

Effects of the new GCSE grading and accountability systems

how teaching and learning will need to develop
with particular reference to English

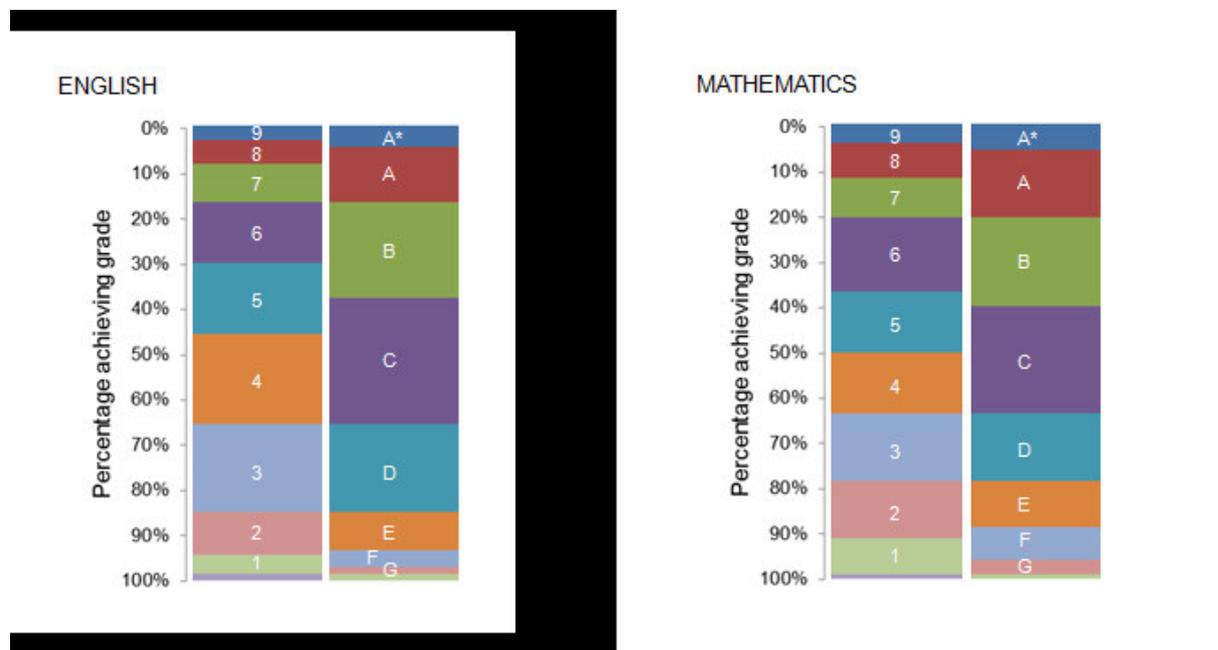
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<http://www.letsthinkinenglish.org/category/news/>

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Introduction

The new GCSE grading and accountability systems will have immediate and longer-term effects. The new accountability system – Attainment 8 (A8) and Progress 8 (P8) begins in 2016 using the current GCSE point scores: A* = 8, A = 7, etc. In 2017 the new GCSEs in English Language, English Literature and Mathematics will be graded 9 to 1 where the grade is also the number of points. This will cause large falls in the point score for these subjects and therefore large falls in many schools' A8 and P8 scores between 2016 and 2017.

This is chiefly because, under the new grades, many grade Bs (= 6 points) will become new grade 5 and most grade Cs (= 5 points) will become new grade 4: see examples from Ofqual below. Schools need to be aware of this so that English and Maths staff are not held responsible for a sudden drop in performance.



The longer-term issue is that the new grading system is designed to influence the distribution of grades and the accountability system based on them. This accompanies higher-demand

specifications aligned with the standards of other more successful countries which are, in turn, designed to influence teaching and learning. *Schools which understand the rationale and practical implications of these changes will respond to the new GCSE specifications more successfully than those which do not.*

A difficulty is that the DfE will not provide any guidance for schools on how to respond effectively to the new GCSE specifications and the new grading and accountability systems, just as it will not provide guidance about the new National Curriculum without levels. This is a reaction against the approach of previous governments which led to the National Strategies and assessment-driven approach to raising standards. These are now seen as having failed. There is cross-party agreement on the need to raise educational standards as shown by international comparisons where England is flatlining and to reduce the 'tail' of students leaving school with poor qualifications or none.

