Unpacking Level 1 and 2 GCSE and Vocational and Technical Qualifications, and Level 3, results

Stuart Shaw

In August, the summer 2024 Level 1 & 2 GCSE and Vocational and Technical Qualification (VTQ) results, together with Level 3 results - AS/A level and VTQs, were released to students across England, Northern Ireland and Wales. This year is the first year in which all three regulators responsible for the qualifications in England (Ofqual), Northern Ireland (CCEA Regulation) and Wales (Qualifications Wales) have returned to pre-pandemic approaches to grading, even though England remains unique in reporting numerical grades for the GCSE. The results reflect the efforts made by students across the land and every result will tell a personal story, but on a grand scale the headlines include:

- Over 6.5 million GCSEs and VTQ results, and over 1 million A level, AS and VTQ results were awarded.
- Overall GCSE results are broadly similar to 2023 although outcomes are down slightly at each of the key grades: 7/A (-0.2pp - percentage points); 4/C (-0.6pp); 1/G (-0.1pp).
- Overall, A level results compared to 2023: A* are up by 0.4pp; A*- A is up by 0.6pp; and A*- E are down by 0.1pp.
- 2024 marked the first year of awarding results for the new Level 1/2 Tech Awards (typically taken alongside GCSEs, designed to support progression to post 16 education).
- 2024 also witnessed the third year Level 3 T Levels have been awarded, with 7,380 students receiving overall results – over twice as many as in 2023, with 88.7% (6,543) achieving a pass or above.

A Covid-impacted generation of cohorts

Many of the students receiving their GCSE and Level 2 results began their Year 7 (11 to 12-year-olds) secondary school education in the usual 'pre-pandemic' manner. However, in March 2020 governments across the UK concluded – with differing amounts of regret – that exams would have to be cancelled, but that grades should still be awarded to enable students to progress. There followed a quest for a fair way to award grades, and most readers know what happened next.[1] For these students learning took place at home through online lessons and virtual teacher/class interactions. The impact of schooling from home depended on where students lived and what access they had to the relevant technology. Clearly, the experience of different amounts of Covid disruption among students was discernible. These 2024 students, therefore, hold a distinctive place in recent secondary school education history - being the first to have experienced the pandemic and its aftermath in each of their secondary school years.

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[1] The approach to employing calculated grades for the summer 2020 cancelled examinations on the basis of rankings supplied by schools/centres, prior attainment data for the current learners and performance data for centres' candidates in previous years, was jettisoned preferring instead to issue 'centre assessment grades' (except where calculated grades were higher). For summer 2021, 'teacher-assessed grades' were awarded to students.

2024 was also a significant year for students receiving their Level 3 results. Most of these students were in Year 9 (13 to 14-year-olds)[2] when the pandemic began. These students were the first-year group to sit in-person GCSEs following Covid lockdowns when they received more guidance, advice and advance information relating to, for example, specific topics to focus on for revision. However, such help was removed this year and the general approach to grading during the summer reflects what it would have been in the absence of examination cancellations due to Covid.

Overall Comparisons with 2023

Level 3 results: AS/A level and Vocational and Technical Qualifications (VTQs)

Notwithstanding the impacts of the Covid pandemic, the number of A level candidates is up 1.9% from 335,437 to 341,710 (overall – all ages – A level entries up 2.2%). The 18-year-old population is also up 0.9% – with more students progressing on to A level this year. The average number of A levels taken per candidate this year is 2.59.

In terms of the highest attaining students – those with A* grades, male students achieved 0.4 percentage points (pp) more than females (the latter making up 54.1% of all A Level entries). However, female students achieved more top grades overall at A* to A.

Compared with last year, 2024 saw no change in the ten most popular subjects with Mathematics, Psychology, Biology, Chemistry and History continuing to assume the top five positions. The subject with the largest increase in entries this year is Mathematics which now exceeds 100,000 entries for the first time (Further Mathematics had the largest percentage increase at 19.9%). Physics, traditionally deemed challenging, has experienced an increase in entries in 2024 making it now more popular than Economics. Encouragingly, the uptake of computer science continues.

Level 3 VTQs taken in schools and colleges alongside/as an alternative to A levels (and included on Performance Tables) reveal that 250,000 results were awarded in over 245 Performance Table Qualifications. Nearly 22,100 top grades were awarded in 2024 for VTQs. The three largest sector subject areas are business, administration, law; social sciences; and health, and public services and care.

