

REVIEW OF THE SUMMER 2018 EXAM SERIES



FEBRUARY 2019

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Introduction

The summer examination series is the biggest exam series that Qualifications Wales regulates. Our role as the independent regulator of qualifications in Wales is to ensure appropriate processes are in place to provide GCSE, AS and A level assessments and to scrutinise the award of these qualifications and the Welsh Baccalaureate. Some exams are still sat in November and January each year, but the summer series is the main exam session. Its success is achieved through effective delivery by the exam boards, overseen by the regulators: us in Wales, Ofqual in England and CCEA in Northern Ireland.

The 2018 summer series produced a total of 739,655 exam scripts (marked exam papers) in Wales. GCSE scripts comprised just under 80% of this total (580,695), with the remaining entries split between AS (91,100) and A level (67,855). 75% of the scripts were marked by examiners using on-screen marking systems. Overall, 369,430 certificates were awarded in Wales for the 2018 summer series¹.

The reformed qualifications have been introduced in phases, so those awarded this summer are at different stages in their life cycle:

- GCSE qualifications in English Language and Welsh Language were awarded for the third time in summer 2018, whilst English Literature and Welsh Literature were awarded for the second time.
- This was the fourth time the new GCSE Mathematics and GCSE Mathematics-Numeracy qualifications were awarded (they were awarded for the first time in November 2016).
- The six new science GCSE qualifications were also awarded for the first time along with nine other new GCSEs².
- Fourteen A level qualifications that had been taught from September 2015 were awarded for the second time this summer³.
- Nine new A level qualifications were awarded for the first time in the subjects that had been taught from September 2016⁴.

¹ <https://www.qualificationswales.org/english/publications/reviews-of-marking-and-moderation-for-gcse-as-and-a-level-in-wales-summer-2018-exam-series/> - see Table 1 of accompanying data tables.

² Art and Design, Drama, Food and Nutrition, French, Geography, German, Music, Physical Education, Spanish.

³ Art and Design, Biology, Business, Chemistry, Computer Science, Economics, English Language, English Language and Literature, English Literature, History, Physics, Psychology, Sociology, Welsh Language

⁴ Drama, French, Geography, German, Music, Physical Education, Religious Studies, Spanish, Welsh Second Language.

- Six new AS level qualifications were awarded in subjects that had been taught from September 2017⁵.
- Although A level Mathematics had only been taught from September 2017, it was awarded for the first time in the summer due to the way it is delivered by many schools alongside A level Further Mathematics.
- The new Advanced and Key Stage 4 Welsh Baccalaureate programmes were awarded for the second time, and the new post-16 Welsh Baccalaureate at National and Foundation levels were awarded for the third time.

A small number of AS and A levels in subjects that have not been reformed will continue to be taken across Wales, England and Northern Ireland.

In Wales, reformed GCSEs, AS and A levels are only offered by WJEC, which is also the exam board providing the Welsh Baccalaureate. Qualifications in subjects that have not been reformed in Wales are provided by AQA, OCR, Pearson and WJEC (under the Eduqas brand). We regulate these qualifications alongside our fellow regulators, Ofqual and CCEA.

This report gives an overview of the summer 2018 examination series; our approach to overseeing the delivery, standard setting and awarding of assessments for general qualifications sat by learners in Wales.

⁵ Design and Technology, Government and Politics, Law, Mathematics, Further Mathematics and Media Studies

Preparing for the series

Our regulatory approach

WJEC is now the main provider of GCSEs, AS and A levels in Wales and the Welsh Baccalaureate, so that is where we focused our monitoring activities.

We took a close interest in WJEC's preparations for the summer exams and awarding period. We checked the planned approach to the exam series and, in particular, the identification and management of risks to the secure delivery of the series.

Qualification reforms meant that in many subjects new qualifications were awarded for first time alongside the last award of legacy qualifications. So this exam series was one of the busiest ever for exam boards, who produced over 1,000 exam papers, in both Welsh and English.

Along with our fellow regulators, Ofqual and CCEA, we engaged with all exam boards that offer GCSEs and A levels, as well as the body that represents them, the Joint Council of Qualifications (JCQ). Through this work we identified risks and issues, exchanged information and received regular updates.

As the independent regulator for qualifications in Wales, we answer directly to the Welsh National Assembly, but we recognise that exam results are of interest to Welsh Ministers. We therefore established clear working guidelines with Welsh Government and provided regular updates during the awarding and results period including early sight of our publications.

Joint working

A small number of qualifications have not been reformed and continue to be taken across Wales, England and Northern Ireland. We regulate the non-reformed three-country qualifications alongside Ofqual and CCEA.

We sent a letter to the exam boards in June to set out our expectations for the summer. This referred to similar communications sent by Ofqual and CCEA. In 2017, we produced a joint statement and infographic to explain the main similarities and differences between the qualifications offered in each country⁶.

