

## **Ofqual Article for DAGB (05.12.17)**

### **Ofqual**

The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) regulates qualifications, examinations and assessments in England. We maintain standards and confidence in GCSEs, GCEs (A and A levels) and vocational and technical qualifications. We're independent of government and report directly to Parliament.

Ofqual are responsible for making sure that regulated qualifications reliably indicate the knowledge, skills and understanding students have demonstrated; that assessments and exams show what a student has achieved; and that people have confidence in the qualifications themselves. We also provide students and teachers with information on the range of qualifications that we regulate.

Ofqual decides which organisations can offer GCSEs, AS and A levels. We also set the rules for assessing the subject content. Exam boards can only award GCSEs, AS and A levels if we have accredited them, and we only accredit qualifications when we are confident the exam board can comply with the requirements for the qualification on an on-going basis.

Whilst we regulate the exam boards that provide qualifications, we don't specify the subject content that students must cover in a particular qualification. Curriculum and teaching are the responsibility of the Department of Education, which has set and published the subject content for all reformed GCSEs, and AS and A levels.

Ofqual do not regulate schools or colleges and so we do not place any requirements directly on them. But some of our rules for the exam boards affect the way they must interact with schools and colleges and the obligations exam boards place on them. This reflects the important role schools and colleges play in making sure the qualifications system works effectively and fairly.

### **Introducing new GCSEs and A levels**

This summer saw the first awards of new GCSEs in English language, English literature and maths, as well as in a number of new A levels, including the sciences. What should you consider now that you've seen your school's exam results this year?

### **New content and assessment**

All new GCSEs are based on new subject content and assessment requirements and graded from 9 to 1, with 9 being the highest grade. The new grades signal a change to GCSEs, with more grades at the top end to differentiate better between higher performing students. The new qualifications also:

- have more demanding subject content than the qualifications they replace
- are accessible to the same proportion of students that previously sat GCSE examinations at the end of key stage 4
- are structured so that all the assessments are taken at the end of the course and, for the three new GCSE subjects this year, all assessment is by examination
- use tiered examination papers only where it is necessary: so English language and English literature GCSEs are not tiered and GCSE mathematics is tiered

The new GCSEs are being phased in. By 2020 all GCSEs taken in England will have been reformed and graded 9 to 1.

This year also saw the first results for new A levels. The reformed A levels have been decoupled from AS in England. This means that in the reformed qualifications, AS results no longer count towards an A level in the way used to. Universities have also played a greater role in deciding the content for the new qualifications than they did previously. Although the new A levels are linear, and the content and assessment requirements have changed, the standard has not.

In the reformed A level biology, chemistry and physics qualifications, practical science work is now reported separately. Students have to complete at least twelve different experiments over the two years of their course, which are assessed according to criteria that are common to all exam boards. A separate pass grade is issued to those students who meet the criteria.

### **Awarding**

In the awarding process, which determines the grading standards in the reformed GCSE qualifications, exam boards have made use of predictions based on students' prior attainment at Key Stage 2 under a system known as 'comparable outcomes'. The same has been done for AS and A level using predictions based on prior attainment at GCSE. As in previous years, senior examiners have been involved in all awards to check whether student work at the boundaries suggested by the statistics was acceptable for the grade.

The principle of comparable outcomes is not new. It has always been used by exam boards, and it is a particularly appropriate approach when qualifications change. It is a principle that exam boards have followed for decades: that if the ability of the cohort of students is similar to previous years, they would expect results to be similar. This is particularly important at times of change, to protect students from being disadvantaged because they are the first to sit new qualifications. We have been clear since before students embarked on these new courses that the exam boards would use predictions to set standards in these new GCSE and A levels. Predictions also give us a mechanism to make sure exam boards' standards are aligned, so that it is no easier to get a grade with one than with another.

This summer saw the first award of the new grade 9 in the reformed GCSE English language, English literature and mathematics specifications. Grade 9 is not the same as A\*: *it is a new*

*grade, designed to recognise the very highest performing students, so there are fewer grade 9s than there were A\*s previously.*

## **National results**

Overall GCSE outcomes were stable last summer. In the reformed qualifications, results for 16-year-olds in English language, English literature and mathematics are stable at grade C/4 when comparing combined GCSE and international GCSE outcomes last summer with GCSE this summer.

Similarly, results were stable for both reformed and unreformed A levels. For the reformed AS, entries have dropped which makes it much more difficult to compare year-on-year results.

## **Variation in school-level results**

We know from the analyses we've published in recent years that individual schools can see some unexpected increases or decreases in their pupils' results from year-to-year. This is normal, and can be due to many different factors, including differences in the ability mix of the students, different teaching approaches, changes in teaching staff or teaching time, and changes to qualifications.

We know there is the potential for some more variability in individual school results in the first few years after new qualifications are introduced, even though national results are stable, as teachers take time to gain familiarity with them. Individual teachers and schools will respond differently, so the year-on-year variation at school level may be greater – although in the reformed qualifications in summer 2017 we did not see a general increase in the normal levels of school level variability.

## **The Governing Body's Role**

Experience tells us that some year-on-year variation in school performance is normal and has a number of causes. It may be that some schools that that didn't perform as well in the new qualifications in the first year, as they struggled to adjust to the new qualifications, will quickly improve their results as they better understand the new requirements. You will therefore want to carefully consider any reasons for changes in your results and whether these are likely to be one-off or, for example, suggest a change in your school's performance in teaching these subjects.

You can find out more about variation in individual school level results, and other information to help explain this year's results, on our website: <https://www.ofqual.gov.uk>

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*{Ed: - We are pleased to include this article in order that colleagues may form a more accurate picture of the role of Ofqual and dis-spell some of the myths that might (and do) often exist. Our grateful thanks to Jonathan}.*