

## Summer 2013 GCSEs – Why the Results Might Look Different



In August 2013 the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ), which represents exam boards, will publish GCSE results. As in previous years, these results will include results for students who have sat one or more units or modules, and who want to claim (or ‘cash in’) their overall result for the qualification. Two basic points: some students take just one qualification, others take seven, eight or more, so the number of qualifications (more than 5 million) is much higher than the number of students; and most students taking GCSEs are aged 16 (Year 11) and at the end of Key Stage 4, but GCSEs can be taken by students of any age and they are all included in the JCQ results publication.

As the qualifications regulator, we want people to understand how the exam system works and any issues that may be relevant to these results. There are a number of changes this year that mean the overall results could look different to results in previous years, even though standards will be maintained.

### How exam boards set standards

It is important that appropriate standards are set for qualifications, so they properly reward the knowledge and skills demonstrated by the student, and everyone can have confidence in the results. Exam boards set standards following the principle that if the group of students entering a qualification is similar, in terms of ability, to the previous year’s group, then the results ought to be similar to the previous year’s results. Exam boards use prior achievement data – how well students did at Key Stage 2 (11 year olds) – to predict the likely GCSE outcomes for the group (the predictions are used for the students as a group, not at individual student level.) So when examiners set grade boundaries, they are weighing up the qualitative evidence, including question papers and mark schemes and student work from the current and previous years’ exams, and statistical data about the 16 year olds within the group of students – who can be matched to their Key Stage 2 results from five years earlier. They also have data about the ‘unmatched candidates’ (those without Key Stage 2 results), such as their age breakdown, what types of schools or colleges they come from, and teachers’ estimates of their grades, so examiners have a good picture of the group as a whole.

This approach aims to make sure that the standard is the same, even when changes in the overall entry mean that the overall results look different.

## **Summer 2013 – what’s different?**

There are several differences with GCSEs this summer, and they could mean that the results published in August will look different, even though the standard set will be the same as in summer 2012. For example:

- There are more entries this year from students in Year 10 or earlier years (students being entered early, before the end of Key Stage 4).
- Entries for International GCSEs<sup>1</sup> (IGCSEs) have increased significantly this summer.
- Some students, particularly in maths, enter for more than one qualification in the same subject, either with the same exam board or with different exam boards.
- Changes have been made to the GCSE science suite to make these qualifications more challenging.

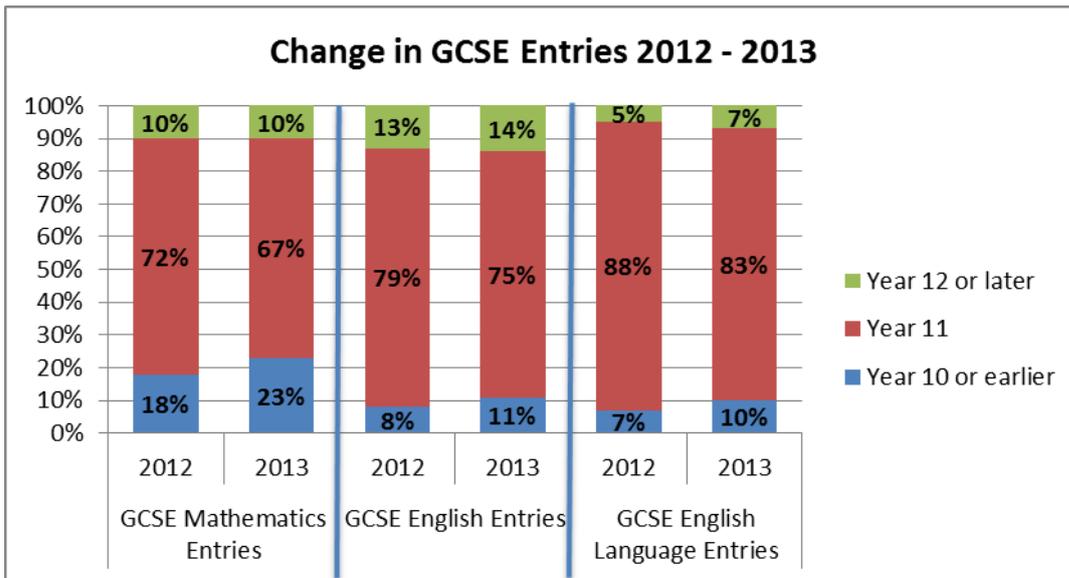
These changes, which are discussed in more detail below, mean that the cohort of students who took GCSEs this summer is likely to be different from the cohort of students who took GCSEs last year.

### **Early entry**

In maths this summer, the proportion of the total entry from students in Year 10 or earlier years has gone from 18 per cent in summer 2012 to 23 per cent. The picture in English and English language this summer is similar, with the proportion of students entering early going from 8 per cent and 7 per cent respectively in summer 2012 to 11 per cent and 10 per cent respectively. This summer is the last time GCSEs in England will be modular, that is with assessments throughout the course. This may be one of the reasons why more students in Year 10 or earlier years are entered for GCSEs this summer.

