



23 January 2020

For the attention of headteachers

Dear Headteacher,

### **Tiered GCSEs in summer 2020**

Ahead of the entry deadline for the summer 2020 exams, I would like to remind you of [the advice we have previously given](#) about making appropriate tier entries for your students. This applies to GCSEs in maths, biology, chemistry, physics, combined science, and modern foreign languages.

Where GCSEs are tiered, it is important that students are entered appropriately. Available grades on foundation tier are 5 to 1 (5-5 to 1-1 in combined science) and available grades on higher tier are 9 to 4 (9-9 to 4-4 on combined science) with a narrow 'safety net' grade 3 (4-3 in combined science) for those students who just miss grade 4 (or 4-4).

Higher tier students who do not achieve enough marks for that safety net grade will receive an unclassified result (U). Therefore, a student who is expected to achieve a grade 4 or grade 5 should be entered for foundation tier. We know that some membership organisations recommend the opposite, but that puts students at risk of missing out on a grade (two grades for combined science) if they do not perform as well as expected.

I can reassure you that a grade 4 gained on foundation tier is the same as a grade 4 gained on the higher tier, and this is also the case for grade 5. Exam boards are required to make sure that it is no easier or more difficult to achieve a grade 4 or 5 on higher or foundation tier. There is nothing on certificates that details the tier of entry.

More detailed letters setting out the arrangements in science and MFL will be sent directly to Heads of Department, but the following provides a brief summary of the situation in those subjects.

#### Arrangements for combined science

In combined science, the available grades are 9-9 to 4-4, with a 'safety net' grade 4-3. Higher tier students who just miss a grade 4-4 will be awarded a grade 4-3; this safety net grade is intentionally narrower, and is set at half a grade width. Students below this safety net grade will receive an unclassified result (U).

We therefore recommend that students who are expected to achieve a grade 4-4 or 5-4 should be entered for foundation tier.

In 2019 just under 4,500 students were ungraded on higher tier combined science, out of a total entry of over 140,000. This is significantly fewer than the 11,000 students that would have been ungraded in summer 2018 if no action had been taken, but still a relatively high number, so we hope you will give this careful consideration.

#### Arrangements for modern foreign languages (MFL)

The available grades for higher tier are 9 to 4, with a 'safety net' grade 3. Higher tier students who just miss a grade 4 will be awarded a grade 3; this safety net grade is intentionally narrower, and is set at half a grade width. Students below this safety net grade will receive an unclassified result (U).

We therefore recommend that students who are expected to achieve a grade 4 or 5 should be entered for foundation tier.

In November 2019, we [announced](#) that we will adjust grading standards in French and German GCSEs in summer 2020. At grade 4, this will be a small adjustment and our strong advice is that this should not influence your tier entry decisions for 2020.

#### More information

Please [visit our blog](#) for more information about GCSE tiering decisions for summer 2020 and feel free to use any of this material in your communications to parents/guardians.

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, Ofqual