

PROSPECTS FOR A-LEVELS 2023

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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.

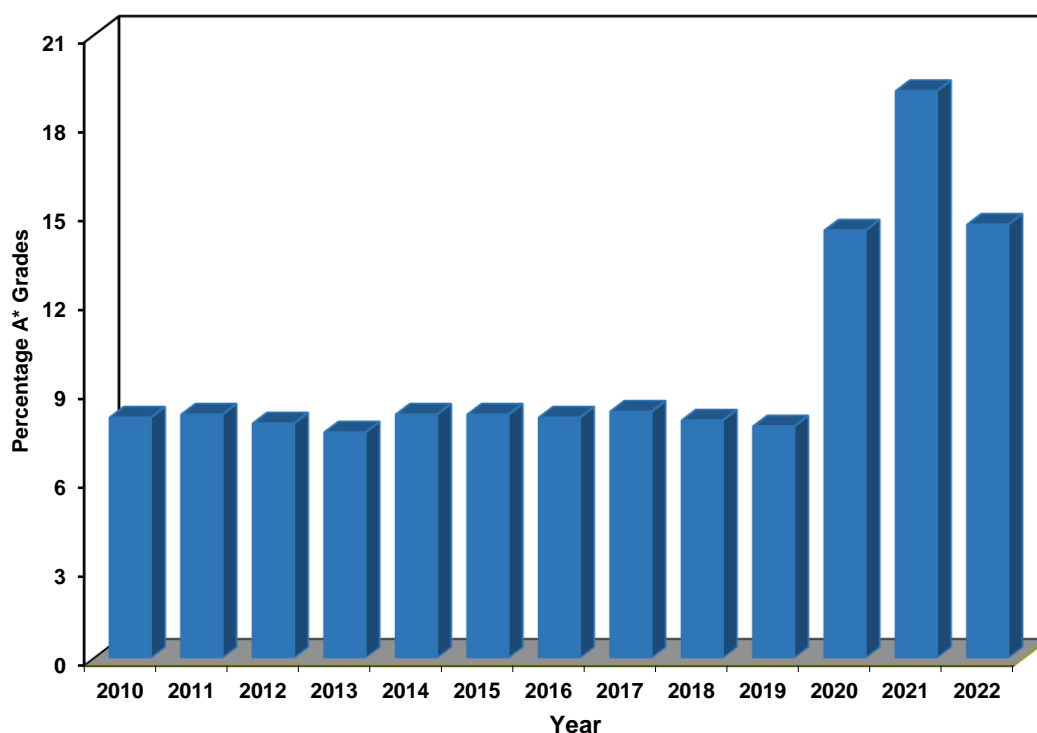
- 1.7. Exams returned in 2022, but they were not the full-on, externally-set, and externally-marked, unseen papers taken under invigilation. They had had to be adapted to be fair to students whose studies had been disrupted by widely different amounts. To allow for this, the syllabuses were shortened to fit into the time available and candidates were given advance notice of the topics on which questions were to be asked. It emerged that 2022 was to be the first stage of a two-point plan. In a letter to headteachers, dated 13 May 2022, Ofqual explained that while the Government's aim was for grades to return to pre-pandemic levels, it wanted this to be in two steps, with 2022 a halfway house. This was because it did not want the candidates, all of whom had experienced considerable disruption to their studies, to be further disadvantaged by receiving much lower grades than had been obtained in the two previous years.
- 1.8. This year, 2023, will complete that process and the hope is that the grade pattern will be similar to that in 2019. But will the examiners be able to deliver on this? It may be that the teacher-assessment years have led to changes that will be hard to surmount.
- 1.9. Teacher assessment was associated with major shifts in the distribution of top grades across the subjects. The performing arts and practical subjects, such as music, drama, physical education, and design & technology, substantially increased their share, while in maths and the physical sciences there were much smaller rises. This will have had a bearing on the relative performance of girls and boys since the erstwhile lead of boys at A* depended on rather few subjects, among which maths and the physical sciences were prominent.
- 1.10. During the two years of teacher assessment, the gap between girls and boys widened appreciably, with girls achieving their largest-ever leads at A* and A*/A. Will the return to exams, go some way to restoring pre-pandemic levels when boys were ahead at A* and there was little difference at A*/A? Or will the new distribution of top grades have become embedded?
- 1.11. The emergency measures of the Covid years also changed the relative performance of the countries of the UK. Wales awarded proportionally more A*/A and A*-C grades than either England or Northern Ireland, and overtook England, having lagged behind for a decade or more. The rises mainly occurred in 2020 when Wales was able to call on the AS grades of 2019 as another indicator of what the A-level results in 2020 might have been. Since AS grades are generally higher than those in the subsequent A-levels, using them would have been another contributor to inflation. In 2022 will Wales drop behind England once more or will it continue closing the gap on Northern Ireland? Since the Welsh administration is not seeking to bring down the top grades to 2019 till next year this likelihood is that they will move further ahead.
- 1.12. The key things to look out for in the 2023 results would, therefore, seem to be:
 - have the percentages of top grades been brought back to pre-pandemic levels?
 - have boys regained their lead at A*?

