

A-LEVEL PROSPECTS 2025
Stable Once More?

Alan Smithers

Centre for Education and Employment Research
University of Buckingham, August 2025

Summary

The 2025 A-level results are hard to call, but the most likely outcome is more top grades than pre-pandemic.

There are no long-term trends to point the way. The most we have to go on is the unexpected rise in top grades in 2024. This was by only a percentage point or two, but amounted to some 14,200 more A*s and 21,300 more A*/A grades.

It is possible that, in England, because 'comparable outcomes' takes into account GCSE results from two years before, the A-level grades in 2024 were temporarily raised by the softened approach used in 2022 to ease pupils back into examinations.

But the increase could be associated with long-term trends such as the government-led increase in top grades in some languages in a bid to attract more students; a swing to high-awarding subjects; or a teacher-assessment legacy of more top grades in subjective subjects, for all of which there is evidence.

Many of the factors pushing up the 2024 grades continue into 2025 and may lead to it, too, being higher than the norm established before Covid.

There is, however, huge variation in grades between subjects, a changing pattern in entries, and movement in the subject distribution of the sexes, any of which could lead to grades going up or down.

Ultimately, the pattern of awards is controlled by Ofqual in England under the direction of the government. It has the power to set the grade cut-off points to get the results it wants to see.

Will it seek in 2025 to continue the more generous grading of 2024, or will the results be a step on the way to reverting to pre-pandemic levels?

Since England accounts for 92 per cent of total A-level entries, it will be the UK result also.

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1. What Can Be Expected in 2025?

- 1.1. The 2025 A-level results are hard to call because there is no reliable trend. Not much has changed, however, so they are likely to be close to what they were in 2024. The published policy for England then was to restore the 2023 grades to where they were in 2019. Northern Ireland and Wales opted to take more time and match the 2019 pattern in 2024. Northern Ireland did it. Wales got a long way towards it. But England having reduced the top grades considerably in 2023 actually saw them rise in 2024. England with 92 per cent of the entries dominates UK results.
- 1.2. The unexpected increase in England in 2024 could have been brought about by a number of factors:
 - The GCSE grades from two years previously, which are used in the ‘comparable outcomes’ procedure to take into account cohort differences were still inflated in 2022 and would have tended to push up the 2024 A-level grades.
 - Ofqual built in an increase in top grades in French and German in an attempt to boost take-up.
 - There was a legacy in 2024 of the huge increase in top grades awarded by teacher assessment in subjects such as music, drama and performing/expressive arts.
 - There was a swing to higher scoring subjects such as maths, physics and chemistry.
- 1.3. Most of these factors could be expected to apply in 2025 too, except that the GCSEs in 2023 were back to normal and could lead to a reduction. Will the 2025 grades be up or down? It is open to the regulators to decide, because they agree grade thresholds with the exam boards. But my best guess, based on the unexpectedness of the 2024 results, is that last year could be the start of a new normal which pitches grades higher than they were before the pandemic.

Sex

- 1.4. We can be sure, however, that girls will do better than boys since, as reported in Chapter 6, they have been ahead for many years. A* is the exception. This seems to be partly because boys’ scores in exams spread much more widely than those of girls so, paradoxically, although girls do better overall, there are more very high performers among the boys. Boys are also much more likely to take high A* subjects, such as Further Maths, Maths and Physics.
- 1.5. The success of boys at A*, however, will continue to be over-shadowed by the long-standing superior results of girls overall. Sadly, the underperformance of boys is no more likely than in previous years to receive the attention it deserves. They and the country would benefit considerably if ways could be found of enabling them to reach their potential.

Subject Entries

- 1.6. The long-term trends of Chapter 5 show that up to 2024, Maths has risen to become the most frequently taken A-level, and English¹ has fallen from that perch to lag behind Psychology and Biology. French and German have been in long-term decline with Spanish becoming the most frequently taken foreign language. After continuous growth, Psychology and Sociology surprisingly fell in 2024. Biology does too, but there are increases in Physics and Chemistry.
- 1.7. Unlike most sections of this report, we have a glimpse of what the entry figures will be like in 2025. Each year in May/June, Ofqual publishes the A-level provisional entries. These are only for England and not everyone who enters sits the examination, but with these small caveats they are a good guide to likely changes.
- 1.8. Chapter 8 shows that the trends up to 2024 mainly continue. Of particular interest is the possibility that 2024 saw the beginning of a swing against Psychology and Sociology. This was supported by further falls in 2025. There were also continuing increases in Maths, Physics and Chemistry, but Biology went down. French and German fell once more in spite of the carrot of more top grades. Economics and Political Studies have increased their entries, but Computing has gone down.
- 1.9. These changes invite many speculations. The swing towards Maths and the Physical Sciences could be a response to the former government's promotion of them. The decline in the Social Sciences could be an early sign that they have finally been rumbled as promising more than they deliver.

Subject Grades

- 1.10. There is wide variation in the grades awarded in the different subjects. In 2024, as Chapter 4 records, A* ranged from 38.7 per cent to 0.6 per cent for single award subjects. This is expected to continue into 2025. While there are many individual features contributing to these enormous differences, for example, top in 2024 was 'Other Modern Languages' which are mainly taken by native speakers, and Further Maths which is highly selective. But generally speaking, there is a difference between subjects where there are right answers and those where they are a matter of judgement. Examiners are much more likely to have the confidence to award top marks in the former than the latter. They also are mainly taken by pupils who know that they can do well in them.
- 1.11. The enforced switch to teacher assessment in 2020 and 2021 greatly increased the proportion of top grades in subjective subjects, so there was little difference in top grades between them and the hard sciences. There is evidence in the 2024 grades that some of this remained. If it persists into 2025, the overall pattern will resemble that in 2024 more than those pre-Covid.

¹ Total entries for Literature; Language; and Language & Literature.

England, Wales and Northern Ireland

- 1.12. The main table published on A-level results day in August is for the UK. This is mainly determined by England which contributes the lion's share of the entrants, with Wales and Northern Ireland accounting for not much more than seven per cent between them. They do, however, have their own administrations, regulators and exam boards which can and has taken them in different directions.
- 1.13. Chapter 7 shows that Northern Ireland is the stand-out performer with the highest grades even though it is the only administration to have returned fully to 2019 standard. If it had more influence on the UK figures, these would resemble the 2019 pattern rather than that in 2024. Wales's results are similar to England's except that in 2024 grades were brought down, but England's went up.
- 1.14. Again, if Wales had more influence on the UK's results, we would not necessarily be forecasting that those in 2025 will be close to what they were in 2024. But England is the main driver, and its 2024 results are essentially the UK's.

2. Background

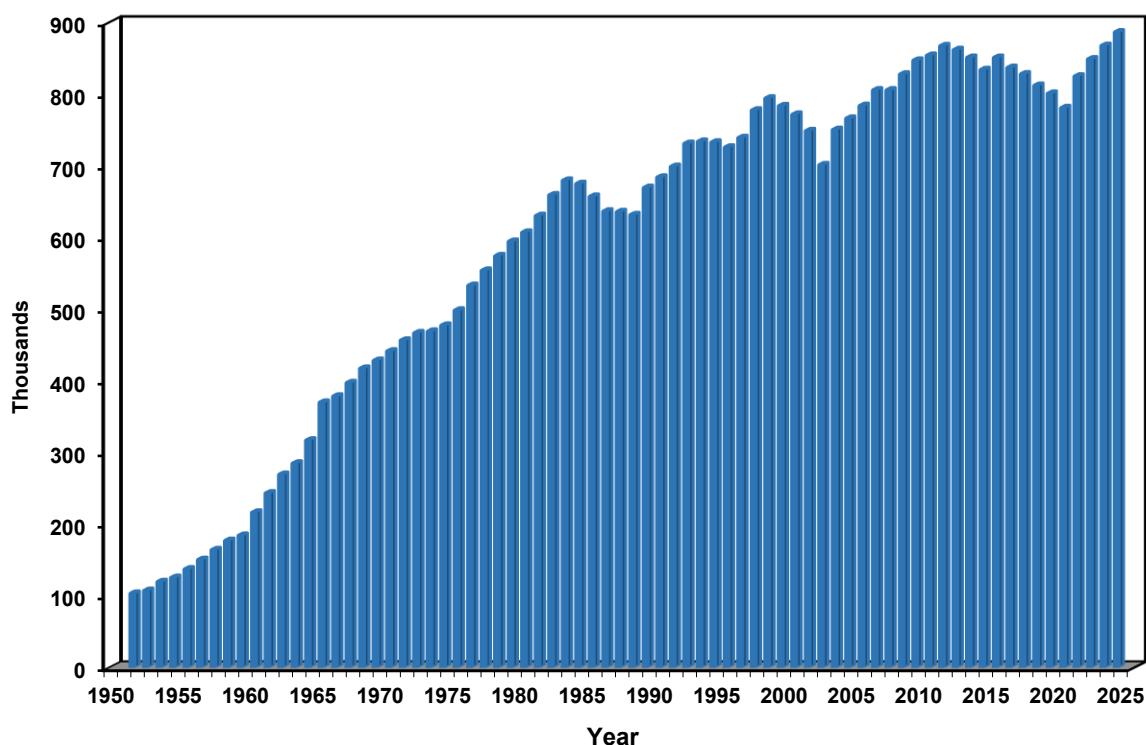
- 2.1. A-level examinations were first held in 1951, along with O-levels as a stepping stone. They replaced the Higher School Certificate and the School Certificate respectively, which were diploma-type awards. This was thought necessary because many pupils were being denied certification because, although they may have done well in parts, they had not met all the requirements. It was generally agreed that a qualification for individual subjects would better reflect attainment.
- 2.2. Originally, A-levels were essentially a pass/fail² award for recognizing school achievement and were not the basis of university admissions. There were only a few universities at the time³ and they conducted their own selection processes, which could consist of exams, interviews or both. In their final year, sixth formers could find themselves travelling around the country to different universities putting their best face forward.
- 2.3. A-levels were taken later in the year and their main purpose in addition to marking achievement was to allocate bursaries and scholarships which were necessary for most young people to cover the costs.. There were high-level A-level papers, known as scholarship papers where success led to the award of a state scholarship. For those not attaining these heights the A-levels the local authorities used the A-levels themselves in allocating their scholarships and bursaries⁴. Receiving a scholarship was sufficiently rare for the successful to make the schools' honours board.
- 2.4. It was not until 1997 that the formal entrance examination was abolished by Oxford University, although A-levels had increasingly come into play. But top grades became so plentiful that in 2004 Oxford reintroduced exams in some departments and many of the top universities have followed it with standardised tests of various types.
- 2.5. Another major development affecting A-levels and GCSEs, the successor to O-levels, was that they, particularly GCSEs, came to be used as an accountability measure. In 1992, the then government began publishing what came to be called 'school league tables' This completely changed how schools and teachers viewed their pupils' results. Instead of them being a mark of pupils' achievement, schools and teachers found themselves being judged by them. Naturally, on finding themselves during the pandemic asked to rate their own performance through the grades awarded through the grades they gave, they went for the highest possible.
- 2.6. Since their inception in 1951, A-levels have grown nearly ninefold, as Figure 2.1 shows. There have been some drops, but the trend has been upward, ever upward. The introduction of alternative technical qualifications, called T-levels, have had little impact so far.

