



Director of Admissions

30 May 2019

To the Director of Admissions

I am writing to provide an overview of recent changes to some of the qualifications we regulate that are typically taken by students in England to support their entry to higher education. I also highlight instances – with which you may already be familiar - of differences between qualifications with similar titles that you may wish to consider when making decisions about entry to your institution.

Reformed GCSEs, AS and A levels - England

This summer is a major milestone in the reform of GCSE, AS and A levels because, in all but a few subjects, students will take reformed qualifications. This means they will have studied updated content and will take all their exams at the end of the course. A levels continue to be graded A* - E and AS graded A – E. At GCSE the grading scale has changed to 9 to 1. You can find details of when each of the reformed qualifications was introduced [here](#).

We make sure that exam boards maintain the standards of these qualifications. For AS and A level this means that, all things being equal, a student who would have received a B in a legacy qualification will get a B in the new qualification. At GCSE, standards in the legacy qualification are carried forward to the new one at three key reference points. We have produced a range of information [about how the 9 to 1 grades relate to the previous A* - G grades](#). This makes clear that, for example, a university that previously required at least a GCSE at grade C in a subject should now require a grade 4 if it wants to carry forward its previous entry standard.

This year you will have received applications from students with 9 to 1 grades for GCSE English language, English literature and mathematics. From next summer most 18-year-old applicants from England will have taken GCSEs graded 9 to 1.

Reform in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

The GCSEs, AS and A levels that are taken across England, Wales and Northern Ireland are now different from each other in most subjects.

We have published a [statement](#) with the regulators in Wales and Northern Ireland that summarises the main similarities and differences between the qualifications available in

each jurisdiction. This confirms that there are differences in some of the design features of the new qualifications but that they also continue to share a number of features and sets out the broad comparisons that can be made between them.

Applied Generals and Tech Levels

Following government requirements introduced in 2016 for level 3 qualifications that count in school and college performance tables, many awarding organisations changed some of their qualifications. These redeveloped qualifications are described as 'Applied Generals' or 'Tech Levels' but are commonly known by brand names (such as BTECs and Cambridge Technicals). However, many students are still taking the pre-existing qualifications, which remain available. These use the same brand names so it is not always easy to tell from the name alone whether a qualification is the redeveloped version or not – the best approach is to check it appears on the full list of redeveloped qualifications [here](#). The Department for Education is currently proposing to withdraw funding eligibility for the pre-existing qualifications from August 2020, where there are two versions of the same qualification running in parallel.

It is not possible to make meaningful comparisons between the pre-existing and redeveloped qualifications because they are sometimes very different, based on different content and assessment methodologies, notably the introduction of mandatory external assessment with limited resit opportunities in place of coursework or controlled assessment. While the overall pass rate is similar between the pre-existing and redeveloped qualifications, the grade distributions differ. Across the range of redeveloped qualifications, in 2018 fewer than 5% of candidates completing the course achieved a top grade, compared with around a third of the candidates achieving a top grade in the pre-existing versions. The picture is not uniform, however, and the grade profile varies across subjects. We set out further information on the differences between the two versions in [our Ofqual blog](#).

International GCSEs

Some students in England take International GCSEs (sometimes known as level 1/2 certificates) rather than GCSEs. UK universities also, of course, welcome applications from international students who hold these qualifications. We have recently published a [blog](#) on GCSEs and International GCSEs and how they operate in England, including details of those International GCSEs that we currently regulate. The awarding organisations that offer these qualifications have chosen for them not to be regulated after this summer.

We explain in the blog that, whether or not they are regulated, as GCSEs and International GCSEs are not the same qualifications, we believe it is not possible to say with precision how the standards of the two suites of qualifications compare.

Comparing different qualifications

You will be used to seeing many different qualifications on students' applications and deciding what value to place on them. It is important that you are aware of these differences so you can determine whether and how to take account of them. Where exact comparability matters for entry to your courses, you might wish to look behind the qualifications' titles to understand how they compare.

Further information

We work closely with UCAS to share information about changes to qualifications and will continue to do so. Please contact us at public.enquiries@ofqual.gov.uk if you have any questions or if you would like to share your views with us.

An electronic copy of this letter is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/letter-to-directors-of-admissions-higher-educational-institutions> if you want to access any of the above links to additional information.

I hope you find this information useful.

Yours sincerely

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

Sally Collier
Chief Regulator