- 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

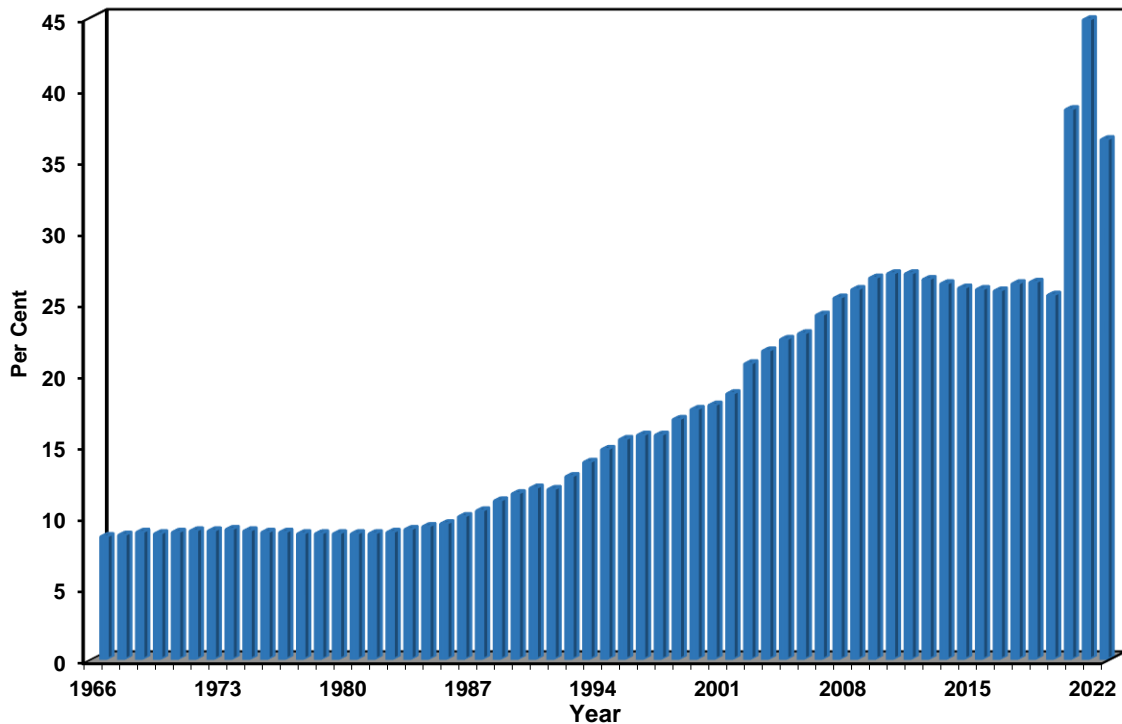
- 2.1. A striking outcome of the enforced switch to the awarding of A-level grades by teacher assessment in 2020 and 2021 was the huge increases in top grades. Chart 2.1 shows what happened at A*.

Chart 2.1: Percentage A* Grades



- 2.2. The A* had been introduced at A-level in 2010 to restore the differentiation that had been lost as the proportion of A grades awarded had trebled from 9.5 per cent in 1985 to 27.0 per cent in 2010. The regulator had also brought in a statistical technique – comparable outcomes – to keep the grade pattern similar from year to year, allowing for intake differences.
- 2.3. Chart 2.1 shows that this approach had kept the proportion of A* close to 8 per cent from its inception to 2019. But then with teacher assessment replacing exams, it almost doubled in 2020 to 14.4 per cent and rose still higher to 19.1 per cent in 2021. With the return of examinations in 2022, top grades could have been expected to resume previous levels, but the Government asked Ofqual to ensure the percentage of top grades came about half-way between those of 2019 and 2021 in recognition of the many disruptions the students had suffered, and that they could be in competition for university places with students who had deferred entry from the Covid years. This would have made the target figure 13.5 per cent still way up on the pre-pandemic 7.8 per cent, but even so the exam boards could not hit it and 14.6 per cent A* grades was the best that they could achieve.
- 2.4. In Chart 2.2 we have the history of the A grades. This letter-grade was originally established to mark performance of those achieving in the top ten per cent.

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>				
Mathematics (Further)	53.1	71.7	75.5	67.8
Mathematics	40.5	50.3	55.2	48.2
Physics	27.5	41.9	46.8	39.5
Chemistry	28.4	42.9	48.6	39.4
Other Physical Sciences	27.2	29.5	36.2	33.5
All Subjects	25.5	38.5	44.8	36.4

- 2.7. All this changed with teacher assessment. While, Chart 2.3 shows, there was some increase in the percentages awarded in maths and physical sciences, in music the percentage went up from 19.3 to 54.3, in drama from 18.0 to 48.8, and media studies from 11.00 to 29.6. In 2022, with the exams back in place, there were still more A*/A grades in music and performing expressive arts than in physics and chemistry. A profound change in the mind-set seems to have taken place. If this survives the return to exams, it will make it difficult to get A*/A grades back to their former levels.
- 2.8. The percentages of A* and A*/A awarded fell back, respectively, from 19.1 and 44.8 in 2021 to 14.6 and 36.4 in 2022. Chart 4.4 shows what this means in terms of the numbers of those awards. To get back to pre-pandemic levels in 2023 from those in 2021 would mean about 100,000 fewer A* grades and about 168,000 fewer A*/A grades.

- 2.9. Chart 4.4 shows the calculations. Allowing for candidates getting lower grades in an average of two subjects would mean that a decline of 100,000 fewer A* would translate into 50,000 students and 95,000 fewer A*/A into 47,500 students.

Chart 2.4: A* and A*/A Numbers Projected to 2023

Year	%A*		%A*/A	
	Per Cent	Number	Per Cent	Number
2019	7.8	67,853	25.5	221,828
2020	14.3	124,398	38.5	334,917
2021	19.1	166,154	44.8	389,721
2022	14.6	127,007	36.4	316,487
2023	7.8	67,853	25.5	221,828
Drop 22-23		-59,154		-94,659

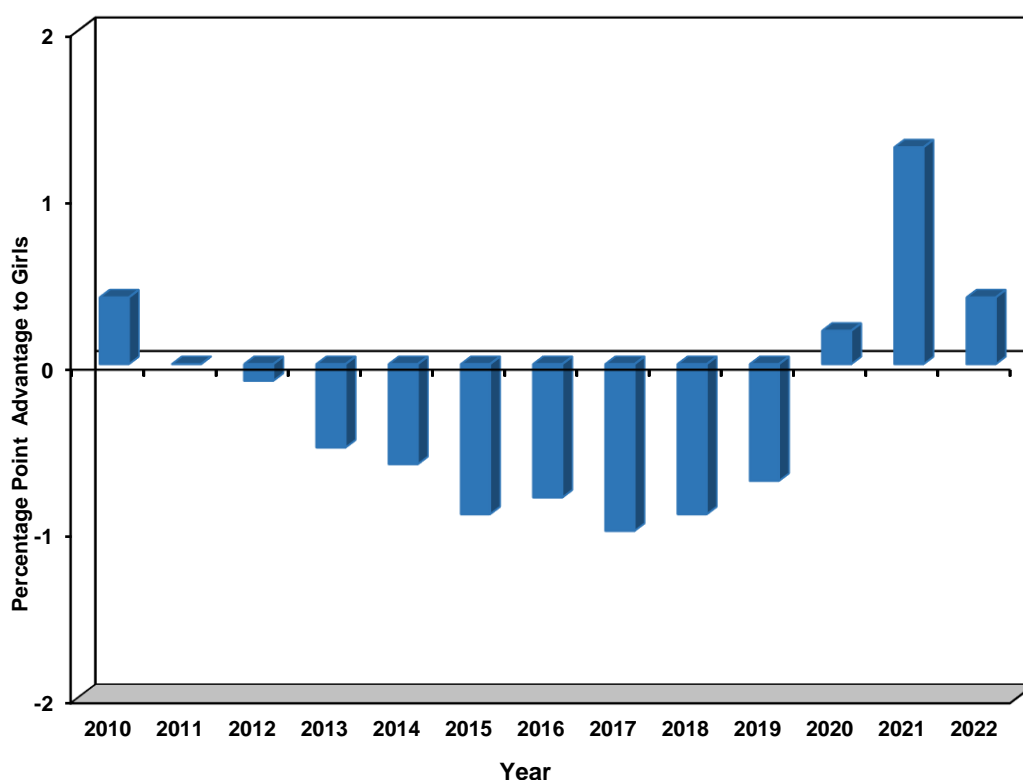
1.UK entry for 2023 A-levels estimated from Ofqual's June provisional entry figures for England by multiplying by 100/92, since typically England accounts for 92 per cent of entries. The figure arrived at of 869,914 was used as the base number in converting all percentages into numbers. It enables us to see in round numbers what restoring pass levels to their 2019 values would mean in reductions in passes at A* and A*/A. It must be remembered that these are exam entries and not persons. Converting entries to persons assumed that on average a person dropped in two top grades with the restoration of standards.