² There was also a 'distinction' for those who had done outstandingly well.

³ Around 20 depending how you count them.

⁴ The Education Act of 1962 mandated local authorities to cover tuition fees and provide maintenance grants if a full-time place was on offer.

Figure 2.1: A-Level Entries



- 2.7. They have also moved a long way from their original purpose of certifying academic achievement. They have become the currency of university admissions, a way of judging schools and teachers, and no longer do they all have an academic focus in the sense of incorporating an established body of knowledge.
- 2.8. When I took my A-levels in 1956 less than half the year group had stayed on beyond the fifth form, and only about half of those taking A-levels were heading towards university. If we fancied a shot, it was up to us to meet the requirements. My teachers were very supportive, but they had no stake in how well I did other than their personal satisfaction.
- 2.9. It is true that the school was in East London and there was a plethora of alternative opportunities, including very attractive offers in the City. I felt no pressure to go on to A-levels and I think this was generally the case. Girls, in particular, were inclined or urged to leave at 16, since common wisdom had it that education was wasted on them as they would not be working for very long, but devoting themselves to husband and family. Even the girls who did go on to higher education, tended to aim for a teacher training rather than university.
- 2.10. Now it is a matter of law that young people continue at school, take an apprenticeship or receive training in the workplace to the age of 18, and most take A-levels. Teachers are held to account for how well their sometimes very unwilling pupils do.
- 2.11. In the transformation of its functions, the A-level has gone through at least five phases which are described in the next chapter.

- 2.12. A-levels and university courses were for many years dominated by men. The University of Cambridge did not grant full degree status to women until 1948. Although other universities began to do so earlier there were often quotas on the numbers accepted. Post the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act the sex balance has gradually been reversed so that now some two-thirds of the places are occupied by females. This has been fuelled by girls outperforming boys at A-level, and universities adding courses that are particularly attractive to them, such as Nursing, the Social Sciences and Media studies. Chapter 6 goes more deeply into the widening gap.
- 2.13. The bodies setting A-levels, the Examination Boards, were originally mainly university based and operated independently. But those in England were brought together under the regulation of Ofqual in 2010, as were those in Wales and Northern Ireland under their own regulators. England's entries account for 92.0 per cent of the UK total, so what happens there tends to be the story for the UK which are usually the main tables published on the annual results day.
- 2.14. This masks what happens in the other two jurisdictions, which particularly for GCSEs have gone in their own directions. They responded differently to the problem of returning the grades awarded to pre-pandemic levels, England taking two years and the other two, three. The 2024 results should have been the year A-level results were restored to stability, but in England the GCSE results from two years previously used for adjusting the grades were still inflated and will have tended to push up the 2024 A-level grades in England. But according to plan they brought down in Wales and Northern Ireland. The differences between the jurisdictions are explored in more detail in Chapter 7.
- 2.15. The pattern of A-levels has changed over the years. Originally sixth formers tended to be on either the arts or the science side and their A-level combinations reflected this. More interest, however, developed in mixed combinations in search of breadth⁵. A government committee⁶ recommended adjusting A-levels to allow for a norm of five subjects to be studied. This, however, was not accepted, the government preferring to introduce half A-levels (AS examinations) and develop General Studies as an A-level promoting breadth. At one stage, this was hugely popular, but now it no longer exists because many universities would not take it seriously as an entry qualification.
- 2.16. More and more subjects have been added to the A-level menu and combinations have become ever more varied. Some new entries have thrived. Psychology, for example, is now the second most frequently taken subject after Maths. But others, such as Critical Thinking and Communication Studies, have foundered.

⁵ The Growth of Mixed A Levels, Alan Smithers and Pamela Robinson, Manchester: Carmichael Press, 1988, ISBN 0-951325-90-6

⁶ Higginson Report (1988). Advancing A Levels. Report of a Committee appointed by the Secretary of State for Education and Science and the Secretary of State for Wales. London: HMSO.

- 2.17. The state of play up to 2024 is considered in Chapter 5. Provisional entries for England published by Ofqual have giving an early sight of 2025 entries are discussed in Chapter 8. The drop in Psychology and Sociology in 2024 has been repeated while the growth Maths, Physics and Chemistry is, if anything, gaining pace. Attempts to shore up French and German with more generous grading appears to have failed.
- 2.18. Meanwhile, as I write, we await the publication of the 2025 A-level results on 14 August. Chapter 3 focuses on what these might be.

3. Trends in A-Level Grades

- 3.1. A-level grades went through the roof in the two years of teacher assessment, with astonishing numbers of A* being awarded. This grade was invented to distinguish top performers - at most 10 per cent of the entries.
- 3.2. But, as Table 3.1 shows, with grades left to the teachers, A* very nearly trebled. A grades rose also. Grades B/C, however, remained more or less unchanged, seemingly having replaced those moved up by receiving those who would have been in lower grades if exams had been held.

Table 3.1: Per Cent A-Level Grades in UK 2019-2024

Grade	2019	2020 ¹	2021 ¹	2022 ²	2023 ³	2024 ⁴
A*	7.7	14.4	19.1	14.6	8.9	9.3
A	17.7	24.2	25.7	21.8	18.3	18.5
B/C	50.5	49.3	43.7	46.2	49.7	48.6

1. Teacher grades.

2. Return to exams but modified; policy in England was to reduce grade half-way to 2019 levels.

3. England aiming to return to 2019 levels, but Northern Ireland and Wales leaving it another year.

4. Intention was to have a grade pattern matching that of 2019 in all three administrations.

- 3.3. Exams did return in 2022, but in modified form to take account of the disruption caused. It was also accepted that to go all the way back down to pre-pandemic grade levels would put the candidates at a disadvantage in competition with those who had benefitted from the teacher bonanza.

3.4. England aimed to fully restore the value of A-levels in 2023, but Northern Ireland and Wales decided to take a year longer. The grades should have been back to normal in 2024 but, in fact, they rose, due to an actual increase in England from which 92 per cent of the entries come. Grades declined in both Northern Ireland and Wales as planned, NI reaching its target and Wales heading in that direction. There has to be the suspicion that the inflation which bedevilled A-level grades in the days before the regulator, Ofqual, may be creeping back in again.

Top Grades

- 3.5. This is borne out if we focus on top grades. Figure 3.1 shows that the trend in top grades in the lifetime of the A grade⁷ is a story in five parts. It begins two years after a formal five-point scale was introduced in 1963. This differentiated pass levels as 'A'-'E', with failing categorised as 'U'. It replaced the three outcomes which had been in place since the first awards in 1951: 'distinction', 'pass' or 'fail'.

