

GCSE Reforms, 2018

Frequently Asked Questions for Parents

1 I have heard GCSEs are changing, what does this mean?

GCSEs are now graded on a new 'reformed' scale of 9 to 1, with 9 the highest grade (rather than A* to G for the 'unreformed' GCSEs), to distinguish clearly between the reformed and unreformed qualifications.

The government and Department for Education (DfE) specified that the new GCSE syllabuses will include more challenging and knowledge-based content, with exams only at the end of the course. English and maths were graded 9 to 1 in 2017, and this year the following 17 subjects will have numbered grading: ancient languages, art and design, biology, chemistry, citizenship studies, computer science, dance, combined science, drama, food preparation and nutrition, geography, history, modern foreign languages (MFL), music, PE, physics, and religious studies (RS). Most others follow in 2019. During this transition, students will receive a mixture of letter and number grades.

2 If the exams are harder, what will happen to the grades this summer?

Although the exams will cover a wider, more challenging range of content, the independent exam regulator Ofqual has made it clear that students sitting these examinations for the first time will not be disadvantaged. Whilst students may come out of exams feeling they have done less well, as we saw in 2017 with the reformed maths and English, broadly the same proportion of students who achieved a C and above in each of the legacy qualifications will achieve a grade 4 and above in the new, reformed GCSEs. The exam boards will base standards on results of 16 year-olds who took unreformed GCSE qualifications, so that it does not disadvantage this year's Year 11 students.

3 Will my child be disadvantaged taking these exams?

In short, no. Whilst it takes a few years for teachers and students to get used to new qualifications and there are fewer past exam papers for students to practise on, the exam regulator Ofqual recognises that teachers are not as familiar with the new qualifications as they were with the old ones. Understandably, it would not be fair to penalise students for this, so the exam boards use statistics to help set grade boundaries. For example, a student who would have previously achieved a grade C or above would be expected to get a grade 4 or above in the new GCSEs. While the content and assessment have changed, Ofqual will make sure that grades are awarded fairly and your child will not be disadvantaged by the changes.

4 Why has this new grading system been introduced?

The introduction of the 9-1 system increases the number of higher grades than the previous A*- G system. By using 9-1, there are now six different grades from 4 to 9, rather than four in the old system (A*, A, B, C), which means individual students can be more accurately recognised in terms of their results. The revised



scale will also enable employers and others to easily identify which students have taken the new, more challenging GCSEs.

5 How does the new grading system match the old one?

The new grade scale will not be directly equivalent to the existing one. However, to be fair to the students and to give meaning to the new grades, Ofqual has decided there will be some comparable points between the old grades, and the approach to awarding will ensure that, in the first year of a new qualification, broadly the same proportion of pupils will:

- achieve a grade 7 and above, as currently achieve a grade A and above
- will achieve a grade 4 and above, as currently achieve a grade C and above
- will achieve a grade 1 and above, as currently achieve a grade G and above

It is important to realise the new GCSEs have more grades. While it is true to say that the same proportion of candidates will achieve a 4 and above as currently get a C and above, it is not true to say a grade 4 is directly equivalent to a grade C. This is because of the expanded number of grades above a 4. So, a grade 4 represents the bottom two thirds of a grade C, while a grade 5 is equivalent to the top third of grade C and the bottom third of grade B.

6 As the top grade is grade 9, will there be similar numbers of 9s awarded to A*s currently?

There is more differentiation in the reformed qualifications, as there are three top grades (7, 8 and 9), compared to two in the unreformed qualifications (A and A*), so it will be the case that there will be less grade 9s than A*s previously.

7 I want my child to aim for the equivalent of a grade C across all subjects but I am confused as to whether they should be aiming for a 4 or a 5

Because the same proportion of candidates will get a 4 and above as currently get a C and above, aiming for 4 and above is equivalent to aiming for C and above. This is, and will remain the level that pupils must achieve so they are not required to continue studying English and maths after secondary school. The government has defined a grade 4 as a 'standard' pass. Where employers, FE providers and universities currently accept a grade C, the government expects them to continue recognising a grade 4.

8 I have heard there will be a 'standard' pass and a 'strong pass', what does this mean?

The government will publish schools' results, not just at the 'standard pass' (grade 4 and above), but also at the 'strong pass' (at grade 5 and above) in school performance tables only. The number of pupils achieving a 'strong pass' will be one of the measures by which schools are judged.

9 How will employers be informed and educated on the differences between the new and old grades and qualifications?

The DfE, the independent regulator Ofqual and exam boards have designed a variety of products and channels including social media, to ensure all stakeholders can access the information they need. This includes ensuring employers understand that the new GCSEs are more demanding, and that a new grade 4 represents a similar level of achievement to a current low to medium grade C (the threshold for a level 2 qualification).

Ofqual's films and digital platforms to communicate the changes to GCSE grading can be found [here](#).

10 Will employers and colleges be asking for a 4 or a 5 as part of their entry criteria?

Employers, colleges and universities will continue to decide the level of GCSE grades needed to meet their individual employment or study requirements. The DfE is encouraging employers, colleges and universities to have realistic expectations of pupils who sit the new, tougher GCSEs when setting their entry requirements for work or further study. Employers and colleges will also need to recruit the same number of students as previously, so are likely to set their criteria in terms of the equivalence of C and above, and 4 and above.

11 Will A levels be changing their grades too?

No, A levels will retain their A*-E grades, and AS qualifications their A-E grades.

ASCL Curriculum and Assessment Specialist Suzanne O'Farrell