

[Qualifications Wales Guest Blog: Changes to GCSEs](#)

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In this guest blog, [Jo Richards](#), Director of Regulation with Qualifications Wales, explains the changes introduced to GCSE examinations this year and what it may mean for this August's results.

The exams are over and the summer holidays are stretching out ahead for students across Wales. Many are thinking about the next stage of their life, whether that be further study or entering the world of work.

Exam boards and their examiners, however, are still hard at work – marking and setting grade boundaries in time for the results days in August (17 and 24). So what might we expect in Wales?



Changes to English, Welsh and Maths

Well there are significant changes to the GCSE English, Welsh and Maths exams. These reformed qualifications were introduced in September 2015, and the first opportunity for pupils to sit the exam after completing the two-year course was this summer – although almost 30,000 did sit one or both of the two new maths exams in an early sitting last November.

For Maths, one of the most noticeable changes is that it has been split into two new exams – GCSE Maths and GCSE Maths Numeracy.

Aside from that obvious difference, students now have a choice of three tiers of entry – foundation, intermediate and higher.

Each of those tiers has a different set of grades available. Pupils entered for the foundation tier can achieve grades of between D and G, the intermediate tier has grades B to E available, while the higher tier students can achieve A*–C grades.



As these tiers overlap – for example, grades B and C are available for those sitting both the Intermediate and Higher tiers – the exam papers contained some common questions, and WJEC will use these questions to ensure that the level of difficulty to achieve – for example a grade C – is the same whatever tier is taken.

Another big change this year has been to GCSE English Language, which is significantly different from the old one. Written coursework previously accounted for 20 per cent of the final grade. That has now been removed, with 80 per cent of the qualification now based on two exam papers that focus on reading and writing. The speaking and listening assessment still remains part of the qualification and contributes the remaining 20 per cent towards the final grade.

There have also been similar changes to GCSE Welsh Language. It now includes two speaking and listening assessments, a group and individual task that count 30 per cent towards the overall grade. The remaining 70 per cent is based on two exam papers that focus on reading and writing.

A noticeable difference for both GCSE English Language and GCSE Welsh Language is that the assessments are no longer tiered. Previously candidates sat a foundation or higher tier paper, but in the new qualifications all candidates sit the same exam paper regardless of the grade they are aiming for.

The new qualifications are also linear, where the old ones were unitised. This means that students must now sit all their exams at the end of the course, whereas previously they could take units and resit those units throughout the course.

Both the GCSE English Literature and GCSE Welsh Literature are similar to the old qualifications. They remain unitised which means students can take units and resit them during the course.

Cohorts of students taking exams

Aside from all the changes to the qualifications the nature of the cohort taking the exams is also markedly different to previous years, particularly in GCSE English Language.

Entry data shows that a very substantial number of students who have taken GCSE English Language are still in Year 10. Approximately 21,000 Year 10 pupils in Wales sat the exam in June, representing around 65 per cent of all Year 10 students in Wales.



Due to these different entry patterns, it's expected that the overall results for GCSE English Language this summer will be lower than previous years. So, to help explain how this year's results compare with previous years, Qualifications Wales' overview once the results are published will focus on 16-year-olds in Year 11. Even so, with all these changes, it will still be difficult to make meaningful year-on-year comparisons this August.

It's a similar story for GCSE Welsh Language. While less than five Year 10 students sat the exam in 2016, 1,030 did so in June which accounts for the 21 per cent overall increase in students and not something that has been typically seen for this subject in previous years.

When it comes to GCSE English Literature, less than 50 per cent of Year 11 pupils took the exam this year, although some sat it while they were in Year 10 in 2016. In total, around 70 per cent of all Year 11 pupils in Wales will have been entered for the exam either this year or early last year – but this is down from 77 per cent in 2016.

GCSE Welsh Literature is showing an 11 per cent decrease in the number of students taking the exam, partly due to the reduction in Year 10 entries this year – down from 130 in 2016 to less than five this summer.

A and AS levels

As well as the changes to GCSEs mentioned here, reformed AS qualifications have also been taken in nine subjects this summer – Drama, French, Geography, German, Music, PE, RS, Spanish and Welsh Second Language. These join 14 other reformed A level qualifications that are being awarded for the first time this year.

Further information

A level results will be published on 17 August with GCSE results the following Thursday, on 24 August.

Further details about the changes to GCSEs, AS and A levels as well as information about the Welsh Baccalaureate and topics such as comparable outcomes and how grade boundaries are set can be found on the [Qualifications Wales website](#).

Image from Qualifications Wales



