Category 1 error related to a collation/printing error by a Third Party,

Table 3: The number of errors in 2017 standard papers (not modified papers) and the total number of standard materials produced by each exam board

	Number of reported assessment material errors in standard question papers ²⁰ or stimulus materials found pre-exam	Number of reported assessment material errors in standard question papers or stimulus materials found post-exam	Number of standard ²¹ question papers and supporting materials produced
AQA	10	10	829
Cambridge International	2	4	436
IBO	2	3	647 ²²
OCR	9	15	971
Pearson	7	5	532
WJEC	13	3	949
Total	43	40	4,364

OCR GCSE English literature

The most significant reported error this year was in an optional question, in OCR's GCSE English literature qualification. The error in the question, based on *Romeo and Juliet*, was not found until the exam was in progress. The error was in an optional question worth 40 marks (25% of the qualification), so not all students were affected. This made it more difficult for the exam board to mitigate the impact of the error.

In light of the seriousness of this unacceptable error, we took a keen interest in the way the exam board sought to mitigate the impact on students' performance, the progress of marking in this subject and communication with all stakeholders²³. To assure ourselves that the right decisions were being made and followed through consistently, we attended examiner training, senior examiner discussions and the awarding meeting.

²⁰ Include GCSE, AS, A level, level 1/level 2 certificates and level 3 general qualifications.

²¹ Include GCSE, AS, A level, level 1/level 2 certificates and level 3 general qualifications.

²² IBO Level 3 qualifications not including language variants of standard papers, e.g.; a mathematics paper offered in Spanish.

²³ <http://www.ocr.org.uk/Images/413287-technical-explanation.pdf>

The error was mitigated by the exam board amending the mark scheme and awarding marks which were adjusted to estimate how the candidate might have performed had the error not been made. This included giving a mark for the Shakespeare question which was calculated from the student's performance on other questions where this was higher than the mark given by the examiner. Further information regarding the mitigation of this error can be found in our report 'Monitoring GCSE, AS and A level exams: summer 2017'²⁴.

We started enforcement action in relation to this incident in October 2017, that case is underway and we expect it to conclude early in 2018.

Errors in online and onscreen assessments

The number of online or onscreen assessments is increasing and sometimes there are technical issues that affect the delivery of the assessment. For the purposes of this report we have included such technical issues in the assessment material error figures. As the number of online and onscreen assessments increases, we will consider whether these types of errors should be categorised separately.

Errors in modified question papers

In addition to the standard papers, 4,285 GCSE, AS and A level modified question papers (each a variation from their standard counterparts), were prepared. These include enlarged papers, and, for some boards, papers where the language was modified to be more accessible. There were 15 errors in modified papers found pre-exam, which were mitigated by replacing the papers or issuing an erratum. There were 3 errors found post-exam – which represents 0.07% of all modified papers.

Most errors in the modified papers were introduced during the modification process, so they did not appear in the standard versions of the paper. However, they are no less significant in terms of their potential impact for the small number of students affected. We will continue to provide a forum for equalities stakeholders and the exam boards to work together to develop best practice for the production of modified papers.

Ongoing work relating to assessment materials

Following the summer, we have sought information from each of the exam boards on the causes of the errors and gained assurances they are taking steps to reduce the occurrence of errors in future.

In 2018, we will be working with experts to determine whether the exams for GCSE English language and mathematics papers were written in clear and unambiguous language. The use of such language reduces the need for the language in exam

²⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/monitoring-gcse-as-and-a-level-exams-summer-2017>

papers to be modified and, in turn, reduces the risk of an error being introduced on modification.

Phase 2: Exam administration

Security breaches

Schools and colleges receive exam papers and supporting materials some weeks before the exams are taken. They must make sure they securely store the exam paper packets and only open them immediately before the exam is taken. If a packet is opened early the confidentiality of the materials is at risk.

Exam boards set out how schools and colleges must store and open packets. For example, two people must check that the packet is the correct one before it is opened. Despite this, sometimes mistakes are made. The error is sometimes quickly realised, but in other cases exam papers are given out at the wrong time and/or to the wrong students.

