

Speech: 9 to 1 GCSE grading webinar

March 2017

A transcript of Chris Shadforth's webinar where he talks about why GCSEs and grades are changing

Chris Shadforth, Associate Director for Communications, Ofqual:

Hello, good afternoon and welcome to this webinar. It is one in a series that we have been doing to help educate people about the changes that are being made to GCSE 9 to 1 grades. Thank you ever so much for joining us this afternoon. We appreciate that you're probably all very busy and you squeezed into your schedule. So we're not going to take more than 40 minutes today, but that is really depending on how many questions you have for us, but we will come onto that in a moment. My name is Chris Shadforth, I am the Associate Director for Communications here at Ofqual. Now, we are going to record today's presentation and we will put a link out on Twitter and we will email it after the event as well. We will also produce a transcript in the next few days and we will send that to you by email as well, so if you did miss anything or want to listen again, you will be able to do so.

We're going to look at why GCSEs and grades are changing. We're going to have a closer look at the new 9 to 1 grades. We're going to explain when they're going to be changing and how they compare with A* to G at present. And then we will talk a little bit about how we can help you to help parents and students within your school to understand the changes. We will then have a short Q&A session with our Director of Strategic Relationships, Richard Garrett.

So GCSEs AS and A levels are being reformed in England, so today, we're talking very specifically about GCSEs, but there is also a wealth of information on our website about the changes that are being made to AS and A levels as well. Each new GCSE subject has new more challenging content that has been set by the Department for Education. After that content has been set by the department, we undertook an accreditation exercise with the four exam boards who had the opportunity to submit new specifications to us for the new examinations and courses. Only when we determined that they were up to the required standard did we accredit them, so as you began teaching the new GCSEs in maths, English literature and English language a couple of years ago, you will have been teaching something that was of the correct standard. Now, what are the other changes that have been brought in? Well, along with the more demanding content, the new GCSEs have been designed for a two-year period of study. They are linear as the courses have been for the last couple of years, so students will take all of their exams at the end of the course. We have also reviewed the degree of non-exam assessment, and that is to better reflect the new balance between the nature, well, reflect the balance and nature of the new subject content and, of course, one of the key changes that has occurred is that we're switching to the new numerical 9 to 1 grading

scale from the existing A* to G system. Now, English literature, English language and maths are the first to swap over to the numerical system from this summer, then another 20 subjects will switch in 2018 with most others changing in 2019. Eventually, all new GCSEs will be graded from 9 to 1, where 9 of course is the very highest grade.

Why have we done this? Well, the new grades are being brought in to signal that GCSEs have been reformed and they are also designed to better differentiate between the abilities of different students. It should be said that the reforms that we're talking about here are for England only. Regulators in Wales and Northern Ireland are not introducing the new 9 to 1 grading scale as part of the changes being made to GCSEs in their jurisdictions.

So here is a chart that compares the new 9 to 1 grading scale with the current A* to G grading scale. Now, one thing you will see immediately is that there is no direct read-across between the two scales. A* to G, eight grades, 9 to 1, of course, nine grades and that means that we have got that one extra grade which gives us the opportunity for the better differentiation between student achievements than we have had in the past. What you can see here is at the bottom we have just three grades now compared to the four we had previously, whereas at the top we have got six, compared to A* to C, which most students achieve. What there will also be are fewer grades 9s awarded than A*s in the past, and grade 9 will reward truly exceptional performance in future. While there is no direct read-across, there are a number of anchor points that we have built in to the new grading system, so these are indicated by this dotted line at the bottom of grade 7 and grade A, and that at the bottom of grade 4 and grade C and that below grade 1 and grade G. So in effect, exam boards will use prior attainment at Key Stage 2 for the 16-year-old cohort to predict the likely achievement at these key grades, 1, 4 and 7. And the bottom of these grades will align with the bottom of the G, C and A grades respectively in previous years, so the proportions of students achieving these grades or higher will be broadly the same as in the past. What this means is that students will not be disadvantaged by being the first to sit the new qualifications. These anchor points will be determined primarily by statistical predictions and that allows us to achieve these goals.

