News story: Guide to AS and A level results for England, 2018

Key points

1. Overall results in England are stable for reformed and unreformed A levels and standards have been maintained. It is important not to over-interpret relatively small changes in year-on-year results.
2. Entries for reformed AS qualifications in England have dropped which makes it much more difficult to compare year-on-year results.
3. The variability in results within centres is similar to previous years showing that schools and colleges have responded well to the reforms. Even when there are no changes to qualifications, individual schools and colleges will see variation in their year-on-year results; this is normal.

Today (16 August 2018) we are publishing:

You may also find it useful to read about how we regulate GCSEs, AS and A levels in England.

An historical perspective…

The exam boards use the principle of comparable outcomes when awarding, as a way of ensuring that standards are maintained.

The principle of comparable outcomes is not new. It has always been used by exam boards, particularly when qualifications change. It's a principle that exam boards have followed for decades: that if the ability of the cohort of students is similar to previous years, they would expect results (outcomes) to be similar. This means that, in general, students who would have achieved a grade A in one year would achieve a grade A in another year.

The phrase 'comparable outcomes' has also come to mean awarding based on statistical predictions, because that's the way we and the exam boards put that principle into practice. Predictions give us a way to maintain standards, and a mechanism to make sure exam boards' standards are aligned, so that it is no easier to get a grade with one than with another. But predictions are not used in isolation. Senior examiners review the work of students at the key grade boundaries to make sure it is appropriate for the grade. Where they judge that it is not, they can move the boundary to a mark where they are satisfied that the standard of work is appropriate.

Since 2010 we have required exam boards to report their results to us against predictions and to provide a rationale where they are not in line. Results in recent years have been stable year-on-year (see infographic).

Setting standards in AS and A levels in 2018

As in previous years, the approach outlined above has been used for all AS and A levels in 2018 – reformed and unreformed. It is particularly important at times of change, as it protects students from being disadvantaged because they are the first to sit new qualifications, when teachers do not have access to the same bank of resources and past papers. We have been clear since before students embarked on these new courses that the exam boards would use predictions to carry forward the standards to these new AS and A levels.

In the 2018 AS and A level awards, exam boards used predictions based on the students' prior attainment at GCSE. And, as in previous years, senior examiners have reviewed students' work in all awards. In the reformed A levels this year they were asked to check whether student work at the grade boundaries suggested by the statistics was acceptable for the grade (either A or E). And, in some of these awards, the senior examiners recommended grade boundaries that deviated from those suggested by the statistical evidence. We have not intervened to ask any boards to change their grade boundaries this summer.

Reformed A level subjects in 2018

This summer, reformed A levels were awarded for the first time in 12 more subjects, including A level mathematics, that was available after one year of study. This was to facilitate students entering A level mathematics after one year of study and A level further mathematics the following year, a continuation of the approach taken by some students prior to reform. The majority of the entries for A level mathematics this summer are for the legacy specifications.

The content of the new A levels has been refreshed and updated, with greater input from universities, and the assessment requirements have changed in some subjects (to reflect changes in the proportion of non-exam assessment). The new A levels are linear qualifications, but overall A levels have not been made more demanding.

We have been clear that exam boards would maintain standards from the legacy versions of the qualifications, so that in general, students who would have achieved a grade A in previous years would achieve a grade A this year.

Average number of A level qualifications per student

JCQ published data presents the numbers of entries and certifications, rather than data at student level. This is because students typically take AS and A levels with more than one exam board. It is also worth noting that many students also take AS or A levels alongside other qualifications, which we have not included in this analysis. We have combined the exam board data to look at the average number of A levels per student for 18-year-olds in

England taking at least one A level each year (students generally complete their A levels aged 18). This is shown in the table below. For A level, the average number has remained stable since 2015.

Average number of A level qualifications per student (18-year-olds in England)

	2015	2016	2017	2018
A level	2.71	2.68	2.67	2.68

Grade boundaries

It is difficult to compare in a meaningful way grade boundaries between reformed and legacy qualifications, for several reasons. Maximum marks for the papers differ, the number of papers in a subject differs, and the type of assessment can be different. It is particularly difficult to compare reformed grade boundaries with the legacy qualifications where there was a significant amount of non-exam assessment, or where the proportion of non-exam assessment has changed, since the grade boundaries on written papers may have been higher to compensate for high performance on the coursework. This makes it difficult to make comparisons for the majority of reformed A level qualifications awarded for the first time this summer, since many contain some non-exam assessment. We have therefore only compared grade boundaries with last summer for reformed A level qualifications first awarded in summer 2017, since for these qualifications we are able to compare like-with-like.

The following table shows a summary of the changes in paper level grade boundaries for these qualifications compared to summer 2017. Although exam papers are intended to be of the same demand as previous years, in practice, this is very difficult to achieve, so grade boundaries change to take account of the demand of the papers.

Overall, the grade boundaries for individual papers are relatively stable compared to last summer. At both grades A and E, a similar number of grade boundaries have increased as have decreased. On average, the grade boundaries at grade A have changed by around a quarter of a raw mark, and the grade boundaries at grade E have changed by less than a quarter of a raw mark.

Changes in paper grade boundaries for reformed A levels first awarded in summer 2017

	Increased	Stayed the same	Decreased	Average mark change
Grade A	118	95	124	-0.25
Grade E	110	136	91	-0.18

Reformed AS qualifications

This summer is the third year that reformed AS qualifications have been

awarded. These are standalone qualifications in England that no longer count towards the A level. Students therefore do not have to take the AS qualification if they are intending to certificate at A level.

AS entries for reformed qualifications have declined sharply this summer, as outlined in the provisional entries report that we published earlier this year. This means that entries to some AS subjects are now relatively small. Due to the decline in entries, we have not published centre variability graphs for AS qualifications this year, since many subjects do not have sufficient entries to make valid comparisons. Where the cohorts are small and changing year on year, the outcomes may inevitably be more variable.

Instead, we have analysed the number of 17-year-old students taking at least one AS qualification in 2018 compared to previous years. This is shown in the table below. The number of students taking at least one AS qualification has declined significantly since 2017, following a smaller decline between 2016 and 2017. Because of this decline we have not calculated the average number of AS qualifications taken per student this year, since significantly fewer 17-year-olds took any AS qualifications compared to last summer.

Number of students taking at least one AS qualification (17-year-olds in England)

	2015	2016	2017	2018
AS	281,600	270,500	209,540	64,810