

Options for setting the grade 9 boundary

Executive summary



We commissioned research from Education Datalab (part of FFT) to consider the likely impact on different types of schools of different approaches to the award of grade 9 in new GCSEs.

Three approaches to the award of grade 9 were modelled:

1. 20% approach: the grade 9 boundary in each subject is set so that the top 20% of students awarded at least a grade 7 is awarded a grade 9.
2. Tailored approach: the grade 9 boundary is set so that over all subjects, 20% of students awarded at least a grade 7 are awarded a grade 9 but the exact percentage varies by subject. It is higher in those subjects with a higher proportion of students awarded at least a grade 7 and lower in those subjects with a lower proportion of students awarded at least a grade 7.
3. 50% approach: the grade 9 boundary in each subject is set so that the top 50% of students currently awarded a grade A* is awarded a grade 9.

The analysis was based on a dataset comprising the exam results for students aged 15-16 years in summer 2014 in state-funded and independent schools.

The key findings of the modelling were as follows.

- Changing the grading scale from A*-G to 1-9 will widen the gaps in Progress 8 scores between the schools with the highest attaining intakes and the rest. However, there is very little difference in the extent to which this will happen by different grade 9 awarding approaches.
- Analysing the data according to the proportion of students in a school eligible for free school meals, for most subjects the choice of grade 9 awarding approach has little impact on school outcomes.
- Analysing the data according to the background of the students, the tailored approach and 20% approach marginally favour students eligible for free school meals over the 50% approach.

- For many subjects, the three approaches each give similar proportions of grade 9s awarded. However, for a minority of subjects which have high proportions of students achieving grades A and A*, the choice of approach makes a difference.
- Within most EBacc subjects, the choice of grade 9 awarding approach is not particularly significant, with the ratio of grades allocated between state-funded and independent sectors varying very little.
- There are, though, noticeable differences in total numbers of grade 9s because independent and grammar schools more frequently enter students for subjects that would award greater numbers of grade 9s under the tailored approach (particularly the separate sciences).
- The 20% approach results in more grade 9s than current A*s in some subjects, mainly those with low proportions of grade A and A*s.