

A-LEVELS 2021
Another Year of Grade Inflation?

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Summary

The emergency procedures adopted for awarding A-level grades in 2020 were a recipe for inflation. The grade received was to be the highest of the teacher's predicted grade, the Ofqual calculated grade or, in the case of Wales, the AS grade achieved in 2019.

This led to:

- the first ever 100% pass rate;
- the highest ever percentage of A*/A grades;
- a bonanza for subjective subjects;
- the biggest ever gap in favour of girls at A*/A;
- Wales being more generous than even England or Northern Ireland.

The Government began the 2020-2021 school year determined that there should be exams, but eventually had to give way. There was, however, time to make teacher assessment more systematic and controlled.

Will this mean a return to the stabilised pattern of results of the previous decade or will it be a repeat of 2020? The early signs are that it will be another bumper year for grades, justified as compensation for all the disruption suffered.

The danger is that the inflated grades, in other words, lower standards, will become the new norm. Relying on teacher assessment for two years will also strengthen the hand of those who wish to see it replace examinations.

1. Introduction

- 1.1. The A-level results in 2020 were like no other, but they could presage what is to come in 2021.
- 1.2. Although the coronavirus pandemic made it impossible for examinations to be held in 2020, Ofqual, the regulator in England, was confident that grades could be awarded accurately by calculation. It produced an algorithm which kept to the national pattern of results, took into account a school's performance in the preceding three years, and shared out the grades within a school according to the ranking of individuals that the teachers had provided. On the face of it, it seems a reasonable way of coping with a crisis. Certainly, the national pattern came out the same as in the previous decade, and newspapers began to think there would be no national exam story that year. But then all hell broke loose.
- 1.3. It turned out that some pupils had received much lower grades than they were expecting or had been predicted, even to the extent of being down by three grades. They took to the social media in droves. Nina Bunting-Mitcham captured the headlines when on BBC Radio 4's 'Any Questions' she accused the Schools Minister of ruining her life because the grades she had received were Ds and she had never been a D-grade person, so "I can't get into any universities with such grades or progress further in my life."
- 1.4. Sensing a public relations and voter disaster, the Government immediately went for damage limitation and scrapped Ofqual's calculated grades (with its chief executive later losing her job) and announced that the grades in 2020 would be those that the teachers had predicted. Job done? Not a bit of it. It soon emerged that some candidates would have received higher grades according to Ofqual's calculations. So there had to be further adjustment, whereby whichever grade was the higher became the one awarded.
- 1.5. Ironically, in the year that Michael Gove's extensive overhaul of A-levels - begun a decade earlier to make them more exam-based and reliable - finally reached fruition, the nation found itself having to arrive at grades in ways that were bound to be inflationary. Not only was there to be the optimism of teacher assessment without any restraining influences, but if Ofqual's calculated grade was the higher, it was to be used. Inflation was to be piled on inflation. Furthermore, in Wales, which retains the AS as a halfway house to A-level, the AS 2019 grade was to be used if that was higher.
- 1.6. The changes forced upon the English, Welsh and Northern Irish ministers and regulators could, therefore, have been expected to lead to a steep rise in higher grades and the pass rate, and so it was. How the inflation manifested itself is detailed in following chapters which report that:
 - for the first time in the 69-year history of A-levels, the pass rate reached 100%;
 - there was a startling increase in the percentage of top grades, with A*/A grades being at its highest ever;

