

Summer 2016 results trends for AS/A Levels and GCSEs

As expected overall entries for **AS** in 2016 were down (by 14%), largely as a result of the introduction of the reformed, decoupled AS in England.

There were 13 new AS qualifications awarded for the first time in England this summer. Results from these qualifications no longer count towards the final A Level grade and so a drop in entries in these subjects was inevitable.

AS overall results were up just over 1% at A grade, but the results include both the unreformed and reformed AS so meaningful comparisons between 2015 and 2016 are difficult to make.

17% of schools in England that had previously offered AS qualifications in reformed AS subjects did not offer any AS qualifications in those subjects in 2016. Of the others, 44% reduced the number of AS qualifications they previously offered in reformed subjects.

Overall results this summer for AS and A Level were very stable, with only small changes in the proportions achieving each grade. The proportion achieving A* to E at A Level was unchanged at 98.1%.

Maths remains the most popular **A Level** subject (and AS too), followed by English, Biology, Psychology and History. Computing has seen the biggest increase in A Level take up, with Economics and Sociology also on the rise.

Declining numbers of candidates can be seen for A

Levels in General Studies, Performing Arts, Music and Drama.

The **Extended Project Qualification** continues its year-on-year increase with a rise of 6.1%, bringing the number of candidates to 35,608 in 2016.

This summer's **GCSE results** showed an overall UK decline in A*-C grades of 2.1% to 66.9%.

Whilst the increasing numbers of post-16 students re-taking English and Maths GCSEs accounts for some of this decline (in general, post 16 students performed less well than 16 year old students), overall results for 16 year olds also saw a drop of 1.3%.

Entries for 16-year-old students increased in the majority of EBacc subjects in summer 2016. However, results for those students tended to be lower than the previous summer.

Computing GCSE saw the biggest percentage increase in entry. Additional Science was also up along with Geography. Decreasing entries were seen for Design & Technology, French and Art & Design.

The number of entries from 15 year-old students continues to decline.

This year's GCSE results mark the end of all GCSEs being graded A* to G ahead of the awarding of the first phase of reformed 9-1 graded GCSEs in 2017.

Qualification reform is not the only reason for variability in AS exam results

There was more variability in *individual* school and college AS results at grade A between 2015 and 2016 than between 2014 and 2015 following the de-coupling of the AS from the A Level, Ofqual [research](#) shows.

Despite this however, AS Level results remain relatively stable year-on-year. But evidence shows that individual schools and colleges can see variation in the proportion of students achieving particular grades from one year to the next.

The Ofqual research shows variability can be due to

many different factors including differences in the mix of the students entered for particular subjects, different teaching approaches, changes in teaching staff or teaching time, as well as teachers and students needing time to get to grips with new qualifications.

Ofqual published a [blog](#) to explain how standards were set for the 13 new AS qualifications taken this summer.

Complementary [research](#) was published last year by Cambridge Assessment showing that volatility in exam results can be caused by a wide set of factors.

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Apprenticeship funding: final proposals announced

The government's long-awaited [proposals](#) for the new system of funding for apprenticeships confirmed that most employers will only have to contribute 10% towards an apprenticeship from April 2017.

Under the plans, employers that are too small to pay the levy – those with annual wage bills below £3m (around 98% of employers in England) - will have 90% of the costs of training paid for by the government.

Companies with fewer than 50 employees will have 100% of apprenticeship training costs covered for 16-18 year old apprentices.

Other proposals for the new apprenticeship funding model, which come into force from April 2017, include:

- Extra support - worth £2,000 per trainee - will be available for employers and training providers that take on 16 to 18-year-old apprentices split equally between employers and training providers.
- Levy-paying employers (with a pay bill of over £3m) that want to spend more on training than is in their digital account - will receive 90% of their additional apprenticeship training costs from government.
- The proposed apprenticeship funding system will be made up of 15 bands, each with an upper limit ranging from £1,500 to £27,000. All existing and new apprenticeship frameworks and standards will be placed within one of these funding bands. This single funding band for individual framework pathways will replace the current system of pricing apprenticeship frameworks at three different levels depending on the

age of the learner.

- English and maths funding at Level 2 will not require an employer contribution and will remain at the current funding levels.
- Levy funds can be used for employees whose main place of work is England whether they live in England or other parts of the UK.
- A new register of training providers - created by the Skills Funding Agency - will be introduced from April 2017; employers will determine what training their apprentices receive and what provider they receive it from.

Following a survey on these proposals, final funding arrangements will be confirmed in October 2016.

Further details of which employers will be affected by the levy and how much they will pay are available on the [DfE website](#).

Meanwhile, The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) has called on the government to consider re-introducing a more formal qualification element to apprenticeships to help young people enter wider professions or occupations.

The [IPPR says](#) the removal of the requirement for the inclusion of a nationally recognised qualification plus the increase in responsibility for employers, places England "in danger of introducing an apprenticeship system that would work well in the economy of the 1960s, but is not fit for a 21st-century workforce".

EBacc affects curriculum choices

Major curriculum reforms are starting to affect the educational choices and outcomes of secondary school pupils. This is according to new research that analysed the impact of the EBacc measure for GCSE students.