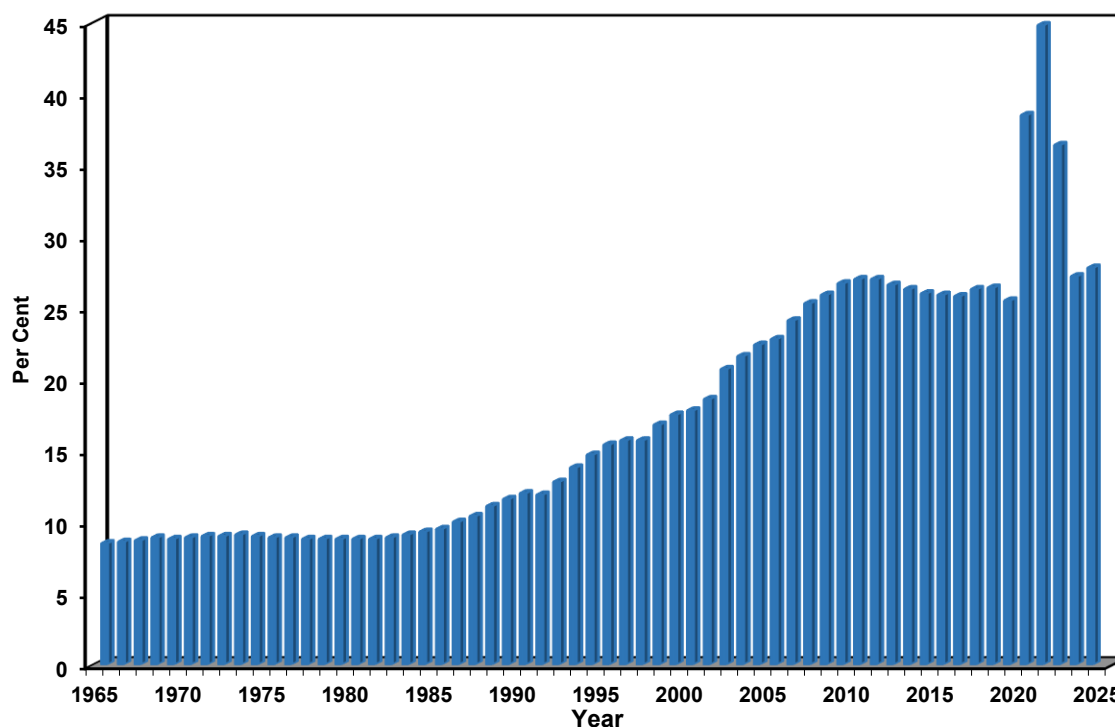
First Phase

- 3.6. At first, there were set proportions for the grades, with an 'A' restricted to a maximum of ten per cent. This ensured that its value was maintained from year-

⁷ Introduced in 1963.

to-year, and provided a means of identifying those most likely to benefit from the scarce university places then available.

Figure 3.1: Trend in A/A* Grades



Second Phase

3.7. The second phase began in 1987 when the basis of grading was changed from fixed proportions to reaching a set standard. As many candidates as could reach it, were awarded the grade. This was thought to offer a greater incentive to those taking the exam to show what they could do. There were also three contextual changes with a bearing on what happened to the results.

- In 1992, the government began publishing schools' A-level and GCSE results which put pressure on them to maximize their pupils' performance.
- The pressure was exacerbated by the new inspectorate, Ofsted, also created in 1992, which used exam results as a major means of judging schools and teachers.
- A third change was the expansion of higher education, greatly increasing the need for suitably qualified applicants.

3.8. It should not be surprising⁸ that, as Figure 3.1 shows, in the 24 years from 1987 to 2010 a near trebling of A grades (from 10.4 to 27 per cent) occurred. This

⁸ It must be remembered that the grades awarded DO NOT show how well the candidate cohort has done. The exam boards can set them where they want them to be by adjusting the threshold for converting the marks to grades. A score of 67 per cent can be an 'A' if the threshold is set at 65 per cent or a 'B' if is set at 70 per cent.

extraordinary and continuing growth, however, led to increasing concern about grade inflation. An embryonic independent regulator was set up in England within the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in 2008. And on 1 April 2010 it became Ofqual (the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation in England), an independent body in its own right.

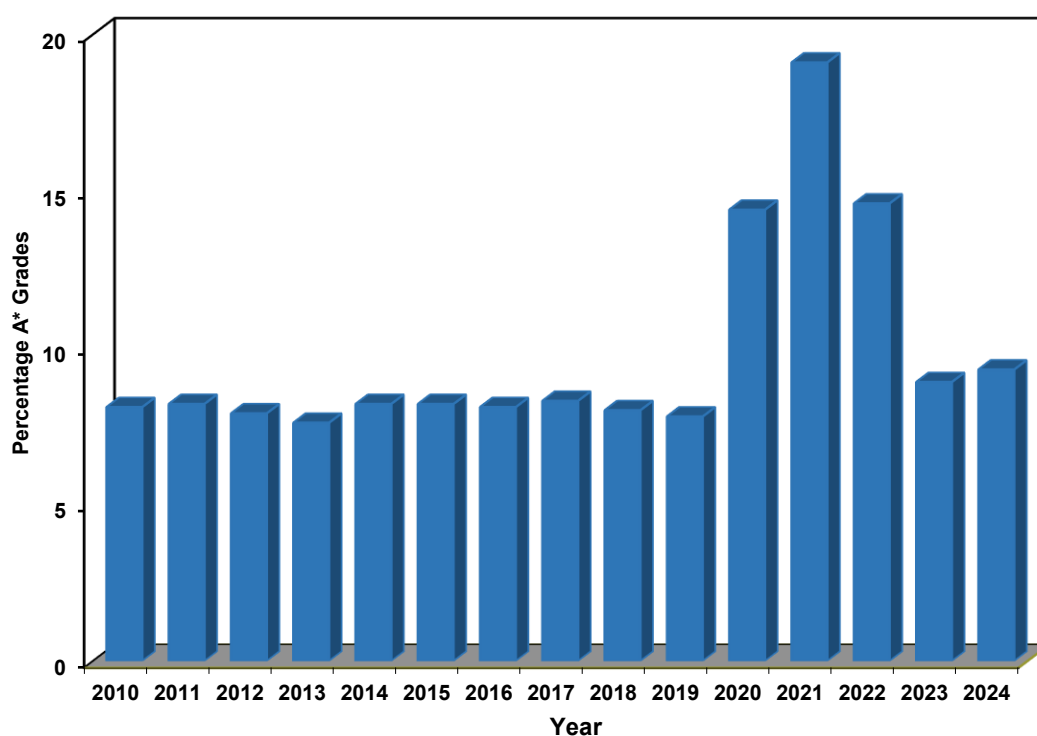
Third Phase

- 3.9. The new body was charged with bringing grade inflation under control, and it established the principle of ‘comparable outcomes’, that results should remain consistent from year to year. This involved the grade pattern being held stable while using performance at GCSE to adjust for any differences between cohorts. Although strongly denied by Ofqual, this was in effect a return to fixed proportions of grades, but at a much higher level than before.
- 3.10. The third phase is thus the impact of ‘comparable outcomes’. ‘A’ grades were kept in check from 2011 to 2019, during which the proportion awarded drifted downwards from 27.0 to 25.5 per cent, and the days of rampant grade inflation appeared to be over.

Fourth Phase

- 3.11. But then in 2020 Covid struck, and the regulator and exam boards blundered into what we distinguish as the fourth phase. The planned exams had to be abandoned. Ofqual had developed a statistical replacement, but at the last moment it was found not to work. This left the government urgently needing a means of enabling the allocation of university places. It decided it had no alternative but to accept teachers’ predicted grades as the actual grades.
- 3.12. There is inevitably an element of exaggeration in predicted grades as teachers naturally want to present their pupils in the best possible light. But its extent had not been foreseen. Top grades exploded. The 25.5 per cent awarded in 2019 became 38.6 per cent in 2020, and reached 44.8 per cent in 2021.
- 3.13. There had been every intention of bringing back examinations in 2021, but again it was eventually accepted that it would not be possible. The decision was, however, taken sufficiently early in the school year for a systematic approach to be put in place. One might have supposed that the grades would drop back. But, in fact, the opposite occurred. Nearly half of the entries were awarded a top grade. It appears that more teachers had cottoned on to the fact that they were able to do what they liked. Given that they and their schools were judged on the basis of the top grades awarded, can it be a surprise that they went for it?
- 3.14. The impact of teacher grading is even clearer if we focus on just A* grades. In order to compensate for about a quarter of the entries being awarded an ‘A’, in 2010 a starred A was brought in to distinguish once again the top ten per cent. Figure 3.2 shows that from 2010 to 2019 ‘comparable outcomes’ kept it in check. But then with teacher grading, A* grades soared to 14.4 per cent in 2020 and went even higher in 2021 to all-but double to 19.1 per cent.

Figure 3.2: Percentage A* Grades



- 3.15. In 2022 the return to examinations - albeit modified - brought the percentage down to 14.6 and it dropped further in 2023 to 8.9 per cent, not quite as low as 2019, but less than 10 per cent. In 2024, however, instead of dropping to the pre-Covid plateau, it rose to a level higher than all of them. Possible reasons are suggested when we come to consider the fifth phase.

Fifth Phase

- 3.16. The return to examinations is our fifth phase. Education is a devolved area, and England, Wales and Northern Ireland handled the return to pre-Covid stability differently. But if their policies had been fully implemented, a further drop in A grades would have taken place in 2024. In fact, top grades in the UK, as Figure 3.1 shows, actually rose. England was the driver. Northern Ireland did reach the target of returning to 2019 levels, but entries there amount to only 3.7 per cent of the total. In Wales, top grades also fell, but not back as far as in 2019.
- 3.17. We don't know the reason for the unexpected outcome. It is possible that, in England, because 'comparable outcomes' takes into account GCSE results from two years before, the A-level grades in 2024 were affected by the softened approach used in 2022 to ease pupils back into examinations. But it could be associated with a government-led increase in the grades awarded in some languages, to a swing to high-awarding subjects, or a teacher-assessment legacy, for all of which there is evidence. Or it could be that Ofqual and the exam boards were sympathetic in view of all the disruption the young people had experienced. We know how popular top grades are with schools, pupils and their parents, and we saw in Phase 2 how these rise when left unchecked.

4. Grades by Subject

Highest and Lowest Subjects for A*

- 4.1. There is wide variation in the A-level grades awarded in different subjects. Table 4.1 shows the top and bottom performers in 2024 out of the 37 subject areas. The highest percentage of A* grades was nearly 40 and the lowest next to zero.