The use of social media and digital messaging can mean that a security breach in one school can be difficult to contain, as confidential information can be readily disseminated. We ask exam boards to tell us when there has been an actual security breach and when there was a potential for a security breach that was contained.

Where a breach happens, we expect the exam board affected to investigate the extent of the breach and take all reasonable steps to mitigate its impact. Where there is evidence of an actual, rather than a potential breach, an exam board might replace the affected exam papers (provided there is enough time and the associated risks can be managed). While social media can be used to disseminate materials that have been made available to the wrong people and/or at the wrong time, the same platform can be used to gather evidence of the extent of any breach. Exam boards may also conduct a statistical analysis of students' performance at individual or cohort level to see if there is any indication they have gained any advantage from a breach. Exam boards can adjust a student's marks in light of their findings or use assessed grades, where necessary, to ensure a student is not unfairly advantaged or disadvantaged by the breach.

Earlier in 2017 we completed an audit of GCSE and A level exam boards' systems of control for preventing, investigating and dealing with security breaches in schools. While the audits did not raise issues of non-compliance with our rules, for some exam boards they highlighted areas for potential improvement, which we have encouraged them to consider.

For summer 2017 we were notified of a total of 114 potential or actual security breaches. A large percentage, 66% (75 cases), of these security breaches arose because of actions taken within schools or colleges. Of these breaches, 46 were

because the centre did not follow the rules relating to keeping confidential exam papers (both non-exam assessment material and exam material) secure, for example by opening packets before the day of exam. Other instances included schools misplacing exam papers on or before the day of the exam. In all cases, the exam boards identified the root cause of the security breach and took action with individuals or schools and colleges that had not followed correct JCQ procedures for conducting exams²⁵. Of the 114 security breaches, 29 were due to schools or colleges handing out the wrong exam papers.

In some cases the circumstances of the breach caused the exam board to treat it as malpractice.

We are encouraging exam boards to take extra steps to reduce incidents where centres open (and sometimes distribute) the wrong papers. We will continue to work with exam boards to help them ensure that schools and colleges adhere to the rules and take action when this does not happen. We have discussed with exam boards closer working with exams officer groups and stakeholders to identify security procedures within centres that are ineffective or inappropriate.

Shortly before some of its GCE mathematics and further mathematics exams were taken, Pearson launched an investigation into allegations that the security of some of the papers had been breached. The police also began a criminal investigation²⁶ Pearson decided to replace some questions in two examinations in a small number of schools and colleges where they had evidence to suggest that some students had access to confidential information about the papers. We monitored Pearson's ongoing investigation and shared the information that we were given by students where we had permission to do so. We were satisfied that Pearson took appropriate steps to secure the delivery of the 2017 exams. When the police investigation has concluded, we will review whether it reveals any ways by which exam security could be improved.

We were alerted to 3 potential breaches of security for GCSE computer science and 5 for GCSE computing in 2017. This followed 12 incidents for GCSE computing in 2016. We have used intelligence from these cases to inform our current work²⁷ on GCSE 9 to 1 computer science.

Malpractice

Everyone involved in the delivery of an exam has a role to play in preventing and reporting malpractice, whether they are teachers, students or examiners. We take

²⁵ <https://www.jcq.org.uk/exams-office/ice---instructions-for-conducting-examinations/instructions-for-conducting-examinations-2017-2018>

²⁶ The criminal investigation is still ongoing at the time of publication.

²⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/consultation-assessment-arrangements-for-gcse-computer-science>

allegations of malpractice very seriously and we expect exam boards to do the same.

Ahead of the summer 2017 exams, we sent posters²⁸ to all schools and colleges for display and we published online postcards to remind teachers and students of the importance of reporting malpractice to us.

Exam boards require schools and their own examiners to report all suspected incidents of malpractice and to cooperate with any subsequent investigation. Exam boards must investigate all allegations of malpractice. Where malpractice is proven, the exam board should take proportionate action against the schools, teachers or students responsible.

This year there was a very small number of widely reported incidents of malpractice, notably those caused by teachers who had been involved in writing exam papers disclosing their contents to their students. Incidents like this are rare but they can have a damaging effect on public confidence and the integrity of the examination system. We are reviewing the practice of teachers writing exam papers and the current safeguards. We have published a separate report²⁹ on our progress with the review.