The Sutton Trust's report [Changing the Subject](#) says that Headteachers are finding that delivering the EBacc to the government target of 90% of pupils is beyond the reach of many schools given specialist teacher shortages and that the EBacc is not appropriate for all students.

The report warns that setting the EBacc as the 'gold standard' for the secondary school curriculum risks deprioritising the educational experiences of those students for whom it isn't appropriate.

The Sutton Trust believes that thousands of disadvantaged pupils miss out on taking particular

subjects at GCSE such as modern languages, history and geography, which limits access to the EBacc curriculum.

The report recommends that:

- All pupils should have fair access to EBacc subjects, particularly those eligible for the pupil premium
- The Government should reconsider its intention that 90% of pupils should be entered for EBacc subjects
- The Government should consider what type of Key Stage 4 curriculum is appropriate for those not entering the EBacc and do more to facilitate a Technical Baccalaureate option.

The Sutton Trust is a foundation dedicated to improving social mobility through education.

Survey shows link between GCSE attainment and predicted A Level grades

Success at GCSE is key to university applicants achieving their predicted A Level grades, a new [study](#) from UCAS shows.

In the study, the A Level predictions of half a million university applicants were compared to the A Level grades they actually achieved in 2015. The report found a strong link between GCSE attainment and likelihood to achieve predicted grades.

The mix of A Level subjects studied is also relevant to achieving predicted grades. For instance, a typical applicant is around two thirds more likely to miss their predictions by two grades or more if they are studying biology, chemistry and maths than an otherwise similar applicant studying English, history and art.

Applicants with a firm choice at a university that set more demanding grades achieve results closer to their

predictions than applicants holding offers with a lower demand. The few applicants holding unconditional offers do slightly less well than other similar applicants.

The report found that over half of English 18 year olds applying to university in 2015 missed their A Level predictions by two or more grades last year – an increase of 34% on 2010.

Despite this increase, over 70% of learners were accepted into their first choice higher education institution in 2015 – a record high; HE institutions understand that predicted grades are estimated around six months before exams are taken.

Similar [research by Cambridge Assessment](#) (2015) also shows how hard it is for teachers to predict how students will do in exams.

Applicant choices affected by perceptions of HE

The most advantaged young people are more likely to be focused on university at a young age than their more disadvantaged peers, and more likely to go to a 'higher tariff' university, according to UCAS' widest ever [student survey](#).

In its survey, UCAS explored the factors that motivate young people to apply to HE and what they perceive the barriers to progression to HE to be. The survey looked at whether those barriers and motivations are different for those applying to higher tariff universities, and how they vary for those from advantaged/disadvantaged groups.

Reasons for not applying to higher tariff universities included:

- A perception that the entry requirements were too high – more would have applied if they had known they had a chance of getting in below the published offer.
- There was a lack of understanding of career

pathways from 'academic-sounding' degree courses. Survey respondents believed higher tariff universities did not offer courses they were interested in.

- Least advantaged students felt the cost of living would be too high. In the report UCAS recommends that all universities provide accessible information about accommodation, transport and day-to-day living costs.
- Least advantaged students were less likely to think the university they went to was more important for securing a job.
- 75% of respondents said they would have applied to a higher tariff university if they were offered a travel voucher for an open day.

UCAS hopes the survey report will highlight interventions that might widen participation in higher education.

Entry Level regulations to reduce

Additional regulations for Entry Level qualifications are set to be removed following a [consultation](#) from Ofqual.

In seeking to improve the quality of Entry Level qualifications and reduce the regulatory burden on exam boards, Ofqual is proposing to remove rules that duplicate other requirements. It believes that additional regulations could constrain the most effective design of the qualifications and prevent them from meeting users' needs.

Ofqual will keep the overall numbers of Entry Level qualifications under review, but does not expect an increase as a result of this change.

[Entry Level](#) recognises achievements at three sub-levels. There are currently just under 2500 regulated Entry Level qualifications and nearly one million awards are made each year.

2015: 16 million qualification certificates awarded last year

Ofqual published its [annual report](#) on the qualifications market (2014/2015).

The report provided a picture of the qualifications available in England, Wales and Northern Ireland by recognised exam boards and changes in take up from one year to the next.

Main findings include:

1. Just under 16 million certificates were awarded in the academic year 2014 to 2015; around 3% fewer than the previous year.
2. The number of awarding organisations recognised by Ofqual fell to 163; 3 fewer than a year earlier.
3. The number of available qualifications decreased by 2% compared to 2013/2014 to just over 24,500, of

which nearly 60% had an award made.

4. 20 awarding organisations accounted for 90% of all certificates awarded during the academic year.
5. For GCSE, AS and A Level more certificates were awarded in the science and maths subject area (37%) than any other area in 2014 to 2015 while for qualifications other than GCSE, AS and A Level, more certificates were awarded in the Preparation for Life and Work sector (30%) than in any other area.

