

GCSE PROSPECTS 2023
Restoring the Value?

Alan Smithers

Centre for Education and Employment Research
University of Buckingham, August 2023

Contents

<i>Summary</i>	<i>ii</i>
1. Prospects for 2023	1
2. Teachers' Generous Grades	3
3. Top Grades in England	6
4. Girls Favoured by Teacher Assessment	8
5. The Collapse of Foreign Languages	11
6. Performance in English and Maths	15
7. Rise of Religious Studies	17
8. Re-Emergence of Separate Sciences	19
9. England, Wales and Northern Ireland	22
10. Predictions	24
<i>Appendix: How GCSEs Came To Be As They Are</i>	27

Summary

There is a strong pointer from the 2023 A-level grades that Ofqual will carry through its two-year plan to return GCSEs to pre-pandemic standards in England. But Wales and Northern Ireland are waiting until next year. As England accounts for nearly 92 per cent of the entries it will determine the overall UK outcomes.

The restoration of the 2019 grade pattern will mean another record drop in top GCSEs to reverse the profligacy of teacher assessment. Although the percentage changes may not look much, given the huge number of entries, it amounts to a major change, resulting in about 300,000 fewer top grades (grade A or equivalent and above).

This will come as a shock to young people and their parents, but it is necessary to restore the value, precision and accuracy of the grades, which got out of hand when examinations could not be held. The grades although less flattering will be a much firmer basis for taking decisions about the future.

Gender

Girls leapt to their highest ever lead over boys when grades were assessed by teachers, the evidence suggesting that teachers tended to favour girls. With the return to fully fledged exams the gap is expected to narrow, but girls will still remain far ahead. The underperformance of boys in school examinations should be a matter of national concern.

Modern Foreign Languages

The study of modern foreign languages has continued to decline, with even the rise of Spanish stalling in 2022. The only growth area was in 'other modern languages' such as Polish, Chinese, Arabic and Italian which are taken by small numbers of mainly native speakers.

Two factors are likely to lie behind the reluctance of the British to engage. First, many young people do not see the point when most of the rest of the world seems to learn English. Secondly, for a long time Britain laboured under the false assumption that you can just as easily begin to learn other languages in secondary school as at an early age, whereas the evidence from other countries is quite the reverse.

EBacc

The Government has tried to nudge schools towards focussing on a core curriculum of five subjects – English, maths, science, a humanity, and a foreign language. It was originally intended to issue a special certificate to successful candidates called the English Baccalaureate, but this proved not to be feasible, and it became instead a measure by which schools are held to account. Targets were set of 75 per cent of pupils to be taking the EBacc combination by 2022 and 90 per cent by 2025.

But in 2022 only 38.7 per cent qualified and the figure had been stuck at this level for some time. The immovable obstacle is the requirement for a foreign language. Rather than incentivising the study of foreign languages, the EBacc has been scuppered by the requirement. Although still on the books, the EBacc has been superseded as an accountability measure, by one consisting of eight subjects, with a foreign language not compulsory.

English and Maths

The grades in English and maths are among the lowest for all 48 GCSE subjects. In part, this is because they are taken by the whole cohort with its wide range of abilities, whereas most subjects are in some degree selective, even science where there are the three options.

The results are also depressed by the rule that to remain in school or at college to the age of 18 you must continue to retake English and maths if you should fail. The pass rates for re-take students are staggeringly low. In 2022, it was only 22.0 per cent in maths and 31.3 per cent in English.

What good does this do? Surely there is the need for an urgent policy rethink starting from the needs of the young people themselves, rather than an idealized picture of what ought to be good for them. Politicians should beware of projecting on to all pupils, the learning that has been important to them personally.

Religious Studies

At a time when Britain is becoming more secular, it is intriguing that the religious studies GCSE is becoming more popular. In 2022, it was the seventh most frequently taken after maths, English, English literature, combined science, history and geography. It is not part of the national curriculum, but the 1944 Education Act requires schools to provide it, though not pupils to take it.

Its popularity could be because the lessons are there, and the exam is there, and it looks like an easy win. Or it could be a consequence of the competition to get into the highly successful faith schools and the importance those schools attach to religious studies. Or it could even be that pupils really do see it as an opportunity to grapple with life's fundamental questions.

The growth of religious studies GCSE has happened beneath the radar and has not been promoted by any policy or requirement. The increase has not been followed through at A-level. But its popularity at GCSE deserves a closer look.

Separate Sciences

The numbers taking biology, chemistry and physics are growing steadily year-by-year and it is they that mainly provide the platform for A-level studies in those subjects.

The results in the combined science awards are shockingly poor. The single science comes last of all 48 subjects for the number of top grades awarded. This is understandable because it is recognised as a course for those who have decided that they do not want to take science further.

But, alarmingly, the double award is next to last, just above the single award. One has to wonder how good a basis it provides for A-level studies. Whether the study of the sciences at A-level is being limited by the GCSE provision should be investigated and, if the double award is found wanting, there should be a renewed drive to increase the availability of the separate sciences.

Devolved Powers

Education is a devolved power. The DfE's remit runs to England, while Wales and Northern Ireland as well as Scotland, have their own administrations, regulators, and exam boards.

With devolution, GCSEs have grown so far apart that it is unhelpful to have the same name. If they are all still to be called GCSEs, the country in which they are awarded should be prominently displayed so that those using them know what they are dealing with.

1. Prospects for 2023

- 1.1 The Covid pandemic and the reaction to it derailed the ten-year programme that the Conservatives had brought with them to office in 2010 to reform the courses, content and examinations of GCSEs and A-levels and also to bring grade inflation under control. This had just about been completed in 2020 when Covid struck and to minimize its spread schools were shut and examinations abandoned. At first, it was thought that the grades could be accurately assigned by calculating them, but when this proved unworkable it was left to the teachers to decide them. Hopes that the examinations could be resumed in 2021 came to nothing and once more the grades were awarded by teacher assessment.
- 1.2 As our annual reviews show, in the hands of the teachers, top grades rocketed. Across the UK they went up from 20.8 per cent in 2019 to 26.2 per cent in 2020 and 28.9 per cent in 2021. On the 2021 entries, this represents an extra 465,000 top grades.
- 1.3 This might be thought of as a good thing as many pupils, parents and schools will have been very pleased at their success. But it must be remembered that the point of examinations is to give as an accurate and precise picture as possible of a person's capabilities. This is a vital piece of information in making decisions about the future. An over-optimistic grade can lead to taking the wrong pathway and wasting both time and money.
- 1.4 In 2022, there was a return to exams, but not the tough ones of the Gove reforms. In an attempt to make them fair to the candidates who had experienced widely different amounts of disruption, the syllabuses were restricted, and advance notice given of question topics. It was also thought unreasonable to bring down the grade levels to what there were in 2019 in one go, so in England, but not in Wales nor Northern Ireland, a two-stage process was initiated whereby the gap would be halved in 2022, and 2019 standards would be restored in 2023.
- 1.5 In 2023, there have been disruptions too, not only from the aftermath of Covid, but also from teachers' strikes as they have sought higher salaries. Ofqual, the regulator in England and the English exam boards, therefore, face a dilemma. Do they seek to deliver the clear targets for 2023, or do they make further allowances. The decision will depend on the advice of the Senior Examiners, and we shall learn what it is on 24th August.
- 1.6 In the report which follows we delve into the prospects for 2023 based on the past history of GCSE grades and various policy statements. In the next chapter we consider in detail what the teachers' generosity has meant in terms of extra top grades across the UK, and by how much they will need to be reduced to get GCSEs back on track.
- 1.7 This is followed by a chapter devoted to top grades in England which has a different and more differentiating grading system than either Wales or Northern Ireland. It is also England which is aiming to restore 2019 standards in 2023, while Wales and Northern Ireland are content to leave it for another year. England

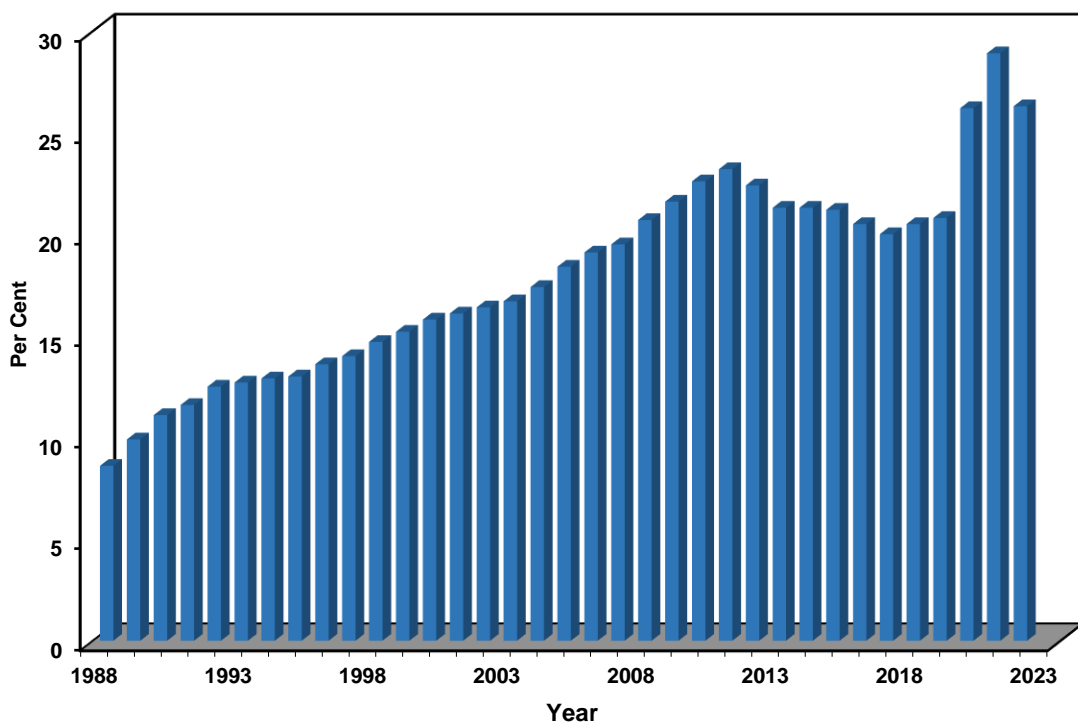
accounts for between 91 and 92 per cent of GCSE entries so its results shapes those for the UK overall.