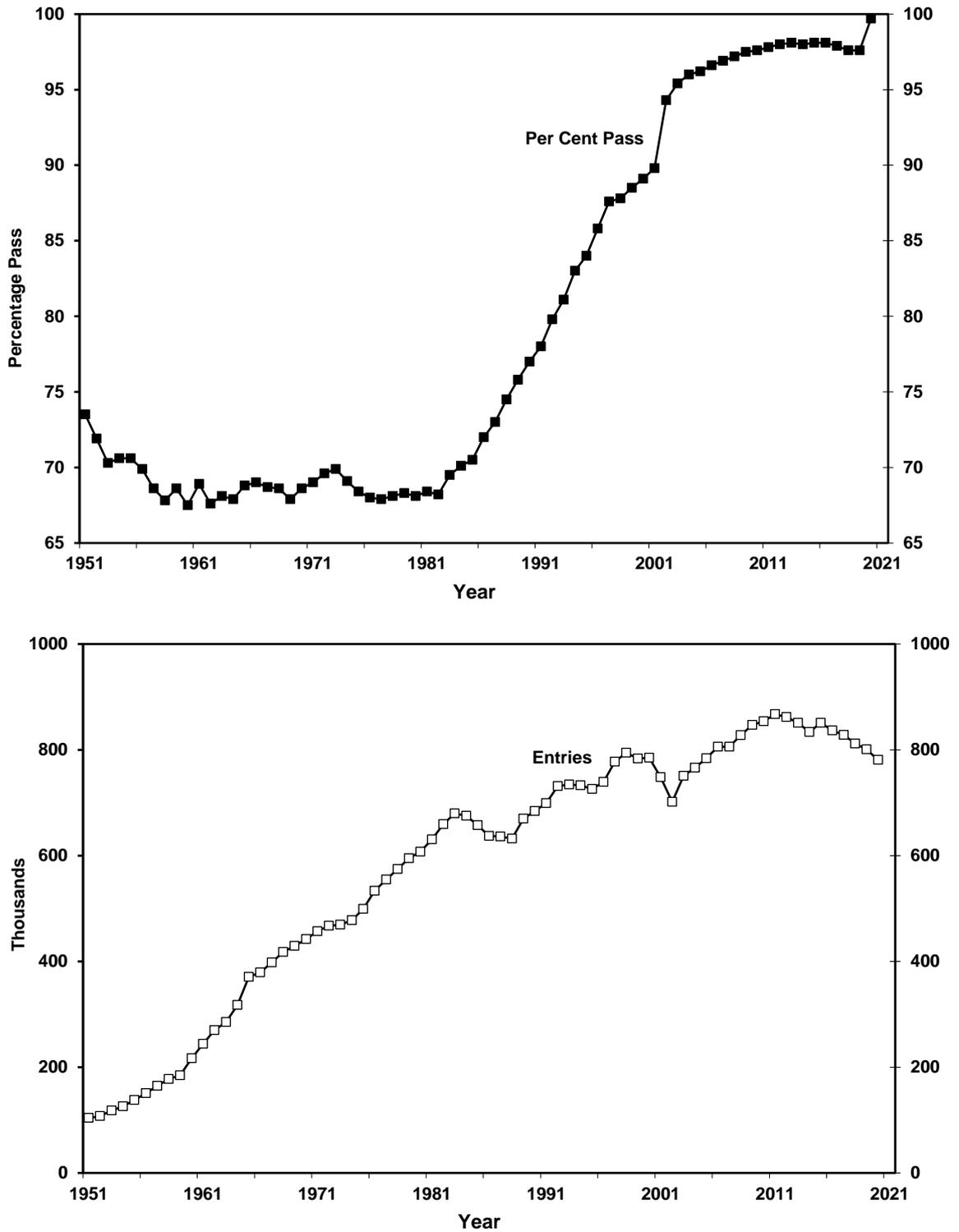
- the performing arts and other subjective subjects have enjoyed higher increases than most of the quantitative subjects and languages;
- the swing to girls has led to the biggest ever gap in their favour at A*/A;
- the increase in Wales is far more than in England or Northern Ireland.

1.7. The kerfuffle around the release of the grades knocked the normally very smooth operation out of kilter. Ofqual rushed out some basic tabulations on the 13th August, but it was not until September 10th that the Joint Qualifications Council which normally takes responsibility for publishing the results released its detailed tabulations. It is these which are used in this report.

2. One Hundred Per Cent Pass Rate

2.1. For the first time in the 69-year history of A-levels, 2020 saw the pass rate reach 100%. The time course of the upper graph in Chart 2.1 traces the path by which it got there. Chart 2.1 also shows how entries changed over those years.