2024 is the third year T Levels have been awarded, with 7,380 students receiving overall results. This represents over twice as many as last year with nearly 90% (88.7%; 6,543) having achieved a pass or above. At this stage, however, comparisons with 2023 T Level outcomes have limited value because of:

- increases in student numbers (from 3,448 in 2023 to 7,380 in 2024),
- increases in the number of pathways (from 10 in 2023 to 16 in 2024), and
- the number of providers (schools and colleges) offering T Levels (from 101 in 2023 to 162 in 2024).[3]

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[2] Year 9 is the third year of Secondary school in which most students usually either choose or start their options for their GCSE qualifications. Having had experience of taking external 'in-person' examinations before 2024, these students were able to make more informed A level subject choices.

[3] To achieve the T Level qualification, time is divided between classroom learning and industry placements - with students awarded a pass, merit, distinction or distinction* after two years of work and study. (Though Dropout rates remain high. Last year, 66% of T-level students completed their course. The retention rate is better this year, at 71%, but still well below that for A-levels in England, which is consistently above 90%.)

GCSE and Level 1 and 2 Vocational and Technical Qualification results:

2024 results mark the biggest ever assessment series in England, Northern Ireland and Wales with GCSE entries reaching 6,186,879, up 4.8%. This compares with a 4.6% increase in 16-year-olds. The average number of GCSEs for 16-year-olds is 7.76 (similar to 2023).

16-year-old GCSE entries increased by 4.0% from 2023 with 17-year-old and over entries up 20.5% from 2023 (moving towards pre-pandemic volumes). Results for the 16-year-old age group are similar to 2023 whilst results for students aged 17 and over are more variable reflecting a more changeable cohort.

There are 50,311 more grades awarded at 7/A and above than in 2023.

Overall, results at GCSE remain higher for female students than male students though there is evidence of a slight reduction in the difference between male and female results. For example, at 7/A the difference between female and male results has reduced 0.2 pp compared with 2023. At grades 4/C the difference between females and males has reduced 0.1pp compared with 2023 whilst grades at 1/G the difference remains the same as in 2023.

As with A levels, the top ten most popular subjects at GCSE remain unchanged - GCSE Science: Double Award, Mathematics, English Language, English Literature, and History attracting more entries compared to 2023. Outside of the top ten most popular subjects, business studies has seen the biggest increase in the number of entries from 123,166 in 2023 to 135,090. Interestingly, Art and Design and Music subject entries are up 5.4% and 8.7% respectively following a notable decline in recent years.

Awarding organisations have awarded 372,900 Level 2 and Level 1/2 VTQ results in over 100 different qualifications in 2024. These include 360,200 results for Tech Awards (first year of awarding results), and 12,700 Technical Certificates (taken by post 16 students, designed to equip students with specialist knowledge and skills, enabling entry to an apprenticeship, employment or progression to a higher level VTQ).[4] The largest sector subject area for the new Tech Awards is leisure, travel and tourism; followed by arts, media and publishing.

A return to 'normality'?

The overriding message to emerge from the 2024 summer results is that the whole of the UK has now returned to pre-pandemic approaches to grading GCSEs and A levels (VTQs being stable).

The changes in how A levels and GCSEs were awarded during the pandemic witnessed significant grade inflation. The issue of grade inflation pre-pandemic was already an old chestnut. For many years prior to the global pandemic the proportion of students achieving higher grades had crept up and this led to howls of "dumbing down" of standards. Students who had worked hard and done well had been subjected to insensitive comments like "A grades are two a penny nowadays". And the exam boards, the regulators and the Government had been placed between a rock and a hard place: if the results are lower than expected, that reflects poor teaching; if they're higher, that demonstrates grade inflation and lower standards.

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[4] Tech Awards – typically taken alongside GCSEs, designed to support progression to post 16 education. Technical Certificates – taken by post 16 students, designed to equip students with specialist knowledge and skills, enabling entry to an apprenticeship, employment or progression to a higher level VTQ.

One of the main reasons for Ed Balls's decision in 2007 to have an independent regulator of exams in England (later called Ofqual and established in 2009) was to end what he called the "old and sterile debate" about standards being dumbed down which resulted in erosion of confidence in qualifications. That issue was to be taken out of the political arena and dealt with by experts, just as key decisions concerning inflation of the currency were assigned to the independent Bank of England. Ofqual was given statutory duties including ensuring that regulated qualifications "indicate …. a consistent level of attainment (including over time) between regulated qualifications".