- 1.8 In Chapter 4 we turn to how boys and girls have fared. Girls have done so much better than boys since the inception of the GCSE in 1988. In fact, the gap now is so large and persistent as to be a matter for concern, although it receives less attention.
- 1.9 The fifth chapter focuses on whether decline in the study of modern foreign languages is continuing. It is surmised that there have been two main reasons for the pupils' reluctance to engage. First, many do not see the point when most of the rest of the world seems content to learn English. Secondly, for a long time Britain laboured under the false assumption that you can just as easily begin to learn other languages in secondary school as at an early age, whereas the evidence from other countries is quite the contrary.
- 1.10 Chapter 6 considers how it is that the two subjects at the heart of education, English and maths, can have some of the poorest grades of all 48 GCSEs. It finds reasons, but also questions the wisdom of compulsory resits for those who fail.
- 1.11 In the next chapter, the rise of religious studies at a time when church attendance is falling sharply is highlighted, and the possible reasons for this apparently spontaneous growth are explored.
- 1.12 In the eighth chapter, the re-emergence of the separate sciences is examined and attention drawn to the shockingly poor results in the combined science options. The grades are so low as to raise the question of whether they are an adequate platform for the study of the sciences at A-level.
- 1.13 In the ninth chapter, we show how far GCSEs have grown apart in Wales and Northern Ireland and from England since control over education has been devolved. They now have different grading systems, are assessed in different ways and have different plans for recovering from the Covid disruption. They are so different now that recruiters should take note of where a GCSE has been obtained.
- 1.14 In a final chapter we attempt to predict what next Thursday's results will look like, taking the A-level results just published as a very strong hint. There are also predictions and observations on the other areas covered in this report: gender, modern foreign languages, EBacc, English and maths, religious studies, separate sciences and devolved powers.
- 1.15 There is also an appendix which sets out in detail how GCSEs got to be how they are.

2. Teachers' Generous Grades

- 2.1. GCSE examinations began in 1988 bringing together the previous O-level and CSE examinations. The original intention when letter grades were introduced in 1963 was that the A grade would denote attainment in the top ten per cent for that subject. But, as Chart 2.1 shows, this was kept to for only two years, and the percentage went up year by year, reaching 23.2 per cent in 2013. Ofqual, the independent exams regulator in England was charged with bringing this inflation under control and came up with a statistical method for doing so. This led to the percentages edging downwards to 2019 when it was 20.8 per cent.

Chart 2.1: UK Trends in Top (7/A) GCSE Grades

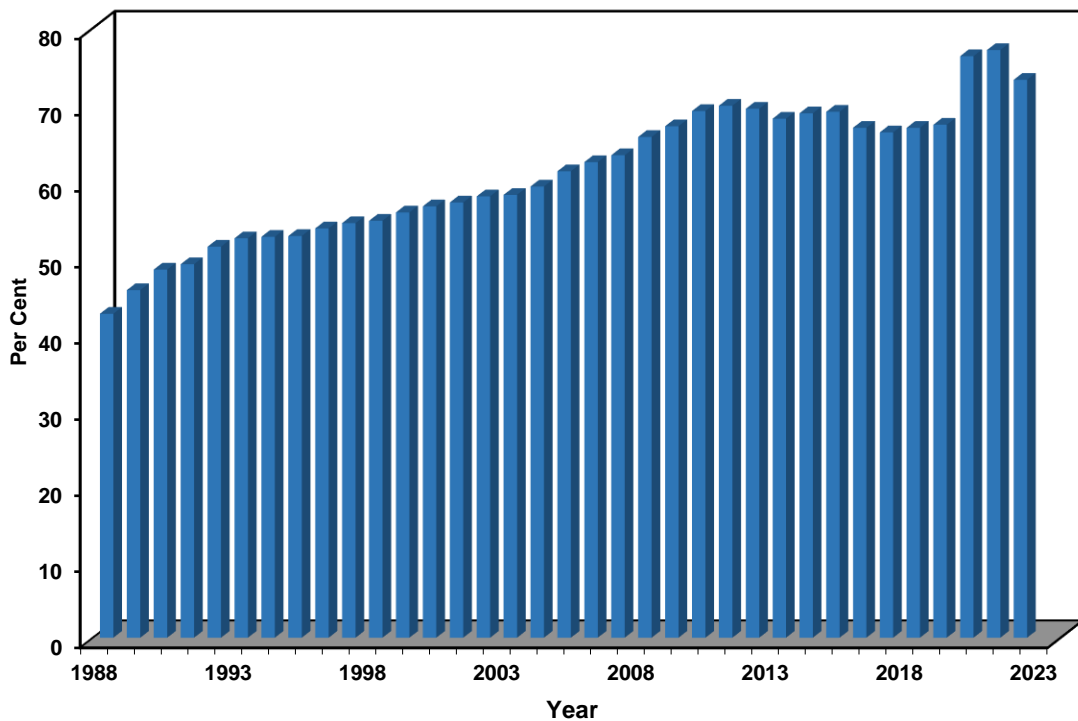


1. Top awards defined as 7/A because now England, Wales and Northern Ireland have different scales. They come together at grade 7 in England (with two points above) and grade A in Wales and Northern Ireland (with one point above).

- 2.2. But, as Chart 2.1 shows, the emergency switch to teacher assessment in 2020 and 2021 resulted in the highest ever proportions of top awards of 26.2 and 28.9 per cent respectively. The return to exams in 2022 brought it down to 26.3 per cent, but clearly still a long way to go to get it down to 20 -21per cent.
- 2.3. If we consider a lower pass level of 4 in England and C in Wales and Northern Ireland, as in Chart 2.2, we can see the same pattern emerges. In the first year of GCSE 42.5 per cent passed at this level or above. It then rose year by year to reach 69.8 per cent in 2011 at which point Ofqual's comparable outcomes approach began to take effect in England bringing the UK figure down to 67.3 per cent in 2019.

2.4. But with the enforced switch to teacher assessment in 2020 and 2021, Chart 2.2 shows that passes at grade C and above leapt to their highest ever levels reaching 77.1 per cent in 2021. The return of exams, albeit modified, in 2022 brought this down to 73.3 per cent, but as the histogram nicely illustrates it is still the third highest percentage ever.

Chart 2.2: UK Trends in Pass (4/C) GCSE Grades



2.5. Although the percentages tell the story, it is necessary to look at the actual numbers to grasp the magnitude of what happened and what needs to be done to rectify the situation. Chart 2.3 shows the broad-brush figures for the UK.

Chart 2.3: UK Numbers

Year	Grade 7/A and Above	
	Per Cent	Number
2019	20.8	1,195,157
2020	26.2	1,505,438
2021	28.9	1,660,578
2022	26.3	1,511,184
2023	21.0?	1,206,648
Drop 22-23	5.3?	304,536?

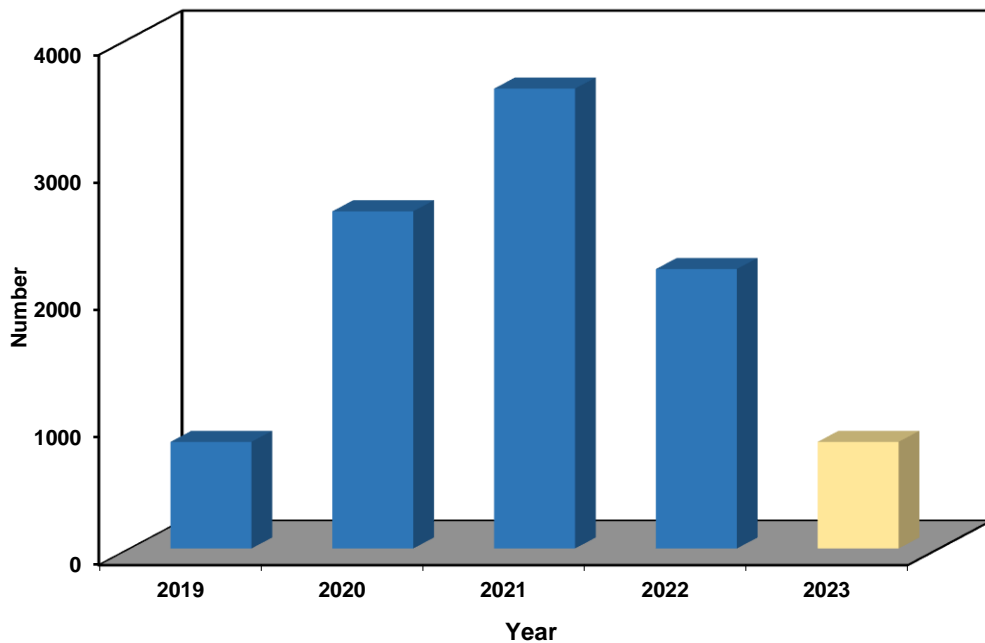
1. Percentages turned to numbers based on exams sat in 2021, 5,745,945. If standards restored to 2019 levels in 2023 there will 5.3 percentage points fewer top grades. In numbers that amounts to over 300,000 top grades having to be squeezed out of the system.

- 2.6. To restore the grade pattern to where it was in the decade leading up to 2019 from the peak perturbation of 2021 requires a drop of 454,000 in top grades. Given that 149,000 were removed in 2022, double that number – 305,000 – will need to come out in 2023 for the objective to be achieved.