Now, one of the other things that we would like to bring to your attention is the degree of variability that schools may see in their results from one year to the next. So this chart shows the variability in any individual school's results between two years, and you will see that it is a bell curve and it suggests that most schools don't see a great degree of variation in their results from one year to the next. However, about 25% of schools do see some more substantial... rather, a small number of schools can see a more substantial change in their results from one year to the next. If you look down here, we're talking tens of schools can see more dramatic shifts in their performance. This is entirely normal. This sort of bell shaped curve is what we observe for any subject over time. What we do know, however, is that at periods of change, when new qualifications are introduced, is that there is the potential for more variability.

Now, what explains this bell curve? Well, this can be due to a number of different factors. I mean, it can be differences in the ability, in the mix of students that any particular school has from one year to the next. It might be because there are different teachers or different teaching approaches that have been introduced. It could also be down to the amount of teaching time or the choice of qualifications that schools choose. We do know, as I say, that there is the potential for more variability as teachers and students get to grips with the new qualifications, so one school may be very, very successful in adopting the new content and the new assessment that is provided by their exam board, other schools may take a little bit more time to become more familiar with the content. Now, that means that some schools may see more variation in their results this year than they perhaps have seen in the past.

What we're doing as part of our communications campaign is to try and provide as much information about these changes as possible, and give you as many opportunities as possible to ask us questions, so we do things like today and this particular webinar. What we have also produced in order to help you then onward communicate with parents and students within your school is a series of resources. Key to this are our newsletters that we circulate – some newsletter materials that we circulated pre-Christmas initially and are still available through the link that is here on your screen. In effect, what we have produced are three different length paragraphs that you can choose to insert into a newsletter that you might send out to parents, so there is a short, a medium and a longer version there, depending on how much information or how much space you have available to you. You have also got the opportunity to... if you have the opportunity, rather, to send a text message to your parents, we have drafted a couple of 140-character word messages that you might send out to them as well. We have produced a flyer that you could print off and hand out or put in pigeonholes at schools to help staff there, either teachers or support staff. And one of the things that we have done most recently is provide a series of films and additional information on our homepage of our website. I am going to leave this presentation now and just take you to that.

If I just go to the bottom of my screen here. So this is the [Ofqual website](#). At the top of the page, apologies for that, we have got one of four films that we have available; we have a 10-second, a 30-second and a 90-second version of the film available, and then one specifically for employers. Please feel free to access these through our YouTube website, they are there as a resource for you to use at parent's evenings or at other events where you feel it might be helpful to convey the main messages of the changeover to 9 to 1, and we have summarised nine things you need to know about GCSE grades here. At the bottom of the page, you will also find a subscription link to our 9 to 1 news document. If you just click on the link it will take you through, ask you some very simple information and this newsletter provides you with the next layer of information if you like, some of the more technical information that is associated with the changeover. We would strongly encourage you to sign up to that newsletter, it is the most appropriate for getting up to the minute updates on what is happening and decisions that we're making.

We have also launched a Facebook page and a LinkedIn page as well. LinkedIn very much for employers, Facebook, please do follow us on these two platforms. Again, there is additional information on there that you might find helpful, there is also the opportunity to post comments on there, and we will try and get through as many of those comments with answers as possible.

If you are looking for more technical information, even beyond our 9 to 1 news, then I suggest you could go to our blog page. We have been writing a series of blogs over the past few months that talk about various aspects of the reforms, and not necessarily limited to GCSEs. We are updating this page every week, we are intending to have a new blog article each Friday up until exams begin on the 15 May, or the week beginning the 15 May, so please do check back there and share that information as well.

If you do have any further questions, you can, of course, email us. You can email me directly, my email address is at the bottom of the screen here. With that all said, I am now going to hand onto our Director of Strategic Relations, Richard Garrett and Ofqual's Chief Communications Office, Barry Cooke to take some of the questions that have been submitted to us through the period of this presentation. Thank you very much for listening. Barry and Richard.

