

It's A Level results day!

Results for this year's A Level and AS qualifications have been published today showing that, at a national level, results remain relatively stable. These are the first set of results since these qualifications effectively became linear through the removal of the January series in England.

Results show that students are increasingly choosing 'traditional' subjects with entries rising in biology, chemistry and physics (combined), maths and further maths. Also, the Extended Project continues to be popular with students and universities. A full analysis of results trends for A, AS and GCSE will follow in September's *Briefing*.

OCR extends its congratulations to all those successful students and recognises the hard work that has gone into revising and preparing for exams.

Further changes to performance tables

Following [advice from Ofqual](#) about the difficulties of ensuring comparability between Level 1/Level 2 Certificates (iGCSEs) and revised GCSEs, the DfE has announced [further changes](#) to the qualifications that will be eligible for the 2017 and 2018 performance tables.

The key announcements are:

- For English and Maths, other academic qualifications (iGCSEs) will no longer be eligible for performance tables following the redevelopment of GCSEs
- For the 2017 performance tables, only the revised GCSEs in English language, English literature and maths will be counted
- For the 2018 performance tables, other academic qualifications in the same subjects as those GCSEs reformed for first teaching from September 2016

(including history, geography, languages and the sciences) will not contribute to performance tables

- Alternative academic qualifications may be permitted in future performance tables provided they can demonstrate the same key characteristics as new GCSEs and be at least as demanding. These alternative qualifications can only be proposed following the first exams of new GCSEs.
- GCSE entries in English and maths from 2016 or earlier will not count towards 2017 performance tables – this affects schools who enter cohorts for GCSEs in year 10 or earlier. This exclusion of 'legacy' qualifications will apply to only English and maths.

Funding to continue for brightest students

Schools and colleges offering their students large programmes, designed to stretch the brightest pupils, will receive additional funding from 2016. In a [controversial announcement](#), the new Skills Minister, Nick Boles, has confirmed that the new rules will apply to the following types of programme:

- 4 or more A Levels
- large TechBacc programmes - rigorous packages of technical qualifications consisting of a tech level, a tough maths qualification and an extended research project
- the full level 3 International Baccalaureate (IB).

The new funding rules will mean that providers offering

a 4 A Level or large TechBacc programme will receive around £400 extra per student. Those offering 5 A Level programmes and full IB will receive around £800 additional funding. The standard per student funding rate for 16-17 year olds is £4000. This new announcement seems to move away from the Wolf Review recommendation that government should fund the place for a student rather than qualifications to avoid perverse incentives to the provider to offer courses not in the best interest of their students. However, the Skills Minister said: "Our funding should support all young people to fulfil their potential. And it is vital that schools are encouraged to offer their brightest students the broadest possible range of qualifications at age 16".

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GCSE English: How to assess spoken language?

Ofqual is seeking views on how the spoken language assessment for the new GCSE English language qualification should be conducted, marked and graded. Ofqual has already announced that:

- the outcomes of the assessment of students' speaking skills will not contribute to the 9 to 1 grade for the subject; this grade will be based on students' performance in their written exams only
- students' performance in their spoken language assessment will instead be reported in a separate grade.

In summary, Ofqual is now proposing that:

For Students:

- performance in their spoken language assessments should be digitally recorded
- performance should be reported using one of three 'pass' grades and that there should also be an outcome to indicate performance below the minimum standard
- who do not attempt the spoken English language

assessment should have this fact indicated on their certificate using the same term as that used for a student who attempts the assessment but does not meet the required standard.

Teachers:

- should assess students against published criteria, common to all exam boards
- should identify the level that best describes each student's performance, which would determine the grade.

Exam boards:

- should trial both approaches with a number of schools and teachers during autumn 2014 and that Ofqual's decision on the best approach should be informed by the outcome of the trial and by responses to the consultation.

Contact policyandstrategy@ocr.org.uk for further details on OCR's response.

Why are MFL A Levels unpopular?

A [review into Modern Foreign Languages post 16](#) could help shape reformed MFL A Levels. A report published by the Joint Council (JCQ) looks at the declining take up of MFL post 16 and why the A* grade is less prevalent in these subjects compared with comparable A Levels. Key points from the review are:

- Students' motivations for choosing, or not choosing, to study a MFL at A Level are wide-ranging and include a perception of difficulty compared with other subjects; and that people have a distinct aptitude for languages.
- MFL A Levels generally have a higher proportion of candidates achieving grade A or A* compared with other subjects, however, the proportion awarded an A* grade is lower compared with other subjects with the same proportion of A grades.
- The way mark schemes are designed mean that relatively weak performance in the writing skill is a key factor in a student not achieving an A*, more so

than for other skills.

