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GCSE results 2020: A look at the grades proposed by schools

By [Philip Nye and Dave Thomson](#) | 15th June 2020 | [Exams and assessment](#)

Over the past fortnight, secondary schools in England have submitted **centre assessment grades** for their Year 11 pupils to the exam boards. This has happened in response to GCSEs being cancelled this year.

Coming up with these grades has been a huge undertaking for teachers – one done with minimal guidance and training.

The next step is moderation by exam boards, before grades are issued to pupils in August.

But an exercise carried out by FFT gives an indication of the challenges facing Ofqual and the exam boards.

The data we collected

Between 28 April and 1 June, FFT ran a statistical moderation service which allowed schools to submit preliminary centre assessment grades they were proposing for their pupils. In return they received reports which compared the spread of grades in each subject to historical attainment figures and progress data.

In this blogpost, we'll take a look at some of the main findings from the service, based on the data of more than 1,900 schools – over half of all state secondaries in England – which had submitted results when the service ended on 1 June.

That's the date on which the window for secondary schools to submit their proposed grades to the exam boards opened – though it's worth saying that we don't know if schools will have submitted the same data to the exam boards as that which we're analysing here. They may have used the reports they were provided with to amend the mix of grades they were proposing.

Comparing 2020 and 2019 results

Noting that caveat, it is nonetheless worth analysing the data that schools submitted.

We're going to compare it to published, school-level results for 2019 – only including the results of schools for which we have both 2019 and 2020 data and only looking at subjects for which we have enough data to form reliable conclusions.^[1]

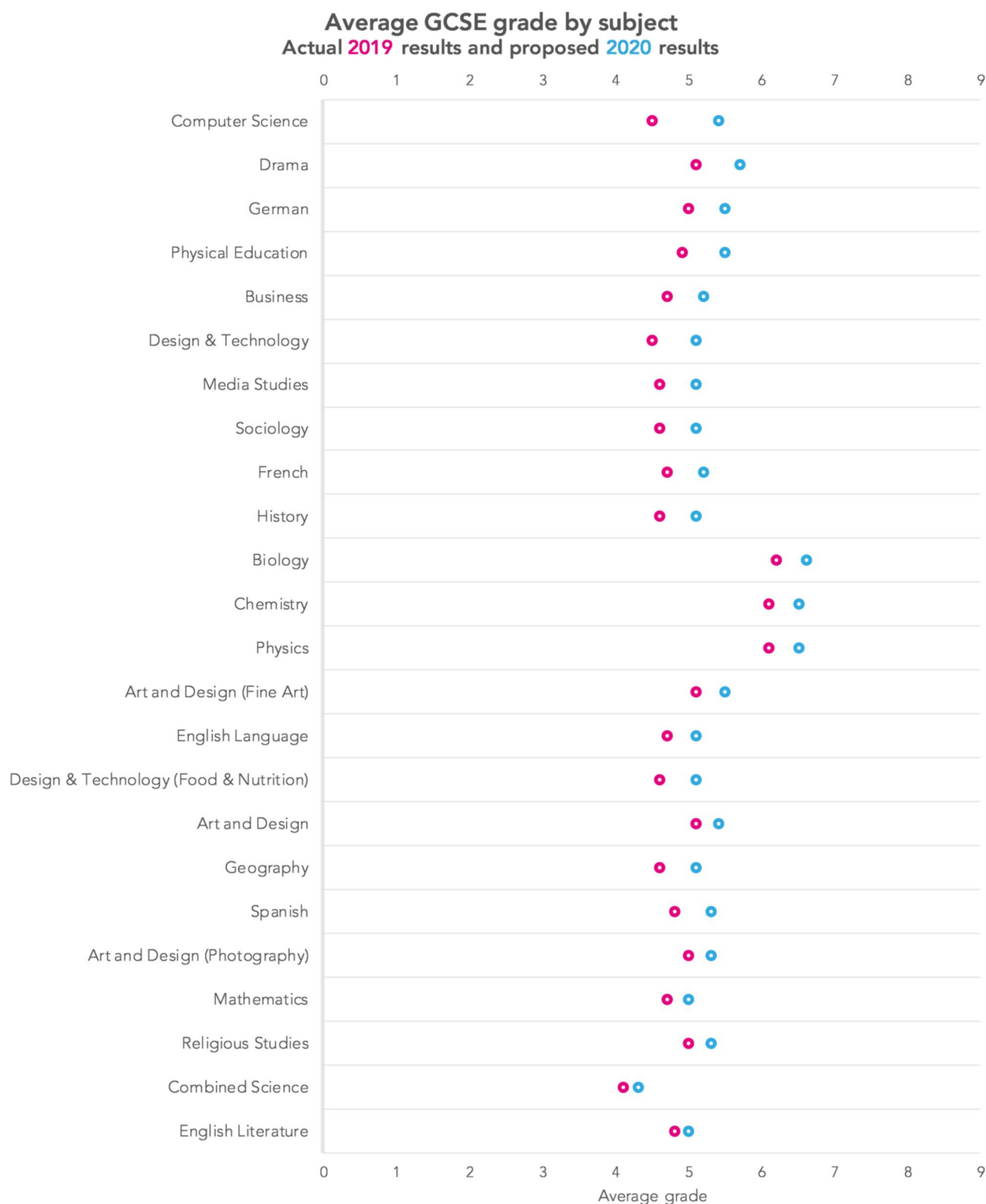
So what does this comparison show?