Table 4.1: UK A-Level Grades 2024

Subject	A*	A*/A	A*-C
Top Five for A*			
Other Modern Languages	38.7	68.3	94.1
Further Maths	28.7	58.4	89.8
Maths	16.9	42.0	76.7
German	16.6	48.0	88.4
Art & Design Studies	13.9	31.9	85.9
Bottom Five for A*			
English Language & Literature	4.2	14.5	76.4
Business Studies	4.1	16.2	74.5
English Language	2.3	11.6	76.4
Media/Film/TV	2.2	13.5	80.4
Health & Social Care ¹	0.6	16.7	87.1
All Subjects	9.3	27.8	76.4

1. This is the single award. There is also a double award with a very small entry where no candidate was awarded an A*.

- 4.2. The main drivers of this extraordinary gap are special circumstances, perceived usefulness, intrinsic factors, and the ability of the candidates.
- 4.3. The top performing subject in 2024 was ‘Other Modern Languages’, a collection of languages available alongside Spanish, French, and German. In 2024, it included 14 languages, of which those with the most entries were Chinese, Russian, Polish, Arabic and Italian. They are mainly taken by native speakers, so it should be no surprise that 94 per cent obtained at least a ‘C’ grade.
- 4.4. ‘Other Modern Languages’ overtook Further Maths as the top performer in 2023 and retained that position in 2024. Further Maths is generally considered to be the hardest subject, but those sitting it frequently get outstanding grades because they choose it, having learned from their experience of maths that it is something at which they can excel. It also has right answers which give the examiners the confidence to use the whole range of marks from zero to 100, while in more subjective subjects they tend to play safe by bunching results around the average.
- 4.5. Maths itself comes next, with Table 4.1 showing a bipolar distribution. The nature of the subject is such as to find you out. If you can do it, you can get near perfect marks; if you can’t there is no way of fudging it and you are doomed to a poor showing. Hence the large percentages being awarded A* but also D & below.

- 4.6. German reaches its highest position due to an administrative change in 2019 when Ofqual, the regulator, was persuaded to attempt to make French and German more attractive by awarding more top grades. These have duly ensued with German fourth and French sixth for top grades out of the 37 subjects. Their entries have continued to fall, however, and leaving aside Irish and Welsh, only three subjects⁹ have fewer entries than German.
- 4.7. Art and Design Studies comes fifth which is interesting because it is an interpretative subject area. The confidence to award top grades must come from a high level of agreement as to what constitutes excellence. It must also attract genuinely gifted students.
- 4.8. At the other end of the scale is Health and Social Care with the lowest percentages of the top grade. Only 0.6 per cent of the students taking the single award in 2024 attained the top grade and none passed the double award at this level. On the other hand, 87 per cent passed with at least a ‘C’, higher than most other subjects including two of the top five. It looks as though most candidates are content to pass at this level, presumably because it opens the door to what they want to do.
- 4.9. Business studies is another job-related qualification among the bottom five, but this time without the good showing at grade C and above. English Language and English Language & Literature are also in the bottom five. This is in marked contrast to English Literature which is squeezed out of the top ten by 0.1 of a percentage point. The ability of the candidates is a likely reason for the contrast. Media/Film/TV studies is the second lowest performer which probably reflects the lack of clarity about what they actually are and where they are intended to lead.

Table 4.2: Top A-Level Subjects at A* in UK in 2024

Subject	2024	2020 ¹	2015 ²	2010 ³
Other Modern Languages	38.7	31.3	15.0	13.8
Further Maths	28.7	41.8	29.0	29.9
Maths	16.9	23.8	17.7	17.2
German	16.6	23.4	8.3	9.9
Art & Design Studies	13.9	17.5	11.8	13.3
French	12.1	20.4	8.1	7.7
Physics	11.3	17.4	9.7	10.3
Spanish	10.9	21.7	8.1	8.5
Classical Subjects	9.9	21.4	10.0	9.6
Chemistry	9.8	14.8	9.4	9.3
All Subjects	9.3	14.4	8.2	8.1

1. In 2020's top ten Irish (21.9) and English Literature (14.9) would have displaced Physics and Chemistry.

2. In 2015 Biology (9.1) scored higher than French or Spanish.

3. In 2010, the first year of A*, Other Science Subjects (9.5), Economics (8.8) would have been in the top ten, and Political Studies (8.7) Irish (8.5) and Biology (8.0) were also above French.

⁹ Health and Social Care, Performing/Expressive Arts and Digital Technology.

Changes in Top Ten

- 4.10. Table 4.2 traces how the top ten A-levels for A* has changed since its inception in 2010 to have a grade once more to mark outstanding performance. It shows there has been a stable core subjects with some movement at the edges.
- 4.11. The impact of the adjustment to produce more top grades for German and French emerges strongly, with German now fourth and French sixth. In 2010, French and Spanish were out of the top ten, with French down in 15th spot.

Performative and Objective Subjects

- 4.12. Top grades increased markedly when exams were replaced by teacher assessment during the pandemic. Not only were they elevated generally, but the subjects fared differently. There was a sharp contrast between those, such as Maths, Physics and Chemistry where there are right answers, and those, like Performing/Expressive Arts, Drama and Music where quality is a matter of judgement.

Table 4.3: A*/A Grades in 2019-2024 for Selected Subjects

Selected Subjects	Year			Difference in Percentage Points		
	2019	2021	2024	2019-21	2021-24	2019-24
<i>Performative Subjects</i>						
Media/Film/TV Studies	11.0	29.6	13.5	18.6	-16.1	2.5
Physical Education	14.7	43.5	18.8	28.8	-24.7	4.1
Drama	18.0	48.8	22.3	30.8	-26.5	4.3
Music	19.3	54.8	24.2	35.5	-30.6	4.9
Performing/Expressive Arts	24.0	51.1	27.6	27.1	-23.5	3.6
Average	17.4	45.6	21.3	28.3	-24.3	3.9
<i>Objective Subjects</i>						
Mathematics (Further)	53.1	75.5	58.4	22.4	-17.1	5.3
Mathematics	40.5	55.2	42.0	14.7	-13.2	1.5
Physics	27.5	46.8	31.9	19.3	-14.9	4.4
Chemistry	28.4	48.6	32.7	20.2	-15.9	4.3
Other Physical Sciences	27.2	36.2	24.0	9.0	-12.2	-3.2
Average	35.3	52.5	37.8	17.2	-14.7	2.5
All Subjects	25.5	44.8	27.8	19.3	-17.0	2.3

- 4.13. Before Covid many more top grades were awarded in quantitative subjects This is probably because there are right answers which give examiners the confidence to use the whole mark scale, whereas in performative subjects, with marking a matter of judgement, examiners tend to be more cautious and give marks more bunched around the middle. With a high-score cut-off as must be for A*, inevitably candidates in quantitative subjects fare better.
- 4.14. All this changed in the enforced switch to teacher assessment. In every subject, top grades shot up, but the performative subjects benefitted much more. Table 4.3 shows that their A*/A grades increased by three times¹⁰ as much as the objective

¹⁰ 162% against 49%.

subjects. In fact, they rose to the extent that the gap between them and the objective subjects disappeared.

- 4.15. Getting back to the pre-pandemic stability has proved difficult. After notable reductions in 2022 and 2023, top grades actually rose in England in 2024 when the policy dictated that they should fall to pre-Covid levels. This unexpected result seems to have been due to subjective subjects retaining some of the uplift they got from teacher assessment, higher grades being built in to French and German, and the swing towards high scoring subjects such as Further Maths, Maths and Physics.
- 4.16. It may be that grades never get back to what was regarded as the norm before the Covid crisis, and 2024 has set the new benchmark.

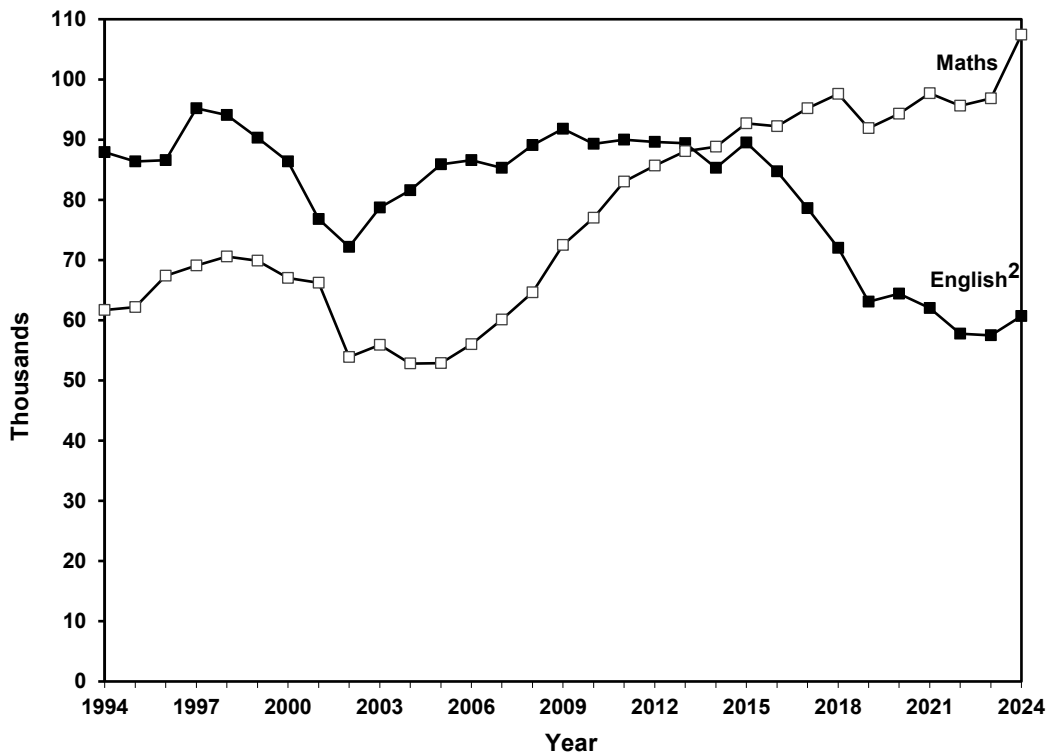
5. Subject Entries

- 5.1. The number of entries also vary widely with subject. Figures 5.1 - 5.4 trace the trends for English and maths, modern languages, social sciences, and thenatural sciences, respectively. They have been compiled from the Joint Qualifications Council’s figures which they publish in August each year as part of the A-level results.