3. Top Grades in England

- 3.1. In order to fully grasp the impact of the switch to teacher assessment on top grades in 2020 and 2021 we need to focus on England. This has a different grading scale from Wales and Northern Ireland, and the reforms making GCSEs end-of-course exams-based took place only in England. It is also the only part of the UK which is seeking to restore the standards established in the decade up to 2019 in 2023. Since it accounts for 91-92 per cent of the total entries what happens in England sets the shape of the overall UK results.
- 3.2. Chart 3.1 shows what happened at the very top, those who achieve the top grade of 9 across all the GCSEs they take. In 2019 there were only 837 students achieving at this level when there were exams, but more than quadruple that in 2021 when there was teacher assessment. The return to exams in 2022 reduced the total to 2,193, still much more than double than 2019. To get back to that level will involve a substantial and tangible reduction in 2023.

Chart 3.1: Straight¹ Grade 9s, 16-Year-Olds, England



1. Minimum of seven GCSE entries.

- 3.3. Straight nines is, of course, the very tip of the iceberg, but it clearly demonstrates the massive effect the switch to teacher assessment had on the awarding of top grades.
- 3.4. Although the percentage changes may not look much, it they must be seen in relation to the size of the entry. In 2023, there were 5,543,840 provisional GCSE entries in England. If, as in Chart 3.2, we use this as the basis for turning percentages into numbers, we can see the very large numbers of pupils affected. The 2.9 percentage rise at Grade 9 from 2019 to 2021 amounted to an extra 160,771 of the very highest grade. The return to exams in 2022 led to a reduction of 0.8 of percentage point or 44,351 grade 9 awards.

Chart 3.2: Top Grades¹ in England as Percentages and Numbers

Year	Grade Nine		Grade Eight		Grade Seven	
	Per Cent	Number	Per Cent	Number	Per Cent	Number
2019	4.5	249,473	11.2	620,910	20.6	1,142,031
2020	6.3	349,262	14.4	798,313	25.9	1,435,855
2021	7.4	410,244	16.5	914,734	28.5	1,579,995
2022	6.6	365,893	15.1	837,120	26.0	1,441,398
2023	4.5?	249,473	11.2?	620,910	20.6?	1,142,031
Drop 22-23	2.1	116,420	3.9	216,210	5.4	299,367

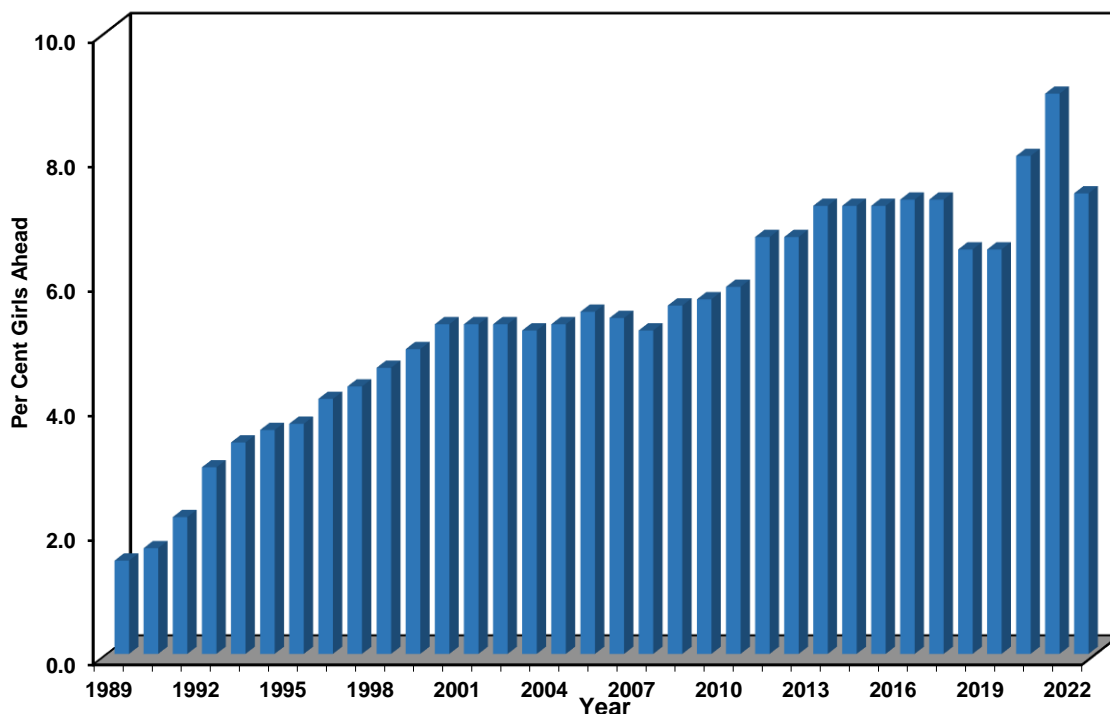
1.Cumulative

- 3.5. If Ofqual does secure a return to 2019 standards in 2023, this will mean 300,000 fewer entries graded seven or above. These are entries, not pupils, but clearly it will be a very big drop which will be felt throughout the system. It is necessary because, the emergency reliance on teacher assessment raised the number of top awards by 437,964, giving many pupils a false picture of their capabilities. The return to exams in 2022 reduced the excess by 138,597 leaving more than double that distance to go.
- 3.6. Results day on the 24th August 2023 will not be as enjoyable as the corresponding days in 2020 and 2021, but the grades will be more accurate and a much better basis for deciding what to do in the future.

4. Girls Favoured by Teacher Assessment

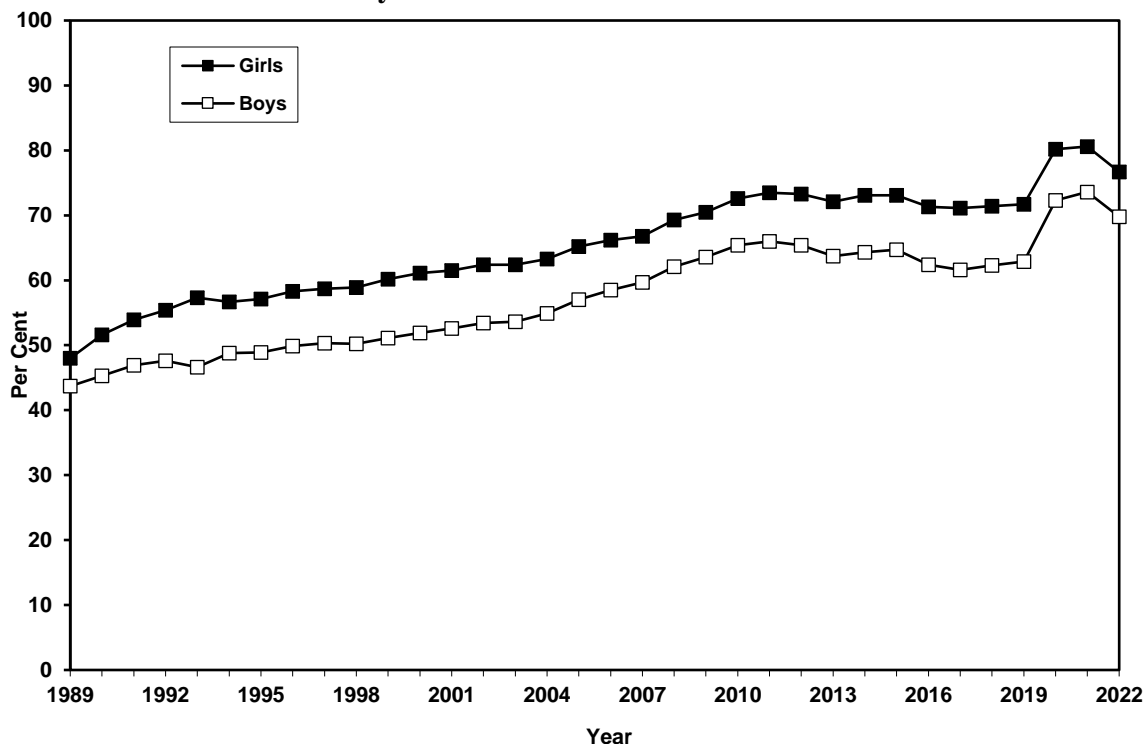
- 4.1. As well as greatly increasing the numbers of top awards, Chart 4.1 shows teacher assessment also resulted in girls gaining their highest ever lead over boys of, respectively, 8.0 percentage points in 2020 and 9.0 pp in 2021. The 2021 figure was an increase 2.5 percentage points on the gap existing when the Government-reformed GCSEs came into operation in 2018 and 2019.

Chart 4.1: Gender Gap in UK at Grade 7/A and Above



- 4.2. Initially, as Chart 4.1 shows, girls were only slightly ahead, but year by year the gap widened rising from 1.5 pp in 1989 to 7.3 pp in 2017. Unlike the O-level examinations which had preceded them, GCSEs were modular with each unit assessed separately and in a variety of ways. Girls evidently adapted to this form of course organisation and assessment more readily than boys. Interestingly, with the return to courses and exams in 2018 and 2019 the gap narrowed somewhat.
- 4.3. It is not only in top grades that girls have outperformed boys. As Chart 4.2 shows, they have been more likely to pass at Grade 4/C and above from the outset, with a steady increase year by year until they were brought under control in England in 2011 by Ofqual applying comparable outcomes which kept the grade pattern consistent allowing for differences in the intakes. The switch to teacher assessment derailed that new-found stability and there were steep rises in 2020 and 2021 with drop back with the resumption of exams in 2022.

Chart 4.2: Girls and Boys GCSE Grades 4/C and Above



Top Grades in England

- 4.4. If we focus on the top grades in England, we find that girls are dominant here also. Of the 31 GCSE subject categories, boys were ahead at grade 7 and above in only five in 2019 - economics, mathematics, physics, statistics, other sciences. Girls were in the lead, often by substantial margins, in the other 26. During the two years of teacher assessment, they drew even further ahead, overtaking boys in economics and maths, leaving boys with the lead in only three of the 31 subject areas.
- 4.5. The indications in the data that girls have tended to do better under teacher assessment are borne out by changes in the gender gap from 2019 to 2022 shown in Chart 4.3.

