



## Statement about GCSE Standards in 2008

With the publication of the GCSE results for 2008, it is timely to look at the changes in outcomes over the recent past and reflect upon what they tell us about the performance of our young people.

Each year, AQA and the other awarding bodies set GCSE standards by following procedures which have been independently acknowledged by an international study to be among the best in the world and are designed to ensure that standards do not change. These procedures are specified by Government regulators (Ofqual in England, DELLS in Wales and CCEA in Northern Ireland) and subject to close scrutiny by them. These scrutinies, and other independent observers, all report that the procedures are closely followed and that the judgements of the quality of candidates' work which they involve are made with great care and skill.

Despite this independent verification that the procedures used to maintain standards in GCSE examinations are excellent, national pass rates for the top grades have increased significantly. In recent years, the overall Grade A rate has gone from 16.8% in 2003 to 20.7% in 2008. For Grade C, the pass rate was 58.2% in 2003 and is 65.7% in 2008.

Some commentators argue that these increases are so large that the examinations must have become easier. This is speculation, based upon the dubious assumptions that schools have made no improvements in the last few years and that young people today cannot really be achieving more than those in previous years. There is no independent evidence for these assumptions. In fact, there is good reason to believe that young people now work harder than ever and that recent years have seen schools striving harder than ever to improve the quality of the education which they provide.

So what do the recent increases in GCSE pass rates actually mean for 16 year olds?

Think of a group of half a dozen average 16 year olds, doing 8 GCSEs each this year. Of the 48 results they got between them, 31 were Grade Cs or better, with just 10 being Grade A or A\*. In 2003, the corresponding figures for the same group of 6 average candidates would have been 28 Grade Cs or better, 8 of which were Grade A or A\*.

Looked at in this way, the improvement in GCSE results over recent years is well within what can reasonably be expected of our school system and not evidence which supports the notion that GCSE standards have changed.

Young people, employers and the nation at large can have complete confidence in GCSE standards. The improving results reflect the continuing improvement of our schools and the hard work of our young people. We celebrate their achievement.

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