Well, at the top level, this year's teacher-assessed grades are higher than those awarded in 2019 exams. In every subject we've looked at, the average grade proposed for 2020 is higher than the average grade awarded last year. In most subjects, the difference is between 0.3 and 0.6 grades.

Starting with the subjects that almost all pupils sit, the average of all the teacher-assessed grades in English language comes out as 5.1 – that is, a little above a grade 5. That compares to an average grade of 4.7 last year. For English literature, a slightly smaller increase in average grade is seen, from 4.8 last year to 5.0 this year, while in maths the average proposed grade for 2020 is 5.0, compared to 4.7 for 2019.

Looked at another way, were these proposed grades to be confirmed, the share of pupils awarded a grade 4 or above would increase from 71.4% to 80.8% in English language, from 73.7% to 79.0% in English literature, and from 72.5% to 77.6% in maths.

The chart below shows how the proposed results for 2020 compare to 2019's actual results for all subjects in terms of average grade.

**Notes**

The grade shown for combined science is the average of the two grades awarded/proposed.

Source: 2019 school performance tables; FFT KS4 statistical moderation service, data at 1 June 2020

The subject with the biggest difference between average grade awarded in 2019 and proposed for 2020 is computer science, with nearly a grade difference: 5.4 for 2020, compared to an average grade of 4.5 for 2019. Of the 24 subjects we've looked at, in 10 of them there's a difference of half a grade or more between the average proposed grade for 2020 and the average grade awarded in 2019.

At the other end of the scale, the smallest differences between average proposed 2020 grades and 2019 grades are around a third of a grade or less: in English literature, combined science, religious studies, maths and art and design (photography).