We discussed arrangements for overseeing the awarding process with Welsh Government via the Information Sharing Group (ISG) which met several times in June, July and August. This group provided a channel for supporting Welsh Government

⁶ <http://qualificationswales.org/media/2436/3-countries-4pp-eng.pdf>

officials and Ministers interpreting both entries and results data as well as alerting them to any risks arising that we felt they should be aware of, including significant issues or incidents.

Entries

In May, we produced a statistical release detailing the provisional entries for exams to be sat in the summer series⁷. This was the first time a separate release has been published for Wales. The report includes tables of the provisional number of entries for GCSEs, Level 1/2 certificates and AS and A levels submitted to exam boards for the exams being sat between May and June 2018. It also includes provisional entries for the Skills Challenge Certificates. These figures are a useful indicator of potential issues that may develop due to entry fluctuations from year to year.

AS and A level entries

In Wales, A level entry figures decreased by 5.3% to 33,640, whilst AS entry fell by 8.1% to 44,990.

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Total A Level entries	37,560	38,480	37,640	35,530	33,640

Source: 2014 to 2017 - Ofqual; 2018 - Awarding Bodies

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Total AS entries	54,690	57,030	52,620	48,970	44,990

Source: 2014 to 2017 - Ofqual; 2018 - Awarding Bodies

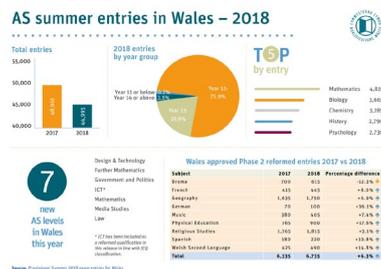
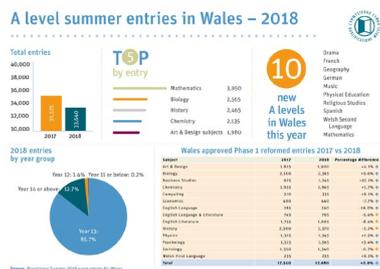
Entry for the reformed A level and AS subjects⁸ decreased approximately in line with overall A level and AS entry. Our Head of Research produced a blog about the change in AS and A level entries in the summer⁹.

⁷ <https://www.qualificationswales.org/english/publications/provisional-summer-entries/>

⁸ Art and Design, Biology, Business Studies, Chemistry, Computing Economics, English Language, English Language and Literature, English Literature, History, Physics, Psychology, Sociology and Welsh First Language and Drama, French, Geography, German, Music, Physical Education, Religious Studies, Spanish, Welsh Second Language.

⁹ <https://www.qualificationswales.org/english/information-for-stakeholders/press-and-media/blogs-and-articles/why-as-level-and-a-level-numbers-are-dipping-in-wales/>

We published infographics highlighting the important themes from the A level and AS entries data.



GCSE entries

GCSE provisional summer entries declined 13.0% to 290,640 in 2018, reverting to the downward trend observed between 2014 and 2016. Entry increased in 2017 due to a large rise in Year 10 (or younger) entry, as well as the replacement of the legacy GCSE Mathematics with two new reformed qualifications GCSE Mathematics and GCSE Mathematics-Numeracy.

This summer there was a big fall in the number of entries from Year 10 or younger students. The Year 10 or younger entry decreased by 77.4% down to 14,290. This is likely to have been caused by a change to Welsh Government policy which means that, from summer 2019, only a student’s first result will count towards school performance tables. Last year saw a record number of students in Year 10 sitting GCSEs early. This means that in some subjects the number of Year 11 students who have sat their exams this summer is lower than in previous years. A substantial number of Year 11 students achieved their GCSEs in English Language, Welsh Language, Mathematics and Mathematics-Numeracy in an earlier exam series – summer or winter 2017 – so their results are not reported in this summer’s data.

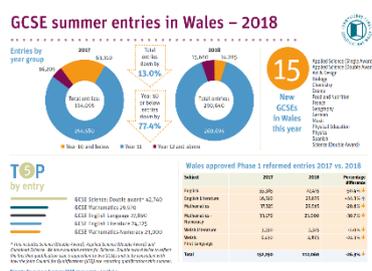
The number of students taking the new science GCSEs has increased. This is because from this year, only results from the new reformed GCSEs can count towards school performance measures.

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Total GCSE entries	317,980	309,190	303,620	334,100	290,640
Year 10 or younger	46,500	46,710	44,900	63,310	14,290
Year 11	258,840	249,800	243,810	254,580	260,700
Year 12 or older	12,640	12,680	14,910	16,210	15,660

Source: 2014 to 2017 - Ofqual; 2018 - Awarding Bodies

Further information on 2017 summer entry can be found in the review of last summer's examination series¹⁰.

We published an infographic highlighting the important themes from the GCSE entries data.



Monitoring ahead of the series

We planned a comprehensive programme of monitoring to oversee each stage of the assessment and awarding process.

We monitored the production of examination papers and non-examination assessments in advance of the series. These processes took place in the 18 months preceding the series. We observed 38 Question Paper Evaluation Committee (QPECs) meetings considering papers for this series.

