

GCSE, AS and A level summer report 2019

Introduction and background

There are 4 exam boards in England which deliver GCSEs, AS and A levels – AQA, OCR, Pearson and WJEC (Eduquas). Ofqual is the body responsible for monitoring how the boards prepare for and deliver examinations. They have a specific responsibility to ensure that: exams are fit for purpose and delivered to plan; accurate results are delivered on time; and standards are maintained in each qualification between exam boards and over time. This report from Ofqual provides an overview of the 2019 summer exams including a summary of key issues and of the actions which were taken by Ofqual and by the exam boards as a result.

Key points

Examination entry statistics

- In summer 2019, a total of 942,155 candidates took GCSE examinations; 284,850 candidates took A levels and 58,570 took AS levels. The numbers for AS show a sharp decline since 2018 when they stood at 153,405.
- GCSE entries in EBacc subjects rose by 4 per cent whereas entries in non-EBacc subjects fell by 9 per cent.
- In 2019, 25 new GCSEs and 19 new A levels were awarded in England for the first time.

Follow up of issues from 2018 and planning for 2019

- Following the 2018 examination series, Ofqual raised some specific concerns with exam boards about a number of recurring issues which had been identified.
- In 2018 some erratum notices provided more information about the affected question than was necessary, risking the confidentiality of the assessment. Ahead of the 2019 exams, the exam boards reviewed the format of their erratum notices to ensure they did not share the question itself, only the detail of the error.
- In 2018 there was an increase in the number of incorrect papers being handed out, usually by invigilators and exams officers, to students. Ahead of 2019, exam boards required schools and colleges to evidence that 2 people were present to check the papers when opening and distributing exam papers.
- In 2018 there was some inconsistency in how schools and colleges dealt with students who had been given the incorrect paper. Ahead of 2019, exam boards issued instructions to schools and colleges about how to deal with this type of incident.
- In the run up to the 2019 summer series, Ofqual carried out a large number of public engagement activities, including: materials and blogs to help students to avoid exam stress; information about the marking of exams and the setting of grade boundaries; and information about the reformed qualifications. Ofqual also monitored social media to identify and respond to areas of concern.
- In 2018, around one third of schools had some students who were inappropriately entered for higher tier exams in combined science and modern foreign languages. As an

- exceptional arrangement, exam boards allowed the award of a grade 3 to some of these students instead of simply giving them an unclassified result. Ofqual wrote to schools and colleges in January 2019 to remind them that these arrangements would not be repeated, and to advise them that any student with a predicted grade 4 should be entered for the foundation tier. Analysis of entry data shows that most schools and colleges heeded this advice.
- Access arrangements are put in place by exam boards in response to the requirement to make reasonable adjustments for students with a disability. During the 2018-19 academic year, there were 404,600 approved access arrangements, up 3.4 per cent on the previous year.
- There have been sharp increases in the numbers of requests for extra time (up 5% between 2017 and 2018 and up a further 9% between 2018 and 2019). This is a matter of concern to Ofqual which has asked exam boards should provide more detailed and granular data about such requests from 2020.
- During the 2019 summer series, Ofqual was made aware of some questions which were very similar to questions which appeared in past papers, sample papers or textbooks. However, in cases where there were perceived similarities, statistical analysis conducted by the boards did not show that the items in question functioned unusually.
- There were some concerns about the level of difficulty of some of Pearson's A level maths papers. Ofqual closely monitored the steps which Pearson took in awarding A level maths; it also considered the demand of Pearson's papers as part of an investigation into all exam boards' A level maths grade boundaries. Pearson has now published information about its plans to improve the accessibility of maths papers for 2020 onwards.
- In 2019, there was a decrease in the number of errors on exam papers or mark schemes. There were only 21 category 1 errors (errors which could make it impossible for learners to give a meaningful response to the question).



Exam delivery

- The number of security breaches (e.g. exam papers being given out at the wrong time or to the wrong students) was the same as in the previous year (68). Many of these breaches were isolated incidents where only centre staff saw the material.
- In April 2019, a centre reported to AQA that they had been sent details of 2 short videos posted to a user's Snapchat story. In the first video, AQA GCSE French and GCE sociology papers were visible. In the second video, the outer consignment package was visible with the address label. AQA replaced the papers and arranged for the originals to be collected from the schools and colleges to which they had been sent. AQA investigated the breach and the police later arrested and interviewed the individual believed to be responsible for taking the exam papers and sharing them on Snapchat.
- AQA was contacted by a number of schools and colleges to report that students had seen one page of a GCSE religious studies question paper on Snapchat. This happened over the weekend before the exam was due to take place. AQA conducted statistical analysis to try and identify any geographical area or particular school or college(s) that appeared to have been advantaged. However, the data did not indicate any anomalous performance. AQA identified some students who had had access to the Snapchat message in advance of the exam and provided them with estimated marks.
- This year there were several instances of individuals on social media claiming to have copies of live papers, and in some cases offering them for sale. The exam boards followed up all the posts which were identified. Where exam boards were able to identify students, they sanctioned those students who had requested or had shared the information.
- This year there was a new requirement for schools and colleges to keep a record of the 2 people who must be present when the papers are opened. This measure appears to have been effective – this year, only 25 breaches occurred because of the wrong paper being opened or handed out.
- In 2019, there were 33 reported events which compromised exam delivery. The most common issues were missing scripts (7) and incorrect content (6). There were 3 instances of cyber-attack, including the use of ransomware.
- In 2019, 3,040 penalties were issued to students for malpractice, an 11 per cent increase since 2018. The most common type of malpractice was bringing a phone or other communication device into the exam room.
- A total of 335 staff received penalties, most of which were for maladministration.

Marking and maintaining standards

- Some concerns were raised in the media this year about the consistency of exam marking. Ahead of results day, the Sunday Times published a story stating that 'teenagers who sat essay-based A levels may be awarded the wrong mark because of inconsistent marking'. This report misrepresented research which Ofqual had conducted and a rebuttal was issued.
- In another case, an individual claiming to be a GCSE English language examiner, raised concerns about the quality of AQA's marking. Subject experts were subsequently asked to review some of the scripts selected for standardisation meetings; no evidence was found to

support the claims.

- There were a small number of cases where examiners were asked to mark papers from a school or college for which they had recorded a conflict of interest. As a result, the 2 exam boards affected put in place additional manual checks for all remaining marking. Going forward, Ofqual will ask all boards to review the advice which they give about conflicts of interest.
- Ofqual monitors standard setting to ensure that standards are consistent across both exam boards and subjects. In August Ofqual published a summary of its 2019 monitoring work. This can be downloaded from: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/826699/Summer_2019_monitoring_summary_-_FINAL196533.pdf

Post results

- This year, the proportion of marking reviews requested, and the number of subsequent grade changes was in line with 2018 figures. In all, 5.4 per cent of all GCSE grades awarded were challenged and 1.1 per cent of the grades were changed.
- At GCE (including AS and A level), 7.4 per cent of all grades awarded were challenged and 1.5 per cent of grades were changed.
- There has been a significant increase in requests for a review of marking at A level, particularly in mathematics. The most likely reasons for this are the decoupling of AS and A level and the linear structure of the new exams.
- Exam boards have now been told by Ofqual that the outcomes of their marking and moderation reviews will be one of the indicators by which their quality of marking is measured.
- In 2019, Ofqual identified a number of subjects where, in 2018, an increased number of grade changes (compared to 2017) were made following reviews of moderation. A review of those subjects has been conducted and Ofqual will share its findings with the exam boards and expect them to implement any recommended improvements.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofqual-reports-and-research-2019>