

[Ofqual publishes NRT results and contextual analysis 2021](#)

Ofqual has today (9 December) published the results of the National Reference Test (NRT) in 2021. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) Results Digest shows the 2021 results alongside results from previous years. In April and May 2021, more than 8,000 students from 216 schools took part in the fifth annual National Reference Test (NRT), administered by NFER. We are grateful to all those schools and students who took part. Due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, fewer schools and students took part this year, but analysis by NFER and Ofqual suggests we can be confident that the 2021 results can be meaningfully compared with those in previous years. The tests are designed to provide evidence about the performance of 16-year-old students in English language and maths. The first live NRT, in 2017, was benchmarked against the first awards of the reformed GCSEs in English language and maths, and subsequent tests compare the performance of students with those in previous years.

Results are reported at three grade boundaries – grades 7, 5 and 4 – as expected percentages of students achieving those grades (and above).

In years when exams are taken, the NRT provides an additional source of evidence for exam boards when setting grade boundaries in GCSE English language and maths. In 2021 exams were cancelled, so NRT evidence could not be used as normal. It does, however, still provide important evidence of student performance.

This year, performance in maths showed a statistically significant downward change compared to 2020, but there was no change in English. The NRT in 2020 was unaffected by the pandemic, having taken place prior to the school closures in March 2020.

In maths, results show that the increases in performance since 2017 have reversed, and performance is now closer to the level seen in 2017 – the first year that the reformed 9 to 1 GCSEs were awarded. This is not surprising, given the disruption to students' education caused by the pandemic.

In English, results show no statistically significant difference from previous years. This is a little surprising, given the disruption to education caused by the pandemic, and in light of the changes seen in maths. It may be that while the disruption meant that students had less practice in maths, they will have continued to use and respond to written and spoken English, in school in English as well as in other subjects, and outside school. These results suggest that the disruption caused by the pandemic might have had less impact on attainment in English than in maths.

More detail is provided in the [Results Digest](#) and in our [contextual analyses](#), and there is more information about the test itself in the [Background Information](#).