We also monitored some Continuing Professional Development training sessions for teachers and lecturers, provided by WJEC. This allows us to gather information about the quality of the training provided and to ensure our regulations (Condition G4 of our Standard Conditions of Recognition¹¹) regarding protecting the confidentiality and, therefore, validity of assessment materials are followed.

We completed a detailed report and gave feedback to WJEC following each monitoring activity.

Stakeholder communications

Ahead of the summer exams series, we continued our information campaign to raise awareness of the new GCSEs and GCEs being awarded in Wales¹².

¹⁰ <https://qualificationswales.org/media/3006/180126-summer-2017-overview-e.pdf>

¹¹ <https://qualificationswales.org/english/publications/standard-conditions-of-recognition/>

¹² <https://www.qualificationswales.org/english/qualifications/gcses-and-a-levels/exam-series/summer-2018/>

As soon as the exams were finished, we wrote to all schools and colleges in Wales setting out our approach to regulating the award of GCSEs and A levels this summer¹³.

In the run-up to the summer exams, we updated and added to our series of 'spotlight' articles. These give short explanations of how qualifications are assessed marked and awarded, and a summary of key changes to specific qualifications¹⁴. Our aim was to raise awareness of how we work with exam boards to secure fairness for students at a time when qualifications are changing and to help learners and parents understand the changes.

As well as the blog on the dip in A level and AS level entries, we published articles providing an overview of the summer series and how we ensure the exam system is fit for purpose in Wales¹⁵. We also gave briefings to the press and media to explain the changes and the potential impact of these changes on results. In the run-up to both results days, we gave a series of briefings for key stakeholders. These focused on the main things to bear in mind when interpreting this year's results, including how awarding works, changes to qualifications and changes to the number and type of students sitting the exams. On both results days, we had a dedicated webpage giving guidance for parents and students once they received their results¹⁶.

¹³ <https://www.qualificationswales.org/media/3510/270618-letter-to-centres-in-wales-summer-2018-exams-e.pdf>

¹⁴ <https://www.qualificationswales.org/english/qualifications/gcses-and-a-levels/exam-series/summer-2018/>

¹⁵ <https://www.qualificationswales.org/english/qualifications/gcses-and-a-levels/exam-series/summer-2018/>

¹⁶ <https://www.qualificationswales.org/english/qualifications/gcses-and-a-levels/exam-series/summer-2018/results-overview/>

Series delivery

Access arrangements and special consideration requests

Exam boards make reasonable adjustments for learners with disabilities and learners who are disadvantaged at the time of the exam (for example, through injury or illness)¹⁷. These adjustments are known as 'access arrangements'. Access arrangements are agreed before the exam is sat and can include the provision of a modified paper (such as larger font sizes) and extra time for the exam.

If a learner has been absent from an exam due to illness, injury or bereavement, or their performance in an exam has been impacted by illness, injury or bereavement, special consideration can be requested by the school or college for the learner. The exam board, where applicable, will estimate a mark for the learner, or adjust the mark given to the learner.

We now produce Wales-only statistical releases, including data which used to be included in a three-country release published by Ofqual. We published two statistical releases after the summer exam series. These report on access arrangements and special consideration requests for GCSEs and A levels during the 2017/18 academic year¹⁸.

Access arrangements

The number of access arrangements approved in Wales decreased by 1.0% to 20,905 in 2017-18.

The most common approved access arrangement remains 25% Extra Time, which accounted for approximately two thirds of the Wales total in 2017-18. Approvals for this arrangement increased by 2.1% to 13,540 in 2018.

	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Total number of approved arrangements	17,450	18,005	19,370	21,120	20,905
25% Extra Time approved arrangements	10,280	10,700	11,945	13,260	13,540

Source: 2013-14 to 2016-17 - Ofqual; 2017-18 - JCQ

Special consideration requests

There were 41,665 special consideration requests for the 2018 summer series in Wales - an increase of 1.8% compared to the previous summer series.

¹⁷ The Equality Act 2010 defines disability.

¹⁸ <https://www.qualificationswales.org/english/publications/access-arrangements-for-gcse-as-and-a-level-in-wales/> and <https://www.qualificationswales.org/english/publications/special-consideration-for-gcse-as-and-a-level-in-wales-summer-2018-exam-series/>

The proportion of special consideration requests approved (79.9%) decreased compared to last year. This was due to an increase in rejected group requests related to building work on school premises, which JCQ do not consider a valid reason to receive special consideration. The proportion of total scripts and non-timetabled assessments receiving a special consideration request (3.2%) remained comparable with corresponding figures for the 2014 to 2017 summer series.

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Number of requests for special consideration	21,860	38,755	32,940	40,925	41,665
Number of requests approved	20,560	36,710	31,625	38,925	33,295
Percentage of requests approved	94.1%	94.7%	96.0%	95.1%	79.9%
Requests approved as a percentage of total scripts and non-timetabled assessments	2.6%	4.6%	2.8%	3.3%	3.2%

Source: 2014 to 2017 - Ofqual; 2018 - Awarding Bodies

Incidents relating to the summer series in 2018

Exam boards must notify us of any incident that is likely to lead to an adverse effect for students or threatens the integrity of a regulated qualification; for example, errors in assessment materials, or a breach in the security of an examination paper.