Chart 2.1: A-Level Passes and Entries in UK, 1951-2020



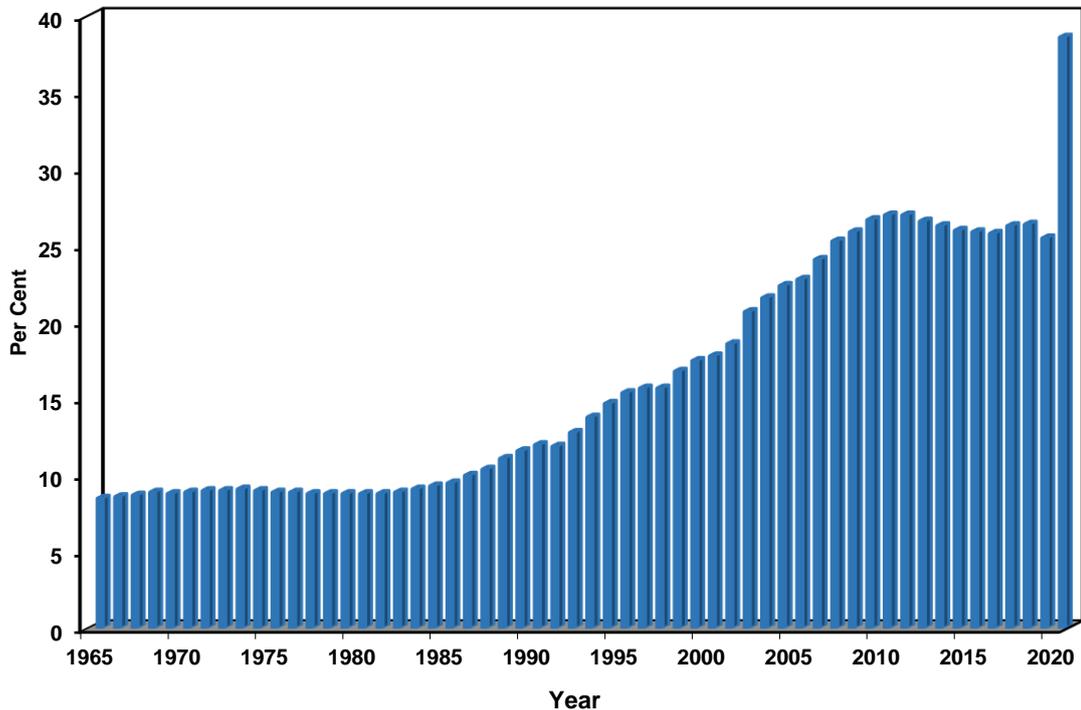
- 2.2. For the first 35 years of its existence the A-level pass rate¹ was close to 70%. It was so consistent because it had been pre-set at that level - which if you think about it was hard on those who had done well enough at O-level to go on to the advanced stage. In 1987, the quotas were replaced by a standards-based system whereby anyone who could meet the criteria received the grade irrespective of how many there were, and results really took off. From 73.0% in 1987 the pass rate rose year-by-year reaching 97.6% in 2010. There was a particularly large increase in 2002 of 4.5 percentage points when A-levels became fully modularised.
- 2.3. Then Ofqual came along. In 2010, it was established as an independent regulator of qualifications in England, having been set up initially as part of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in 2008. From the outset, it showed itself to be determined to cool the rampant inflation of the previous quarter of a century, and it devised a statistical methodology for keeping the grades comparable over time. So from 2011 to 2019 the overall pass rate remained close to 98%.
- 2.4. It took the emergency arrangements of 2020 to produce the final spurt to 100% (strictly speaking 99.7%). It stands out starkly in Chart 2.1 where the gradual levelling off of the pass rate suddenly changes.
- 2.5. The chart also shows that, remarkably, the lifetime of rising pass rate has occurred as the number of entries has increased. Instead of the failure rate increasing as a wider range of ability entered the exams, more of the expanding intake were passing and, as we shall see, achieving higher grades. This was mainly due to a deliberate widening of the gateway to qualify more for the expanding higher education system, although the growth rate was also affected by the size of the 18-year-old cohort which varied.
- 2.6. In 2020, entries decreased, as they had done in the four preceding years, with the drop being in line with a decrease in the number of 18-year-olds. But it is also possible that the drop in entries could also have come from schools not putting forward pupils who they did not think would pass, knowing that there was no examination in which the pupils would be able to redeem themselves.
- 2.7. Whatever the reason, in 2020 the unthinkable happened, everyone entered passed their A-levels.

¹ From 1951 to 1962, A-levels were graded pass or distinction; the five-point scale of A to E was introduced in 1963.

3. Bumper Year for Top Grades

- 3.1. The enforced switch from exams to teacher assessment in 2020 also led, as Chart 3.1 shows, to an extraordinary increase in A*/A awards.

