

GCSE PROSPECTS 2025
Back To Normal?

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Summary

GCSE grades are settling down after the chaos of Covid. Top grades in 2024 were up by only a percentage point, but since there were over six million entries this was, in fact, 61,869 more top grades. These included a 52 per cent increase in the pinnacle - straight nines in at least seven subjects. The 4/C pass rate was also up.

There was wide variation in the subject grades, with 'Other Modern Languages', Additional Maths and the sciences notably high scorers. In contrast, passes were concentrated around 4/C in the occupationally relevant GCSEs, such as Hospitality and Leisure & Tourism, derived from defunct vocational qualifications. Their take-up is very poor and the lack of a platform in Key Stage 4 may be why T-levels post-16 have been so slow to take off.

Among the lowest performers were Maths and English whose scores were brought down by compulsory re-sits. Shockingly, only about a fifth of those repeating gain a bare pass. While well intentioned, the government should urgently find a better way of ensuring that all young people leave school with the word and number skills needed to get the most out of their lives.

Perhaps not unconnected with compulsory resits, about 10 per cent of 16-year-olds were no longer in school. While allowing for alternative provision, home schooling, exclusions, and returning to home country, it seems that many are just not turning up.

The attempt to create a core curriculum in 2010 looks to have failed. The EBacc with five compulsory elements including a foreign language has been stuck below 50 per cent when the target for 2025 is 90 per cent. It has already been superseded by a more flexible grouping of eight subjects, but the duplication is confusing to both parents and schools. The EBacc should be scrapped.

Girls continued to dominate GCSEs in 2024, as they do other aspects of education. They were ahead in all but five of the 47 subject areas. Boys only led in five subjects - Maths, Statistics, Physics, 'Other Sciences' (Astronomy Geology etc) and Economics - all of which are quantitative. Perhaps this points to an inherent sex difference.

The main tables published on the August results day are for the UK, but 92 per cent of the entries are from England, so the results for Wales and Northern Ireland tend to be masked. Northern Ireland, in fact, has uniformly better results than the rest of the UK. This could be softer exams. But much more likely is that it is structural, since NI also does well in international tests. It could be something to do with its grammar school system.

The provisional entries for GCSEs in England in 2025 point to further falls in French and German, with Spanish becoming the most frequently taken foreign language. Both English and Maths rise, but surprisingly the separate sciences after a long period of growth go down. Among the non-core subjects, there are major recent increases in Statistics, Music, and Classical Subjects.

1. Prospects for 2025

- 1.1. My reading of the results up to 2024 and the provisional entries for 2025 is that GCSE grades are settling down again after being sent haywire by teacher assessment during Covid. But this is with more top grades than before. The difference is only one percentage point, but given there are over six million entries, this means there were 61,869 more top awards (7/A) in 2024 than in 2019. At the very highest level, straight grades ‘nines’ in England, there were over 50 per cent more in 2024 than 2019.
- 1.2. These grades, of course, are not determined by some ineluctable force of nature, but by human decisions. The regulators can alter the grade pattern at will by adjusting the thresholds for each grade. The increased top grades in the past two years point to higher grades in 2025 also, but the regulators could decide otherwise.
- 1.3. The overall results are not the only interesting question that the publication of the 2025 results will answer. In the order that they are presented in this report, they are:
 - What is happening to the gulf in top grades between subjects; is it getting even wider or is it closing up a bit?
 - How are the subject entries changing; are some becoming more popular and others declining?
 - Is the gulf in performance between the sexes bigger or smaller?
 - How do the results in the different countries of the UK compare?
- 1.4. The story up to 2024, and in the case of entries up to 2025, is told in the chapters which follow. They aim to provide some insight into what the 2025 results will be.

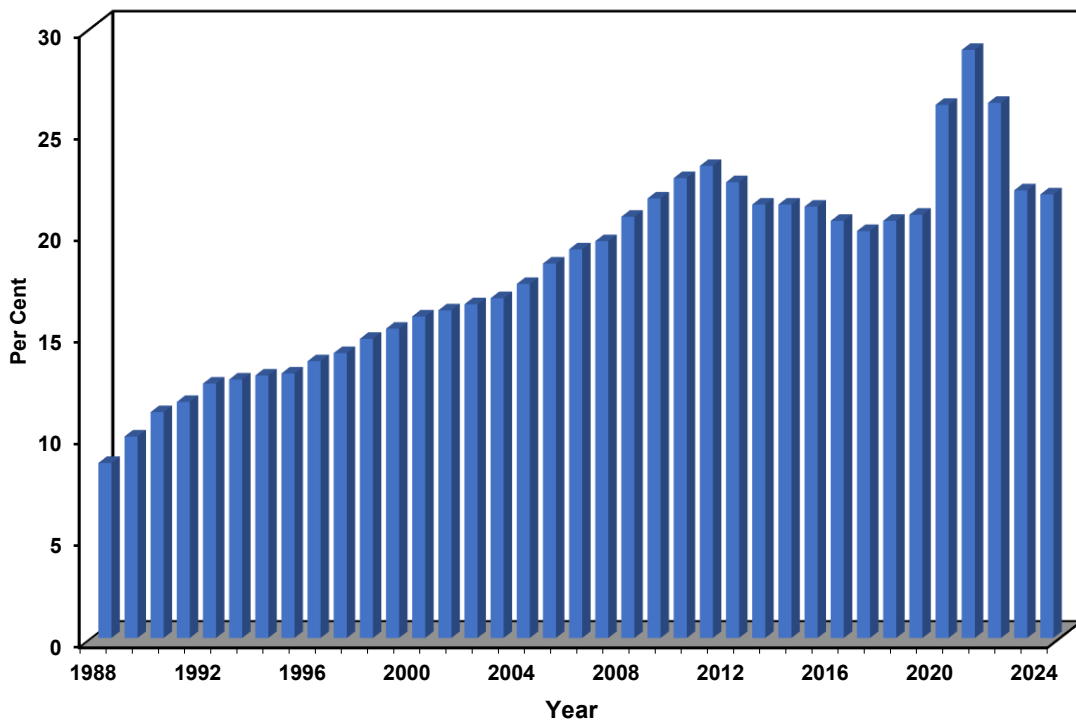
2. Background

- 2.1. The Centre for Education and Employment Research has been forecasting GCSE results since their inception in 1988. Usually, by looking at the trends and policies, it has been able to do so accurately. There was a long period in which top grades rose each year, which made it easy providing the policy did not change.
- 2.2. The policy did change in 2010 when the Coalition Government came in determined to put an end to grade inflation. The newly formed regulator for England, Ofqual, was tasked with stopping it, and it developed a technique, which it called 'comparable outcomes', with which it was able to bring grades under control. Again, it was possible to make accurate, though in this case not very exciting, predictions.
- 2.3. It all went awry when exams could not be held during the pandemic lockdowns. The teacher assessments that were used instead were over-generous. When examinations could be held again in 2022, they were designed to allow candidates to re-adjust gradually. England set out to restore the value of its grades to what they were before the pandemic in two stages, half-way in 2022 with completion in 2023. Wales and Northern Ireland decided to take a year longer aiming for a full return in 2024.
- 2.4. It thus became possible to say with some confidence that there would be a steep fall in 2023, and there was. England, however, did not quite get to where it said it would, and it seemed reasonable to suppose it would finish the job in 2024. Given that Wales and Northern Ireland were committed to reductions, the grades looked as if they would fall again.
- 2.5. It did not turn out this way. Instead of falling, England had its highest ever percentage of top grades outside of the pandemic, far outweighing the reductions in Wales and Northern Ireland. The grades in 2024 matched those a year earlier and again was above pre-pandemic levels
- 2.6. This report looks at what the overall grades this year might be (Chapter 3), trends in the subject grades (Chapter 4) and entries (Chapters 5 and 6), the extent of the differences in girls' and boys' performance (Chapter 7), and how the countries of the UK compare now that their GCSEs have grown so far apart that they barely deserve the same name (Chapter 8). There is also an Appendix tracing how GCSEs got to be how they are and have come to play such a prominent part in the educational systems of the UK.

3. Trends in GCSE Grades

3.1. GCSEs replaced the previous O-level and CSE examinations, for higher and more modest attainers respectively, in 1988. The original intention was that the A grade would denote the attainment of the top ten per cent. But, as Figure 3.1 shows, after two years, the percentage went up year by year, reaching 23.2 per cent in 2013. Ofqual, the new independent exams regulator in England, was charged with bringing this runaway inflation under control. It came up with a statistical method called ‘comparable outcomes’ which did the trick. It led to top grades being held stable, with 20.8 per cent awarded in 2019.

Figure 3.1: UK Trends in Top GCSE Grades¹



1. Top grades originally defined as a grade A, but now as 7/A because England, Wales and Northern Ireland have different grade scales. They come together at grade 7 in England (with two points above) and grade A in Wales and Northern Ireland (with one point above).