- 2.10. The maths is straightforward, how feasible will it be to put it into practice? Teacher assessment has given subjective subjects a taste for awarding top grades, which they will be reluctant to relinquish. It is also true that Wales is not aiming to return to pre-pandemic standards until 2024, and in 2023 gave advance information about its papers. Similarly, in Northern Ireland advance information has been given and Covid disruption has been taken into account.
- 2.11. There are many who would welcome slower progress towards restoring standards including many parents who are worried that their sons and daughters will miss out on university places that would have been open to them last year or the year before. If a full return to 2019 levels is a step too far, what might be achievable?
- 2.12. In 2022, the notional targets were missed by 1.1 percentage points at A* (14.6 instead of 13.5 per cent) and 1.5 percentage points at A*/A (36.4 per cent instead of 35.0 per cent). Taking this as a guide for 2023, we perhaps should be expecting something like 10.0 per cent A* grades and 27.5 per cent A*/A grades. This would go a long way towards restoring the value of A-level grades, but would the loss be too much for students and their parents to accept?

3. Girls Move Ahead at A*

- 3.1. Boys notoriously underperform in school tests and examinations. My efforts in recent years to make this an issue have largely been met with silence. Apparently, the hard facts of exam results do not fit the prevailing narrative that males, particularly white males, are privileged by both the colour of their skin and their sex, and that however they do at school they will come out on top in the end. A comforting thought in some ways, but one that does not fit the facts.
- 3.2. A bright spot for boys has been that almost from the first year of the A* award, as Chart 3.1 shows, they have been ahead at the highest level. In part, this was because the subjects they gravitated towards were high yielders of top grades. In 2019, just five subjects - maths, further maths, physics, chemistry, and economics - contributed two-thirds (65.5%) of the A* awarded to boys.

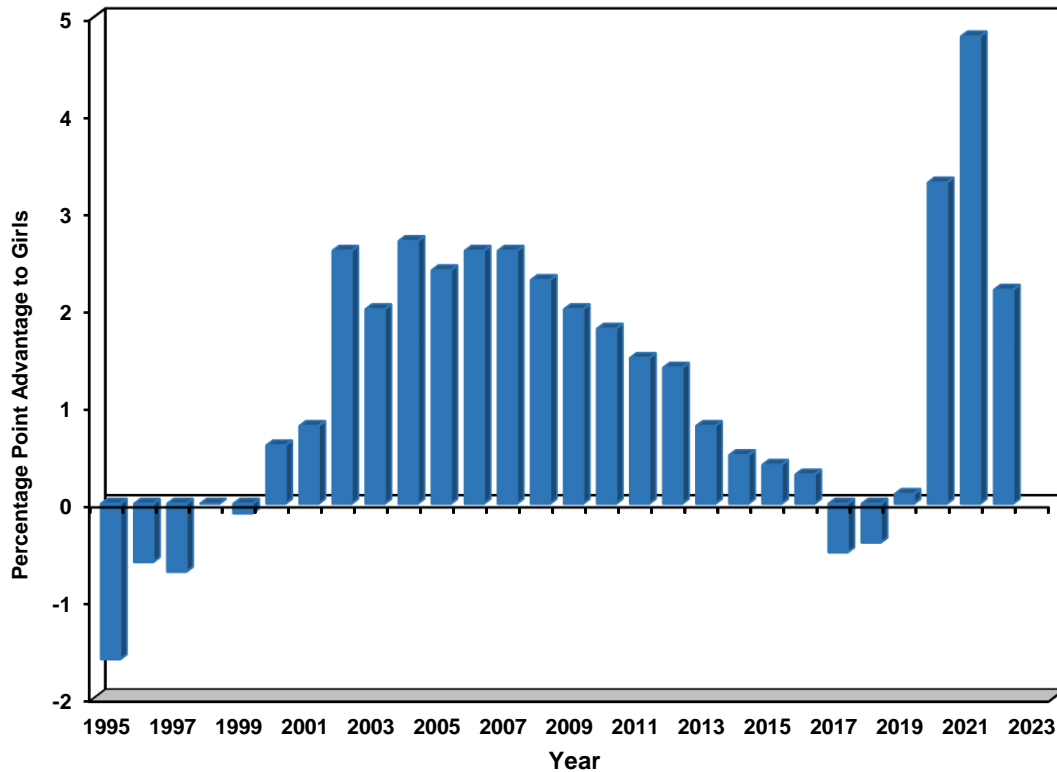
Chart 3.1: Gender Gap at A*



- 3.3. But in 2020 with the switch to teacher assessment, boys lost that lead and in 2021 girls went 1.3 percentage points ahead. The impact of teacher assessment is also evident in the gender gap at A*/A shown in Chart 3.2. The direction and size of this gap has fluctuated over the years. In the mid-nineties, boys were ahead, then with the curriculum and assessment changes of the early 21st century girls established a lead, but the recent Gove-Gibb A-level reforms gradually gave the advantage back to boys.
- 3.4. The gentle oscillation was shattered by the emergency arrangements of the Covid years. Girls leapt ahead by 3.2 percentage points in 2020 and 4.8 percentage

