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LT Extra: Standing up for fairness on exams

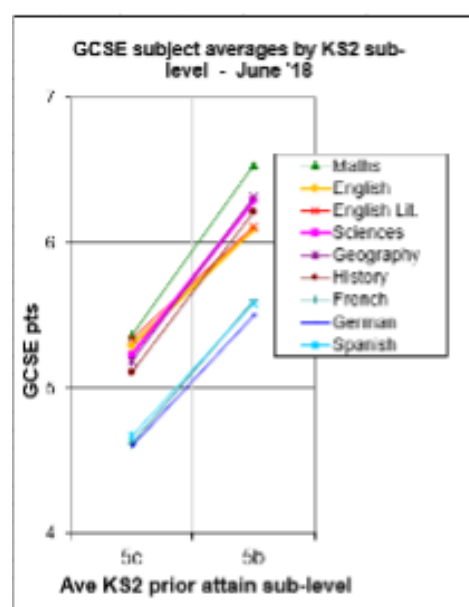
David Blow, ALL Fellow and Executive Headteacher

ALL, in conjunction with other organisations such as the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) and Independent Schools Modern Language Association (ISMLA) have been active for nearly 20 years in raising the issue of severe grading in GCSE and A-level Language exams. Some significant progress has been made through the consistent, persistent and professionally assertive approach adopted, meaning that many students have been awarded the grades they are entitled to, but much remains to be done to achieve a level playing field. It has been incredibly important that all the key organisations and sectors including ALL, ISMLA and ASCL have been working together throughout on this, as it has cut through specious arguments.



Many individuals have been involved over this period, in particular, David Blow (Executive Head), Helen Myers (ALL London), Nick Mair (ISMLA), Suzanne O'Farrell (ASCL) and Katrin Kohl (University of Oxford). The support and interest of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Languages has been welcome. *Other abbreviations are explained below.*

It should be that pupils of the same prior attainment gain, on average, a similar GCSE grade in their EBacc subjects (English, maths, sciences, history / geography and a language). But there has been a discrepancy going right back to the days of O-level whereby languages (blue lines in graph to right) have had a lower average grading – by over half a grade for many students. (The same principle should hold at A-level, with prior attainment measured by GCSE score). This is what we mean by **severe grading**.

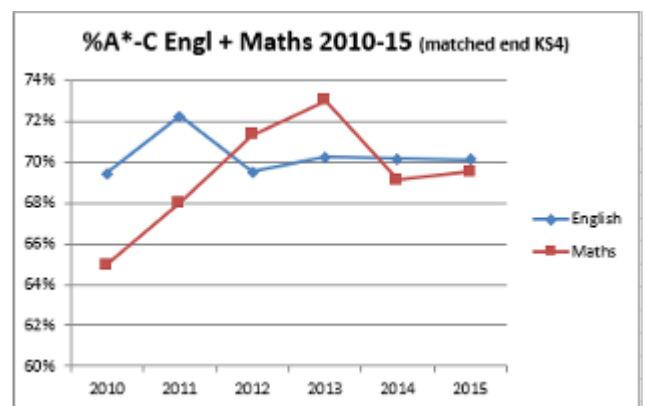


Until 2008, the official line from QCA and ministers was that standards in all subjects were comparable, in spite of clear evidence over time of historic variation between subjects, e.g. the Cockcroft Report (1982) into Maths showed that 33% passed O-level English but only 25% O-level Maths.

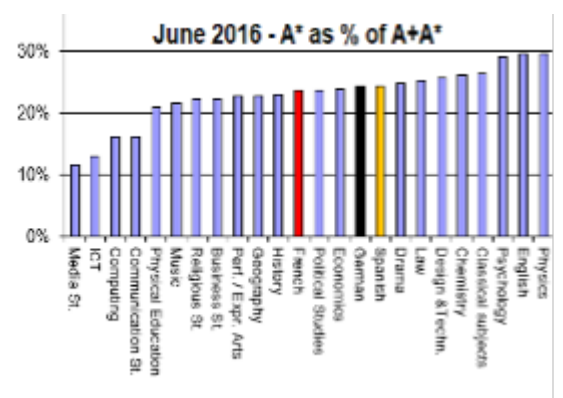
In 2006 Lord Dearing gave a sympathetic hearing to evidence produced by David and Helen with the support of John Dunford, then General Secretary of ASCL, and commented that even the Daily Mail would find it hard to argue with the request that ML should be made “as hard as Maths”. As a result of the recommendations of the Dearing Review, and a follow-up joint letter from ASCL, ALL, SSAT and ISMLA, the Secretary of State asked QCA to look into the matter. The QCA report in 2008 officially acknowledged for the first time the severe grading in Languages, but in spite of pleading from Lord Dearing himself, they were not prepared to take action. This was extremely disappointing, and John Dunford’s press release captured the argument well: *“it is about creating a level playing field... not to maintain a grading standard that was unfair to begin with.”* Ironically, it did seem to trigger an official recognition that inter-subject comparability was an issue, and later in the year, David and Helen were invited to present to the first QCA conference.