Incidents that originate outside Wales may have the potential to impact upon Welsh students who are entered for the same qualification.

When we receive a notification, we check that the exam board is taking appropriate steps to reduce the impact on learners in Wales and to prevent a recurrence.

This section provides an overview of incidents received relating to A level, AS level and GCSE qualifications, for the 2018 summer series. Exam boards notified us of 123 incidents this year, an increase of five incidents compared to the previous summer series.

The table below gives a breakdown of incidents relating to the summer series, by exam board ¹⁹:

Exam board	Number of incidents summer series 2018
OCR	33
AQA	32
WJEC	39
Pearson	19
Total	123

¹⁹ For details of all incidents received in 2017-18, see our [Annual Report](#).

We categorise incidents as follows:

- Question paper errors – issues in any material used for assessment purposes, including the mark scheme.
- Security breach – any disclosure of confidential information or assessment materials.
- Malpractice - an intentional or reckless breach of the regulations, in Wales, that could undermine the integrity of an assessment.
- Marking – issues with the process of marking assessments and issuing results.
- Process and system errors – issues involving processes or systems employed by either the exam board or an examination centre.
- Other – incidents that do not fit into any of the above categories.

The table below gives a breakdown of the type of incidents reported by exam boards, relating to the summer series:

Incident Type	Number summer series 2017	Number summer series 2018
Question paper errors	37	49
Security breach	73	42
Malpractice (alleged)	0	11
Marking	3	16
Process and system errors	3	1
Other	2	4
Total	118	123

The increase in question paper errors should be viewed in the context of an increase in erratum notifications (i.e. incidents where question paper errors were identified before the assessment, allowing steps to be taken to minimise the impact on learners), following Ofqual’s decision to ask exam boards to report all errata.

There has been a substantial reduction in security breach notifications. The drop in the number of security breaches reflected fewer incidents involving English centres and online breaches. However, the number of papers being lost in transit increased. This year, we will monitor the effectiveness of the remedial actions taken to address this.

The increase in the number of malpractice cases in 2018 is largely as a result of how we have collected information on malpractice from exam boards. In all of the cases we monitored this year, the exam board took steps to ensure that students in Wales

were neither advantaged nor disadvantaged. Where evidence of malpractice was found, proportionate sanctions were imposed by the exam board.

The increase in marking incidents largely related to delays in the marking of scripts by one exam board. We monitored these incidents to ensure there were no delays issuing results, and have asked the exam board to review what caused these delays, to prevent a recurrence of these issues next year.

Question paper errors

Assessments are subject to internal quality assurance processes during their production, which on average takes 18 months. However, errors in question papers, Welsh translation and the modification process²⁰ can occasionally occur.

When errors are detected before an assessment is sat, the exam board sends an erratum notice to schools and colleges to minimise the impact on learners and reports the incident to us. Over 20% of the question paper errors reported to us did not have any impact on students' ability to answer the question.

In very few cases, errors are discovered after the assessment has been sat. Exam boards report the incident to us, explaining what impact the error has had on learners and, where necessary, what actions they will take to ensure learners are not disadvantaged. For example, exam boards may amend a mark scheme to compensate for an error or credit all learners with marks in the most serious cases. These measures ensure no learners are disadvantaged.

There were 49 question paper errors reported to us that related to the summer series. The number of incidents that concerned unanswerable questions (the most serious category) reduced by a third. There was a net increase in the number of question paper errors with some impact on learners' ability to respond, and we have monitored the actions taken by exam boards to improve the effectiveness of their quality assurance processes for next year.

Question Paper Error sub-category	Number summer series 2017	Number summer series 2018
No impact	2	10
Impact	29	35
Unanswerable	6	4
Total	37	49

²⁰ Assessments are modified in order that learners can access them. The modification process may include modified large print or braille.

Security breaches

Exam papers are kept securely by exam boards and by schools and colleges until the day of the exam. Occasionally a security breach occurs and is reported to us, along with actions the exam board will undertake to mitigate the impact. These actions may include:

- monitoring social media to evaluate the scale of the breach;
- conducting statistical analyses of completed exam scripts from the centres affected, to detect any atypical performances;
- recalling and replacing the examination paper to be sat.

This year, the majority of security breaches originated within a school or college; for example, where staff opened an incorrect packet of exam papers, and in some instances, handing them out to students. Only four of these incidents originated in Wales. In each case, the exam board put sanctions in place. Statistical analysis showed no evidence of candidates being advantaged or disadvantaged, of a wider breach.

The second most common type of security breach related to materials that were lost in transit. Exam boards are working to improve security in this area, and we will monitor changes closely to evaluate their effectiveness.

Security breach sub-category	Number summer series 2017	Number summer series 2018
Centre breach (England + NI)	44	27
Centre breach (Wales)	2	4
Online breach	19	2
Lost in transit	4	8
Exam board breach	4	1
Total	73	42

Marking

We are notified by exam boards if there are any issues in relation to the progress of marking during the summer series, the quality of marking, or the accuracy of results issued.