Chart 3.1: Trend in A/A* Grades

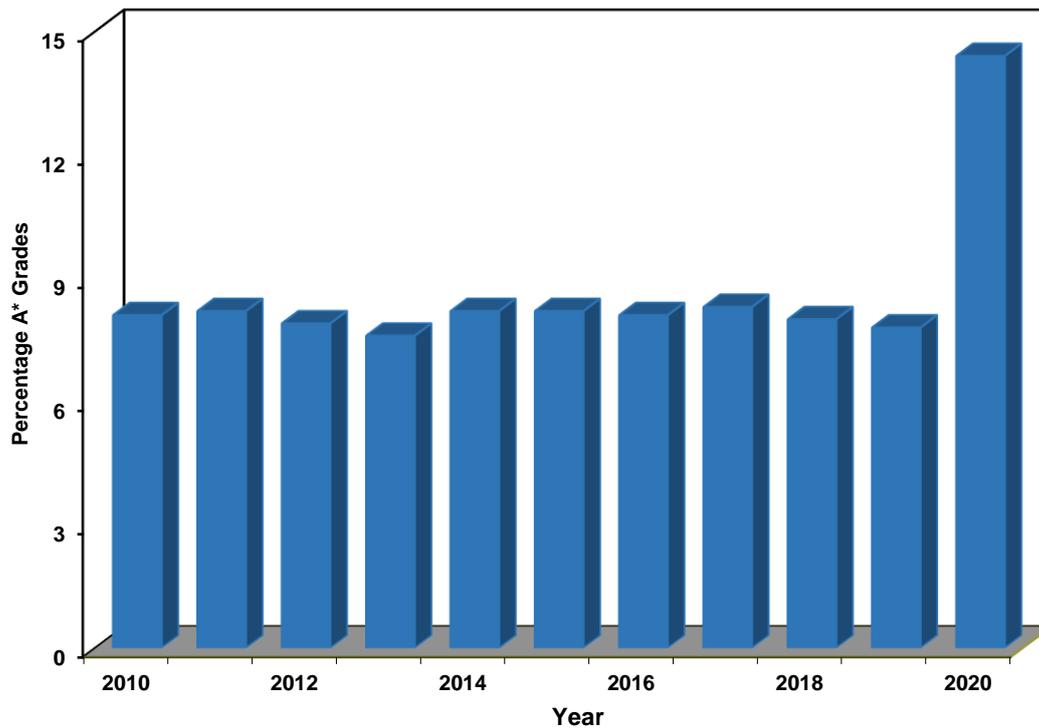


- 3.2. The shape of the curve was mainly determined by whether or not there was a quota for the percentage of A grades awarded. From the inception of the A-E scale in 1963 through to 1986 the proportion of A grades was limited to 10% and, as Chart 3.1 shows, awards remained at that level or below for the whole of that period. When, in 1987, quotas were replaced by standards with no cap on numbers, the percentage went up year-by-year. The chart shows that the proportion of A*/A almost trebled from 10.4% in 1987 to 27.0% in 2010, against a background of increasing entries. This ended in 2010 when Ofqual was established as a separate and independent regulator of qualifications in England and it made halting inflation a priority. It developed a comparable outcomes approach which, in effect, turned the 2010 grade proportions into quotas, so from then until 2019 the percentage of A*/A grades remained the same, if anything falling somewhat.
- 3.3. All changed in 2020 when Covid and the failure of Ofqual's algorithm for calculating grades forced rushed emergency measures which led to the explosion in top grades that we have seen. The 25.5% awarded A*/A in 2019 became 38.6% in 2020, an

increase of 51.4%. In Chart 3.1 its column stands isolated, unconnected with previous years².

- 3.4. Such had been the growth in A grades from 1987 that it was decided to bring in from 2010 an A* grade with a notional pass rate of 10%, in effect creating a grade with the value that the A grade itself had once had. Chart 3.2 shows it kept to this proportion until the emergency arrangements of 2020 produced a near doubling from 7.8% to 14%.

Chart 3.2: Percentage A* Grades



- 3.5. Some would say where is the harm? The pupils have had a difficult and disrupted year and it is right to treat them generously. But then we have a paradox: the least well-prepared sixth-formers of all time have received the highest ever grades. The expansion of the A* and A grades means that a much wider range of abilities is bundled up in them, which makes it much more difficult for universities to select accurately and fairly. Some of those admitted may not be able to cope and will have wasted time and money, and some who are much more able will be missing out on when they could have done really well. Awarding higher grades in compensation for lost learning can be killing with kindness.

² Just conceivably, 2020 falls on where the inflation line from 1987 to 2010, would have been if Ofqual had not intervened to halt the runaway growth.

