Office of Qualifications
and Examinations Regulation
Spring Place
Coventry Business Park
Herald Avenue
Coventry CV5 6UB

Telephone 0300 303 3344
Textphone 0300 303 3345
public.enquiries@ofqual.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofqual

6 August 2018

Dear

Tiered 9 to 1 GCSEs in French, German, Spanish, separate sciences and combined science

I am writing further to our recent discussions about the allowed grades on the higher tier in the 9 to 1 GCSEs that are being awarded for the first time this summer – French, German, Spanish (MFL), biology, chemistry, physics and combined science. Our aim in monitoring the first awards of these new GCSEs is to make sure that standards are anchored to those in the legacy qualifications and students are not disadvantaged by being the first to sit these new qualifications. Our recent discussions have focused on this issue in the context of higher tier students.

Tiering is not new in these subjects, but it is the case that the legacy A* to G qualifications were modular GCSEs which, since 2014, had been taken in a linear way (with all assessment at the end). This made them distinct from legacy A* to G GCSE mathematics where, since 2014, the linear version had been taken by the vast majority of students.

One of the main differences in the structures of these legacy qualifications is that in the linear GCSE mathematics, students taking higher tier who did not achieve enough marks for the 'allowed' grade E would receive an unclassified result. In contrast, in the legacy modular qualifications in MFL and the sciences, the inclusion of untiered controlled assessment and the use of UMS marks meant that all grades were available to students taking higher tier modules, and those who did not achieve sufficient marks for a grade E could get a grade F or G, depending on how many UMS marks they scored. This meant that in mathematics students could 'fall off' the higher tier at grade E and so receive an unclassified result, whereas in MFL and the sciences the modular structure of the qualifications meant that students could achieve grades below E. Our analysis of the results in 2017 suggests that between 0 and 10% of students taking all papers (in MFL and the science subjects) at higher tier achieved grades F and G on the legacy modular specifications.

In the reformed 9 to 1 GCSEs, we put in place rules so that all tiered subjects have the same tiering arrangements, with overlap grades at 5 and 4, and an allowed grade 3 on the higher tier. In the double award combined science, the overlap grades are 5-5, 5-4 and 4-4, with an allowed grade 4-3 on the higher tier. Higher tier students who do not score enough marks to be awarded a grade 3 (4-3 in combined science) will receive an unclassified result.

In 9 to 1 mathematics in 2017, approximately 0.5% of higher tier students received an unclassified result, and the figure is likely to be very similar for 2018. However, during the awarding of the new combined science GCSEs, you alerted us to the fact that a greater than expected number of higher tier students were likely to receive an unclassified result. The situation was less severe in MFL and in biology, chemistry and physics and you have no concerns about your 2018 awards in GCSE mathematics.

We have examined possible reasons for the greater volumes of students who could receive an unclassified result in MFL and the sciences, compared to mathematics. Your colleagues have carefully analysed the outcomes of the tier equating, and so we are assured that the issue is not due to higher tier grade 4 boundaries that are inappropriately high. There also do not appear to be systematic problems in the way the question papers have functioned. The most likely reason therefore appears to be that some schools had not appreciated the impact of the structural changes on the grades available to higher tier students, and may therefore not have adjusted their approach to tier entry. As a result, it appears that several thousand students may have been inappropriately entered for higher tier.

Generally, students do not choose their tier of entry. We are mindful of our responsibilities and our public commitment to minimise the impact of structural changes on students taking new qualifications during the transitional period of reform, and particularly in the first year of awards.

We discussed an alternative approach to the allowed grade on the new double award GCSE combined science specifications. In line with the GCSE 9 to 1 qualification level conditions, you must consider moving the 4-3/U boundary on higher tier where there is technical and statistical evidence to do so, for example to make it a full width grade. We have reviewed the modelling that you have done and it is clear that a full width grade 4-3 on higher tier would generally not fully mitigate the impact of inappropriate tier entry. We have therefore considered an exceptional arrangement whereby this year you would also award an allowed grade 3-3 on higher tier.

There is currently no provision in our rules for a grade 3-3 to be awarded on the higher tier of a double award GCSE. Nevertheless, it is appropriate that we act to minimise the likelihood that thousands of higher tier students receive unclassified results, which means that their performance is not recognised appropriately.

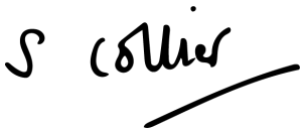
Therefore we would be open to you awarding a 3-3 grade on higher tier in combined science this year. You will want to make sure that your senior examiners are content with the proposed boundary marks – with the standard of work that would be reflected by this grade. You will also need to assure yourself that your systems can cope with such a change at this point in the awarding process. On balance, we consider that allowing you to take such action would be in the interests of the students in these individual and particular circumstances and would not undermine our objective to maintain standards in these new GCSEs.

In relation to MFL and the separate sciences, the GCSE 9 to 1 qualification level conditions for setting the allowed grade 3 on higher tier in single award GCSEs require you to provisionally set the boundary mark at half the mark difference between the 5/4 and 4/3 boundaries on higher tier, but also require you to consider moving it "where a review of statistical and technical evidence leads [you] to judge that the 3/U boundary should be set at a different mark". In our view, the structural changes and the evidence of grade distributions in the legacy modular specifications provide such evidence. We discussed the fact that awarding a full width grade 3 would be consistent with the approach taken in combined science, and would ensure that students taking these new tiered GCSEs in the first year would be treated consistently, regardless of subject and exam board.

It will also be important for you to provide enhanced support to those schools and colleges who are affected by these changes, in order that they have the opportunity to reconsider their approach to tier entry for 2019 and beyond. You will need to support teachers to understand the potential consequences of inappropriate entry decisions when the exceptional arrangements we have made for this year are not available.

I am sending this letter to the Responsible Officers of all exam boards offering these specifications in England, and copying it to the regulators in Wales and Northern Ireland.

Yours sincerely,



Sally Collier
Chief Regulator