

Additional assessment series announced for T Levels

Awarding organisations will now have the option to provide an additional assessment series for the technical qualifications within T Levels. This is one of the changes from the original Ofqual proposals, which has emerged as the outcomes to its earlier consultation are published.

The consultation outcomes confirm that each of the assessment series can be used both for students sitting assessments for the first time and those re-taking assessments. This means that students will not have to wait a whole year to re-take – particularly important for those wishing to re-take after their second year of study.

Other key points to note from the [consultation outcomes](#) include:

- Ofqual will not specify when in the year the assessments will take place.
- The whole of the core will be assessed together

and the whole of each occupational specialism will be assessed together. This means that a student wishing to re-take an assessment must re-take all associated assessments for that part of the technical qualification.

- Due to its perceived limited value, Ofqual will not be moving forward with the 'working towards' grade below pass for the occupational specialisms.
- Awarding organisations will not issue certificates for the technical qualifications. Instead, certification will be for the overall T Level by the government, with a statement of achievement issued for students who do not successfully pass all elements of the T Level.

Ofqual has issued another [consultation](#) to move forward with the rules, conditions and guidance for the technical qualifications within T Levels.

New T Level panels announced

The DfE has revealed the membership of nine [new T Level panels](#). These panels will cover the 2022 and 2023 routes, namely:

- Agriculture, Environmental and Animal Care
- Creative and Design
- Hair and Beauty
- Business and Administration
- Catering and Hospitality.

T Level panels, made up of employers, professional bodies and providers, are responsible for developing the outline content for T Levels.

This further wave of panels adds to the members already revealed for 2020 and 2021 in:

- Digital
- Education and Childcare
- Construction
- Health and Science
- Legal, Financial and Accounting
- Engineering and Manufacturing.

A total of 25 panels is now up and running.

T Levels: employability in a changing economy

Reforms to technical education are ambitious but could be game-changing. That's the message from a joint [report](#) from the Collab Group of large FE colleges and labour market analytics company Emsi.

The report examines the issues behind T Levels such as: how can T Levels be designed to target gaps in key industries; how can employers gear up to deliver industry placements; and how can learners be convinced of the value of T Levels?

Using data analysis and interviews with employers to

inform its conclusions, the report considers four areas critical to the success of T Levels:

- Employability skills
- Local labour market alignment
- Industry placements
- Student engagement.

The Collab Group believes that flexibility within T Levels could give them much-needed currency for employers and learners, and that making the link from T Levels to employability will provide opportunities, make them a success and raise the profile of technical education.

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What do employers think of T Levels?

Employers are supportive of technical education reforms according to the CIPD's report [Reforming technical education: Employers' views of T Levels](#) despite some of the challenges.

The report examining employers' views on T Levels, states that employers believe T Levels will have a beneficial effect on young people's employability, and shows early indications of a willingness to recruit young people who have been through this route.

The survey of employers suggests that employers would value breadth over depth in terms of the skills young people gain from T Levels, preferring embedded employability skills and a broad understanding of their sector rather than specialist skills and knowledge required for specific vacancies.

The survey also highlighted a concerning lack of awareness amongst employers of the new qualifications recommending an awareness-raising campaign to increase employer engagement.

Employers' ability to offer a placement of the length

needed to fulfil T Level requirements, either at all, or without some type of financial incentive, support and guidance, was also questioned.

The report was based on a survey of 2000 organisations and attempts to shine a light on employers' views and attitudes to T Levels.

[Research](#) has also been carried out by the DfE into employer engagement with T Levels and in particular, capacity to support T Level industry placements. Overall, employers welcomed the idea of the placements with the length of time viewed as being sufficient to enable the learner to settle in, understand the business, undertake work of value, and make a positive contribution.

Employers did not feel that they could commit to offering placements until they had further clarification on:

- The content of the course
- The objectives of the placement
- The role of the learning provider
- How T Levels fit with other FE and HE qualifications
- Paying learners.

Want to know more about T Levels?

Tick the T Levels box and [subscribe](#) to our new, regular newsletter *Spotlight on T Levels* to get the latest news and developments as well as views and debates from interested stakeholders.

VTQs and Functional Skills are viewed positively

Vocational/Technical Qualifications and Functional Skills are predominantly viewed positively by employers, training providers and learners, according to Ofqual's recent [qualifications perceptions survey](#).

The survey covered a range of regulated vocational and technical qualifications. It provides a snapshot of attitudes towards them and helps to understand how stakeholders view and use these qualifications, particularly important at this time of vocational qualifications reform.