4. Subjective Subjects Benefit Most

4.1. Chart 4.1 shows that not all subjects benefitted to the same extent from the A* grades handout.

Chart 4.1: Comparison of A* in 2020 and 2019

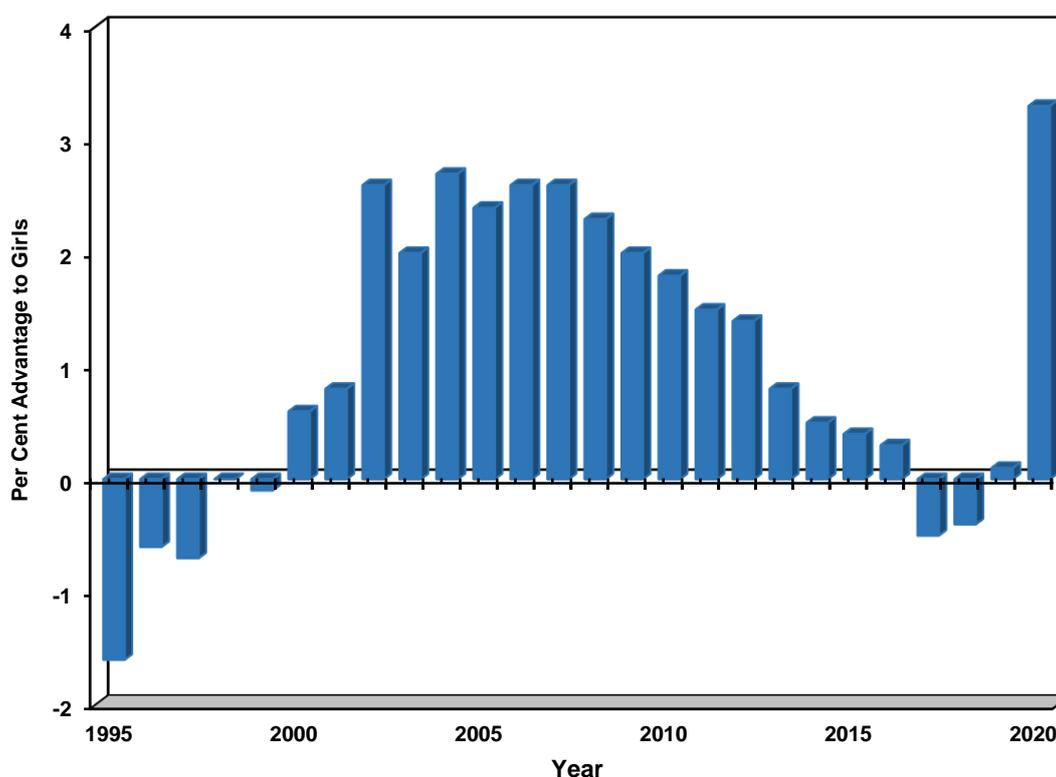
JCQ Subject Categories	2020		2019		Per Cent Increase
	%A*	Rank	%A*	Rank	
Other Modern Languages	73.8	1	51.5	2	43.3
Mathematics (Further)	71.1	2	53.1	1	33.9
German	58.3	3	40.4	4	44.3
Spanish	54.5	4	34.9	6	56.2
French	53.6	5	36.4	5	47.3
Classical subjects	53.1	6	34.4	7	54.4
Mathematics	49.5	7	40.5	3	22.2
Performing / Expressive Arts	43.8	8	24.0	15	82.5
Chemistry	41.9	9	28.4	9	47.5
Music	41.4	10	19.3	20	114.5
Art & Design subjects	41.3	11	27.7	10	49.1
Physics	41.2	12	27.5	11	49.8
Economics	41.0	13	28.7	8	42.9
Other sciences	40.0	14	27.2	12	47.1
Political Studies	39.7	15	26.0	13	52.7
Drama	39.2	16	18.0	22	117.8
English Literature	37.7	17	24.1	14	56.4
Biology	36.8	18	23.5	16	56.6
History	36.7	19	22.5	18	63.1
Computing	36.2	20	17.6	23	105.7
Religious Studies	36.1	21	21.5	19	67.9
Geography	36.0	22	23.3	17	54.5
Design and Technology	32.6	23	15.9	26	105.0
Physical Education	31.2	24	14.7	27	112.2
Psychology	29.0	25	16.5	24	75.8
All other subjects	27.6	26	14.1	28	95.7
Sociology	27.5	27	18.1	21	51.9
Law	26.9	28	16.0	25	68.1
Business Studies	25.1	29	14.1	29	78.0
English Language & Literature	23.4	30	12.1	30	93.4
Media / Film / TV Studies	23.4	31	11.0	32	112.7
English Language	21.8	32	11.3	31	92.9
All Subjects	38.1		25.2		51.2

- 4.2. There was an increase in every subject, with the average at 51.2%, but with wide variation. Chart 4.1 shows that, in England, the standout increases were in the performing arts, with drama up by 117.8%, music up by 114.5% and performing/expressive arts by 82.5%, moving them up the rankings to 16th, 10th and 8th places respectively. In contrast, maths had the lowest increase of 22.2% (dropping to 7th spot) and further maths, the second lowest of 33.9%.
- 4.3. In general, quantitative subjects (with the notable exception of computing) and languages had the smallest increases, and subjective subjects the greater. This could have been because in quantitative subjects and languages at the school level there are right and wrong answers, so it is more obvious how well a pupil is doing. There is also a rank order effect with the bigger increases being in subjects in the lower half of the table.
- 4.4. The changes in the distribution of A* grades across subjects had consequences not only for the overall percentage of top grades, but also for the relative performance of girls and boys.

5. Swing to Girls

5.1. The special circumstances of 2020 saw the largest ever gap in the relative performance of girls and boys at A*/A. Chart 5.1 shows that it is now extraordinarily large compared with the differences of the past decade. From 0.1 percentage point in 2019, the girls surged ahead by 3.3 points in 2020.