Chart 4.3: Gender Gap at Grades 9-7 in England

Grade	2019		2021		2022	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Nine	3.7	5.2	5.9	8.9	5.4	7.9
Eight	9.4	13.1	13.5	19.5	12.7	17.6
Seven	17.5	23.7	24.1	32.9	22.4	29.6
Gap 7-9	6.2pp		8.8pp		7.2 pp	

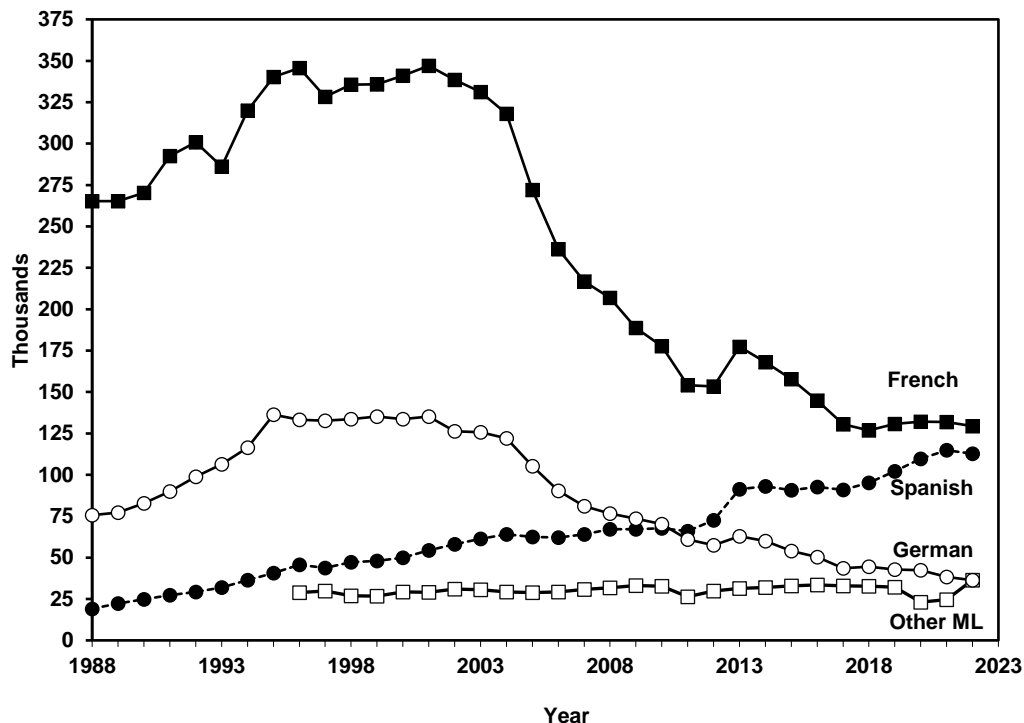
- 4.6. The gap widens from the exams of 2019 to the teacher assessment of 2021 falling with the return to exams in 2022. In each case, it was the girls’ performance that was most affected by the change in assessment method, up by 9.2 pp in 2021 compared to boys’ 6.6 pp, and down by 3.3 pp in 2022 compared to the boys’ 1.6 pp.

- 4.7. Girls have come to dominate education, not only at GCSE, but also at A-level and in degrees, both in terms of numbers and performance. Whereas the genders were about equal at O-level, girls have always done better, on average, than boys at GCSE. At A-level, while boys led at A* almost from its introduction in 2010, with the help of teacher assessment girls have overtaken them there also.
- 4.8. Not so long ago, boys comprised about three-fifths of university students, but now this ratio has been reversed. Boys also used to gain more firsts, but girls have now gone in front in many subjects. In part, this is associated with changes to course structures and assessment practices. Many degrees have become modular and rely on course work assessment, which seems to suit girls more. It has also led to an extraordinary growth in ‘firsts’. It seems that girls are more aware of the value of education and apply themselves more diligently to the hard work involved.
- 4.9. With the return to exams and the desire to restore standards, the gap in GCSE performance might be expected to fall. But that will depend on how strongly the return to the normality of the decade up to 2019 is pursued. It will come as a huge shock to those whose expectations have been shaped by the giveaway years, and Senior Examiners may wish to ameliorate the impact. But the 2023 A-level results strongly suggest that Ofqual will restore 2019 standards.
- 4.10. Although the focus is on teacher assessment and the changes it has wrought, there is the underlying problem of the underperformance of boys in education. This is of national importance, because we are not developing the talents of half the population as fully as we could. This can only lead to a decline in the nation’s economic competitiveness and ultimately loss of its standing in the world.
- 4.11. Last year, I called for a high-level inquiry into the underperformance of boys, but was met with the complacent view that since men usually came out on top anyway what’s to worry about. We seem to be content for the hard evidence of the exam results to be over-ridden by the narratives fashionable at the time.

5. The Collapse of Foreign Language Studies

- 5.1. The most striking trend in GCSE entries has been the freefall of French and German when the exams were made optional by the Blair government in 2004. Chart 5.1 based on UK data shows that French has fallen from 318,000 entries in 1996 to just 132,000 in 2021, while German has dropped from 122,000 to 44,000. When left to choose it seems that very few young people want to learn these languages.

Chart 5.1: Trends in Entries to Modern Languages



- 5.2. Even Spanish declined in 2022 in spite of having grown each year from 19,000 in 1988 to 115,000 in 2021. It has overtaken German and running French close. Quite why there should have been this surge in popularity in Spanish is unclear, but it may have something to do with the increasing popularity of Spanish-speaking countries as holiday destinations. This is plausible because Spanish, like English, is one of the four most frequently spoken languages in the world (the other two are Mandarin and Hindi), and as with the British, Spanish-speaking people feel less need to learn other languages. A more prosaic explanation is that Spanish is seen as easier than French or German.
- 5.3. There are many other foreign languages taught in our schools which are grouped together in the statistics as 'other modern languages'. The most popular in 2022 were Polish (6,003), Chinese (5,504) Arabic (4,931) and Italian (4,897). They are frequently taken by native speakers as an easy way to a language GCSE, but native speakers of Chinese can make it difficult for interested British students to do well in the subject.

- 5.4. Ofqual, the regulator for England, published provisional 2023 GCSE entries by subject in June, and these show a 3.6 per cent increase overall reflecting the increase in the number of 16-year-olds. Chart 5.2 shows that German has continued to plummet and while entries in French were maintained they did not keep pace with the rising number of pupils. Spanish entries did match this and ‘other modern languages’ recovered strongly from previous sharp falls.

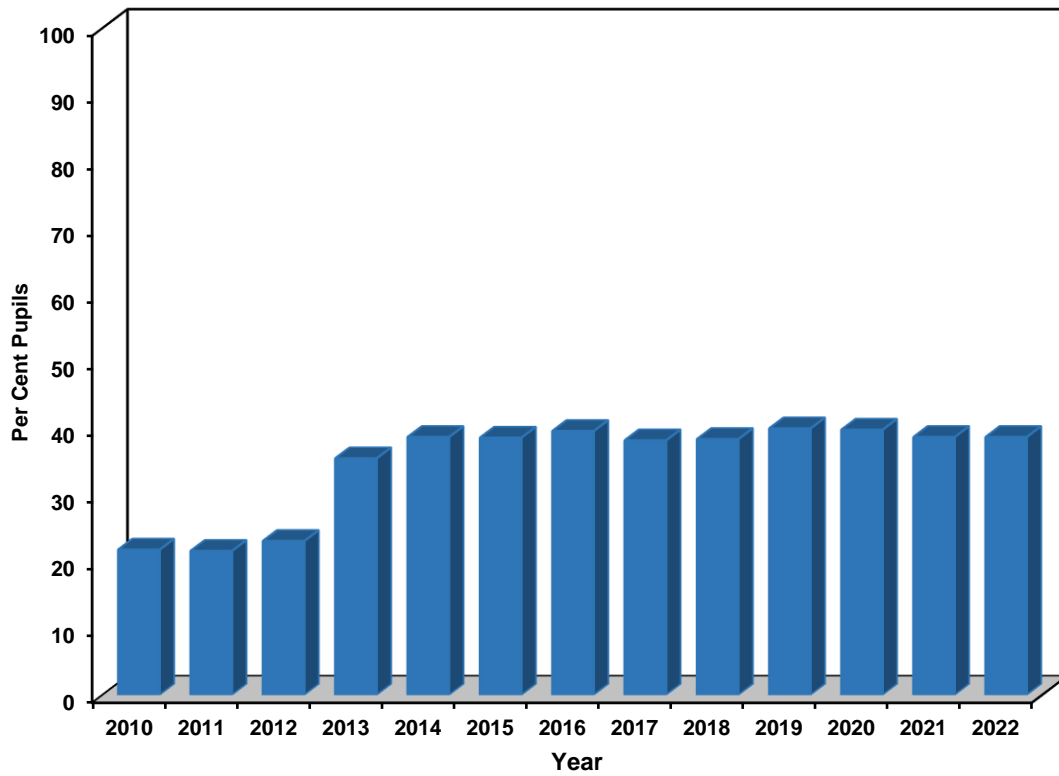
Chart 5.2: Provisional Language Entries 2022-23

Subjects	2022	2023	% Change
French	126,185	126,560	0.3
Spanish	116,355	121,670	4.6
German	36,000	33,945	-5.7
Other Modern Languages	36,310	39,700	8.1
Ancient Languages	11,510	11,290	-1.9
Total	326,360	332,735	2.0

