

Vaccine update: issue 309, June 2020

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Perceptions of qualifications in England

News story

The results of Ofqual's surveys of perceptions of general qualifications and vocational and technical qualifications in England.



Ofqual has today (1 July 2020) published [Wave 18 of the annual qualifications perceptions survey for general qualifications](#). This information, published annually as Official Statistics, was carried out by the research organisation YouGov on our behalf.

We have also published today, our third survey on the [Perceptions of Vocational and Technical Qualifications](#). The survey was also carried out by YouGov.

These regular survey outputs allow us to understand changes and variations of levels of understanding about qualifications among learners, parents, business groups, teachers, headteachers and the general public.

Please note that the responses presented in these reports do not relate to the exceptional arrangements being put in place this year in response to coronavirus (COVID-19). They refer only to the normal arrangements in place in 2019.

Highlights from the general qualifications survey:

GCSEs, AS and A levels

- the perception of GCSEs being trusted qualifications has increased, with approximately 74% agreeing with this statement in the current wave compared with 71% in wave 17
- consistent with the previous three waves, 41% stakeholders agreed that GCSE standards are maintained year-on-year, and 49% for AS and A level
- the proportion agreeing that AS and A levels are trusted qualifications was 82%, which is consistent with the previous four waves
- the proportion of stakeholders who agreed that the marking of GCSEs, AS and A levels is accurate was consistent with wave 17, with four in ten stakeholders in agreement in wave 18

Applied General qualifications

- in line with wave 17, a quarter agreed that Applied General qualifications are trusted qualifications and that standards are maintained year-on-year, higher than in waves 16 and 17

GCSE 9 to 1 grading

- there has been a sustained increase in knowledge of the 9 to 1 grading scale, with 9 in 10 stakeholders correctly identifying that 9 is the highest grade that students can get, compared to under 7 in 10 stakeholders in wave 14

Special consideration, reasonable adjustments and malpractice

- overall, 8 in 10 teachers and headteachers agreed that they have adequate information about the arrangements that are available for a GCSE or AS/A level student who is eligible for special consideration. This was in line with the previous wave, and an increase in levels of agreement from waves 15 and 16

- consistent with waves 15, 16 and 17, the majority (86%) of teachers and head teachers agreed that they have adequate information about what constitutes malpractice for GCSEs, AS and A levels

Reviews of marking and moderation, and appeals (ROMMA)

- seven in ten stakeholders were aware that there is a review of marking and moderation, and appeals (ROMMA) system for GCSE, AS and A level results. Consistent with the previous wave, a similar proportion of stakeholders agreed that the ROMMA system is fair for GCSEs and AS/A levels. There was an increase in headteachers' levels of agreement compared to wave 17

Highlights from the Vocational and Technical skills survey:

Vocational and Technical Qualifications (VTQs)

- the vast majority (88%) of training providers, 70% of learners and nearly half of employers said they value VTQs
- approximately two-fifths of employers reported having a very or quite good understanding of VTQs, with large employers being the most likely to see the value of VTQs
- among learners who had started or completed a VTQ, the most frequently perceived benefit was an increase in confidence using their vocational / technical skills

Functional Skills qualifications (FSQs)

- the majority of training providers (64%) and learners (54%) said that they value FSQs and a significant proportion of these agreed that FSQs offer value for money
- medium-sized and large employers were significantly more likely than smaller employers to agree that their organisation values FSQs

End-point assessments (EPAs)

- overall, there was a strong sense that apprenticeships are good preparation for work – with the majority (84%) of providers, learners (81%) and employers (74%) in agreement on this

- 3 in 5 providers reported having a very or quite good understanding of EPAs of apprenticeships, with two-thirds confirming that they know the difference between apprenticeship frameworks and the new apprenticeship standards
- nearly 8 in 10 providers were aware that EPAs are specific to apprenticeship standards

Please note that YouGov and Ofqual advise against drawing conclusions based on differences in the data in comparison with waves 1 and 2 of the VTQ survey. This is due to key changes in the sampling approach and survey mode made for wave 3.