5.1: Gender Gap at A*/A

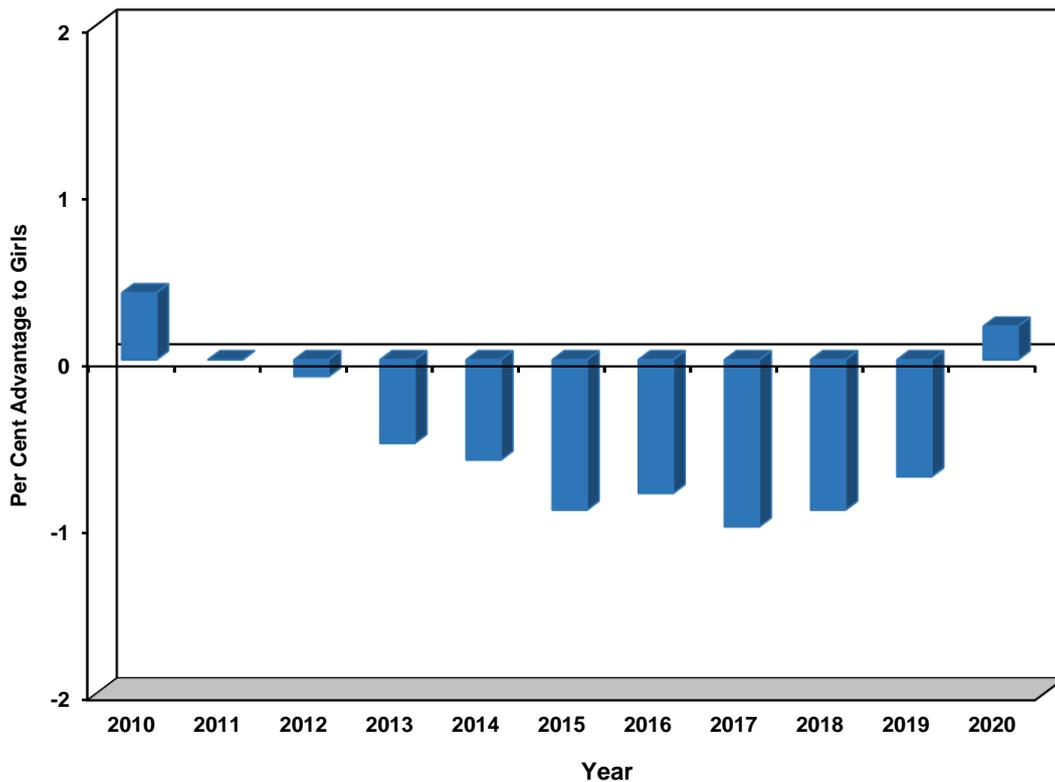


5.2. The gap has varied over the years. In the first three years, 1995 to 1997, as Chart 5.1 shows, boys were ahead, but they were gradually overhauled by the girls. The difference leapt in 2002 when A-levels were fully modularised and that gap was maintained until 2008 when the boys began to catch up. In 2017 and 2018, they went ahead once more. It was even-stein in 2019, only for 2020 to produce the largest gap ever - and in favour of girls.

5.3. The picture is just as sharp when only A* grades are considered. Chart 5.2 shows that for eight of the eleven years that the grade has existed boys have been substantially ahead and in one of the other years – 2011 – there was no difference. In only two years have girls scored higher, one of which was 2020 when from being 0.7 points ahead in 2019 boys found themselves 0.2 points behind in 2020.

5.4. There is a common impression that teacher assessment favours girls and Charts 5.1 and 5.2 appear to bear this out. But 2020 was a truly exceptional year. As we have already reported in Chapter 4, teacher assessment also greatly affected the distribution of top grades across the subjects, which in turn would have a bearing on the gender gap.

Chart 5.2: Gender Gap at A*



- 5.5. In 2019, just five subjects - maths, further maths, physics, chemistry and economics - contributed two-thirds (65.5%) of the A* awarded to boys, but only 28.5% of those received by girls. All of these subjects had below average increases in 2020, especially maths, the main contributor, which fell in the ranking from 3rd to 7th. In contrast, subjects in which girls tended to be very much in the majority, such as the performing arts, psychology and English literature all enjoyed a results bonanza.
- 5.6. It could be that the difference in the grading of subjects brought about the change in the relative performance of the sexes or, conversely, the more favourable grading of girls in teacher assessment resulted in the subject differences. I am inclined to the former. The nature of quantitative subjects, and also languages, is that in exams the full range of marks can be confidently used which, in turn, leads to more A* grades but also more failures. In subjective subjects, on the other hand, the marks and grades tend to be much more bunched and so there is less use of the top and bottom grades.
- 5.7. Boys have traditionally been attracted to the quantitative subjects and girls to more subjective ones, leading to boys often coming out ahead at A*. With the switch to teacher assessment this effect was removed and the pattern changed. Hence, in my view, the swing to girls.