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' ideal of the good pupil. In contrast, the 'big-bang' approach of heavy concentration for brief periods that boys tend to adopt can show up well in end-of-course examinations.
- 3.6. Whatever the explanation, the landscape changed markedly in 2020/21. Given the current emphasis on getting back to where we were in 2019, it is a moot point whether the gap at A* will be reversed. Certainly, the return to exams will eliminate any bias in favour of girls, and boys will have every chance to show what they can achieve in the high-scoring subjects in which they tend to be found.
- 3.7. But there was another change during the Covid years which may have become ingrained and have a major impact on relative performance. Subjective subjects felt freed and grew used to being much more generous in awarding A* and A*/A grades. Girls are more attracted to the subjective subjects than boys and although they have tended to do well in them, this has not always been reflected in the grades awarded. If there has been a shift in basic assumptions, then the distribution of top grades may have been changed forever. This would mean the gender gap at A* would be unlikely to be reversed completely.

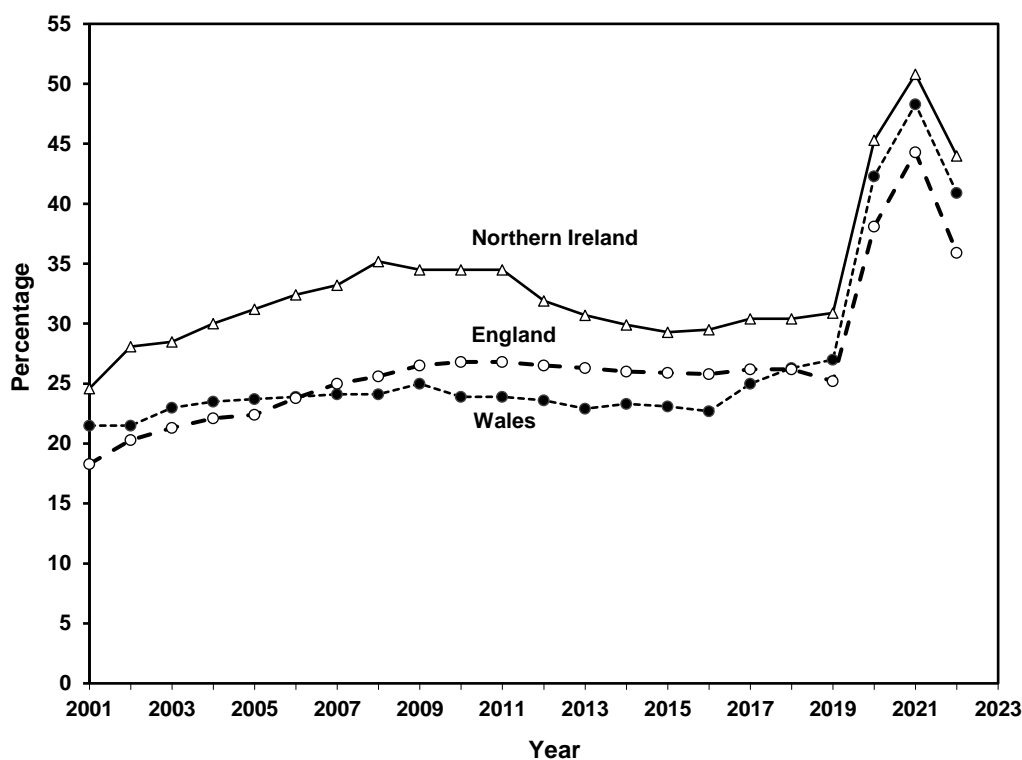
4. England, Wales and Northern Ireland

- 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	13.9	13.1	10.9
A*- C 2022	82.1	85.3	89.5	82.6
A*- C 2019	75.5	76.3	84.8	75.8
Difference	6.6	9.0	4.7	6.8

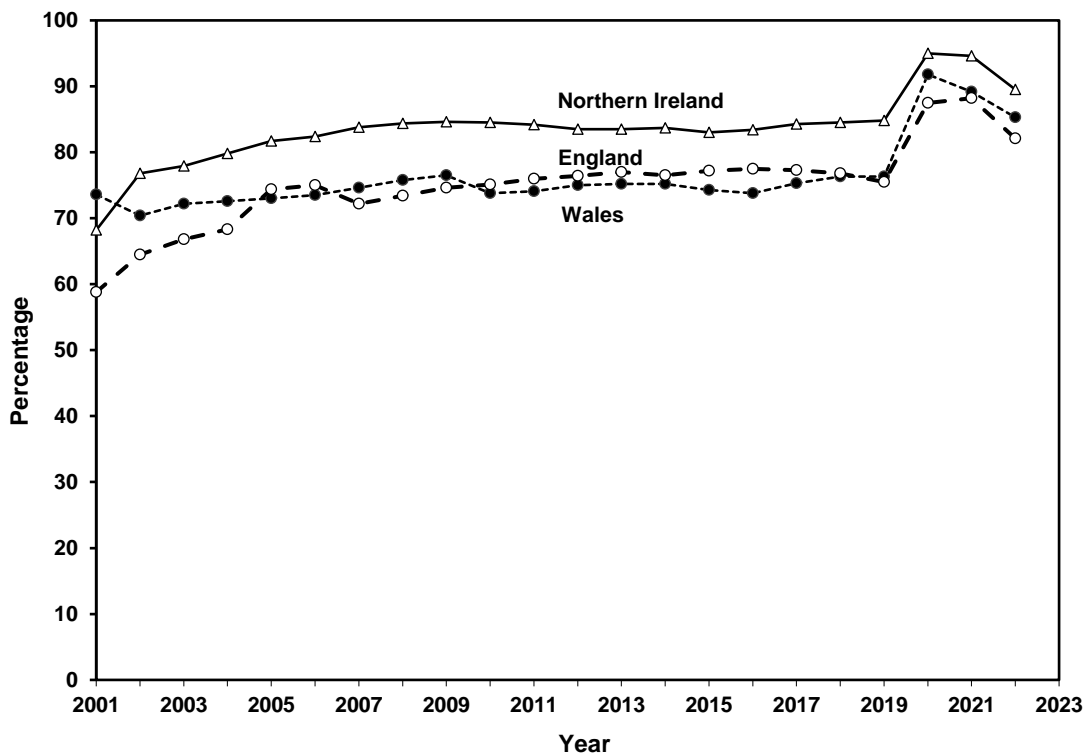
Chart 4.2: Trends in A*/A Grades



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 by Wales which is now firmly established in second place.

