

An investigation into the number of special consideration enhancements and their impact on examination grades

Carmen L. Vidal Rodeiro Research Division

Introduction

The GCSE, GCE, Principal Learning and Project Code of Practice (Ofqual, 2011) promotes quality, consistency, accuracy and fairness in assessment and awarding. Therefore, awarding bodies in England need to make sure that candidates have fair access to exams so that they are able to demonstrate their skills and knowledge. Awarding bodies also have to facilitate open access to their qualifications for candidates who are eligible for reasonable adjustments without compromising the assessment of the skills, knowledge or understanding being measured.

A reasonable adjustment is any action that helps to reduce the effect of a disability or difficulty that places the candidate at a disadvantage in the assessment. Reasonable adjustments can be of two types: access arrangements and special consideration. Access arrangements are approved or set in place before the assessment takes place and they constitute an arrangement to give candidates access to the qualification. Examples of access arrangements include: extra time; the use of a scribe; adapting assessment papers, for example providing materials in Braille. Special consideration, the focus of this research, is a post examination adjustment to the marks or grades of a candidate. Applications for special consideration should be submitted by the candidate's school and can be of two types: *present but disadvantaged* or *absent with good reason*.

Present but disadvantaged

Candidates who sat a component/unit are eligible for special consideration if they had been fully prepared and had covered the whole course but performance in the examination or in the production of coursework was affected by adverse circumstances beyond their control. These include:

- temporary illness, accident or injury at the time of the assessment;
- bereavement at the time of the assessment;
- serious disturbance during an examination, particularly where recorded materials are being used;
- accidental events such as being given the wrong examination paper, being given a defective examination paper or tape, failure of practical equipment, failure of materials to arrive on time;
- failure by the centre or awarding body to implement previously agreed access arrangements.

A more exhaustive list of circumstances which might be eligible for special consideration can be found in JCQ (2010).

When candidates were present but disadvantaged, the special consideration enhancements are post examination adjustments to their results. They might cause a relative minor change to the marks obtained in the examination of up to five per cent of the maximum mark for the

question paper. The maximum adjustment (or tariff) is reserved for exceptional cases, for example, candidates disadvantaged by the recent death of an immediate family member. However, most adjustments for special consideration are smaller, for example, two per cent of the maximum available mark for candidates with minor illnesses on the day of the examination. It should be noted that a successful application will not necessarily change a candidate's grade.

Absent with good reason

When a candidate has missed a component/unit for acceptable reasons and can produce evidence of that, an adjustment may be made to the overall grade as long as the component/unit was missed in the terminal series and some minimum requirements have been satisfied.

Candidates must have covered the whole course and failure to prepare candidates is not an acceptable reason for an enhanced special consideration grade. In addition, for GCE qualifications, 50% of the total assessment must be completed before a special consideration enhancement may be considered; for GCSE qualifications, 35% of the total assessment must be completed. If too much of the examination has been missed, the candidate will be graded on the marks scored and the certificate will be endorsed to show that not all of the components have been completed.

In the past few years, there have been claims about the number of students receiving extra marks in their examinations due to special consideration increasing year on year (e.g. BBC, 2009; Lipsett, 2009). Also, there has been a great deal of speculation about how pupils and teachers might be abusing the system to boost results, helping schools climb national league tables (e.g. BBC, 2008; Paton, 2009). Therefore, the main aim of this research was to provide evidence in relation to:

- the patterns of special consideration applications
 - over time;
 - by qualification (GCSE vs. A level);
 - by type of school;
- the impact of the special consideration enhancements in the examination outcomes.

Data and methods

Data

The research presents summary statistics of special consideration applications from 2007 to 2009 and detailed analyses of special consideration applications in individual GCSE and A level subjects in the June 2009 session.

At GCSE, eight contrasting subjects were chosen: four subjects that were assessed in a linear fashion (history, geography, mathematics and

religious studies) and four unitised specifications (English, French¹, mathematics and science). At A level, four subjects were chosen: English literature, mathematics, chemistry and history.