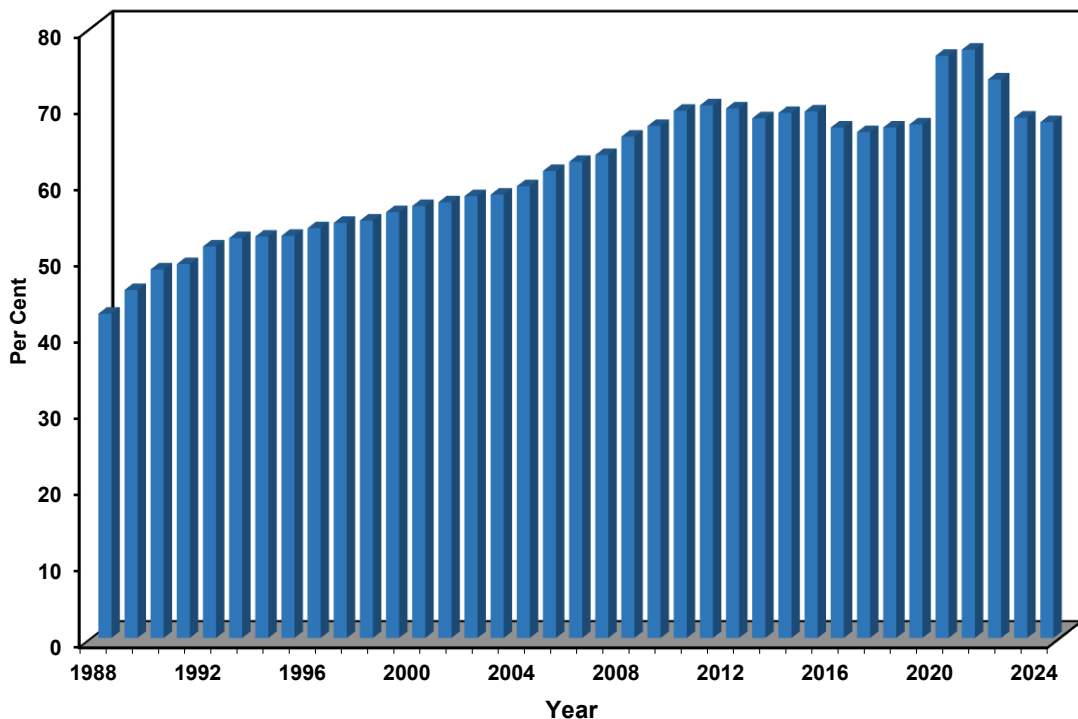
3.2. But then Covid struck, and it was deemed to be unsafe to hold examinations. In order for the cohort to receive grades, it was eventually decided that the teachers’ predicted grades would be used. This led to top grades rocketing. As Figure 3.1 shows, the highest percentages of top grades ever of 26.2 and 28.9 per cent were recorded in 2020 and 2021 respectively. The partial return to exams in 2022 brought it down to 26.3 per cent, but this was still the third highest ever. In 2023, this was cut back to 22.0 per cent, but still leaving some way to go to get back to the pre-pandemic level. In 2024, it was very close to the 2023 figure at 21.8 per cent.

3.3. This was just one percentage point higher than in 2019. It does not sound very much, but given over six million entries, it is in fact 61,879 more top grades. Thus

we could be seeing the start of a new normal, which the forthcoming results will confirm or challenge.

- 3.4. Figure 3.2 shows that the same pattern emerges in pass grades. In the first year of GCSE, 42.5 per cent scored a C or above. It then rose year by year to reach 69.8 per cent in 2011, at which point Ofqual's comparable outcomes kicked in bringing the UK figure down to 67.3 per cent in 2019.
- 3.5. But with teacher assessment in 2020 and 2021, top grade passes leapt to their highest-ever levels, reaching 77.1 per cent in 2021. The return of exams in 2022, albeit in modified form, brought this down to 73.3 per cent, but as the histogram shows, it is nevertheless the third highest percentage ever. In 2023, when the restoration process was due to be completed in England, pass grades were down to 68.2 per cent, with a further fall in 2024 to 67.6 per cent. This was 0.3 above the 2019 level or 18,561 grades at 4/C and above. This is less than a third of that at 7/A and above, underlining the point that the difference post-Covid is mainly in the highest grades.

Figure 3.2: UK Trends in Pass (4/C) GCSE Grades

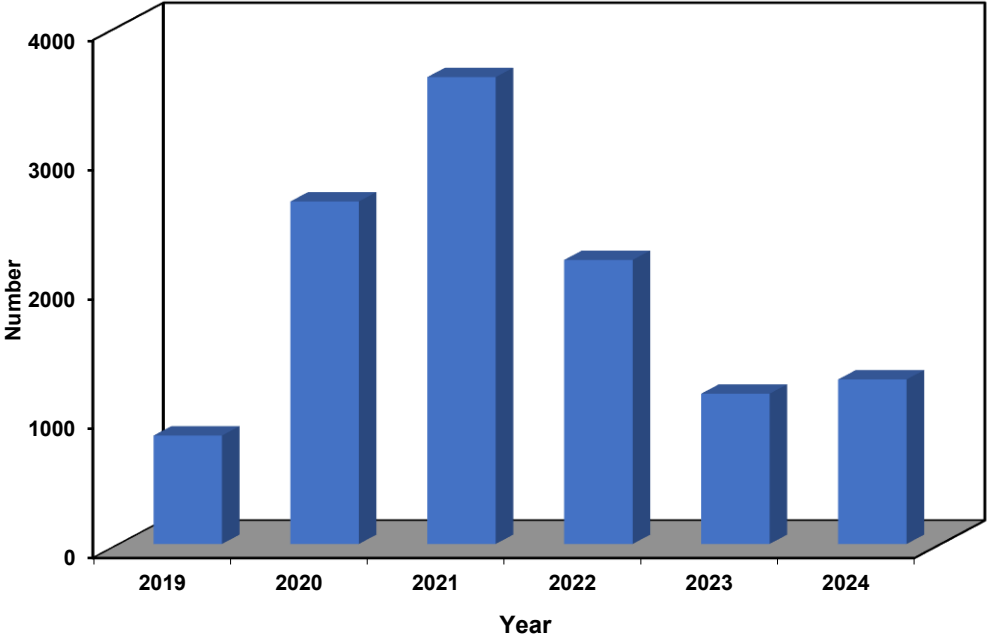


Top Grades in England

- 3.6. The definition of a top grade at GCSE is broad, embracing grades 9-7 in England, A* and A in Wales, and Northern Ireland, with there being a C* in the latter. In order to see the impact of teacher assessment at the highest level, we need to focus on grade 9s in England.

3.7. Figure 3.3 shows that in 2019, when there were exams, only 837 of those sitting achieved straight ‘9s’ in seven or more subjects. But, in 2021, at the height of teacher assessment, 3,606 did so, more than four times as many. The return to exams in 2022 reduced this to 2,193, over 2.5 times the 2019 total. There was a major reduction in 2023, but still nearly 40 per cent short of what was required to return to what it was pre-pandemic. In 2024, it was 1270, over half as much again as in 2019.

Figure 3.3: Straight¹ Grade 9s, 16-Year-Olds, England



1. Minimum of seven GCSE entries.
 Source: Ofqual, Infographics for GCSE results.

3.8. Straight nines is, of course, the very tip of the iceberg, but it clearly demonstrates the massive effect the switch to teacher assessment had on top grades, and that there is still work to be done in England to restore pre-pandemic standards.

Prospects

3.9. The UK results are a combination¹ of those in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The three administrations adopted different strategies getting back to where grades were pre-pandemic. England aimed to do so in 2023, but Wales and Northern Ireland decided to take a year longer. All three countries should have been back to 2019 levels in 2024, but only Northern Ireland got close. England was still some way above it.

3.10. It could be that we are seeing the emergence of a new normal in which case 2025 will resemble 2024, or the regulators could make a further push to get back to pre-pandemic levels. Since the top grades were not lowered in 2023 and 2024 when

¹ Plus a very small percentage (0.2%) from other parts of the UK including Scotland.

there was pressure to do so, it is more likely that in 2025 they will remain high. It looks as if a new norm is emerging.

4. Grades by Subject

- 4.1. The percentage of top grades awarded varies considerably with subject and the differences are consistent from year to year. The top three in 2019 and 2024 were, ‘Other Modern Languages’, Additional Maths and Classical Subjects. The percentage of top grades in 2024 in the lowest of the three was 58.2 against the average for all subjects of 21.8. Each, in its own way, is a special case. ‘Other Modern Languages’ are mainly taken by children of native speakers; Additional Maths entries are a subset with a talent for maths; and Classical Subjects are mainly taught in independent schools and grammar schools.
- 4.2. The separate sciences are also selective either by school or top set and well over 40 per cent achieve top grades. In the Combined Science alternative taken by the majority of pupils, it was in the double award 9.1 per cent, and in the single award 4.6 per cent. These are a lot poorer than even those in English and Maths, which have their own reasons for falling short.

English and Maths

- 4.3. English and Maths are the cornerstone of education in England. They are compulsory to the age of 16 and are double weighted in the Attainment 8 and Progress 8 accountability measures. Pupils failing to achieve at least a standard pass (grade 4) are required to re-take them until the age of 18. Maths is regarded as so important by some that there have been calls to make it compulsory for all in the sixth form
- 4.4. It is very disappointing, therefore, to see how poor the performance is at GCSE. Among the traditional subjects², only Combined Science comes below them.. Chart 4.1 shows the percentages of top grades in English and Maths in comparison with selected subjects. It is striking how much lower they are than those in the separate sciences, ‘Other Modern Languages’, Additional Maths.

