

Tiered assessment

GCSEs are assessed in different ways. In tiered GCSEs, students sit different exam papers depending on the grades they are aiming for. In untiered GCSEs, there is just one exam paper for all students, regardless of which grade they are aiming for.

Our view on GCSEs in Wales is that they should not include tiered assessment unless it's necessary to ensure that exams are accessible and manageable for the students sitting them.

In many subjects, such as Welsh, English or Geography, it's possible to assess the content using mainly open-ended questions that are accessible to the whole cohort of students sitting an assessment. The marks that a student gets depends on the quality of their answer. For these subjects, there is no need for tiered exam papers.

Tiering is used for subjects where the content is assessed through a series of questions that are of a different level of difficulty.

Whereas all students will be able to answer the more straightforward questions, as the questions become more difficult, fewer students are able to answer them. This is the case for subjects such as maths and science.

While it would be possible to set a paper that includes enough questions of various difficulty to assess the full range of attainment, this would lead to much longer exam papers and less positive exam experiences for students.

This more effective use of the exam time allows for more accurate measurement of candidate's ability and performance.

In practice, tiering means that only a subset of grades are targeted by each exam paper. The tier a student enters for depends on the grade they are aiming for.

Most tiered qualifications have two tiers: foundation and higher. Grades C and D are available on both the higher and lower tiers.

Higher	A*	A	B	C	D			
Intermediate				C	D	E	F	G

The GCSE Mathematics and GCSE Mathematics-Numeracy have three tiers of entry: Foundation, Intermediate and Higher.

Higher	A*	A	B	C				
Intermediate			B	C	D	E		
Foundation					D	E	F	G

Because tiered exam papers only target a subset of the grades, it is important to take care when looking at grade boundaries. In higher tier GCSE Mathematics and GCSE Mathematics-Numeracy for example, roughly a quarter of the questions will be targeted at each grade A*, A, B and C. This is why grade boundaries for grade C on higher tier papers are lower than they are for intermediate or foundation tier papers. For more information see our article on [**setting grade boundaries.**](#)