Chart 4.3: Trends in A*-C Grades



4.4. Chart 4.3 show the equivalent figures for passes at grade C and above. The spike is less pronounced, but otherwise the pattern is similar to that for the top grades. Northern Ireland again in front, followed by Wales which has recently overtaken England.

4.5. Northern Ireland has always come out best of the home countries at A-level and, indeed, at GCSE and in international comparisons. But there is no generally accepted explanation of why this should be. It may be that commentators do not want to acknowledge the success of its grammar school system. There are other differences, however, which could account for its pre-eminence. It has its own regulator and exam board (though pupils there also sit the examinations of other UK boards), its own curriculum, its own teaching methods, and perhaps a

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.

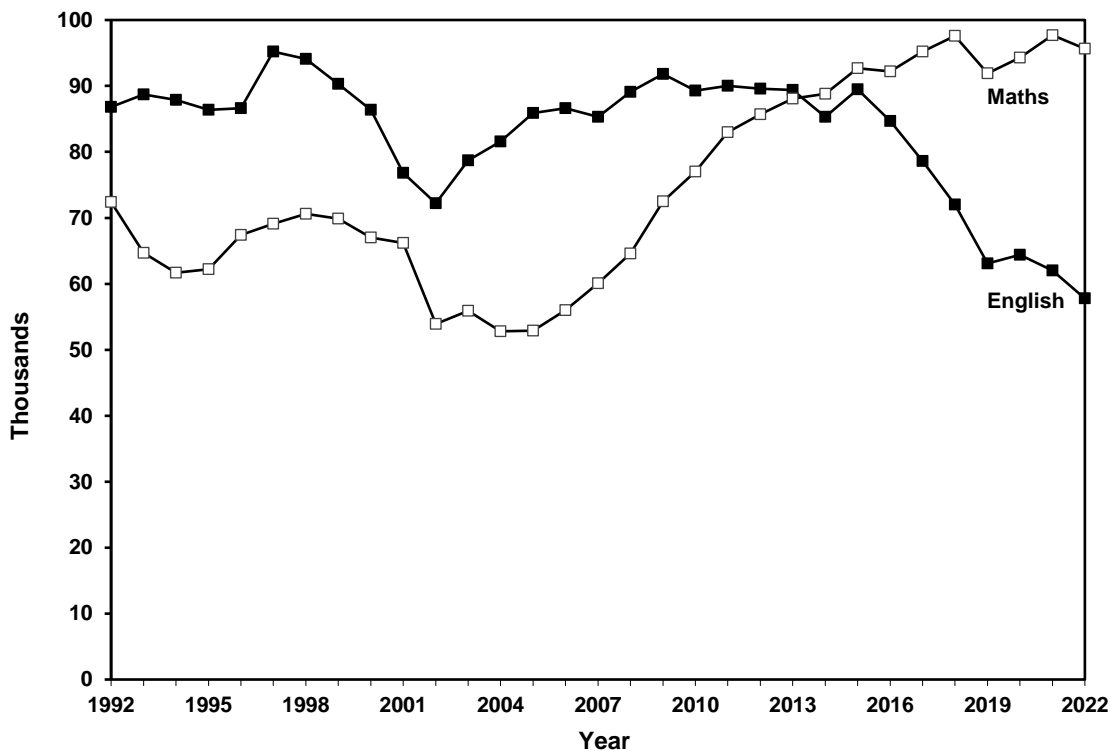
5. Trends in Entries by Subject

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



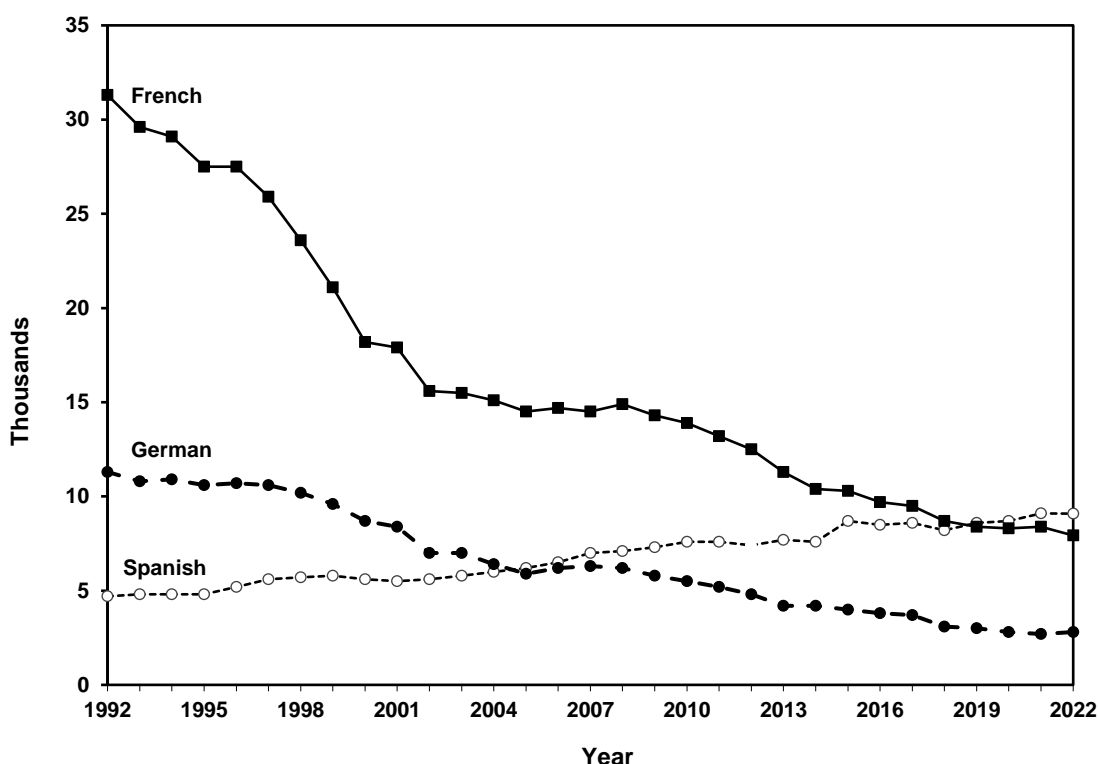
5.3. For a long time it was English, but it was overtaken by maths in 2014, and following its recent slump it has also fallen behind psychology, biology and chemistry. The provisional entries for 2023 in England (Chart 5.6) show the take-up of English is still declining.

