

## Media Release

**Strictly Embargoed until 09.30 hours on Thursday 17 August 2017**



### **UK results steady during time of significant reform**

The Joint Council for Qualifications<sup>CIC</sup> has today published 2017 provisional national results for A-levels and AS qualifications.

Key points:

- Overall, A level results and entries remain steady during a period of significant reform
- Proportion of A\* grades up 0.2 percentage points year on year to 8.3%; A\*-A up 0.5 percentage points to 26.3%; and A\*-E down 0.2 percentage points to 97.9%
- Decline in AS entries gathers pace, down 39.1%, making UK year on year comparisons of AS outcomes unreliable
- Interesting gender patterns emerging in reformed specifications, but too early to draw firm conclusions

These results were awarded at a time of significant reform to A level and AS qualifications. In England and in Wales, this was the first year of award for the reformed A levels (13 subjects in England and 14 in Wales). These subjects contain new content, to meet the requirements of Higher Education, and less non-exam assessment. In England, learners' achievements in the AS qualification no longer contribute to the linear A level qualification.

This year also saw the first award for phase 2 of reformed AS subjects in England and Wales, and the first award for reformed AS qualifications in Northern Ireland. In Wales and Northern Ireland, the contribution of the AS to the A level has been reduced from 50% to 40% for the reformed qualifications.

These reforms across the UK are being phased over several years, with the third wave of reformed AS and A levels being taught from September 2017 in England and Wales. It is important to note that standards in A level and AS qualifications remain unchanged.

#### **A level**

There were 8,350 fewer A levels awarded in 2017 compared to 2016, a drop of 1.0% to 828,355. This decrease is less than the 1.7% fall in the number of 18 year olds in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Facilitating Subjects<sup>1</sup> continued to represent over half of entries at A level, making up 51.7% of all entries compared to 51.1% in 2016 and 51.2% in 2015.

The proportion of A\* grades awarded across all subjects was up 0.2 percentage points year on year to 8.3%. At A\*-A there was an increase of 0.5 percentage points to 26.3%, and at A\*-E the proportion of awards was down 0.2 percentage points to 97.9%

---

<sup>1</sup> Some A-level subjects are more frequently required for entry to degree courses than others. These subjects are commonly known as 'Facilitating Subjects' which are: Biology; Chemistry; English Literature; Geography; History; Maths and Further Maths; Modern and classical languages; Physics.

The 13 reformed subjects in England, which were assessed for the first time this year, showed a different pattern and outcomes are down slightly when compared to equivalent subjects in 2016. When comparing 18 year olds, which gives the most accurate year on year comparison, the proportion of A\* grades declined 0.5 percentage points to 7.2%; A\*-A went down 0.7 percentage points to 24.3%; and A\*-E went down 0.5 percentage points to 98.1%.

The year on year changes in the reformed subjects may be influenced by several factors including lower prior attainment for students taking these subjects in 2017, and it is not possible to draw accurate conclusions at this stage.

Although this data on reformed subjects helps explain performance in the new A levels in England, caution is needed when comparing with all subjects and with non-reformed subjects, since the subjects reformed in the first phase are not necessarily typical of all subjects in terms of their entries and past years' results. For example, amongst the unreformed subjects, mathematics has historically had higher outcomes, for legitimate reasons such as prior ability of the students.

A body of research conducted by JCQ and Ofqual earlier this year in relation to modern foreign languages<sup>2</sup>, suggested a small but important effect that native speakers have on the results in their respective languages, especially at the top grades. To balance this, it was agreed exam boards would increase expectations for outcomes at A\*-A by 1%.

As expected, this change led to an increase in the proportion of A\*-A grades awarded in French, German, and Spanish. In French, A\*-A grades rose 1.7 percentage points to 39%; in German, they went up 1.8 percentage points to 41.4%; and in Spanish the increase was 2.5 percentage points to 36.9%.

This year's results have shown some interesting patterns emerging in the performance of males and females, especially in the reformed subjects in England. At the top grade (A\*), 18 year old females perform better than males (7.3% compared to 7.0%) and at A\*-A males and females perform the same (24.3%).