Features of the new grading system

The new grades will be aligned by statistical prediction with the present grades in three grade-groups:

- new grades 9 – 7 will have the same proportion of students as A*/A
- new grades 6 – 4 will have the same proportion of students as B/C
- new grades 3 – 1 will have the same proportion of students as D – G

Grades will be allocated arithmetically within these grade groups. Other features are:

- abolition of C/D borderline so all grades count towards A8 and P8
- the new mid-grade 5 will be aligned to average performance in several more successful jurisdictions and so will be more demanding than grade C; a specified proportion of students achieving grade 5 and above in English and Maths will almost certainly be the new threshold measure under the new system
- the top four grades A* – C are replaced with six grades 9 – 4; these will have narrower mark ranges than A* – C enabling students with appropriate teaching to move up the grades more easily.

Accountability measures

From 2016 secondary schools will be required to publish four accountability measures:

- Attainment 8 (A8) – each student's best 8 GCSE results including English Language or English Literature (one double weighted if both are taken in the same series),

Mathematics (double weighted), 3 other EBacc subjects and 3 others from a prescribed list; the school's A8 figure is the average of its students' A8s;

- Progress 8 (P8) – each student's progress score from their KS2 test scores in Reading and Mathematics; this is calculated by relating each student's A8 score to their Key Stage 2 test score in Reading and Mathematics using an annual matrix of average fine level scores; the school's P8 is the average of its students' P8s;
- the percentage of students achieving a threshold measure in English and Maths; for the new GCSEs, this will almost certainly be grade 5 as the new mid grade aligned to average performance in several more successful jurisdictions; and
- the percentage of pupils achieving the English Baccalaureate.

Schools will be required to publish these four figures in a standardised format on their website each year for easy comparison by parents and others. It appears that they will also be required to publish the school's average point score for each GCSE subject.

Schools will be judged mainly on their overall P8 score to show those that add value to their students' prior attainment at KS2 as against those that are coasting. *If the P8 score is less than minus 0.5, i.e. less than half a GCSE grade, this will trigger an Ofsted inspection.* (Ofsted inspections will be less frequent in future and conducted by HMIs because the current inspection contracts will not be renewed when they expire. This is a response to the inconsistency of contractors' reports. Outstanding and good schools will have a one-day visit by an HMI every 2/3 years for a discussion with the SLT which is reported to parents (no lesson observations). Section 5 Ofsted inspections will be triggered by inadequate P8 scores, other evidence of declining attainment or concerns about safeguarding.)

Rationale for the changes

The Government's concern about England's lack of improvement in international comparisons and low attainment by less able students is set out in *The Importance of Teaching* White Paper in November 2010 with a foreword by the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister. There is cross-party agreement about the need for improvement which has led to the pupil premium; the establishment of the Educational Endowment Foundation with £110 million funding to research ways of raising attainment of disadvantaged pupils; the creation of a National Curriculum without levels; and the requirement on Ofsted to report on schools' progress in 'closing the gap'.

The implementation of these policies since 2010 have led to further cross-party agreement that the new GCSE specifications and the grading system and accountability systems based on them should be:

- **more demanding** in examination (end of course only), content and assessment (more challenging questions)
- **consistent in standard** between the various Awarding Bodies
- **internationally referenced** to standards in more successful jurisdictions
- **referenced to national standards over time** by national reference tests in English and Mathematics
- **equitable** so that all students' grades count towards A8 and P8 and 'gaming' by repeated or multiple entries is deterred
- **focussed on effective teaching** through commissioning and promotion of formal research into effective teaching methods through e.g. the Education Endowment Foundation and the London Schools Excellence Fund. Influences on policy include research-based presentations such as HMI's *Moving English forward* (Ofsted 2012) and Robin Alexander's in February 2012.

The aim is to provide public recognition of schools that do well with *all* their students, including the less able and disadvantaged, and to expose those that are coasting or concentrate on the more able.

Standard setting in 2017

Ofqual was established with a statutory remit to ensure consistency, validity and reliability in school examinations. It has power to approve specifications, supervise marking and require Awarding Bodies to change their grade boundaries if necessary.

Ofqual's aim is therefore for the various specifications in each subject to be set, marked and graded with such consistency between Awarding Bodies that they are in effect a single national test, as in other countries. This will be achieved for new GCSEs by:

- all Awarding Bodies required to use the same tightly-drawn subject content and assessment objectives resulting in very similar specifications and mark schemes
- continued and improved use of KS2 scores to refine predictions
- using interboard screening of results data to improve comparability of standards between Awarding Bodies.

For example, if an Awarding Body sets a paper which is 'easier' than those of others, it will not be allowed to generate a larger proportion of higher grades. The use of KS2 scores and interboard screening of results data will reveal this anomaly and Ofqual's statutory powers to ensure consistency will allow it to require the Awarding Body to alter its grade boundaries appropriately. Concern has been expressed that AQA has provided sample Maths papers

which are less demanding than those of other Boards. This may also be true of aspects of the English Language sample papers and markschemes.