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.

Languages

- 5.5. English has not been the only language where entries have declined sharply. Chart 5.2 shows that both French and German have experienced even steeper falls. Entries to French in 2022 were only a quarter of what they were in 1992. German has fallen to a fifth of its 1992 take-up, and it is now the least frequently taken of all the A-level subjects, attracting only about half as many entries as the next lowest - classical subjects.

Chart 5.2: Trends in Entries to Modern Languages



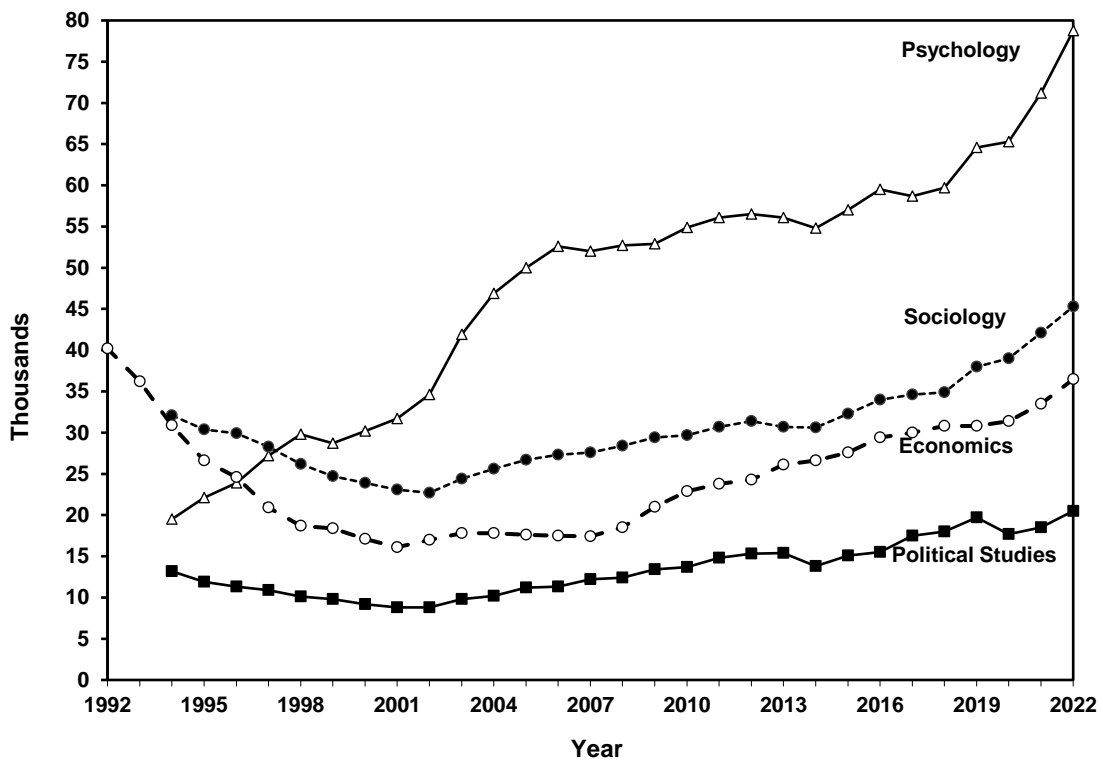
- 5.6. Spanish has tended to buck the trend. Over the 30 years shown in Chart 5.2, it has grown steadily from 4,700 entries in 1992 to 9,088 entries in 2022, overtaking French as the most frequently taken in 2019. Even now, however, entries are low compared with the near 100,000 in maths. Furthermore, in the provisional entries for England in 2023 published by Ofqual, even entries to Spanish appear to be falling, with a drop of 12.7 per cent recorded for 2022-23.
- 5.7. The proximal cause of the low take-up of languages at A-level is the small numbers sitting them at GCSE. Since languages were made optional at this level in 2004 there has been a sharp decrease. Instead of compulsion, the Government had hoped to encourage pupils to study at least one foreign language by including languages in the 'EBacc' core curriculum. This was intended to give a nudge to schools to teach key subjects, including a language. Ambitious targets were set, and schools made accountable for progress towards them. But while there has been no difficulty in reaching the targets for four of the five subjects, the lack of enthusiasm for language learning continues to frustrate attempts to get a full house.

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, so the pool from which teachers are recruited is too small, and this impacts on the availability and quality of the teaching. But around the world there are, of course, many native speakers of these languages and our teachers could be drawn from among their ranks if their English is good enough. Another contributory factor to the shortfall may be that in Britain teaching of languages does not usually start till secondary school, when receptivity to language learning is much less than it is in younger children. It is not clear why we do not teach languages from the earliest years as other countries do.

Social Sciences

5.9. The other side of the coin from languages is social sciences. As Chart 5.3 shows, there has been almost continual growth for at least two decades. Psychology has burgeoned. Since it first became available in 1994, in round figures entries have quadrupled from 20,000 to now nearly 80,000. In Ofqual’s provisional entries for A-levels in 2023, it put on a further 2.3 per cent last year. It now stands second only to maths in its entries.

Chart 5.3: Trends in Entries to Social Sciences



5.10. One can speculate that the great appeal of psychology has something to do with it appearing to offer insights into some of the great questions of life, such as the nature of consciousness, what lies behind human behaviour, and making sense of human interaction. Access to the meaning of life has become ever more important