Key findings include:

Other vocational/technical qualifications

- VTQs are valued by employers because of their relevance, capacity to equip learners with technical as well as softer skills, and to prepare learners for the workplace. Learners who take VTQs expect improvement in their vocational and technical skills as a result
- Learners with prior experience of the workplace are significantly more likely to have positive perceptions

of VTQs than learners with no work experience

- VTQs are more likely to be viewed positively when taken as part of an apprenticeship or when the qualification leads to outcomes such as a pay increase or promotion.

Functional Skills

- Nearly three-quarters of employers (72%) say they value Functional Skills because of their relevance, ability to meet business needs and assurance of competence
- The level of knowledge of Functional Skills increases with organisation size, with large businesses significantly more likely to have an understanding of them
- Learners expect that studying towards Functional Skills will help improve their English and maths skills, and confidence in using these skills.

The survey was carried out between October 2017 and February 2018 and reports the views of more than 3,000 employers, learners and training providers.

Employers struggle to fill skilled jobs

The number of skills-shortage vacancies has increased over the past 2 years according to new research from the DfE.

Finding the right workers remains a challenge for employers often due to a lack of the required skills, qualifications or experience among applicants. Around 60% of employers also anticipate changing skills requirements over the next year.

The DfE research, [Employer skills survey 2017](#), provides a source of intelligence on the skills challenges that UK employers face both within their current workforce and when recruiting new employees.

The research suggests a need for locally targeted solutions to respond to skills shortages following evidence of huge geographical differences (Birmingham struggles to fill 32%

of vacancies, with only 4% reported in Leeds). The business services sector and construction sector in particular are experiencing a large amount of these skills shortages.

On the technical side, employers report a lack of digital skills, operational and analytical skills. Use of on-line training and e-learning is on the increase amongst employers across all UK nations and all sectors.

There is a decrease in the number of staff being trained to nationally recognised qualifications but those employers who do use higher level qualifications as part of their employee training are more likely to be high performing employers.

The research was based on responses from over 87,000 employers and was carried out between May and October 2017.

Results trends 2018: GCSEs

Overall GCSE outcomes have remained stable in recent years and this trend continued in summer 2018.

In total, 23 reformed GCSE subjects graded 9-1 were available in 2018.

Small numbers of candidates achieved a grade 9, designed to recognise the very highest performing students. Only 732 students achieved 7 or more grade 9s, with girls performing better than boys at the highest grade. The average number of reformed GCSEs taken by 16 year olds was 7.46.

Ahead of Maths and English this year, the [science double award](#) had the greatest number of entries with 14.6% of the total GCSE entries. Separate sciences – Biology, Chemistry and Physics - all saw increases in entries this year.

GCSE subjects in decline included Design and Technology, Religious Studies, French and Performing Arts.

For post-16 students, English entries were up and maths entries were down when compared with 2017.

This year, only 22% of post-16 students achieved a grade 4 or higher in maths, with 33% achieving this pass grade in English Language.

Statistics covering the whole of the UK by subject, grade and gender are available on the [JCQ website](#).

For further exploration of results trends, Ofqual has produced an [analytics tool](#) including an interactive map of England showing GCSE results in different subjects by grade and county.

Results trends 2018: A Levels

Overall A Level results in England remained stable in summer 2018 for both reformed and unreformed A Levels with outcomes relatively unchanged from 2017.

746,000 entries were made across all A Level subjects (759,000 in 2017) with A* success rates falling slightly from 8.3% in 2017 to 8% in 2018.

The majority of subjects have now been reformed, with 12 more reformed subjects awarded this year.

Maths continues to be the most popular subject at A Level (97,627 candidates), followed by Biology (63,819) and Psychology (59,708). Maths remained popular at AS Level too, with 81,051 entries. The majority of entries for Maths were for the unreformed A Level, rather than the reformed A Level which was available for the first time this summer to allow highly able maths students to take Maths in one year at age 17 and Further Maths at 18.

Computing saw the biggest percentage rise in A Level candidate entries, up by 23.9% from the previous year (to 10,286), followed by Business Studies and Chemistry. ICT,

Religious Studies and Geography were amongst the top decreasing subjects.

More female students took Biology and Chemistry than male, with more male students taking Mathematics and Physics.

As predicted, AS entries declined sharply this summer, following the de-coupling of the AS from the A Level. Only 64,810 17 year olds took at least one AS this year, compared with 209,540 in 2017.

Entries for the Extended Project Qualification plateaued at 40,437 (up 1.1% on 2017).

Statistics covering the whole of the UK by subject, grade and gender are available on the [JCQ website](#).

