

Analysis: Level 3 and GCSE Results Day 2022

Introduction and background

This summary is based on 2 separate analyses published by the Education Policy Institute (EPI). One looks at GCSE results and the other at A level results. Among other things, the authors discuss the impact of mitigations, grade distributions, and how this year's grades compare with those before the pandemic.

Key points and findings

Background to results day

- The year 11 and year 13 cohorts which sat public exams this year had faced widespread disruption because of the pandemic – disruption which continued into this academic year in the form of COVID-related staff and student absence. For year 11 students this was the first 'normal' year since year 8. For year 13 pupils, A levels were the first formal examinations which they had ever experienced.
- This year, Ofqual set out several mitigations in recognition of the impact of the pandemic. These included optional topics and content, the provision of formula sheets, and changes to fieldwork and practical activity.
- In the 2 years when examinations were cancelled, they were replaced by teacher assessed grades. This led to considerable grade inflation. For example, between 2019 and 2021, the proportion of entries gaining a GCSE grade 4 or above (i.e., a standard pass) rose from 70 to 79 per cent.
- This year Ofqual had to decide whether to accept the new distribution as normal, return to the 2019 distribution of grades, or aim to return to the 2019 distribution over a number of years. In September 2021, it appeared to follow the third option, announcing that grades in 2022 would be at a midpoint between 2019 and 2021.

- held up despite the disruption of the pandemic with no statistically significant change in outcomes. However, there has been a statistically significant decline in mathematics performance at all grades. This ties in with earlier research by EPI which suggested bigger losses in mathematics than in reading (though other studies have illustrated learning losses in writing).
- Every subject saw increases in the percentage of pupils awarded a grade 4 or above between 2019 and 2021, but these increases were not uniform. Unsurprisingly, they were generally lowest in subjects with already high attainment, such as the individual sciences where pupils tend to have high prior attainment and the vast majority would be expected to achieve grade 4 or above. The percentage point increases in biology, chemistry, and physics were all around 5 percentage points. The largest increases were seen in computing, social sciences, and physical education where the percentage of pupils awarded grade 4 or above increased by over 15 percentage points.
- The subjects which experienced the largest increases have now experienced the largest falls, with the percentage of pupils awarded grade 4 or above in computing, social sciences, and business studies all now over 5 percentage points lower than they were in 2021. Importantly however, all these subjects are still well above where they were in 2019 and where we might expect them to be in 2023.
- As in previous years, there continue to be regional disparities. The highest results were seen in London and the South East and the lowest results in the North East. In London, around a third of grades achieved were at grade 7 or above. In the North and Midlands, it was under a quarter.
- This year, 78.7 per cent of entries from girls achieved a grade 4 or above in comparison with 71.9 per cent of entries from boys. The gap between boys and girls has therefore remained broadly the same, narrowing by only 0.1 percentage points in comparison with last year, while it has narrowed by 2.1 percentage points since 2019.
- However, for grade 7 and above the gap has increased. Girls continue to outperform boys in most subjects, and at higher attainment levels girls have outperformed boys to a greater degree than they did in 2019. In 2022, physics is the only subject where boys consistently outperform girls at both grade 4 and grade 7.

Analysis of GCSE results

- In line with Ofqual's intentions, GCSE results this year were between those of 2021 and those of 2019, although they were slightly closer to 2021. Overall, amongst 16-year-olds in England, 75.3 per cent of all awards were at grade 4 or above. This is 3.8 percentage points lower than in 2021 but still 5.4 percentage points higher than in 2019. At the higher end of the distribution, 27 per cent of all awards were at grade 7 or above, this is 3 percentage points lower than in 2021 but still 5.2 percentage points higher than in 2019.
- Overall, the average grade awarded to 16-year-olds in England this year was 5.0. This is down from 5.2 in 2021 but still above the average grade of 4.8 from 2019.
- A good way to track performance over time is to look at the results from the National Reference Test (NRT) in English and mathematics taken by a representative sample of year 11 pupils. As with results last year, the NRT suggests that outcomes in English have actually



Analysis of A level results

- As envisaged by Ofqual, the A level grading distribution in 2022 sits between the 2019 and 2021 distributions. Almost 36 per cent of 2022 grades were A or A* compared with 25.2 per cent in 2019 and 44.3 per cent in 2021. In 2022 there was also a higher proportion of students with grades D, E, and U, compared with either 2020 or 2021.
- In 2021, the largest increase in top grades occurred in independent schools, likely due to a combination of greater grade increases due to teacher assessed grades, and lower levels of learning loss.
- The gradual return to pre-pandemic grading also saw independent schools experience a large fall in top grades in 2022.
- However, whereas the proportion of students achieving top grades in independent schools was roughly halfway between the rate in 2019 and 2021, FE colleges saw a much greater decrease in top grades since 2019 than may have been expected. This may have been due to greater learning losses in the FE sector (which serves a greater proportion of disadvantaged students), or different approaches to teacher assessment in 2021. It could also be that FE colleges were disproportionately affected when taking on new students in 2020, because students who would not otherwise have secured the GCSE grades to access A levels did so under Centre Assessed Grades in 2020. FE colleges are more likely to take on students with GCSE grades just above the threshold, and many of these students may have then struggled with their A levels.
- The proportion of students achieving top grades is closest to pre-pandemic levels in the North East, whilst it is still somewhat higher in London and the North West. These differences have been driven by both the differential impact in the use of teacher assessments in 2021 and differences in learning loss over the past 2 years.
- In 2021, female students saw bigger increases in grades than male students across most subjects. Existing research suggests that this is probably because final exams favour male students. The use of teacher assessed grades in 2020 and 2021 would have favoured female students. The return to exams in 2022 has seen this gap reduce across most subjects. In chemistry and biology, the trend has reversed since 2021, with greater increases in the proportion of boys getting top grades compared to 2019. Broadly, the additional gains made by female students in stem subjects in 2021 have largely been reversed.
- Although female students experienced both the largest grade increases in 2021 and the biggest falls in 2022, in most subjects they still have a higher share of the top grades compared with male students.
- There are some subjects in which boys attain higher grades on average. These are French, German, Spanish, further mathematics, chemistry, and music.

T levels and other alternative levels 3 qualifications

- T levels were designed as high-status technical alternatives to A levels. The first cohort of T level students began their qualifications in 2020, following either digital, construction, or education and childcare courses, with one of 43 providers. Although around 1,300 students began a T level 2 years ago, only around 1,000 completed their T level and received a

grade. This equates to a completion rate of 82 per cent compared with pre-pandemic completion rates of 79 and 76 per cent for applied general and tech level qualifications (the existing alternatives to A levels). As the methodologies for calculating the completion rates differ, it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions from this comparison, although it suggests that there are no specific issues with dropouts from the first wave of T levels.

Applications to higher education

- The number of 18-year-olds applying for higher education courses was higher than ever in 2022. The increase was driven by both a rise in the 18-year-old population and an increase in the proportion of those applying. In addition, a larger than usual number of 18-year-olds who deferred in 2021 will begin their courses this year. These factors may have contributed to many popular universities increasing their grade requirements for 2022, and the offer rate falling from 73 per cent in 2019 to 66 per cent in 2022.
- The number of students securing their first or insurance place was second only to the record set in 2021, under teacher assessed grades. However, it also showed that a record number of students were free to be placed into clearing, meaning that this year's clearing may be particularly competitive.

The full documents can be downloaded from:

<https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/analysis-gcse-results-day-2022/>

<https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/analysis-a-level-results-2021-2/>