

Results trends 2017: GCSEs

GCSE results this year saw the first awards of the new 9 to 1 GCSE grades in maths, English Literature and English Language.

2017 results overall for *16 year olds* in English and maths were stable at grade C/4 when comparing combined GCSE and international GCSE outcomes from last summer.

Small percentages of candidates achieved a grade 9, designed to recognise the very highest performing students: 2.6% of candidates achieved a grade 9 in English language; 3.3% in English literature; and 3.5% in maths.

The balance of entries to the two maths tiers at GCSE changed from last year. In 2016, 24% of candidates entered for the foundation tier. This increased to 47% this year.

Behind maths and English, science, religious studies, history and geography remained the most popular subjects.

The summer's GCSE outcomes show that *post-16* re-sits for GCSEs in English and maths continued to rise in England.

Whilst the number of candidates achieving a standard pass in GCSE English increased amongst this *post-16* group, the attainment rate for maths decreased.

New GCSEs graded 9-1 are being phased in. By 2020 all GCSEs taken in England will be graded 9 to 1.

Qualification reforms made comparisons difficult across years, subjects and UK nations this year. Ofqual published more detailed results information on [GCSEs](#). Statistics covering the whole of the UK by subject, grade and age are available on the [JCQ website](#).

Results trends 2017: A Levels

Overall A Level results and entries remained stable in summer 2017 during a period of significant reform.

'Facilitating subjects' – A Level subjects said by some to be more frequently required than others for entry to degree courses - continued to represent over half of A Level entries.

759,000 entries were made across all A Level subjects with A* achievements up from 8.1% in 2016 to 8.3% in 2017.

A* success rates for the 13 reformed A Level subjects in England (397,000 entries) fell from 7.7% to 7.2%.

Maths continued to be the most popular subject at A Level (95,244 entries). Computing saw the biggest percentage rise by 33% (to 8,299) followed by Political

Studies (up 12% to 17,523) and Business Studies (up 6% to 30,023). General Studies, ICT, Performing Arts and Music were amongst the top 10 decreasing subjects.

The decline in AS entries gathered pace with entries down 39% this summer. The Extended Project Qualification saw an increase in entries by 12% (to 40,013).

As of midnight before results day, 416,310 applicants had been accepted into Higher Education through UCAS – a decrease of 2% compared with the same date last year. However, the entry rate for English 18-year-olds at this time was at an all-time high of 27.5%.

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School leaders expect AS entries to decline further

A survey of school leaders has shown that 65% of respondents have cut the number of AS Level courses they offer since the process of 'decoupling' them from A Levels began.

The snapshot [survey](#), conducted by the Association of School and College Leaders in England, also found that 86% expect to remove AS courses in the future as they no longer count towards the full A Level.

The findings come as the results of this summer's exams show the number of AS entries fell by 39% from 2016.

Ofsted confirms GCSE grade 5 for accountability measures

Ofsted will use GCSE grade 5 – what the government calls a 'strong pass' - as its measure when inspecting schools.

In a [letter to inspectors](#), Ofsted's national Director of Education said that it was important to remember that for headline accountability measures, the grade 5 or above is to be used. Other measures – such as the grade 4 'standard pass' - will be used to inform judgements, but only as additional measures.

Ofsted also warned inspectors against directly comparing

this year's results with last year's, given the significant changes to GCSEs in 2017.

Inspectors were also advised to challenge school leaders about unusual exam entry patterns which may not be in the best interests of pupils, particularly where there is significant subject overlap, where pupils sit English language and English literature only for the purposes of higher attainment 8 and progress 8 scores, and where high entries are made for qualifications that are not 'core subjects'.

Teachers as examiners: Ofqual review underway

Ofqual is to conduct a review of the rules under which serving teachers take part in writing and reviewing question papers. Ofqual will also look at the safeguards in place to prevent the disclosure of confidential information.

In its review announcement, Ofqual added that the involvement of serving teachers in the process of exam setting has many benefits and exam malpractice by teachers is rare. However, it will investigate whether the safeguards in place are sufficiently robust and whether changes are needed.

An update will be provided in Ofqual's 'Summer Report' to be published later this year.

The Joint Council for Qualifications has produced an [overview](#) to explain the exam setting process.

Disadvantaged pupils 2 years behind peers by age 16

New research finds that the educational attainment gap between persistently disadvantaged pupils and their peers has got worse, increasing to an average of over 2 full years of learning by the end of secondary.

The Education Policy Institute has examined the progress made in closing the gap in educational attainment between disadvantaged pupils and their peers and found that based on current trends it will take 50 years before an equitable education system is reached in England.

The report [Closing the Gap](#) also considers how the gap varies in different parts of the country. It acknowledges the government's 12 Opportunity Areas, but believes there are other areas – such as Darlington, Rossendale and Boston - which have sizeable and more importantly,

growing gaps which should be receiving extra support.

According to the report, other areas showing considerable gaps are the Isle of Wight, Derby, Cumbria, Knowsley, South Gloucestershire, Northumberland and Dudley.

