

February 2010

Dear Colleagues

## **Open letter to secondary schools and colleges about the new A\* grade at A level**

In March 2009, I wrote to you about how we were working with the awarding organisations to ensure continuity of standards from the six unit A levels to the new four unit A levels. That letter has been published on the Ofqual website and can be found at <http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/2235.aspx>

While specifically addressed to you, this open letter will also be published on Ofqual's website and reported in Ofqual's e-newsletters.

Summer 2010 sees the first awards of the new A level specifications in nearly all subjects, together with the first awards of the new A\* grade at A level. This new grade will reward exceptional performance and allow for improved discrimination between the best performing candidates. The A\* grade will be awarded for all A levels, including those in which new specifications have not yet been introduced, such as mathematics.

It is important to remember that **the A\* grade will be awarded for the A level qualification only, not for the AS qualification or at unit level.**

The A\* grade will be awarded to candidates who have achieved:

- An A grade overall in their A level, and
- 90 per cent of the maximum uniform marks (UMS) on the aggregate of their **A2** units.

The way in which the A\* grade is to be awarded will mean that it is achieved by learners who have consistently performed very well throughout their A level units and outstandingly on the A2 units, which incorporate the most challenging questions.

This has implications for you and your students and I wanted to make sure you were aware of these. It means that there will be candidates in summer 2010 who do not achieve an A\* grade but who have higher A level UMS scores (which arise from the total units, both AS and A2) than candidates who have achieved the new grade.

It should also be noted that the percentage of A\* grades is likely to vary from subject to subject, as does the percentage of A grades awarded each year. The new grade is not being awarded to a set percentage of the total candidates or a set percentage of those who achieve an A grade – it will strictly be awarded according to the rules set out above.

As the new A levels have come on stream, Ofqual and our regulatory partners in Wales and Northern Ireland have worked closely with the awarding organisations. We monitored closely the awarding of the new specifications in the AS levels in 2009 and we believe that the grades awarded to candidates were fair and consistent.

We have continued the process into 2010 in planning for the first award of the full A levels. This has included agreeing with the awarding bodies the evidence to be used to ensure fairness and consistency in awarding meetings and which will be used to monitor and evaluate outcomes at A\* as well as at grades A to E. Should any very unexpected outcomes occur, we will require an explanation and may ask the awarding organisation to take action to ensure that standards are maintained from 2009 and the awards are fair and consistent across the awarding bodies.

If you have any questions or comments, please do not hesitate to contact us via the helpline 0300 303 3346 or via e-mail at [info@ofqual.gov.uk](mailto:info@ofqual.gov.uk)

Finally, I know that many schools and colleges made great efforts to open during the adverse weather in January and I wanted to put on record my thanks to all those who helped keep the examination system running.

Yours sincerely



Kathleen Tattersall  
Chair of Ofqual

The following examples of candidates' results in a four unit A level, where 400 UMS are available, show how a candidate may not achieve an A* despite having a higher UMS score than a candidate who does achieve the new grade:
Student X achieves a grade B at AS level (145 UMS) and then does very well at A2, achieving 180 UMS. She has, therefore, passed the A grade threshold at A level with a total of 325 UMS.
Student Y achieves a grade A at AS (190 UMS) but does less well at A2 (achieving 140 UMS). He, therefore, also passed the threshold for an A grade overall at A level with a total of 330 UMS.
Both students have made the 320 UMS threshold for an A grade for this A level. However, only Student X would receive an A* grade, as she met the requirement to achieve 90 per cent or more of the maximum uniform marks at A2, while Student Y did not.