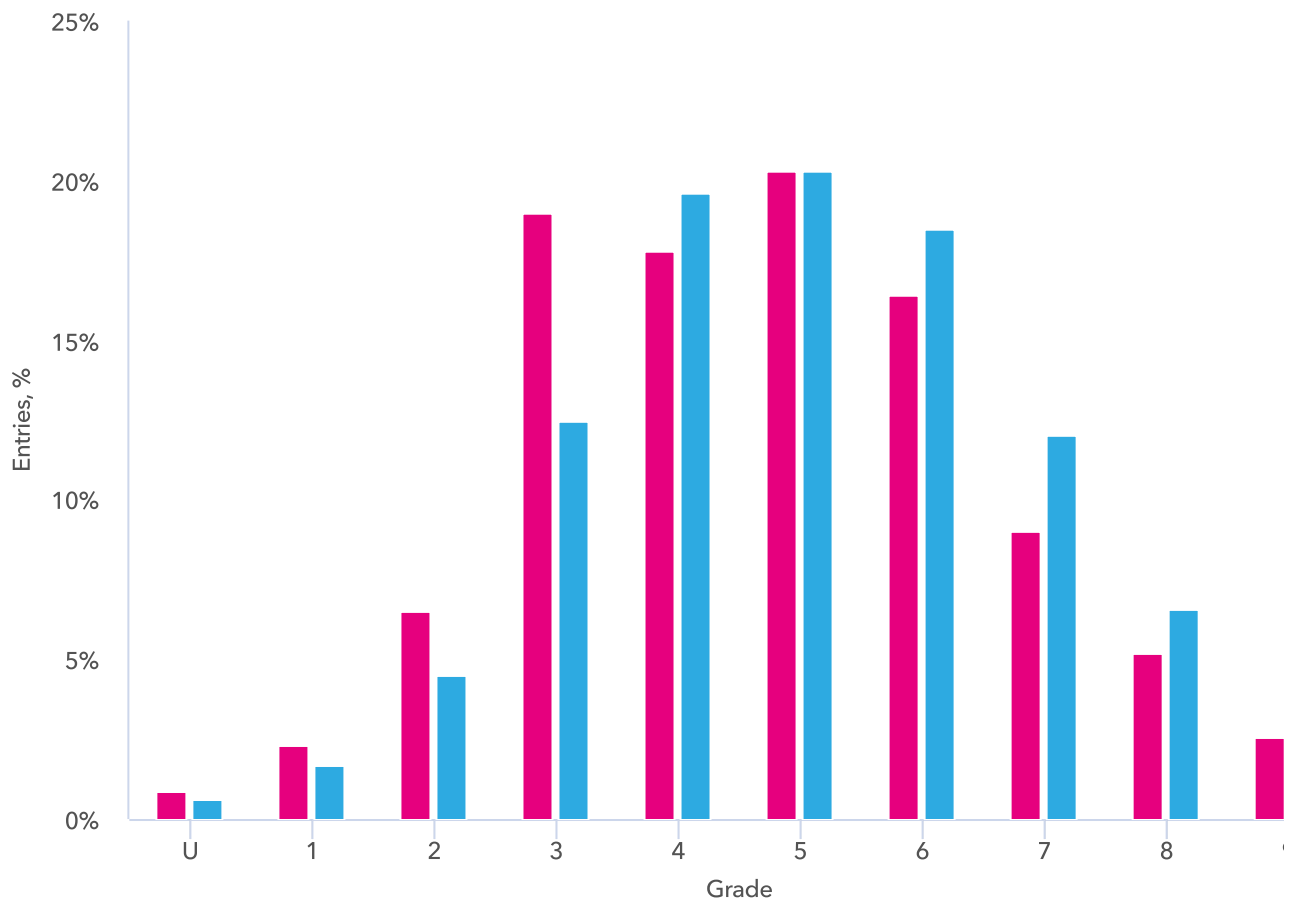
The next chart shows the 2019 grade distribution for the individual subjects we've looked at, compared to the teacher-assessed figures we have for 2020.

English language



Grade distribution in GCSE English language

Actual 2019 results and proposed 2020 results



Notes

Combined science is graded differently and is not shown.

Source: 2019 school performance tables; FFT KS4 statistical moderation service, data at 1 June 2020



Looking across all subjects, if these grades were given out this summer then we would see the share of grade 9s increase from 4.8% of all grades awarded to 6.3%. The share of results receiving a grade 7 or above would increase from 23.4% of all grades to 28.2%, while the share of results receiving a grade 4 or above would increase from 72.8% to 80.7%.

The upshot

What should we make of this?

Well, first of all it's worth saying again that we don't know that these will be the results that schools will have been submitted to the exam boards.

The precise reason that schools submitted data to FFT's statistical moderation service was to seek some assistance in determining what grades to set. Many will have used the reports that they received to tweak the grades they were proposing before they are submitted to the exam boards.

That said, around 1,000 schools submitted data to FFT two or more times. On average, there was some change in the grades proposed between these different iterations, but in most subjects the impact was relatively small: a reduction in average grade of 0.1 of a grade.

That suggests that the proposed grades submitted to the exam boards will still have been above those awarded last year.

Consequently, it seems likely that Ofqual and the exam boards will have to apply statistical moderation to the grades submitted by schools, bringing them down on average.

This will be a hugely complex task, the likes of which have never been done before. As well as proposed grades, schools were required to submit rank orderings of their pupils, and it seems likely that these will be used to shift some pupils down from one grade to the next.

Reflecting on the difficult task faced by schools

It's worth taking a moment to consider the difficulty of the task that schools had, and think about why their proposed grades were higher than those awarded last year.

First, in terms of difficulty, teachers were being asked to form an assessment of the level of attainment that each child had reached – taking into account evidence from a range of sources, but done at a time when schooling has been significantly disrupted.

Lest we forget, 9-1 grades for GCSEs also haven't been around for that many years yet. In some subjects, teachers only have one year of past results to go on. All other things being equal, you would expect the second cohort of pupils taking a qualification to do a bit better than last year's, as teachers have an extra year of experience under their belts. An approach called *comparable outcomes* is normally applied to exam results to account for this, but that won't have been factored in to the proposed grades that schools have come up with.

