

News story: Response to Guardian story about language learning in schools

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Our statement responding to news coverage criticising grading in modern foreign language GCSE and A level subjects



Today's (11 May 2019) Guardian reports concerns raised by representatives from higher education about grading standards in modern foreign languages, and our work to maintain these. We take seriously these concerns and are currently conducting a comprehensive review of grading standards in GCSE French, German and Spanish. We are looking at statistical evidence, contextual data including trends in the numbers taking these subjects, and considering the quality of students' work through looking at how GCSE grades relate to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), to see if there is compelling case for an adjustment to grading standards in these subjects. We are talking to subject experts and other stakeholders and we welcome thoughts and contributions. We are due to report on this work in the autumn. We will report any feedback about subject content to the Department for Education, which is responsible for this.

Our work on inter-subject comparability to date:

- We [published in November the outcome of an extensive research programme into the comparability of MFL \(and science\) subjects at A level](#) which considered a broad range of sources of evidence. This included a comprehensive programme of research looking at factors such as student motivation and subject choices, and engagement with the broadest possible range of interested parties, including Ofqual's Standards Advisory Group, higher education, subject experts and teachers
- We judged the evidence against 4 criteria:
 - statistical measures of subject difficulty show evidence of persistent grading severity over several years
 - persuasive evidence of the potential detrimental impact caused by

severe grading on those who use the qualification, and on society at large, over several years

- evidence which shows that those who use the qualification and those responsible for maintaining the grading standard judge an adjustment to be acceptable
- likely benefit to users of the qualification and society as a whole from a change to grading standards must outweigh any potential negative effects
- We set these criteria to reflect our view that any adjustment to grading standards must be informed by a wide range of factors
- Statistical evidence is an important consideration in our view, but it has limitations. For example, simple interpretations of subject difficulty based on comparisons of results do not take into account student motivation or their ability in that subject
- As such, it would be inappropriate to make adjustments to grading standards by looking at such statistics in isolation or in limited combinations
- Nor is it the case that numbers of students studying subjects perceived to be more difficult than others are falling; entries for some A level science subjects, for example, have increased over the past 10 years
- That's why we believe it is essential to take a broad range of information into account before taking any decision
- Our criteria were developed with input from our Standards Advisory Group, which comprises experts from across the educational community, and they allow us to make consistent and secure judgements in all circumstances. This is essential for the acceptability of any change to those who rely on qualifications and for public confidence
- While we did not find a compelling case to adjust grading standards in the A level subjects we reviewed, we did recognise that perceived grading severity undermines confidence and we committed to working with the exam boards to ensure that these subjects do not become statistically more severely graded in the future
- There may be many reasons why students are choosing to take, and schools are opting to offer, one subject – or modern foreign language (MFL) – over another. [Research conducted by Cuff \(2017\), found \(in a qualitative survey of 112 students\) that perceptions of difficulty were not the main basis of their decisions](#) and instead their choices were focussed more upon enjoyment and usefulness
- We looked at the issue of native speakers in detail, quantified the impact we judged they were having and made an adjustment to grade standards that was then built into future awards
- We are also [undertaking work to review the effectiveness of the reformed MFL GCSEs](#). As part of this, we have spoken to a number of MFL teachers – they have told us that reformed GCSE and A level question papers assessing writing are fair. They also felt that the speaking assessments were better than those of the legacy qualifications
- We are aware of statistical evidence that suggests that GCSE MFL subjects may be more severely graded than many others. As we explained in detail in relation to our work at A level, given the limitations inherent in these statistical approaches, we do not believe that such evidence on its own is strong enough to justify a change to grading

standards. As such, our work at GCSE will consider these statistics but also a wide range of other evidence, including the quality of students' work

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Thank you for your feedback