

Summer 2019: GCSE, AS and A levels

I want to take this opportunity to reflect on the first two weeks of GCSE, AS and A level exams, and thank you and your colleagues for helping to run them so efficiently. I also want to look ahead to the remainder of the exam period and remind you about the range of resources we have available to support you and your colleagues.

Exams so far

We know that students often take to social media to voice their views about exam papers. This year already we have seen several instances of individuals on social media claiming to have copies of live papers, and in some cases offering them for sale. I urge you to remind your students not to be distracted by such claims, or to initiate them. Exam boards take such matters very seriously and any students found to be involved could face sanctions.

It is in everyone's interests that the security of papers is maintained, so that the exam system is fair for all students. Please remind your staff to be vigilant in opening papers on the day of the exam. JCQ has produced [a video that explains the process to be followed](#). There are three key points to remember.

- Papers must be stored securely at all times
- Two people must check the time, date and any other relevant information **before** each packet is opened, and sign to say they have done that
- Packets should only be opened within 60 minutes of the published start time (either 9.00 am or 1.30 pm)

Maintaining standards

This year, almost all of the GCSEs, AS and A levels taken in England will be reformed specifications – we [published provisional entry statistics](#) for these qualifications last week. For some subjects, such as GCSE English language and maths, this summer will be the third year of awards in the new specifications. For others, for example, GCSE design and technology, or A level politics, it is the first year.

For those exams already taken, exam boards will already be starting to mark students' responses. In many cases, that means students' exam scripts are scanned and separated into individual questions which are sent electronically to different markers. For some papers, this will mean many different people marking the scripts from one school.

Once marking is complete, exam boards will be able to judge how difficult this year's papers were compared to previous years, and set appropriate grade boundaries. They do this by using both statistics and senior examiners' judgements about the quality of work at key grade boundaries. The boundaries determine the marks needed for each grade. This method provides flexibility to account for changes in performance of the student cohort, so the proportion of grades awarded is not fixed. Despite this, we know that some people

will try to predict where grade boundaries will be set. Please treat any such predictions with caution.

In those subjects being awarded for the first time this year, exam boards will use statistics to carry forward the standards from the previous qualifications – as was the case for subjects awarded for the first time in 2017 and 2018. For the new GCSEs, the same anchor points between the old and new grade scales will apply as in previous years. Where the cohort taking each GCSE is similar to that in 2018, we expect that:

- broadly the same proportion of students will receive a grade 7 and above as previously received grade A and above;
- broadly the same proportion of students will receive a grade 4 and above as previously received grade C and above; and
- the bottom of grade 1 will align with the bottom of grade G previously.

We've produced a short [film](#), and [animation for students](#), that explain in more detail how we maintain standards between exam boards and over time.

National Reference Test

This is the third year of the National Reference Test (NRT) and the first time that we will use the results of the test to inform the way in which grade boundaries are set in GCSE English language and GCSE maths. We have already published [more detail on how we will make this decision](#), and on GCSE results day (22 August) we will publish the results and the reasons for our decision.

Variability in results at school/college level

We know that it is normal for schools and colleges to see some variation in their year-on-year results, either up or down. This can be due to many different factors including the ability mix of the students, different teaching approaches, changes to the qualification itself, changes in teaching staff, or the amount of time allocated to teaching a particular subject. Generally, when qualifications change, we expect that there might be more variation in school and college results. However, in 2017 and 2018 we saw normal levels of variation, including in those subjects that were reformed. We concluded that schools and colleges had coped well with the changes. But it is still possible that some schools and colleges could see more variation than usual this year. We will publish more information about this on results days in August.

Keeping in touch

You may find it helpful to [sign up for our newsletter, Exam Matters](#). I would also encourage you to continue to use the resources we have produced, including:

- those to explain [the reforms](#), to help raise awareness and understanding of your students, their parents/carers and others within your school/college and local community
- our [guides for schools/colleges](#) and [for students](#), which include additional information about the key elements of the exam system, including how the key processes are expected to work and what schools, colleges and students can expect from exam boards
- and those to [support students in coping with exam pressure](#), and [exams officers in their work over the remainder of the series](#).

Do feel free to share this letter with your governing body, teaching staff and others in your school.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "S Collier". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish underneath the name.

Sally Collier
Chief Regulator