It's also much easier to distinguish between two pupils using marks from an exam. As a thought experiment, imagine two pupils thought to be on the 5/4 boundary who have produced a similar quality of work at school. It would be unfair for the teacher to give one a 5 and the other a 4 – but an exam would rule definitively on the matter, for better or worse.

All things said and done, then, schools have had an incredibly difficult task – albeit one matched in difficulty by that now facing the exam boards and Ofqual.

You can read more analysis of this data in two further posts – one looking at [centre variability in results](#), and another looking at [the severity of grading of different subjects](#).

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Notes

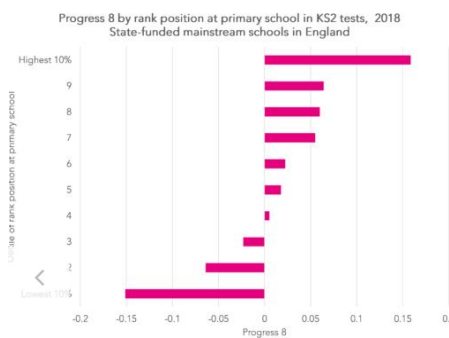
1. Only schools with more than 25 entries in a given subject in both 2019 and 2020 have been included in this analysis, and we're only looking at subjects where there were 100 or more such schools. This leaves us with a total of 1,916 schools in the analysis.

Exams and assessment

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About the author: [Philip Nye and Dave Thomson](#)

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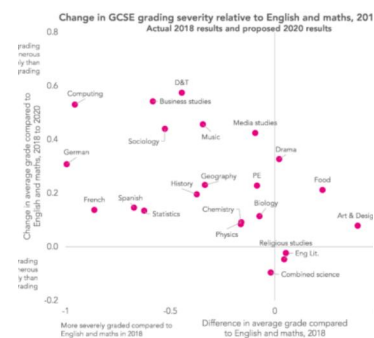


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19 comments

Prof George Constantinides 15 June, 2020 at 7:19 am - [Reply](#)

Very interesting. Thank you for this. You can read my views on the problems faced by Ofqual at <https://constantinides.net/2020/04/16/award-of-gcses-and-a-levels-in-2020/> and the comments therein, which I've kept updated as the details of the standardisation process slowly appear. We await the full standardisation process with bated breath.

Ben Redmond 15 June, 2020 at 8:51 am - [Reply](#)

There is an important difference between 2019 and 2020 for computer science. In previous years the programming project that requires 20 hours of teaching time but carries no assessment value had to be delivered in year 11, this year it was able to be delivered to the students while they were in year 10, allowing for year 11 to be completely dedicated to exam preparation. It is inevitable that the students will perform better on any interim measures used to try and benchmark their achievement, such as past papers.

Also, we were a little disappointed that the data only looked at one year previous and not a 3 year trend. If a school had a dip in 2019 after an otherwise improving trend (possibly due to cohort profile differences, staffing disruption) they might expect their results to be back on track. Such schools are also likely to respond to a dip in results to put measures in place to ensure they get back on track.

Andy Case 15 June, 2020 at 10:40 am - [Reply](#)

Has prior attainment been factored into the analysis? If the 2020 cohort's KS2 results are higher in a given subject than last year's then we would expect higher grades on average for this year's candidates. The comparable outcomes process would account for this and produce grade boundaries to reflect as such in a normal year. If it is the case, then the centre assessed grades may be more accurate than suggested and Ofqual's standardisation model may not need to do as much work.

Philip Nye 15 June, 2020 at 11:30 am - [Reply](#)

Thanks for the comment, Andy. In an individual subject it's possible that that's the case. We see the same pattern across all the subjects we looked at, though, to a greater or lesser extent, which is unlikely to be explained by prior attainment.

Stephen Down 17 June, 2020 at 4:49 pm - [Reply](#)

At a national level, that wouldn't really apply, although it would undoubtedly affect some individual schools. This year's Y11 was the last cohort to have sat the old 'levels' KS2, and there was little difference between the 2014 and 2015 results at KS2 - reading saw a very slight drop, maths a slight increase and writing a slight increase. Not enough to account for the differences we're seeing between 2019 and 2020 data here.

Charles Ben-Nathan 15 June, 2020 at 12:27 pm - [Reply](#)

You would expect schools to submit 'inflated' grades. Every year pupils under-perform in exams for a multitude of reasons, and under-performance is far more likely than over-performance - very few pupils suddenly understand things in the exam. Under-performance, by definition, is below what teachers would have expected, so you can't predict it. Therefore, with pupils predicted to perform as expected, you would expect to see better result this year than in other years.