We do not require exam boards to report all cases of suspected malpractice while they are still investigating. They tell us only of the most serious issues, including those that might affect a number of students. Once their investigations are complete, they must tell us about the total number and types of incidents that caused, or were likely to cause, an adverse effect. This will include cases where they have imposed sanctions. For GCSEs and A levels we collect and publish data on the number of malpractice investigations carried out by the exam boards and their outcomes, including the types of sanctions imposed by exam boards³⁰.

This summer the exam boards notified us of 25 allegations or suspicions of malpractice they were investigating in relation to GCSEs, A levels and level 1/level 2 certificates, compared to 13 last year (as explained above, these notifications related to only the most serious concerns). Table 4 shows this year's notifications broken down by the alleged cause of the malpractice and whether, after investigation, exam boards imposed sanctions on individual students and/or schools and colleges. Not all of these cases have led to malpractice being proven; some cases are still being reviewed. It is important to note that increased reporting of malpractice might reflect a greater awareness and understanding of how to report concerns, not an increase in the number of incidents.

²⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/report-cheating-malpractice-or-wrongdoing-ofqual-urges>

²⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teacher-involvement-in-developing-exam-papers-interim-report>

³⁰ Our Malpractice data is due to be published early January 2018.

Table 4: Exam board notifications of serious malpractice investigations

Alleged source of malpractice	Number of notifications of alleged malpractice	Number of cases where sanctions were imposed	Cases ongoing
Students	3	2 ³¹	1
Schools/Colleges	3	1	-
School/College Staff	10 ³²	4	2
Serving teachers involved in the setting of examinations	9	3	3
Total	25	10	6

In addition to concerns about malpractice that are reported to us by the exam boards, we also receive reports of suspected malpractice relating to schools and colleges directly from students, teachers, parents and others.

As we are designated under the Public Interest Disclosure (Prescribed Persons) Order 2014, eligible workers who make qualified disclosures to us are protected against unfair dismissal or detrimental treatment for blowing the whistle on wrongdoing within their workplace. We have changed our Whistleblowing Policy³³ and accompanying procedures to make it easier to use and to clearly define our remit.

If someone is not classified as a whistle-blower but has concerns about wrongdoing at a school or college, we can share their allegations with the exam board to investigate. We do not generally provide the names of individuals where they do not wish to be identified, but we share the allegations, where doing so will not lead to their identification. When we pass on allegations relating to schools and colleges to exam boards to investigate, we monitor whether they take appropriate action. We follow up where necessary to assure ourselves the allegations were properly investigated and any appropriate sanctions applied. We will investigate any concerns regarding an exam board's approach.

³¹ One exam board notified us of an increased number of malpractice cases relating to GCSE computing which we categorised as one case in these figures. Individual sanctions will be shown in our malpractice data, due to be published shortly.

³² Some centres were investigated by more than one exam board

³³ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ofquals-whistleblowing-policy>

Table 5: The number³⁴ of separate malpractice allegations relating to schools and colleges raised directly with us, compared to 2016.

2017: Total number of malpractice allegations made directly to Ofqual	Number raising concerns about events within their workplace	Number who did not work at the place where malpractice was alleged (includes students and parents)	2016: Total number of malpractice allegations received
47	29	18	23

Under the Public Interest Disclosure (Prescribed Persons) Order 2014, we are named as a Prescribed Person and are required to report annually on whistleblowing disclosures made to us. We plan to report the whistleblowing data for April 2017 – March 2018 in our 2018 Annual Report and then on an annual basis. Examples of the types of issues reported to us this summer include reports from teachers about malpractice in their school and reports from students of incorrect assessment conduct.

Over the next year we will continue to work with key stakeholders to promote a common understanding of malpractice, how to report it and of the sanctions that can be applied. We will explore how social media monitoring can best help us and the exam boards to detect indicators of malpractice.

Phase 3: Marking

Exam boards can mark students’ scripts in a number of ways – on paper and onscreen. Where marking is onscreen, it can be by item (an individual question or several related part questions) or at whole paper level. Marking at item level has advantages in that many different examiners will mark each paper. This minimises the impact of any leniency or severity on the part of any one examiner. If a school has an entry of 100 students for a paper that is marked onscreen at item level, it is possible that over 100 examiners will collectively have marked those scripts.

