Data
Bytes

July 2025

Would you get the same grade in a subject if you sat fewer GCSE exams?

Summary

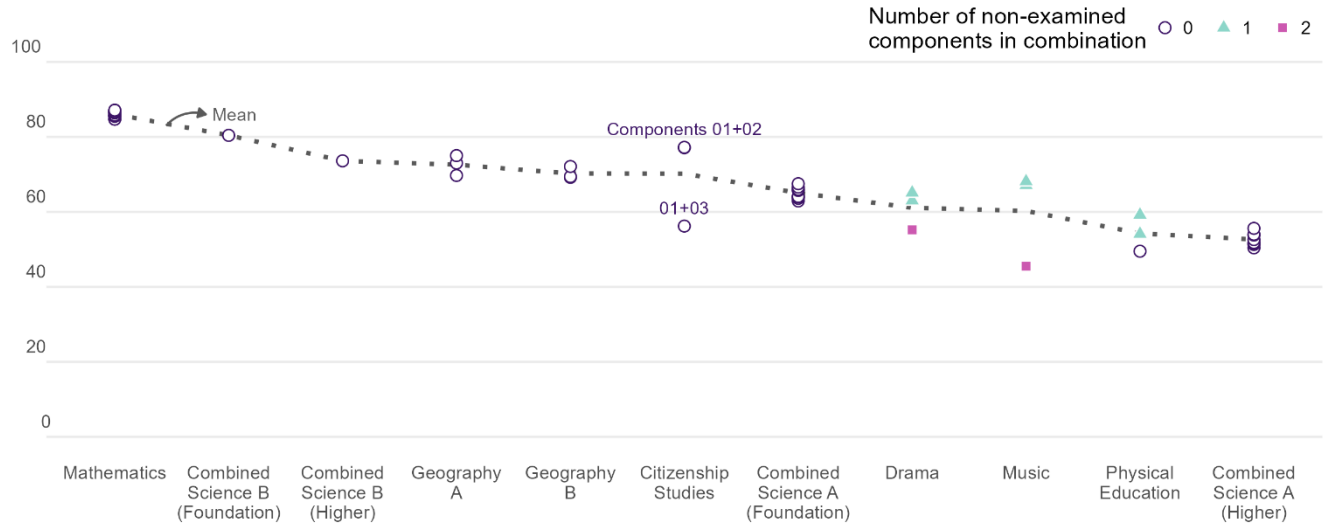
A typical GCSE student spends about 31.5 hours sitting for exams over several weeks at the end of their courses. This is nearly double the time required for students of similar age in the Republic of Ireland and three times more than Canadian students in Alberta (OCR, 2024). The high volume and intensity of GCSE exams have recently prompted calls for policies to reduce the assessment burden on students.

Assessment burden can be lessened in a few ways. The challenge is to do so without compromising the standard and rigour of the assessments. One option is to reduce the number of components required for each subject. For example, GCSE Maths currently requires students to sit for three exam components, 1.5 hours each. Reducing this requirement to two components would therefore lower exam hours to 3 hours, instead of the existing 4.5 hours.

What would be the impact of this approach? Gill (2025) explored this by examining how students' final grades might have been different if they had taken fewer components per subject compared to those taken in summer 2024.

Unburdening

Estimated percentage of students with the same grade after reducing the number of GCSE components, %



Notes: For Combined Science, each point represents a unique combination of three components, one from each Physics, Biology and Chemistry. For other subjects, each point represents a unique combination of two components. OCR qualifications only. For more, see Gill (2025).

Source: CUP&A Research Division

What does the chart show?

The chart illustrates the percentage of students who would have received the same final grade as they did in summer 2024 if the number of GCSE components were reduced. This means their final grade would remain unchanged whether they take the existing or the hypothetical assessment structure with a reduced number of components for each subject.

For most subjects shown on the chart, GCSE students currently must take three components. The analysis assumed this number was reduced to two. For Combined Science, the assumption was that students would sit for one component each in Physics, Chemistry, and Biology, totalling three components - instead of the current six for Combined Science A and four for Combined Science B. The different points on the graphs represent all possible combinations of the reduced set of components. Subjects have been ordered by the averages of these percentages across all possible combinations. These percentages are shown by the dotted line.

Why is the chart interesting?

The chart indicates that reducing the number of components within each subject can be done with minimal impact on students' final grades, suggesting that it is possible to maintain the standard and rigour of the assessments with fewer exams. However, this does not equally apply to all subjects.

On the left side of the chart, subjects like GCSE Maths show that reducing the number of components to two would still result in about 85% of students achieving the same grade as they would with three components. On the other end, some subjects would see a significant change in final grades if the number of components were reduced. However, further details in Gill (2025) show that, across all subjects, the vast majority of students' results would change by no more than 1 grade.

Subjects likely to be most affected by this approach are those requiring at least one non-examined component, such as coursework or practical tests. These include Drama, Music, and Physical Education. Removing a component from these subjects is likely to result in larger grade changes because each component assesses different topics and competencies.

Combined Science A is another subject likely to see more changes, particularly on the higher tier, with less than half of its students expected to maintain the same grade. This is unsurprising since our hypothetical experiment involves removing a greater proportion of this GCSE's assessment (from six to three components).

The chart also shows that within a subject, it matters which components are removed. This is particularly visible in GCSE Citizenship Studies, where component 02 is a much longer paper than components 01 and 03. Therefore, not assessing students using component 02 would result in a bigger change in their final grades compared to cases where it is included.

In conclusion, the chart shows that reducing the number of components could be a viable approach to lessen the assessment burden for some subjects, particularly those with overlapping content and skills across components. However, it would significantly affect subjects requiring non-examined components and those where each component is testing different areas of knowledge.

Further information

Gill, Tim. (2025). *The impact of reducing the number of exams on results in GCSEs.* Cambridge University Press & Assessment. https://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/Images/728985-the-impact-of-reducing-the-number-of-exams-on-results-in-gcses.pdf

OCR. (2024). *Striking the balance: Keeping the conversation going on curriculum and assessment reform.* Cambridge University Press & Assessment. https://www.ocr.org.uk/Images/717919-striking-the-balance.pdf