Since the rules about re-sits and the November series were changed by the Regulator there has been an understandably significant decline in entries of new work for these controlled assessment units in the November series. The rules governing re-sits mean that any folders of work submitted for assessment must consist of work that has not previously been submitted. Some centres seemed to have forgotten this rule and were contacted by moderators who had found work in folders which had been completed in Years 10 and 11. In these circumstances the candidate’s mark had to be changed to ‘carry-forward’. ‘Carry-forward’ marks were understandably widespread as centres, with only a few weeks to prepare candidates for the November exams, focused on Unit 1.

With so few entries and use of the same task bank as in the summer, there is very little that can be added to the summer report. Moderators reported some difficulties in supporting centre marks, especially in the case of ENL03. With most entries focused on candidates attempting to achieve a grade C in the subject, moderators reported some lenient assessment where band 3 achievement was assessed as band 4 in candidates’ responses to literary texts or the spoken language study. To move from the ‘clear, consistent understanding’ of meaning and ideas in band 3 to the ‘assuredness’ of band 4, candidates need to demonstrate the ability to ‘develop’ their exploration of ideas and to ‘analyse’ rather than simply explain features of language.

There has also been some lenient assessment of responses in which candidates focus on single words from a text – often without contextualising them - and assert a number of ‘alternative’ interpretations as though this in itself is an indication of high band response. Candidates writing about Crooks in ‘Of Mice and Men’ might, for example, select the word ‘straw’ from the description of the character’s bed and suggest that straw is ‘itchy’ and itching might suggest you will never get your dream; that rabbits eat straw and they, in the novella, are symbols of hope; that straw is easily messed up like people’s lives can be. Listed in this way these ideas do not display ‘analysis’ or ‘perception’: the link to ‘rabbits’, for example, and the idea that they symbolise ‘hope’ is potentially interesting but asserted in a list it does little more than show ‘awareness of’ (band 2) an idea. ‘Analysis’ requires some joining-up of ideas, some exploration of patterns, some ‘development’. A list of alternative interpretations, however long, might remain at the level of band 2.

If a single piece of work in a folder is placed in band 4 rather than band 2, that single mark can take an entire folder out of tolerance and if more single pieces of work in the folder are similarly over-rewarded the aggregation of marks out of tolerance can become very significant.
There are very small tolerances permitted in GCSE English and English Language and the sample is considered as representative of the centre’s entire entry. It is very important, therefore, that departments internally standardise rigorously. Internal standardising becomes more challenging the greater the number of teachers involved, and in some large centres there can be more than twenty staff involved. In these circumstances it is highly unlikely that everyone can meet at single standardising events, nevertheless it is of some considerable importance that every teacher has the same understanding of how to apply the mark schemes. This might be achieved by sharing one or two unmarked pieces of candidates’ work, distributing ‘clean’ copies amongst participating staff and asking for them to be returned with marks and annotations. This might give the person with overall responsibility for assessment the opportunity to see if every marker is applying the mark scheme in the same way. When large numbers of markers are involved, the greatest problems can be created not by uniformly lenient or severe assessment but by a small number of markers who do not fully understand how to apply the strands of the mark scheme. Moderators are often surprised by the variation in approaches to marking and annotation within the same centre and would strongly recommend a common policy and consistent approach. The best approaches seen by moderators consist of brief marginal annotations based on strand (in the case of ENG03 reading, for example, the strands would be meaning, ideas, language / structure, and context) and band. Effective summative comment draws these annotations together concisely and shows how a ‘best fit’ mark has been achieved. A dearth of annotation concerning ‘context’, for example, could lead to a summative comment placing the response in bands 1 or 2, or even zero for that strand.

The workload issues for teachers of GCSE English are acknowledged. Approaching a small number of the centre’s students’ responses to exemplify how to apply the mark schemes is considered to be a useful approach for internal standardising.

Whilst there is only one more summer series for these controlled assessment units in 2016 and in a lot of centres much time and energy will be devoted to the preparation, planning and teaching of the new specifications, but rigorous internal standardising will be as important in 2016 as it has always been.
Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the Results Statistics page of the AQA Website.

Converting Marks into UMS marks

Convert raw marks into Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) marks by using the link below.
UMS conversion calculator