- There are relatively low correlations between the skills in the A2 units and this appears to be preventing many A grade students from achieving the 90% of the maximum uniform mark required to achieve an A*.
- Some teachers consider that the jump in demand in content and learning style between GCSE and A Level is too great and can act as a deterrent. This may be resolved by the reformed GCSE content announced by the Department for Education.
- Language learning requires the ability to develop across a wide range of skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking, comprehension, communication) all of which need to be mastered to achieve an A*.
- Writing and speaking tasks are most likely to test stretch and challenge. Essays in particular are useful in identifying A* candidates.

Numbers of qualifications increase

The number of available qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland increased by 15% from 2011/12 to nearly 24,000 in 2012/13 with the majority of this increase coming from qualifications other than GCSE and A Level. This is one of a number of findings from Ofqual's [Annual Qualifications Market Report](#) which reports on:

- The number of recognised awarding organisations offering qualifications
- The qualifications available and the certificates awarded in them
- Participation rates in education and training for 16-19 year olds in England.

Other key findings from the report are:

- The number of certificates increased by 4% to 17.9 million between 2011/12 and 2012/13. Certificates were awarded in 54% of available qualifications.
- The overall qualifications market remains highly concentrated, with 20 awarding organisations accounting for over 90% of all certificates.
- Health, Public Services and Care is now the second largest sector following an increase in the number of certificates to 28% in 2012/13. (Preparation for Life and Work is the largest sector).
- Certificates in functional skills increased significantly (31%) between 2011/12 and 2012/13. From 1st October 2012 functional skills qualifications replaced key skills as a mandatory component of all apprenticeship frameworks.
- In schools in England, certificates in qualifications other than GCSE and A Level fell by 9% to 1.6 million in 2012/13.

In a change to last year's report, it does not include some of the previous reported data on external drivers in the market or information about the legal status and income of the awarding organisations. This will be included in a companion market report due to be issued later in the year.

Apprenticeships and traineeships under inquiry

Nine areas, including the effectiveness of apprenticeships and traineeships, will be covered in a new inquiry. Before heading off for their summer break, the cross-party House of Commons Education Select Committee announced a call for written evidence for its [inquiry into apprenticeships and traineeships](#) for 16-19 year olds.

The inquiry will also examine whether these awards meet the needs of employers and provide a solid grounding for employment. The MPs will also investigate the range of courses available, the impact of recent changes to funding and whether government investment represents good value for money.

Part of the inquiry will look at how to encourage more businesses to offer apprenticeships and the factors which prevent more young people from considering apprenticeships. The MPs will also ask whether young people are adequately prepared for apprenticeships and how the government could encourage more people to take on apprenticeships and traineeships.

It is likely that the inquiry will be the committee's last before the general election. Contact policyandstrategy@ocr.org.uk for further details on OCR's response.

More “rigorous and robust” rules for funding vocational qualifications

New [Technical Guidance](#) from the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) on funding for qualifications for adult learners includes some notable updates:

- Recognition of the Ofqual consultation on the QCF and the potential impacts – the introduction and overview section signals, for the first time in print, that the approval rule relating to the QCF may be removed following the completion of the consultation and publishing of the outcomes.
- An intention to work with Ofqual during the second half of 2014 and into 2015, to ensure a managed transition in funding terms to avoid destabilising learners, further information on this will be in the next version of guidance due in January 2015.
- The inclusion of Substantial Level 2 vocational

qualifications (SL2VQs), that are eligible for 16-19 performance tables, to the automatic approval list.

- Further updates on the timescales for submission of approval requests and the publication of the catalogue into 2015.
- Inclusion of the new rules relating to QCF English and maths qualifications.

The publication of the new rules for QCF English and maths qualifications in early June provided some good news for our Cambridge Progression qualifications. The [SFA catalogue](#) published at the end of July confirmed that our whole suite, including the Level 2 certificate, was available for funding.

Lowest NEET rate for 20 years

The proportion of 16- to 18-year-olds not in education, employment or training (NEET) is at the lowest level since comparable records began 20 years ago. New [figures released](#) show that for England, at the end of 2013:

- There are 33,400 fewer 16 to 18-year-olds NEET than in 2012 - a drop of almost a fifth in just a year.
- The proportion of 16- to 18-year-olds NEET is also down - to 7.6%, the lowest rate since comparable records began in 1994.
- There are now more than half a million 16-year-olds in full-time education - up 16,200 (2.4%) on last year. These are the first figures available since the age to which young people must stay in education or training was raised to 17
- The number of 16-year-olds NEET fell by almost 12,000 (1.9%) - the largest fall seen since comparable records began.

Additional measures of schools' success

Parents and students can now see for themselves how successful their schools and colleges are at ensuring young people progress after they have left education.

The DfE has published [destinations data](#) for key stage 4 and 5 pupils leaving school in 2011, to show percentages advancing to attend university, begin apprenticeships or training, or embark on a career. Key figures include:

- After KS4, 89% of pupils were recorded in sustained

education, employment and/or training, 86% of which were in a sustained education destination.