6. Biggest Increases in Wales

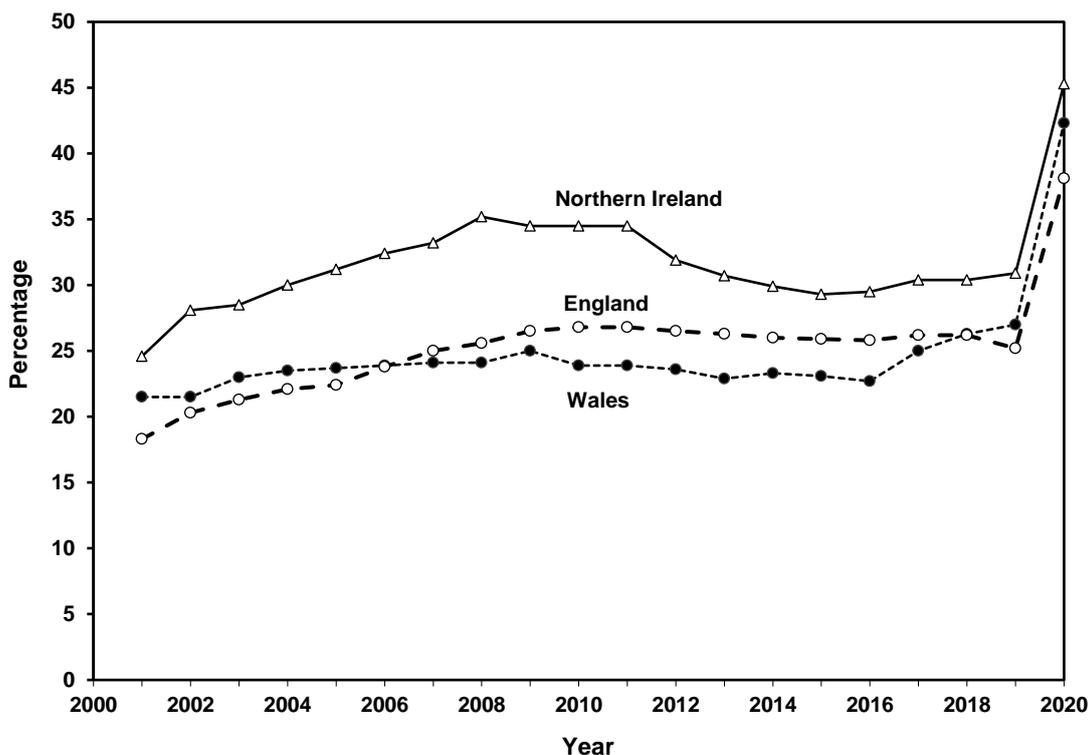
6.1. Although 2020 has so far been the year of the great giveaway of A-grades in England, in fact, as Chart 6.1 shows, Wales and also Northern Ireland were even more generous. The increase at A*/A in Wales was 15.3 percentage points compared with 12.9 points in England and 14.4 point in Northern Ireland. It could be that the additional criterion available in Wales - the 2019 AS grade - has led to the discrepancy. Or it could be that Wales, which has its own education minister, regulator and exam board, has taken a generally more lenient view.

Chart 6.1: Relative Change in Countries of UK

Grade & Year	England	Wales	NI	UK
A*/A 2020	38.1	42.3	45.3	38.6
A*/A 2019	25.2	27.0	30.9	25.5
Difference	12.9	15.3	14.4	13.1
A*- C 2020	87.5	91.8	95.0	87.9
A*- C 2019	75.5	76.3	84.8	75.8
Difference	12.0	15.5	10.2	12.1

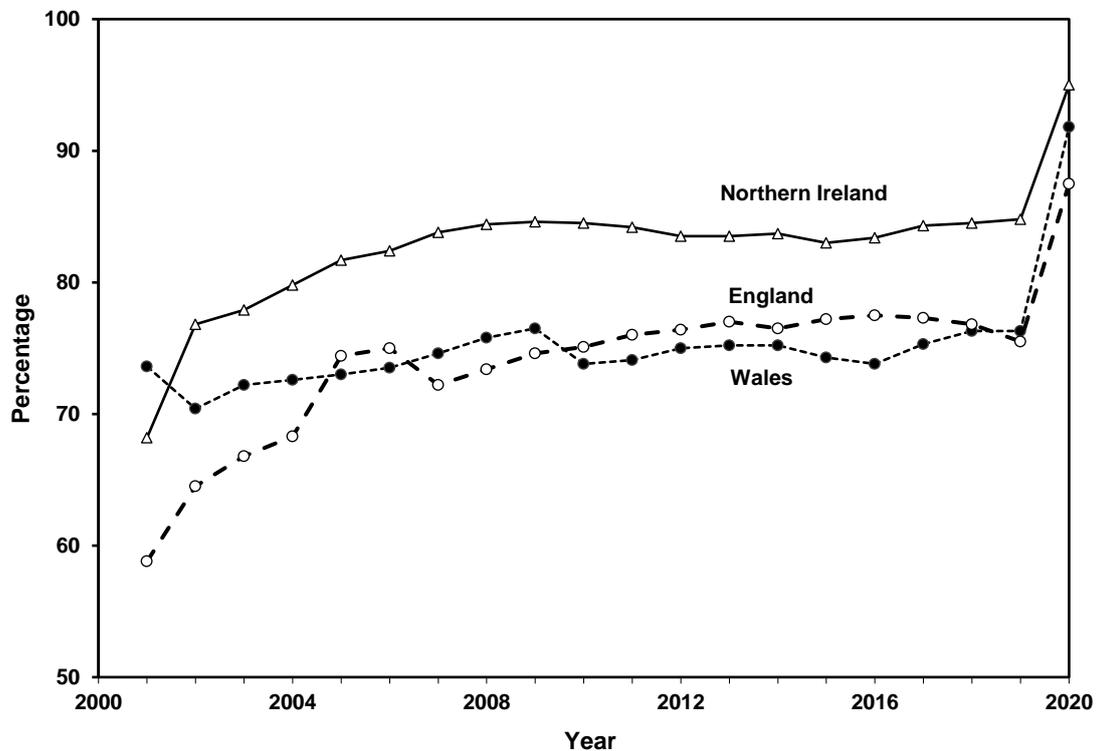
6.2. Charts 6.2 and 6.3 set the 2020 grades in the context of the past two decades. In both graphs the eye is drawn to the big leap in 2020 in all three countries.