Published 1 July 2020

[CMA imposes £1.2m in fines for price-fixing in private eyecare](#)

Press release

The CMA has found that a private hospital group and 7 consultant ophthalmologists broke competition law by taking part in illegal price fixing.



Following an investigation by the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA), Spire Healthcare Limited and Spire Healthcare Group plc (Spire) has admitted that one of its hospitals instigated and facilitated an illegal arrangement with 7 consultant ophthalmologists. They have all admitted that they agreed to fix fees for initial private consultations for self-pay patients at £200 and will now face fines totalling more than £1.2 million.

Ophthalmology is a branch of medicine specialising in the treatment of eye

disorders like cataracts or glaucoma. Private consultants set their own prices for initial consultations for self-pay patients, but by agreeing not to compete with each other on price, the Spire hospital and the consultants in this case denied potential patients the chance to choose between the consultants to get the best deal.

The arrangement between Spire and the consultants, who all operated out of a Spire hospital in the north of England, continued for almost 2 years. It was first initiated following a dinner organised by that hospital's management and attended by 5 of the 7 ophthalmologists, during which the topic of fees was raised. After the dinner, a Spire employee at the hospital sent an email to all 7 consultants to suggest that the agreed price for initial consultations for self-pay patients be set at £200 going forward.

The ophthalmologists confirmed they would charge this fee, with 4 of them raising their prices from £180 to £200. The remaining 3 were already charging £200 and continued to charge this amount. Spire then liaised with its customer service team to facilitate the arrangement.

Michael Grenfell, Executive Director of Enforcement at the CMA, said:

Initial consultations are an essential first step for people suffering from eye disorders. It is unacceptable that patients were unable to shop around and get the best deal because Spire and the consultants illegally set a minimum consultation fee.

It is particularly disappointing that the CMA has had to take action in the private ophthalmology sector again, following a previous finding of anti-competitive practices in the sector in 2015. Today's decision, and the subsequent fines, send a clear signal that we will not tolerate anti-competitive behaviour.

The total fines imposed take into account the behaviour of those involved. The CMA has discounted each of the fines by 20% to reflect that they all admitted to the illegal arrangement and agreed to cooperate with the CMA, thereby shortening the length of its investigation.

One consultant was not fined as they brought the illegal activity to the CMA's attention and fully cooperated with its investigation.

Notes to editors:

1. The final total penalties payable are set out as the following:
£1,200,000 for Spire Healthcare Limited and Spire Healthcare Group plc;
the consultants received fines of: £2,978, £1,186, £2,312, £2,193,
£3,859, £642
2. The arrangement was found to have taken place from at least 29 August 2017 to 3 July 2019. In the case of one consultant, the arrangement was up to 28 June 2018, when they stopped consulting at the Hospital.
3. In arriving at its decision in this case the CMA reiterates the established legal position that persons entering into an agreement to

fix prices may break the law, even where this does not involve them having to subsequently change their prices. Equally a business can break the law if they are facilitating illegal conduct, even if they don't supply the product or service for which the price has been fixed.

4. A party under investigation by the CMA may enter into a settlement agreement if it is prepared to admit that it has breached competition law and is willing to agree to a streamlined administrative procedure for the remainder of the investigation. In return, the CMA imposes a reduced penalty on the business where settlement would achieve clear efficiencies, resulting in the earlier adoption of any infringement decision and other resource savings.
5. The Statement of Objections in this case was issued to the parties on 09 June 2020.
6. [The CMA previously issued fines of £382,500 after finding a membership organisation of private consultant ophthalmologists broke competition law.](#)
7. Further detail of the CMA's procedures in Competition Act 1998 cases is available in [CMA's procedures in Competition Act 1998 cases.](#)
8. Anyone who has information about a cartel is encouraged to call the CMA cartels hotline on 020 3738 6888 or email cartelshotline@cma.gov.uk.
9. More information on this investigation can be found on the ['Privately funded ophthalmology services' investigation case page.](#)
10. Media enquiries should be directed to the CMA's press team: press@cma.gov.uk, or 020 3738 6460.