Table 4.1: English and Maths Results

GCSE Subject	%7/A		
	2019	2023	2024
<i>Core</i>			
Mathematics	16.1	17.5	16.9
English	14.0	16.3	15.7
<i>Selected</i>			
Other Modern Languages	65.1	70.3	71.8
Additional Maths	57.9	64.1	58.3
Chemistry	44.1	44.0	44.9
Physics	44.0	43.4	44.2
Biology	42.4	42.4	42.2
All Subjects	20.8	22.0	21.8

Source: JCQ Full Course GCSE Results (All UK Candidates).

² The occupationally related subjects, such as Hospitality and Leisure & Tourism, derived from former vocational qualifications, do uniformly badly.

- 4.5. There are several reasons. Unlike most other subjects they are compulsory for the whole cohort with its wide ability range, while the top performing subjects are actively chosen by pupils with a talent or interest in them. But there is an even greater impact from compulsory re-sits. They must be re-sat to the age of 18 as a condition of the institution receiving funding for the place. Table 4.2 shows that, unsurprisingly, the percentage sitting at age 17 or over is much higher than the overall figure.

Table 4.2: GCSE Entries by Age, UK, 2024

Age	English		Maths		All Subjects	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
15 & Under	3.8	0.4	6.8	0.8	103.2	1.6
16	683.3	80.8	675.5	76.9	5653.3	91.4
17 & Over	158.7	18.8	195.9	22.3	430.4	7.0
Total	845.8	100.0	878.2	100.0	6186.9	100.0

- 4.6. Table 4.3 shows that the post-16 entries achieve disappointingly low grades. In 2024, less than a quarter passed in Maths and even fewer in English. The Maths and English entries comprise four-fifths of the 17+ entry and so depress the overall pass rate as well. It must be soul-destroying to continually have to re-take English and/or Maths. Surely, there is an urgent need for a re-think. Instead of just assuming that the GCSEs embody the minimum understanding that is essential to living a full life, there should be a careful analysis of what is actually required in terms of the use of words and numbers.

Table 4.3: GCSE Grades by Age, UK, 2024

Age	English		Maths		All Subjects	
	7/A	4/C	7/A	4/C	7/A	4/C
15 & Under	13.1	59.4	44.9	79.7	38.2	76.4
16	18.9	71.0	21.0	71.2	22.7	70.3
17 & Over	1.8	22.9	1.7	18.6	6.1	29.6
Total	15.7	61.9	16.9	59.5	21.8	67.6

- 4.7. The figures for those aged 15 and under in Table 4.3, reveal an interesting difference between Maths and English. Those entered early for Maths achieved proportionally twice as many top grades as the 16-year-olds, but in English they did less well. It looks as though taking Maths early is driven by talent, but in English it may be to allow weaker candidates the opportunity of more than one go at getting a pass by the age of 16.

Science

- 4.8. Science in Key Stage 4 is compulsory. It has to be taken as a single science, the double award, or all three separate sciences. There is a vast gulf in the results for Combined Science and the separate sciences. While Combined Science regularly is at, or close to, the bottom for top awards, the separate sciences are among the high-

flyers. Table 4.4 shows the percentages in recent years. In 2024, those taking the separate sciences achieved over four times as many top grades as those taking the supposedly equivalent double award. The gulf between them and the single award is less surprising since the latter is accepted as a route for pupils whose abilities and interests lie elsewhere.

Table 4.4: Top Grades in Science GCSEs

GCSE Subject	2019	%7/A 2021	2024
	Science Single Award	5.6	8.3
Science Double Award	7.8	12.7	9.1
Biology	42.4	56.0	42.2
Physics	44.0	55.6	44.2
Chemistry	44.1	54.9	44.9
All Subjects	20.8	28.9	21.8

Source: JCQ Full Course GCSE Results (All UK Candidates).

- 4.9. The high level of performance in the separate sciences is because entry is selective either by school or by top-set. In 2024 pupils were 265% more likely to take combined science as the separate sciences. As Table 4.4 shows there is great disparity in outcomes. It means that over half the year group are probably not equipped to progress to science A-levels. This is another issue ripe for investigation.

Prospects

- 4.10. The distribution of grades across the subjects in 2025 is likely to resemble that in 2024. The differences are structural and will not change until the structures change. Some subjects are compulsory and others selective, the former inevitably encompassing a wider range of ability. More able children are channelled into particular subjects, such as the separate sciences. The whole mark range can be used in subjects which have right answers, such as maths, the sciences, and languages, but for more subjective subjects they tend to bunch around the middle, hence fewer top grades. If there are compulsory re-sits, as in Maths and English, lower ability children will build up and distort the grade pattern, And if there are pressures to increase the percentage of passes in foreign languages³ as with the EBacc accountability measure then schools and pupils will go for easy options such obtaining a GCSE in their mother tongue.
- 4.11. The disparate success rates point to issues that need to be addressed. These include; the value of compulsory re-sits in English and Maths, the poor performance in Double Science, and the inclusion of mother tongues in accountability measures.

³ There has been no formal increase in top grades in GCSEs as there has been at A-level, but reforms to the curriculum and assessment designed to make them easier are in the pipeline.

5. Subject Entries

- 5.1. GCSE entries are heavily influenced by the accountability measures applied to them. The Coalition Government wanted to establish a core of studies at Key Stage 4, rather than leaving the pupils and schools to range widely and haphazardly. It settled on five subject areas - English, Maths, Science, Humanities, and Languages. At first, it was proposed that pupils passing a recognised GCSE in each of these categories should receive a special certificate called the English Baccalaureate. This was not feasible, so the EBacc, as it became known, was turned into an accountability measure, which meant schools in England (education is a devolved area) have to report annually on the number of their pupils taking the specified subjects and how well they have done in them. In order to drive its adoption, the Department of Education set targets of 75 per cent of pupils to be studying the EBacc by 2022 and 90 per cent by 2025.
- 5.2. Languages, however, proved to be a huge stumbling block, as we shall be setting out later in this chapter, and it put the EBacc targets out of reach. The Government was accused of causing schools to neglect subjects not included in the EBacc, such as the arts and practical domains. Since 2016, the EBacc has been supplanted as the main accountability measure by Attainment 8 and Progress 8. The 'Eights' comprise English and Maths double-weighted, three other EBacc subjects (so a foreign language is no longer compulsory), and three other subjects which could come from among those excluded from the EBacc.⁴

Overall Trends

- 5.3. The ten most frequently taken GCSE subjects have shown remarkable stability over the past two decades. Table 5.1 shows that of the ten, eight were still there ten and twenty years later. The two to drop out were French and Design & Technology. We will consider the decline of modern foreign languages in detail later in the chapter. Design & Technology ceased to be a compulsory subject in Key Stage 4 at the turn of the century and has since plummeted. The 437,400 GCSE entries in 2004 fell fivefold to only 88,600 twenty years on.
- 5.4. The two subjects dropping out were replaced in 2024 by Biology and Chemistry reflecting the move away from Combined Science. Physics was not far behind and was in 11th spot with 185,000 entries. The trend in the sciences will be discussed later in the chapter.
- 5.5. A somewhat surprising regular in the top ten is Religious Studies. Entries doubled from 2004 to 2014, moving it up to sixth place above History and Geography. It is not part of the national curriculum nor part of the Ebacc accountability measure. Although it has been compulsory for schools to provide religious education since the 1944 Education Act, pupils do not have to attend the classes. Neither has there been a drive to increase take-up. It is true that some of the best state secondary schools are faith-based, and even non-religious parents compete to get their children into them. The faith schools naturally attach great importance to religious studies. But why there

was a decade of growth followed by a decade of some slippage is worthy of a research project.

Table 5.1: Top Ten UK GCSE Entries in Thousands

2004		2014		2024	
Subject	N ²	Subject	N ²	Subject	N ²
Maths	741.7	Maths	736.4	Maths	878.2
English	708.2	English	515.6	English Language	845.8
English Literature	576.6	English Literature	478.6	English Literature	655.9
Double Science	527.0	Science	375.0	Double Science	490.4
Design & Technology	437.4	Additional Science	324.0	History	325.4
French	318.1	Religious Studies	282.1	Geography	297.4
Geography	227.8	History	256.2	Religious Studies	245.0
History	230.7	Geography	225.1	Art & Design	208.9
Art	211.7	Design & Technology	213.6	Biology	194.9
Religious Studies	141.0	Art & Design	191.4	Chemistry	185.3
Total Entries	5,875.4	Total Entries	5,217.6	Total Entries	6,186.9

Source: Joint Council for Qualifications..