Over half of marking incidents (nine) related to delays in the marking of exam papers by one exam board. Our first priority was to monitor the exam board's approach, to ensure they minimised any risk of delay to the release of results. We also asked the exam board to investigate the underlying cause of the delays, and consider what it should do to prevent a recurrence of these issues next year.

Marking sub-category	Number summer series 2017	Number summer series 2018
Delays	3	10
Quality of marking	0	2
Incorrect results issued	0	4
Total	3	16

Malpractice

We require exam boards to take all reasonable steps to prevent malpractice by students and centres, and to investigate allegations thoroughly. If evidence of malpractice is found, exam boards are required to impose appropriate sanctions.

We published a statistical release in December 2018, that presents data on the number of malpractice penalties and offences in Wales for GCSE, AS and A level qualifications in summer 2018²¹. The release contains details about the types of malpractice reported by exam boards and any penalties they have imposed.

210 penalties were issued to students for malpractice in summer 2018, up 17.3% compared to 180 penalties in 2017. The number of penalties issued to students in summer 2018 represents approximately one penalty for every 5,000 GCSE, AS and A level entry, which is consistent with the summer 2017 exam series. Proportionately, more penalties were issued relating to GCSEs than AS and A levels.

Taking a mobile phone into an exam room continues to be the most common malpractice offence, making up 45.7% of all penalties issued.

In summer 2018, 15 penalties were issued to individual members of school or college staff for malpractice, and 10 penalties were issued to schools and colleges.

Where an alleged malpractice case could affect standards or public confidence, an exam board must report this to us promptly during the examination series, as an incident. We closely monitor the actions taken by exam boards in respect of these cases.

The exam boards reported eleven incidents to us during the examination series. They made eight findings of alleged malpractice and one finding of alleged maladministration, in respect of these incidents. Proportionate sanctions were imposed in all cases of confirmed malpractice or maladministration. The exam boards also took steps to ensure that alleged malpractice did not advantage or disadvantage

²¹ <https://www.qualificationswales.org/media/4020/malpractice-for-gcse-as-and-a-level-in-wales-summer-2018.pdf>

learners in Wales, such as requiring learners to complete a replacement assessment, applying special consideration, and issuing results based on projected results.

Malpractice sub-category	Number summer series 2018
Insufficient process	1
Too much assistance	10
Total	11

Monitoring during the series

In addition to the monitoring of the production of examination papers and non-examination assessments which took place ahead of the series, we also observed examiner and moderator standardisation meetings. These meetings ensure that there is a good understanding of the mark scheme which has to be followed and is important in setting the standards for moderating and marking. There is an opportunity to adjust the mark schemes to ensure credit is given to candidates fairly. Mark schemes are not finalised until this standardisation process is completed. We observed 26 meetings for GCSE subjects and 32 for AS and A level. We also monitored the moderation of the Welsh Baccalaureate Skills Challenge Certificate, attending three meetings. In all cases where paper errors had been seen, we attended the events to be satisfied that appropriate actions had been taken to ensure that no candidates were advantaged or disadvantaged. In all cases, we were satisfied this was the case.

We also monitored social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter; these are increasingly popular routes for comment for many candidates. We monitored these social media platforms to identify trends relating to particular exams for us to consider as part of our monitoring intelligence on the exam series.

Have Your Say questionnaire

We ran an online questionnaire ('Have Your Say') again in 2018, to gather views on the new GCSE, AS and A level qualifications from students and teachers.

The online questionnaire was open between May and July. It allowed respondents to comment on any exam, but the reformed GCSE, AS and A level exams were the focus. The questionnaire was carried out to promote engagement with stakeholders, and to gather immediate feedback that may be useful when combined with other information.

859 people completed the questionnaire. This year, far more of the responses were from teachers and lecturers (76%) than students (21%). We asked about the difficulty of the exams, whether they assessed the specification fairly, whether students were given enough time, and for general comments on the qualifications.

Findings of the questionnaire

Responses focused on a range of qualifications, with no one issue or subject dominating. There was general agreement that the content from the syllabus had been assessed appropriately. We saw a range of views about the difficulty of the assessments and whether enough time had been given, but nothing to indicate an overwhelming concern about a specific subject or exam.

The responses to the questions were analysed separately for learners and teachers (see Figures 1 and 2 overleaf).