- After KS5, 74% of young people were in sustained education, employment and/or training, 67% of which were in a sustained education destination.

The data is available at local authority, national, institution and parliamentary constituency level.

More colleges taking on 14 year olds

Nine colleges have applied to commence enrolment of full-time 14-16 year olds for the 2014-15 academic year. Seven colleges (Halesowen College, Middlesbrough College, Leeds City College, Newcastle College Group (at Newcastle College), Accrington and Rossendale College, Hull College Group and Hadlow College) are already able to recruit younger pupils. This move follows on from recommendations in the Wolf Review which stated that "colleges will generally be far better placed to provide vocational options for 14-16 year olds, and not

just 16-18 year olds, than schools will".

Colleges can recruit directly if they meet [certain criteria](#), including a dedicated 14 to 16 area on the college estate and separate leadership for 14 to 16 education. Education Funding Agency (EFA) funding for 14 and 15-year-old learners is only available to colleges which have been rated as outstanding or good. Ofsted will plan a monitoring visit to these colleges in the first year of delivery.

New UTCs aim to equip young people with skills to secure jobs

Seven new University Technical Colleges (UTCs) are to be established with the backing of major employers.

The new institutions will bring the total number of UTCs across England to 57 by 2016, with more than 35,000 pupils aged 14-19 when they have fully recruited. UTCs offer a more technical or vocational based education using curriculums developed in partnership with universities and employers, aiming to ensure students are developing the skills needed in a particular region or sector. UTCs integrate academic study with practical learning, teaching core GCSEs alongside technical qualifications.

The seven new UTCs will open in Bromley, Leeds, Scarborough, Sheffield, South Durham, Crewe and Solihull/Coventry.

Academies use freedoms to innovate and improve standards

A plethora of reports on how the academies programme is working has been released recently.

The results of a survey carried out and reported in [Do academies make use of their autonomy?](#) included:

- Two-thirds of academies (65%) said results had either substantially or moderately improved since they became an academy.
- More than half of all sponsored academies (two thirds of secondary sponsored) said they had seen a rise in first choice applications since becoming an academy.
- More than two-thirds (72%) of all academies now support schools they did not work with while under local authority control.

The survey also found that academies have made a wide range of changes since converting or becoming sponsored including:

- Three-quarters have changed or plan to change the curriculum they offer.
- Almost three-quarters have formalised collaboration arrangements with other schools or plan to.
- Almost 1 in 10 academies have already changed their term dates, or plan to, to suit the needs of their parents and pupils.

Another report, [The Evolving Education System in England: a "Temperature Check"](#) showed that due to the increased autonomy provided by the academies programme, there are now more school-led partnerships. The report stated that school leaders welcomed the encouragement to lead school improvement through partnerships, with strategic decision-making shifting from local authorities to networks of schools. Evidence from previous studies shows that these partnerships are linked to faster rates of improvement in schools.

[Chain Effects](#) claims that disadvantaged students at the best academy chains outperform similar students at state-funded schools, while the weakest chains trail their mainstream counterparts in raising standards for their poorest pupils. The report also shows that, across the board, disadvantaged students in 18 of the 31 chains are improving faster than the national average.

The [annual report](#) on academies for 2012/13 has also been published providing data, information and examples of academy activities.

Head teachers elected to Regional School Commissioners

[32 head teachers](#) have been elected by their peers to sit on the boards of eight new Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs). Starting in September 2014, these boards will be responsible for championing academic freedom, identifying where new academies can be created and provide a failure regime for struggling academies. The 32 head teachers are education experts from schools judged by Ofsted to have 'outstanding' leadership and management.

RSCs will take on responsibilities previously held by the Secretary of State, such as agreeing or rejecting academy applications. It is hoped that their combined local insight will mean they can make informed decisions on when and how to intervene.

Latest figures show there are now 4,199 academies overall, with 58% of secondary schools and 12% of primaries now academies.

New higher level apprenticeships for Northern Ireland

Two new higher level apprenticeships in Finance and Accountancy, and Applied Industrial and Life Science have just been launched into pilot in NI for the first time. A number of FE colleges are involved in these apprenticeships which lead to a Level 5 qualification.

The new model for apprenticeships will put employers in the driving seat by aligning with their needs in meeting the growing demand for higher level skills.

This is the first introduction to higher level apprenticeships in NI and results of the pilot will be published to determine the plans for other sector areas in the future.

Countdown to General Election 2015

We continue our monthly round-up of pre-general election news during the quiet Westminster summer recess period.

Labour plan to introduce German-style “technical degrees”

Under Labour plans to target school leavers who shun traditional academic subjects, universities will run a new range of German-style “technical degrees”. The party has outlined proposals to encourage top universities to develop high-level practical courses in subjects such as engineering and technology.