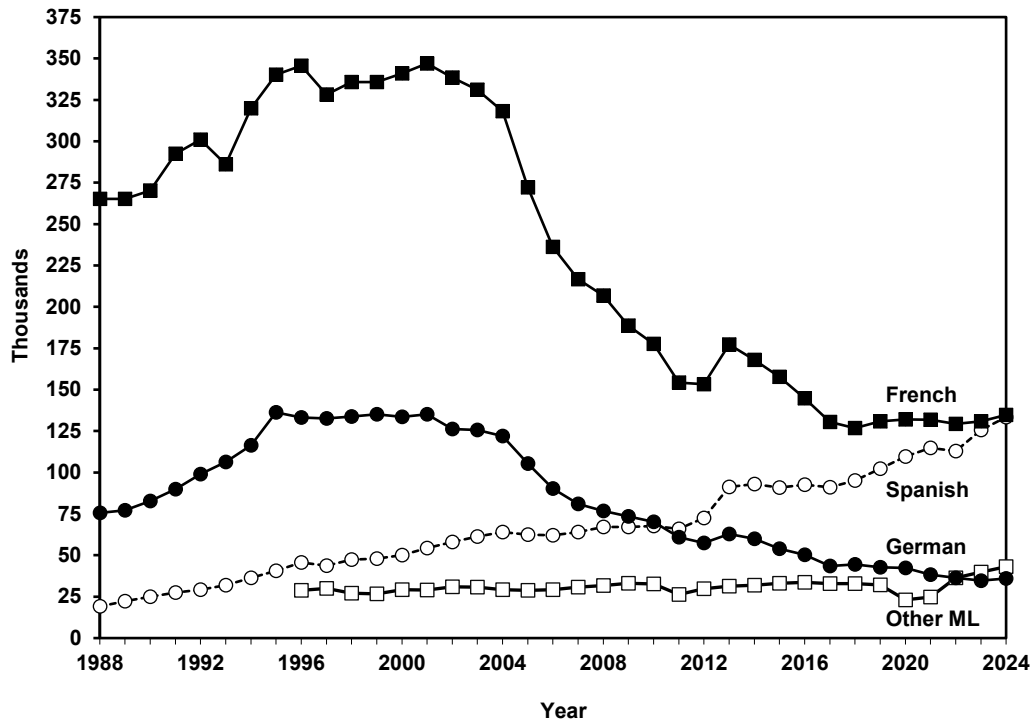
- 5.6. The increase could be down to the classes being there, and the exam being there, so why not add another GCSE. But whatever was driving the growth from 2004 to 2014 cooled in the following decade, with a loss of 37,000 entries. It fell behind History and Geography once more, although like them it is now reportable in the Progress 8 accountability measure.

Foreign Languages

- 5.7. The most striking GCSE trend in the past twenty years has been the fall in French and German entries since taking an exam in a foreign language was made optional by the Blair Government. Figure 5.1 shows that French has fallen from its peak of 345,000 entries in 1996 to just 134,600 in 2024, while German over the same period has dropped from 133,000 to only 35,900. When left to choose, it seems that very few young people want to learn a foreign language.
- 5.8. Even Spanish, which had been showing strong growth, fell somewhat in 2022. But the climb resumed and, by 2024, it had reached 133,400 entries, only 1,300 behind French. Quite why there has been this surge in popularity is unclear, but it may have something to do with the increasing popularity of Spanish-speaking countries as holiday destinations. This is plausible because Spanish, like English, is one of the four world languages (the other two are Mandarin and Hindi). A more prosaic explanation is that Spanish is seen as easier than French or German.
- 5.9. There are many other foreign languages taught in our schools which are grouped together in the statistics as ‘Other Modern Languages’. The most popular in 2024 were Chinese, Polish, Arabic, Italian and Urdu. They are frequently taken by the children of native speakers residing in this country perhaps to enable them to converse fluently in the home and with relatives in the country of origin. They also,

however, let's face it, are an easy way of meeting the EBacc requirements. They tend to be taken early and are so good as to put off home students who might be tempted to take them as a foreign language.

Figure 5.1: Trends in UK Entries to Modern Languages



- 5.10. English is increasingly becoming everyone's second language, if not their first. The British, therefore, may feel there is no need to learn other languages. It could also be that England until recently has not taught a foreign language in the primary phase of education. It had been left to the secondary stage, by which time they are less easy to learn. But the 2014 revised primary school curriculum made a foreign language compulsory at Key Stage 2. If the previous neglect of foreign languages in primary schools was a factor in the low take-up at GCSE and A-level, then ten years on entries should show signs of increasing, which they have.
- 5.11. The reluctance of British young people to engage with other languages is a concern in itself, but it has put the attempt of the Coalition Government to establish a core Key Stage 4 curriculum of five subjects, the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), at considerable risk. Originally thought of as an award, it was turned into an accountability measure. Schools have to report annually to the Department of Education on the numbers taking the specified subjects. They were set the targets of 75 per cent of pupils studying the full EBacc by 2022, and 90 per cent by 2025.
- 5.12. This proved to be hopelessly out of reach for many. Figure 5.2 shows that, after a promising start, from 2014 onwards the total taking the five subjects has been stuck at close to 40 per cent. The main culprit as can be seen in Figure 5.3 is the foreign language requirement.

Figure 5.2: Percentage of Pupils Taking Five GCSE EBacc Subjects¹

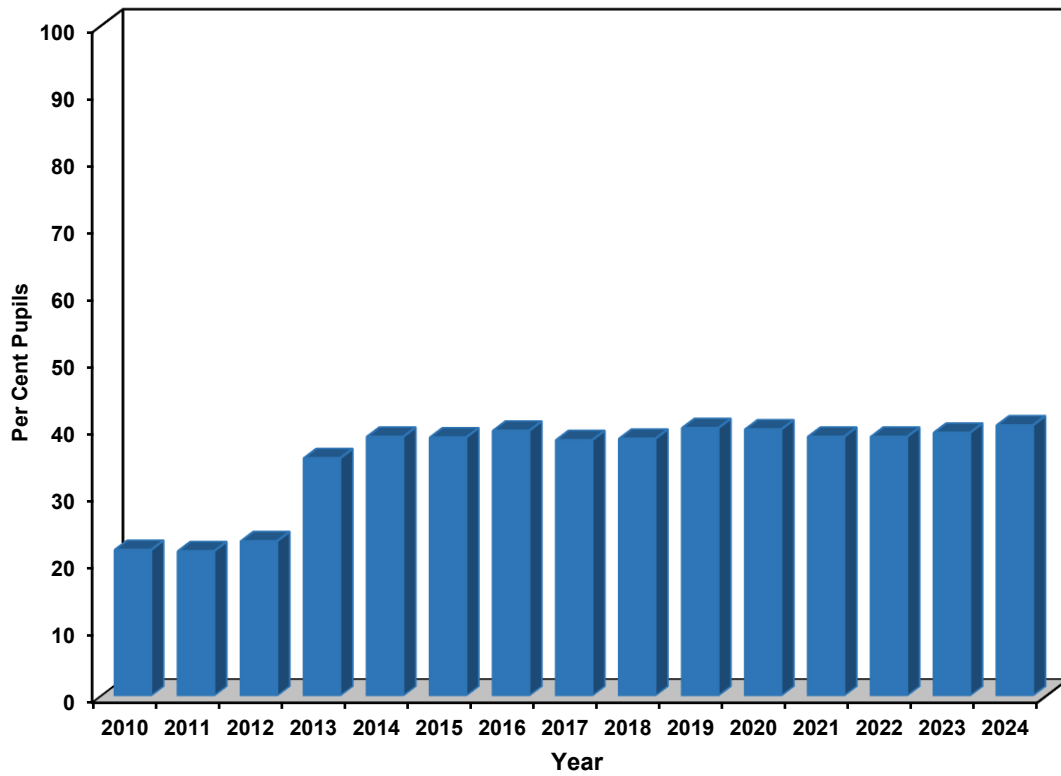
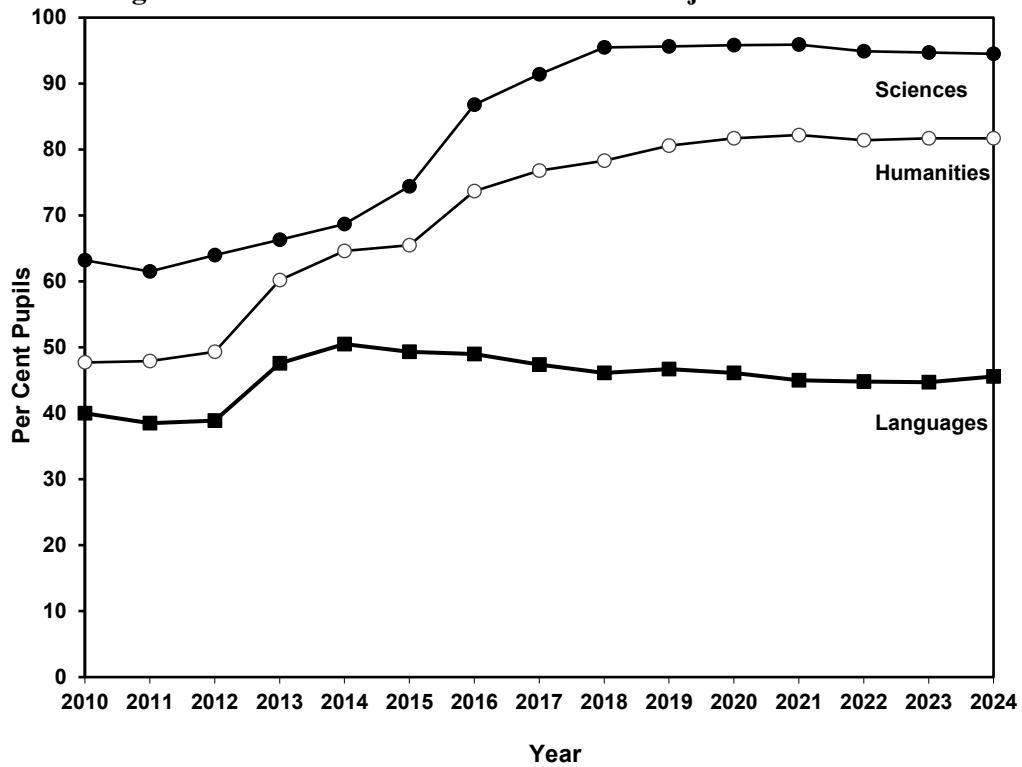


Figure 5.3: Trends in Entries to 'EBacc' Subjects



Source: Gov.uk education statistics: Key Stage 4 Performance Academic Year 2023-2024, updated February 2024

5.13. Without radical change, it appears that the percentage achieving the EBacc will never increase much beyond where it is now. It looks to be an experiment which has failed. Not delivering on its targets has led to it being replaced by the more flexible Attainment 8 and Progress 8 as accountability measures. The DfE, nevertheless, continues to compile and publish statistics for the EBacc, which have not changed in a decade. The EBacc should be scrapped to reduce bureaucracy and simplify the information available to parents choosing schools.

