

Spotlight on Comparable Outcomes

In our [June letter](#) to schools and colleges, we set out our regulatory approach to the summer examination series. We talked about the well-established approach to maintaining standards and securing fairness when new qualifications are introduced, known as ‘comparable outcomes’.

What is the comparable outcomes approach?

The comparable outcomes approach has been used by UK qualifications regulators for several years as the main mechanism to prevent grade inflation over time. However, the principal aim of the approach is to protect students so that they are not unfairly disadvantaged from being the first to sit new qualifications. This means that if the national cohort, that is all students sitting a qualification, is similar to last year, then we expect the results at a national level to be similar this year.

This comparable outcomes approach is tried and tested, and has previously been used successfully by exam boards to maintain standards at a time of qualification change.

If a cohort hasn’t changed much, then we wouldn’t expect the results to change much either. It is well established practice when new qualifications are introduced to give priority to comparable outcomes over comparable performance. If the awards were based on judgements of performance, students could be disadvantaged as they are likely to get lower marks due to a lack of familiarity with the new exams. The aim of the comparable outcomes approach is that the first students to take these new exams should be awarded grades that they would have received had they taken the old exams.

In essence, the comparable outcomes approach compensates for a likely small drop in performance when new qualifications are introduced. This approach was used successfully last summer when awarding the new AS level qualifications.

But how do you ensure that the first students to take these new exams are awarded grades that they would have received if they had taken the old exams?

When new qualifications are introduced, students in the first few years are likely to get lower marks in the exams than students in previous years, who were more familiar with the exams. This pattern of change caused by assessment reform is known as the 'sawtooth effect'.

Specifically, performance on high stakes assessments is often adversely affected when that assessment undergoes reform, followed by improving performance over time as students and teachers gain familiarity with the new test.

In practical terms, we require exam boards to make an adjustment to grade boundaries for the sawtooth

effect. When grade boundaries are set, evidence will be considered to see if an adjustment is needed to allow for this effect. Where there is evidence to support the presence of the sawtooth effect, grade boundaries are likely to be lowered, to compensate for the dip in performance of those students sitting new qualifications.

To identify and quantify the sawtooth effect, WJEC will undertake additional statistical analysis and modelling to support senior examiner judgements of student work at key grade boundaries during the awarding process.

Will this mean that results will look the same this year as they did last year?

If the cohort sitting the qualification this year is similar to last year, then we would expect results at a national level to be similar this year. There will be some subjects where this is the case.

However, we know that there are a number of subjects where there have been significant changes to the nature of the cohort sitting the exams. For example, in GCSE English Language where more than 21,000 Year 10 students have been entered by schools. In these cases,

we do not expect the overall results to be similar to last year.

Given these changes, this summer's results should be treated with care when looking at overall results compared with previous years. To be meaningful, it is essential to compare like with like. Our focus is on 16 year olds who make up the vast majority of GCSE entries. When we make any comparisons, these will be comparing the results of 16 year olds from one year to the next.

A final word....

The comparable outcomes approach is applied at whole cohort level and will ensure that variability in outcomes at the national level is limited where the cohort is similar to previous years.

Even when there are no changes to qualifications, individual schools and colleges may see some year-on-year variation in their results. However,

when a qualification changes, there can be more year-on-year variability than usual in the results for individual schools and colleges.


This can be due to a variety of factors including a change in entry strategy or a change in approach to delivering a qualification, and for new qualifications, familiarity with the exams.

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