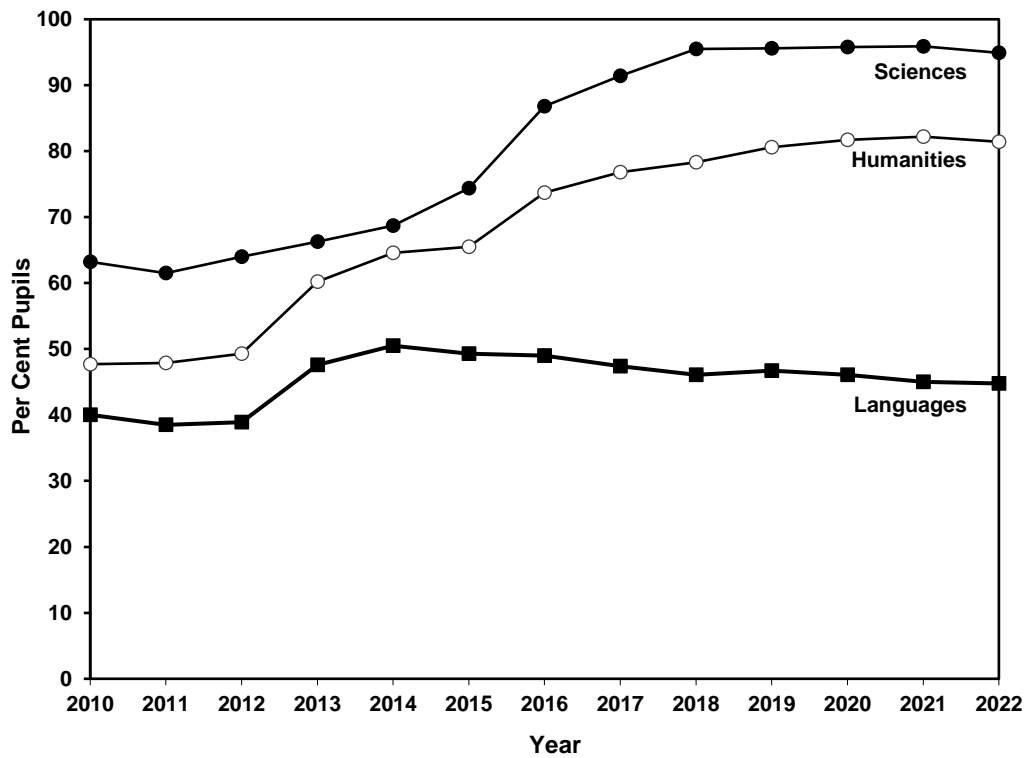
1. Source: Ofqual (2023). Provisional entries for GCSE, AS and A-level: summer 2023 exam series. Published 1 June 2023.

- 5.5. The reluctance of British young people to engage with other languages is a concern in itself, but it has put the attempt of the Government to establish a core Key Stage 4 curriculum of five subjects, the British Baccalaureate (EBacc), at considerable risk.
- 5.6. When Nick Gibb became Schools Minister in the Coalition Government in 2010, he was very concerned at the way key stage 4 pupils were spreading themselves too thinly across a wide range of GCSEs. In order to establish a central core, he set out to incentivise schools and pupils to give priority to those subjects he regarded as the most fundamental. He settled on five subject areas – English, maths, science, humanities, and languages - and, at first, proposed that pupils passing a recognised GCSE in each of these categories should receive a special certificate called the English Baccalaureate.
- 5.7. In the event, this was deemed not feasible, so EBacc was turned into an accountability measure, which meant schools in England (education is a devolved area) have to report annually on the number of their pupils taking the specified subjects and how well they had done. In order to further nudge schools into adopting it, the Department of Education set targets of 75 per cent of pupils studying the full EBacc by 2022 and 90 per cent by 2025.
- 5.8. But the percentage studying for the full EBacc in state-funded schools in England fell far short of target in 2022 reaching only 38.7 per cent. In fact, although the EBacc gave an initial boost to the study of the core subjects, as Chart 5.3 shows, it has been more or less stuck at the present level since 2013. The reason, as Chart 5.4 makes clear, is the poor take-up of modern or ancient foreign languages. Students are required to take English and maths, and indeed repeat them if they fail, 94.9 per cent met the science requirement in 2022, and 81.4 per cent that for humanities, but only 44.8 per cent that for a language.

Chart 5.3: Per Cent of Pupils Taking Five EBacc Subjects¹



5.4: Trends in Entries to 'EBacc' Subjects¹



1. Source for both Chart 5.3 and 5.4 Gov.uk education statistics: Key Stage 4 Performance Academic Year 2021/22, Updated 1 February 2023.

- 5.9. There are many possible reasons why the British are not interested in learning other people's languages. It could be English has become de facto the world's language. It is true that there are more Mandarin and Hindi speakers, but they are mainly confined to the two most populous countries. English is increasingly becoming everyone's second language if not their first. The British, therefore, may feel there is no need to learn other languages.
- 5.10. It could be that we do not start learning languages at an earlier enough age for them to be acquired relatively easily, although primary schools are increasingly making the effort to teach a foreign language in key stage 2. But even this may be too late to start. For a long time, the Government was guided by some early research for the National Foundation for Educational Research which apparently showed no difference in the success of language learning whether it was started in the primary or secondary school, which is certainly not the experience of other countries.
- 5.11. Or pragmatically it could be that there are not enough foreign language teachers. But they would be a ready supply abroad.
- 5.12. If the government values learning languages, then it should set up an inquiry to clarify why it is not happening as was hoped. It may have to face the fact that any attempt to boost language learning may be met with the seemingly deep-seated resistance to doing so.
- 5.13. Without radical change, the percentage achieving EBacc will never increase much beyond where it is now. The idea of establishing this particular set of core subjects appears to be beyond its sell-by-date. It has already been superseded by another accountability measure, this time based on eight subjects, Attainment 8/Progress 8, as its name suggests, allows for a wider range of subjects and crucially does not depend on taking a language. I suspect that the EBacc will be left to quietly fade away.

6. Performance in English and Maths

- 6.1. English and maths are the cornerstone of British education. They are compulsory subjects to be studied to the age of 16 and pupils failing to achieve at least a grade 4 are required to re-take them until the age of 18. The current prime minister, Rishi Sunak, believes maths is so important that he has expressed a desire for it to be made compulsory to the age of 18.
- 6.2. It is very disappointing, therefore, to see how poorly candidates perform in the GCSE examinations. In the annual August figures published by the Joint Council for Qualifications the two subjects regularly return some of the lowest results. Chart 6.1 gives the percentage of A-grade equivalents in comparison with selected other subjects.

Chart 6.1: English and Maths Results

GCSE Subject	%7/A	
	2019	2022
English	14.0	20.4
Mathematics	16.1	20.1
Physics	44.0	50.6
Chemistry	44.1	50.0
Additional Maths	57.9	67.4
Other Modern Languages	65.1	71.7
Classical Subjects	63.8	69.3
All Subjects	20.8	26.3

Source: JCQ Full Course GCSE Results (All UK Candidates).

- 6.3. The percentage of top grades awarded varies widely across the subjects. The top three in 2019 were ‘classical subjects’, ‘other modern languages’ and ‘additional maths’. Each is, in its own way, a special case. ‘Classical subjects’ are mainly taught in independent schools and grammar schools, ‘other modern languages’ are mainly taken by native speakers, and ‘additional maths’ is taken by those with a talent for maths.
- 6.4. Nevertheless, the gulf is huge. While English and maths languish among the bottom five, there are subjects in which pupils are achieving three or four times as many top grades. The figures raise in stark form whether tuition in these central subjects is good as it could be.
- 6.5. Some of the reasons for the gulf are structural and have nothing to do with the quality of tuition. English and maths are taken by the whole cohort with its wide range of ability, while the top performing subjects are actively chosen by pupils with a talent and an interest for them.
- 6.6. Another is the policy that pupils who fail English and/or maths must retake them up to the age of 18 if they wish to remain in school or college. If they do really badly there are alternatives to the GCSE, but for most retakes are a requirement.

The retakes depress the overall scores as Charts 6.2 and 6.3 show for maths and English respectively.

Chart 6.2: Entries and Grades by Age in Maths, UK, 2019 and 2022

Age	2019			2022		
	% Entries	7/A	4/C	% Entries	7/A	4/C
15 & Under	0.9	43.5	76.5	0.9	47.4	81.8
16	75.9	20.2	70.8	80.7	23.9	74.6
17 & Over	23.2	1.6	22.3	18.4	2.1	22.0
Total	100.0	16.1	56.6	100.0	20.1	65.0

Chart 6.3: Entries and Grades by Age in English, UK, 2019 and 2022

Age	2019			2021		
	% Entries	7/A	4/C	% Entries	7/A	4/C
15 & Under	1.2	13.3	76.5	0.9	16.2	67.3
16	77.5	17.3	70.2	84.2	23.5	77.2
17 & Over	21.3	1.8	31.9	15.0	3.1	31.3
Total	100.0	14.0	62.0	100.0	20.4	70.2

- 6.7. What is striking in Charts 6.2 and 6.3 is how few of those aged 17 and over, comprising about a fifth of the entrants and presumably including many resits actually pass second or third time around. In maths, in 2022, it is only 22 per cent and in English 31.3 per cent.
- 6.8. It must be soul destroying to continually have to re-take exams that you have failed in, perhaps several times, and to be denied entry to apprenticeships and much else if you cannot pass them. Surely, there is an urgent need for a policy rethink. Instead of just assuming that the GCSEs embody the minimum understanding that is essential, there should be a careful analysis of what is actually required in terms of the use of words and numbers to lead a full life.
- 6.9. Instead of a theoretical approach we need a pragmatic one which sets minimum educational requirements in line with what people actually need. Politicians should beware of projecting on to others the study of what has been good for them, as with the present prime minister, Rishi Sunak, and compulsory maths to age 18.

