

SUMMARY

NRT Annual Statement 2018

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Introduction

In February/March 2018 around 12,000 year 11 students from over 300 schools took the second annual National Reference Test (NRT) in English and maths, which is administered by NFER. The tests are designed to provide evidence on the performance of 16-year-old students in English language and maths. The first live NRT, taken in 2017, was benchmarked against the first awards of the reformed GCSEs in English language and maths, and the 2018 NRT is the first opportunity to compare the performance of students in 2018 with those in 2017.

Results are reported at three grade boundaries – grade 7, grade 5 and grade 4. In 2017 the NRT scores in English and maths were benchmarked to the 2017 GCSE results in English language and maths, respectively. Results are reported as expected percentages of students achieving those grades (and above) based on changes in performance on the NRT.

Results for 2018

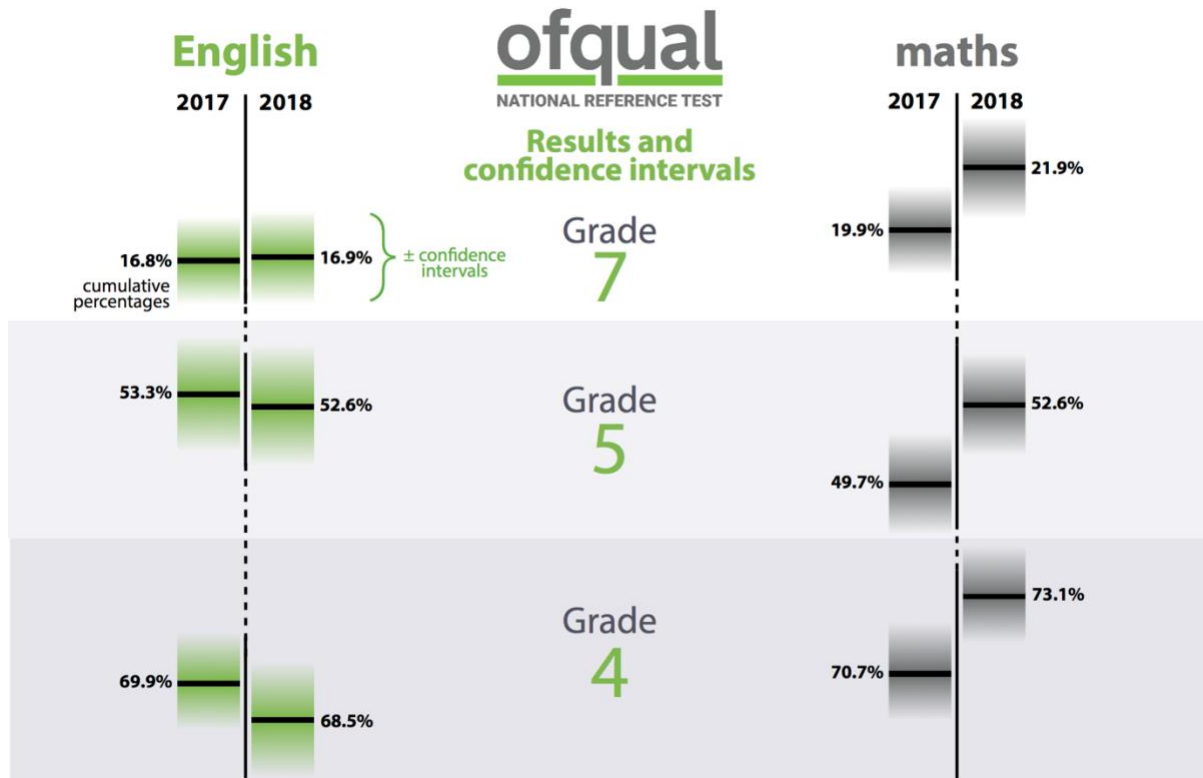
The results are shown below. Because this test uses a sample of students, we report ‘confidence intervals’ around the results. These confidence intervals represent the possibility that if we had taken a sample of different students, we would get a slightly different result.

The diagram below shows the changes in the expected percentage of students at the grade 7, grade 5 and grade 4 boundaries, compared to 2017. The expected percentages are generally up in maths and slightly down in English for two of the three grade boundaries.

In English, the differences between 2017 and 2018 are not statistically significant, which means that we can't be sure there has been a real change.

In maths, NFER report a statistically significant change, which suggests that student performance has improved slightly. This is not surprising, as we might expect to see an improvement in performance in the first years, as teachers get more familiar with the requirements of the new GCSEs.

The diagram below shows the results in 2017 and 2018, as well as the confidence intervals around those figures. Although the percentage of students at those grades in 2017 is fixed, the confidence intervals reflect the reported precision of the 2017 NRT results.



Using the NRT evidence in awarding

We have always been clear that the 2018 NRT results would not be used in GCSE awarding in 2018, because any improvement was likely to be due to the [sawtooth effect](#), as teachers get used to the new GCSEs.

The timescale for using NRT evidence is as follows.

Year 1 (2017) – first live NRT; results were baselined to GCSE results

Year 2 (2018) – first opportunity to compare results over time; expect to see small increases in performance due to increased familiarity with new GCSEs; for this reason evidence from NRT not used in GCSE awarding

Year 3 (2019) – third year of new GCSEs; we will consider NRT evidence in May and whether there is a case to make an adjustment in summer 2019 to grade standards in GCSE English language and/or maths.¹

Years 4+ (2020 onwards) – as in 2019; we will consider NRT evidence and whether there is a case to make an adjustment.

In considering the evidence from the NRT in 2019 and beyond, we will make sure that:

- Our decisions are consistent over time and between subjects, regardless of the direction of any change

¹ The NRT also reports results at grade 5. We will not make adjustments at grade 5, as this is an arithmetic grade boundary calculated by dividing equally the marks between grade 4 and grade 7. However, any adjustment to grade 4 or grade 7 is likely to have an impact on grade 5.

- We take account of contextual evidence from the student survey and other sources, and that we act cautiously in making any adjustments to grade standards
- We document and publish the reasons for our decisions.

We will consider carefully the evidence from the NRT and other related analyses when we consider the case for an adjustment. We will not consider an adjustment unless the change(s) reported are statistically significant, but neither will we automatically adjust GCSE grade standards where changes are statistically significant. Exam boards will also want to be sure that their senior examiners are content with any adjustment.

It is also worth noting that the impact of any adjustment is likely to be relatively small. For example, if we wanted to adjust grade standards in GCSE maths on the basis of the 2018 NRT results, it would have meant grade boundaries in the maths papers being 1 or 2 marks lower on an 80-mark paper.

In 2019 and beyond, we intend to publish on GCSE results day the NRT results for that year alongside a statement about how we considered that evidence in GCSE awarding and our decision about any adjustment.

There is more information about the NRT in [the background report and the detailed results of the 2018 test are available in the NFER results digest](#).



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