



Pearson

Comparable Outcomes: A Guide

How can improvements in teaching and/or learning be recognised under the comparable outcomes approach?

Many assessment experts have deliberated on this issue over time, particularly that very point about 'fairness'. Comparable outcomes has been retained as the preferred system precisely because it is deemed to be the fairest way of ensuring no candidate is advantaged or disadvantaged on the basis of the year in which they were born, or rather, the year in which they are entered for their GCSEs or A levels.

It is generally recognised that as a reformed qualification beds in over time, factors such as familiarity, greater availability of professional development and support resources, increased teacher confidence, greater numbers of past papers and so on, can all contribute to improvements in cohort performance. The converse of this is that when new qualifications are introduced, there can often be a dip in cohort performance.

This is often referred to as the 'Sawtooth Effect'. Ofqual have recently published a study into patterns of performance seen after 2010 and 2011 reform which shows that changes in average grade boundaries over the period in question roughly follow the expected Sawtooth Effect pattern. The data also suggest that students and teachers took around 3 years on average to become familiar with the content and style of the new tests. [You can find out more about this study here.](#)

If our system of awarding grades was entirely 'criterion referenced' (if there was a fixed and immovable relationship between the quality of what a candidate produces and the grade they achieve), learners who happened to turn 16 in the first or second assessment year of a new GCSE qualification would be disadvantaged by the Sawtooth Effect.

In the summer of 2016, we saw the first wave of reformed AS qualifications assessed for the first time, and they provide a useful example here. Across many qualifications, and across all awarding organisations, grade boundaries were often significantly lower than they had been in the previous year. Despite the fact that the overall demand of the AS qualification had not been increased, significant content and assessment changes meant these were no longer familiar - and that impacted on performance. Without starting from the principle that roughly the same proportion of candidates should achieve each grade as in the previous year, a significant number of learners would have been disadvantaged by that lack of familiarity in the system - perhaps even lost their university place as a result.

This might mean that grade boundaries in the first few years of a qualification might be set lower than in subsequent years.

How can awarding bodies recognise genuine improvements in student or teacher performance over time?

Currently, exam boards have limited evidence of how performance can change over time in terms of genuine improvement in teaching and learning. Ofqual recently introduced the National Reference Test (NRT). The test will indicate if, over several years, there is a change in how students perform at the national level, which exam boards can then consider prior to GCSEs being awarded.

[You can find out more information about the NRT here.](#)

Will comparable outcomes mean that results for linear, 9-1 GCSE English and Maths at my centre in 2017 will be in line with modular A*-G in previous years?

Ofqual has stated that the statistical predictions will be used in 2017 to ensure there is alignment between the new and current grading structures such that:

- broadly the same proportion of students will achieve a grade 4 and above as currently achieve a grade C and above
- broadly the same proportion of students will achieve a grade 7 and above as currently achieve a grade A and above
- broadly the same proportion of students will achieve a grade 1 and above as currently achieve a grade G and above.

This means that at national level, there will be some stability in the proportion of candidates achieving across the grade range. [You can read more about grade equivalences here.](#)

It is important to remember that this alignment is carried out on 16-year-olds (and only those for whom we have prior Key Stage 2 attainment data). If there is a significant shift in the number of Year 10, 12 or 13 learners sitting maths or English in a given series, it can impact what the national spread of results looks like.

Nationally, the proportion of 16-year-olds achieving a Grade 4 in 2017 should be broadly aligned with the proportion who achieved a C in 2016 - but there is scope for variability in individual centre results. The factors influencing that variability might range from decisions about teaching and learning, setting and timetabling, staffing levels and use of KS3, to how well new content demands are understood.

If you're interested in knowing more about year-on-year variability at centre level, Ofqual have published several studies on it, eg [Variability in GCSE Results for Individual Schools and Colleges 2012 to 2015](#)