



CAMBRIDGE ASSESSMENT

Do special consideration enhancements skew examination grades?

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Abstract

The GCSE and GCE code of practice promotes quality, consistency, accuracy and fairness in assessment. Therefore, awarding bodies need to ensure that candidates have fair access to exams in order to be able to demonstrate their skills and knowledge. A reasonable adjustment is any action that reduces the effect of a disability or difficulty that places the candidate at a disadvantage in the assessment. One type of adjustment is special consideration, which makes allowances for students who were fully prepared for the examination and covered the course, but whose performance was affected by circumstances beyond their control such as a recent bereavement, serious accident or illness.

The main aims of this research were to investigate: 1) the number of special consideration requests over time, by qualification (GCSE vs. A-level) and by school type; 2) the effect of the special consideration enhancements on the overall grades in a range of GCSE and A-level subjects.

GCSE and A-level examination results, as well as data on special consideration applications, were obtained from the OCR awarding body (only candidates who were present but disadvantaged and submitted an application for special consideration in subjects offered by OCR were considered).

The number of special consideration applications rose from around 30,000 in 2000 to around 80,000 in 2009, with more requests at A-level than at GCSE. The percentage of candidates with at least one application for special consideration in GCSE subjects was lower than 5% compared to lower than 10% in subjects at A-level. In both qualifications, candidates in independent schools were more likely to submit a request for special consideration than candidates in state schools.

The research confirmed that the special consideration enhancements were minor adjustments to candidates' marks, with the most popular tariff applied being 2% of the unit/component mark (normally due to minor illnesses at the time of the examination). Therefore, it was unsurprising that the percentages of students (out of the total entry) who improved their overall grades in GCSE and A-level subjects as a result of special consideration were very small (lower than 1% in all subjects considered).

There has been criticism in the media about how the system might be being abused to enhance results and to help schools climb national league tables. However, as this research shows, the percentages of pupils improving their grades after special consideration are so small that there is no evidence for such a claim.

