

Confidence in GCSEs, AS and A Levels is improving says Ofqual survey

Levels of trust and confidence in general qualifications are higher than in previous years, according to Ofqual's [annual survey](#) on the perceptions of qualifications. Confidence in the maintenance of standards has also improved.

Other findings from the survey, taken during a period of major reform, include:

- Compared to previous years, higher proportions of stakeholders agreed that **GCSEs** "are a trusted qualification" (65% to 72%), that "standards are maintained year on year" (30% to 40%), and that "marking of GCSEs is accurate" (26% to 38%).
- A higher proportion of stakeholders also agreed that "**AS and A Level** standards are maintained year on year" (37% to 47%), and that "the marking of AS and A levels is accurate" (31% to 41%).
- Whilst the proportion of stakeholders who were aware of the new **9 to 1 GCSE grading** system

was higher than the previous year, Ofqual expects this to improve further as a consequence of its communications campaign around the new grading system.

- Parents, young people and the general public strongly agreed that the systems used by schools and colleges to **review the marking** of GCSE, AS and A Level results are fair but that more information about the processes could be provided. Awareness of the systems for appealing vocational qualification results was much lower, with only half of head teachers and a quarter of teachers responding that they knew about the process.

Commissioned by Ofqual and conducted by YouGov, the survey questioned heads of schools, teachers, parents, students, the general public, employers and Higher Education Institutions in November 2016.

Ofqual corporate plan seeks to build public confidence

Ofqual has set out its first [corporate plan](#) under both its new Chair and Chief Regulator.

Written during a period of significant change in the education and training landscape, the plan reflects recent reforms which are now being implemented, as well as emerging new developments.

Ofqual's corporate plan and objectives for 2017 to 2020 are focused around:

- General qualification reform and the safe delivery of new GCSEs, AS and A Levels
- Working towards a clearer system for reviews and appeals of marking. Ofqual intends to conduct additional research over the coming year to help identify any further improvements in marking
- Working closely with government on the redevelopment of Functional Skills qualifications and evaluating the new qualifications before they enter the market

- Engaging with government to support the development of new technical qualifications - T Levels.

Goals are also set out to:

- Review the regulatory approach to Applied General Qualifications
- Review how well standards in Project and Core Maths qualifications are set
- Take forward the work on inter-subject comparability and decide whether standards should be adjusted in any subjects
- Consider how the results of the National Reference Test may be used in GCSE awarding in future
- Survey exam boards on the impact of Ofqual's regulatory requirements on innovation.

Details of Ofqual's regulatory activities at Key Stage 1 and 2 are also set out in the plan.

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Grade standards will be adjusted for MFL; other subjects may follow

Ofqual has [announced](#) it will require adjustments to standards setting in A Level French, German and Spanish this summer.

After more than a year of public discussion and debate, the decision on MFL follows new [research](#) on the comparability of different subjects which suggests that awarding should take into account the fact that native language speakers take Modern Foreign Languages.

The regulator said that further changes to grade

standards in other subjects may be considered if there is a “compelling case” consistent with its [policy decision](#) on inter-subject comparability. However, Ofqual has decided that the challenges in measuring how subjects compare means that it will not try to take co-ordinated action to align grade standards across the full range of GCSE or A Level subjects.

Ofqual has already begun further comparability conversations with subject communities in relation to A Levels in physics, chemistry and biology.

Fluctuations in schools’ exam results are “normal, quantifiable and predictable”

Fluctuations in individual schools’ GCSE results are to be expected according to new research from Cambridge Assessment. [Volatility Happens](#) says that, although it might be obvious, in some years pupils will perform better than expected, while in other years pupils will perform worse.

The researchers believe the study will enable schools to manage expectations and allow head teachers and governors to interpret changes in performance

appropriately.

The research builds on an [earlier study](#) that ruled out exam grade boundaries and marking as major components of volatility.

The current research adds an understanding of just how much volatility can be accounted for by the routine changes in students between years and normal variations in individual students’ performance in a particular exam.

DfE-commissioned report suggests A Level subject cuts

The government should consider reducing the range of A Levels on offer in order to make them more financially viable for providers.

This is one of the options laid out in a DfE [research report](#) which looked into the decision-making process behind A Level class sizes in 16 to 19 settings, and the impact this has on the cost of provision.

The report suggests that reducing the range of A Level subjects on offer nationally, or providing a clearer indication of which A Levels are deemed to be of “national importance” could help to make more A Levels financially sustainable for providers in the future.

Other options include: more active management of the A Level market, for example, imposing more stringent criteria for demonstrating the viability of A Level provision locally similar to area-based reviews; promoting collaboration between institutions; and creating a more managed, UCAS-style system of post-16 applications to better translate student applications into confirmed places.