Figure 1 (Learner responses)

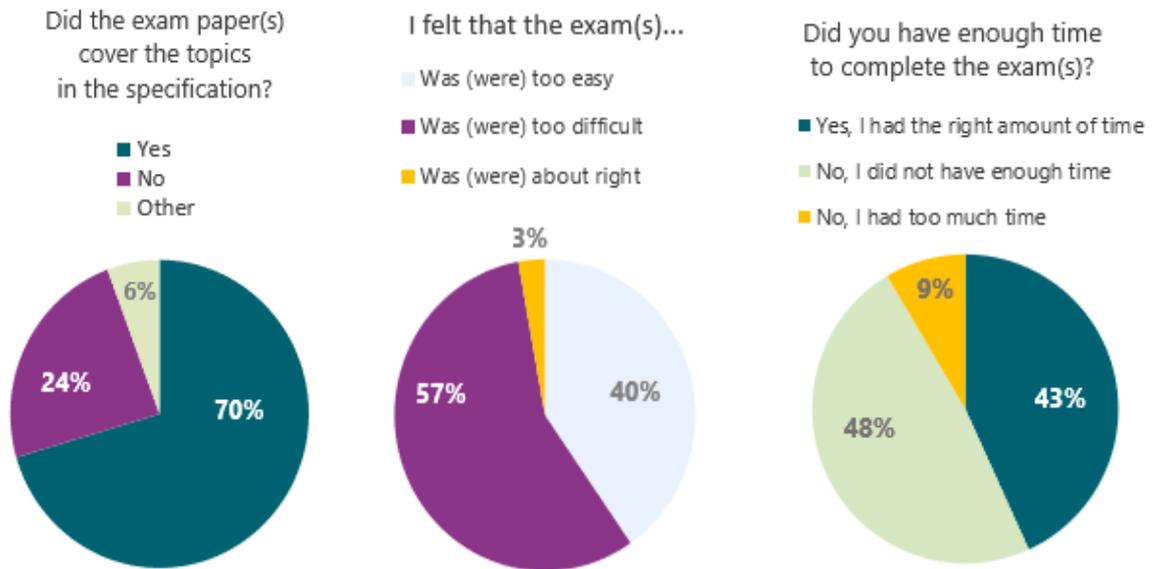
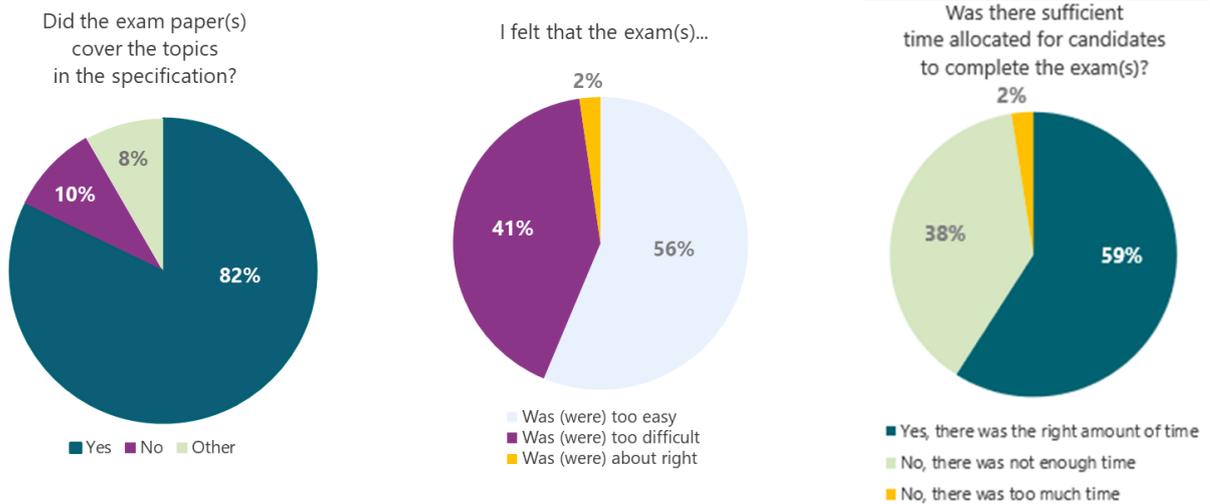


Figure 2 (Teacher responses)



225 responses were received for AS level qualifications and 117 for A levels. The subjects with over 10 responses are shown in the table below:

GCE AS Level	AS - Number of responses	% of all AS responses
Biology	14	6.3%
Chemistry	11	4.9%
Computer Science	15	6.7%
History	10	4.5%
Mathematics	42	18.8%
Music	13	5.8%
PE	13	5.8%
Physics	16	7.3%
Psychology	11	4.9%
GCE A2 Level	A2 – number of responses	% of all A2 responses
Chemistry	10	8.6%
French	15	12.8%

519 responses were received for GCSE. Subjects with over 20 responses are shown in the table below:

GCSE	Number of questionnaire responses	% of all GCSE responses
Biology	21	4.1%
English Language	63	12.1%
French	33	6.4%
Geography	45	8.7%
History	27	5.2%
Mathematics	27	5.2%
Mathematics - Numeracy	23	4.4%
Physics	23	4.4%
Science (Double Award)	38	7.3%
Spanish	20	3.9%
Welsh Second Language	30	5.8%

There are limitations in the data collected from the questionnaire. The open-ended nature of the questionnaire, and the self-selecting nature of the responding sample, means that further statistical analysis would not be valid.

We shared all the qualification-specific comments with WJEC to consider and we are using the information gathered to inform our monitoring work.

We have reviewed and evaluated the questionnaire and will repeat the questionnaire for the summer 2019 exam series.