GCSE and A level candidates normally take exams from more than one awarding body and therefore might apply for special consideration to one or more awarding bodies. In this research, only candidates who submitted applications for special consideration to the OCR awarding body were considered. GCSE and A level results for those candidates and data on special consideration applications were obtained from OCR's examinations processing system. The data comprised personal details (name, sex, date of birth and school), assessment grade details (session, tier, final mark and final grade) and enhancement details (type of application, outcome and tariff applied).

A measure of students' general attainment (proxy for ability) was computed using data from the National Pupil Database². By assigning scores to the GCSE grades (A*=8, A=7, B=6, C=5, D=4, E=3, F=2, G=1, U=0) it was possible to arrive to a total GCSE score for each student. A 'mean GCSE' indicator was calculated by dividing the total score by the number of subjects attempted. The mean GCSE score was used as a measure of prior attainment for students taking A level subjects. For students taking GCSE subjects, a measure of concurrent attainment was used instead. For each GCSE subject, the concurrent measure was the mean GCSE score calculated excluding the grade in the subject under consideration.

Methods

There are three different types of analyses carried out in this research.

- (a) *General statistics on special consideration applications:* Descriptive statistics were used to investigate the patterns in the numbers of special consideration applications over time and by type of qualification.
- (b) *Impact of the special consideration enhancements in examination outcomes:* To evaluate the impact of the special consideration enhancements in the examinations outcomes, grades and marks before and after the enhancements were required. Descriptive statistics were then used to calculate the percentages of candidates who certificated in June 2009 and improved their grades due to special consideration.

In order to calculate the number of candidates who improved the overall grade in a subject, applications for special consideration in previous sessions needed to be considered (as GCSE and A level modules could have been taken in different sessions). The analyses were restricted to candidates who certificated in the June 2009 session and had taken any modules used for aggregation in 2008 or 2009 examination sessions. This restriction was made in an attempt to select typical GCSE and A level cohorts.
- (c) *Effects of school type on special consideration applications:* To investigate if there were differences at school level in terms of the numbers of special consideration applications, a logistic regression analysis was carried out. Logistic regression is a type of regression analysis that is used when the dependent variable is a dichotomous variable (i.e. it takes only two values, which usually represent the

occurrence or non-occurrence of some event) and the independent variables are continuous, categorical, or both. It is used to predict the probability that the 'event of interest' will occur as a function of the independent variables.

In this research, the dependent variable was the request of a special consideration enhancement: the variable took the value 1 if the student applied for special consideration and 0 otherwise. The independent or explanatory variables were the mean GCSE score (proxy for students' ability) and the type of school.

The formal representation of the model was:

$$\log \left[\frac{p}{1-p} \right] = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2$$

where p was the probability that a student requested special consideration and X_1 and X_2 were the independent variables. β_0 , β_1 and β_2 were the regression coefficients, which were estimated from the data.

In this research, the regression coefficients were used to produce estimates of the probabilities of requesting a special consideration enhancement by the candidates' ability and the type of school attended.

Results

The results of the analyses carried out in this research are presented in two sections: section one contains the analysis of special consideration applications where candidates were present but disadvantaged; section two contains the same analyses for candidates who were absent with good reason.

Present but disadvantaged

General statistics

Table 1 presents all the special consideration applications received by OCR (all centres and all qualifications) from 2007 until 2009. These figures show that special consideration applications increased in the period of study (from 78389 in 2007 to 80189 in 2009) and that the majority of the requests were accepted.