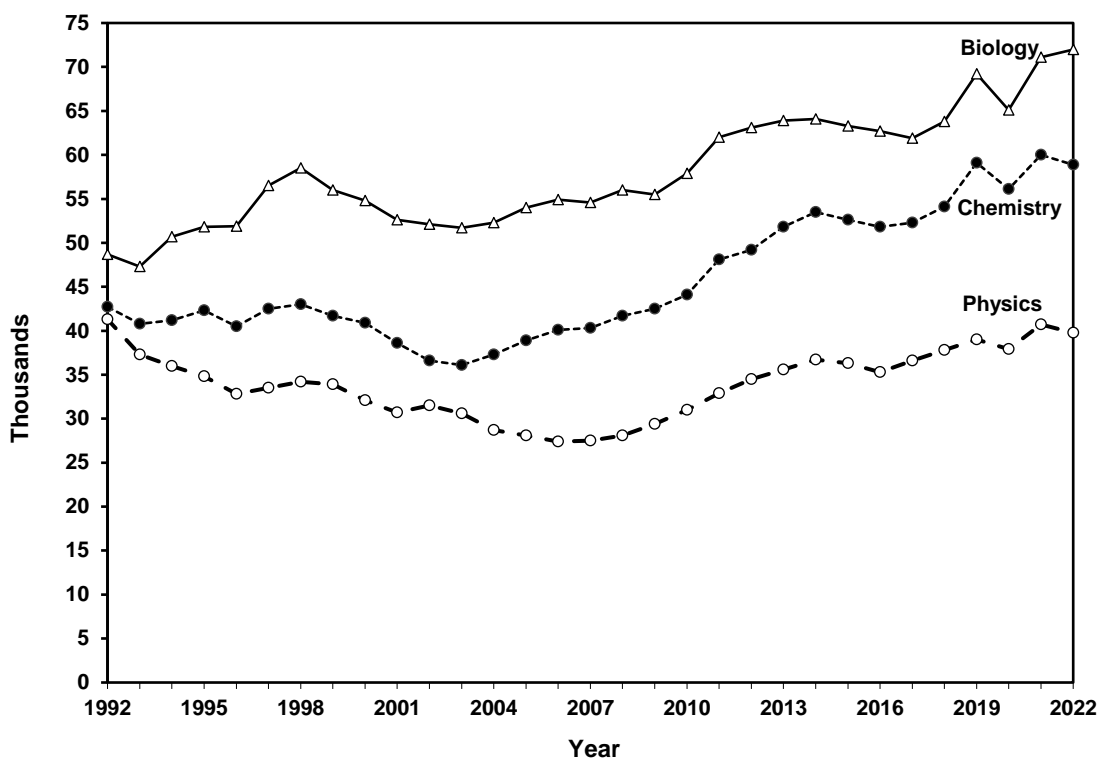
with the decline of religious faith in much of the Western world. It is also true that psychology is not an exact, replicable subject in the way that maths, the physical sciences, and languages are, so there is less risk of being exposed as someone who cannot really do it, which makes it appealing to the broader range of students attracted to university education.

- 5.11. Sociology has similarly climbed, although more slowly, to become the seventh most frequently taken subject. One can see the attraction of a discipline which offers an understanding of the structure of society and ways to change it. Political studies while slower to take off than psychology and sociology has been progressing steadily, with numbers more than doubling from 2001 to 2022. Politics is now constantly in the spotlight which makes the systematic study of it very appealing, especially to those who see it as the path to power. Both sociology and political studies, as Chart 5.6 shows, greatly increased their A-level entry in 2023, rising by 4.9 and 7.8 per cent respectively. Like psychology, they are a mix of the arts and sciences, so there is always room for theories not grounded in evidence.
- 5.12. Economics is different being essentially a quantitative subject. While like the other social sciences it has grown since the turn of the century, this reverses the decline from 1992 to 2001 with A-level entries then dropping from 40,200 to 16,100. In 2023, it had got back to 36,483 and the provisional figures for England in 2023 (Chart 5.6) show a further increase of 7.2 per cent.
- 5.13. The pivotal year for all of the social sciences is 2002, which is when growth of took off. This is the year when the new fully modularised courses came on stream. Evidently, it made these subjects more appealing. Another factor was the great expansion of provision and Blair's target of half of 18-30- year-olds to go on to higher education. This brought in many young people without the interest or talents required to take the traditional subjects to a high level, so they looked further afield. Growth was temporarily halted in the year that the Gove reforms reintroduced end-of-course exams, but has resumed since, as Chart 5.6 shows.

Sciences

- 5.14. The sciences have also seen increased take-up in recent years with biology always the most popular, followed by chemistry, with physics some way behind. Gordon Brown, in 2004, when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer, incentivised schools to return to the separate sciences as part of his Science Investment Strategy. Chart 5.4 shows that this seems to have borne fruit with all three science A-levels increasing their numbers in the years which followed.
- 5.15. There were falls from 2015 along with the declining cohort, but with the introduction of the reformed A-levels in 2017 numbers picked up again. Unlike English and maths, the exam reforms appear to have boosted the take-up of the sciences. Perhaps this is not unconnected with the removal of practical examinations. The increases are, however, far from a swing to the sciences. As Chart 5.5 shows, the 2022 physics entry of nearly 40,000, as encouraging as it is, is still 20 per cent down on the levels of the 1980s.

Chart 5.4: Trends in Entries to Sciences



- 5.16. The slump occurred following the introduction in 1988 of the National Curriculum in which the separate sciences were wrapped up into one subject 'science'. This was said to be necessary to fit the three subjects into a time-slot for only two, but it was also ideological, promoting the idea that biology, chemistry and physics should be taught as one subject till the age of 16. The O-level exams in biology, chemistry and physics were intended to be replaced by the single and double GCSEs in science, and the separate sciences may well have disappeared altogether up to 16 had not the independent schools fought a strong rearguard action. This won the concession that pupils could still take exams in the separate sciences provided they took all three. It was too high a hurdle for all but the independent schools, grammar schools and the leading comprehensives, but it preserved the separate sciences, and they were there to be revived when it was realised they were needed.
- 5.17. Most schools obeyed the party line and switched to 'science' as the subject. The consequences in terms of A-level exam entries can be seen in Chart 5.5. From 45,300 entries, physics went down to 27,400 in 2006. A steep decline in the number of 18-year-olds from 1983 to 1995 played a part in the drop, but as Chart 5.5 shows, while A-level entries in general recovered, physics did not, until the Brown strategy became effective. It does look, therefore, as though the removal of the separate sciences at GCSE in most schools was a major factor in the decline in physics take-up.
- 5.18. It makes sense that, if the three sciences have not been clearly distinguished, a 16-year-old is unlikely to develop the confidence that they are sufficiently good at physics – acknowledged to be a hard subject – to risk their futures on it. The

