

Circular S/IF/23/10/

February/ 2010

To: Examination Officers of Post-primary schools

For circulation to: All Principals, Heads of Departments and Examination Officers

GCE A level grading summer 2010

This summer sees the first awards for the new 4-unit A level specifications in nearly all subjects, together with the introduction of the new A* grade at A level. The A* grade will reward outstanding performance and allow for improved discrimination between the best performing candidates. It will be awarded for all A levels from Summer 2010

The A* grade will be awarded for the full A level qualification only. It will not be awarded 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 GCE A level , and
- 90 per cent of the maximum Uniform Marks Scale (UMS) on the aggregate of their A2 units. This will mean achieving at least 180 uniform marks out of the 200 available at A2.

The A* grade will be achieved by learners who have performed very well throughout all of their A level units (AS and A2) and, in addition, outstandingly well on the A2 units, which incorporate the most challenging questions.

Please note that the A* awarding criteria may mean that you will have candidate(s) in your centre achieving high combined UMS overall across their AS and A2 units but not achieving an A* grade. This is further explained in the table at the end of this circular.

It is normal for the percentage distribution of grades at A level to vary across subjects and from year to year. With the introduction of the A* it is to be expected that the percentage of A* grades will also vary across subjects and from year to year.

As the new A levels have been introduced, CCEA in its regulatory role has been working closely with regulatory colleagues in England and Wales, and with the awarding bodies. We closely monitored the awarding of the new specifications at AS level in 2009 and we believe that the grades awarded to candidates were fair and consistent.

The regulators have continued the monitoring 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 in awarding meetings to ensure fairness and consistency. In addition, the Regulators will monitor and evaluate outcomes at A* as well as at grades A to E. Should any unexpected outcomes occur, the Regulators will require an explanation and may ask the awarding body to take action to ensure that standards of awards are fair and consistent.



Examples of awarding scenarios

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:

Ann 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.

Robert 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 Ann 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 Robert did not.

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