Table 1: Numbers and percentages of accepted and rejected special consideration applications (present but disadvantaged), 2007–2009

Session	Year	Accepted		Rejected		Total number of applications ³
		Number	%	Number	%	
January	2007	8757	93.72	202	2.16	9344
	2008	8358	92.88	118	1.31	8999
	2009	9898	88.84	189	1.70	11141
June	2007	62900	91.10	2021	2.93	69045
	2008	71047	93.93	1983	2.62	75639
	2009	64001	92.69	2517	3.65	69048
All	2007	71657	91.41	2223	2.84	78389
	2008	79405	93.82	2101	2.48	84638
	2009	73899	92.16	2706	3.37	80189

Tables 2 and 3 present the numbers of special consideration applications by type of qualification and by tariff in English schools only. Applications for qualifications other than GCSE or A level (e.g. STEP, Entry

1 In this research GCSE French is considered a unitised specification. Although the specification is linear in the sense that all units must be taken in the same session, the entry operates as though it were modular.

2 The National Pupil Database, compiled by the Department for Education, holds national examination data for all candidates who sat an examination in an academic year.

3 'Total' includes applications accepted, rejected, referred to centre or referred to grade review.

Table 2: Special consideration applications (present but disadvantaged) by type of qualification, 2007–2009

Session	Year	GCSE		A level	
		Number of applications	% accepted	Number of applications	% accepted
January	2007	1770	99.10	6639	97.61
	2008	2908	98.93	5294	98.58
	2009	3268	97.95	6378	98.26
June	2007	31361	97.38	30358	96.91
	2008	37298	97.73	32731	96.68
	2009	33628	96.76	29408	95.86
All	2007	33131	97.47	36997	97.03
	2008	40206	97.82	38025	96.94
	2009	36896	96.87	35786	96.29

Table 3: Percentages of approved special consideration applications (present but disadvantaged) by tariff, 2007–2009

Tariff	2007		2008		2009	
	January	June	January	June	January	June
0	2.48	3.89	4.19	3.75	0.30	5.79
1	36.69	25.26	22.96	18.38	15.20	16.04
2	40.88	40.10	42.65	46.03	54.37	39.74
3	9.13	13.14	15.64	13.89	12.55	17.71
4	9.16	13.64	12.18	14.70	14.31	16.45
5	1.66	3.97	2.38	3.25	3.27	4.27

Level, GNVQs) or applications from candidates in schools in Wales, Northern Ireland or Scotland were not included in these analyses.

Looking just at the numbers of applications in Table 2, it seems that similar numbers of requests were submitted for both types of qualifications. However, as a proportion of the entries for each qualification, there were more special consideration requests at A level than at GCSE (for example, 1.35% of GCSE entries requested special consideration in June 2009 vs. 4.52% of A level entries). One reason for this could be the fact that A levels are high stakes examinations and therefore it is more important for candidates to get the 'extra marks'.

Table 3 shows that the most popular tariff applied was 2% of the unit/component total mark, which corresponds to circumstances such as minor illnesses at the time of the examination (e.g. broken limb on the mend, hay fever). Very small percentages of applications were awarded a 5% enhancement.

Individual subjects

The tables presented in this section show summary statistics for special consideration applications in the fourteen GCSE and A level subjects investigated in this research. Detailed analysis for each of the subjects can be found in Vidal Rodeiro (2010).

Results are presented separately for linear and unitised GCSE qualifications. In a modular/unitised qualification a candidate can request special consideration in one or more units and each of these requests counts as one application. In a linear qualification a candidate can request special consideration in one or more papers/components but this counts as one application only.

For individual GCSE and A level subjects, the percentages of special consideration requests, as a proportion of the entries in the subjects,

Table 4: Summary statistics for special consideration applications (present but disadvantaged) in unitised GCSE subjects, June 2009

Subject	Candidates	Candidates (%) with at least one SC application	Candidates (%) out of previous column) with overall grade improvement after SC	Candidates (%) out of entries in subject) with overall grade improvement after SC
English	46997	1266 (2.69%)	189 (14.93%)	0.40%
French	29696	1268 (4.27%)	106 (8.36%)	0.36%
Mathematics	58697	1853 (3.16%)	115 (6.21%)	0.20%
Science	109953	1766 (1.61%)	81 (4.59%)	0.07%

