



**Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP**  
Minister of State for School Standards

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Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP  
Chair, Education Select Committee  
House of Commons  
London  
SW1A 0AA

5 November 2019

Dear Robert,

As promised in my letter of 23 May, I am writing to update the Committee on the analysis the Department for Education has undertaken on whether standards in international GCSEs offered in England differ systematically from those of GCSEs.

I explained in my previous letter that no valid conclusions can be drawn from simply comparing the proportion of top grades achieved by pupils taking each type of qualification, because that takes no account of the prior attainment of the cohort in each case. The Ofqual Chief Regulator, Sally Collier, explained clearly in her letter to the Committee of 4 April why that was the case. Both Cambridge Assessment and Pearson – the two exam boards that offer international GCSEs in England - have also written to the Committee to set out the steps they take each year to seek to align their international GCSE standards with the GCSE.

Nevertheless, I acknowledged in my letter that I recognise the concerns that have been expressed about possible differences in standards between these qualifications, given the similarity of qualification titles. As I explained, precise comparisons between performance in the two qualifications are not possible, given the differing subject content and assessment approaches. However, it is possible to draw some conclusions from a range of analyses of the outcomes achieved by students sitting each type of qualification, after accounting for prior attainment and other variables.

Against this background, we have taken the time to conduct in-depth analysis based on the range of alternative approaches cited in my previous letter, in order to identify any systematic differences between outcomes for GCSE and

international GCSE, either overall, or for one or other of Pearson and Cambridge Assessment. We have focused that analysis on independent schools, as international GCSEs no longer count in school performance tables and as a result are almost exclusively used in independent rather than state schools in England (according to the Independent Schools Council, just under half of exam entries at the end of key stage 4 in its member schools were to international GCSEs this summer). We have discussed our findings with Ofqual and directly with the exam boards concerned.

We have now concluded, on the basis of comparisons of data for 2018, that there is no evidence of systematic differences in standard between Cambridge's IGCSEs<sup>1</sup> and GCSEs, but that there is some evidence that Pearson's International GCSEs were graded slightly more generously on average than GCSEs in that year. More specifically, we have concluded that:

- independent school pupils, on average, achieved higher grades in their Pearson International GCSEs than in their GCSE qualifications in EBacc subjects in 2018, by around a quarter of a grade, when looking at pupils who took both types of qualifications, and adjusting for subject difficulty;
- pupils taking Pearson's International GCSEs achieved higher grades on average in a range of EBacc subjects, and especially in English language, English literature and mathematics; and
- the evidence does not point to a systematic difference between the grading of Cambridge's IGCSEs and GCSEs, although there are some slight variations by subject; for example, there was higher performance in English language and literature IGCSEs than GCSEs (these subjects accounted for around half of pupil entries in EBacc subjects in independent schools in 2018).

We have published the detailed findings and the methodology we have used to reach our conclusions in an ad hoc statistical release today at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/comparing-international-gcse-and-gcse-in-england-2018>. It is important to note that this analysis is based on one year's data only and the exam boards have told us that some changes have been made that may give a different picture in 2019. It should also be noted that small variations in standards between different qualifications and between years are normal: the boards have established processes in place for making adjustments to respond to such variations. As I mentioned above, we have shared our analysis with both boards and they have confirmed that they will be taking this into account in decisions on standard setting next year to support their ongoing attempts to align standards as closely as possible to the GCSE.

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<sup>1</sup> IGCSE is a trademarked term used by Cambridge Assessment International Education to describe their international GCSEs. This cannot be used as a shorthand term to describe international GCSEs in general.

I am copying this letter to Sally Collier at Ofqual, Sharon Hague at Pearson, Christine Özden at Cambridge Assessment International Education and Clare Marchant at UCAS.

With best wishes.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Nick Gibb". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "N".

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