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

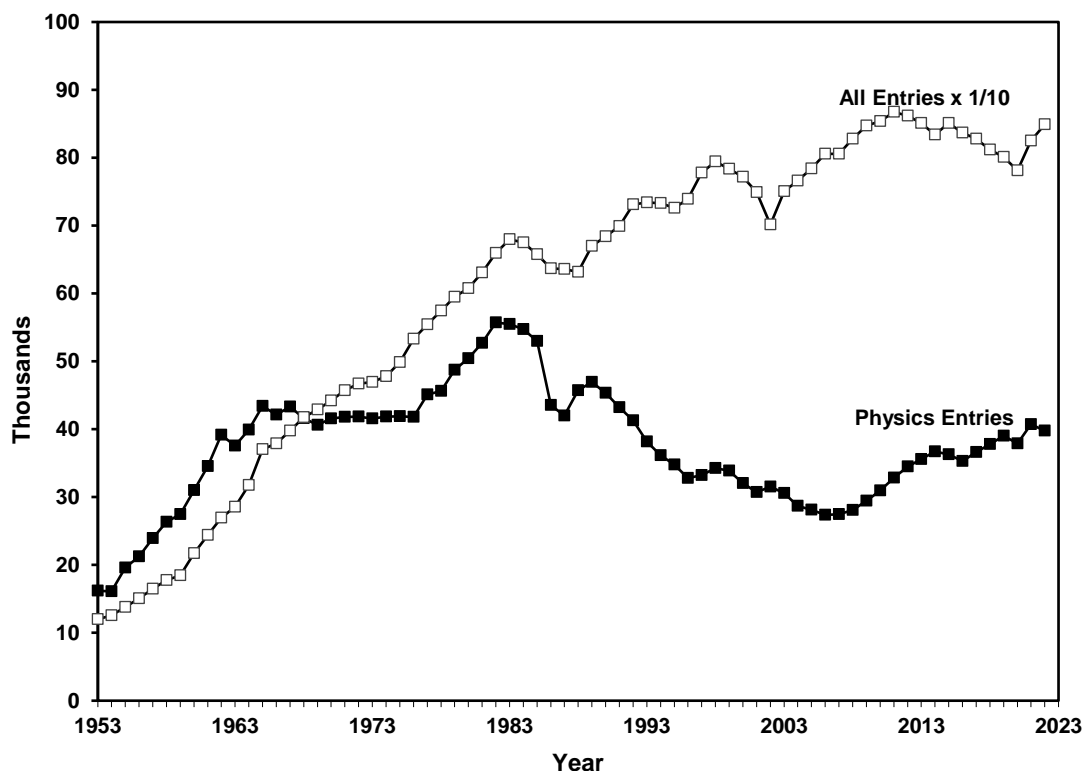


Chart 5.6: England Provisional Entries

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 press ahead. But against an expanding 18-year-old population and an overall increase in A-level entries of 2.3 per cent, there is further decline in English and foreign languages. Even Spanish drops by 12.7 per cent. While there is steady growth in chemistry, physics entries dropped by 2.6 per cent.

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 size would be very disappointing for the students and their parents. Some will find that they have been cut off from university places that would have been open to them last year.
- 6.4. The exam boards, therefore, are faced with a dilemma. The excesses of teacher assessment destroyed the value of A-level grades, with in 2021, 44.8 per cent of the entries being awarded an A* or an A grade. It is really important that the value be restored to the grades and that they accurately reflect performance. To achieve this in two years is brutal, because it shatters the over-optimistic impressions that the grade bonanza created. We see how Ofqual and the boards have resolved the dilemma on the 17 August. But I suspect that they will not be able to get the grades all the way back to where they were before Covid.
- 6.5. A further complicating factor, as we saw in Chart 2.3, is that A*s were relatively rare, because so few were awarded in subjective subjects. But this changed with teacher assessment when they were given generously. Much will depend on the extent to which this new valuation has become embedded. The wider spread of A* across subjects could make it difficult to get numbers down to 2019 levels. Students in quantitative subjects achieving very high proportions of right answers will be hard to squeeze down in a general reduction exercise. But to have the blow falling mainly on the subjective subjects may well be questioned as unfair.
- 6.6. When the A* was introduced in 2010, it was envisaged as being for the top ten per cent, and I think the Government, regulators, and exam boards would be content if they achieved this as the outcome in 2023. The other side of the coin is that during the teacher-assessment years, many students and their parents developed unreasonable expectations. Bringing down top grades this year, especially to 2019 levels, will lead to widespread disappointment and probably a huge increase in the number of appeals.

Gender Differences

- 6.7. Girls have come to dominate A-level, GCSE, and Sats results, but one bright spot for boys was that they were ahead at A* at A-level, almost from its introduction in 2010. Perhaps boys are the outstanding talents after all! But when the exams were replaced by teacher assessment, it was the girls who moved ahead at A*.
- 6.8. Close reading of the 2021 and 2022 results raises the suspicion that teachers assess girls more favourably. In 2021, when grades were awarded by teacher assessment boys were ahead at A* in only three of the 38 subject categories - chemistry, German and 'other sciences'. But only a year later with a return to exams, this had trebled, with them being ahead in, among other things, maths, music and a range of languages. The overall gap in favour of girls of 1.3 percentage points under teacher assessment reduced to 0.4 percentage points when exams returned. Does this mean that in 2023 when exams fully return that boys will be ahead at A* again.?
- 6.9. They certainly could be, but their previous position depended mainly on five subjects - further maths, maths, chemistry, physics and economics – which awarded the most A* and had large numbers of entries from boys. With teacher assessment, top grades became more widely distributed and if that survives the return to exams, the special factors which gave the boys the lead may not recur.
- 6.10. Putting all this together, I would expect to see in the 2023 A-level results girls continuing to dominate generally, with not much of a difference either way at A*.

England, Wales and Northern Ireland

- 6.11. I would expect to see present trends continue, with Northern Ireland getting the best results, followed by Wales, then England. Courses and assessment have become increasingly different under the separate jurisdictions and in many ways they are becoming different qualifications. Universities and employers should bear this in mind when selecting between candidates from the different countries. England used to do better than Wales in grade terms, but as its assessment processes have become more rigorous it has slipped behind.

Subjects

- 6.12. Provisional entries for England already published by Ofqual suggest the main trends in subject choices are set to continue:
- maths, the most frequently taken A-level, continuing to grow, while English, formerly number one, drops further away;
 - continuing decline in languages;
 - growth in the social sciences;
 - sciences, apart from physics, continuing to recover from impact of the switch from separate sciences to double-award science GCSE.

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.