7. Rise of Religious Studies

- 7.1 At a time when church attendance is declining and the common view is that Britain is becoming more secular, it is intriguing that entries for the GCSE in religious studies have doubled since 2002, from 122,600 to reach 243,300 in 2022. It is now the seventh most frequently taken.

Chart 7.1: Top Ten UK GCSE Entries¹

2002		2012		2022	
Subject	N ²	Subject	N ²	Subject	N ²
Maths	709.0	Maths	675.8	Maths	782.8
English	667.4	English	669.5	English	756.5
Double Science	551.9	Science	552.5	English Literature	615.3
English Literature	543.5	English Literature	468.2	Combined Science	452.0
Design & Technology	433.6	Additional Science	290.0	History	292.2
French	338.5	Design & Technology	240.7	Geography	289.4
Geography	240.3	Religious Studies	239.1	Religious Studies	243.9
History	217.6	History	223.0	Art & Design	205.7
Humanities	209.3	Geography	187.0	Biology	186.4
Art	204.8	Art & Design	178.9	Chemistry	177.9

1. Joint Council for Qualifications.

2. In thousands.

- 7.2 This has occurred against a largely stable background of six of the top ten subjects – maths, English, English literature, geography, history and art & design – being ever present. The other changes reflect the decline of languages as was discussed in the previous chapter, design and technology ceasing to be compulsory at key stage 4, and the shifting balance between science as an integrated subject and separate sciences that will be addressed in the next chapter. All of these changes were driven by shifts in policy except for languages where policy came up against the stubborn resistance of the populace to taking them.
- 7.3 But then there is religious studies which seems to have grown of its own accord. Ofqual's provision entries for 2023 show a further rise to 245,365.
- 7.4 Religious studies has featured in no recent policy decisions and there have been no attempts to nudge an increase in take up. It is not part of the national curriculum, and although it has been compulsory for schools to provide religious education since the 1944 Education Act it is not compulsory for pupils to take the classes.
- 7.5 Quite how do we account for the GCSEs spontaneous growth? A number of thoughts come to mind, but I have no strong evidence.
- 7.6 It could just be that the classes are there, and the exam is there, so why not take it to clock up another GCSE? Or it could be pragmatic. Some of the best state secondary schools are faith-based, and even non-religious parents compete to get

their children into them. As faith schools they will naturally be promoting religious studies.

- 7.7 Or it could increasingly be seen as way to the heart of human understanding. As Britain becomes more and more a multi-faith society, the old certainties disappear and fundamental questions are raised. Perhaps young people are attracted to religious studies as a possible way towards finding answers.
- 7.8 A quick win, a pragmatic move or a search for fundamental understanding? I do not know. But it is a very interesting and unnoticed phenomenon which should be investigated.

8. Re-Emergence of the Separate Sciences

- 8.1 The changing pattern of the most frequently taken GCSEs shown in Chart 8.1 (which repeats Chart 7.1) underlines the re-emergence of the separate sciences at key stage 4. Absent from the 2002 and 2012 lists where science as integrated study is dominant, biology and chemistry occupy places nine and ten in 2022, with physics not far behind in eleventh spot with 177,100 entrants.

Chart 8.1: Top Ten UK GCSE Entries¹

2002		2012		2022	
Subject	N ²	Subject	N ²	Subject	N ²
Maths	709.0	Maths	675.8	Maths	782.8
English	667.4	English	669.5	English	756.5
Double Science	551.9	Science	552.5	English Literature	615.3
English Literature	543.5	English Literature	468.2	Combined Science	452.0
Design & Technology	433.6	Additional Science	290.0	History	292.2
French	338.5	Design & Technology	240.7	Geography	289.4
Geography	240.3	Religious Studies	239.1	Religious Studies	243.3
History	217.6	History	223.0	Art & Design	205.7
Humanities	209.3	Geography	187.0	Biology	186.4
Art	204.8	Art & Design	178.9	Chemistry	177.9

3. Joint Council for Qualifications.

4. In thousands.

- 8.2 The growth of the separate sciences has given rise to recent talk about them pushing out the humanities as the expectations of education become more instrumental. But far from being a cuckoo in the nest, the sciences have been slowly recovering from policies which almost saw them disappear as subjects in pre-16 education.
- 8.3 In 1988, 'science' was the subject settled on for inclusion in the national curriculum. It was envisaged that the GCSEs would be double and single awards in science, and that biology, chemistry and physics GCSEs would be phased out. And they would have been if it were not for the independent schools. Free of the national curriculum, they put up fierce resistance to the dropping of biology, chemistry and physics awards and won. For a decade or more the separate science exams were largely confined to the independent sector and top state schools.
- 8.4 It was only when the disastrous impact on entries to A-level physics in particular, and the consequences for degree admissions, was fully grasped by politicians that the government of the day responded. In 2004, Gordon Brown, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, published the Science and Innovation Investment Framework 2004-14. This created incentives for state schools to return to teaching biology, chemistry and physics as separate subjects at GCSE.

Chart 8.2: UK Science Entries in 1988 and 2022

Subject	1988	2022	%Change ¹ 1988-2022
Biology	304,675	186,445	-38.8
Chemistry	217,638	177,925	-18.3
Physics	254,107	177,137	-30.3

1. The actual decreases are even greater because 1988 figures are for England and Wales only, whereas 2022 includes Northern Ireland as well.

8.5 That policy has set the separate science on the path to recovery. But, as Chart 8.2 shows, there is still some way to go before entries approach the levels they were at in 1988, still down by nearly 40 per cent in biology, 30 per cent in physics and just under 20 per cent in chemistry.

8.6 Nevertheless, the swing back to the separate sciences continues. The overall increase in the provisional entry figures of 3.6 per cent from 2022 to 2023 is in line with the increase in the size of the cohort. The growth of physics and chemistry, as Chart 8.3 shows, slightly exceeds this, but combined science does not keep pace.

Chart 8.3: Provisional Science Entries in England 2022-23

Subjects	2022	2023	% Change
Combined Science	427,225	440,963	3.2
Biology	174,605	180,125	3.2
Chemistry	167,190	173,530	3.8
Physics	166,550	172,725	3.7
Other Sciences ²	2,320	2,465	6.4

1. Source: Ofqual (2023). Provisional entries for GCSE, AS and A-level: summer 2023 exam series. Published 1 June 2023.

2. Geology and astronomy.

8.7 Although all pupils are required to study science in key stage 4, either as a single science, double science or the triple separate sciences, and expected to take an appropriate GCSE, the performance in the science and double science awards shown in Chart 8.4 raises doubts about the platform they provide for science A-levels.

Chart 8.4: Top Grades in Science GCSEs

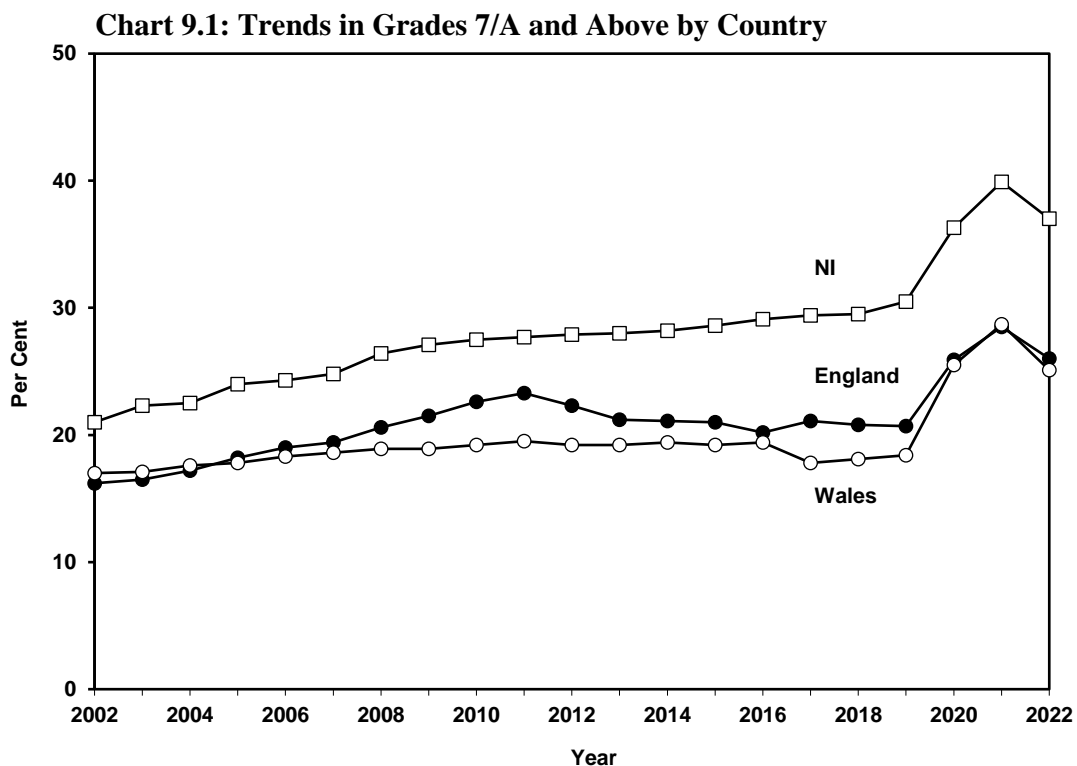
GCSE Subject	%7/A	
	2019	2022
Science Single Award	5.6	8.5
Science Double Award	7.8	10.7
Biology	42.4	50.0
Physics	44.0	50.6
Chemistry	44.1	50.0
All Subjects	20.8	26.3

Source: JCQ Full Course GCSE Results (All UK Candidates).