Barry Cooke, Chief Communications Officer, Ofqual: Thank you, Chris.

I hope that those of you who have been listening in today have found the information helpful and informative. We have had quite a few questions coming through as we have been going... as Chris has been going through the webinar, so we will crack straight on with those with Richard, as you can see on the screen, Director of Strategic Relationships.

Richard, good afternoon. The first question we have had, a couple of people have asked this one is about grade boundaries. Obviously, I think most teachers now understand that point about 4 being linked to the bottom of what is currently C, as an example, but some of the kind of, you know, the calculations around the other grades, 2, 3, 5s, from 1 up to 9, how is that going to be worked out and what do teachers – what do they need with regards to assessment and trying to work out how to track the data and get their head around the changes that are coming in.

Richard Garrett, Director of Strategic Relationships, Ofqual:

Thanks, Barry. I think the first thing to say is that in any year, the grade boundaries for all GCSEs and A levels aren't set in advance. They are set each year in relation to the demands of that year's paper. But as well as this, and I think Chris has already gone over a bit of this in the introduction, but to be really clear, in the new GCSEs, to make sure that no students are disadvantaged, we will act to ensure that at grade 7, currently assuming that the cohort of student is broadly similar, that broadly the same proportion of students will achieve a grade 7 as currently achieve a grade A and above, broadly the same proportion of students will achieve a 4 as currently achieve a C and above, and broadly the same proportion of students

will achieve a grade 1 as achieved a grade G and above. So grades 2, 3, 5 and 6 are going to be set mathematically, so they are evenly spaced between those points, and grade 9, right at the top of the scale, is going to be set with the defined relationship to the grade 7, and as Chris said, fewer students will achieve that as previously achieved an A*. But I think the key point to emphasise about all of this is the approach we're taking means that grade boundaries can't be set in advance, so they're going to be set at the marks that best deliver comparability with the standards set in the previous GCSEs at those key grade points. However, what we can say, I think, is that in 2016 in English and maths, about 70% of 16-year-olds achieved a grade C or above, so we would expect a similar proportion to achieve a 4 and above in 2017, and at grade A in English and maths, the figures were a bit different between the two, but 16% of students achieved a grade A or above in English and 20% achieved a grade A or above in maths, so again we would expect those figures to be broadly the same in 2017.

BC: Thanks, Richard, and I hope that has made the position clearer. Of course, sticking on grades themselves, we know that most students will be looking to continue their education at Sixth Form or at college and for them and also for teachers and parents, they will want to know what grades do they need, should they be aspiring to get onto the next level of education, and in particular, is there a bottom line around the grades related to resit exams, for example.

RG: I think the short answer in terms of when students want to progress to the next stage is that it is going to be up to the institution that they will be moving to, to set the expectation. So they will be taking decisions about what they're looking for in order to progress on their courses. And, actually, at the moment, depending on the institutions that students want to progress to, there are a wide range of expectations in terms of what they expect. I think in a lot of cases, unless there has been some kind of change in their expectations, then it will be relatively straightforward. For example, if somewhere already requires a C of GCSE or they require an A, there is no reason to think that they would require anything different in future than a 4 or a 7. I think in cases where they might currently require one of the other grades, then the position will be a little more complex, so for example, if they currently require a B, they will need to think about – the institution will need to think about whether or not in future they require a 5 or a 6, and that is a choice that they're going to make based on the requirements of their course and what they think is best needed for entry. I think the key point is that it is really important that all these institutions and students understand the new grade scale as well as possible, so that their decisions here are best informed, and so that is why we're making all the efforts we're making to get the information out there. And I think, crucially, for example, in the case of universities, to get this all set out ahead of time, so that when students are applying and they're considering their options, they are very clear on what is going to be required of them.

BC: OK, thank you. So one of the other questions we also had come through this afternoon is about tiering and about what subjects tiering will be

taking place in and how those decisions were perhaps reached. Is that something that you can expand up, Richard?