For further exploration of results trends, Ofqual has produced an [analytics tool](#) including an interactive map of England showing A Level results in different subjects by grade and county.

Unconditional offers continue to rise

The number of unconditional offers made to university applicants is on the increase according to an [update](#) from UCAS.

In 2013, 2,985 unconditional offers accounted for 0.4% of all offers made to 18 year olds. By 2018 this had risen to 67,915 unconditional offers – 7.1% of all offers made.

More than a fifth (22.9%) of 18 year old applicants received at least one unconditional offer this year before they had completed their qualification at school or

college.

These statistics have caused great debate about the merits or otherwise of unconditional offers to the higher education sector and to the impacts that such offers might have on 16-18 year old learner achievement.

UCAS is due to publish a more detailed analysis of offer-making, including any impact on students' attainment, later this year.

National reference test dates for 2019 confirmed

Ofqual has confirmed the dates for the 2019 [National Reference Test](#) – the third year that the tests have been in operation.

The schools involved will administer the test between 25 February and 8 March 2019.

Each year a sample of English and maths GCSE students take largely the same test to establish, over time, if there is any change in how students perform

at a national level. Results from the test are only used to measure changes in performance nationally with no results for individual students or schools.

Ofqual has confirmed that use of the information gained from the NRT could be used in GCSE awarding in 2019 at the earliest.

Around 350 schools have been contacted to take part for 2019.

Rules strengthened for teacher involvement in exam development

Involvement of teachers in the development of confidential assessment materials will continue but the rules and guidance for Awarding Organisations (AOs) have been strengthened and clarified by Ofqual.

Following consultation, Ofqual has confirmed [changes to its rules](#) designed to safeguard exam materials.

Ofqual accepts that AOs will need some time to put in

place the complete package of appropriate safeguards so as not to introduce an unacceptable degree of risk to the safe delivery of qualifications. AOs have until 1 January 2020 to fully reflect the new rules and guidance in their practices.

This clarification of the guidance follows earlier [decisions by Ofqual](#) which highlighted the clear benefits of allowing teachers to be involved in the assessment process.

Additional resit for Cambridge Technicals continues

The DfE has confirmed that the recently implemented, additional re-sit for each of the external units in the 2016 Applied General Qualifications (such as 2016 Cambridge Technicals) should continue for as long as the pre-existing, unreformed Technical qualifications are still being offered.

The 'safety net' for those students who just fail one or more external units will also remain in place, allowing

students to be awarded the qualification even if they have just missed a pass on one or two units. Previously the requirement to pass every unit would have meant they failed the whole qualification.

In a recent [blog](#), Ofqual outlined the reasons behind this policy decision and some of the potential impacts on student results.

Review outlines challenges and potential of higher level technical qualifications

The wide range of qualifications available at Levels 4 and 5 vary in how well they are understood by employers and learners, but have good labour market currency in certain sectors.

This is the interim conclusion from the evidence gathered so far as part of the review of higher level technical education. First [announced](#) by the DfE in November 2017, this review of Level 4-5 education, focuses on how technical qualifications at this level can best address the needs of learners and employers. The Review forms part of the Department's wider work on the Post-16 Skills Plan and the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding.

[Evidence so far](#) suggests:

For learners

- Student uptake at this level is very low. Around 7% of all students between 18 and 65 are training at Level 4-5.
- Availability and awareness of financial support affects students' decisions to study at Level 4-5. However, some students are attracted to Level 4-5 provision because the course and living costs can be lower than three-year undergraduate degrees.
- Some potential students may be encouraged to study at Level 4-5 if the benefits were more clearly communicated, for instance around the potential for increased employability and earnings.

For employers

- Employers in some sectors, including ICT and Engineering, suggest there is a growing demand for qualifications at this level in order to meet skills needs.
- Employer engagement in the development of Level 4-5 qualifications is a key element of good practice. However, research suggests that employers need a greater understanding of the benefits of Level 4-5 qualifications before they engage more effectively.
- Where providers intend to expand their Level 4-5 offer, this was often reported to be in response to an increasing local employer demand for skills at this level.

For providers

- Staff need to have expertise in both teaching and the relevant industry practices, but the cost of attracting such candidates is high.
- The costs of procuring up-to-date, industry standard equipment is challenging.

The DfE expects to publish Level 4-5 proposals for formal consultation alongside the conclusion of the Post-18 Review in early 2019. Final proposals will be agreed later in 2019 to ensure reforms are on target for the progression of the first cohort of T Level students.

