

1. Prospects for 2023

- 1.1. During the two years of teacher assessment there was an explosion in top grades. With the return to exams, the government is seeking to restore pre-pandemic standards in two steps, with 2022 as a halfway house. This would mean nearly 100,000 fewer A* grades being awarded. Will the regulators and exam boards be able to deliver? In order to assess their chances, we need to look back to see how we got to where we are.
- 1.2. Ironically, just as the major A-level and GCSE reforms, making them more exam-based, were coming to fruition, Covid struck. At the time A-levels were in a good place. Even the inflation inherent in a standards-based approach had been brought under control by keeping the grade pattern consistent from year to year. But the pandemic prevented examinations being held in 2020. The regulator, Ofqual, had assured the Government that the problem could be handled by calculating the grades by fitting teachers' rankings into the established grade pattern.
- 1.3. While, however, it was possible to reproduce the overall grade pattern, it led to some very odd results for individual candidates, with some receiving grades three down on what had been predicted. In the face of a public relations disaster, the Government immediately went for damage limitation and scrapped Ofqual's calculations (with its chief executive later losing her job) and announced that the grades in 2020 would be those that the teachers had already predicted for university admission and employment. Inevitably, in this situation teachers tend to be as optimistic as possible, so some hike in the top grades was anticipated. But there was quite a jump.
- 1.4. In 2021, the hope that exams could take place had to be abandoned, but at least it was in time to allow for something more systematic 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 if required. The intention was for more realistic grades, but in the event, even more top grades were given out than in 2020. Analysis of the results indicated that a number of schools had taken the opportunity to present themselves and their pupils in the best possible light.
- 1.5. Taken together the two years of teacher assessment, 2020 and 2021, the percentage of A* grades almost trebled from 7.8 to 19.1, and A*/A grades nearly doubled from 25.5 to 44.8. In other words, an extra 100,000 A* were given out in 2021 compared with 2019, and an extra 168,000 of A*/A grades.
- 1.6. Candidates, parents and schools were delighted by the A-grade bonanza, but of course it meant that universities and employers were not able to tell applicants apart as accurately. It also led to some candidates getting a false picture of themselves and not taking the wisest decisions about their futures. Some of the leading universities expanded to take those getting higher grades than expected, but this left some middle range universities denuded of students and in financial difficulties. In short, the bonanza was a mixed blessing.

- 1.7. Exams returned in 2022, but they were not the full-on, externally-set, and externally-marked, unseen papers taken under invigilation. They had had to be adapted to be fair to students whose studies had been disrupted by widely different amounts. To allow for this, the syllabuses were shortened to fit into the time available and candidates were given advance notice of the topics on which questions were to be asked.

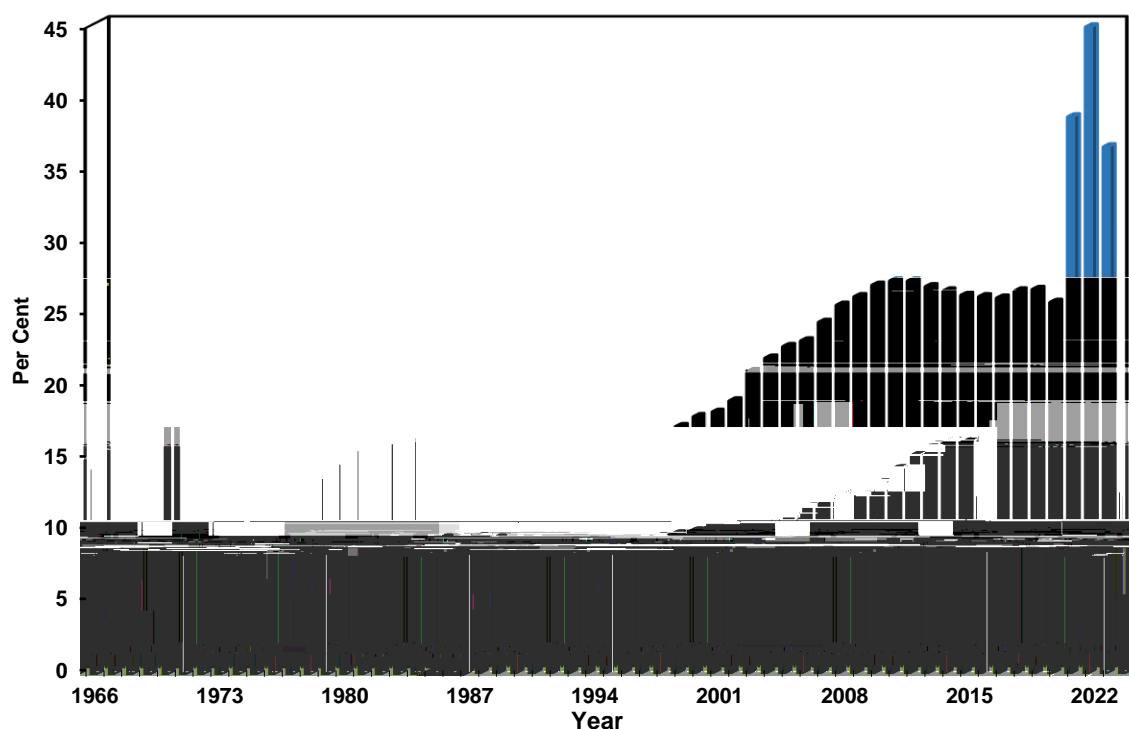
have A-levels in England, Wales and Northern Ireland grown even further apart?