Table 5: Summary statistics for special consideration applications (present but disadvantaged) in linear GCSE subjects, June 2009

Subject	Candidates	Candidates (%) with at least one SC application	Candidates (%) out of previous column) with overall grade improvement after SC	Candidates (%) out of entries in subject) with overall grade improvement after SC
History	50621	1932 (3.82%)	314 (16.25%)	0.62%
Geography	35908	832 (1.41%)	126 (15.14%)	0.35%
Mathematics	39467	555 (1.41%)	81 (14.59%)	0.20%
Religious Studies	34262	190 (0.55%)	25 (13.15%)	0.07%

Table 6: Summary statistics for special consideration applications (present but disadvantaged) in A level subjects, June 2009

Subject	Candidates	Candidates (%) with at least one SC application	Candidates (%) out of previous column) with overall grade improvement after SC	Candidates (%) out of entries in subject) with overall grade improvement after SC
English Literature	7797	709 (9.09%)	25 (3.53%)	0.32%
Mathematics	11499	844 (7.34%)	41 (4.86%)	0.36%
Chemistry	11897	1077 (9.05%)	72 (6.69%)	0.61%
History	12878	1110 (8.62%)	88 (7.93%)	0.68%

were fairly small. Tables 4 and 5 show that, at GCSE, the percentages of candidates with at least one application for special consideration were below 5% for all subjects considered in this research. At A level, the percentages of candidates with at least one application were slightly higher but below 10% (Table 6).

The percentages of candidates with at least one application for special consideration were higher in modular/unitised qualifications than in linear qualifications. Percentages were higher at A level than at GCSE in all subjects considered. It is the case that due to the modular structure of the qualifications, candidates' examinations are spread over a wider period of time (e.g. candidates sit modules on different days, sessions or years), increasing the probability of a temporary illness, injury, or other unforeseen circumstances taking place.

At GCSE, the percentages of candidates improving their grade, as a percentage of the candidates submitting at least one special consideration request, were higher for linear qualifications than for modular qualifications.

In all subjects, both at GCSE and A level, the percentages of candidates out of the total entry who improved their overall grade as a result of a special consideration enhancement were very low (less than 1%).

This research also showed that, in general, candidates in the high attaining groups were more likely to apply for special consideration than those in low attaining groups. At GCSE, in particular, it was more common to improve grades from C to B or from B to A than from D to C, the much debated threshold that determines where a school is ranked in national league tables.

School type analyses

This section investigates the effect of the type of school on the probability of requesting a special consideration enhancement at GCSE and at A level.

Due to the small numbers of applications in each individual subject, all GCSE subjects considered in this research (unitised and linear specifications) and all A level subjects were grouped together.

A logistic regression analysis was carried out for each group.

Figure 1 presents the probability of requesting special consideration in GCSE subjects by school type. It shows that candidates in independent schools were more likely to submit a request for special consideration than candidates in state schools⁴. This figure also shows that the probability of applying for special consideration in at least one GCSE unit or GCSE paper/component was very low, ranging from 0.01 to 0.05 (the equivalent to between one and five candidates out of one hundred applying for it).

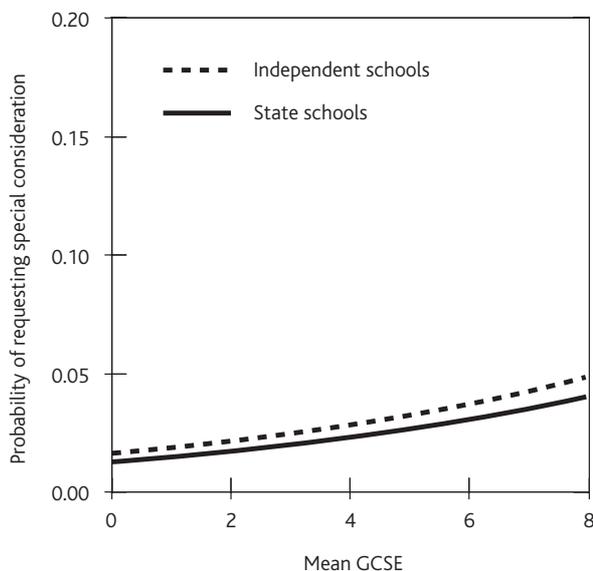


Figure 1: Probability of requesting special consideration (present but disadvantaged) in GCSE subjects by school type

4 'State' schools include comprehensive schools, grammar schools and secondary modern schools.