The report concludes that the current system is delivering change far too slowly, failing to meet the educational needs of all pupils.

The Education Policy Institute describes itself as an independent, impartial and evidence-based research institute that aims to promote high quality education outcomes, regardless of social background.

Draft Functional Skills content now available

The Department for Education is currently seeking views on the proposed subject content for reformed Functional Skills in English and mathematics.

The reformed [subject content consultation](#) asks questions on the proposed content for all five qualification levels - Entry Levels 1-3, Level 1 and Level 2 – and covers the essential knowledge and understanding for the subject at that level.

The updated subject content is intended to improve students' underlying skills and knowledge (such as

reading, spelling and arithmetic) as well as improving communication skills.

In parallel with this consultation, Ofqual will be consulting on the revised regulatory requirements for the reformed Functional Skills. This [consultation](#) will be available from 27 September.

The Functional Skills review aims to have revised qualifications ready for teaching from September 2019.

Report gives student voice to post-16 skills policies

A new NUS report outlines a vision for what students believe makes for excellent vocational teaching and learning.

The report [Students Shaping the Post-16 Skills Plan](#) calls for a more 'student-centred' approach, following what the NUS sees as a lack of consultation with students on recent Further Education, skills and technical education reforms.

The report provides a range of policy recommendations in relation to the post-16 skills plan and changing FE landscape including:

- A more applied level 2 English and maths qualification
- A broader definition of Basic Skills beyond English,

maths and digital

- The creation of student panels alongside employer panels for T-Levels
- Apprenticeships which lead to appropriate and nationally recognised qualifications
- Improved, high-quality work experience opportunities
- 'All ages, all stages' careers education
- Increased financial support for adult learners
- Lowering the voting age to include 16 and 17 year olds.

The report's production team included Vince Cable MP, leader of the Liberal Democrats and former Secretary of State for Skills, and a long-time supporter of Further Education.

Employers ask: will technical routes provide specialist skills?

Employers have expressed concern that technical education reforms may not develop sufficient levels of specialist, practical skills, according to a recent DfE survey.

The [survey](#), comprising 40 telephone interviews, explored employer perceptions of the current system and views on the proposed reforms for technical education.

Whilst many employers were positive about the technical education routes believing that young people would develop a good range of transferable skills, they

expressed concern that sufficient levels of specialist skills may not be delivered.

Other themes identified by the survey as key areas for improvement in technical education were:

- Ensuring work readiness
- Good attitudes and behaviours
- Good basic skills in English, maths and ICT.

The survey forms part of the DfE's on-going consultation with employers around technical education.

International evidence aims to guide technical education panels

An [investigation into post-16 occupational standards](#) in international education systems has recommended that the most immediate task for the [technical education panels](#) in England is to achieve consensus on the occupational specification for each route.

The study aimed to gather evidence on what constitutes a 'good' occupational standard and best practice in standards development.

It examined evidence from countries with similar high-performing technical education systems to the new system proposed for England - Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands.

The DfE-commissioned report also suggests that, once the initial development has taken place, a cross-technical routes review should be implemented to ensure common key skill competencies exist to ensure transferability between and equivalence across routes.

The report admits that differing international occupational standards do not always lend themselves to comparison, but found that:

- The evidence supports the implementation of a staged process where occupational competency is first defined and then training designed to meet these needs
- Successful standards are characterised by strong support from industry and other partners
- There is a trend towards functional or key skills equivalents used as a foundation and to transfer between routes, qualifications or occupations.

The DfE has also carried out a [review of funding](#) and expenditure arrangements for international post-16 vocational programmes in Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Norway. Findings include:

- All of the countries are investing considerable resources in post-16 vocational education and training
- All spend more per student following vocational routes than for those following academic routes
- Students in all countries generally receive around 1000 teaching hours per year
- There is a strong focus on and investment in the professionalisation and upskilling of vocational teachers
- Changes to vocational programmes are made regularly to meet the demands of the labour market.

Vocational education is high on the policy agendas of all the countries involved in this study, with major reforms underway.

New teaching union urges MPs to visit their local college

A new campaign to raise awareness of Further Education amongst MPs has been launched by the UK's newest teaching union.

The National Education Union (NEU), formed from a merger of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) is reminding MPs about its campaign [EfEffective Education: securing skills for a post-Brexit future](#).

Part of this campaign aims to introduce politicians to post-16 institutions in their local area to raise awareness of Further Education amongst MPs when many of them may have gone straight from school to university and had no experience of FE.

The NEU came into existence on 1 September 2017. With more than 450,000 members, it is now the largest education union in the UK.

Is post-school education funding fit for purpose?

That's the question being posed by the Lords Select Committee on Economic Affairs in their [latest inquiry](#).

Against a background of university funding, student debt, employment prospects for graduates and school/college leavers, apprenticeships, technical education and T-Levels, and the decrease in levels of adult education,

the cross-party Committee, is inviting written submissions on 'the economics of higher education, further education and vocational training'.