- 1.13. Each of these issues is addressed in a separate chapter. While there were major changes in the grade patterns during the pandemic, the trends in the subjects studied marched on. There is a chapter on this also.
- 1.14. The report concludes with some predictions.

2. Explosion of A Grades

- 2.1. A striking outcome of the enforced switch to the awarding of A-level grades by teacher assessment in 2020 and 2021 was the huge increases in top grades. Chart 2.1 shows what happened

Chart 2.2: Trend in A/A* Grades



2.5. But, as Chart 2.2 clearly shows, there have been at least four phases in the life of the A grade at A-level:

1. From the introduction of letter-grades in 1963 through to about 1985 the A grade was specified as being for the top ten per cent, and the exam boards kept comfortably within this limit.

2. Then the rules were changed so it became possible for any number of candidates to receive the award if they met the set standard. This led to the percentage of A grades rising each year. By 2007 the pass rate at A grade had nearly trebled to 27 per cent and grade inflation was hitting the headlines.

3. An embryonic independent regulator, Ofqual, was established in 2008 within the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, becoming independent on 1 April 2010. It was charged with bringing ‘grade inflation’ under control, and came up with the technique of comparable outcomes whereby the grade pattern was held consistent from year to year, with allowance made for the cohort’s performance in the end-of-primary-school Sats tests. This had the effect of keeping A grades in check and, by 2019, the going rate had settled at close to 25 per cent.

4. With the last-minute switch to teacher assessment in 2020 all this careful structuring broke down. A-grades went wild. The 25.5 per cent awarded in 2019 became 38.6 per cent in 2020. In 2021 there was more time to prepare for teacher assessment and for it to be made more systematic, so one might

have supposed grades would fall. But quite the opposite occurred. A*/A grades increased even more, so nearly half of all entries were given a top grade (44.8 per cent) that year.

- 2.6. If the Government’s request, through Ofqual, to bring down A*/A grades in 2022 had been fully met, they would have been given to about 35 per cent of the entries. The percentage did fall, but to only 36.4 per cent, which suggests that it was not easy. Chart 2.3 provides a clue as to why this might be the case. In 2019, the highest proportions of top grades went to maths, the physical sciences, and languages where there were right answers. Subjective subjects, where outstanding performance is more a matter of judgement, such as the performing and expressive arts, tended to be much more modest in their use of top grades.

Chart 2.3: A*/A Awarded 2019-2022

Subjects	%A*/A Awarded			
	2019	2020	2021	2022
<i>Subjective</i>				
Media/Film/TV Studies	11.0	23.8	29.6	23.6
Physical Education	14.7	32.0	43.5	32.3
Drama	18.0	39.8	48.8	39.2
Music	19.3	41.1	54.8	42.3
Performing/Expressive Arts	24.0	43.3	51.1	43.3
<i>Maths & Physical Sciences</i>				

points in 2021, the biggest ever gaps between the sexes at this level. More than that girls were ahead at A* in 2021 in all but three of the 38 A-level subjects, but with the return to exams in 2022 boys' share trebled.