English & Maths

- 5.2. One or other of English or maths has been the most frequently taken A-level for the past 30 years. For the first twenty, it was English (literature, language, and combined), but in the last decade it has plummeted. There was some suggestion of the decline tailing off in 2023, and the 2024 data do point to an increase.

Figure 5.1: English and Maths Entries¹



1. Numbers sitting the examination in August as published by the JCQ.

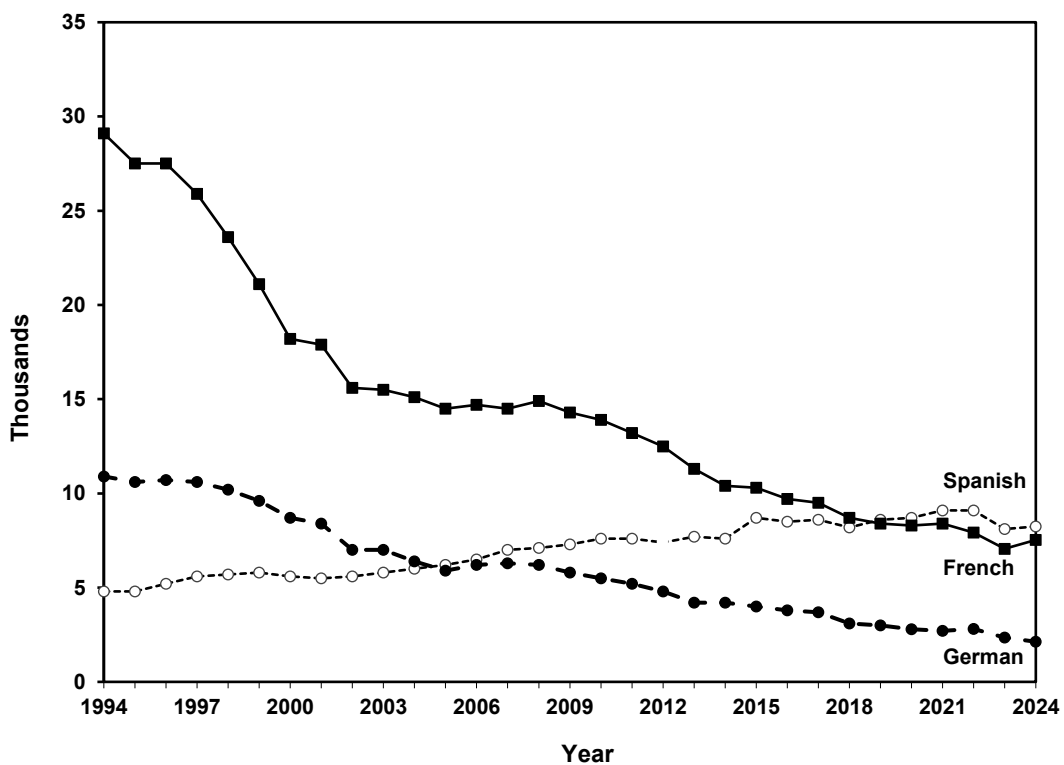
2. Total entries for Literature, Language, and Language & Literature.

- 5.3. Maths has continued to grow becoming the most-frequently taken A-level in 2014. The 2024 figures show a further sizeable increase jumping 12 percentage points from 2023. Its lift-off in 2005 can be traced to the easing of maths exams following the Dearing reforms of 2000 responding to the claim that A-level maths was too hard. There has also been a major push to increase entries to maths and the sciences, by emphasizing their importance to the country and their value in the jobs market.

Languages

- 5.4. English has not been the only language to have fallen sharply. Figure 5.2 shows that both French and German have been in steep decline for the past thirty years. The number sitting French fell rapidly from 1993 to 2002, but then there were signs of levelling off, but the descent resumed in 2008. This is associated with the decision in 2004 to make taking a foreign language at GCSE optional. This led to a sharp fall in entries and pulled the ladder from under language A-levels. The attempt to boost GCSE language take-up through making it part of an EBacc award soon stalled.
- 5.5. French continued its downward path from 2008 and the number sitting in 2024 was less than a quarter of what it had been in 1993, even with an occasional small increase. German has fallen to an even greater extent. The 2024 entrants were only about a fifth of those sitting in 1993. German is now among the least frequently taken of the 37 A-level subjects. If Irish and Welsh are left to one side only Performing/Expressive Arts, Digital Technology, and Health & Social Care come below it.

Figure 5.2: Modern Languages Entries



- 5.6. Spanish has bucked the trend. Since 1993, as Chart 5.2 shows, entries have doubled, and it has taken over from French as the most frequently taken language at A-level. But, like the other two languages, it fell in 2023 and only picked up slightly in 2024.
- 5.7. There are several possible reasons for the reluctance to learn a foreign language. It could be because English is a world language, and the British take it for granted that the people of other countries can speak it. Spanish is also a world language

and that may have contributed to its increasing popularity. It could also be that there is a vicious cycle whereby too few passes at A-level makes it difficult to fill the places at university, so the pool from which home-grown teachers can be drawn is very small. The lack of good teachers will impact on the subject's attractiveness and quality. But around the world there are, of course, many native speakers of these languages and our schools recruit directly from them.

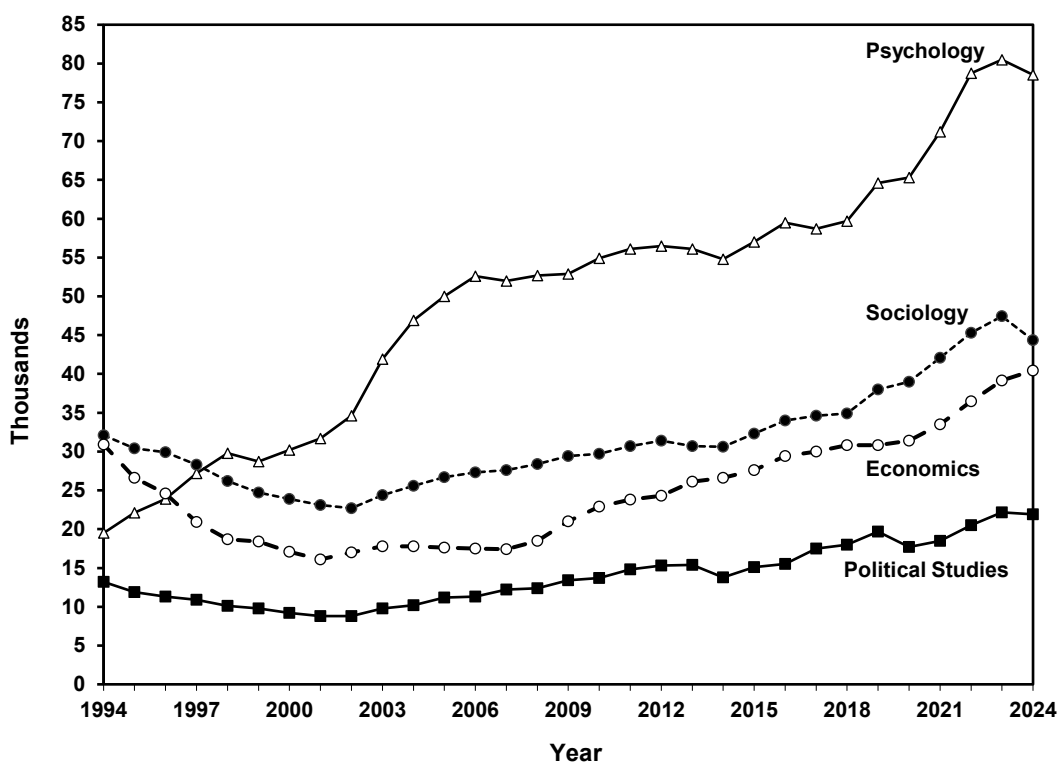
- 5.8. Another contributory factor to the poor take-up could be that in Britain teaching of languages has until recently not started till secondary school, when receptivity is much less than it is in young children. The Conservative government, however, did make a modern foreign language part of the Key Stage 2 curriculum, and if it catches on will provide a foundation from which languages at GCSE and A-levels could grow. But it was cut off at the neck by the decision dating from 2004 to make the taking of a language at GCSE optional.
- 5.9. The Coalition Government (2010-15) tried to encourage pupils to take at least one foreign language at GCSE by making it a core subject for the Ebacc performance measure which it introduced. Ambitious targets were set, and schools were made accountable for meeting them. But while no difficulty was found in getting close to 100 per cent for the four other subjects, there was stubborn resistance to taking a foreign language and entries plateaued at about two-fifths of pupils. The EBacc targets were missed by a country mile.