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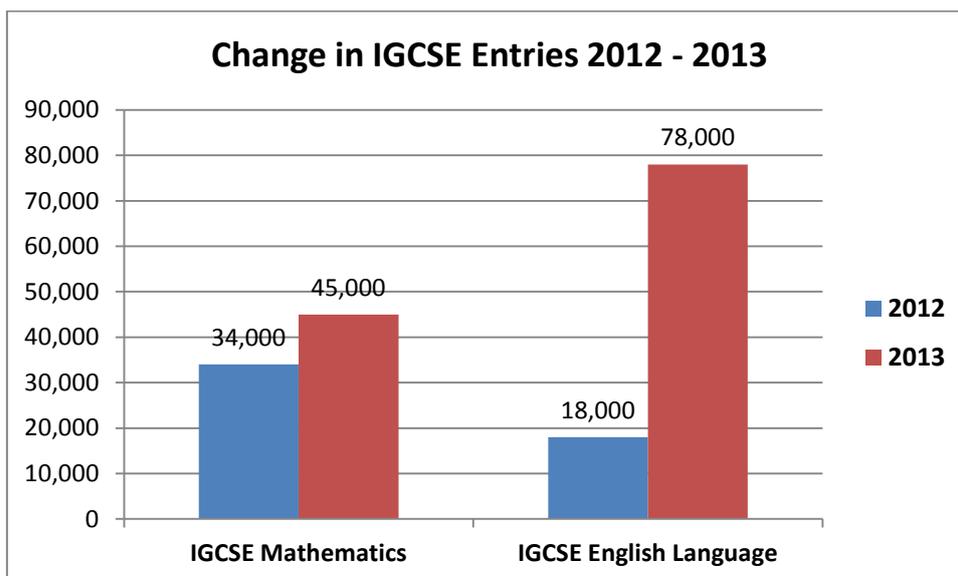
<sup>1</sup> IGCSEs use the same grading scale as GCSEs, and, in some cases, IGCSE results count as GCSE results for school and college performance measures.



So, this summer, only 67 per cent of maths entries, 75 per cent of English entries and 83 per cent of English language entries are from students in Year 11. This compares with 72 per cent, 79 per cent and 88 per cent respectively in summer 2012. This won't make a difference for exam boards setting standards, but this change in the overall entry could mean the overall results look different. If students in Year 10 are very able and ready to take GCSEs early, and they perform well, they will achieve good grades, which would mean the overall results may be higher than in summer 2012. But if they are not ready to take GCSEs early, and they perform less well, then the overall results may be lower. But the standard set for Year 11 students will be in line with last year.

### Increased entries for IGCSEs

Entries from UK schools for IGCSEs have increased. In maths, the entries for IGCSEs have gone from 34,000 in summer 2012 to 45,000 this summer. And, in English language, the entries have gone from 18,000 in summer 2012 to 78,000 this summer.



If students are entering IGCSEs, they are much less likely to be entered for a GCSE in the same subject. Therefore, an increase in IGCSE entries will mean a decrease in the overall GCSE entry, and this could affect the overall picture of GCSE results. For example, if schools with high ability students are moving to IGCSEs, then we could see a lower proportion of higher grades at GCSE than in 2012. But, if schools with a large proportion of students thought to be at the grade C/D border move to IGCSEs then any impact on the overall figures will be seen much more at the grade C/D border and in the proportion of A\*-C grades overall.

### **Multiple entry**

We know from analysis of summer 2012 data that, in some subjects, many students enter for more than one qualification in the same subject: different versions with the same exam board and/or with different exam boards. This is not re-sitting, but sitting another qualification in the same subject. In summer 2012, 15 per cent of students entered for GCSE maths had also sat one or more units from another maths GCSE, or taken another whole maths GCSE. These students tend to be concentrated at the grade C/D border.

Exam boards can set standards when students are being, in effect, 'double counted', but it can make setting grade boundaries more challenging when the entry pattern changes. And, sometimes, the fact that a student does better in one qualification than another can be taken to mean that one qualification is easier than another. There are many other factors that might mean students get different results – motivation, being better prepared for one qualification, and so on.

## **GCSE science subjects (science, additional science, biology, chemistry, physics)**

Results in the GCSE science subjects could also look different this summer. New qualifications in biology, chemistry, physics, additional science and additional applied science will be awarded for the first time. And, we are still seeing a shift in entries towards the separate sciences. These new GCSEs are designed to be more challenging, because the previous syllabuses did not adequately test the subject content and were not sufficiently demanding. Although we cannot be sure until results come in, we are expecting a small drop in achievements overall rather than anything more substantial. The picture may be different school by school, and some schools could see much bigger changes than others.

### **A levels**

We have focused here on the reasons why GCSE results may look different this year. Entries for A levels are more stable, with fewer changes to the groups of students taking them or to the qualifications themselves.

### **Conclusion**

When this summer's results are published, it will be important to consider the impact of the entry patterns and other changes discussed here, as they mean that year-on-year comparisons may not be comparing like with like.

### **More information**

There is more information on summer awarding available on the summer 2013 page of our website.

[www.ofqual.gov.uk/standards/summer-exams-2013/](http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/standards/summer-exams-2013/)

We have also published an open letter to schools and colleges, which is available here:

[www.ofqual.gov.uk/news/open-letter-to-schools-on-changes-to-qualifications/](http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/news/open-letter-to-schools-on-changes-to-qualifications/)