Chart 3.2.: Gender Gap at A*/A

- 3.5. The sharp turnaround makes one wonder if girls were favoured in teacher assessment. This could have been because girls, who tend to apply themselves more consistently than boys, come closer to the teachers' idea

4. England, Wales and Northern Ireland

- 4.1. The dataset for this report is all UK candidates. But it must be remembered that the examinations come under three separate jurisdictions. The writ of the UK Government runs only for England as far as education is concerned. Wales and Northern Ireland have their own administrations, regulatory bodies and examination boards. While the UK government is keen to return to 2019 standards, Wales aims for the grades to come mid-way between the 2019 and 2022 results. In both Wales and Northern Ireland information about the content of some of the papers was given out in advance, and Covid disruption has been taken into account in the marking. Although A-levels have the same name in England, Wales and Northern Ireland they are growing increasingly apart.

Chart 4.1: Percentage Point Change 2019 to 2022

Grade & Year	England	Wales	NI	UK
A*/A 2022	35.9	40.9	44.0	36.4
A*/A 2019	25.2	27.0	30.9	25.5
Difference	10.7			

4.2. Chart 4.1 summarizes the changes that have occurred over the four years from pre-pandemic in 2019 to hopefully post-pandemic in 2022. What stands out is that Wales' more-relaxed-less-rigorous approach has led to the highest increases in top grades. A large gap has now opened up on England. Nevertheless, Northern Ireland remains the standout performer whatever the form of assessment.

4.3. In Charts 4.2 and 4.3 the time courses of performance in the three countries this century is shown. Dominating Chart 4.2, which focuses on top grades, is the huge spike during the years of teacher assessment. This occurred in all three countries and began to decline with the resumption of exams. For a number of years, the rank order had been Northern Ireland, England, and Wales, but as the Gove-Gibb reforms began to toughen A-level exams in England, it was overtaken

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different appreciation of the value of education. Its success seems often to go under the radar, and it deserves more attention, especially with a view of discovering whether there are lessons to be learned by the rest of the UK.