Separate Sciences

5.14. The growth of the separate sciences in recent years has been interpreted as evidence of ever-growing popularity, but in fact they have been slowly recovering from policies which almost saw them disappear from pre-16 education.

5.15. In 1988, ‘science’ was the subject settled on for inclusion in the national curriculum. It was envisaged that the GCSEs would be double and single awards in Science, and that the Biology, Chemistry and Physics O-levels would not be replaced. And they would not have been if it were not for the independent schools. Free of the national curriculum, they put up fierce resistance to dropping the separate qualifications for. And won! But in state schools they could only be taken if it were all three, which then had to be fitted into a two-subject timetable slot. For a decade or more the separate science exams were largely confined to the independent sector and top state schools.

5.16. It was only when the disastrous impact on A-level physics entries in particular, and the consequences for degree admissions, was fully grasped by politicians that the government of the day responded. In 2004, Gordon Brown, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, published the Science and Innovation Investment Framework 2004-14. This created incentives for state schools to return to teaching Biology, Chemistry, and Physics as separate GCSEs.

Table 5.2: UK Science Entries in 1988 and 2024

Subject	1987	2024	%Change ¹ 1988-2024
Biology	304.7	194.9	-36.0
Chemistry	217.6	185.3	-14.8
Physics	254.1	185.0	-27.2

1. The actual decreases are even greater because 1988 figures are for England and Wales only, whereas 2024 includes Northern Ireland as well.

5.17. Since then, the separate sciences have slowly recovered and, as Table 5.2 shows, in 2024 entries were still below those for the last year of O-levels, 37 years before. The 2024 entries indicate only sluggish growth much less than that of the science double award and way below the overall rate and the increase in the 16-year-old population.

Prospects

5.18. The distribution of grades across the subjects is not likely to change from what it was in 2024. The disparate success rates do, however, point to issues that should be reviewed. These include: the value of compulsory re-sits in English and maths, the

poor performance in double science, and the inclusion of mother tongues in accountability measures.

- 5.19. The core subjects of English and maths are regularly among those with the lowest success rates and this will almost certainly continue in 2025. This is because these subjects are thought to be so important that anyone not achieving a standard pass is required to re-sit them. Up to about a fifth of the total entries are aged 17 or over and they have appalling pass rates that lower the grades overall. This puts a big question mark over the efficacy of the re-sit requirement. Although well intended, it looks to be utterly demoralising to pupils who find difficulty with these GCSEs whose purpose is different from ensuring the basic grasp of words and numbers that is necessary to cope with life as it is lived. There should be an urgent review of the re-sit requirement, with a view to replacing it with a programme and qualification which would enable those failing the GCSEs to achieve necessary fluency in the use of words and numbers.
- 5.20. The combined science GCSEs will continue as subjects with among the lowest results, sometimes even the lowest. This is understandable for the single award which is taken by young people who do not wish to progress in science, but the double award is intended to be a platform for the sciences at A-level. The percentage of top grades awarded in double science, however, is so low as to raise considerable doubts about whether it serves this function.
- 5.21. The separate qualifications in Biology, Chemistry, and Physics, which survived the demise of O-levels, have among the highest percentages of top grades of all GCSEs, and are clearly the preferred route to the A-levels. But they have only two-fifths of the entry of double science. It is not that young people necessarily prefer the double award; more likely it is that they lack the opportunity of studying the separate sciences. The net effect is that the system is limiting access to science A-levels, which is totally against what the country needs. The situation should be urgently reviewed and the requirement in state schools of having to take all three if you want to take any one of them should be scrapped.
- 5.22. The occupationally-related GCSEs, derived from the old General National Vocational Qualifications which were scrapped, attract few applicants and award few top grades.. It looks to be a time to consider whether they are needed. The equivalent BTech awards may be a better route through to the new T-Levels.

6. Provisional Entries in England for 2025

- 6.1. Ofqual, the regulator for England, helpfully publishes in May/June each year the provisional entries for the GCSE examinations. These are not the numbers that appear in the Joint Council for Qualifications August results for the UK, since not everyone entered actually sits the exam, and Wales and Northern Ireland are not included. But England's provisional entries are a clear indication of what to expect.
- 6.2. Table 6.1 shows that the Coalition Government's definition of a core has been largely accepted and that, in spite of the greater flexibility built into Attainment 8 and Progress 8, the 15 EBacc subjects account for 84.5 per cent of the provisional entries in England in 2025.
- 6.3. The subject entries, however, as Tables 6.1 and 6.2 show, fluctuate from year to year. Last year, for example, French and German showed signs of revival after prolonged periods of decline. (see figure 5.1, p 20). But it was a false dawn and both are down once more in 2025, particularly German. It was not all bad news for languages though, Spanish, continued to increase and is due to become in 2025 the most frequently taken language for the first time. Meanwhile the take-up of 'Other Modern Languages' which are often taken by those for whom it is the mother tongue, continues apace. While there are good reasons for studying the family language, it has to be said that it is a soft way of meeting Ebacc requirement of a pass in a foreign language.

Table 6.1: Provisional EBacc Entries, England 2023-25

Subject	2023	2024	2025	% Change 2023-24	% Change 2024-25
Mathematics	786.8	842.6	856.4	7.1	1.6
English Language	754.9	807.8	825.9	7.0	2.2
English Literature	601.9	623.6	614.8	3.6	-1.4
Combined Science ¹	441.0	463.4	467.3	5.1	0.8
Biology	180.1	183.4	171.7	1.8	-6.4
Chemistry	173.5	174.8	163.1	0.7	-6.7
Physics	172.7	174.7	162.9	1.2	-6.8
Computing	88.5	94.0	89.6	6.2	-4.7
History	298.2	312.4	293.8	4.8	-6.0
Geography	283.0	287.6	291.9	1.6	1.5
French	126.6	130.7	128.2	3.2	-1.9
Spanish	121.7	130.0	132.0	6.8	1.5
Other Modern Languages	39.3	42.5	42.9	8.1	0.9
German	33.9	35.1	32.4	3.5	-7.7
Total	4,554,415	4,776,980	4,751,520	4.9	-0.5
16-Year-Olds	663,078	697,673	699,401	5.2	0.2

1. Double award entries reported as two entries divided by two to convert to persons.

Source: Ofqual (2025). Provisional entries for GCSE, AS and A-level: summer 2025 exam series. Published 12 June 2025.

- 6.4. Separate science entries also fall in 2025. Unlike French and German this is not the resumption of sustained decline, but a hiccup on the long climb back from the determined attempt to abolish them in the 1980s. the only science contributor to the EBacc to show growth is Combined Science which hitherto has been declining as the separate sciences have made inroads.
- 6.5. Maths and English Language the core subjects of Ebacc and counted double in Progress 8 have continued to increase, but elsewhere English Literature, History and Geography have fluctuated.
- 6.6. Table 6.2 shows that there was a bigger drop in the GCSEs which do not count towards the Ebacc. Statistics, Music and Classical Subjects, particularly, but also Business Studies and Physical Education continued to grow. But ten of the 17 subject areas fell back, nearly all reversing the often quite substantial increases of 2024. Only Drama dropped in both years, although Citizenship Studies did not make good the losses of 2024.

Table 6.2:Provisional Non-EBacc Entries England 2024-25

Subject	2023	2024	2025	% Change 2023-24	% Change 2024-25
Religious Studies	245.4	248.1	242.3	1.1	-2.3
Art and Design Subjects	187.7	197.5	194.2	5.2	-1.7
Business Studies	114.5	127.3	130.1	11.2	2.2
Physical Education	74.6	77.9	79.3	4.5	1.8
Design and Technology	79.0	80.6	77.8	2.0	-3.5
Food Prep & Nutrition	53.4	56.3	55.0	5.4	-2.3
Social Science Subjects	49.3	52.4	50.0	6.3	-4.6
Drama	49.8	49.4	48.7	-0.8	-1.4
Statistics	26.8	32.2	35.2	20.3	9.3
Music	30.1	32.6	34.6	8.3	6.1
Media/Film/TV Studies	32.9	33.9	32.6	3.0	-3.8
Citizenship Studies	22.4	21.5	21.5	-3.9	-0.0
Economics	7.2	7.8	7.3	7.7	-6.4
Performing/Expressive Arts	6.9	6.7	7.2	-3.1	7.5
Classical Subjects	4.5	5.0	5.1	11.7	2.0
Other Sciences	2.5	2.7	2.5	10.6	-7.4
Engineering	2.5	2.9	2.3	17.4	-20.7
Total	989,430	1,034,805	1,025,500	4.6	-0.9
16-Year-Olds	663,078	697,673	699,401	5.2	0.2

Source: Ofqual (2025). Provisional entries for GCSE, AS and A-level: summer 2025 exam. Published 12 June 2025.