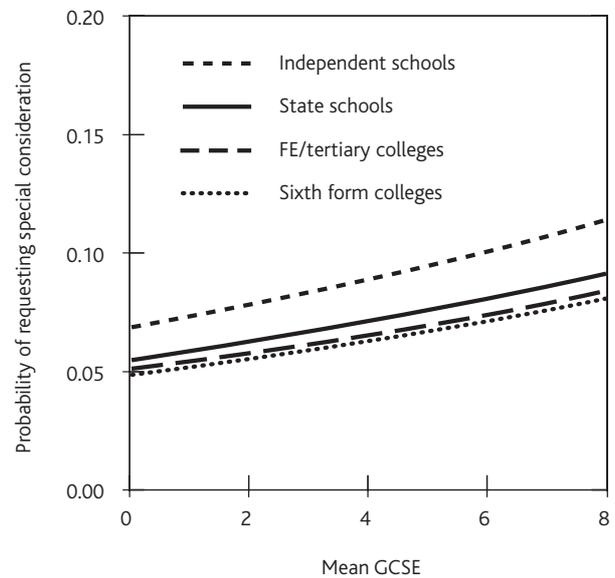


Figure 2: Probability of requesting special consideration (present but disadvantaged) in A level subjects by school type

Figure 2 presents the probability of requesting special consideration at A level by school type and shows that the probability of applying for special consideration in at least one A level unit was higher in independent schools than in any other type of school. The lowest probability was in sixth form colleges.

It should be noted that this probability was also very low (ranging from 0.06 to 0.11) although slightly higher than at GCSE.

Absent with good reason

General statistics

Table 7 presents all the special consideration applications (absent with good reason) received by OCR from 2007 until 2009. It shows that the number of this type of special consideration applications has been increasing in the past few years. Note that the percentages of accepted applications in the January sessions are fairly small. This is probably due to the fact that units/components missed in examination series prior to certification have to be re-entered at a later date.

Table 7: Numbers of special consideration applications (absent with good reason), 2007–2009

Session	Year	Accepted		Rejected		Total number of applications ⁵
		Number	%	Number	%	
January	2007	42	20.39	6	2.91	206
	2008	60	21.13	2	0.70	284
	2009	61	13.29	394	85.84	459
June	2007	4092	82.68	30	0.61	4949
	2008	4185	83.68	50	1.00	5001
	2009	4857	83.32	856	14.69	5829
All	2007	4134	80.19	36	0.70	5155
	2008	4245	80.32	52	0.98	5285
	2009	4918	78.21	1250	19.88	6288

5 'Total' includes applications accepted, rejected, referred to centre or referred to grade review.

In 2009 the OCR awarding body received 6288 applications for special consideration where candidates were absent, an increase of about 1000 applications from 2008. Around 80% of the requests were approved. The percentage of approved applications was more than 10% smaller than the percentage of approved applications among candidates who were present but disadvantaged (around 92% in all sessions and years).

Table 8 presents the number of special consideration applications by type of qualification in English schools only. Looking just at the numbers of applications in Table 8, it seems that higher numbers of requests were submitted at GCSE than at A level. However, as a proportion of the unit/specification entries, the percentages of special consideration requests when the candidates were absent were fairly similar for both types of qualifications (e.g. 0.16% at GCSE vs. 0.10% at A level in 2009).

