

Marking and grading factsheet

Grading students' work is a complex and large-scale process. To help make it easier to understand, we've created a simple guide to explain how it works.

A simple guide: Assuring Cambridge OCR's marking accuracy

1

Before any exam, we create a 'mark scheme'. This is a set of instructions for examiners that explains how marks should be awarded for each question. Experts check the mark scheme using real student answers to make sure it works well.

2

We select and train our markers carefully. Most of them are experienced teachers. Each marker works in a team, led by a Team Leader. Team Leaders are supervised by a Principal Examiner.

3

Before starting full marking, all examiners must go through a process called 'standardisation'. This means they all mark the same sample answers to check they're applying the mark scheme in the same way. If they pass, they begin marking real student work.

4

We check marking accuracy in two ways:

- We insert test scripts (previously marked papers) into each marker's workload to check consistency (known as 'seeding').
- Team Leaders check samples of the Principal Examiner's marking.

If a marker or Team Leader marks inaccurately, we re-mark the affected scripts.

How do students get their grades

Grading vs marking

Grading (also called 'awarding') is a separate process from marking. It takes place after most, or all the marking is done. Examiners give marks based on a detailed mark scheme. At this stage, they don't think about what grade the mark might lead to. Later, awarding looks at all the marks and decides what mark ranges to review for each grade.

The awarding committee includes:

- An Assessment Standards Manager who has overall responsibility for maintaining standards
- Senior assessors who are responsible for the marking of questions papers and for moderation where qualifications feature NEA

The awarding committee reviews a range of statistical data and student work and the Assessment Standards Manager recommends grade boundaries ensuring comparability of standards, at unit and qualification level, year on year.



Expert judgement

The awarding committee looks at examples of student work from the current year and previous years. They compare these to consider where the grade boundaries should fall. The difficulty of two examinations is often different and the boundary marks take this into account.

To ensure standards stay the same from year to year, senior assessors look at examples of past student work that were on the boundary for 'key grades':

- 7, 4 and 1 for GCSEs
- Pass Level 1, Pass Level 2 and Distinction Level 2 for Cambridge Nationals
- A and E for A and AS levels
- Pass and Distinction for Level 3 Cambridge Technicals and Cambridge Advanced Nationals

This helps them understand any difference in the demand between the current year's exam and last year's exam. The assessors' judgements are collated and reviewed by the Assessment Standards Manager (see table 1).

Table 1: Awarding committee examiners' judgements – E/U boundary

Mark	Examiner 1	Examiner 2	Examiner 3	Examiner 4	Examiner 5
24	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓
23	✓✓	✓?	✓?	✓✓	✓✓
22	✓×	✓?	✓?	✓✓	✓?
21	✓×	✓×	✓×	✓×	✓?
20	×✓	×✓	×✓	×✓	×✓
19	××	××	××	××	××

In this example, the lowest mark of 19 would be unlikely to be used because there's no evidence showing that this mark meets the performance standards of a grade E. The final decision about where the grade boundary should be will depend on looking more closely at the statistical data and how students performed.

Once the 'key grade' boundaries are set, the boundaries for the grades in between are assigned arithmetically.

Statistical data

The awarding committee also looks at statistics, including:

- **Mark distribution** information such as the mean mark and standard deviation, from current and previous sessions.
- **Prior attainment** of students. For A Levels, this means looking at students' average GCSE scores. For GCSEs, it means looking at their Key Stage 2 test results. This method is called the **Comparable Outcomes Approach**.

Comparable outcomes approach

The goal of this approach is to keep the level of progress (or "value added") the same each year. This means that if two groups of students have similar previous results, they should end up with a similar spread of grades.

To help with this a predicted grade profile is created. This is done by using national data from a previous year as a benchmark. It shows prior attainment and how that previously related to outcomes in the qualification being awarded.

All exam boards in England follow the Comparable Outcomes approach for GCSEs and A Levels, as required by the regulator, Ofqual. This approach uses the prior attainment of a cohort to produce predictions in terms of outcomes. This statistical information is used in conjunction with the expert judgement of senior assessors (through the examination of scripts and NEA work in comparison to the previous year) and the consideration of the difficulty of that particular session's assessments when making decisions in terms of grade boundaries.

Exam boards must report their results at key grades (A*, A, and E for A levels; 9, 7, 4, and 1 for GCSEs) to Ofqual. They also have to explain if their results are not close to the predictions, or not within the allowed range.

This allowed range (called a tolerance) depends on how many students took the exam. The more students, the smaller the tolerance. For example, if more than 3,000 students took an A level subject, the tolerance is 1%. So if the prediction is that 19.8% of students should get an A, then it would be expected that grade boundaries would return outcomes between 18.8% and 20.8%.

Sometimes exam boards go outside this range, but only for good reasons—and only after carefully discussing it with Ofqual and other boards.

The key consideration is looking to maintain standards over time, to ensure that no cohort is either advantaged or disadvantaged in comparison to previous cohorts.

Vocational Qualifications

Vocational Qualifications such as Cambridge Nationals, Cambridge Technicals and Cambridge Advanced Nationals do not have to follow the Comparable Outcomes approach. A common approach is not possible with current VQs because they vary more in their assessment models, grading structure and subject content. As such, a common method to be used by all awarding organisations is not possible, although each awarding organisation must still be able to demonstrate that they comply with Ofqual's General Conditions in terms of how they grade and issue results.

As part of OCRs awarding process, we use a similar range of statistical data in our awarding of these Vocational Qualifications to that used in GCSEs and A levels. We look at the assessment performance that series against what has happened historically, difference in the assessments, the students taking the assessments, what we know about their prior attainment, and adopt the same principles to the awarding process.

As with GCSEs and A levels, the key consideration is looking to maintain standards over time, to ensure that no cohort is either advantaged or disadvantaged in comparison to previous cohorts.

Summary and final comments

Awarding is a complex activity, and its main purpose is to keep grading standards consistent from year to year. This is done by carefully deciding where the grade boundaries should be, using different types of evidence about what counts as a fair standard.

The purpose of expert judgement is to make sure the **content and performance standards** stay the same – that is, making sure students are showing the same level of knowledge and skills as in previous years.

At the same time, the **Comparable Outcomes** approach is used to make sure the **amount of progress (value added)** students make stays consistent across different year groups.

