

Spotlight on Common Myths

The exams are now finished and it's over to the exam boards to mark and grade the qualifications sat this summer. In just a few weeks' time, it will be results day. Some will be eagerly anticipating those days, others anxiously awaiting to see if their hard work has paid off. And bubbling away in the background during this time are myths, misbeliefs, misconceptions - whatever we want to call them.

Some of these come to us directly, others are hearsay. However, there is always a danger that they start to be seen as facts, which could damage confidence and undermine the hard-earned achievements of students. So, let's explore some that we have heard and set the record straight:

1. The first group of students taking a new examination will be unfairly disadvantaged

The new qualifications have had changes made to their content and structure. Some of the content is new or updated, and the structure and design of the assessments has changed. Research shows that when new qualifications are introduced, the change has an effect on student performance.

Students in the first few years of the new qualification are likely to get lower marks in their exam papers than students in previous years, where there was more familiarity with the exams. This pattern of change is known as the 'sawtooth effect'. Over time as teachers and students gain familiarity with the new test, performance is likely to improve.

To protect students so that they are not unfairly disadvantaged from being the first to sit new qualifications, we follow the principle of comparable outcomes. This means that if the national cohort of students taking a qualification is similar to last year, then we expect the results at a national level to be similar this year. In practical terms, we expect exam boards to make an adjustment to grade boundaries to compensate for weaker performance in the assessments - the sawtooth effect.

This comparable outcomes approach has previously been used by exam boards to maintain standards at a time of qualification change. We have more information about the comparable outcomes approach in a [separate spotlight article](#).

2. There's a fixed quota of grades

We don't expect to see large changes in the proportion of grades awarded each year. However, we do accept some variation in results from one year to the next, as long as the exam board has evidence to support how it has set its grade boundaries.

Exam boards set grade boundaries at awarding meetings where a committee of senior examiners consider a range of evidence including both statistical indicators and students' work. Where there is evidence to support an improvement, or indeed a decline, in performance, exam boards can provide us with this evidence to justify why this should be reflected in outcomes, which may be out of line with statistical predictions.

3. Schools can't improve

Even when national results remain steady, our approach to maintaining standards does not prevent an individual school's results from improving. Our assumption is that unless there is good reason, proportions of grades awarded nationally each year should not see large changes.

Some schools and colleges have very stable results over time. However, when a qualification changes, we anticipate 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 changes in school entry patterns for exams, and the degree to which teaching has adapted to meet the requirements of the new specifications.

4. A grade C is a different standard every year

GCSEs have a 'compensatory' model of assessment. That is, they allow better performance in one part of a qualification to compensate for poorer performance in another part of the qualification. Therefore, the notion that a C grade means that a student can do X, Y and Z is not entirely true based on their performance in examinations.

GCSEs are not made up of a series of hurdles that students have to clear in order to be awarded that grade. Instead, there is a 'best fit' approach based on evidence from exams. This means that there may be two students who achieve a C grade who have excelled in different elements of the qualification and at a unit level their results look very different.


There may be other 'myths' that you have heard which you may want some more information on. Please feel free to let us know if you are uncertain of something you have been told or a 'fact' that you have heard that you are unsure about and we will endeavour to provide some clarity for you.

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