The research found:

- The minimum, financially viable A Level class size was judged on average to be 11 students. Delivering

a large number of classes below this minimum financial threshold would ultimately affect whether A Level provision in the institution was affordable.

- Reduction in class sizes as students moved from 4 to 3 A Levels was distributed unevenly across subjects – as was student drop outs - making planning difficult.
- Providers deemed it essential to continue to run very small class sizes in minority subjects in order to retain existing students or attract new ones. This was particularly acute for school sixth forms where there was little benefit in discontinuing an A Level subject if the teacher was still required to teach GCSE.
- Responding to student choice played an important part in determining the breadth of the curriculum on offer
- Whilst many institutions made reference to financial considerations as part of their decision-making process around subject breadth and class size, finance was a determining factor for only around a third. Many providers did not routinely review the cost of delivering A Levels.

The report acknowledged that besides class size, there are a number of factors influencing achievement at A Level, not least the quality of teaching and the prior attainment of students.

How well do schools prepare children for their future?

There is more work to be done in the education sector to prepare children for the changing world of work, according to the [inquiry report](#) by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Education.

“There is strong evidence from the business community that the education system is not delivering the skills they require in the sufficient quantities”, says the report, claiming that evidence submitted to the inquiry points to a number of factors behind this failing.

Factors cited include school accountability, a lack of resources, low teacher recruitment and high staff workload which all provide barriers preventing children from accessing the education and information they need to thrive in a changing workforce. Improved networking between institutions and employers, and careers advice and guidance would help young people to be better prepared for employment.

The report hopes to open a dialogue about the challenges faced at a time of high youth unemployment.

Institute for Apprenticeships up and running

The new Institute, launched to ensure apprenticeships deliver the skills that employers need, is now officially established.

Independent from government, Chaired by Antony Jenkins with Peter Lauener at the helm, the [Institute for Apprenticeships](#) will support the commitment to deliver three million apprenticeships by 2020.

From April 2018, the Institute will also take on responsibility for technical education. A wide-ranging consultation on technical qualifications is expected over the summer.

The Technical and Further Education Act 2017 was passed by Parliament ahead of its pre-general election dissolution.

The FE sector can rise to the challenge

The Further Education sector can be a vital driver of social mobility in Britain after Brexit, according to a new [research report](#).

The Social Market Foundation research argues that although the FE and skills sector faces a series of challenges over the next two decades, it can seize the opportunity to play an even greater role in helping people of all ages raise their skills and wages.

The report - sponsored by the Further Education Trust for Leadership - warns that the FE and skills sector faces both financial pressures and an uncertain policy environment.

The report argues that maximising FE and skills' ability to boost the technical skills of British workers, young and old, should be an urgent priority for politicians, given that Brexit may reduce the number of skilled European workers in the UK.

FE and skills providers, says the report, in partnership with employers, could be well-placed to promote the lifelong learning that will be needed in the global economy of the 21st Century – workers in their 50s and 60s may find training at their local college more convenient and relevant than a university degree.

Call for Minister for lifelong learning

A joint Minister for lifelong learning should be created between the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Education, according to a new report.

The Skills Commission report focuses on how skills provision can deliver for an ageing population and how employers can adapt their policies for the over 50s to encourage them to remain in work.

[Lifelong Learning for an Ageing Workforce](#) claims that a joint-Departmental Minister for lifelong learning would improve co-ordination and make it possible to assess the impact of retraining or up-skilling on the duration of a

working life.

The report makes recommendations to learning providers, employers and government on how best to incentivise the uptake of training for older workers. Proposals include on-going career reviews to encourage training in later life, and signposting learning loans for the over 50s.

The report comes at a time when the government is committed to exploring lifelong learning further as outlined in its [Industrial Strategy](#) and [Spring budget](#) earlier this year.

Making the UK's skills system world class

“For many years the UK has given priority to expanding higher education rather than complementing that expansion with developing further education, strengthening adult education, and creating a high-quality vocational training system”.

This is one of the conclusions from a new analysis which highlights the failings in the skills system and offers thoughts and recommendations on how UK performance can be improved.

The report from the CIPD, the professional body for HR, gives support to developing a range of high-quality vocational routes to employment.

Making the UK's skills system world class looks at how people can acquire and develop skills throughout their working lives, and not just in the earlier years.

The recommendations are grouped around six themes:

1. Strength and stability in the system
2. Improving basic/core skills
3. Increasing the quality of vocational pathways
4. Building capacity at a local and workplace level
5. Promoting learning across the life course
6. Access to quality information, advice and guidance.

The analysis forms part of the CIPD's formal response to the Government's [Industrial Strategy](#).

Significant reforms to HE sector approved by parliament

The [Higher Education and Research Bill](#) has been passed as an act of parliament.

Described as the “most significant legislative reform of the sector for 25 years” by the Universities Minister, Jo Johnson, the legislation is designed to increase competition and choice in higher education and provide stability with a new regulatory framework.

