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School choices on GCSE maths tier of entry

Submission date 25/11/2026	**Recruitment status** Recruiting	[ ] Prospectively registered [ ] Protocol [ ] Statistical analysis plan [ ] Results [ ] Individual participant data [X] Record updated in last year
Registration date 26/11/2026	**Overall study status** Ongoing	
Last Edited 26/11/2026	**Condition category** Other	

Plain English summary of protocol

Background and study aims
GCSE mathematics is an important qualification for young people in England. A grade 4 or above is usually needed to progress to many further education courses, apprenticeships and training programmes. GCSE mathematics can be taken at either foundation tier or higher tier. Pupils entered for the foundation tier can achieve grades 1 to 5, while pupils entered for the higher tier can achieve grades 4 to 9, although those who do not reach the required mark may receive a lower grade or no grade.
Current guidance recommends that pupils predicted to achieve a grade 5 should normally be entered for the foundation tier examination. However, some schools choose to enter these pupils for the higher tier examination instead. This study aims to find out how this decision affects pupils' final GCSE mathematics results.

Who can participate?
Pupils aged 15 to 16 years who are:
1. In Year 11 during the 2026/27 school year
2. Taking GCSE mathematics in summer 2027 for the first time
3. Predicted to achieve grade 5 in GCSE mathematics
4. Attending a mainstream state-funded school in England

What does the study involve?
The study will compare GCSE mathematics results between pupils predicted to achieve grade 5 who are entered for the higher tier examination and similar pupils who are entered for the foundation tier examination.
Researchers will analyse GCSE examination results from around 4,200 pupils across approximately 140 schools. The study will also explore how schools make decisions about examination tier entry. This will include surveys of mathematics subject leaders and case studies in some schools. In selected schools, pupils may be invited to complete a survey about their experiences.
The study does not require pupils to receive any additional teaching programme or intervention beyond their normal education. Schools will continue to make examination entry decisions as they usually would.

What are the possible benefits and risks of participating?
The study may help schools, teachers and policy makers better understand whether entering

pupils predicted to achieve grade 5 for the higher tier mathematics examination affects their academic achievement. The findings could help improve future decisions about GCSE mathematics examination entry.
The risks to participants are expected to be low, as the study mainly involves the analysis of educational data and surveys. Some pupils may be asked to complete a questionnaire, but participation is not expected to involve any significant burden or harm.

Where is the study run from?
The study is run from Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK.

When is the study starting and how long is it expected to run for?
November 2026 to July 2027.

Who is funding the study?
The study is funded by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF).

Who is the main contact?
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Contact information

Type(s)
Principal investigator, Scientific, Public

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Additional identifiers

Study information

Scientific Title
An evaluation of how school choices on examination tier impact pupil attainment in GCSE maths

Study objectives
Evaluate the impact of entering pupils predicted grade 5 in GCSE maths into the higher tier examination.

Ethics approval required
Ethics approval required

Ethics approval(s)
Approved 11/11/2026, Sheffield Hallam University Ethics Research (Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, S1 1WB, United Kingdom; no telephone number provided; ethicssupport@shu.ac.uk), ref: ER101424313

Primary study design
Interventional

Allocation
Non-randomized controlled trial

Masking
Open (masking not used)

Control
Active

Assignment
Parallel

Purpose
Educational

Study type(s)

Health condition(s) or problem(s) studied
How entry into the higher tier examination for GCSE maths impacts the grades achieved by pupils predicted grade 5 in that subject.

Interventions

The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual), the body that regulates assessments and examinations in England, recommends that pupils predicted to achieve grade 5 at GCSE should be entered for the foundation tier examination. Some schools enter these pupils into the higher tier examination - that is being treated as the intervention for this study.

Treatment group – pupils entered into higher tier GCSE maths in summer 2027.
Comparison group – pupils entered into foundation tier.
There is no intervention as such, pupils are taught by their teachers in the usual way during the evaluation period, the study examines the effect of being entered into the higher or foundation tier. The outcome measure is the achieved grade on the GCSE maths exam. There is no follow up beyond this.

Intervention Type
Other

Primary outcome(s)
1. Mathematics attainment measured using GCSE grade at GCSE summer 2027

Key secondary outcome(s)

Completion date
30/07/2027

Eligibility

Key inclusion criteria
Pupils taking GCSE maths in summer 2027 at mainstream, state-funded schools in England who are predicted a grade 5 in that subject.

Healthy volunteers allowed
Yes

Age group
Child

Lower age limit
15 Years

Upper age limit
16 Years

Sex
All

Total final enrolment
0

Key exclusion criteria

1. Pupils not in Year 11 for 2026/27 school year
2. Pupils not predicted grade 5 in GCSE maths
3. Pupils in non-mainstream or non-state funded schools

Date of first enrolment
16/11/2026

Date of final enrolment
31/03/2027

Locations

Countries of recruitment
United Kingdom

England

Study participating centre
Sheffield Hallam University
City Campus
Pond Street
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Sponsor information

Organisation
Education Endowment Foundation

ROR
https://ror.org/03bhd6288

Funder(s)

Funder type

Funder Name
Education Endowment Foundation

Alternative Name(s)

EducEndowFoundn, The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), Education Endowment Foundation | London, EEF

Funding Body Type
Private sector organisation

Funding Body Subtype
Trusts, charities, foundations (both public and private)

Location
United Kingdom

Results and Publications

Individual participant data (IPD) sharing plan

IPD sharing plan summary
Not expected to be made available

Study outputs

Output type	Details	Date created	Date added	Peer reviewed?	Patient-facing?
Study website			26/11/2026	No	No
Study website			26/11/2026	No	No