The inquiry will investigate how post-school education is funded and whether it is focused sufficiently on the skills which the British economy requires.

MPs urged to back sixth form funding campaign

MPs are being warned that the funding crisis in post-16 education will mean further cuts to courses, rising class sizes and sixth form closures unless urgent action is taken.

This message comes from the Sixth Form Colleges Association (SFCA), the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), and the Association of Colleges (AoC).

These three, national organisations representing sixth

forms and colleges have launched a joint [manifesto](#) recommending that MPs introduce a £200 per student uplift in funding to improve the education and support offered to sixth form students, and conduct a review of sixth form funding to ensure realistic funds are available to deliver a high-quality curriculum.

The joint campaign highlights the rising pressures on post-16 college and sixth form budgets and the need for, what it sees as, urgent action from MPs.

'Every pound matters' in new ESFA business plan

Delivering the best possible value for money for the taxpayer is the claim at the centre of the Education and Skills Funding Agency's 2017-18 [business plan](#).

The plan, the first since the merger of the former Education Funding Agency and the Skills Funding Agency in April this year, sets out how the new agency will deliver its key objectives and operational priorities.

The eight objectives are focused around funding

allocations and calculations, championing opportunities for learners and employers, apprenticeships, and improvements to services.

The ESFA is an executive agency of the DfE that is accountable for £63 billion of funding for the education and training of children, young people and adults.

The DfE has also announced the appointment of [Eileen Milner](#) as the new Chief Executive of the ESFA from November 2017.

Reformed Education Select Committee to focus on social justice and productivity

The [Education Select Committee](#), with its new Chair and 10 MP members, has announced its initial programme of work.

The Committee has agreed that its work in this Parliament will focus on two themes: social justice and productivity.

Robert Halfon MP, Chair of the Committee, said: "How our education system helps to improve young people's lives and puts them on the ladder of opportunity will be placed front and centre of our programme of work."

The Committee has already announced its first two inquiries covering the topics of value for money in higher education, and 'alternative provision' – the education of young people who do not attend mainstream schools.

The Committee will also hold early hearings with the Secretary of State for Education, Justine Greening, Ofsted's Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman, and Ofqual's Chief Regulator, Sally Collier, once Parliament returns from party conferences in October.

The Last Word

Lindsey Taylor, Policy Researcher, comments on some of the issues in this issue.

I always find the post-holiday, Autumn period brings a time of reflection - am I going to approach things differently or better during the next few months? Are there some elements that are working well? What successes can I learn from? These are also the questions that those of us involved in reforms to qualifications will continue to ask as we move into yet another year of mass change.

And so what did we learn from the 2017 results – particularly GCSEs – which saw great change with the birth of 9-1 qualifications? We've had time to reflect since results day and one thing we have learnt is that comparison with previous years is incredibly difficult. Comparison across years, subjects, grades, reformed and unreformed subjects, and across jurisdictions made it harder than ever to make sense of the data this summer. You only have to read Ofsted's update letter, highlighting all the changes for Inspectors to look out for, to get a feel for the huge amount of change that is being experienced in our schools and colleges.

In the main, GCSE results were stable from 2016 with few surprises: grade 9s were rare, as predicted, providing that differentiation at the higher grades; the entries for AS declined, with every sign that this will continue; and the number of 17 year-olds re-sitting English and maths GCSEs grew again. What we did learn was that attainment in English grew amongst this group of learners, but, worryingly, achievement in maths declined. The success of the review of Functional Skills will be crucial to these learners and to the challenges faced by post-16 institutions in continuing to offer English and maths GCSEs in ever-growing numbers. The learners deserve an effective qualification that reflects real life situations and feels relevant for them. Let's hope the responses to the latest DfE and Ofqual consultations help to shape these important qualifications for the future.

Results for vocational qualifications don't make the national press in quite the same way as GCSEs and A Levels. But fanfares are just as important for these learners too. The huge reforms that we are seeing in vocational qualifications and technical education make it even more important to recognise and celebrate successes at a particularly challenging time for post-16 education.

We have first-hand experience in our house of the different demands of vocational qualifications, with my own

17-year-old daughter currently in the middle of a technical education course. I have seen the motivation and enthusiasm that being immersed in a sector of choice can bring to young people. And there is real determination to progress, either, as is the case with my daughter, to higher training, or for many, to the world of work. That would be the evidence I would bring to the technical education panels.

The Education Select Committee has undergone its own mass reform, with a new Chair (Conservative) and 10 mostly new members (4 Conservative, 5 Labour and 1 Scottish National MP) including 2 former teachers. "How our education system helps to improve young people's lives and put them on the ladder of opportunity" is no small topic to debate and scrutinise. Hopefully their early hearings with the Secretary of State for Education, Ofsted's Chief Inspector and Ofqual's Chief Regulator will provide a strong basis for their investigations. We wish them well with their new programme of work. Like the rest of us, at this time of education reform, they are going to have their hands full.

Paul Steer is away.