Social Sciences

- 5.10. The other side of the coin from languages is social sciences. As Chart 5.3 shows, there was almost continual growth in Psychology from its first entries till last year, but in 2024 it fell. In round figures entries have quadrupled from nearly 20,000 to over 80,000 in 2023. In spite of the dip in 2024, it stands behind only maths in the list of most frequently taken A-levels.
- 5.11. One can speculate that the great appeal of psychology has something to do with it appearing to offer insights into some of the great questions of life, such as the nature of consciousness, what lies behind human behaviour, and making sense of human interaction. The search for meaning has become ever more important with the decline of religious faith in much of the Western world. It is also true that psychology is not an exact, replicable subject in the way that maths, the physical sciences, and languages are, so there is less risk of being exposed as someone who cannot really do it. This perhaps gives it appeal to a broader range of students.
- 5.12. Sociology has similarly climbed, although more slowly, to become the seventh most frequently taken subject. It too, however, has fallen back in 2024. One can see the appeal of a discipline which appears to offer an understanding of the structure of society and ways to change it. Potential activists are likely to treat as a training ground.
- 5.13. Political studies, while slower to take off than psychology and sociology, has been progressing steadily with numbers more than doubling from 2001 to 2023, but again dropping back in 2024. Politics is now constantly in the spotlight which makes the systematic study of it appealing, especially to those who see it as the

path to power. Both sociology and political studies, like psychology, are a mix of the arts and sciences, so there is always room for generalists.

Figure 5.3: Social Science Entries



- 5.14. Economics as a largely quantitative subject does not sit easily in this group and perhaps it is wrong to place it here. While it has grown since the turn of the century, this reverses the decline from 1992 to 2001 with A-level entries then dropping from 40,200 to 16,100. In 2024, there was an increase to 40,451 entries taking it above the initial figure for the first time.
- 5.15. The pivotal year for all the social sciences was 2002, which is when their growth took off. In that year the new fully modularised courses came on stream, which seems to have made these subjects more appealing. Another factor was the great expansion of provision and Blair’s target of half of 18-30-year-olds to go on to higher education. This brought in many young people without the interest or talents required to take the traditional subjects to a high level, so they looked further afield. Growth was temporarily halted in 2019 when the Gove reforms brought back end-of-course exams, but soon took off again.

Natural Sciences

- 5.16. The natural sciences have also seen increases in recent years with Biology the most popular, followed by Chemistry, with Physics some way behind. Gordon Brown, in 2004, when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer, incentivised schools to return to the separate sciences at GCSE as part of his Science Investment Strategy. Figure 5.4 shows that this led to increased science A-level take-up in the years which followed.

5.17. There were falls from 2015 along with the smaller cohort, but with the introduction of the reformed A-levels in 2017 numbers picked up again.

Figure 5.4: Natural Science Entries

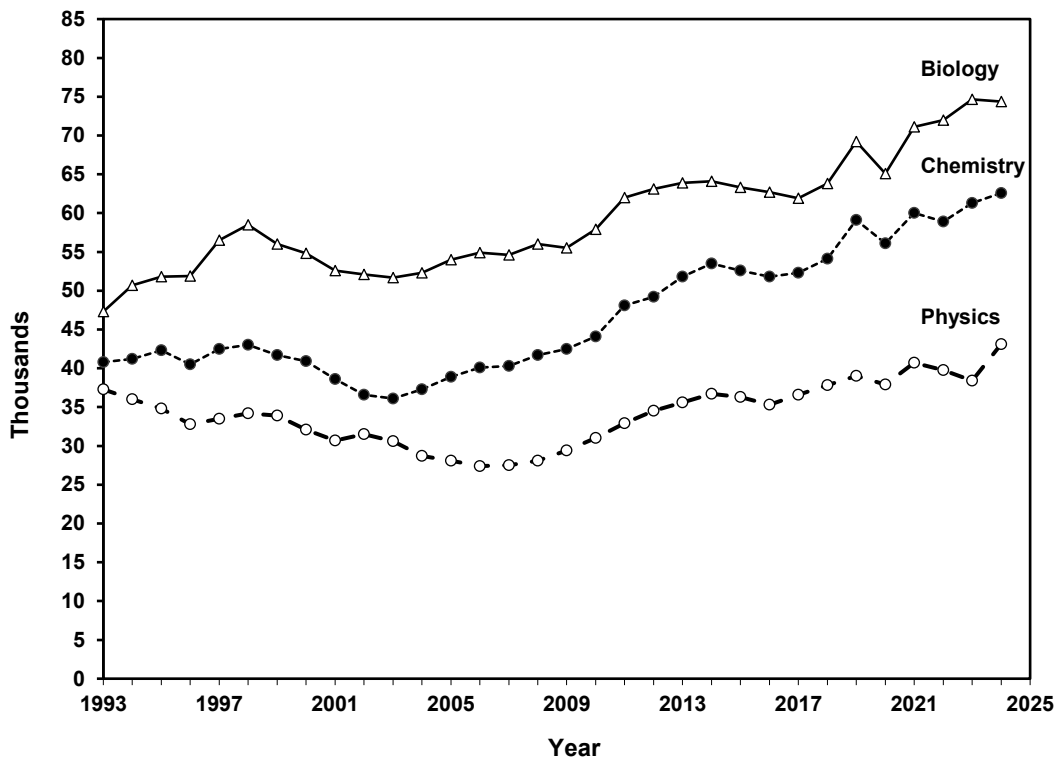
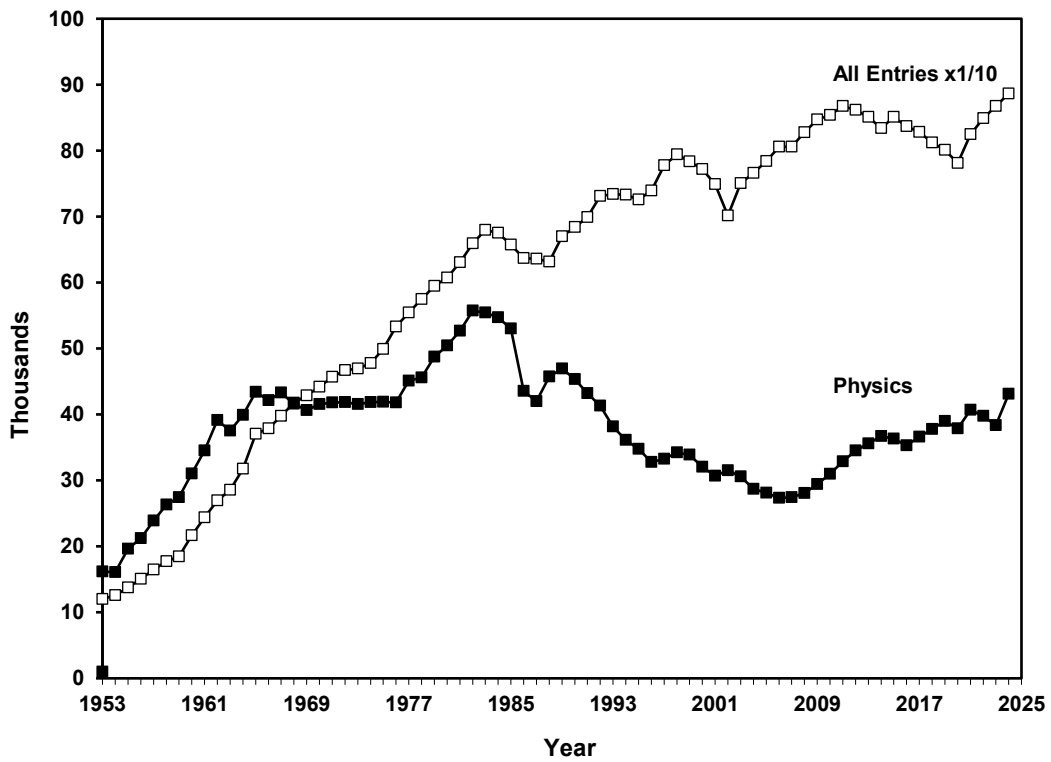