The qualifications, which would be run in a partnership with employers, will be aimed primarily at young adults who have already completed apprenticeships to a decent standard.

In a recent speech, the leader of the Labour Party, Ed Miliband said “more needs to be done to help the “forgotten 50 per cent” of school leavers who do not go on to university”. He went on to say that the introduction of technical degrees will build on a new approach to vocational qualifications and make the system a genuine alternative to the academic route of A Levels and traditional university courses.

Modern languages recovery programme

The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on modern languages wants to see a “national recovery programme” to improve language skills.

The APPG has been gathering evidence on the impact of poor language skills on the UK economy and its standing in the world. It claims the UK economy is already losing around £50bn a year in lost contracts because of a lack of language skills in the workforce. It suggests businesses are struggling to fill posts and are losing out on export opportunities.

The APPG has put together its own [Manifesto for Languages](#) - which it has already presented to the main party leaders. It is calling for all political parties to support a new Framework for National Recovery in Language Learning in their 2015 General Election manifestos, which commits them to:

- changing the reputation of UK citizens as poor linguists
- providing high quality language learning for all children throughout the UK from age 7 onwards
- aiming for every child to have a language qualification by the end of secondary school
- encouraging business and employers to get involved in tackling the crisis
- maintaining and developing UK expertise at Higher Education level.

In connection with the new manifesto, the University Council of Modern Languages (UCML) has also launched a [campaign](#) urging all universities to ask for a language qualification as an entry requirement regardless of the subject of study.

The Last Word

Paul Steer, Policy and Strategy Director, comments on some of the issues featured in this issue.

On the face of it, the latest policy announcement of ‘funding for the brightest’ at 16-19 is good news for the AS. It seems to fund students to take four ASs in their first year, with the potential to drop down to three full A Levels in their second year. But the announcement does not refer to AS and seems to be about encouraging people to take four full A Levels over two years. Furthermore, overall reductions in funding levels (especially for sixth form colleges) still loom large and are not going to be balanced off by this policy. And the policy also intends to incentivise the taking of five A Levels. It seems unlikely that a programme of five A Levels is appropriate for most young people, however bright they are. HE certainly aren’t asking for that many A Levels, but they are seeking broader skills and experiences which would not be accessed through taking another A Level.

The Ofqual consultation on assessing spoken language skills in GCSE English sets out a balanced and pragmatic approach. The assessment of practical skills is, generally, best carried out by teachers and the results are best reported separately from the results of exams. Ofqual recommends that candidate performance should be digitally recorded which makes perfect sense. The debate is around whether this should continue to be audio recordings or whether video should be used. In the era of the digital camera this would seem to make sense but only after we have conducted enough trials to see how to make best use of appropriate technology but, also, to give us a greater

understanding of the impact on student performance and how those performances are assessed.

Languages other than English are the subject of the new JCQ report on Languages A Levels. This takes a look at the technical design of Languages A Levels and highlights some of the challenges these qualifications present. It suggests that these A Levels are innately challenging for many learners with their requirements across the skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing. It is interesting, given the current consultation on GCSE spoken language skills that the report says of the A Level: "Writing and speaking tasks are most likely to test stretch and challenge". In the last issue of *The Briefing* we reported on ALCAB's recommendations for reformed A Levels in Languages. These included recommendations to increase the extent to which students become familiar with the culture, arts and history of the country associated with the language being studied. This adds to the burden of designing an A Level but *might* engage and interest a wider range of students, undoubtedly it would offer broader preparation for the study of languages in HE.

Of course the real barriers to the uptake of languages in the UK go well beyond the design of the A Level. The APPG report advocates a 'national framework for recovery' of our nation's poor linguistic skills. It cites familiar issues about infrastructure and lazy cultural attitudes about the dominance of English. Many of the points are reminiscent of the last labour government's Languages Strategy which put vast amounts of funds and effort into improving language education, especially at primary level. The strategy included the development of Asset languages qualifications which have, sadly, withered on the vine. It seems it is time for a new languages strategy.

Finally, it is great news that the number of 16-18 year old NEETS is at its lowest for 20 years. Keeping people of this age group engaged and within a system of learning and training is essential to keeping them and their futures safe. It isn't clear quite how this significant reduction has been achieved. No doubt many of the initiatives mentioned in this issue have contributed: the publication of destination measures; greater school partnership working; traineeships; apprenticeships; UTCs... But surely the main cause of this improvement is the increase of the minimum age for participation in education and training. Now, there is an opportunity to investigate what courses and programmes are being taken by people who would previously have been at risk of becoming NEET - how engaged they are, what qualifications they are taking and eventually where their additional time in education or training might take them.

Information is correct at the time of writing. OCR can accept no liability for any decisions made on the basis of the information given.