Prospects

- 6.7. What the entries will be like is contained in Tables 6.1 and 6.2. They show further falls in French and German, with Spanish becoming the most frequently taken; the growth in separate science halted; and Statistics and Music gaining in popularity.

- 6.8. Both tables show that GCSE take-up has not been keeping pace with the growth in the 16-year-old population. The provisional entries for 2025 show that, while there are more 16-year-olds, GCSE entries have actually gone down in both Ebacc and non-Ebacc subjects, although by less in the former.
- 6.9. Significantly, while the 16-year-old population increased to 699,401, the number of Year 11 pupils actually fell from 634,835⁵ to 630,354. The widening gap is likely to be due to the post-Covid attitude of some young people that school is voluntary. It is also possible that the move away from the separate sciences (3 entries) to Combined Science (2 or 1 entry) has contributed.

⁵ The number of Year 11 pupils is lower than the 16-year-old- population for several reasons: alternative provision for those with behavioural, emotional or learning difficulties; home schooling, exclusions; and encouragement to leave by schools whose performance is judged on the results of their pupils.

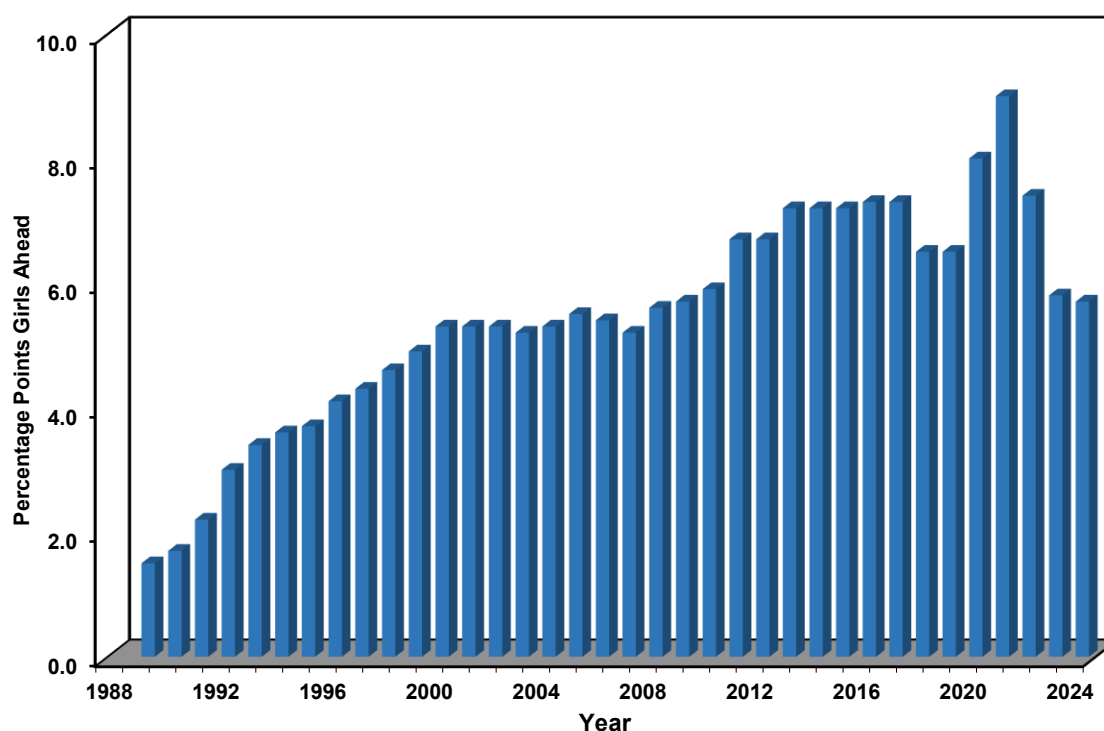
7. Differences Between the Sexes

- 7.1. Girls have come to dominate GCSE grades, the the gap widening as the percentage of top awards increased.

Top Grades

- 7.2. Figure 7.1 shows that from the outset girls have been ahead in GCSEs. At first, as Chart 7.1 shows, the gap was small, but year by year it widened, rising from 1.5 percentage points in 1989 to 7.3 pp in 2017. Unlike the O-level examinations which had preceded them, GCSEs were modular with each unit assessed separately and in a variety of ways. Girls evidently adapted to this form of course organisation and assessment more readily than boys. With the return in 2018 and 2019 to whole courses examined at the end the gap narrowed somewhat to 6.5 pp in 2019.

Figure 7.1: Sex Difference at Grade 7/A and Above in UK GCSEs



- 7.3. But when it was deemed impossible to hold examination during the pandemic, the enforced switch to teacher grading took the gap to new heights. With teachers deciding the grades, the gap reached 8.0 pp in 2020, and went even higher to 9.0 pp in 2021. The return of exams, although softened to take account of the circumstances, reduced the gap in 2022 to 7.4 pp. It was furthered lowered to 5.8 pp in 2023 on the resumption of full exams in England, and to 5.7 pp in 2024 when Wales and Northern Ireland followed.
- 7.4. The gap between the sexes is, however, still huge. In 2024 girls were ahead in 42 of the 47 subjects. Boys led in just five, all of which, interestingly, are

quantitative: Maths, Statistics, Physics, ‘Other Sciences’⁶ and Economics. Do boys have inherent advantage in this one area?

Top Grades in England

- 7.5. England, Wales and Northern Ireland now have different structures for their GCSEs (see Appendix paras A.3-A.5). England awards numeric grades from 9 to 1, while the other two still use a literal scale, but in Wales it has six points and Northern Ireland with a C* grade seven. The alignments also differ. This is why there has to be broad categories for UK results. If we want to explore achievement at the very highest level we have to turn to the data for England.

Table 7.1: Gender Gap at Grades 9-7 for 16-Year-Olds in England

Grade	Nine		Eight		Seven	
	%Boys	%Girls	%Boys	%Girls	%Boys	%Girls
2019	3.7	5.2	5.7	7.9	8.1	10.6
2021	5.9	8.9	7.6	10.6	10.6	13.4
2023	4.2	5.8	6.4	8.4	8.9	11.1
2024	4.3	5.8	6.5	8.4	9.0	11.3

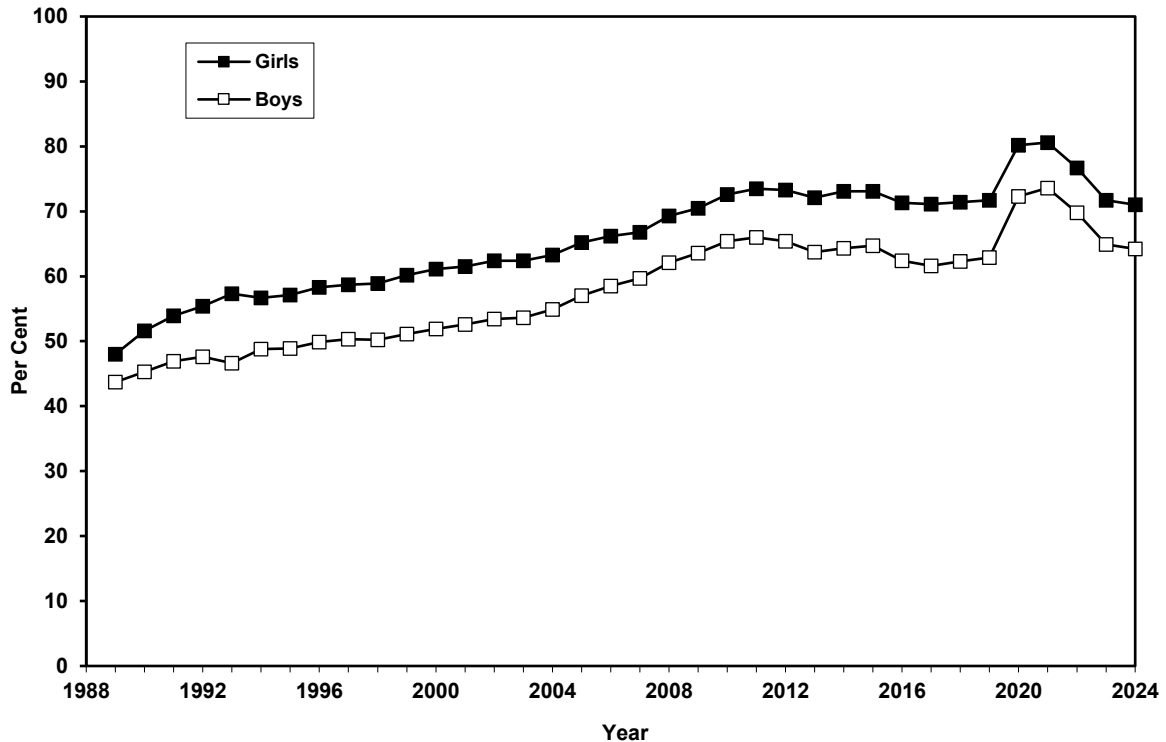
- 7.6. Table 7.1 shows the percentages of the very top awards from 2019 to 2024. There is a marked difference in the grades earned by girls and boys. The gap widens from the exams of 2019 to the teacher assessment of 2021, falling again with the return to exams in 2022. In each case, it was the girls’ performance benefited most from the change in the method of assessment, up at grade 9 by 3.7 pp in 2021 compared to boys’ 2.2 pp. While the gap was back to what it was in 2019, the legacy was both that boys and girls scored higher.

