

Exam Results Analysis: 'the wood from the trees.'

Outside many school gates in the UK, headlines make bold and impressive claims: '100% PASS RATE', 'RECORD A LEVELS RESULTS', 'THE MOST POINTS PER STUDENT AT GCSE', 'OUTSTANDING GRADES A*-G', and so on. With such apparent success, how are parents and students able to distinguish genuine academic excellence, from the rest? All schools put the best 'shine' on their own achievement, but this can create confusion in trying to interpret one school's performance against another. So how should we understand a school's results? Why do colleges, universities and employers place a higher premium on some exam results than others? The questions and answers below might help clarify some of this complexity!

1. What is a GCSE?

The General Certificate of Secondary Education [GCSE] was first introduced in England and Wales in 1986 to replace the old 'ordinary' or O level. Completed in Year 10 and Year 11, most schools require their students to study nine or ten subjects, with a *core* or compulsory offering of Maths, English Language, Sciences and a Modern Foreign Language, combined with three or four *optional* and additional subjects from a broad range: History or Geography, Classics, Music, Art or Design, IT, Drama, PE and RS etc. This mix of subjects allows students to keep their options open for further advanced studies beyond GCSE.

2 What constitutes a good grade at GCSE?

Some schools highlight their 100% pass rate at grades A*-G. This is not an indication of excellence as grades D, E, F and G are very modest levels of attainment. A 'good' pass grade at GCSE is described by the government as ranging from grades A*-C, including Maths and English Language, and this is the minimum requirement usually insisted on by employers taking on junior positions or apprenticeships at age 16. Schools that highlight their '90% pass mark at GCSE', mean that 90% of their students get five or more passes at GCSE grade A*-C. A general rule of thumb for these grades is in increments of 10%. Grade C equates to an approximate 50% pass mark, Grade B to 60%, Grade A at 70% and A* at 80%+.

3. What grades do the best schools highlight?

National league tables in the press, such as the *Daily Telegraph* tables, or the *Sunday Times* Top 500 schools in the UK, focus on the % of grades at A*-A at GCSE, in other words the percentage of passes in all subjects above the 70% and 80% threshold. Merchant Taylors' sets a benchmark target of 60% of all grades at GCSE meeting this A*-A threshold. Whilst one or two students will not quite achieve this benchmark, the majority do so and, below this threshold, we would expect all our students to achieve the lower *A-C mark. This places Merchant Taylors' among the top 300 secondary schools in the UK [from over 3500 secondary schools in total] including highly selective grammar schools and oversubscribed schools in the South East. In the North of England, these place us in the top 25 schools.

4. How do other schools in Sefton, Lancashire and Liverpool fare at GCSE, using the grade A*-A criteria?

The short answer, is that we don't often know, for they refuse to publish them! Parents can draw their own conclusions as to why many schools make it very difficult for an enquirer to find out this % A*-A level of performance. Instead, local schools highlight other criteria which shows them in a positive light, but makes it difficult to understand their %A*-A level of performance. These schools might highlight '*the most points per student at GCSE in Sefton*', or describe themselves as '*the best school in West Lancashire*.' Merchant Taylors' compares itself against a national field, using accepted levels of excellence and therefore looks beyond regional tables.

5. Why not use *points per student at GCSE* as a benchmark, as one local school does?

Each grade at GCSE receives a tariff from the QCA, the Qualification and Curriculum Authority and at aged 18, from UCAS, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service. Broadly speaking, grade A* at GCSE is worth 58 points, grade A 52 points, grade B 46 points, grade C 40 points, Grade D 34 points, and so on. This then allows schools to measure the number of points achieved by each student and also allows schools to calculate the *mean* or average number of points achieved by each student. This latter figure is used by Sefton, Lancashire and Liverpool local authorities in their annual tables of school GCSE performance, usually published in January each year. However it does not include the international version of the GCSE, or IGCSE, which many independent schools such as Merchant Taylors' often favour.

One local school highlights the fact that because it enters its students for many more GCSEs than other schools, its average number of points per student is higher, in fact, 'the best in the area', which it then publishes in its literature as indicating academic excellence.

6. How many GCSEs do Merchant Taylors' students traditionally enter?

Each year our boys and girls are entered for either 9 or 10 GCSEs, at the end of Year 11. In some schools in the region, students study between 12-16 GCSEs, with three or four studied in Year 10 and the rest in Year 11. This produces a higher average points per student score, but in our opinion, is educationally unsound and not focussed on genuine academic excellence. Broadly speaking 9 or 10 GCSEs at grade A or B are much more preferable to 12 or 13 GCSEs at grade B and C. In addition, the effect of teaching much more content at GCSE, with 12 or more subjects to master, can distort the overall curriculum, and ensure that students are cramming more factual knowledge. This also undermines the wider curriculum of sport, music, the arts and extra-curricular activities, so important to promote good teenage mental health, character and confidence. We will not simply cram more subjects into the curriculum to achieve a higher average points score per student.

7. What's the difference between GCSEs and IGCSEs?

With a growing awareness of 'grade inflation' with more and more students over the past twenty years achieving A*-C grades, the GCSE exam is perceived as getting easier, and lacking an absolute standard. IGCSEs were introduced in 1988 and are internationally recognised qualifications, taken by students all over the world. In February 2009, 16 Cambridge University IGCSE syllabuses received accreditation from Ofqual, the governing body that regulates qualifications in England and Wales. They are perceived by many leading schools as academically more rigorous than GCSEs and better preparation for A level courses. There is also more scope for teachers to choose from a wider range of material. In 2013, with leading maintained schools switching to the IGCSE, the government changed its mind and now no longer includes IGCSEs in local government league tables! Therefore Merchant Taylors' Boys' School often appears at the bottom of the Sefton GCSE League tables, despite having among the best GCSE and IGCSE results in the country! In spite of the government *volte face*, IGCSEs remain excellent preparation for A level study and are widely accepted by employers, universities and colleges as part of their entry requirements.

8. How else do schools distort or inflate their GCSE results?

Bluntly, some GCSEs are harder than others, but also more valuable in terms of intellectual credibility, employability and general all round education. For instance, many schools don't insist that their students study a modern foreign language. Fewer than half of the boys in the UK study a modern foreign language to GCDSE level. In addition, many schools have abandoned teaching separate sciences at GCSE, [Chemistry, Physics and Biology,] and instead most of their students are entered for a less demanding GCSE in General Science or Additional Science. This might help with their pass grades at GCSE, but may well adversely affect their university or career options in the years ahead. At Merchant Taylors', we expect all our students to study a language to GCSE level and all boys study either two or three separate sciences. Our results would be even higher if we didn't insist on this, but we won't compromise our students' future chances for short term, league table gains.

If you visit another school and are struggling to find their headline exam results, ask the Head for the %A*-A achieved at GCSE and ask if all students study a foreign language or separate sciences at GCSE!