To exacerbate issues, superimposed on that long-term debate has been the Covid factor: the cancellation of traditional exams in 2020 and 2021 and the search for other ways to award grades to enable students to progress. After schools were closed in the spring of 2020 and the decision was made not to proceed with summer exams, it was judged unfair to deny students the grades they needed to progress to the next stage in their lives. The task was to find a fair way to award grades in the absence of exams. The approaches developed in all four parts of the UK - and the Republic of Ireland - were thought by the regulators and Ministers to be the fairest possible, but in the event the grades initially awarded were widely decried as "unfair"[5] and instead all the UK countries switched to awarding Centre Assessed Grades. The result was not only significant grade inflation (compared to previous years) but unequal treatment of different subjects and groups of candidates.[6]

A return to pre-pandemic approaches to grading outcomes is being trumpeted as 'good' hearing. This is, of course, contingent upon the notion that pre-pandemic approaches to grading were both fair and appropriate. Issues relating to loss of learning time, mental wellbeing, technological poverty, and other circumstantial, lived deprivations - whilst pre-dating the Covid era, were certainly aggravated by it, including inequality of grade inflation. For example, the gap between the two regions with the highest and lowest proportions of A* and A grades at A level each year has grown, and is still higher than it was before the pandemic. However, the evident divide between North and South – exacerbated during Covid, existed *before* the pandemic. It seems that in England at least, the North-South divide in exam success remains entrenched. The situation is no less bleak for GCSEs where the regional divide is still growing. For example, four out of five regions in the North and Midlands had a lower GCSE pass rate this year than in 2019 contrasted with the South where in every region the pass rate has risen.

Analysis from the Northern Powerhouse think tank – an initiative launched by former chancellor George Osborne in 2016 and designed to devolve power and boost the North's economic output, indicates that regional variations are "largely a reflection of the differences... in the proportions of long-term disadvantaged children by region". In 2018, some four years prior to the first Covid lockdown, the Northern Powerhouse had already reported that disadvantaged children in the North of England achieve GCSE grades that are significantly worse than their counterparts in London. According to new Labour Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson it is "too often the case" that where you come from shapes your

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[5] Who can forget the furore caused by the infamous "algorithm" (Stewart, 2020) used in England to calculate grades. The algorithm combined rank orders from teachers with information on the historical performances of schools and the prior attainment of candidates. Stewart, H. (2020, August 26). Boris Johnson blames 'mutant algorithm' for exams fiasco. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/aug/26/boris-johnson blames-mutant-algorithm-for-exams-fiasco.
[6] For example, in 2020 the initial plans were to award "calculated grades" using a statistical approach which, the regulators were told, should keep results "broadly in line" with previous years. But after an enormous row and the subsequent U-turn, students were awarded the higher of the calculated grades or the grade proposed by their school or college.

eventual outcomes. This proclamation - it would seem – was as true pre-pandemic as it is now.

Efforts are being made, of course, to address the gap between disadvantaged students and their wealthier counterparts. Parliament's influential public accounts committee (PAC) as part of its inquiry into education recovery after the disruption of Covid published a report in June 2023 estimating that it could take a decade for the attainment gap to narrow to what it was before Covid, causing MPs to proclaim a 'lost decade' of progress in education in England following the pandemic.[7]

Nevertheless, the attainment gap between North and South continues to widen both at GCSE and A-Level prompting warnings from education and business leaders that the impact will have enduring consequences for the economy and for bringing opportunity to young people from differing and disparate backgrounds.[8]

The more important question was always - and remains - how most fairly and appropriately to reflect students' knowledge, understanding and skills, irrespective of their circumstances. Grading weightings by postcode to address regional unfairness for candidates living in areas known to have multiple disadvantages (achieved through judicial adjustment of grade boundaries) would afford better chances to succeed in life and to compensate for the disadvantages suffered.[9] Or is this yet another form of unfairness?

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[7] House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts. (2023). Education Recovery in Schools in England. Fifty-Fifth Report of Session 2022-2023. Report, together with formal minutes relating to the report Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed 22 May 2023.
[8] https://www.northernpowerhousepartnership.co.uk/north-south-education-divide-widens-at-gcse-and-a-level/
[9] Reflecting Rawls's (1971) second 'fair equality of opportunity' principle in its strong form that "Those with similar abilities and skills should have similar life chances." (1971, p.17). Rawls, J. (1971) A Theory of Justice. Oxford: Oxford University Press.