Standard setting will be demanding in English and Maths in 2017 (and other subjects in 2018) because Ofqual is requiring the Awarding Bodies to discontinue any element of criterion-referenced assessment by which students' answers are compared with those in previous years. Grading will be by "comparable outcomes" only, with the numbers of candidates in each grade group (9 – 7, 6 – 4 and 3 – 1) fixed by statistical prediction and the mark ranges with each grade group fixed by other means, e.g. grades 9 – 7 awarded in the percentage ratios 20:30:50 and grade 5 aligned to average performance in some other more successful jurisdictions.

As the proportions of grades will be fixed in advance, schools will compete for the higher grades and the competition will be most acute for grades 6 – 4. In effect, schools whose candidates are better prepared for the new examinations will push candidates from less well prepared schools downwards.

Predicting students' grades in 2017 will be difficult for these reasons together with the fact that the international standard for grade 5 has not yet been exemplified and published so that sample papers and markschemes can be compared with them. This needs to be done in time to inform teaching.

A further complication is that Ofqual intends to trial the new national reference tests (NRTs) in English and Mathematics in 2016 and for these to be taken fully early in 2017 with the new GCSEs in those subjects being used to establish equivalent performance standards for the NRTs. As students will take the same national reference test each year, changes in the standards of GCSE English Language and Mathematics over time will be apparent and used to permit changes in the proportions of each grade in due course.

As the standards set for the NRTs will be the basis for GCSE standards for years to come, they will need to be set very carefully. Ofqual will no doubt ensure that the standards for GCSE English and Maths in 2017 are as secure as they can possibly be to provide the baseline standards of the NRTs.

For schools which do not implement the changes in teaching and learning on which the new specifications and grading system are predicated effectively, grade rates in English Language, English Literature and Mathematics are likely to be considerably lower in 2017 than in 2016. If this is a majority of schools, there will be lower grade rates nationally. Politically this will be presented by Ofqual and the new Government as students' 'true' level of attainment in contrast with previous grade inflation and as a springboard from which England's future education success can be accurately measured by the national reference tests and international comparisons.

How should schools respond? Suggested developments in teaching and learning

Schools are in an unprecedented situation in that, from September 2015, they need to teach examination courses on which their accountability will be based but for which some essential information about the required standards is currently unknown. In these circumstances it would be prudent to analyse the requirements of the new specifications and to make the best decisions possible in the light of available research. *In a situation where various providers offer solutions, it would be reasonable to ask them for the academic research supporting what is offered and to make decisions according to the clarity and robustness of this evidence.*

The new GCSE English Language sample papers provided by the Awarding Bodies indicate that:

- unseen texts have a higher linguistic demand than at present and will always include words and phrases that most students will not understand;
- unseen texts have a historical and cultural context; students will understand them better if they have read and discussed others of the same period and genre; and
- students will need confidence and resilience to do well on the new papers and these qualities can best be built up by frequent experience in making reasonable deductions and inferences about unfamiliar texts.

Each of these considerations also applies to English Literature in relation to set texts and to unseen texts set for comparison. *The greater emphasis on literary unseen texts in English Language indicates a greater overlap between the two subjects than at present.*

It is clear that to answer questions successfully with the necessary confidence and resilience students will need:

- higher-order reading skills including the ability to make reasonable deductions and inferences when faced with complex or unfamiliar language;
- ‘cultural capital’ – enough experience of a variety of texts to ‘place’ unseen texts historically and draw on this experience when reading and writing about them;
- ability to analyse texts in relation to their underlying literary features (intention, genre, structure, mood, figurative language, etc); and
- experience of these beginning in Key Stage 3.

There is strong research evidence that these four needs would be met and higher grades under the new grading system achieved if schools adopted the following four policies relating to teaching and learning:

- (1) use a teaching programme which explicitly develops the higher-order cognitive skills of response and analysis, beginning in KS3;
- (2) recognise that, for English, the new GCSEs require a rich programme of teaching and learning based on exploratory discussion of high quality literature, beginning in KS3;
- (3) accept that the National Strategy model of teaching and detailed tracking of progress, and Ofsted's previous support of it, are now regarded as unsuccessful and have been abandoned as a distraction from more appropriate teaching; and
- (4) adopt mixed-ability groupings preferably for all lessons but initially at least for skill-development lessons.

Each of these propositions is explained and supporting research evidence given in the full version of the paper.

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