

2014/49

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## Pocket Watch – Grading GCSEs

### Introduction

It's been a week now since Ofqual, the exams regulator, announced how the new grading system was going to operate for the first round of new GCSEs which begin in Sept 2015. Reactions have been broadly supportive and where there have been concerns, they've tended to emphasise three points. First, a concern about the impact on students (*'students must not be disadvantaged by the change in grading'*: the ASCL); second, a concern about the potential for confusion with two sets of grades, old and new, running for a while at the same time (*'students will be sitting new style exam papers for three subjects and old style for the others'*: ATL); and third, concerns that from now on things are going to get a bit tougher (*'Changes to GCSEs may cut number of students receiving top grades'*: The Guardian.) As Glenys Stacy the Chief Regulator recognised, *"how grade standards are set is an extremely important issue"* and for those wanting to get a deeper understanding of the whole thing, Ofqual accompanied its announcement with the release of a more technical **Board Paper** setting out the reasoning behind its decision making. A non-technical summary of some of the key points follows.

### GCSE grading: some explanatory notes

- This latest announcement covers the grading procedures for the first three of the 'new' GCSEs, namely English Language, English Lit and maths. Ofqual will carefully evaluate how it goes with this first round but would anticipate the arrangements forming the basis for the grading arrangements for other new GCSEs as they are gradually introduced
- The national reference tests which Ofqual will be using to monitor and performance standards over time in KS4 English Lang and maths will apply formally from 2018. The contract for the tests will be awarded in 2014, the tests developed in 2015, trialled in 2016 and used to establish benchmarks in 2017
- In making the transition from one grading scale to another Ofqual will draw on its statistical predictions approach. This was the approach favoured by Ofqual in its consultation and means using evidence derived from cohort performance in KS2 tests. It won't however be used for determining every grade, as follows:
  - It will be used to determine the grade boundaries at U/1, 3/4 and 6/7 where the bottom of the new grade 1 will be aligned to the current grade G and where *"broadly"* the same proportion of students will get a grade 4 and above as currently get a C and above and who get a grade 7 as who currently achieve an A and above
  - For grade 5 things are a bit different. This is because one of the aims of the original Gove reforms was to raise the bar at the current grade C by hitching it to the performance levels of so-called *'high-performing jurisdictions.'* This has been a contentious proposal, 49% of respondents to the consultation for instance disagreed with it and Ofqual has trodden carefully, not fixing the standard to any one international test but instead taking an arithmetical approach so that it's *"positioned in the top third of marks for a current C and bottom third for a B"*
  - Grade 9 has also proved challenging. Originally Ofqual considered setting this so that 50% of those who would have got an A\* would get a 9 but following further modelling is proposing restricting this to 20% of those achieving at least a grade 7 being awarded a grade 9. Part of the problem seems to have been the variability in top performance in different subjects and part that 50% would tie things too closely to the current A\*. It would mean a halving of the number gaining the top grade but Ofqual intends to at least apply it for 2017 and review how it goes
  - Other grades will be determined arithmetically as currently

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