We collect data on the marking method used by the GCSE and A level exam boards. We have been asked about the marking approach for new 9 to 1 GCSEs and Table 6 provides more detail on the method for each of the new GCSEs, by exam board.

³⁴ Allegations received from 03/01/2017 to 06/11/2017 for GCSE, AS, A level and level 1/level 2 qualifications

Table 6: marking approach used by each of the exam boards in GCSEs (9 to 1) in summer 2017

Exam board	English language (both papers)	English literature (both papers)	Mathematics (all papers)
AQA	Item level onscreen	Full script onscreen	Item level onscreen
OCR	Full script onscreen	Full script onscreen	Full script onscreen
Pearson	Item level onscreen	Item level onscreen	Item level onscreen
WJEC/Eduqas	Item level onscreen	Item level onscreen	Full script paper

Marking progress

Exam boards must notify us if they believe there are issues that might affect their ability to issue results accurately and on time. This year, we asked the GCSE and A level exam boards to give us advance notice of early concerns they had about marking progress.

One exam board alerted us to potential delays in relation to the marking of a total of seven components³⁵ this summer. In all seven cases the delays did not affect the completion of marking. This is a similar picture to progress in 2016, when we were notified of potential delays in a total of five components.

Phase 4: Setting standards

GCSE, AS and A level standard setting

We closely monitor standard setting in GCSEs, AS and A levels. We do this because we expect very close comparability of grade standards between different exam boards and between different specifications in any one subject. Exam boards send us data from their GCSE, AS and A level awards, detailing the results against statistical predictions of the proportions of students likely to achieve the key grades.³⁶

³⁵ Qualifications are made up of a number of components, and students usually take an exam or non-exam assessment for each component.

³⁶ At GCSE, the key grades are A*, A, C and F; at AS they are A and E, and at A level they are A*, A and E.

Our aims in this monitoring are to:

- maintain standards year on year
- align standards across exam boards in a subject
- secure public confidence in the results being issued

We expect exam boards' outcomes to be close to predictions, unless they can provide evidence to justify different outcomes. We set reporting tolerances to be used, based on the number of students entered for a qualification. For example, for qualifications with more than 3,000 students about whom we know their prior attainment, exam boards must report and provide evidence to justify any outcomes that are more than one percentage point away from the prediction. For smaller entry qualifications, the reporting tolerances are wider.

We did not set reporting tolerances for the reformed qualifications. We agreed with the exam boards that they would carry forward standards using statistics. In the new AS and A levels, this meant using predictions so that, in general, a student who would have achieved a grade A in the previous qualifications would achieve a grade A this summer. In the new GCSEs graded 9 to 1, this meant using predictions so that the proportions achieving grades 7, 4 and 1 were anchored to the proportions achieving grades A, C and G in the previous qualifications. In all the new qualifications, we expected exam boards to set grade boundaries to get as close as possible to predictions, unless they had strong evidence to support an alternative boundary mark.

Ahead of the first awards of the new 9 to 1 GCSEs, we considered whether to use the previous results for GCSEs and international GCSEs to set standards in summer 2017. We decided to use only GCSEs from 2016 to set the standards in new GCSEs in 2017. We have published a separate report³⁷ that sets out the analyses we carried out to inform this decision.

Before the summer, we also committed to carry out further work to look at the demand of the new GCSE mathematics live papers. We have published a report³⁸ which details the two separate investigations we carried out, the first of which showed that the overall difficulty of the live assessments was comparable between exam boards and was also similar to the sample assessments. We then investigated the way that problem-solving questions had been constructed and found few differences between the exam boards in their approaches, and greater similarity in question features than was found in the sample assessments.

³⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofqual-2017-summer-exam-series-report>

³⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofqual-2017-summer-exam-series-report>

In August we published a summary of our monitoring work³⁹, which included details of the way in which we monitored the first new GCSE and A level awards in England, details of the number of awards and those that were outside the reporting tolerances or, for reformed qualifications, did not get as close as possible to predictions.