Standard setting, awarding and results

GCSE, AS and A level standard setting

Several new qualifications, designed specifically for learners in Wales, were awarded for the first time in summer 2018. Other new qualifications were awarded for only the second or third time and GCSE Mathematics and GCSE Mathematics-Numeracy were awarded for the fourth time. We scrutinised WJEC's process for setting appropriate grade boundaries for these qualifications closely throughout the awarding period.

We required WJEC to use the established comparable outcomes approach to ensure students were neither advantaged nor disadvantaged. This approach can compensate in situations where a small drop in performance may occur when new qualifications are introduced. It is the approach that was used successfully in the previous two summers when awarding the new qualifications.

Where the cohort of students taking the qualification is similar to previous years, we expect results to be similar. However, there are no quotas or allocations to be filled and we do expect to see some variation. If results vary more than we might normally expect, we require evidence to support a genuine change in student attainment. Where exam boards provide us with evidence to support an improvement or indeed a decline in student attainment, we consider whether the evidence justifies the proposed change to outcomes.

The comparable outcomes approach will produce similar results year-on-year if the cohort for the subject remains similar in terms of its overall ability. However, when a qualification changes, there can be more year-on-year variability than usual in the results for individual schools and colleges, as they may have taken different approaches to delivering the new qualification. This variability can be due to a variety of factors, including a change in entry strategy or a change in approach to delivering a qualification. For new qualifications, familiarity with the assessment arrangements can also play a part. Some variability was seen for individual schools and colleges this year, though it was very slightly less than in summer 2017.

In addition to adopting the comparable outcomes approach, as part of the awarding process, for some qualifications we required WJEC to undertake additional statistical analysis of how each assessment performed.

The standard-setting process for GCSEs and A levels takes place at the point at which a qualification is awarded and is closely monitored by us. Each year, statistical analysis of the prior attainment of that year's cohort is compared with the performance of previous cohorts. This analysis is used to make predictions for this year's outcomes. Exam boards are expected to award in line with these predictions (within a reporting tolerance), or to give a rationale for why they have not done this. This process is outlined in our data exchange document²². As the regulator, we review the award outcomes and, where an award is 'out of tolerance', we review the evidence submitted by the exam board to decide whether the award is justified.

In reviewing the evidence, we are mindful of the following three principles:

1. fairness for learners;
2. public confidence in the results being issued; and
3. maintenance of standards.

Qualifications that have not yet been reformed continue to be awarded across Wales, England and Northern Ireland. We worked closely with the qualifications regulators in those countries (Ofqual in England and CCEA in Northern Ireland) as part of an existing three-country regulatory approach. We worked with them to manage the risks to the three-country qualifications which are associated with:

- changes to entry patterns that tend to occur at the end of the lifetime of a specification;
- the challenges of qualifications co-regulated across three countries at a time of operational and policy divergence.

Monitoring

Our comprehensive programme of monitoring continued with the awarding process. Again, we focused our attention on the reformed qualifications and the Skills Challenge Certificate qualifications that contribute to the Welsh Bacc.

We observed meetings of awarding committees for almost all new GCSE and A level subjects. We attended 18 awarding meetings for GCSE subjects. For AS and A level,

²² <https://www.qualificationswales.org/english/publications/data-exchange-procedures-wales-summer-2018/>

we attended 25 awarding meetings. We also monitored the awarding of the Skills Challenge Certificates, attending all four awarding meetings.

Our monitoring focused on WJEC's compliance with our regulations and requirements. All the meetings we observed complied with our requirements. We wrote detailed reports of our monitoring and feedback was provided to WJEC.

Results

On both the GCSE and AS / A level results days, we published an overview of results on our website along with infographics highlighting the important themes from the data²³.

The overall percentages of A level grades awarded at both A* and A in Wales rose. Although the percentages achieving these grades increased, it is important to consider the change in numbers sitting the qualifications this year. The actual number of grades awarded at A*, A* and A, and A* to E was broadly stable, with small shifts which we would expect and that can be considered normal.

The overall percentages of AS level grades awarded at both A and A to E in Wales rose. However, as with A level results, these changes need to be considered within the context of a change in the numbers sitting these qualifications. The actual number of grades awarded at A and A to E was broadly stable, with small shifts which we would expect and that can be considered normal.

GCSEs

The overall Wales GCSE performance was broadly stable. The proportion of A* and A grades awarded increased slightly, the proportion of A* to C grades fell and the overall pass rate (A*-G) was marginally down.

It is important to remember that these results are only for exams sat in Wales this summer by students of all ages. They do not give a full or accurate picture of the GCSEs achieved by 16-year-olds in Wales. The cohort of students sitting GCSE exams in some core subjects this summer was very different to previous years.

GCSE English Language

After results were published, some schools, local authorities and a regional education consortium in north Wales contacted us to raise concerns about grade boundaries for GCSE English Language. As the regulator, we took swift action to investigate.

