

Summer 2014 GCSEs and IGCSEs

The potential impact on results of changes in entry patterns



Today we have published provisional entry data¹ for England, collected from the GCSE and IGCSE exam boards in April 2014, and we compare them with similar data from summer 2013. These data are based on the number of entries, not the number of students. But, the data suggest that the cohort taking GCSEs in England in summer 2014 is a different mix of students compared to the cohort in summer 2013. This could mean overall results in some subjects are different from those in 2013, even though standards have been held steady.

Background – the changes to GCSEs in summer 2014

Unlike in recent years, students who take GCSEs in England this summer will sit all their exams at the same time, in summer 2014. They won't have been able to take some units early or re-sit any units, although they can re-sit the whole GCSE qualification at a later date.

This change affects all GCSE subjects, but there are also additional changes to some particular subjects – in GCSE English and English language the speaking and listening element will be reported separately for the first time this summer. Also, geography qualifications have been strengthened so that exams must cover the full curriculum.

Our job is to make sure exam boards maintain grade standards, even when things change. Our approach to maintaining standards is based on a principle that exam boards have used for decades – the idea that if the cohort is similar, in terms of ability, to the previous year's cohort, then results should look similar. But the cohort in summer 2014 is a different mix of students compared to the summer 2013 cohort and in some subjects this will make it impossible to compare 2014 results with those from 2013.

¹ www.ofqual.gov.uk/standards/statistics/provisional-summer-gcse-igcse-entries

GCSEs are intended to be taken primarily by 16 year olds at the end of compulsory schooling (the end of Key Stage 4). But in recent years we have seen greater churn in the mix of students taking GCSEs in any particular year. Some students have taken GCSEs in exam series earlier in the academic year (in the November, January and/or March exam series) or in an earlier academic year. In summer 2013, for example, there were more 'early entries' (entries from students who are 15 and younger)² than in summer 2012.

Summer 2014 entries

This summer the patterns of entry across year groups and subjects in England are noticeably different from summer 2013. These changes in entry patterns will change the overall mix of ability in the cohort for particular subjects and mean that results may not look similar to previous years' results, for good reason. When the cohort changes it becomes difficult to compare one year to the next. This is because you are not comparing 'like with like'.

Overall entries have declined since 2013 by 4 per cent, to 5.3 million. This appears to be in line with the decline in the 16 year old cohort. However, the number of entries from students in Year 11³ increased by 3 per cent, while the entries from students in Year 10⁴ declined by 40 per cent, from 836,000 in summer 2013 to 505,000 this summer.

Some of these differences are an inevitable consequence of fewer exam series in this academic year. Other changes probably reflect strategic decisions in schools in response to other changes in the system. Last autumn, for example, the Secretary of State announced that only the first result in a GCSE would count for performance tables. This may be one of the reasons for fewer entries from students in Year 10 and below.

Some subjects have seen more significant changes in entry patterns.

In **mathematics**, overall entries declined by 3 per cent compared to 2013. This decline is due to the drop in entries from students in Year 10 and earlier – entries from these students dropped by 82 per cent, from 166,000 in summer 2013 to 31,000 this summer. In contrast, entries from students in Year 11 increased by 18 per cent to 580,000 and entries from post-16 students increased by 18 per cent to 97,000.

² See "summer 2013 – Why the Results Might Look Different" available at www.ofqual.gov.uk/standards/summer-exams-2013

³ Year 11 is the final year of Key Stage 4, when students are aged 16 at the end of the academic year

⁴ Students in Year 10 will be aged 15 by the end of the academic year

In the science subjects (biology, chemistry, physics, science and additional science) there is considerable change in entry patterns. The recent trend of declining entries for science and additional science and increasing entries for the separate sciences has reversed. Fewer Year 11 students are entered for the separate sciences (biology down 12 per cent to 128,000, chemistry down 11 per cent to 130,000, physics down 9 per cent to 132,000) but the entries from Year 11 students for science and additional science are up by 32 per cent (to 152,000) and 18 per cent (to 297,000) respectively.

Entries from students in Year 10 declined in all science subjects (science down 34 per cent to 200,000, additional science down 27 per cent to 10,000, biology down 49 per cent to 8,000, chemistry down 47 per cent to 5,000, physics down 56 per cent to 3,000). The suite of science subjects has been modular for some time and schools have had many years' experience of delivering these qualifications in a modular way. These changes in entries may reflect changes in the way schools approach the science subjects and in the timing of exam entry, now that qualifications are linear.

In **English** and **English language** the entries from students in Year 11 decreased by 28 per cent to 390,000. Some of this decline is likely to be due to the increase in Year 11 entries for IGCSE English language, which are up by 133 per cent to 105,000 this summer. It is also likely to be the case that some students who are in Year 11 this summer took their GCSEs (or IGCSEs) in summer 2013 or in November 2013 and are not re-sitting.

Unlike most other subjects, in **English literature** the entry from students in Year 10 and below increased by 134 per cent to 48,000 this summer. Schools that have previously entered Year 10 students for English language may now be entering Year 10 students for English literature instead, in an attempt to minimise the number of exams at the end of Year 11.

Other subjects have much more stable Year 11 entries. For example; **history** is up 1 per cent to 230,000; **geography** is up 4 per cent to 201,000; **French** saw no change at 150,000, **German** is down 2 per cent to 56,000 and Spanish is up 7 per cent to 83,000.

We know that previously students from Year 10 have not performed as well as students from Year 11.⁵ So in subjects where there the proportion of Year 10 entries is lower in summer 2014 we might expect to see overall results that are slightly higher. And if Year 10 students in 2014 perform less well than Year 11 students then in English literature we might expect to see overall results that are lower than in summer 2013.

⁵ See "A Brief Explanation of Summer 2013 GCSE Results" available at www.ofqual.gov.uk/standards/summer-exams-2013

The changes outlined above and in the statistical release published today suggest that many schools and colleges have made significant changes to their teaching programmes and to their entry strategies. This may also mean that schools and colleges could see greater year-on-year variation in their own results.

We have published more information on our website about some of the changes to GCSEs and A levels this summer. This is available at www.ofqual.gov.uk/news/summer-2014-gcse-igcse-entries-england-data.