

Proposed exam reforms 'unlikely to drive up standards'

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A report by Oxford University's Centre for Educational Assessment says there is little evidence to support government claims that standards of examinations have fallen in England, and argues that the government's proposed reforms in today's Queen's Speech are unlikely to drive up standards.

The review suggests an alternative approach, already followed by other countries, would be to push up overall performance and aim to start to close the gap between the lowest and highest performers.

Oxford researchers reviewed international [test scores](#) over a 16 year period and reviewed existing education research to produce their report, entitled '[Research evidence](#) relating to proposals for the reform of the GCSE'. The report notes that international tests show that in 2011 England was in the top ten countries for maths (for Years 5 and 9) and science (for Year 9) out of the 63 countries measured by TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study), and finds there has been no decline in test scores since 1995. For Year 5 science pupils, meanwhile, England is among the top 15 countries.

However, the TIMSS data also shows that England has a wider spread between the lowest and highest achievers compared with the other countries surveyed in IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of [Educational Achievement](#)) countries.

England's scores using PISA data (Programme for International Student Assessment) are generally close to the Organisation for [Economic Cooperation](#) and Development (OECD) countries' average, says the report.

Looking at all the evidence, the report says there is currently no clear, single explanation for the trend towards rising GCSE grades. But there is little research evidence to point to exam questions getting easier. It suggests that more evidence is needed to establish whether this is the case or whether there is now more teaching to test than in the past. However, the report adds that pupils could be benefitting from better teaching or working harder than pupils did in the past.

The report argues that by simply introducing more demanding GCSE

exams, standards of achievement will not automatically rise, pointing out that 41% of GCSE candidates in England currently fail to gain five 'good' GCSEs ie. grade C or above, including English and mathematics. It also suggests an alternative approach would be to push up overall performance and aim to start to close the gap between the lowest and highest performers – an approach already followed by other countries.

Report co-author and Pearson Professor of Educational Assessment at Oxford University, Jo-Anne Baird, said: 'The purpose of this report is to investigate the evidence for reforming the current GCSE, with a view to ensuring that decisions taken have the desired effect. We have to be clear about not only where we are going but where we are right now. International test scores indicate that England is doing well in science and maths, but there are limits on what we can conclude from these results given the differences between these tests and our GCSE curricula.

'However, what is clear is the yawning gap between the highest and lowest performers in England, which is much greater here than in other countries and seems to be based on the social and economic factors of a school's intake. I think this highlights a need for better educational provision for low-achieving students who, according to the reports examined, are often from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.'

The report also examines different forms of assessment and argues that a model based on modular assessments is not consistently easier than one based on an end-of-course exam. It found 'high stakes end-of-course examinations' produced 'backwash effects', which included a narrowing of the curriculum and an increase in teaching to test.

More information: [oucea.education.ox.ac.uk/about ... -reform-of-the-gcse/](https://oucea.education.ox.ac.uk/about...-reform-of-the-gcse/)

Provided by Oxford University

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