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[Tax credits: it's time to update your award](#)

HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) is reminding tax credits customers that they need to tell HMRC about any changes in their circumstances or income by 31 July 2020.

Tax credits help working families with targeted financial support so it is important that people don't miss out on money that they are entitled to.

Renewing tax credits online is quick and easy. Customers can [log onto GOV.UK](#) to check the progress of their renewal, be reassured that it's being processed, and know when they will hear back from HMRC.

While most tax credit awards will be renewed automatically in 2020, the self-employed, those in receipt of taxable social security benefit, or those who have other income may need to review their total household income and tell HMRC if the income held is incorrect.

Customers who need to respond to the annual review pack will need to do so by 31 July – or their payments will stop.

HMRC's Director General for Customer Services, Angela MacDonald said:

During these uncertain times, while the UK comes together to combat COVID-19, tax credits payments are a vital source of support for millions of people and their families.

If you have been contacted by HMRC to provide your income details, I urge you to contact the department before 31 July.

Don't leave it too late, get in touch and make sure the information we hold is correct.

If any information HMRC holds is incorrect or incomplete, customers may have to pay back any tax credits that have been overpaid. They may also have to pay a penalty.

Customers can use the HMRC App on their smartphone to:

- renew their tax credits
- check their tax credits payments schedule
- find out how much they have earned for the year

Customers should be aware that criminals could take advantage of tax credits renewals to text, email or phone the public, offering fake support. The scams mimic HMRC messages in an effort to look genuine.

If someone texts, emails or calls claiming to be from HMRC, saying that a customer can renew a tax credits award or access financial help, and asks for credit card or bank details, it's likely to be a scam. People should check GOV.UK for information on [how to recognise genuine HMRC contact](#).

Customers can get help and information on renewing tax credits:

The deadline for people to renew their tax credits is 31 July 2020.

In April, HMRC announced Working Tax Credit customers would receive up to £20 extra each week from 6 April 2020 until 5 April 2021, as part of a number of measures to support the country during the Coronavirus pandemic. To make sure the information HMRC holds is correct and up to date, letters have been sent to some customers to reconfirm their income details.

To establish how the total income was calculated, or report any changes use the webchat service. Go to GOV.UK and search 'tax credits general enquiries'.

Customers who are self-employed, and have not filed their tax return for the 2019 to 2020 tax year, must estimate their profit or loss and report this to us online by 31 July 2020. If they don't tell us, we will finalise their award using the information we hold, and they will not be able to change it

at a later date. Once they have provided an estimate, they'll need to contact us again when they know their actual income, by no later than 31 January 2021.

Customers that receive a letter or text and the details are correct, or have already made their declaration including confirming their income and circumstances, don't need to do anything.

Contact HMRC straight away if you disagree with any of the information in the letter or need to tell us any changes.

Tax credits will gradually be replaced by Universal Credit. Customers cannot receive tax credits and Universal Credit at the same time. For more information, they need to go to www.gov.uk/universalcredit.

HMRC's scams advice

Stop:

- take a moment to think before parting with your information or money
- genuine organisations like banks or HMRC won't normally contact you out of the blue to ask for personal details

Challenge:

Protect:

- forward suspicious emails claiming to be from HMRC to phishing@hmrc.gov.uk and texts to 60599.
- contact your bank immediately if you think you've fallen victim to a scam, and report it to [Action Fraud](#)

[Government fires up R&D across the country to cement the UK as science superpower](#)

\$CTA * Government to ensure UK is the best place in the world for scientists, researchers and entrepreneurs with new and ambitious R&D Roadmap * Roadmap sets out vision to attract global talent, cut unnecessary bureaucracy and cement the UK as a world-leading science superpower * significant £300 million government investment will upgrade scientific infrastructure across the UK * new Office for Talent set up to make it easier for leading global scientists, researchers and innovators to come to the UK

New plans to cement the UK as the world's leading research and science superpower have been set out by the Business Secretary Alok Sharma today (1

July 2020).