Table 8: Special consideration applications (absent with good reason) by type of qualification, 2007–2009

Session	Year	GCSE		A level	
		Number of applications	% accepted	Number of applications	% accepted
January	2007	43	88.37	3	66.67
	2008	47	97.87	11	90.91
	2009	358	12.85	85	12.94
June	2007	3256	99.45	963	98.75
	2008	3327	99.10	831	97.23
	2009	3997	85.11	1685	81.60
All	2007	3299	99.30	966	98.65
	2008	3374	99.08	842	97.15
	2009	4355	79.17	1770	78.31

Prior to 2009, when candidates missed a unit/component but they were not aggregating in that session, the applications were referred to the centre. This changed in 2009; when OCR issued revised working instructions for special consideration, those applications were instead rejected by the awarding body. This explains the big decreases in the percentages of accepted applications in 2009 shown in Tables 7 and 8.

Individual subjects

Tables 9 and 10 show that, in GCSE subjects, the percentages of candidates with at least one application for special consideration were very small (below 0.50% of the subject entry). In A level subjects, Table 11 shows that the percentages of candidates with at least one application were slightly higher but still below 0.50%.

At GCSE, the percentages of candidates with at least one application for special consideration in modular/unitised qualifications were very similar to those in linear qualifications. Percentages at A level were very similar to those at GCSE.

The percentages of candidates with a missing unit/component who improved their grades after a special consideration enhancement (as a proportion of the candidates with at least one application) were much higher than those of candidates who were present but disadvantaged. The reasoning for this is that when a special consideration enhancement is approved after the candidate missed a unit, an enhanced grade (based on performance on other units/components of the specification) is issued. The adjustment therefore is usually bigger than up to 5% of the total mark in the unit/component missed.

In all subjects, both at GCSE and at A level, the percentages of

candidates, out of the total entry, who improved their overall grade as a result of a special consideration enhancement, were fairly low (all below 0.50%).

Table 9: Summary statistics for special consideration applications (absent with good reason) in unitised GCSE subjects, June 2009

Subject	Candidates	Candidates (%) with at least one SC application	Candidates (% out of previous column) with overall grade improvement after SC	Candidates (% out of entries in subject) with overall grade improvement after SC
English	46997	164 (0.35%)	127 (77.44%)	0.27%
French	29696	98 (0.33%)	92 (93.88)	0.31%
Mathematics	58697	172 (0.29%)	116 (67.44%)	0.20%
Science	109953	251 (0.23%)	147 (58.57%)	0.13%

Table 10: Summary statistics for special consideration applications (absent with good reason) in linear GCSE subjects, June 2009

Subject	Candidates	Candidates (%) with at least one SC application	Candidates (% out of previous column) with overall grade improvement after SC	Candidates (% out of entries in subject) with overall grade improvement after SC
History	50621	134 (0.26%)	103 (76.87%)	0.20%
Geography	35908	124 (0.35%)	83 (66.94%)	0.23%
Mathematics	39467	110 (0.28%)	95 (86.36%)	0.24%
Religious Studies	34262	114 (0.33%)	109 (95.61%)	0.32%

Table 11: Summary statistics for special consideration applications (absent with good reason) in A level subjects, June 2009

Subject	Candidates	Candidates (%) with at least one SC application	Candidates (% out of previous column) with overall grade improvement after SC	Candidates (% out of entries in subject) with overall grade improvement after SC
English Literature	7797	32 (0.41%)	29 (90.63%)	0.37%
Mathematics	11499	25 (0.21%)	15 (60.00%)	0.13%
Chemistry	11897	48 (0.40%)	32 (66.67%)	0.26%
History	12878	59 (0.45%)	50 (84.75%)	0.39%

School type analyses

Due to the small numbers of special consideration applications in each individual subject made by candidates who were absent with good reason, a logistic regression analysis was not feasible and an alternative, descriptive, analysis was carried out to investigate the numbers of applications by the type of school.

Tables 12 and 13 present the percentages of schools (as a percentage of the schools registered with the OCR awarding body) with at least one candidate requesting special consideration in GCSE and A level subjects, respectively, in the June sessions from 2007 to 2009.

