


# **Does removing tiering from high-stakes examinations reduce the size of attainment gaps?**

Conference abstract

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## **Abstract**

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) was introduced in the 1980s to replace separate qualifications for higher- and lower-attaining students. To allow all students to access GCSEs, many subjects had tiered examinations: lower-attaining students took foundation papers, targeting lower grades, and higher-attaining students took higher papers, targeting higher grades. However, tiering was criticised for limiting attainment and aspiration of foundation tier students. Moreover, some argued that “capping” disproportionately affected certain demographic groups, thus exacerbating attainment gaps. Accordingly, in reforms in the 2010s, tiering was removed from most subjects. This provides an opportunity to examine the effect of tiering on attainment gaps. Here, attainment gaps between age, sex and socioeconomic deprivation groups were calculated for subjects where tiering was removed or retained, or which were never tiered, for years before and after reform. Against expectations, removal of tiering was not associated with reduced attainment gaps; indeed, gaps often increased, in contrast to subjects that retained tiering. These effects cannot be definitively attributed to tiering, but results indicate that impacts of tiering removal may be more complex than anticipated, and further research may be required to understand responses of schools and students to untiered examinations.