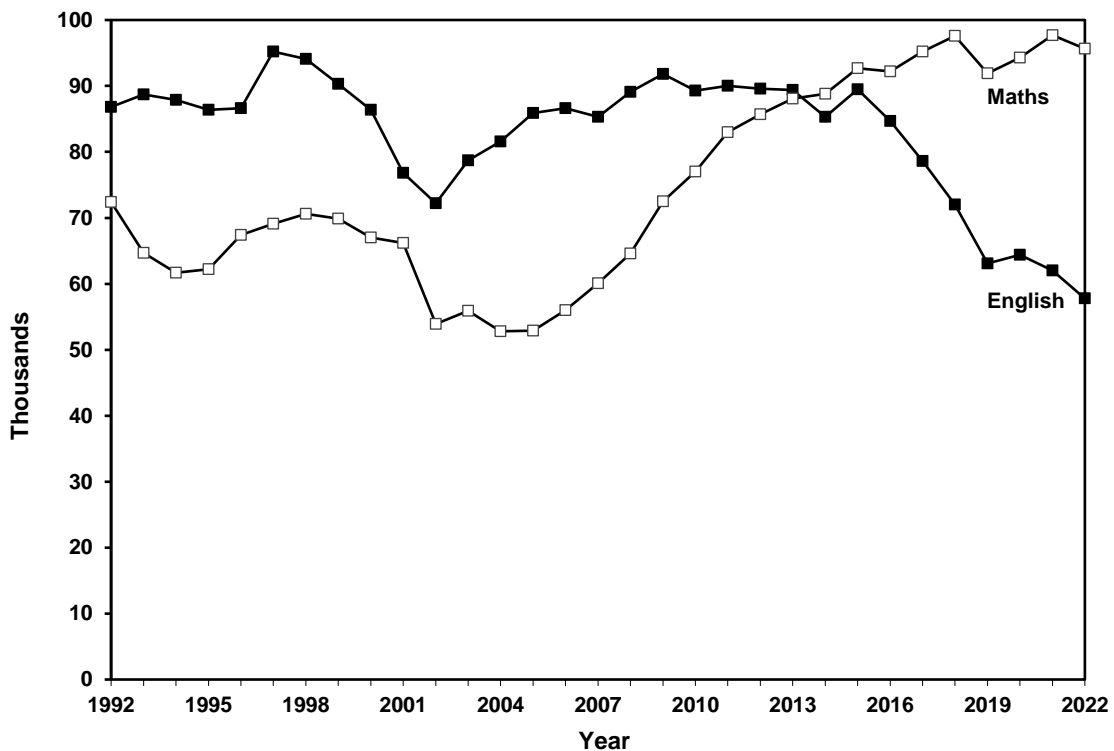
5. Trends in Entries by Subject

- 5.1. While the effects of Covid have captured the attention, major changes have been taking place in the subject choices of the students at A-level. The data published each August by the Joint Council for Qualifications enable us to trace the long-term trends. Each year Ofqual also publishes in May the provisional A-level entry figures for England. We thus have a preview of the 2023 entries. Our sixth chart shows how the four subject groups we have followed fare in these most recent figures.

English & Maths

- 5.2. One or other of English or maths has been the most frequently taken A-level for most of the 30 years covered in Chart 5.1.

Chart 5.1: English and Maths Entries 1992-2022



- 5.3. For a long time it was English, but it was overtaken by maths in 2014, and following its recent slump it has also fallen behind psychology, biology and chemistry. The provisional entries for 2023 in England (Chart 5.6) show the take-up of English is still declining.
- 5.4. Maths, by contrast, has almost doubled its numbers since 2005, reaching 95,635 entries in 2022. Its take-off in 2005 can be traced to the easing of exams in that year following complaints that the Dearing reforms of 2000 had made A-level maths too hard. What has driven the subsequent growth is a matter of conjecture, but it has coincided with a major push to boost maths and the sciences.

- 5.8. There are several possible reasons for this reluctance to learn other languages. Perhaps it is because English is a world language and the British take it for granted that the people of other countries will learn it. Spanish is also a world language and that may account for 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,

problem was exacerbated by ‘science’ being mainly taught by biologists, since physics teachers, particularly, were in short supply.

Chart 5.5: A-Level Physics Entries 1953-2022



Chart 5.6: England Provisional Entries

Subject	Entries in Thousands		%Change
	2022	2023	
Mathematics ¹	89.61	90.55	1.4
English ²	53.97	53.71	-0.5
French	7.44	6.51	-12.5
German	2.68	2.21	-17.2
Spanish	8.64	7.55	-12.7
Psychology	76.27	78.02	2.3
Sociology	43.59	45.73	4.9
Economics	35.76	38.33	7.2
Political Studies	19.15	20.63	7.8
Biology	66.22	68.87	4.0
Chemistry	54.87	57.62	5.0
Physics	36.77	35.82	-2.6
All Subjects	788,125	806,410	2.3

1. Does not include Further Maths.

2. Entries for English Literature, English Language, and English Literature & Language Combined.

Source: Ofqual (June 2023) Provisional Entries for GCSE, AS and A-Level, Summer 2023 Exam Series. Applies to England.

Provisional Entries in England 2023

- 5.19. We have referred to Ofqual's provisional A-level entries for England several times already. In Chart 5.6 they are displayed for the four subject groups we have focused on. Although they are provisional, and for England only, they indicate whether the trends are likely to continue.

- 5.20. It shows that in most cases they do. The social sciences and biology continue to

6. Predictions

- 6.1. It is unwise to be predicting outcomes that have already been settled and which some people know what they are, when you have absolutely no inside information. But it is only because I am completely outside the process that I am free to comment as I do.

A*/A Grades

- 6.2. With the return of exams, the Government has wanted A-level grades to return to pre-pandemic levels. In 2022, it made clear that it wanted to achieve this in two steps, with 2022 a halfway house. The exam boards did not quite get there last year, so what are we to expect of this year's results?

- 6.3. The learning experience has been more disrupted than might have been expected. Not only has there been the aftermath of Covid, but also numerous teacher strikes. These may have prompted the exam boards towards leniency. Also, as we saw in Chart 2.4, to get fully back to the grade levels of 2019, nearly 60,000 fewer A* grades would be awarded in 2023 than 2022. A drop of this tow0 G{)JTJETQ EMC /Span ÆMC

6.13. Each is a story in its own right. I would only point to the great growth of the social sciences coinciding with universities becoming known as hotbeds of activism and wokery.