Table 12: Percentages of schools with at least one GCSE candidate applying for special consideration (absent with good reason), 2007–2009

Year	Comprehensive	Grammar	Independent	Secondary Modern
2007	43.94	30.25	16.90	36.02
2008	45.31	28.75	16.62	33.74
2009	47.44	29.30	17.51	36.88

Table 12 shows that around 45% of comprehensive schools offering OCR GCSE examinations submitted at least one application for special consideration; this contrasts with around 17% of independent schools and 30% of grammar schools.

Table 13 shows that there were more sixth form colleges and FE/Tertiary colleges submitting special consideration applications (absent with good reason) than other types of schools. Furthermore, applications in each type of school increased considerably in 2009.

Table 13: Percentages of schools with at least one A level candidate applying for special consideration (absent with good reason), 2007–2009

Year	Comprehensive	FE/Tertiary	Grammar	Independent	Sixth Form College
2007	14.52	25.63	25.61	15.22	55.64
2008	13.33	28.72	18.29	10.50	47.45
2009	22.28	35.52	30.3	16.25	57.55

Conclusions and discussion

The area of special consideration is complex. A very fine balance is required between allowing candidates, who were disadvantaged for reasons out of their control, enhancements which enable them to be placed on an equal footing with other candidates but not advantaging them to the extent that the assessment objectives of a particular examination are compromised.

It was surprising to find such scarce literature about special consideration, a practice that is fairly common nationally and internationally at secondary school and university. In particular, very little academic writing or research addressing the issue of special consideration in higher education was found (e.g. Croucher, 1995; De Lambert and Williams, 2006; Thompson, Phillips and De Lange, 2006) and there was no academic discussion about this practice in English secondary schools.

Numbers of special consideration applications

The overall picture presented in this report is clear: the numbers of special consideration applications have been increasing in the last few years. Overall applications increased from 83544 in 2007 to 86477 in 2009, while OCR's entries decreased in the same period⁶.

There might be a number of reasons for the increases in the numbers of special consideration applications:

- First, as a former chairman of the Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator admitted, "schools are increasingly wise to the rules". In fact, there is more awareness now than in previous years of the special consideration enhancements amongst teachers

and parents and more information about the circumstances which might be eligible for special consideration.

- Secondly, it should be noted that the figures reported by the Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator (e.g. Ofqual (2009), Ofqual (2010)) are the numbers of applications for special consideration and not the numbers of candidates receiving an enhancement. The fact that every year the number of modular qualifications increases leads to an increase in the number of applications: in a linear qualification a candidate can request special consideration in one or more papers/components but this counts as only one application; in a modular/unitised qualification a candidate can request special consideration in one or more units and each of these requests counts as one application.
- Thirdly, the increases in applications can be due to increased inclusion, as awarding bodies are committed to meet the needs of those candidates that have been disadvantaged.
- Finally, it could be argued that people are manipulating the system. In fact, there has been speculation about how pupils and teachers might be abusing the system to boost results, helping schools climb in national league tables.

The proportions of approved special consideration requests when candidates were present but disadvantaged, were fairly high (over 90% in most years). However, the percentages of approved applications were about 10% lower for absent candidates. One of the reasons for this might be that units missed in examination series prior to certification had to be re-entered at a later date and applications in those units were rejected even though the candidate might have had a good reason for missing the assessment.

For present but disadvantaged candidates, the research showed that there were more special consideration requests at A level than at GCSE as a proportion of the entries. One reason for this could be the fact that A levels are high stakes examinations (e.g. performance at A level might affect university applications) and therefore it might be more important for candidates to get the 'extra marks'. The research also showed that there were fewer applications for special consideration after missing a time-tabled unit/component for acceptable reasons among A level students than among GCSE students. It could be the case that A level students, due to the high stakes nature of the qualification, were more likely to tolerate unfortunate situations or minor illnesses and do their exams regardless, whereas GCSE students may have been more inclined not to take the exam.