- 8.8 In both 2019 and 2020 the single award science and the double award science were the bottom two of the 48 subjects in the percentage of top grades awarded. In contrast, the separate sciences were among the high-flyers with between five and eight times as many top awards. The reason is that in many schools selection by ability and interest had taken place with the triple sciences offered to only the top sets.
- 8.9 The single science award is recognised as a route for pupils whose abilities and interests lie elsewhere so the miniscule percentage of top awards is not surprising, but the poor performance in the double award is concerning. It indicates that the base for science A-levels is not as strong as might be supposed. Again, this is another issue ripe for investigation.

9. England, Wales and Northern Ireland

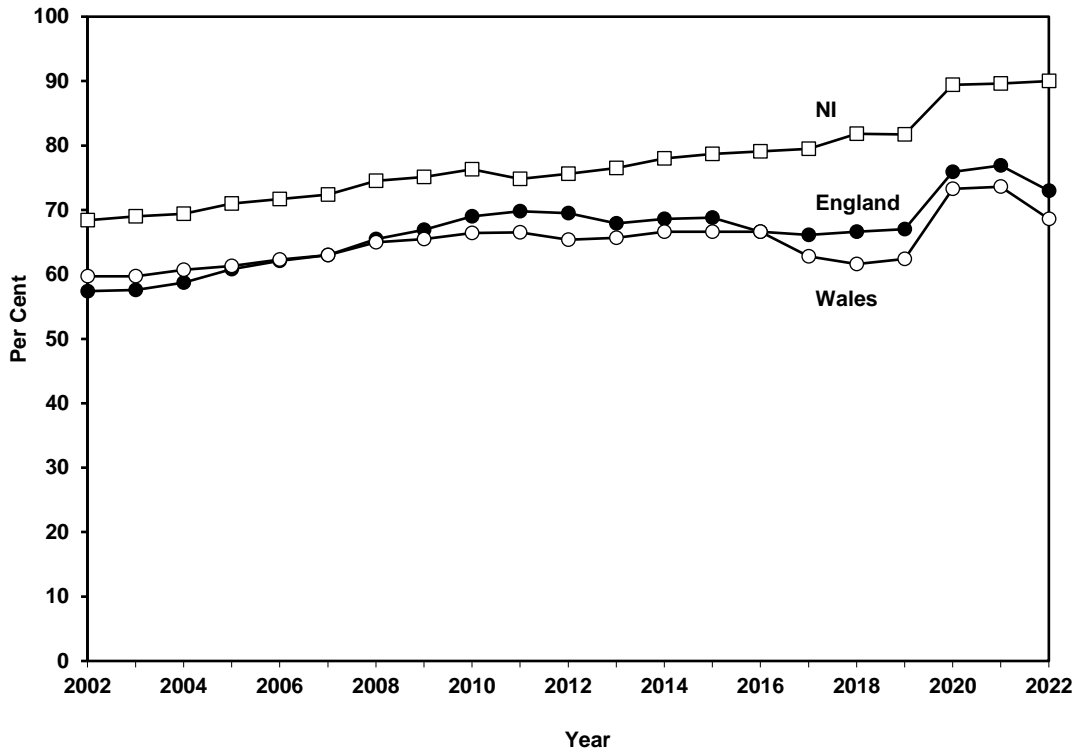
- 9.1 Education is a devolved power and GCSEs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are controlled by different administrations, regulators and exam boards. Since the devolution they have grown increasing apart as described in paragraphs A3-A5 of the Appendix.
- 9.2 The regulatory bodies do co-operate, however, to try to ensure comparable standards, but they do have different grading systems. On results day in August the outcomes are brought together as ‘top grades’ and ‘pass grades’. It is the UK results that receive the most attention on publication day, but for a more detailed analysis the nine-point scale in England is more useful. In 2022, 91.7% of the entries came from England, compared with 5.5% from Wales and 2.9% from Northern Ireland.
- 9.3 Chart 9.1 shows that top grades (7/A) rose appreciably in all three countries when, in 2020 and 2021, they were decided by teacher assessment. Wales benefitted the most and from being behind in 2019, it caught up in 2020 and maintained parity in 2021. This suggests that teachers in Wales were the most generous in their assessments. With the return to exams in 2022 top grades dropped in all three countries, but most in Wales.



- 9.4 A similar pattern of results is found in Chart 9.2 for the passing grades of 4/C and above, with Northern Ireland out in front by some distance, and Wales and England close together. Again, there was major impact from teacher assessment, with the biggest gains being made in 2020, but while Northern Ireland and Wales tended to

level off at this point, England went up further in 2021. On the return to exams in 2022 there were drops in England and Wales, but not at the pass level in Northern Ireland.

Chart 9.2: Trends in Grades 4/C and Above by Country



9.5 The exam success of Northern Ireland’s children does not receive the attention or credit that it deserves. This may not be unconnected with the fact that it has a grammar school system. But the intriguing question is: why is Northern Ireland so far ahead of England in GCSE results, and not just in these, but also at A-level and in the international comparisons?

10. Predictions

- 10.1 The 2023 A-level grades point strongly to Ofqual carrying through its two-year plan that GCSEs in England should return to pre-pandemic standards this year. This further distances England's grades from those awarded in Wales and Northern Ireland which are waiting until next year to restore their grade patterns. As the Joint Council for Qualifications tends to release UK-wide data all the results will be bundled up together. Since England accounts for nearly 92 per cent of the entries it will determine the overall pattern, but the inclusion of data from Wales and Northern Ireland with their different timetables means that the UK results will not be reduced all the way down to what they were in 2019.
- 10.2 The restoration of the 2019 grade pattern in England will result in another record drop in top GCSE grades as the profligacy of teacher assessment is reversed. Although the changes as percentages may not look much, given the huge number of entries, they amount to a substantial drop of some 300,000 top grades.
- 10.3 This will come as a shock to the pupils and their parents, who may find the grades that emerge hard to accept given what those in the classes above them had received in the preceding three years. There was never going to be a pain-free time to take out the unwarranted top grades. Much better you would think to get it over with, rather than letting it drag on. The grades, although now less flattering, will provide a much firmer basis for taking decisions about the future.

Gender

- 10.4 The evidence from the years when the grades were decided by teachers is that this form of assessment tends to favour girls. With the return to fully fledged exams, we can expect the gap to narrow. But the girls will remain far ahead as they have been almost from the inception of the GCSE. The underperformance of boys in school examinations tends to be accepted, but it should be treated as a national concern since it indicates that boys are not developing their full potential.

Modern Foreign Languages

- 10.5 The study of modern foreign languages seems destined to decline further. The provisional entries for England in 2023 show another sharp drop in German and French falling well short of the 3.6 increase in entries driven mainly by a bigger 16-year-old population. There is a small increase in Spanish. But 'other modern languages', such as Polish, Chinese, Arabic, Italian which are taken by small numbers of mainly native speakers, does recover from its recent post-Brexit dip.
- 10.6 Two factors seem likely to lie behind the reluctance of the British to engage. First, many young people do not see the point when most of the rest of the world seems content to learn English. Secondly, for a long time Britain laboured under the false assumption that you can just as easily begin to learn other languages in secondary school as at an early age, whereas the evidence from other countries shows you need to start much earlier.

EBacc

- 10.7 Another prediction is that the EBacc is finished and will quietly be allowed to fade away.
- 10.8 The Government has attempted to nudge schools towards a core curriculum of five subjects – English, maths, science, a humanity, and a foreign language. It was originally intended to be marked by a special certificate called the English Baccalaureate, but when this proved not to be possible it became instead a measure by which schools are held to account. Targets were set of 75 per cent of pupils to be taking the EBacc combination by 2022 and 90 per cent by 2025.
- 10.9 But, in 2022, only 38.7 per cent qualified and the figure had been stuck at this level for some time. The immovable stumbling block is the foreign language element. Rather than incentivising the study of foreign languages, the EBacc has been scuppered by the requirement. Although still on the books, the EBacc has been superseded as an accountability measure by Attainment 8 which as the name suggests consists of eight subjects, but crucially the specification does not insist upon a foreign language.

English and Maths

- 10.10 I predict that soon the requirement to re-take English and maths GCSEs to the age of 18 should they be failed will be reviewed.
- 10.11 The grades in English and maths are among the lowest for all 48 GCSE subjects. In part, this is because they are taken by the whole cohort with its wide range of abilities, whereas most subjects are chosen by the pupils.
- 10.12 The results are also depressed by the rule that to remain in school or at college to the age of 18 you must continue to retake English and maths if you should fail. The pass rates for re-take students are staggeringly low. In 2022, it was only 22.0 per cent in maths and 31.3 per cent in English.
- 10.13 What good does this do? Surely there is the need for an urgent policy rethink starting from the needs of the young people themselves, rather than an idealized picture of what could be. Politicians should beware of projecting on to all pupils, the learning that has been important to them personally as seems to be the case with the present prime minister wanting maths to become compulsory to age 18.

Religious Studies

- 10.14 Not a prediction, but an intriguing observation.
- 10.15 At a time when Britain is becoming more secular, it is curious that the religious studies GCSE is becoming more popular. In 2022, it was the seventh most frequently taken after maths, English, English literature, combined science, history and geography. It is not part of the national curriculum, but the 1944 Education Act requires schools to provide it, though not pupils to take it.
- 10.16 Its popularity could be because the lessons are there, and the exam is there, and it looks like an easy win. Or it could be a consequence of the competition to get into the highly successful faith schools and the importance those schools attach to

religious studies. Or it could be that pupils really do see it as an opportunity to grapple with life's fundamental questions.

- 10.17 The growth of religious studies GCSE has happened beneath the radar and has not been promoted by any policy or requirement. The increase has not been followed through at A-level. But its popularity at GCSE deserves a closer look.

Separate Sciences

- 10.18 I predict that as concern for the take up of STEM subjects grows, there will be a drive to increase the availability of the separate science GCSEs.
- 10.19 The results obtained in the combined science awards are shockingly poor. The single science comes last of all 48 subjects for the number of top grades awarded. Perhaps this is understandable because it is recognised as a course for those who have decided that they do not want to take science further.
- 10.20 But, alarmingly, the double award is next to last, just above the single award. To what extent does it, can it, provide a platform for studying science A-levels. Or is that left mainly to the triple package of biology, chemistry and physics. If so, access to science A-levels is being severely limited.
- 10.21 It calls for an investigation and a new policy.

