



Cambridge IGCSE standards and GCSE

Summary

- We commit in our Code of Practice to align the standard of Cambridge IGCSE with equivalent qualifications taken in England; we do this using statistical evidence and comparability studies.
- Work by external bodies shows Cambridge IGCSE to be comparable to qualifications taken by UK schools; Ofqual has regulated Cambridge IGCSE as Level 1/Level 2 qualifications; which is also the level of GCSEs.
- Cambridge IGCSE is high quality preparation for post-16 study
- Cambridge IGCSE qualifications were a benchmark for the design of the reformed GCSE in England.
- The content of reformed GCSE and Cambridge IGCSE syllabuses has extensive overlap, though Cambridge IGCSE will remain distinct from GCSE, offering an international choice to schools around the world.

Cambridge IGCSE® is the world's most popular international qualification for 14 to 16 year olds. It is recognised by leading universities and employers worldwide, and is an international passport to progression and success. Developed over 30 years ago, it is tried, tested and trusted by schools worldwide.

This note explains how Cambridge Assessment International Education maintains the standard of Cambridge IGCSE. IGCSE® is a registered trademark of Cambridge Assessment International Education.

Our commitment

Our Code of Practice¹ states: “The grading process will maintain the awarding standard of a syllabus from one year to the next, subject to the need for alignment with any equivalent qualification taken in England, and paying due consideration to the need for comparability with different subjects in the same qualification.”

This commitment means we align Cambridge IGCSE awarding standards to those of GCSEs offered in England.

How we achieve this

We use several well-established methods to ensure that we meet our commitment.

¹ Cambridge Assessment International Education, “Code of Practice”, 2017.

Each year we look at the following statistical and judgemental evidence on the alignment of Cambridge IGCSE and GCSE standards when we are setting the grade boundaries for Cambridge IGCSE.

1. We analyse GCSE-Cambridge IGCSE subject pairs – these look at the previous year’s candidates who took a combination of a Cambridge IGCSE in one subject and a GCSE in another, to see whether they performed better in one than the other. Individual candidates of course often perform better in one subject than another, but over a large population of candidates we can expect to see a close alignment of aggregate performance across any pair of subjects. When a range of GCSE subjects is considered, this tells us whether the Cambridge IGCSE is properly aligned to GCSE standards, or whether the standard needs a minor correction.
2. We look at post-award screening data – this is the method used by GCSE boards to show whether one board’s exams are slightly easier or harder than the others, so that, if any discrepancy is found, it can be corrected in the next year. We use the same method to check that Cambridge IGCSE standards are properly aligned to those of the GCSE boards.
3. We conduct judgemental exercises to compare Cambridge IGCSE and GCSE standards. We use the professional expertise of examiners to review candidates’ scripts at key grade thresholds.

We keep the alignment of standards under continual review, and, as is common practice across awarding organisations, we make fine adjustments if there is evidence of any divergence of standards in either direction.

Looking ahead, we will continue to undertake this analysis to ensure standards between GCSE and Cambridge IGCSE remain aligned.

Recognition

UK NARIC, the UK’s national agency for the recognition and comparison of international qualifications and skills, has found that the Cambridge IGCSE can be considered of a comparable level to the reformed GCSE in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.² [Further information can be found on our website.](#)

In the last decade, while the UK Government was encouraging its state schools to use international GCSEs, Ofqual has regulated many Cambridge IGCSEs as Level 1/Level 2 qualifications, which is also the level of GCSEs³.

Many high-performing schools worldwide use Cambridge IGCSE as part of their curriculum. They find Cambridge IGCSEs to be excellent preparation for advanced study and higher education.

Universities in the UK are used to seeing IGCSEs as part of portfolios of applications offered by international applicants. [Many have supplied statements](#) assuring equal recognition of reformed GCSE and Cambridge IGCSE.

² The National Recognition Information Centre for the United Kingdom, “Benchmarking Cambridge IGCSE in the Context of the UK Education System”, 2016. A further study was completed in 2019.

³ The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual), “Register of Regulated Qualifications” <https://register.ofqual.gov.uk/> and “What qualification levels mean” <https://www.gov.uk/what-different-qualification-levels-mean/list-of-qualification-levels>

Schools' choice

Schools tell us that they choose to offer Cambridge IGCSE on the strengths of the syllabus content, and how it prepares students well for post-16 study.

The content of reformed GCSE and Cambridge IGCSE syllabuses have extensive overlap. Cambridge IGCSE will continue to contain features unique to its syllabuses so as to offer meaningful choice to schools and learners.

The vast majority of our UK schools offer a mixed economy of GCSE and Cambridge IGCSE, which suggests that in many cases, departmental heads select the syllabus that they favour based on educational considerations, including how well it prepares students for post-16 study.

Independent schools in the UK using Cambridge IGCSE are in good company. Beyond the UK, Cambridge IGCSE continues to be the leading international qualification in its class, with almost 750,000 entries in 2017/18, a 7% increase on the previous year. It is used by almost 5000 schools in over 145 countries.

The UK government brought GCSEs closer to Cambridge IGCSEs

Over the years, we have maintained Cambridge IGCSE as a rigorous examination. The reformed GCSE in England, introduced over three years from 2017, now reflects good practice already within Cambridge IGCSE; and indeed the standards and quality of Cambridge IGCSE qualifications were a benchmark for the design of the reformed GCSE. Reformed GCSEs have adopted a linear model – Cambridge IGCSEs have always been linear, allowing for a holistic approach to teaching and assessment and allowing more time for teaching and learning, with only one set of examinations at the end of the course.

“...[we are] learning from best international practice and I would encourage all schools to consider how the IGCSE might be an appropriate preparation for the changes that we hope to introduce.” Secretary of State for Education, 17 September 2012

Awarding standards for GCSE have not changed, [as confirmed by Government Ministers and the Chief Regulator at the point of introduction of the GCSE reforms.](#)

Even though new GCSEs contain broader and more challenging content and questions than before – bringing them closer to the demands of Cambridge IGCSE content⁴ – exam boards allow for this in the awarding process. In terms of awarding standards, the pre-reform GCSEs, the reformed GCSEs and Cambridge IGCSEs remain very closely aligned.

⁴ [Ofqual's 2015 study](#), “A Comparison of Actual and Expected Difficulty, and Assessment of Problem Solving in GCSE Maths”, page 20, observed that “Current GCSEs are judged to be of lower expected difficulty than similar international assessments [including Cambridge IGCSE mathematics]”. In general, the expected difficulty of the reformed, higher tier GCSE sample assessments is more in line with similar international assessments [including Cambridge IGCSE mathematics] than the current GCSE papers.