In all ten GCSE subjects investigated in this research, the percentages of present but disadvantaged candidates with at least one application for special consideration were below 5%. At A level, those percentages were slightly higher but below 10% for all subjects. The equivalent percentages for students who missed a time-tabled examination ranged from 0.28% to 0.35% at GCSE and from 0.21% to 0.45% at A level.

There were more applications for special consideration, as a percentage of the entries, in unitised qualifications than in linear ones. This might be partly explained by the fact that with the introduction of modular specifications there are more points in the year when a candidate might have a problem (as examinations are spread over a wider period of time with candidates sitting modules on different days, sessions and even years).

This study also showed marked differences in special consideration applications between schools. Both at GCSE and A level, candidates in

⁶ Note that to calculate the number of entries, each unit of a modular GCSE or A level subject has been counted individually.

independent schools who were present but disadvantaged were more likely than the same type of candidate in another school to request special consideration. For absent candidates, in GCSE examinations around 45% of comprehensive schools submitted at least one application for special consideration whilst only 17% of independent schools and 30% of grammar schools did so; at A level, there were more sixth form colleges and FE/Tertiary colleges submitting special consideration applications than other types of schools.

Impact of the special consideration enhancements

This research has confirmed that for present but disadvantaged candidates the special consideration enhancements were minor adjustments to their marks, with the most popular tariff applied being 2% of the unit/component total mark (this tariff corresponds to circumstances such as minor illnesses at the time of the examination). Therefore, it was not surprising that the percentages of students who improved their overall grades after a special consideration enhancement were very small: both at GCSE and A level, the percentages of candidates (out of the total entry) who improved their overall grade as a result of a special consideration enhancement were lower than 1%.

It was not unexpected either that the percentages of candidates with a missing unit/component who improved their grades after a special consideration enhancement were much higher than those of candidates who were present but disadvantaged. The reasoning for this is that when a special consideration enhancement is approved after the candidate missed a unit/component, an enhanced grade, based on performance on other units/components of the specification, is issued. The adjustment therefore is usually bigger than up to 5% of the total mark in the unit/component missed.

At GCSE, the percentages of present but disadvantaged candidates improving their grade (as a percentage of the candidates submitting at least one special consideration request) were higher for linear qualifications than for modular qualifications. Percentages for A level candidates were in line with the percentages for modular GCSEs. However, the percentages of candidates who missed a time-tabled unit in a unitised qualification (A levels and new GCSEs) were very similar to those who missed a paper/component in a linear qualification.

Other issues

There has been lots of criticism about how pupils and teachers might be abusing the system to boost results, helping schools climb national league tables, but there is no measure of how frequently such behaviour might occur. However, as shown in this research, the percentages of pupils improving their grades after a special consideration enhancement are so small that this claim seems not to have a strong base.

On the other hand, a survey by Eve and Bromley (1981) revealed that 59% of US college students regarded it as dishonest to feign an illness to avoid taking an examination. It may, therefore, be not too surprising that some students will go to great lengths to avoid or delay taking an examination, or provide evidence to explain a poor performance. In England, claiming special consideration by submitting false information could lead to malpractice.

It might be worth investigating the reverse situation: are deserving students being denied special consideration? There might be a level of abuse which might be justifiable in order to 'rescue' the careers of those worthy candidates whose genuine illness on the wrong day could change the course of their careers.

One of the biggest concerns in relation to special consideration enhancements is the size of the rewards. However, this is a very difficult issue as awarding bodies cannot compromise the assessments and need to be fair with all candidates.

Another concern is related to making judgements on decisions about special consideration applications as there might be a subjective factor when granting an adjustment. The decisions are made by the awarding body based on various factors which are different from one candidate to another. These might include the severity of the circumstances or the date of the examination in relation to the circumstances. Although each case is assessed individually, the best written rules will still require someone to decide on which side of a dividing line each case lies.

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