A new Office for Students will be introduced as the

regulator for English higher education.

The Act also contains major changes to the structure of the UK-wide research system aiming to raise standards in research and innovation.

Plans in the original Bill to link university fees to the quality of teaching (the Teaching Excellence Framework) have been delayed to 2020 at the earliest.

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Education manifestos at a glance

In the run up to the 2017 General Election, we take a look at the manifestos of the main political parties, focusing on key education and skills policies. In the order of publication, what are Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives promising to deliver?

Labour manifesto

Labour will create a National Education Service for England that supports learning from early years to life-long learning. They will:

Schools

- Increase investment and introduce a new funding formula
- Reduce class sizes and providing free school meals for primary schools
- Review KS1 and KS2 SATs
- Improve the recruitment, retention and workload of teachers
- Invest in counselling services and increased SEND support
- Introduce an arts pupil premium in primary schools and review the EBacc performance measure

Further Education and skills

- Provide free, lifelong learning
- Scrap Conservative plans for new technical colleges
- Recruit more FE teachers
- Improve careers advice in the FE sector

Labour has expressed broad support for the aims of the Sainsbury Review and has committed to make the UK a “world-leading provider of adult and vocational training” through:

- Providing the same funding for 16 to 18 year olds as is available pre-16
- Restoring the education maintenance allowance
- Increasing investment to support the teaching of T-Levels
- Improving the quality of apprenticeships
- Setting up a commission on lifelong learning tasked with integrating Further and Higher Education

Higher Education

- Abolish tuition fees
- Reintroduce maintenance grants for university students.

Liberal Democrat manifesto

Schools

- Reverse cuts to school and college budgets and protect per-pupil funding
- Oppose new grammar schools
- Improve teacher retention
- Introduce a core curriculum entitlement which would be taught in all schools
- Protect the availability of arts and creative subjects in schools
- Encourage greater co-operation between schools and employers

Further Education and skills

- Support lifelong learning
- Double the number of businesses that hire apprentices

- Ensure the apprenticeship levy is spent on a wide range of training
- Develop national colleges as centres for sector expertise
- Provide further funding for adult and part-time training

Higher Education

- Reinstatement of maintenance loans for the poorest students
- Establish a review of higher education
- Require universities to widen participation and access.

Conservative manifesto

Schools

- Continue the commitment to the free schools programme - building at least 100 new free schools every year
- Establish a specialist maths school in every major English city
- Lift the ban on new selective schools
- Require universities and independent schools to sponsor new free schools
- Review the school admissions policy
- Suspend student debt repayments for teachers

Further Education and skills

- Introduce T-Levels covering 15 different technical education routes
- Establish new Institutes of Technology to provide courses at degree level and above in technical disciplines, plus higher-level apprenticeships and bespoke courses for employers
- Launch a review into funding for tertiary education
- Invest in FE facilities and attract industry professionals to work in FE
- Introduce a UCAS-style portal for technical education
- Create 3 million new apprenticeship starts by 2020

Higher Education

- Increase investment in research and development.

The Last Word

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

While others have been poring over the education policies in the various election manifestos, we decided, instead, to take a look at Ofqual’s Corporate Plan. A corporate plan is not quite the same thing as a manifesto but we thought it would make a refreshing change to take a more in-depth look at something other than the wall-to-wall coverage of the general election.

Ofqual’s plan begins with an upbeat and passionate forward from the Chair, Roger Taylor. He declares “the pace of reform is striking and not without risk”. The plan lays out a large and ambitious programme of work, or as Mr Taylor puts it, “a significant body of work with complex

interdependencies”. All this work will have to be carried out with no new money as the projected budget is set to decline slightly from its current £15 million per annum. The report promises to find £1.1 million in savings by cutting administrative costs.

Not surprisingly, Ofqual places the safe roll-out of reformed general qualifications at the top of its priorities. The new 9-1 grading system occupies a fair amount of copy. OCR and the other exam boards will be working closely together over the summer to ensure a smooth transition to the new grades and to raise awareness and understanding of how they will work. Ofqual has already

invested in a (slightly surreal) [short animation](#) explaining the new grading system. It's not quite Palme d'Or quality, but if you haven't seen it, it's worth a look.

Ofqual will be watching to see how ongoing reforms to the system for reviews and appeals are phased in over the coming years. In particular, there will be interest in plans to make GCSE scripts available to schools much earlier so that teachers can review the marking before deciding whether to request a formal review from the board. Some are concerned that school leaders will put pressure on teachers to review all scripts before they can take their well-earned summer breaks. Meanwhile, we are still awaiting Ofqual's report on the outcome of a pilot which took place last year in a limited range of subjects which sought to widen the grounds by which a school or college could appeal against a result. The consensus is that this pilot will be opened up to include all subjects, but we will have to wait and see.