The Research and Development Roadmap, published today, puts pursuing ground-breaking research, attracting global talent, and cutting unnecessary red tape at the forefront of our long-term plan to ensure the UK is the best place in the world for scientists, researchers and entrepreneurs to live, work and innovate. This will help to power up economic recovery and level up the UK.

£300 million will also be brought forwards to upgrade scientific infrastructure across the UK through the government's World Class Labs funding scheme. This funding will enable research institutes and universities to make sure UK researchers have access to better lab equipment, digital resources, and to improve and maintain current research facilities.

The Roadmap will also support the government's efforts to address global challenges from eradicating our contribution to climate change by 2050 and developing new medicines, to improving life at home by strengthening national security and improving public services.

To achieve this, the government has today committed to:

- Increasing investment in ground-breaking research, cutting unnecessary bureaucracy and setting ambitious new goals for research to keep the UK ahead in cutting-edge discoveries.
- Attracting, retaining and developing top talent to ensure the UK is the best place for researchers to work, offering careers at all stages that attract a diverse range of people. The government will also establish a new Office for Talent, making it easier for top global science, research and innovation talent to come to the UK.
- Securing the economic and societal benefits of world-class research across the UK by setting up a new Innovation Expert Group to review and improve how the Government supports research, from idea stage right through to product development.
- Supporting our innovators and risk-takers by backing entrepreneurs and start-ups with the funding needed to scale up their innovations, as well as ensuring the UK is making the most of its first-class industries and technologies.
- Boosting international collaboration to ensure the UK benefits from global scientific partnerships. This will create new opportunities for trade, growth and influence for the science and innovation communities and research institutions.
- Aiming to maintain a close relationship with European partners by seeking to agree a fair and balanced deal for participation in EU R&D schemes. If the UK does not associate with programmes such as the EU's research programme, Horizon Europe, the government will commit to meeting any funding shortfalls and putting in place alternative schemes to support vital UK research.

The new Office for Talent is a team based in No10 with delivery teams across government departments. It will ensure the UK's talent offer is stronger than ever for students, those building their careers, and those who are already world leaders in their fields, and will make it easier for those with the

most talent, potential, energy and creativity to come to the UK from around the world.

The Office will begin work immediately to review the effectiveness of the current rules and ensure excellent customer service across the immigration system, so that it is simple, easy, and quick. They will also help those coming to the UK better understand the opportunities on offer and break down any barriers they might face.

The government announced today, as part of the new graduate route, international students who complete a PhD from Summer 2021 can stay in the UK for 3 years after study to live and work. As previously announced, students who have successfully completed undergraduate and master's degrees will be able to stay 2 two years after study. This will make it easier for some of the best, young international graduates to secure skilled jobs in the UK and contribute to economic growth.

In addition, when the student route opens this autumn as part of the UK's new points-based immigration system, there will be a number of improvements which will further streamline the immigration process. These include extending the window in which prospective students can make visa applications, removing study time limits at postgraduate level and allowing all students to switch any other type of visa from within the UK. Existing students and those who start their course this autumn will benefit from these changes, once they have been introduced.

The [global talent scheme](#) will also be opened up to EU citizens which will allow highly-skilled scientists and researchers to come to the UK without needing a job offer.

To attract the top digital and tech talent from across the UK and from overseas into government itself, a flagship innovation fellowship programme will be launched, sponsored by No10. Those admitted to the programme will help transform the delivery of public services by accelerating the adoption of cutting-edge technologies and approaches from industry, academia and civil society.

