

Practical suggestions for grading your Year 10 students taking the new GCSE ML

Teachers and HoDs are likely to be being asked to give grades for the Year 10 students taking the new GCSE in French, German and Spanish. This aims to give some practical suggestions on how to do so.

Ofqual publish official guidance relating to all subjects at GCSE and AL

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gcse-and-a-level-grading-what-you-need-to-know/gcse-and-a-level-grading-what-you-need-to-know>

which includes the following key points:

Grade boundaries change from year to year

If an exam is easier than in previous years, the grade boundaries for that paper will be higher. If it is harder, the grade boundaries will be lower.

The difficulty of exam questions varies year to year, even though exam boards try to keep the level of demand consistent. That's because it is impossible to determine how difficult students will find a paper until it is taken.

This is why new grade boundaries are set each year – to reflect the difficulty of that particular paper, and to ensure that it is no easier or harder to get a grade in any given year.

The standard of work needed to get each grade remains comparable year on year

Grade boundaries are decided after students take exams and when marking is nearly complete

And also regarding a change of specification such as the new GCSEs

<https://ofqual.blog.gov.uk/2017/03/10/comparable-outcomes-and-new-a-levels/>

When qualifications change, we follow the principle of comparable outcomes – this means that if the national cohort for a subject is similar (in terms of past performance) to last year, then results should also be similar at a national level in that subject. So exam boards will control for the impact of the changes such that this year's cohort is not unfairly disadvantaged. They will be relying heavily on the statistical evidence to do this, but also using senior examiners to check the grade boundaries that the statistics are pointing to.

Pearson have produced a very helpful summary relating to the new ML GCSEs:

<https://qualifications.pearson.com/content/dam/pdf/GCSE/Modern-Languages/grade-boundaries-faq-2026-pearson-edexcel-gcse-mfl.pdf>

which draws on the official Ofqual advice

Our additional advice

The above gives a clear explanation about why grade boundaries are not set in advance, and how the exam boards will determine what they are after the papers have been taken in June 2026.

However, that does leave a real challenge for teachers in determining how to interpret “the standard itself has not changed, even though the assessments have.” because it is not just the assessment which has changed, there has been a significant change to the subject content, in particular with a restricted word list and a focus on greater mastery of a more specified content.

In this situation, what is the definition of “standards” and how will that definition be manifested in measurable performance? These are the questions which the standards-setting process referred to will give an official answer to, but this not help teachers being required to give grades based on performance in either the Sample Assessment Materials (SAMs) or adapted previous exam papers. The situation of judging the ability of a cohort generally is especially hard for June 2026 and 2027 as pupils did not take KS2 tests in 2020 or 2021. There is an argument that because of the greater focus on mastery, then standards will slowly rise in the coming years, and this is a point which ALL and other language associations have put to Ofqual, and they are considering how to test this hypothesis.

Our advice would be to assume that the ability and likely outcomes of the pupils will be similar to previous years, and to use a similar distribution of grades to that obtained by Year 11 in Jun 2024 and previous years. Pupils can be ranked on the assessments they have taken, and then allocated a grade using the likely distribution. It can also be very helpful to look at the distribution English and Maths grades obtained by ML students in the actual exams in 2023 and 2024 and what was “predicted” in Year 10), and cross-reference to the English and Maths grades being given to the current Year 10 ML students. It may well be worth asking your data manager to help with this process. Note that there was a slight increase in grading in 2023 and 2024 arising from Ofqual’s work on standards, but it is small and will be subsumed in the wider variations.

Worked example

Step 1: convert the distribution of grades in 2023 and 2024 to percentages, and average. So, ave of 10% of students gained a grade 9.

Step 2: apply those percentages to the number in the current cohort studying the subject. So with 60 in the cohort, 6 is the most likely number of grade 9.

Step 3: look at the grades in English and Maths given in Year 10 to those students who took ML exam in 2023 and 2024.

Step 4: look at the grades in English and Maths being given to current Year 10. Does the distribution look similar? If so. It is likely that the final distribution of grades in ML is likely to be similar to the figures above.

Step 5: take into account the policy of your school about awarding grades in Year 10 compared with the actual grades obtained in the actual Year 11 GCSE

Step 6: use the rank order of students in the Year 10 assessments to allocate grades

		no in subject
		60
grade	ave '23, 24	no. each grade
9	10%	6
8	10%	6
7	15%	9
6	15%	9
5	10%	6
4	20%	12
3	15%	9
2	5%	3
1	0%	0
		60

Be very wary of using any of the “grade boundaries” which are being circulated.

Tiering

Tiering is going to be an additional complication and ALL, ISMLA, ASCL and others are liaising with Ofqual and the exam boards about providing advice to teachers, and we are looking to the Autumn Term for this.

In the meantime, Year 10 pupils in the same school may have sat different papers depending on their ability level e.g. “Foundation” and “Higher”

Follow the same procedure for **Steps 1 to 2** for the combined group – this gives you an estimated final distribution once you have combined the grades for “Foundation” and “Higher” together. There will be a degree of iteration to this process, and do ask your data manager or another colleague for assistance.

Now **Steps 3 to 5** separately for “Foundation” and “Higher” so you will get two distributions of grades. Combine them together and compare with your outcome from **Steps 1 and 2**. Apply **Step 6** to both. Make adjustments to each distribution, and compare at student level using your local knowledge and the grades in other subjects for the crossover students. When you are happy with both the separate distributions and combined distribution, use the allocated grades

Severe grading

This is a useful opportunity to remind people of the severe grading in GCSE ML which is a historic anomaly going back to O-level and first identified 50 years ago!

A recent analysis by FFT Datalab is at

<https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2025/05/grading-severity-at-key-stage-4-in-2024/>

Helen Myers maintains a page on the ALL London website full of useful information and links

<https://all-london.org.uk/severe-grading/>