However, there is a suggestion that males are closing the gap. At A\*, whereas female outcomes at A\* went down 0.6 percentage points in the reformed subjects, males went down only 0.3 percentage points. There is a similar picture at grades A\*-A, with females dropping 1.1 percentage points but males only 0.2 percentage points.

It is too early to draw conclusions, especially as this is the first year of the reformed specifications, and we are also seeing a similar pattern in Wales, which has had different reforms. It will be interesting, as we continue to progress through the reform timetable, to see if this pattern becomes a trend and the gender performance gap is closed at A level.

## **AS**

The decline in the number of candidates taking AS qualifications gathered pace this year, with a 39.1% drop in entries. This follows a 13.7% drop in 2016. These UK figures are mainly being driven by changes in England. Schools, colleges and students are making these choices across all subject areas, especially those that have already been reformed and are decoupled from the A level in England.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ofqual's research into the impact of native speakers can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/native-speakers-in-a-level-modern-foreign-languages>

The decoupling of the AS and A level qualifications is of course a significant driver in this change in England, however, there may be other explanations such as a switch to the Extended Project Qualification, which saw a 12.4% increase year on year (35,608 to 40,013).

However, the AS continues to be valued by many and in 2017 more than 700,000 entries were made. Interestingly, Further Mathematics has an opposite trend and grew 4.6% year on year to 27,980 entries. Mathematics continued to have a high entry with 160,450 entries.

The decline in AS entries makes year on year UK outcome comparisons unreliable and they should be made with caution.

Commenting on this year's results, JCQ's Director General, Michael Turner, said:

"Today is about congratulating the hundreds of thousands of students on their efforts and results and ensuring they get the right support they need to embark on the next stage of their lives.

"The overall UK picture for A levels this year is steady, with small increases in the top grades.

"There may be several factors influencing the performance of males and females in reformed A levels in England, and of course it is too early to draw any firm conclusions. However, it will be interesting to see if the pattern continues as we progress through the reform timetable."

-Ends-

#### Notes to editors

1. The reformed A Level subjects are: Art & Design, Biology, Business, Chemistry, Computer Science, Economics, English Language, English Literature, English Literature and Language, History, Physics, Psychology, Sociology, Welsh First Language
2. Details on the reforms in England, including content changes and timetable can be found here: [GCSE, AS and A level reforms](#)
3. Details on reforms in Wales and Northern Ireland can be found here: Qualifications Wales: [Process for reforming GCSEs and A levels](#) and CCEA: [Regulation GCE and GCSE](#)
4. Detailed tabulations of the GCE AS and A-level, Applied GCE AS and A-level are published separately, also with the STRICT EMBARGO of 09.30 Thursday 17 August 2017 and will be available on the JCQ<sup>CIC</sup> website from 09.30 on 17 August 2016 – [www.jcq.org.uk](http://www.jcq.org.uk)
5. These results are for qualifications taken by students across the UK but predominantly in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.
6. All awarding organisations are answerable to the regulatory authorities - Ofqual (England), Qualifications Wales (Wales) and CCEA (Northern Ireland). The regulatory authorities monitor the awarding bodies' standards. In addition, the awarding organisations themselves conduct a number of comparability studies to compare standards. Maintaining standards within and across all qualifications in order to ensure fairness to all candidates is the paramount concern of the awarding bodies.
7. The JCQ<sup>CIC</sup> comprises AQA, CCEA, City & Guilds, OCR, Pearson, SQA and WJEC – the seven largest providers of qualifications in the UK.
8. The JCQ<sup>CIC</sup> is a membership organisation and enables member awarding bodies to act together in providing, where possible, common administrative arrangements for the schools and colleges and other providers which offer their qualifications; and responding to proposals and initiatives in assessment and the curriculum.
9. Media contacts: The JCQ's press office can be contacted on: 020 7227 0671/020 7638 4132/07905 683 816