RG: Yes, I think the important thing, the general message, if you like, around tiering is that there are many fewer subjects in the new GCSEs that are tiered than were currently. So tiering is when there are different papers, different sets of papers available for different grades. Normally, in the current GCSEs, there is a higher tier covering the top part of the grade scale and a foundation tier covering the bottom part of the grade scale, with an overlap in the middle. So there are some grades, usually around the D/C area where students can get those grades on either paper. And one of the decisions we took in the reform of GCSEs was to reduce the number of subjects that have tiering in them, and that was a principle that we took that tiering would only remain in those subjects where it was absolutely necessary in order to allow the full range of content to be assessed effectively. And so in many subjects, we took a decision, actually, that the full range of content could be covered within a single set of assessments, and therefore they wouldn't be tiered. So what that means is that applying that principle and looking to minimise the incidents of tiering, has meant that in the new GCSEs, it is only GCSEs in mathematics, statistics, the science subjects and French, German and Spanish that continue to be tiered. All the other GCSEs will be un-tiered.

BC: And what about those decisions when teachers are looking at students, which one they should put in for, which tier is most appropriate for them? I suspect, probably, most of them have already made that decision. Is there still some room for manoeuvre in that area?

RG: Well, I think the bottom line is that in subjects that are tiered, teachers are going to need to take some decisions, clearly, about what tier to enter students for and in doing that, they're going to use their professional judgement. They are going to be thinking about which tier best reflects the grades they would expect their students to achieve. So in those... so I think that where they expect their students to achieve, either largely towards the top end or the bottom end of the grade scale, then those decisions will be relatively straightforward and where there will be perhaps more than teachers need to consider is at the point at which the tiers overlap when students are achieving around those grades, and then they will need to think about what tier is likely to best suit their students. In the new GCSEs, the higher tier is grades 4 to 9 and the foundation tier is grades 1 to 5, so it is when students are achieving ... when teachers are expecting students to achieve around those grades that they will have some more difficult decisions to make. I think there are probably a couple of things that people want to consider about that, I think the first of which is that on the foundation tier, it is not possible to achieve higher than grade 5. Clearly, if teachers are thinking that students may do better than that, then they will want to think very carefully about higher tier entry, in the sense that that would restrict what the students are able to achieve. On the other side of the coin though, the target of that tier is grades 9 to 4, and so if there is only the possibility of what we are calling, if you like, a safety net of grade 3, for those who just miss out on a grade 4, so think, if

actually a teacher's expectation is a student is likely or reasonable chance of achieving a grade 3, then they will have to think very carefully about higher tier entry, because we're not expecting significant numbers of students who are entered for the higher tier to achieve a grade 3. That is very much a safety net that is aimed at those who just miss out.

CS: We have had a question in Richard, it is Chris here, again, and the person is interested in knowing what the expectations are of higher education, but I suspect this probably goes a little bit further than that as well and could probably read-across to employers in terms of the new 9 to 1 grades. Would higher education institutions be expecting a 4 or a 5 given that they cover off the ground that is currently covered by a grade C? I suspect we don't actually know the answer to that, that is very much for those organisations.

RG: Yeah, I mean, I talked a little bit about this in the previous question as well. I think it is absolutely up to those organisations and they will be making some decisions using the new grades kind of what best suits their courses. I think the key point is that if hitherto they have kind of always expected a C or expected an A, you wouldn't expect unless something about their expectations has changed in the meantime, you wouldn't expect this to be a difficult decision for them and they would be likely to expect a 4 or a 7. I think that we have been putting quite a lot of effort, particularly into the sort of higher education sector, people like university admissions tutors, making sure they understand the new grading scale, and so they're making informed decisions here, certainly an indication has been to us that if they're generally happy with the students they're getting in relation to the sorts of GCSE expectations they have got, then in general they are not expecting to make very significant changes. A couple of things I would say about it, one is that we have been saying to the people in higher education, it is really important that they're clear upfront about this, so when students are applying, they know exactly what they need and I think that is an aspiration that is very much shared. The other thing is, clearly, at those grades that don't straightforwardly align, they will have a decision to take and they will need to think about whether if they currently ask for a B, whether or not they will be asking for a 5 or 6 in future, thinking about the demands of their particular courses. I think where there would be a change, because clearly there would then be something slightly different that is expected of students than is expected currently, the important thing is that that is out there and that information is available as soon as possible.