Ofqual reports that changes in take up of qualifications can be as a result of government policy changes such as performance measures, funding and reform but that overall, market shares are well established and the number of certificates awarded is concentrated in a relatively small number of qualifications.

The Last Word

Paul Steer, Head of Policy, comments on some of the issues featured in this issue.

As always at this time of year, congratulations must go to all those students who studied so hard and got the results they deserved – once again we are reminded of the hard work and commitment that personifies so many of our young people – and the outstanding support they get from teachers, lecturers and trainers.

The trends revealed in exam results this summer haven't yielded many surprises although the GCSE results showed an overall UK decline in A*-C grades of 2.1% to 66.9%. Whilst the increasing numbers of post-16 students re-taking English and maths GCSEs accounts for much of this decline (in general, post-16 students performed less well than 16 year old students), overall results for 16 year olds also saw a drop of 1.3%. The use of 'comparable outcomes' in recent years has pretty much abolished the old phenomenon of grade inflation but this slight drop in outcomes is probably best explained by a shift in subject choices driven by the EBacc policy and the ongoing impact of other policies which have reduced re-sit opportunities, introduced a linear approach and significantly reduced the number of early entries.

Across GCSE and GCE we see a further increase in the popularity of science and maths subjects and a decline in arts based and creative subjects. This seems in line with government priorities as signalled by the EBacc policy, though those opposed to the impact of the EBacc on creative subjects will have more ammunition to support their cause. Sadly, the EBacc has not brought about a much needed increase in the study of MFL at GCSE except for a tiny improvement in Spanish – entries for Spanish were up 2.1% but there was a drop of 7% in German and 8.1% in French.

The data on achievements for those over 16 re-sitting maths and English presents, at best, a mixed picture. In a DfE press release, Nick Gibb rightly celebrated the fact that "51,200 maths exams sat by students aged 17 and over were graded A* to C - up from 30,000 in 2012. For English, the equivalent figures were 34,500 in 2016, up from 21,100 in 2012." That's 85,700 examples of improved maths and English results and there is plenty of evidence that possession of a good pass in these key subjects has a positive impact on future life chances. The downside, however, is the remaining 200,000 re-sits taken by 17 year olds this summer that didn't make the grade. This prompted ASCL to say in its results day press release: "While some who are close to the C/D borderline may benefit, others do not and a different approach is perhaps needed in which they are taught more practical applications. There is no point in setting up young people for a feeling of failure".

The decline in numbers taking AS was widely foreseen as a natural consequence of the arrival of the first wave of reformed, 'decoupled' A Levels where the AS does not count towards the final A Level result. The decline can probably also be traced to the financial challenges facing many institutions which make offering a choice of four A Level

subjects in the first year increasingly difficult to afford.

The Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) seems to have benefited from the decline in AS with an increase in uptake of 6.1% on an already impressive base. It seems many schools and colleges are seeing the EPQ as a more manageable alternative to that fourth AS.

Core Maths, however, has not benefited from a decline in AS uptake. Core Maths is new and not long out of pilot so it would be premature to label it a failure at this early stage. It can and should play an important role in ensuring that more young people continue to study maths post 16 - the UK is often singled out for the unusually high numbers of people who are able to avoid the study of maths post 16. As reported in previous editions of [OCR Policy Briefing](#), Professor Sir Adrian Smith has been asked to review the case for how to improve the study of maths from 16 to 18, including looking at the case for more or all students continuing to study maths to 18 in the longer-term. He will need to look carefully at the role of Core Maths in achieving this *and* whether the current GCSE resit policy is in need of re-tuning.

Vocational qualifications don't get the same 'results day' treatment from the media as A Levels, but it is important to celebrate the fact that a great many students will have achieved them this summer. Today at least one learner in four entering university does so with a vocational qualification and increasing numbers of students are enrolling on 'blended courses' that mix academic and vocational qualifications. It is a shame that this important route to university is so often overlooked by politicians and the media.

By contrast, much media attention has focused on the new apprenticeship levy. The long delayed detail of how this levy will work has been published as a 'survey' suggesting there is still scope for tinkering with the model. It is understandably complex, and the DfE is right to consult, but the levy is, in some ways, the easy bit - taking money from employers and giving it back to them in the form of vouchers that can only be spent on apprenticeships is surely manageable, if expensive. The critical bit is making sure there are quality apprenticeships in place that employers want to spend their vouchers on.

The current roll-out of new employer-designed apprentices has been slow and what has emerged so far from the 'Trailblazer' programme has not inspired confidence. The 'end point assessments' which (you guessed it) are to be taken at the end of apprenticeships vary from sector to sector, but are often unwieldy and sometimes plain weird. Lord Sainsbury was concerned enough to ask that some of the brand new apprenticeship standards should be reviewed and those "found to be overlapping or wanting in terms of breadth or technical content should be revised, consolidated or withdrawn". And now the Institute for Public Policy Research has warned us that we are "in danger of introducing an apprenticeship system that would work well in the economy of the 1960s, but is not fit for a 21st-century workforce". The fledgling Institute of Apprenticeships, which won't be a fully functioning entity until April 2017 - and which has already lost its first Chief Executive - is going to have its work cut out.