Ofqual has also restated its commitment to introduce new ways of monitoring the quality of marking of exam boards. It looks like this is proving a tougher nut to crack than was originally envisaged. The Ofqual annual report for 2014/15 stated: "In early 2014 we published the results of a year-long investigation into the quality of GCSE, AS and A level marking in England. We concluded that the exam boards' marking systems were well organised, tightly controlled and ones in which the public should have confidence". But it went on to make a commitment: "In addition, we said that we would look to develop standardised quality of marking indicators for reformed GCSEs, AS and A levels from 2017". The quest for standardised indicators doesn't seem to have borne fruit yet; and the objective in the new plan seems a little less ambitious: "[We will] evaluate the quality of exam board marking". This is a far more subtle change of tack than the sort of 'U' turns that sometimes afflict manifesto pledges.

The corporate plan commits Ofqual to evaluating how revised general qualifications impact on teaching and learning and whether they "meet the qualifications' purpose". This generated some discussion in our office about the broad purposes of GCSEs and A Levels and the different places in which these purposes have been stated. At the outset of the current reforms, Ofqual consulted on the objectives of A Levels and came up with the following, which we offer for interest and without comment:

- to define and assess achievement of the knowledge, skills and understanding which will be needed by students planning to progress to undergraduate study at a UK higher education establishment, particularly (although not only) in the same subject area
- to set out a robust and internationally comparable post-16 academic course of study and to develop that knowledge, skills and understanding
- to permit UK universities to accurately identify the level of attainment of students
- to provide a basis for school and college

- accountability measures at age 18 and to provide a benchmark of academic ability for employers.

The plan highlights the fact that Ofqual is very interested in binding a range of different qualifications more tightly into the regulatory fold – an opportunity perhaps to consult on their purposes. Ofqual will look at standard setting in both Core Maths qualifications and the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ). The EPQ is locally marked and very much an applied qualification with different candidates undertaking vastly different projects. The danger is that any significant regulatory intervention will bring tighter standards at the expense of the very purpose and essence of the EPQ. Functional Skills qualifications are also firmly in Ofqual's sights. It is already indicating an interest in introducing a process for checking the quality of exam board's revised Functional Skills tests ahead of any implementation. It is also questioning whether the large number of test sessions currently available is a threat to comparability of standards over time. Anything which brings greater comparability between the many Functional Skills tests currently offered in this crowded market place has to be a good thing and a narrower, more coherent statement of their purpose and what they are intended to assess wouldn't go amiss either.

Likewise, Ofqual is keen to "review our regulatory approach to Applied General Qualifications [AGQs]". AGQs form a category of qualification brought into being by the DfE to group together certain Level 3 vocational qualifications which can then count alongside A Levels in performance tables. They include qualifications like BTECs and OCR's Cambridge Technicals. The AGQ concept and criteria have been developed by the DfE and currently sit outside any *regulatory* category. It seems inevitable that Ofqual will need to develop and agree criteria for how all AGQs are awarded and how different qualifications in this category guarantee comparability.

In Lord Sainsbury's review of Technical Education, AGQs are described as being part of an academic route, preparing young people for study at university. As such they are immune from the sweeping changes Lord Sainsbury has proposed in his alternative technical route which is intended to comprise T-Levels and apprenticeships. Ofqual wants to play an active role in reforms to apprenticeships and the introduction of T-Levels: "[We] will play our full role in finalising the outstanding operational decisions related to apprenticeship reform, and associated development of T-Levels".

The wording here is carefully crafted. As things stand, there is little clarity as to what Ofqual's 'full role' in these reforms could look like. Plans for a new Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) already describe the Institute as *regulating* the quality of apprenticeships and, in due course, T-Levels. The legislation setting up IfATE, rushed through ahead

of the general election, makes it wholly possible for IfATE to steam ahead with or without Ofqual's support in developing new T-Levels and new 'End Point Assessments' for apprenticeships. We should be hoping that Ofqual is invited to the party – it is an organisation with deep expertise in matters related to assessment and regulation and is best placed to bring some systemic coherence to what otherwise risks becoming a rushed and shambolic development and implementation process.

There are lots of other interesting nuggets in the Corporate Plan, including plans to revisit the relative difficulty of different maths GCSEs, the ongoing

delivery of National Reference Tests to benchmark the performance of maths and English GCSEs, more work on rising levels of malpractice reported in the examinations system, and a review of assessor competence in vocational qualifications.

Significantly, Ofqual will also be investigating the impact of its regulatory activities on the ability of exam boards to innovate. This demonstrates a healthy acknowledgement that, as Ofqual extends its regulatory reach and develops ever more requirements and conditions, that it does not ossify and constrain the system in ways that prove less than helpful.