In 2010 **Ofqual** was setup as an independent organisation accountable to Parliament (replacing the exam regulatory part of QCA). It introduced ‘comparable outcomes’ for both A-level and GCSE so that, broadly, the number of pupils getting particular grades would remain consistent from year to year (taking into account changes in the subject cohort entry profile). This effectively cuts through the ‘standards’ debate as grading will not be changed by any increase or decrease in standards, or methods of teaching and learning etc.

In June 2012, Ofqual and the exam boards accidentally changed the relative **comparability** of English and Maths so that they were now similar, as indeed, were all the EBacc subjects apart from Languages. This showed that Ofqual could change relative GCSE subject gradings, and there was no reason for not making the change to Languages that the 2008 report suggested.



In 2010, a new grade A* was introduced at **A-level**. It was immediately clear that the proportion of A* relative to A grade was lower for Languages than for other “facilitating” subjects (i.e. EBacc subjects at A-level). Following combined pressure, Ofqual launched a research project which uncovered some technical reasons relating to AS and A2 mark distributions, and made changes for 2015 to address the issue. This had been particularly



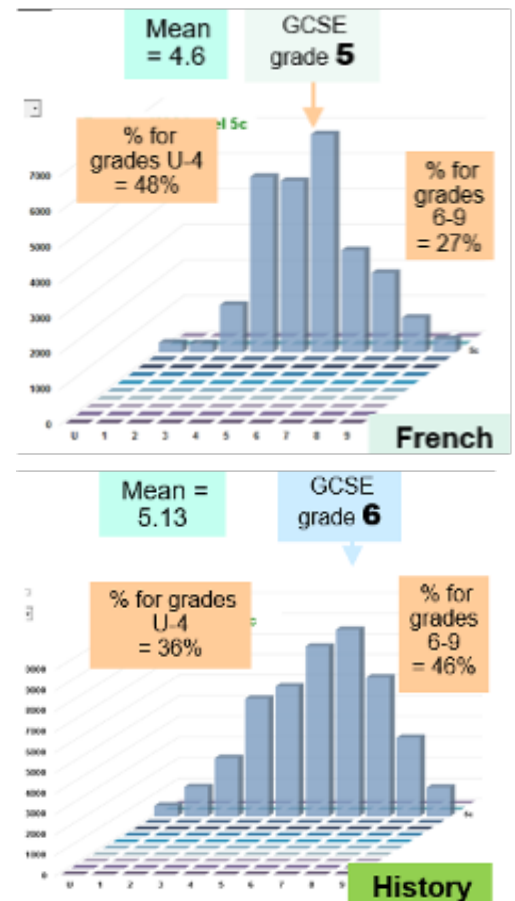
damaging for entry to Oxbridge where A* had become a requirement. As a result of the changes, there was then a fair and level playing field.

Ofqual also agreed to look at the potentially distorting impact of native speakers on A-level grading in the context of 'comparable outcomes' which depend on the input measure (GCSE performance) being a consistent measure across subjects. This was complex as native speakers are not all the same. Clearly you can get students who are proficient in their own language, but struggle across the range of exams because they may not have lived in Britain for long etc. The outcome was a welcome decision in 2017 to increase the percentage of A grades awarded in A-Level Languages by 1%.

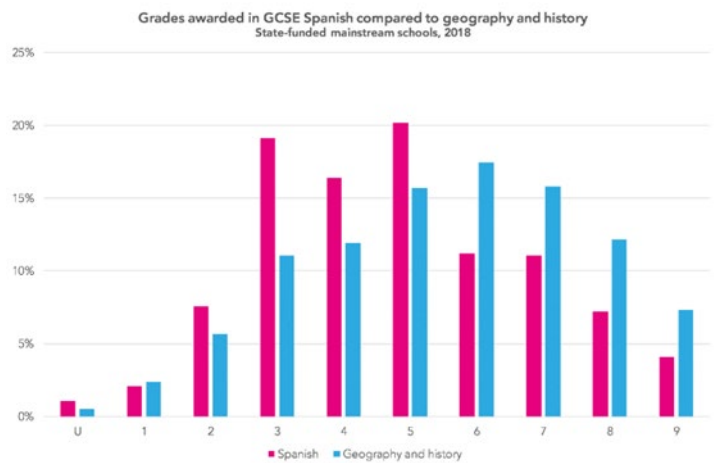
In 2016, Ofqual picked up the issue of inter-subject **comparability** and Nick Mair presented at the launch conference of a formal consultation. One outcome was to launch formal research projects into grading at A-Level in Sciences, and in Languages. Although there was clear evidence in statistical facts, and support from HE colleagues in practical workshops, the bitterly disappointing decision in 2018 was to take no action.