With the Autumn exam series allowing those pupils who feel they have been hard done by to have another go and take the best grade forward, we will have a year group whose overall results will be much higher than previous year groups in any case. The boards strictly standardising to prevent grade inflation is a nonsense that will cause much unnecessary heartache.

Ian blundell 16 June, 2020 at 11:49 am - [Reply](#)

Ordinarily at my FE college a certain number of students would fail to turn up for one of the three maths gcse exams. Maybe 5%. This year those students will have been predicted grades based on their ability and the 5% non attendees have been eliminated entirely from the data. This would mean that 5% of the students will score considerably higher with this years system compared to last years as the non attendees were a broad spectrum of abilities.

Has this been considered?

Philip Nye 17 June, 2020 at 1:05 pm - [Reply](#)

Thanks for your comment, Ian. The 2019 data we've used won't include these pupils. They will be included in the 2020 data at their centre-assessed grade, but it's unlikely to have a big effect on the national picture - in 2018, we think something like a third of a percent of pupils in state-funded mainstream education didn't sit their maths exam, for example.

Andrew Jones 15 June, 2020 at 1:11 pm - [Reply](#)

Why is Music not on this data?

Philip Nye 15 June, 2020 at 1:45 pm - [Reply](#)

Hi Andrew. Only subjects where 100 or more schools with more than 25 entries are included in the analysis – see the footnote on the blogpost. There were only 53 such schools in our sample.

Dennis Sherwood 15 June, 2020 at 4:30 pm - [Reply](#)

Good stuff, thank you. Three questions, if I may, please...

1. Will you be publishing stats for A level?
2. For GCSE, and supposing that the boards intervene to place the grade boundaries so that the 2020 distribution matches 2019, is it possible to estimate the % of centre assessed grades that would still be confirmed, the % down-graded, and (if any) the % upgraded?
3. You're very straight about what you did and how you did it, and of the limitations, and you make quite clear that the only comparison is 2019. Do you have any feel for what, if anything, might be different if the boards were also to take 2018 into account, for those subjects graded 9, 8, 7...?

thank you

Dave Thomson 15 June, 2020 at 5:31 pm - [Reply](#)

Hello Dennis. A few quick responses 1- no, we've not done a similar exercise for A-level. 2- This is tricky. If you were to start at grade 9 and then lower approx 37% of the 2020 grades we collected you would get something close to the 2019 distribution across all subjects. But we'd expect the Ofqual statistical moderation process to be more complex than this and so might end up raising some grades in some subjects in some schools and lowering others. We've not got a feel for how this might work in any real detail so can't really comment any further. The same would apply to taking account of 2018 results as well.

Dennis 15 June, 2020 at 6:10 pm - [Reply](#)

Hi Dave – thanks for the prompt response, and, yes, that all makes good sense. Your results are most illuminating, so let's see what happens... Cheers Dennis

Jonathan Kay 15 June, 2020 at 9:21 pm - [Reply](#)

Very interesting – thanks so much for this

Jon Siracusano 16 June, 2020 at 6:42 am - [Reply](#)

Will you be splitting the data by gender?

Philip Nye 16 June, 2020 at 9:38 am - [Reply](#)

Hi Jon, I don't think we have any plans to do further analysis of the data for now. It's something we might be able to look at in August/early September though, as FFT [will be running it's KS4 Early Results Service again this summer](#).

Dennis Sherwood 18 June, 2020 at 8:28 am - [Reply](#)

Hi FFT – I've linked to this in a blog posted on HEPI this morning – <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/06/18/have-teachers-been-set-up-to-fail/>. I hope that's OK. Thank you, Dennis

Philip Nye 18 June, 2020 at 10:06 am - [Reply](#)

That's fine – thank you, Dennis.

Monica Ginever 21 June, 2020 at 11:56 am - [Reply](#)

This is really interesting. Thank you.
As you know, exam boards had committed to bringing German and French results in line with other subjects' results this year. It will be interestingly to see whether and how they will now actually do this. One way of doing it would be to keep the German and French teacher predictions as they are, even if they decide to reduce other subjects' grades. This would go some way to bringing German and French in line. German grades in 2019 a whole grade below English Language. French 0.85 of a grade below. Have you any ideas? What do you think they might do? What would be the fairest way?

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