Devolved Powers

- 10.22 I predict that under separate administrations GCSEs have grown so far apart that it will soon be impossible for them to bear the same name.
- 10.23 Education is a devolved power. The DfE's remit runs to England, while Wales and Northern Ireland as well as Scotland, have their own administrations, regulators, and exam boards. They have different contents, different forms of assessment and different grading scales. The different administrations follow different policies so that while England is aiming to return to pre-pandemic standards in 2023, Wales and Northern Ireland are leaving it to 2024.
- 10.24 Further details of the differences are given in paragraphs A3 to A5 of the Appendix. If they are all still to be called GCSEs, the country in which they are awarded should be prominently displayed so that those using them know what they are dealing with. But it would be better if they were renamed so that they are no longer mistaken for the same thing.

Appendix: How GCSEs Came To Be As They Are

A.1. The content, assessment and use of GCSEs have undergone considerable change since their introduction in 1988. Most recently, the Conservatives, with Michael Gove leading on education, came to power in 2010 with well-formed plans for the radical reform of GCSEs and A-levels. They were to become once more two-year courses with externally set and marked examinations at the end.

Chart A.1: Timetable for Introduction of Reformed GCSEs

2017		2018		2019	
Subject	% Exam	Subject	% Exam	Subject	% Exam
English Lang	100.0	Art & Design	100.0	Ancient History	100.0
English Lit	100.0	Biology*	100.0	Astronomy	100.0
Maths*	100.0	Chemistry*	100.0	Business	100.0
		Citizenship Stud	100.0	Classical Civil	100.0
		Classical Greek	100.0	D &T	50.0
		Comb Science*	100.0	Economics	100.0
		Computer Science	80.0	Electronics	80.0
		Dance	40.0	Engineering	60.0
		Drama	40.0	Film Studies	70.0
		Food Prep & Nut	50.0	Geology	100.0
		French*	75.0	Media Studies	70.0
		Geography	100.0	MFL* ¹	75.0
		German*	75.0	Psychology	100.0
		History	100.0	Sociology	100.0
		Latin	100.0	Statistics*	100.0
		Music	40.0		
		PE	60.0		
		Physics*	100.0		
		Religious Studies	100.0		
		Spanish*	75.0		
				2020	
				Subject	% Exam
				Biblical Hebrew	100.0
				MFL* ²	75.0

*Tiered exam, with higher tier graded 9-4 and a foundation tier graded 5-1.

1. Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Italian, Japanese, Modern Greek, Modern Hebrew, Panjabi, Polish, Russian, Urdu.

2. Gujarati, Persian, Portuguese, Turkish.

Reform of GCSEs

A.2. Michael Gove's GCSE revolution was completed in 2019 save for Biblical Hebrew and four foreign languages. Chart A.1 shows the sequence in which the reformed GCSEs were introduced. First English and maths in 2017, then the EBacc subjects in 2018, before most of the rest came on stream in 2019. Then Covid struck. The exams could not be held in 2020 or 2021 so the grades were left to the teachers. There were exams in 2022, but in modified form to take account of the disruption suffered during the pandemic. Awarding grades by teacher assessment took them far from the standards that had been the basis of the reforms. In 2022 Ofqual announced that the value of the award would be restored in 2023. And the immediate issue is how successful it will be.

Countries of UK Go Their Own Ways

- A.3. England, Wales and Northern Ireland have their own administrations, regulatory bodies and exam boards, and since responsibility for education was devolved in 1999 GCSEs have grown increasingly apart. So much so that it is reasonable to question whether they should bear the same name since this can only be confusing to the people using them.
- A.4. The main differences between the reformed GCSEs in the three countries are:
- Different grading scales: 9-1 in England; A*-G in Wales; and A*-G in Northern Ireland with the insertion of a C* grade.
 - In Northern Ireland's GCSEs, the new C* grade will be aligned with grade 5 in England, and its A* with England's grade 9.
 - Different subjects are offered and the content requirements of subjects with the same name differ.
 - Not all subjects are offered by the exam boards of each country. Ancient history is offered by the English boards only. The NI board is alone in offering 'agriculture and land use'. Applied science (single and double awards) is offered only by the Welsh board.
 - In England, assessment will be mainly by examination at the end of courses; in Wales and NI there will be a mixture of modular and linear courses depending on the subject.
 - Re-sits in England involve re-taking the whole examination (although continuous assessment marks may be used again); for modular courses in Wales and NI each unit can be re-taken but only once.
- A.5. The differences are such that the results are only truly comparable at the 7/A and 4/C levels. The issue of over-generous top grades needs closer scrutiny than these broad levels permit, so the analysis has to focus on England which typically contributes 91-92 per cent of GCSE entries.

England

- A.6. In England the main changes brought about by the reforms were:
- more demanding content;
 - designed for a two-year course of study;
 - examinations at end of the course;
 - assessment other than by examination allowed only where necessary to reflect the nature of a particular subject, for example, in art and design, dance, drama, music and physical education;
 - new grading scale running from 9 (top) to 1, with U as the ultimate fail grade;

- combined science which is a double award can have 17 outcomes ranging from 9-9, 9-8 to 1-1;
- re-sits are available in November for English and maths only, the whole examination having to be retaken.

Accountability

A.7. In England GCSE results are as important to schools as to the pupils. The schools are judged on the pupils' performance. If the results fall below expectations, there could be serious consequences for the school. Not surprisingly, the schools direct the pupils' energies to achieving the best scores possible on whatever the main accountability measure happens to be. These can, therefore, have a considerable bearing on entries and the results to emerge.

English Baccalaureate

A.8. In order to promote breadth, the government requires schools to report on how many of their Key Stage 4 pupils are taking a combination of GCSEs which is called the English Baccalaureate. This consists of English, maths, two sciences, history or geography, and a language. It was the government's ambition that, by 2022 75 per cent of schools would reach this level and by 2025 90 per cent would be reached.

A.9. From 2018 onwards pupils' performance has been turned into a score based on the average of the points scored in the five subject areas. Pupil's scores are averaged to get the school's score. Both English language and English literature must be taken to count towards the English score. In science, there are two options: the double-award combined science; or three subjects from biology, chemistry, computer science and physics.

Progress 8 and Attainment 8

A.10. Since 2016, the EBacc has been supplanted as the main accountability measure by Attainment 8 and Progress 8. In essence, they are the EBacc subjects, with a language no longer compulsory, plus three other subjects. There are three groups from which the subjects are to be chosen to contribute to Attainment 8/Progress 8:

- English and maths, which are double weighted in scoring;
- three other EBacc subjects from the sciences, computer science, geography, history and languages;
- three more subjects which may be EBacc subjects or can be any other GCSEs or approved arts, academic or vocational qualifications.

A.11. Attainment8 will report the performance and Progress8 the improvement made by the pupils compared to the national average of pupils with similar Sats results. Attainment8/Progress8 makes room for GCSEs, such as art & design, design & technology, religious studies and the performing arts, which were previously excluded. Taking eight GCSEs is not compulsory, but any missing will be scored zero.

- A.12. Unlike A-levels, there has been a recalibration of the grade scale for GCSEs, so there was the opportunity to allow the new grades to find their own level. But Ofqual has decided to peg the new Grade 7 to the old Grade A, with A* being split into Grades 8 and 9. It was originally intended that the new Grade 5 would be the equivalent of the C grade, but this was re-considered, and 'C' was aligned instead to Grade 4. The change leaves some ambiguity as grade 5 is now spoken of as a strong pass.

Comparable Outcomes

- A.13. Since 2011, Ofqual, the regulator in England, has acted to keep the grade pattern consistent over time, adjusting for prior attainment. The composition of the cohort can change quite markedly from year to year. Many schools, for example, transferred their pupils from the national GCSE in English to the international GCSE when the internal assessment component of the national award was dropped in 2014. The IGCSE retained it and thereby attracted entries from many schools. But when, from 2018, this no longer counted in the league tables the schools, switched back again. Pass rates at the various levels were, therefore, kept much the same from 2011 onwards, with if anything top grades being reduced slightly. But then Covid struck and there was a dramatic increase in top grades.

Covid

- A.14. The Covid Pandemic threw the awarding of grades into disarray. It was decided it would not be safe to hold exams, but Ofqual was initially confident that the grades could be accurately calculated by fitting teachers' rankings into the grade pattern of the previous decade. It all seemed plausible and feasible, but while the grade pattern of previous years could be reproduced by computer programme quite easily, fitting the schools' rankings into this mould was, to say the least, problematic. It threw up major anomalies in the individual A-levels grades, with candidates even receiving grades three down from what they were expecting and had been predicted to achieve. Not surprisingly, there was uproar, with loud and emotional protests that the calculated grades were ruining young people's lives.
- A.15. The Government decided enough was enough and abandoned Ofqual's attempt at calculation (with its chief executive later losing her job). Setting aside its scepticism, the Government announced that the A-level calculated grades would be replaced by teachers' predictions, if that was higher than the calculated grade, but that this could be retained if it was the higher. It was a formula for grade inflation.
- A.16. In 2021, there was the hope that exams could resume, but at least it was recognised they could not early enough to allow for something more systematic than in 2020 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. The intention was to arrive at more realistic grades than the previous year, but in the event there were more top grades than ever in 2021.

A.17. In 2022, there was a return to exams, but not the tough ones of the Gove reforms. In an attempt to make them fair to the candidates with widely differing teaching provision and degrees of interruption, the syllabuses were restricted, and advance notice given of the question topics. In May 2022 Ofqual announced that the 2022 results would be the first step in getting the grades levels back to pre-pandemic levels in 2023.