We have published further information about the comparability of exam boards, within a subject, in summer 2017.⁴⁰

This was also the first year of the National Reference Tests (following the Preliminary Reference Tests in 2016). The tests, in English language and mathematics, are taken by a sample of schools to provide additional evidence about students' performance over time in those subjects. The 2017 test will be used to set the benchmark going forward and in future we hope to use the output of the test as an additional source of evidence to set standards in GCSE English language and mathematics. We have published more information about the operation of this year's tests, but we do not plan to use the tests to inform standard setting until at least 2019, so that the new GCSEs have time to bed in.

Phase 5: Post results

Incorrect results

We expect exam boards to mark all assessments accurately and to issue results that reflect the performance of each student. They occasionally make mistakes. The reasons for an error could range from incorrect adding up of marks to a marker's unreasonable exercise of academic judgement. We take the issue of incorrect results, regardless of their causes, very seriously. We will be considering the steps the exam boards are taking to reduce the risks that incorrect results are issued. The numbers of incorrect results arising from marking or moderation errors and identified through a review of marking or moderation are reported separately as part of our publication on the review of marking and moderation statistics⁴¹.

Exam boards may also identify processing errors while dealing with review of marking requests, carrying out internal reviews, or responding to complaints. They must notify us when they have issued incorrect results because of these errors, which are reported in Table 7. The processing errors we saw in summer 2017 largely occurred either while the exam boards were applying mark adjustments, following malpractice investigations or for special considerations, or while students' marks were being recorded (administrative errors). We will be reviewing the exam boards' systems and resources in relation to these areas.

³⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/monitoring-gcse-as-and-a-level-exams-summer-2017>

⁴⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofqual-2017-summer-exam-series-report>

⁴¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/reviews-of-marking-and-moderation-for-gcse-as-and-a-level-summer-2017-exam-series>

Table 7: Processing errors that caused the issue of incorrect results

Root cause of incorrect results	Number of events reported in 2017
Marker / Exam board staff administrative error	17
IT / system error	3
Mark scheme	2
Total	22

Note: In 6 of these events, the errors came to light when schools requested a review of marking

Table 8 shows the impact of the grade changes reported by GCSE and A level exam boards on students' grades at qualification level in summer 2016 and 2017. The number of grade changes for 2017 (850) accounted for 0.01% of the total certifications for GCSE, AS and A levels made this year (6,596,013).

Table 8: Grade changes as a result of processing errors, 2016 and 2017

	2017			2016		
	Total Grade Changes	Grade increases	Grade decreases	Total Grade Changes	Grade increases	Grade decreases
AQA	121 ⁴²	106	15	296	296	0
Cambridge International	40	40	0	50	48	2
IBO	0	0	0	118	118	0
OCR	103 ⁴³	98	5	336	318	18
Pearson	625	625	0	0	0	0
WJEC	1	1	0	216	216	0
Total	890	870	20	1,016	996	20

Note: these figures are accurate as of 08/12/2017.

Reviews of marking and moderation

In August 2016, we put in place new rules for reviews of marking and moderation and for appeals, so that the focus is on correcting errors and on not changing marks for any other reason.

⁴² One case still to be resolved

⁴³ One case still to be resolved

We have published official statistics on reviews of marking and moderation in GCSEs, AS and A levels for summer 2017⁴⁴. Of all GCSE and AS/A level grades issued this year, 1.3% were changed following a review. Although the proportion of grades changed following review remains small, this is an increase from 2016 when 0.9% changed on review.

A total of 520,919 reviews were requested in 2017 compared with 427,100 in 2016⁴⁵. These related to 369,217 qualification grades (as reviews are at paper or component level there is often more than one review per overall grade). Of the 6.6m grades issued, 5.6% were the subject of a review.

The increase in this year's number of request reviews might be explained because more students took GCSE English language and literature; both are subjects where there is not always a single 'right' mark for a student's response. GCSE English language is especially important for progression.

The increase in the number of reviews is also seen across all grades. Similar to previous years, more of the reviews submitted for GCSEs had an original grade of 3 or D. However, the percentage of reviews submitted for an original grade D (or 3 in reformed GCSEs) has fallen and the percentages at all other grades have risen. This could be due to the changes in accountability measures which emphasise progress at all grades.