Figure 5.5: A-Level Physics Actual Entries 1953-2024

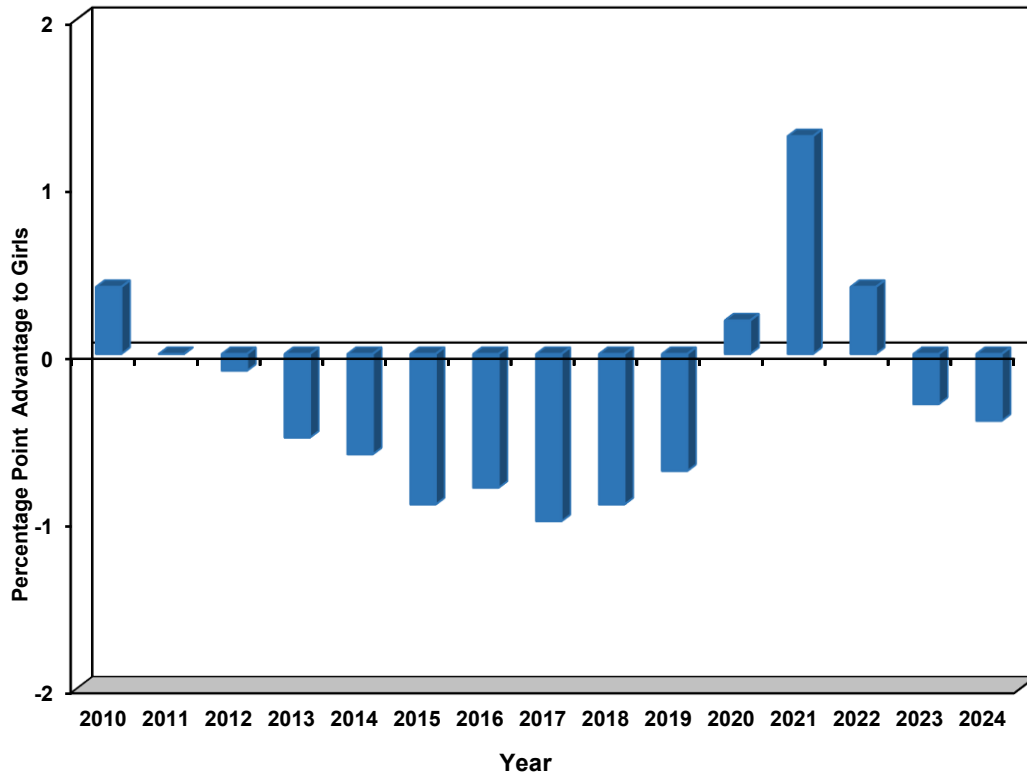


- 5.18. In Figure 5.5 we take the long view of physics entries in comparison with total entries. It shows that for the first dozen years it kept pace with the growth of A-levels as a whole and then plateaued around 40 thousand before hitting a peak of 55 thousand in the early 1980s. But then it parted company with the growth of A-levels overall and lost almost half its entries from 1986 to 2006. Since then, there has been a climb back and a spurt in 2024 has taken it up to its 1986 level.
- 5.19. The slump in physics occurred following the introduction of GCSEs in 1986 and the National Curriculum in 1988. They became caught up a determined attempt to end the teaching of the separate sciences before the age of 16, combining them instead into general science. The separate sciences survived only because the independent schools fought hard to retain them. Most state schools went with the flow.
- 5.20. A-level physics, reputedly hard, went into decline because combined science did not give the pupils a realistic opportunity of discovering whether they were any good at it and whether they liked it. The situation was exacerbated by combined science being mainly taught by biology teachers since there was an acute shortage of physics specialists.
- 5.21. As already noted, the separate sciences at GCSE level were saved by Gordon Brown in 2004. A-level physics began to recover almost immediately, and there has since been a long climb back. It got reached its 1986 level in 2024. The provisional entries for 2025 (see Chapter 8) show another big increase, making it the seventh most frequently taken subject.

6. Grades by Sex

- 6.1. Boys are now greatly outperformed at A-level by girls, but one bright spot for them has been their superiority at A*. Almost from the first year this award, as Figure 6.1 shows, they have been ahead.

Figure 6.1: Trend in Sex Difference¹ at A*



1. Girls' average minus the boys' average, so a lead for boys is shown below the zero line.

- 6.2. In part, this is because boys tend to gravitate in much larger numbers to high scoring subjects like the two Maths and Physics. Girls, on the other hand, are very much in the majority in low-scoring subjects such as Psychology, Sociology and Drama. but not to the extent they once were.
- 6.3. This picture radically changed in 2020 with the enforced switch to teacher assessment. Girls overtook boys at the A* grade in 2020, and in 2021 went ahead by the largest margin of either sex in the lifetime of the award. Table 6.2 shows this was not just down to teachers awarding more top grades to subjects favoured by girls, but girls overtaking boys within subjects.
- 6.4. Girls even got more A* than boys in Maths and Further maths, and were ahead in all but three subjects areas - Chemistry, 'Other Sciences', and French – out of the 37. Even in these the gap was reduced. This dramatic turn-around was brought about by the enforced change to teacher assessment. Even the modified exams of 2022 called a halt. With the resumption of full-blown examinations in England in

2023, boys went in front once more. The lead was extended when Wales and Northern Ireland returned to normal in 2024, but not to the extent it once was.

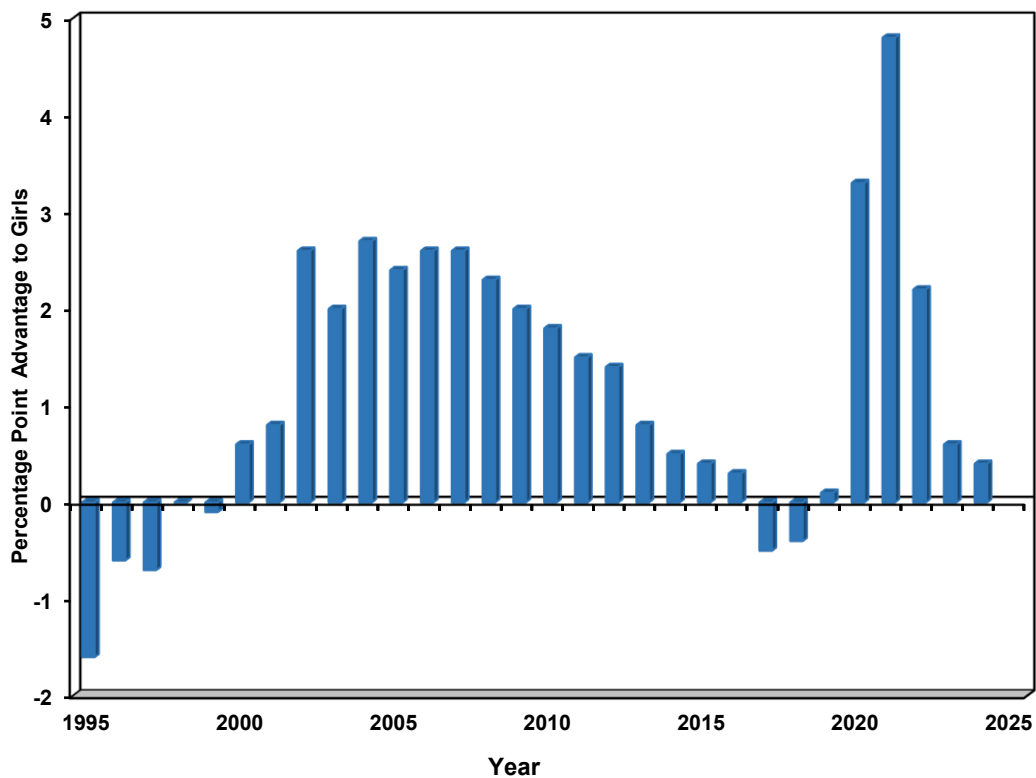
Table 6.1: Gender Differences at A* Grade

Subject	2019		2021		2023		2024	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
<i>Performative Subjects</i>								
Media/Film/TV Studies	1.1	1.9	5.1	10.2	1.1	3.0	1.2	3.0
Physical Education	2.5	6.1	11.5	27.0	4.0	9.0	3.3	8.2
Drama	3.0	4.8	15.8	22.2	4.4	6.0	4.1	6.5
Music	5.2	3.7	23.1	24.4	6.6	6.8	7.8	5.7
Performing/Expressive Arts	1.8	7.7	19.7	21.1	6.8	8.7	4.9	7.9
<i>Maths & Physical Sciences</i>								
Mathematics (Further)	25.8	22.1	49.1	50.7	30.6	25.8	29.6	26.3
Mathematics	16.1	14.0	28.5	29.1	18.2	15.4	18.0	14.9
Physics	8.8	8.5	20.9	25.3	11.7	10.0	11.5	10.5
Chemistry	8.7	6.6	20.2	19.0	11.5	8.1	10.9	8.1
Other Physical Sciences	7.2	4.0	14.6	13.5	10.8	7.0	9.9	5.9
All Subjects	8.2	7.5	18.4	19.7	9.1	8.8	9.5	9.1

Trend in A*/A Grades

6.5. The impact of teacher assessment is also evident in the sex difference at A*/A. Figure 6.2, shows how the direction and size of the advantage have fluctuated.

Figure 6.2: Trend in Sex Gap at A*/A



- 6.6. In the mid-nineties, boys were ahead, but the modularisation of A-levels in the early 21st century led to girls taking a lead. The Gove-Gibb return to end-of-course examinations during the Coalition Government of 2010-15 reduced the lead and boys even went ahead briefly.
- 6.7. But that lead was short-lived, ended by the emergency use of teacher assessment in the Covid years when it was deemed impossible to hold exams. Figure 6.2 shows girls leapt into leads of 3.2 percentage points in 2020 and 4.8 percentage points in 2021. These were halved in 2023 on the return to exams modified to take into account of Covid disruption. It was reduced further in 2023 and 2024 on the return to full exams.
- 6.8. The question for 2025 is will boys resume the lead at this level?

7. England, Wales and Northern Ireland

- 7.1. The main results published by the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) on A-level-day in August are for all UK candidates. But it must be remembered that the examinations come under three different jurisdictions. While the exams in England are the responsibility of the national government, Wales and Northern Ireland have their own administrations, regulatory bodies, and examination boards. Although A-levels in the different nations are treated as the same, they follow different syllabuses and are examined in different ways.
- 7.2. The three jurisdictions have also handled the return to examinations in their own ways. The intention in England was to get back to the standards of the decade before Covid in 2023. But Wales and Northern Ireland left it until 2024.