²³ <https://www.qualificationswales.org/english/qualifications/gcses-and-a-levels/exam-series/summer-2018/results-overview/>

The concerns focused on the impact on students of setting the grade C boundary in summer 2018 at a higher mark than in previous awards. Those who contacted us questioned whether the summer 2018 grade boundary was justified and whether it had been skewed by the effect of the very high levels of early entry in 2017.

We reviewed this summer's GCSE English Language award to investigate:

- whether standards for the qualification had been maintained in line with previous exam series.
- whether students who sat the qualification for the first time this summer had been disadvantaged compared to those who sat the qualification last year.

Our conclusions were that:

- the national standard for GCSE English Language was maintained in the summer 2018 award.
- there is no evidence that the GCSE English Language award in summer 2018 unfairly disadvantaged students sitting the qualification for the first time compared to those who sat the qualification in 2017.
- we are confident that students' achievements have been fairly recognised. Users can rely on the fact that the grades awarded in summer 2018 are equivalent to those awarded in 2017.

The full report into the review of the GCSE English Language award is available on our website. ²⁴

²⁴ <https://www.qualificationswales.org/media/3802/qws-review-of-2018-gcse-english-language.pdf>

Post-results

Incorrect results issued

As part of the incident notification process, exam boards must notify us of cases where incorrect results have been issued. These errors may occur due to exam boards' IT system issues or administrative errors. There were four incidents reported to us relating to the summer series; all were rectified, with corrected results issued to affected candidates. Exam boards were also required to inform us of what steps they will be taking to prevent future recurrences, wherever possible.

Reviews of marking and moderation

For the first time we have published a statistical release for Wales-only statistics on reviews of marking and moderation for GCSE and AS and A level qualifications²⁵.

In the summer 2018 exam series, 8,865 reviews of marking were requested for GCSE assessments in Wales, compared to 12,935 last year - a decrease of 31.4%. Part of this decrease in review requests was due to the decrease in GCSE entries this summer.

There were 2,960 reviews requested for AS and A level assessments during the same period, compared to 3,020 in 2017, a decrease of 2.0%. Although entries fell, other factors, such as requirements for entry to Higher Education, could be influencing decisions on review requests for AS and A level.

2.0% (down from 2.5%) of all GCSE grades certificated in the 2018 Summer exam series were challenged and 0.3% (down from 0.5%) were changed. 2.7% (down from 2.8%) of all GCE grades certificated in the 2018 Summer exam series were challenged and 0.4% (down from 0.5%) were changed.

The most commonly challenged grade for GCSE (A*-G) was D (58.1% down from 58.4%). For AS and A levels, the most commonly challenged grade was grade B (33.5% up from 31.4%).

Overall, 72.3% (up from 55.4%) of GCSE and GCE reviews resulted in no mark change. It is important to note that a mark change does not necessarily result in a grade change.

- At GCSE, of the reviews requested, 84.2% (up from 77.9%) resulted in no grade change.

²⁵ <https://qualificationswales.org/english/publications/reviews-of-marking-and-moderation-for-gcse-as-and-a-level-in-wales-summer-2018-exam-series/>

- At AS and A level, 82.5% (up from 81.5%) of the reviews resulted in no grade change.

Conclusion

This report gives an overview of the preparation for and delivery of the summer 2018 series, including our monitoring of the exam boards that are involved in the examination series. The exam series was successfully delivered. Generally, there were few issues that occurred which had the potential to have a significant adverse effect for learners in Wales. When issues did arise, we oversaw the exam board's actions to ensure that they took appropriate action to protect learners, maintain standards and issued timely and accurate results. We closely monitored the standard setting in the reformed Wales-only GCSE, AS and A level qualifications, and we are content that standards have been appropriately carried forward.

Concerns were raised about the GCSE English Language grade boundaries following the release of results. We swiftly carried out a full review of the processes leading to the production of those boundaries and concluded that processes were appropriate, and the standard had been consistently applied between summer 2017 and summer 2018.

We continuously review our approach to regulating and monitoring the delivery and award of general qualifications. Following the 2018 summer exams series we have identified areas to undertake further work aimed at ensuring that future exam series will continue to be successfully delivered.

This work includes:

- Updating the 2018-19 monitoring plan and refining our regulatory processes
- Seeking assurances from exam boards on the actions they are taking to prevent recurrences of incidents reported to us during the 2018 exam series.
- Stakeholder engagement on the use and effectiveness of non-examination assessments
- Evaluating current methodologies used to award qualifications and identifying opportunities for further research into potential improvements
- Investigating methodologies for monitoring comparability over time.

We retain our focus on and scrutiny of WJEC's work, to check preparations for the awarding of the Wales GCSEs and A levels. We will continue our comprehensive programme of monitoring and will use the findings of any evaluation and research

work to inform actions as necessary. We will run a questionnaire again in summer 2019 for students and teachers to feed back on the qualifications.

We are already discussing with WJEC, the other exam boards and fellow regulators the arrangements for the summer 2019 series. We will be using information gathered during summer 2018 and ongoing research to inform our discussions.. As in previous years, we will be publishing our approach to the summer 2019 examination series.