Business Secretary Alok Sharma said:

The UK has a strong history of turning new ideas into revolutionary technologies – from penicillin to graphene and the world wide web. Our vision builds on these incredible successes to cement Britain's reputation as a global science superpower.

The R&D Roadmap sets out our plan to attract global talent, cut unnecessary red tape and ensure our best minds get the support they need to solve the biggest challenges of our time.

Today's announcement, is on top of the [£280 million provided to universities](#) to continue their cutting-edge work during the coronavirus pandemic, such as research into antibiotics resistance and the effects of coronavirus on

society, by covering the costs of equipment and salaries. A new research funding scheme also opens this Autumn to cover up to 80% of a university's income losses from a decline in international students.

Science Minister Amanda Solloway said:

Coronavirus has shown us the agility, creativity and innovative thinking of our world-leading institutions, scientists and researchers to tackle this disease and save people's lives. We want to harness this expertise to rejuvenate science and research across the UK, building a future that is greener, safer and healthier.

The R&D Roadmap will help us achieve our ambitions by unleashing the potential of science and research to embrace diversity, resilience and adaptability while tackling our biggest challenges such as achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2050.

Chair of the [Royal Academy of Engineering](#) Research Committee Professor Karen Holford CBE FREng FLSW said:

This is unquestionably a time of uncertainty and challenge for research and innovation in the UK, yet we are also faced with a great opportunity to build back better with R&D at the heart of the economy. The publication of the R&D Roadmap confirms the government's ambition to make that a reality. We are looking forward to working with the full breadth of the community and being part of the conversation that will follow. Investing in R&D is investing in the future.

We are a community of many parts – from the researchers in our universities pushing the boundaries of knowledge, the start-ups and entrepreneurs embracing risk, the innovators and businesses that are powered by R&D, to the institutions providing expertise and facilities. But working in collaboration with government we can be greater than the sum of our parts and deliver even more for the economy and society. I am particularly encouraged by the ambition to work across the devolved administrations and key stakeholders, the opportunity to maintain the positive collaborative behaviours emerging as a result of COVID-19 and the recognition of equality, diversity and inclusion as a critical aspect of research culture.

UK Research and Innovation Chief Executive Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser said:

Research and innovation are national strengths, central to our well-being, our economy, and our prosperity. The government's R&D Roadmap emphasises this importance, sets out a clear ambition and recognises the vital role UK Research and Innovation will play in

unlocking its full potential.

UKRI welcomes the continued commitment to a record increase in public investment in R&D to £22 billion a year by 2024/25. This investment will allow us to build, with others, an inclusive knowledge economy across the UK, a system we are all part of and proud of, which we can all contribute to and benefit from.

Notes to editors

Following the government's commitment to increase R&D investment to £22 billion a year by 2024/25, the Roadmap will drive collaboration between government, industry, research organisations and local authorities to ensure research funding is accessible, boosts productivity, improves public services, creates high-quality jobs and delivers economic and societal benefits to communities across the UK.

World-leading projects already taking place in the UK, include:

- The University of Manchester has developed nuclear robotics that can map floor spaces to detect radioactive contamination without people needing to enter harmful environments.
- Creo Medical has developed a device for a new less invasive and safer method to remove complex polyps, abnormal tissue growths, from patients diagnosed with gastric carcinoma, the fourth most common cancer worldwide. This has helped the NHS save £5,000 per procedure and can also reduce the length of hospital stays for patients.
- The Satellite Applications Catapult is building the UK's first private standalone 5G network in Milton Keynes, embedding satellite connectivity into the network to ensure access and reach for all. This could improve health and social care in the community, including early diagnosis and screening, home monitoring and telemedicine. In addition, Milton Keynes Council will look at how 5G could transform the town's transport by connecting autonomous vehicles such as delivery robots – which have been providing food deliveries for those shielding during the Covid-19 pandemic.