Lords Committee says DfE 'failed to engage' with recommendations

The House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee has expressed its disappointment that the DfE's [response](#) to its recent report *Treating Students Fairly: The Economics of Post-School Education* failed to engage with its main arguments.

In a [letter](#) to the Secretary of State for Education, the Chair of the Committee says that the reports' conclusions and recommendations have gone unacknowledged.

As previously [reported](#), the *Treating Students Fairly* inquiry, called for a new deal for post-school education funding with a better distribution of funds between higher and further education.

The Committee is particularly concerned that the government did not respond on student loans and what it calls the 'true cost of public spending on higher education'.

It also claims that the response did not address the Committee's recommendation to scrap the government's target of three million apprenticeship starts by 2020.

The government did respond however, on the Committee's recommendation to abolish the Institute for Apprenticeships, disagreeing with the proposal and saying that the Institute had made good progress during its first year of operation.

JCQ announces commission into malpractice

The Joint Council for Qualifications has launched an independent [commission](#) into exam malpractice.

Starting in September 2018, the commission will consider both general and vocational assessments.

Although incidents of malpractice remain relatively low, and exam boards have clear and robust procedures in place to deter, identify and penalise malpractice, the

commission recognises that malpractice can have a negative impact on the fairness of the exam system as well as public confidence.

The commission will seek evidence from a range of stakeholders across the sector, and aims to make recommendations which will play a significant part in reducing malpractice.

Skills for progression added to digital framework

The government's [digital skills framework](#) for adults has been updated to include specific skills to show progression.

The framework, designed to support providers and employers across the UK who offer training for adults in essential digital skills, has been reviewed since its original publication in 2015.

It sets out five categories of essential digital skills for life and work:

- Communicating
- Handling information and content
- Transacting
- Problem solving
- Being safe and legal online.

The essential digital skills framework defines the digital skills adults need to safely benefit from, participate in and contribute to the digital world. The DfE believes that the benefits of working to a common framework will enable progression and the transferability of skills.

Pupil destination to be key performance measure for UTCs rather than Progress 8

The DfE will strengthen the prominence of 'pupil destinations' as a performance measure for UTCs, studio schools and FE colleges providing education from age 14.

Following feedback from a number of stakeholders, the [DfE has decided](#) that for pre-16 institutions with more of a focus on technical education and an atypical age range, Progress 8 is not the most appropriate performance

measure.

These institutions do not cover the full five years measured by Progress 8 and start educating pupils partway through the period covered by Progress 8.

Changes will be made to the performance tables from October this year.

Careers hubs to “transform careers education for young people”

The names of 20 new [careers hubs](#) have been announced as part of the government's [careers strategy](#).

Each careers hub will consist of up to 40 local schools and colleges working together with universities, training providers, employers and career professionals to improve careers education for young people in the region.

From September, 710 schools and colleges will work within a hub and there will be at least one hub in every region of England outside of London. This means that one in five secondary schools and colleges in England will be part of a careers hub.

Ofqual finds exam board approval of centres effective

Awarding Organisations (AOs) have the controls in place to ensure centres have the capability and capacity to deliver their qualifications, according to a recent Ofqual audit.

Overall, Ofqual's findings were positive and recognised the efforts made by AOs to prevent ineffective or inappropriate organisations becoming qualification centres, to monitor centres once approved and to take action to address any issues.

The audit reported that stronger performing AOs were able to demonstrate that:

- Approval requirements, such as physical resources and staff/learner ratios, were clearly set out to prospective centres and verified where necessary
- Regular monitoring of centres took place after approval
- Where corrective action was required from centres, stronger performing AOs closely monitored corrective action.

Areas of weakness identified in the audit have been fed back to the relevant AOs, and Ofqual's programme to audit AOs continues.

The Last Word

Over the last month there has been plenty of analysis of the summer exam results. Paul Steer, Head of Policy, offers an overview of some of the most eye-catching trends using data for all boards across the UK, as published by the JCQ.

The good news for the A Level is that the numbers of entries remain very stable. Indeed, allowing for the fact that the population of 18 year olds this summer was 3.5% smaller than in 2017, it looks like there has been a very slight rise in the popularity of A Levels. AS Level entries, however, are anything but stable. Since the AS was decoupled from the A Level, AS entries have taken a real pounding and the trend continues this summer with entries down a further 52%. If this trend continues, people will begin to question the long term viability of the AS.

