



By email

Jayne Bryant MS
Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee

4 October 2022

Dear Jayne

We are happy to provide the Committee with more information about the decisions made related to grading in Summer 2022 and would also like to take the opportunity to inform the Committee of the decision made by the Board in relation to grading in November 2022/Summer 2023.

In operationalising the decision for outcomes to fall broadly midway between those seen in 2019 and 2021 it was always our intention that judgements made within the process should err on the side of more positive outcomes. This was to recognise the very specific context for awards this year and to give learners confidence that they would not be disadvantaged relative to their peers elsewhere. However, until July this commitment fell short of taking specific action to weight outcomes towards those seen in 2021.

The processes for awarding GCSEs, AS and A levels are broadly similar across jurisdictions, but differences exist. These are partly because the context for ensuring comparability is slightly different across jurisdictions. In Wales, where there is one awarding body (WJEC) delivering made-for-Wales qualifications, our focus is on comparability over time. In England, as well as considering comparability over time Ofqual must consider comparability across the four awarding bodies awarding GCSEs, AS and A levels.

As detailed work progressed to operationalise the grading policy in England, Ofqual became concerned that there was a risk that the approach taken there could lead to outcomes that fell below a simple interpretation of the midpoint, so decided in July to weight the approach towards 2021 outcomes. This meant that the technical process to enact the 'broadly midway' policy was weighted 60:40 towards 2021.

Whilst we were party to discussions leading up to this decision, we were not involved in the decision itself, which was rightly for Ofqual to make as it related to awards in England. We were less concerned that the approach taken in Wales would lead to outcomes falling below a simple interpretation of 'broadly midway' but decided that the interests of learners in Wales were best protected by mirroring the approach taken by Ofqual. Ultimately, we would not want learners in Wales to be at a disadvantage relative to their peers taking the same qualifications in England. We then worked with WJEC to implement a similar weighting towards 2021 outcomes for learners taking made-for-Wales GCSEs, AS and A levels.

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As you have noted, this does lead to the potential issue of a 'cliff edge' of correction back to pre-pandemic standards in 2023. We share the Committee's concern that this should be avoided and, therefore, recommended to our Board that the approach towards grading in 2023 should aim for outcomes that are broadly midway between 2019 and 2022 – in effect seeking to implement a further step towards pre-pandemic standards in 2023 rather than a firm correction back to them. In making this decision the Board considered:

- The ongoing impact of the disruption to education because of the pandemic and the likelihood that some disruption from illness and other social factors may continue into this academic year
- The fact that a full correction to pre-pandemic standards in 2023 would present too much of a cliff edge
- The unitised nature of many qualifications in Wales (particularly the relationship of a 'coupled' AS and A level model) meant that it would not be possible to make a full correction to pre-pandemic standards because of the approach taken in 2022¹.

The Board also considered the position that was likely to be taken by Ofqual, which has now been confirmed, that similar qualifications under the made-for-England policy will be awarded at a pre-pandemic standard in 2023, using outcomes in 2019 as the benchmark.

This means that the grading approaches will be slightly different across jurisdictions in 2023, while Wales takes more time to correct back to pre-pandemic standards. In making its decision, the Board reflected on supportive feedback provided by several stakeholders in Wales. The Board also considered the risks associated with taking a different approach to Ofqual but considered that these risks were manageable and did not outweigh the considerations outlined in the bullet points above. It is currently intended that there will effectively be a correction to pre-pandemic standards in Wales in 2024¹.

We announced our decision in relation to grading in November 2022 and Summer 2023 on 29 September – the same day as Ofqual announced its decision. Representatives that we have engaged with from HE have welcomed the early clarity that we have provided.

I hope that this information has addressed the points raised in your letter, but please feel free to contact me if I can be of any further assistance.

Yours sincerely



Philip Blaker
Chief Executive

¹ There will be some effect from grading decisions in AS levels and some GCSE units made in 2023 into outcomes in 2024. However, the impact will be small.