

A level insight briefing

Insight into the data behind the educational and career choices that young people make at 16 and 18 (full report)

Publication information

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About this report

This report provides the detailed background data that underpins the A Level Myth Buster. We hope that both of these resources will be useful for Careers Leaders in schools and colleges as they design and develop their careers programmes. We hope that this document will give you useful labour market information that you can use in your programmes as well as resources that you can adapt and distribute to teachers, parents and young people. Both documents are available to download for free on our website.

We hope that this will be useful to support:

- young people's educational and career decision making at 15 and 16 as they consider whether to pursue A levels or take another route
- discussions and deliberations that happen during Key Stage 5 about future options
- advice and guidance in the frantic period after A level results as young people rethink and adjust their career plans after their results have arrived

The resource is organised around a series of common myths. We have provided a factual response to each of these myths and some points for reflection by young people. You can use the myths to stimulate discussion in class, the factual responses to provide labour market information to young people and the reflection points to help young people to think through their responses to this information.

We hope that you find it useful and that it helps you to meet both Gatsby Benchmark 2 (learning from career and labour market information) and Gatsby Benchmark 7 (encounters with further and higher education).



1 | Introduction

Every year newspapers report on A level results day. Stories often focus on whether this was the best year ever or whether the qualifications are getting easier or harder. They are almost always accompanied by pictures of happy students jumping in the air as their dreams come true, or miserable looking young people dealing with the disappointment of not doing as well as they hoped.

What these stories are often short on is perspective. What does a 'good' or a 'bad' A level result really mean? How many other people out there are experiencing the same result as you are? What happens to people who complete their A levels? Where do they go? How important is it in the long run to get your desired university place, and what other options are there? In this publication we wanted to draw together some information that could inform discussions about A levels and life after they've finished. We wanted to put the basic facts about A levels in England into the hands of teachers, careers advisers, parents and young people. We were also keen to bust a few myths and use some hard facts to lay a few urban legends to rest.

Over 400,000 students in England's mainstream schools and colleges finish A levels or equivalent qualifications every year. In this report we follow the routes they take from the age of 15 or 16 as they choose what A levels to study (or whether to do something else) through to what happens to them after they leave school or college at 18. On the way we look at the subjects that they have studied, the qualifications that they have entered and achieved and what happens to them after they leave compulsory education.

We've provided insights into the possible paths that can be taken and information that supports these choices, based on the most recent data available. We have used the best publicly available data to explore some of the common myths that exist around A levels and equivalent qualifications. It is not designed as an academic report (although we've provided footnotes so you can follow up the details if you want). Rather it is intended as a resource to support young people with the career choices that they will need to make between the ages of 15 and 18.

These career choices matter immensely to the young people that are making them. What you study in this period of your life and how well you do in these qualifications exerts a strong influence on the rest of your career. It is important that young people understand that the decisions that they take at the beginning and end of their A levels are career decisions. Of course, there are many other decisions that will matter after this point, but the choices that you make at school and college provide the context within which all future decisions will be made. The data presented in this paper can help young people to understand this and to make wise decisions about how to navigate this period of their lives.

The choices that young people make, do not just matter for them. They also matter for their schools, their families, for the businesses that will employ them in the future and ultimately for society. This is why the government has put education and careers at the heart of the *Industrial Strategy*.¹ If young people choose qualifications that align with the needs of society and the economy, they will fuel the economy and allow business to grow and develop. On the other hand, if young people develop their skills and knowledge in ways that the economy cannot use or if they fail to attain at the right level, education becomes a barrier to growth.

The fact that there is a strong public interest in young people's results does not mean that young people should just be following government policies when they choose A levels, apprenticeships or university places. It is important that young people pursue careers that are interesting to them and which provide a good opportunity for them to use and expand their talents. However, the Industrial Strategy and the broader economy and labour market provide a context for people's careers.

The Careers & Enterprise Company are committed to bringing education and employment together and increasing the dialogue between the two. If young people recognise that their educational choices are career choices and seek to make these career choices informed by engagement with, and information from, employers, then everyone will benefit.

¹ Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy. (2017). *Industrial Strategy: The 5 Foundations*. Available from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/industrial-strategy-the-foundations/industrial-strategy-the-5-foundations> [Accessed 18th July 2018].

2 | Decisions at 16

By the age of 16 young people have already made some key decisions that will have an impact on the rest of their lives. As they get to the end of their GCSEs they will be asked to think about and choose what they want to do or study, where they want to do it and what type of qualifications they will pursue for the next couple of years.

In this section we are going to look at these decisions and use data to show how young people are currently managing these decisions at 16.



Where do they go?

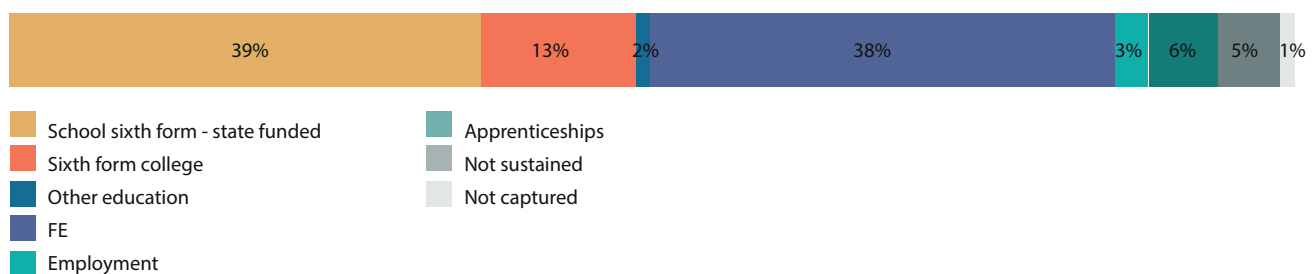
Myth These days everyone stays in school until they are 18.