Grades 4/C and Above

- 7.7. It is not only in top grades that girls have outperformed boys. As Chart 7.2 shows, from the outset they have been more likely to pass at Grade 4/C and above. The percentage steadily increased year by year until grades were brought under control in England by comparable outcomes. This kept the grade pattern consistent allowing for differences in the intakes. The switch to teacher assessment derailed that new-found stability and there were steep rises in 2020 and 2021 with falls on the resumption of exams in 2022. This was in the girls’ lead as well as the overall pass rate.
- 7.8. While the difference between the sexes has narrowed on the return to full examinations, girls continue to be ahead on all GCSE metrics. The apparent underperformance of boys at this stage of education should be a matter of national concern. It seems we are not fully developing their potential. But because boys are habitually seen as privileged, it does not receive the attention it deserves.

⁶ Not Chemistry and Biology, but Geology, Astronomy etc.

Figure 7.2: Girls and Boys GCSE Grades 4/C and Above



Girls' Dominance

- 7.9. Girls have come to dominate education, not only at GCSE, but also at A-level and in degrees, both in terms of numbers and performance. Whereas the genders were about equal at O-level, girls have always done better than boys at GCSE. At A-level this is true of A-levels, apart from A*. Not so long ago, boys comprised about three-fifths of university students, but now this ratio has been reversed. Boys also used to gain more firsts, but girls have now gone in front in many subjects. In part, this is associated with changes to course structures and assessment practices. Many degrees have become modular and rely on course work assessment, which seems to suit girls more. It has also led to an extraordinary growth in 'firsts'. It seems that girls are more aware of the value of education and apply themselves more diligently to the hard work involved.
- 7.10. The chronic underperformance of boys in education should be treated as a major issue. It appears that we are not developing the talents of half the population as fully as we could. This can only lead to a decline in the nation's economic competitiveness and ultimately loss of its standing in the world.
- 7.11. In 2023, I called for a high-level inquiry into the underperformance of boys, but was met with the complacent view that since men usually came out on top anyway what's to worry about. Our policy makers seem to be content for the hard evidence of the exam results to be over-ridden by fashionable narratives.

8. England, Wales, and Northern Ireland

- 8.1. Education is a devolved power and GCSEs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are controlled by different administrations, regulators, and exam boards. Since devolution they have grown increasingly further apart, and they are now so different (see Appendix) as to hardly merit the same name, but nevertheless they are treated as such.
- 8.2. The regulatory bodies do co-operate in trying to ensure similar standards, but they do have different grading systems. On results day in August, the outcomes are brought together by the Joint Council for Qualifications as ‘top grades’ (7/A) and ‘pass grades’(4/C). On publication day, it is the UK results that receive the most attention. In 2023, 91.8 per cent of the entries were in England, 5.1 per cent in Wales, and 2.8 per cent in Northern Ireland, with a tiny proportion, 0.3 per cent, in other locations, including Scotland. This huge discrepancy means that the UK figures are driven by England, with outcomes elsewhere over-shadowed.

Table 8.1: A*/A Grades 2019-2024 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

Country	%7/A Grades			
	2019	2021	2023	2024
England	20.7	28.5	21.6	21.7
Wales	18.4	28.7	21.7	19.2
Northern Ireland	30.5	39.9	34.5	31.0
UK	20.8	28.9	22.0	21.8

- 8.3. The recent trends in the three administrations are shown in Table 8.1. It is clear that teacher assessment had a considerable impact on all three, with top grades rising appreciably. The results in Wales benefitted the most. Lagging behind in 2019, top grades increased by 10.3 percentage points in 2021, compared with 9.4 pp in Northern Ireland and 7.8 pp in England.
- 8.4. Figures 8.1 and 8.2 show the trends over the two decades to 2024. In England, it is possible to separate four phases in the growth of top grades. From 2003 to 2011 they increased year by year from 16.5 per cent to 23.3 per cent. Then ‘comparable outcomes’, the second phase, held grades consistent from year to year close to the 20.7 per cent of 2019. The third phase is the teacher-assessment explosion of 2020 and 2021, with the percentage reaching the highest ever in England at 28.5. The fourth phase is the present recovery. England aimed to do this in two stages with a return to normality in 2023. They did come down to 21.6 per cent, but not back to 2019’s 20.7. The final step was not taken in 2024, with the percentage still one percentage point higher.
- 8.5. Wales and Northern Ireland decided to take a year longer and aimed for 2024 to get grades back to where they were in 2019. Northern Ireland came closest, but at a much higher percentage than the other two administrations. As shown in Figure 8.1, Northern Ireland has consistently achieved much better results. This could reflect superior performance by the candidates or softer assessment. The former

is much more likely as NI also does well in international comparisons. Could it be to do with its having a grammar school system.

Figure 8.1: Trends in Grades 7/A and Above by Country

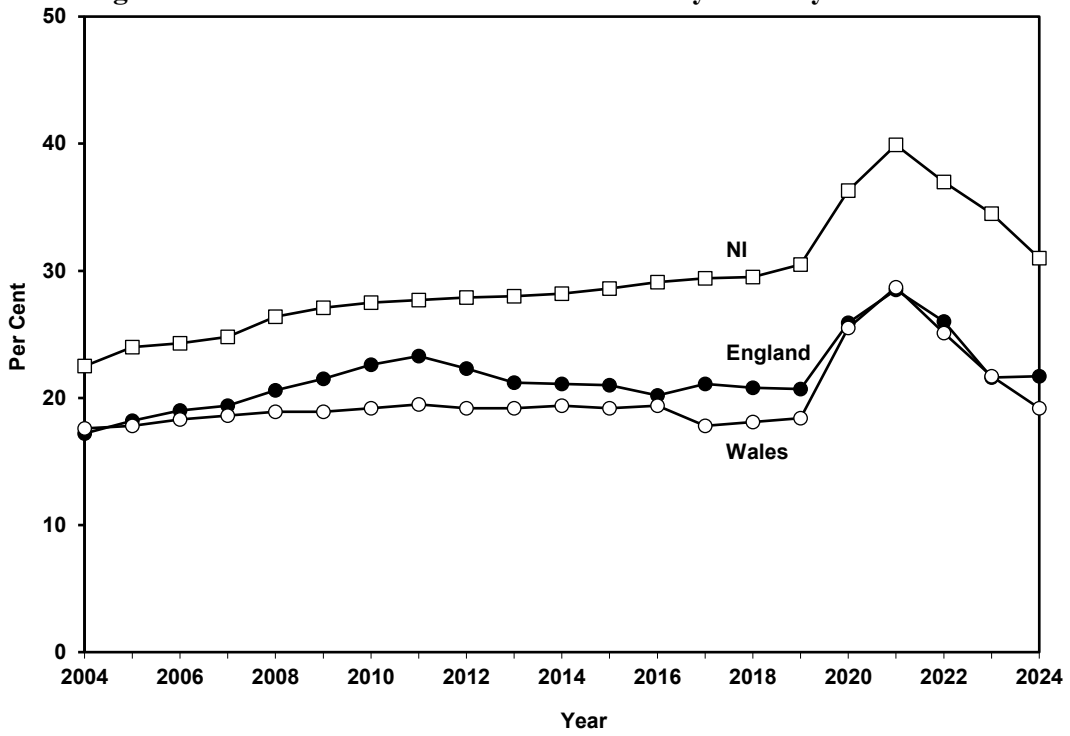
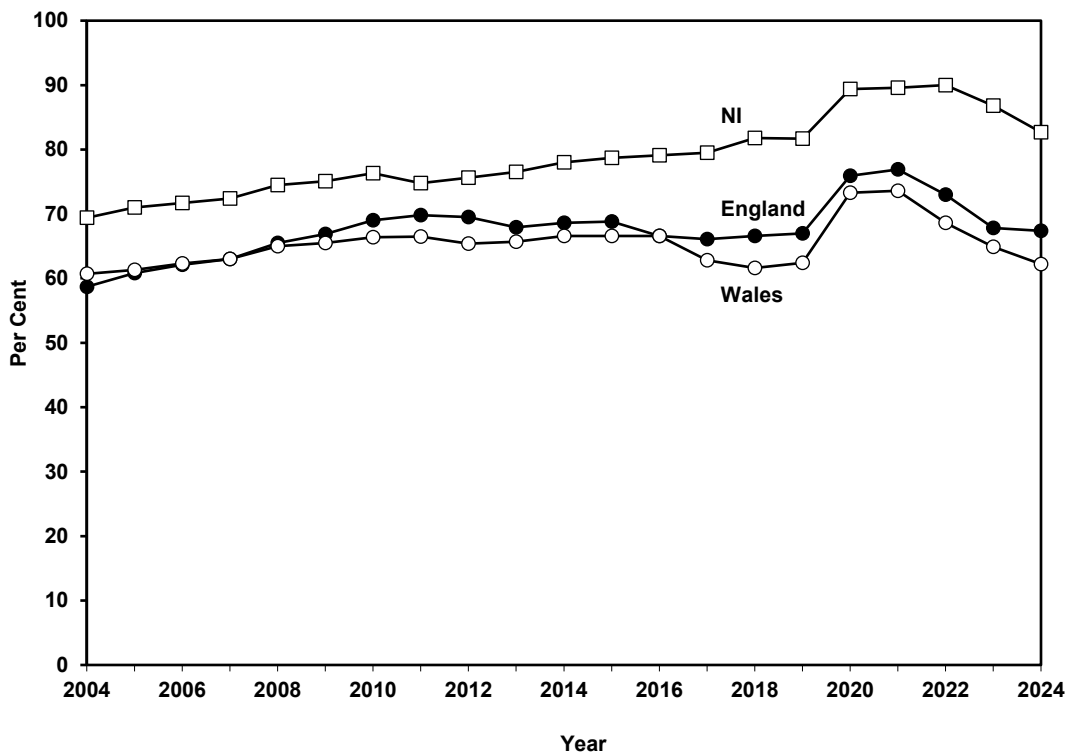


