Media Release

Strictly Embargoed until 09.30 hours on Thursday 16 August 2018

A level results remain steady and STEM subjects increase in popularity

The Joint Council for Qualifications has today published the 2018 national results for A levels and AS qualifications.

Highlights

- A steady national picture with outcomes relatively unchanged as reformed qualifications continue to be introduced
- At A level, A* down 0.3 percentage points to 8.0%; A*-A up 0.1 percentage points to 26.4%; A*-E down 0.3 percentage points to 97.6%
- STEM subjects continue to grow in popularity, especially amongst females
- Entry trends in French, German, Spanish continue, Chinese languages buck the trend
- AS entries continue significant decline in England following decoupling from the A level

The national A level results published today show very little movement compared with last year, with 8.0% achieving the top grade A*, compared to 8.3% in 2017, and 26.4% achieving an A*-A, compared to 26.3% in 2017.

This stability comes at a time of significant change, with the majority of subjects now having been reformed. New content and structures ensure these qualifications prepare students for study at higher education while maintaining standards year on year.

A level entries

The number of A level entries continues to fall although at a slower rate than the number of 18 year olds in the UK. In 2018, there were 811,776 entries, a drop of 2.0% on 2017 although the drop in the population of 18 year olds was 3.5%.

Increase in entries for Facilitating Subjects[1]

As a collective, entries in Facilitating Subjects continued to rise, increasing from 50.2% of all entries in 2014 to 52.5% in 2018. This growth happened at a time of fluctuations across many Facilitating and non-Facilitating subjects. For example, in Facilitating subjects, Mathematics rose by 2.5% and Geography was down 11.3%. In non-Facilitating subjects, Computing went up 23.9% and Psychology 1.8%.

[1]Some A-level subjects are more frequently required for entry to degree courses than others. These subjects are commonly known as 'Facilitating Subjects' which are: Biology; Chemistry; English Literature; Geography; History; Maths and Further Maths; Modern and classical languages; Physics.

March of STEM

STEM subjects (Science Technology Engineering and Maths) continued to rise in popularity. In 2018, 36.2% of all entries were in one of these subjects, an increase from 28.0% in 2009, 33.4% in 2014, and 34.5% in 2017.

Male students are more likely to study a STEM subject, with them making up 57.0% of all STEM entries. The balance, however, is starting to shift. More female students take Biology and Chemistry than male, with more male students taking Mathematics and Physics. But year on year comparisons show that females are closing the gap in these subjects, with entries rising 3.1% for Mathematics (compared to males rising 2.1%) and 6.9% in Physics (males rising 2.4%). There is still a long way to go to close the gap completely.

Mathematics remains most popular A level

There were 2,383 more Mathematics entries in 2018 compared to 2017, an increase of 2.5%, ensuring it remained the most popular A level with 97,627 entries.

Mathematics is part of the Phase 3 reforms which started teaching in 2017. Assessments for all other Phase 3 reformed subjects won't be available until 2019, but Mathematics has been offered in 2018 after just one year of study. This decision was taken to allow those highly able students who take Mathematics at 17 years old and Further Mathematics at 18 years old to do so. This only makes up a very small proportion, only 1,965 out of the 97,627 total.

There is very little movement year on year in Mathematics results at most grades. For example, A*-A is down only 0.1 percentage point to 42.2%. At A*, however, there is a dip of 2 percentage points to 15.9%, which is the result of a less able cohort at the top end of ability range compared with last year. This is supported by the prior attainment of these candidates.

Falling trend in Modern Foreign Languages continues

Entries for French, German and Spanish fell collectively by 7.9% in 2018. Results at A* rose for German and Spanish, but fell for all three subjects at A*-A. It is important to note that year on year standards have been maintained and that the fall in results is due to changing entry patterns impacting the performance of the overall cohort.

Other foreign languages (see notes to editors) showed an overall 3.1% increase. Of these languages, Chinese languages had the most entries, 3,334, rising 8.6% year on year.

AS

The decline in AS levels continued, with 52.5% fewer UK entries compared with 2017. This fall is driven by entries in England, where the AS has been decoupled from the A level and is a standalone qualification. In Wales and Northern Ireland, where the AS remains coupled to the A level, AS entries remain relatively stable.

Despite this fall in England, there were 346,126 UK entries, with Mathematics remaining the most popular with 81,051 entries (160,450 in 2017).

These significant changes in entry patterns make it very challenging to draw year on year comparisons.

Commenting on this year's results, Michael Turner, JCQ's Director General said:

"The overall picture shown by today's A level results is one of national stability during a period of significant reform.

"Students, and teachers, should be congratulated. They can be confident in their grades, knowing they have been achieved in a world-class system that is robust, challenging, and fair.

"The rise in STEM subjects will be welcomed by many including employers who have been calling for more people to have the knowledge and skills developed by taking these qualifications. That we are moving, albeit slowly, towards greater gender equilibrium in entries and results in STEM should also be welcomed and encouraged.

"Taking examinations and receiving results can be a challenging time for students. For those who have achieved the grades they wanted or needed, congratulations. For those who haven't, there are many other paths and opportunities available so take time to seek advice and guidance from teachers, parents and friends."

Notes to editors

1. Details on the reforms in England, including content changes and timetable can be found here: GCSE, AS and A level reforms

3. Details on reforms in Wales and Norther Ireland can be found here: Qualifications Wales: Process for reforming GCSEs and A levels and CCEA: Regulation GCE and GCSE

4. Detailed tabulations of the GCE AS and A-level, Applied GCE AS and A-level are published separately, also with the STRICT EMBARGO of 09.30 Thursday 17 August 2017 and will be available on the JCQCIC website from 09.30 on 17 August 2016 – www.jcq.org.uk

5. These results are for qualifications taken by students across the UK but predominantly in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

6. Other modern languages are: Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Dutch, Gujarati, Italian, Japanese, Modern Greek, Modern Hebrew, Panjabi, Persian, Polish, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Turkish, and Urdu.

7. All awarding organisations are answerable to the regulatory authorities - Ofqual (England), Qualifications Wales (Wales) and CCEA (Northern Ireland). The regulatory authorities monitor the awarding bodies' standards. In addition, the awarding organisations themselves conduct a number of comparability studies to compare standards. Maintaining standards within and across all qualifications in order to ensure fairness to all candidates is the paramount concern of the awarding bodies.

8. The JCQCIC comprises AQA, CCEA, City & Guilds, NCFE, OCR, Pearson, SQA and WJEC – the eight largest providers of qualifications in the UK.

9. The JCQCIC is a membership organisation and enables member awarding bodies to act together in providing, where possible, common administrative arrangements for the schools and colleges and other providers which offer their qualifications; and responding to proposals and initiatives in assessment and the curriculum.

10. Media contacts: The JCQ's press office can be contacted on: 020 7227 0671/020 7638 4132/07905 683 816