Chart 6.2: Trends in A*/A Grades Awarded in UK Countries



- 6.3. At A*/A Northern Ireland remains ahead, as it always has been, but the teacher assessments in 2020 have resulted in a narrowing of the gap with Wales, but a widening of it from England.
- 6.4. At A*-C, as we can see in Chart 6.3, both England and Wales draw closer to Northern Ireland, especially Wales which was only just ahead of England in 2019, but in 2020 had opened up a lead of 4.3 percentage points.

Chart 6.3: Trends in A*-C Grades Awarded in UK Countries



- 6.5. 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 its having a grammar school system has deterred researchers unenthusiastic about finding in favour of such a 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 both to find out more about what's happening and to see if there are lessons to be learned by the rest of the UK.

7. Prospects for 2021 and Beyond

- 7.1. The emergency measures needed to get out acceptable A-level results in 2020 considerably devalued the grades. There were massive hikes in the top grades and the pass rates. The big question is whether the grade pattern in 2021 will be returned to where it had been stabilised in the period 2010-19 (which, after all, embodied all the previous inflation) or will the results be more like those of 2020? Looking further ahead, the question becomes: has Covid jolted us into a new set of standards?
- 7.2. The original intention for 2020 was that the results should be calculated to conform to the established grade pattern. But that went out of the window when it became clear that it had gone seriously awry at the individual level. The highly charged criticism that ensued panicked the Government into allowing the teachers' predicted grades to stand, except where the calculated grades or, in the case of Wales, AS grades were higher. Inevitably, this led to runaway inflation.
- 7.3. At the beginning of the school year 2020-21, the Government had been determined that examinations should return. Both the Prime Minister and Secretary of State made categorical statements to that effect. But gradually it dawned that this would not be possible. Unlike 2020, however, there was time to develop a more systematic and constrained system of teacher assessment based on, among other things, mock exams, test results and course work.
- 7.4. The Conservative Party has always paid close attention to standards. The passionate advocacy of a knowledge-rich curriculum by the Schools Minister, Nick Gibb, is but one example. Given these values and that there was time to prepare for the 2021 A-level assessments, it might be expected that the grade pattern would return to where it was in 2019. Logical, but would it be politically acceptable? It would mean, for example, cutting back the proportion of A*/A grades from 38-39% to 25-26%.
- 7.5. It could be argued that this year's candidates will be competing for university places with the overspill from 2020, and reverting to the harder-edged 2019 grade pattern would leave them in danger of being squeezed out. The point could also be made that the 2021 candidates have encountered disruption in both years of their courses, whereas their predecessors had suffered in only one, and therefore they should be treated even more sympathetically. It is also the case that many parents and pupils are happy with the more plentiful A grades because it makes for more room at the top and improves their chance of a place at a top university.
- 7.6. While logically there is no reason why A-level standards should not be restored to what they were in 2019, my fear is that the various pressures will cause the Government to allow what they became in 2020 to stand. At best, the grade pattern may fall somewhere between those of 2019 and 2020, but there are hints that there could be more top grades even than in 2020.
- 7.7. If there is another significant departure from the 2010-2019 benchmark standards, then it is likely that the inflated grades will become the new norm.

- 7.8. When it comes to money, inflation is persistent and there have been few attempts to halt or reverse it. Indeed, a rate of 2% has been set as a way of managing debt and anything less is seen as a problem. Similarly, with exam grades – also a currency – pass rates have always gone up not down. Where is the harm? Doesn't the increase in top grades enable schools, pupils and parents to feel good? And, importantly, it feeds the ever-expanding university system.
- 7.9. The paradox of 2020 is that the least well-prepared sixth-formers of all time have been awarded the highest grades ever. This inflation reduces the precision of the grades, which in consequence convey less information. It, therefore, becomes more difficult for universities to make accurate decisions about whom to admit. More mistakes will be made so that some candidates will be deprived of their rightful places, while others who cannot cope will be admitted and waste their and the university's time. We are fast reaching the point where with A-levels no longer enabling the leading universities to tell applicants apart with sufficient clarity some will consider reintroducing their own tests and exams, which they had before ceding the responsibility to A-levels.
- 7.10. The Government will also face pressures for teacher assessment to become the new norm. Teachers and their unions are generally opposed to exams, not necessarily for intrinsic reasons, but because they are judged (inappropriately in my view) on what their pupils do in exams. The absurdity of this form of accountability has been demonstrated many times without those in power listening, but from the teachers' point of view one way out it would be for the exams to go. Without the rigour of exams, it would also become easier for universities to comply with requirements to make their intakes more representative.
- 7.11. Government ministers have made it clear that they regard exams as the most reliable means of academic assessment, with other advantages in terms of objectivity, motivation and efficiency. They have said many times that they are anxious to return to them as soon as is safely possible. But will it happen? What the 2021 A-level results look like will be a strong pointer.