BC: Thanks, Richard, and thanks, Chris. We have just got a couple more questions to focus on now. If there are any late ones that are coming through, we will try to address those as well. We're talking about GCSEs, obviously, and about the change from letters to numbers for the grading scales. What about IGCSEs as well, are they changing in the same way that GCSEs are?

RG: In terms of IGCSE, I think the first thing to say is that for GCSEs and A levels, we have set really detailed expectations about them. We don't set the same detailed requirements for IGCSE, so what we don't do is set expectations about exactly how they are designed, the content they must be based on, how

they have got to be assessed, and nor do we set particular expectations about how they're graded. Those decisions are taken by the organisations that offer those qualifications. So there isn't a completely straightforward answer to that question. It will be down to the organisations that offer IGCSEs and decisions they have taken. Now, what I think that means in particular is that it is an international market for these qualifications. I think that will mean that in some markets where there is an international market and they're used to the grades – the existing grade scale, there is no particular pressure for change, they might not change. and certainly we know that from some of the main providers that are out there at these qualifications, that a number of their qualifications, they are going to continue to offer with the existing A* to G grade scale, but they are also planning to introduce some new IGCSE qualifications that are graded on the new school, and as I say, that is a decision that is for them and so I think that probably the short answer is that if people are unsure or they are confused, it is to contact the specific IGCSE awarding body they work with and just check what they are planning to do.

CS: It may be a follow-up question, but it is related to conditions of funding, and resits, which I don't think is actually a question for us, Richard, I think that is possibly one for the Department for Education.

RG: Yes, the condition of funding is a requirement that is set by the Department of Education, but there is quite a bit of very detailed information about the condition of funding and how it links to resits that is available on their website, and certainly we can make sure that links to that are available to people if they need to see that.

BC: Turning briefly to other exams, other qualifications, again, of course, students taking their GCSEs are often looking to move onto other education, A levels or AS levels, possibly BTEC qualification, and so they are asking the question, are there any plans, certainly, in the short-term to change the grading on those qualifications or are they staying as they are. Is that something that you can help to clarify?

RG: Yeah, so in terms of A levels, then there is no change to the A level grading structure, we set the requirements for that. A levels are currently graded A* to E, we have got no plans to change that, and indeed, A levels are being reformed at the same time as GCSEs. One of the things that we considered as part of the reform process was A level grading, whether or not there was any case to consider any change to the grading structure, and we concluded that there wasn't, that the grading system is supporting progression is fine for the moment, there is no need to change that. So we have got no plans to change the A level grading structure. In relation to other qualifications, I think the answer is quite similar to what we talked about for IGCSEs, so for most other qualifications, we don't set detailed expectations about how they are graded, that that is a matter for the exam board that offers them, and so it will be up to those organisations if they want to change the grading scale for those qualifications, but we have no particular expectation that they should.

BC: Thank you, Richard.

That just about wraps up the questions that we have had through today. What I will do now is I will hand you back over to Chris Shadforth and he will just talk you through some of the final bits and perhaps remind everyone about where they can find out more information. Thank you very much.

CS: Thank you, Richard and Barry. So we hope you found that useful. I suspect you will have or you may have questions that present themselves almost immediately after this session and maybe over coming hours or days. As I say, you are more than welcome to email me directly, my email address is here at the bottom of the screen, or please go to our website, Facebook, or LinkedIn and you can find more information there. Please post a comment, please give us a phone call, get in touch any way in which is easiest for you and we can answer any other questions you may have. With that said, we will draw this session to a close. Thank you ever so much for joining us, and we hope it all goes well for your students in the summer and take care.

[9 to 1 GCSE grading webinar March 2017](#)