Ofqual did then agree to look at **GCSE grading** in Languages. This time, after an extensive programme of research and workshops, Ofqual agreed in November 2019 to bring GCSE French and German into line with GCSE Spanish but refused to bring them all into line with the other EBacc subjects. Unfortunately, these changes were lost in Gavin Williamson's national U-turn in August 2020; they were implemented in June 2022, but the impact is not easy to unpick from the other interim post-pandemic grading decisions.

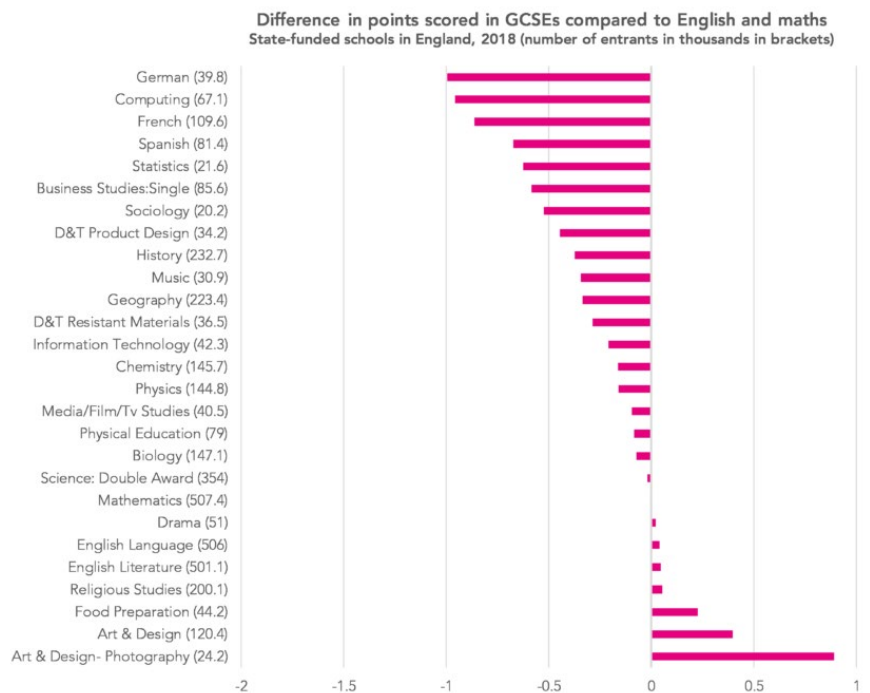
The **increases will take effect for June 2023**, and should be clear as Ofqual have said that grading generally is to return to the 2019 levels, with GCSE French and German as specified exceptions. These changes will benefit thousands of students to get the grades they deserve, but many more will still be getting lower grades than they should, if the grading were in line with the other EBacc subjects. The graphs below show this clearly, using the example of above average pupils with KS2 Level 5c, and showing the grading in French is relative to History.



This is very clearly shown in the bar chart on the right, produced by FFT Datalab in Nov 2019 looking at the grades obtained by the 68,000 pupils who took both Spanish and either History or Geography, i.e. the grades obtained by same pupils. You can see the severe grading in Spanish relative to History/ Geography. Below that is a graph from the same blog showing the grade in each subject relative to the grade obtained by each pupil in their English and Maths. German is the most severely graded, with French close by.



When Helen raised the matter publicly at a conference in 2005 with Charles Clarke, then Secretary of State, he replied that it was her 'perception'. In fact, it continues to be a **reality**, clearly visible in DfE and Ofqual data



(formally accepted back in 2008 by QCA, and affirmed by Ofqual in 2018.) However, the use, (or mis-use), of language and mixing / muddling of different aspects continue to muddy the waters:

- Perceptions of easy / hard subjects can be based on the classroom experience of a student in various subjects. Studies show that pupils feel that subjects such as Food, Art and English can be easily accessed, whereas Maths and Languages are 'hard' / 'difficult'.
- Then there is the exam experience – whether the students feel that they can answer the question (whether or not they have the right answer). Students feel Language exams are particularly difficult – especially Listening and Speaking, which is stressful.
- Finally there are the grades awarded. As we have seen, all the other EBacc subjects apart from Languages now have similar grading, even though

students may feel that some in the classroom or exam are 'harder' than others.

Our fundamental argument is around fairness and comparability.

We must continue to state that the reality is that Languages are more severely graded than other EBacc subjects, and push back on the use of the word "perception" in this context.

Abbreviations

QCA – Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

SSAT – Specialist Schools and Academies Trust

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