The A Level in Religious Studies stands out as having had a particularly disappointing summer, with entries falling by 21% on the previous year. There will be a range of factors leading to this, but clearly young people are making different choices. Some must be turning to the sciences which had yet another year of growth and is something to celebrate in the context of the Government's Industrial Strategy which makes STEM subjects such a priority. Another possible indicator of the changing preferences and aspirations of young people might be the modest rises in the popularity of Political Studies, Economics, Business Studies and Computing.

On paper, Computing has had a bumper year with an impressive rise in uptake since 2017 of 23.9%. But before we herald a new dawn in the popularity of Computing, we should note that the rise is from a very low base. There were 10,286 candidates in total this summer, which is healthy, but isn't up there with the top subjects – there were 59,708 Psychology entries this summer and the biggest of them all, A Level Maths, had 97,627 entries. A more concerning statistic is that over 80% of the candidates that took the Computing A Level were male.

Interest in A Level Modern Foreign Languages continues to wane with French down 8%, German 17%, and Spanish a little less at 4%. Another sign of the times, however, is the growth of Chinese – for the first time there are more students taking Chinese A Level than German, albeit that the entries for both are very small.

In recent years we have seen the runaway success of the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ). Between 2016 and 2017, alone, the numbers of students taking the EPQ rose by 12.3%. With the continued decline in AS, it might have been expected that, this year, the numbers of EPQ candidates would have risen yet again, but that isn't the case. In fact, uptake has plateaued with growth of just 1.1%. So it may be the case that the rise of the EPQ has reached its natural limits. Even if this is the case, it is striking that, if the EPQ were an A Level, it would now be the eighth most popular subject, tucked in behind Art and Design and pulling ahead of Physics and Geography.

The EPQ is often described as bringing breadth to an A Level programme, allowing students to develop skills in research and independent learning. There is nothing new about wanting to add breadth to A Level programmes. Back in 1959, General Studies was introduced to address these very concerns. And now, almost 60 years later, General Studies is no more, with this summer marking the very last entries in the UK.

Meanwhile, in the world of GCSEs, the headline story is the same as it has been for several years – entries for EBacc subjects are up and entries for non EBacc subjects are (mainly) down. Of the top ten most popular GCSE subjects, only 2 of them are non-EBacc subjects - Religious Studies and Art and Design.

Although not as steep as the decline of this subject at A Level, GCSE Religious Studies is down 10% and has fallen from number 6 to number 7 in the chart of top ten most popular GCSEs. Art and Design, however, has shown modest growth, climbing one place to number 8 in the top ten. Art and Design has become the creative subject of choice at GCSE – and its good health is sometimes used to counter arguments that the EBacc is destroying creative subjects.

However, other creative subjects like Music, Performing Arts and Drama, which have always been very low uptake subjects at GCSE, continue to bump along the very bottom of the charts. The uptake of Performing Arts is down a striking 44.7% joining, for the first time, those subjects that are taken by less than 2% of the candidate population. Music, which has consistently been taken by less than 1% of the candidate population for years, suffered a drop in entries this summer of 8%.

But perhaps the creative subject at GCSE generating the most concern is Design and Technology, which took a further drop of 23% this year, falling out of the top ten subjects for the first time in many years. Back in 2007 it was the fifth most popular GCSE subject of all. It's easy to blame the EBacc for this but there will be many factors working together here against D&T, including funding in schools, historical perceptions of the subject amongst parents and senior management in centres, and changes to technology itself, but it is time that policy makers acknowledge this marked decline and declare whether they think it matters or not and, if it does, what is to be done about it. With Government investing millions in Technical Education for 16-19 year olds, it is time to be looking at what is happening at Key Stage 4 with both vocational qualifications and GCSEs.

If proof were needed that the EBacc isn't the only thing

that drives GCSE subject choices, then languages are a case in point. Despite being EBacc subjects, Modern Foreign Languages are showing only the slightest signs of growth. German at GCSE is up 2% on entries for the previous year, which might suggest signs of recovery but in reality, even with this growth, less than 1% of the overall cohort is studying German. Nevertheless, the trend for MFL at GCSE is better than at A Level and hopefully this will feed through.

The EBacc does seem to be continuing to boost other subjects with more people taking History, more taking Geography, a strong spike in the popularity of English Literature, and the continuing march of STEM subjects -

and it is excellent to see these subjects thriving.

Finally, it's important to remember that behind all these statistics are real young people, each with their own particular story to tell. All their achievements must be recognised and celebrated; and we also need to recognise the growing number of achievements in vocational qualifications, for which data is less readily available. Maybe, too, we should give a special thought to the 732 pupils who achieved seven or more straight GCSE grade 9s – given that the total cohort for GCSEs was 640,000 people, that's some achievement.