As in previous years, the majority of assessments reviewed (54.9%) received no mark change following review.

We have also published⁴⁶ further details of grade changes of two or more grades. This shows that the number of changes of two grades or more has increased from 401 in 2016 to 1969 in 2017, mainly due to the number of changes in GCSE English. While changes of two or more grades are rare relative to the number of qualifications awarded - the 1969 changes in summer 2017 represent 0.03% of all qualification grades - we are concerned about the sharp increase in the number of changes on this scale this year.

The data indicate the rise in grades changed after review this year stemmed principally from a rise in the number of successful review requests in new and legacy versions of GCSE English language and English literature. This is partly explained by a significant increase in GCSE entries in these subjects this year, with fewer

⁴⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/reviews-of-marking-and-moderation-for-gcse-as-and-a-level-summer-2017-exam-series>

⁴⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/reviews-of-marking-and-moderation-for-gcse-and-a-level-summer-2016-exam-series>

⁴⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofqual-2017-summer-exam-series-report>

students taking alternative qualifications. However, the proportion of successful grade changes has also risen.

The evidence from a range of original marking and review of marking data points to variation in some exam boards' efforts to embed the revised rules for reviews, rather than issues with the original marking. The data suggests that Pearson was more successful than the others at embedding the rules for reviews of marking.

This is unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. We changed our rules in order to create a more level playing field, so that those students who put in for a review do not gain an advantage over those who do not. We expect the exam boards to follow our rules and we will take action where they do not.

Conclusion

The 2017 exam series was successfully delivered, marking was completed and the results announced on time. The first 9 to 1 GCSEs were awarded successfully. Our 9 to 1 campaign helped a wide range of people understand the new grading arrangements.

Exams in many new qualifications were taken for the first time this year. At the same time exams in the legacy qualifications were available for re-sitting students for the last time. This increased the number of different papers exam boards produced and marked and the number of different qualifications they awarded. It also increased the number of different exams schools and colleges administered. The system coped well.

The exam boards responded appropriately to the unforeseeable and tragic terrorist incidents and the Grenfell Tower fire.

The disclosure of confidential exam materials by a very small number of teachers who had been involved with developing the exams, the compromised security of some GCE mathematics papers, and a serious assessment material error may have had an impact on the public's confidence in a generally successful exam series. We will be working with the exam boards to reduce the risks of such incidents in future.

We are concerned that the new rules for GCSE and GCE reviews of marking we introduced in 2016 have not been embedded by all exam boards in all subjects, despite a promising start last year. We will work with the exam boards affected to address these issues for next year.

We are now looking ahead to next summer. 2018 will see more reformed qualifications taken, including the first sitting of GCSEs (9 to 1) in science, modern foreign languages and religious studies. Our analysis of the exam series has informed our rolling programme of monitoring, audits and technical evaluations which will include:

- a review of the summer 2017 assessment materials for all reformed GCSE and A level qualifications awarded for the first time this summer to identify any aspects of our regulatory requirements that might need to be reviewed
- a review of exam boards' approaches to moderation
- auditing exam boards' monitoring of centres' assessment of A level practical science and GCSE English language spoken language
- marking reliability studies in a variety of subjects, complementing the marking metrics data that we have collected for a number of years
- investigating the functioning of A level science examination items which were designed to indirectly assess practical skills

We will use the findings to inform action we might require the exam boards to take to reduce any risks to the safe delivery and awarding of qualifications next year.

As we did in 2017, we plan to review the GCSE AS and A level exam boards' readiness for the challenges and risks identified for reformed qualifications in 2018. We will also continue our discussions with exam boards and other stakeholders on deterring, preventing, identifying, investigating and sanctioning malpractice and on protecting confidential assessment materials from cyber and other forms of security breach.

Summer 2017 also saw the first awards of new Applied General qualifications with mandatory external assessment. These are offered by many different awarding organisations, including some of the exam boards covered by this report. In many cases, these externally assessed units are timetabled exams and so this is the first summer series that our monitoring has included these qualifications. In 2018, we expect the volumes to be much higher, as many more units will be offered and a wider range of qualifications will be available. We will therefore be monitoring these qualifications more closely to make sure that any issues that might arise are appropriately managed.

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