Figure 8.2.: Trends in Grades 4/C and Above by Country



- 8.6. Wales's grades are much closer to England's. In fact, top grades held steady from 2003 to 2019, rising only 1.3 percentage points to 18.4 per cent. But like the other parts of the UK there was then a huge teacher-assessment effect with, in 2021, 28.7 per cent top grades being awarded. This was brought down to 19.2 per cent in 2024 still leaving it 0.8 percentage points adrift of its 2019 target.
- 8.7. Figure 8.2 displays the trends for the pass grades of 4/C They are similar to those for the top grades, with one important difference. The teacher-assessment effect is blunter and shallower, showing once again that the generosity of teachers was mainly directed toward the top grades.
- 8.8. Otherwise, the trends resemble those for top grades. Northern Ireland is way out in front again, with its passing percentages increasing throughout the two decades, until the planned falls in 2023 and 2024. In England, the four phases identified for top are evident: growth, followed by comparable outcomes, then the teacher-assessment effect, with the attempt to restore pre-Covid grades. Wales also returned to its 2019 level, but Northern Ireland where 89.6 per cent were awarded a grade of C and above in 2021, still remained one percentage point higher than 2019 at 82.7 per cent.

Countries of UK Go Their Own Ways

- A.3. England, Wales, and Northern Ireland have their own administrations, regulatory bodies, and exam boards, and since responsibility for education was devolved in 1999, GCSEs have grown increasingly apart. So much so that it is reasonable to question whether they should bear the same name since this can only be confusing to the people using them.
- A.4. The main differences between the reformed GCSEs in the three countries are:
- Different grading scales: 9-1 in England; A*-G in Wales; and A*-G in Northern Ireland with the insertion of a C* grade.
 - In Northern Ireland's GCSEs, the new C* grade will be aligned with grade 5 in England, and its A* with England's grade 9.
 - Different subjects are offered and the content requirements of subjects with the same name differ.
 - Not all subjects are offered by the exam boards of each country. Ancient History is offered by the English boards only. The NI board is alone in offering 'Agriculture & Land Use'. Applied science (single and double awards) is offered only by the Welsh board.
 - In England, assessment is mainly by examination at the end of courses; in Wales and NI there is a mixture of modular and linear courses depending on the subject.
 - Re-sits in England involve re-taking the whole examination (although continuous assessment marks may be used again); for modular courses in Wales and NI each unit can be re-taken but only once.
- A.5. The differences are such that the results are only truly comparable at the 7/A and 4/C levels. The issue of over-generous top grades needs closer scrutiny than these broad levels permit, so the analysis has to focus on the three top grades in England, which typically contributes about 92 per cent of GCSE entries.

England

- A.6. In England, the main changes brought about by the reforms were:
- more demanding content;
 - designed for a two-year course of study;
 - examinations at end of the course;
 - assessment other than by examination allowed only where necessary to reflect the nature of a particular subject, for example, in art and design, dance, drama, music and physical education;
 - new grading scale running from 9 (top) to 1, with U as the ultimate fail grade;

- Combined Science which is a double award has 17 possible outcomes ranging from 9-9, 9-8 to 1-1;
- re-sits are available in November for English and Maths only, the whole examination having to be retaken.

Accountability

- A.7. In England, GCSE results are as important to schools as to the pupils. The schools are judged on their pupils' performance. If the results fall below expectations, there could be serious consequences for the school. Not surprisingly, the schools direct the pupils' energies towards achieving the best scores possible on whatever the main accountability measure happens to be. These can, therefore, have a considerable bearing on entries and the results which are obtained.

English Baccalaureate

- A.8. In order to promote core subjects, the Government requires schools to report on how many of their Key Stage 4 pupils are taking a combination of GCSEs which is called the English Baccalaureate. This consists of English, maths, two sciences, history or geography, and a language. It was the Government's ambition that, by 2022, 75 per cent of schools would reach this level and, by 2025, 90 per cent would do so.
- A.9. From 2018 onwards pupils' performance has been turned into a score based on the average of the points scored in the five subject areas. Pupil's scores are averaged to get the school's score. Both English language and English literature must be taken to count towards the English score. In science, there are two options: the double-award Combined Science; or two subjects from Biology, Chemistry, Computer science and Physics.

Progress 8 and Attainment 8

- A.10. Since 2016, the EBacc has been supplanted as the main accountability measure by Attainment 8 and Progress 8. In essence, they are the EBacc subjects, with a language no longer compulsory, plus three other subjects. There are three groups from which the subjects can be chosen to contribute to Attainment 8/Progress 8:
- English and maths, which are double weighted in the scoring;
 - three other EBacc subjects from the Sciences including Computing; Geography; History; and Languages;
 - three more subjects which may be EBacc subjects or can be any other GCSEs or approved arts, academic or vocational qualifications.
- A.11. Attainment 8 reports the performance and Progress 8 the improvement made by the pupils compared to the national average of pupils with similar Sats results. Attainment 8/Progress 8 makes room for GCSEs, such as Art & Design, Design & Technology, Religious Studies, and the Performing Arts, which were previously excluded. Taking eight GCSEs is not compulsory, but any missing will be scored zero.

- A.12. Unlike A-levels, there has been a recalibration of the grade scale for GCSEs, so there was the opportunity to allow the new grades to find their own level. But Ofqual has decided to peg the new Grade 7 to the old Grade A, with A* being split into Grades 8 and 9. It was originally intended that the new Grade 5 would be the equivalent of the C grade, but this was re-considered, and 'C' was aligned instead to Grade 4. The change leaves some ambiguity, as grade 5 is now spoken of as a strong pass.

Comparable Outcomes

- A.13. Since 2011, Ofqual, the regulator in England, has acted to keep the grade pattern consistent over time, adjusting for prior attainment. The composition of the cohort can change quite markedly from year to year. Many schools, for example, transferred their pupils from the national GCSE in English to the international GCSE when the internal assessment component of the national award was dropped in 2014. The IGCSE retained it and thereby attracted entries from many schools. But when, from 2018, this no longer counted in the league tables, the schools switched back again. But pass rates at the various levels were, therefore, kept much the same from 2011 onwards, with if anything top grades being reduced slightly. But then Covid struck and there was a dramatic increase in top grades.

Covid

- A.14. The Covid pandemic threw the awarding of grades into disarray. It was decided it would not be safe to hold exams, but Ofqual was initially confident that the grades could be accurately calculated by fitting teachers' rankings into the grade pattern of the previous decade. It all seemed plausible and feasible, but while the grade pattern of previous years could be reproduced by the computer programme quite easily, fitting the schools' rankings into this mould was, to say the least, problematic. It threw up major anomalies in the individual A-level grades, with candidates even receiving grades three down from what they were expecting and had been predicted to achieve. Not surprisingly, there was uproar, with loud and emotional protests that the calculated grades were ruining young people's lives.
- A.15. The Government decided enough was enough and abandoned Ofqual's attempt at calculation (with its chief executive later losing her job). Setting aside its scepticism, the Government announced that the calculated A-level grades would be replaced by teachers' predictions, if that were higher than the calculated grade, but that this could be retained if it were the higher. It was a formula for grade inflation.
- A.16. In 2021, there was the hope that exams could resume, but at least it was recognised they could not early enough to allow for something more systematic than in 2020 to be arranged. Schools were requested to collect evidence on which to base their assessments using tests, assignments, and projects, which would be available for inspection by the exam boards. The intention was to arrive at more realistic grades than the previous year, but in the event there were more top grades than ever in 2021.

A.17. In 2022, there was a return to exams, but not the tough ones of the Gove reforms. In an attempt to make them fair to candidates with widely differing teaching provision and interruptions, the syllabuses were restricted, and advance notice given of the question topics. In May 2022, Ofqual announced that the results that year would be the first step in getting the grades back to pre-pandemic levels in 2023. Wales and Northern Ireland decided to take a year longer.