Table 7.1: A*/A Grades 2019-2024 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

Country	2019	% A*/A			% Point Change	
		2021	2023	2024	2019-21	2021-24
England	25.2	44.3	26.5	27.6	19.1	-16.7
Wales	27.0	50.8	34.0	29.9	23.8	-20.9
Northern Ireland	30.9	48.3	37.5	30.3	17.4	-18.0
UK	25.5	44.8	27.2	27.8	19.3	-17.0

- 7.3. The effects of the different policies can be seen in Table 7.1. While A*/A grades in England were brought back in 2023 to within 1.3 percentage points of where they were in 2019, Wales and Northern Ireland were still awarding, respectively, 7.0 and 6.6 percentage points more. This was reversed in 2024 when Northern Ireland reduced the percentage to below where it was in 2019 and Wales cut the gap to 2.9 percentage points. Conversely, in England it widened to 2.4 percentage points. It looks as if there are going to be more top grades than pre-pandemic. A new norm seems to be emerging of between 27 and 28 per cent.
- 7.4. If we broaden the range of grades considered to A* - C, we can see that the effect of teacher assessment was mainly on the top grades. In the case of 'C' and above they were returned in 2024 to within about half of a percentage point of where they were in 2019.

Table 7.2: A*-C Grades 2019-2024 in the Three Nations

Country	2019	% A*-C			% Point Change	
		2021	2023	2024	2019-21	2021-24
England	75.5	88.2	75.4	76.0	12.7	-12.2
Wales	76.3	89.2	78.9	76.5	12.9	-12.7
Northern Ireland	84.8	94.6	87.3	85.1	9.8	-9.5
UK	75.8	88.5	76.0	76.4	12.7	-12.1

- 7.5. In Figures 7.1 and 7.2 we take a longer view graphically. The impact of teacher assessment on top grades stands out starkly in all three jurisdictions. Northern

Ireland is the top performer perhaps due to its grammar schools system, but Wales and England close the gap somewhat during the years of teacher assessment.

Figure 7.1: Trends in A*/A Grades

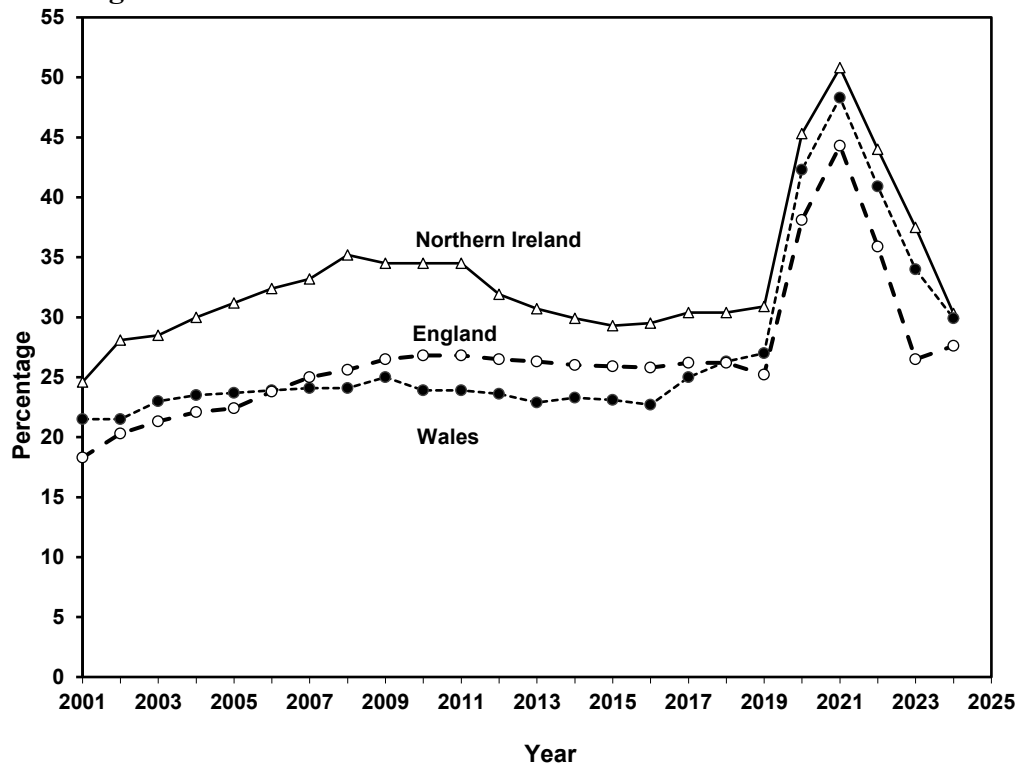
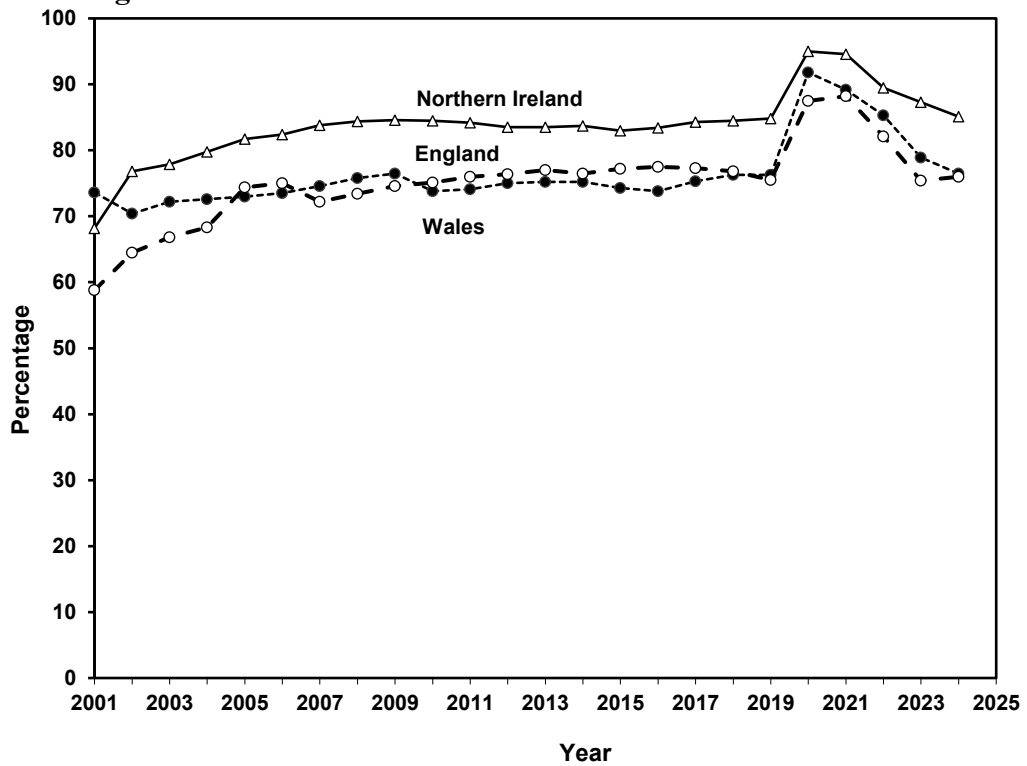


Figure 7.2: Trends in A*-C Grades



- 7.6. Northern Ireland is the only jurisdiction to reduce the percentage of A*/A grades awarded to 2019 levels. England instead of dropping further in 2024 to return to pre-Covid levels actually saw them rise. In terms of A*-C grades, both Northern Ireland and Wales get back to where they were, but again England shows an increase. And because of the size of its entry, it is England from which the overall picture for the UK comes.

8. Provisional Entries 2025

- 8.1 Each year Ofqual publishes in May/June the provisional A-level entries in England. We thus have a preview of the actual exam entries. Not everyone who has been provisionally entered actually sits the examination, but the absentees amount to only about one per cent of the total.¹¹

Provisional Entries in England 2025

- 8.2 The June 2025 provisional figures allow us to see how the trends of Chapter 5 develop. Table 8.1 shows how the four subject groups we have focused on fare. In the core subjects, maths continues to bound ahead, but English continues to decline after an increase in 2024. French and German, which also grew last year, fall once again. Spanish, however, continues its climb which has taken it to become the most frequently taken language.

Table 8.1: Provisional A-Level Entries in England

Subject	Entries in Thousands		Change	
	2024	2025	Difference	%
Mathematics ¹	101.23	105.76	4.53	4.5
English ²	56.75	53.99	-2.76	-4.9
French	7.04	6.45	-0.59	-8.4
German	2.28	2.13	-0.15	-6.6
Spanish	7.72	7.83	0.11	1.4
Psychology	76.13	73.57	-2.56	-3.4
Sociology	42.58	42.04	-0.54	-1.3
Economics	39.66	41.88	2.22	5.6
Political Studies	20.42	20.84	0.42	2.1
Biology	69.05	66.10	-2.95	-4.3
Chemistry	58.85	59.85	1.00	1.7
Physics	40.32	42.03	1.71	4.2
Computing	19.5	19.01	-0.49	-2.5
All Subjects	825,390	821,875	-3,515	-0.4
18-Year-Olds	655,635	680,553	24,918	3.8

1. Does not include Further Maths.

2. Entries for English Literature, English Language, and English Literature & Language are combined.

Sources: Ofqual (June 2024 and June 2025 Provisional Entries for GCSE, AS and A-Level, Summer 2023 Exam Series. England only.

- 8.3 The 2025 provisional entries show that the swing to Physics and Chemistry, as well as maths, continues, reflecting the promotion of these quantitative subjects. But the decline of Biology, Psychology and Sociology begun in 2023 proceeded. The first two, however, remain the most frequently taken subjects after Maths.

¹¹ In 2023, 98.88% of the provisional entries in England sat the exams.

8.4 As someone with who has engaged with all of these these subjects at degree level. I wonder if there is growing recognition that the social sciences promise more than they can deliver, whereas the quantitative may be hard but they are meaningful. Economics and political studies continued their long-term recovery from their slump at the turn of the century.