Fact Less than half of young people stay on at school after the age of 16. Most go on to college, but a small number move into apprenticeships or work.

The first question is what kinds of institutions young people are pursuing their studies or careers in. Data produced by the Department for Education shows us what students go on to do in the year after they turn 16. These data describe ‘sustained’ destinations which means that young people were engaged in this activity for at least the period from October to March. If a destination is not sustained, then it usually means that the student has dropped out of what they started doing at the beginning of the academic year.

Figure 1: Post 16 (key stage 4) 2015/16 destinations for the 2014/15 cohort²

Post 16 (KS4) destinations:



Using latest DfE Destinations data.

Apprenticeships are often in conjunction with education or employment, so will lead to double counting.

² Department for Education (2015). Destinations of KS4 and KS5 pupils: 2016. Available from <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/destinations-of-ks4-and-ks5-pupils-2016> [Accessed 18th July 2018].

Using the most recent data available, we can see that just over half of students (54%) go to sixth forms, with 3 in 4 of those studying at a school sixth form and the remainder at a sixth form college. Over one third of the total (38%) choose further education colleges as their destination. Another 2% are in other educational destinations including alternative provision, hospital schools and so on. Although the overwhelming majority of 16-year-olds are still in full-time education, there are a minority of young people who go to work. Of these, 6% are on Apprenticeships and will be combining work with study (this leads to an overlap with the other categories). Another 3% move straight into employment. This leaves 5% who are in 'Not sustained' destinations which includes those who are not in education, employment or training (NEET).

If we look back over the last six years we can see that there are some changes in where young people are going at the age of 16. More young people than ever are staying in education - there has been an uplift from 86% to 91% of students pursuing educational destinations. Over this period, enrolment in FE colleges by this cohort has increased from 33% to 38%, with not sustained destinations showing a corresponding fall from 10% to 5%. This shift away from NEET to educational outcomes is welcome and can at least be partially explained by the governments' policy of raising the participation age for education and training to 18.³ However, the change in the law was not designed to keep young people in school and allows for the possibility of them moving into employment as long as they combine this with education or training. Current initiatives around Apprenticeships are trying to increase the engagement with this school to work route.

What qualifications do they do?

Myth

Everyone goes on to do A levels straight after GCSEs.

Fact

While lots of young people are progressing onto A levels or equivalent qualifications (known as level 3 qualifications) at 16, around half of young people are studying for lower level qualifications. Sometimes they are combining these with A levels and at other times they are just studying the lower level qualification.

At 16, students can take a variety of different qualifications. For those that have achieved good grades in their GCSEs it is normal to move on to take an A level or an equivalent qualification. These qualifications are collectively known as 'level 3' qualifications, with GCSEs being 'level 2' and the first year of a degree being 'level 4'. Some students who don't do well in their GCSEs may study more subjects at level 2 e.g. repeating their Maths GCSE or taking a level 2 vocational qualification because they are not yet ready to take a level 3 qualification.

Figure 2: Levels and relative scale of qualification entries⁴

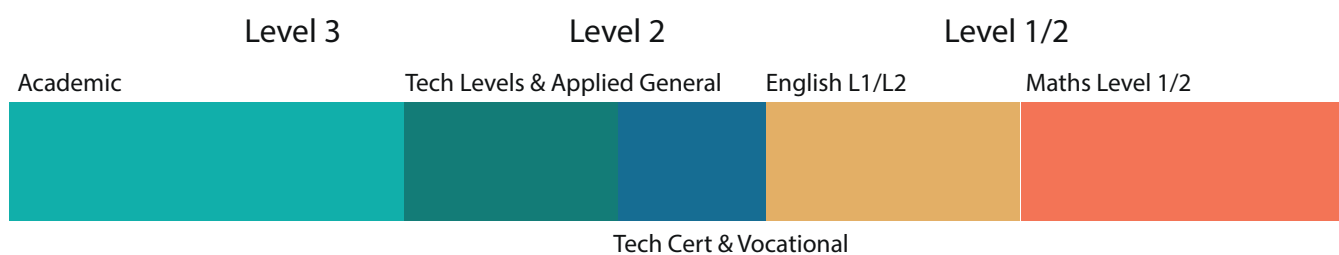


Figure 2 shows that of all the examinations taken in the 16-18 Key Stage, A levels (which comprise almost all of the 'Academic' section) are in a minority.

Myth

The academic path is the only option.

Fact

A levels are only one type of qualification that you could work towards. Of those young people who take a level 3 qualification only, about 3 in 5 are just taking A levels. The rest are either combining A levels with a vocational qualification or specialising in a vocational subject.

Of those young people that move on to pursue a level 3 qualification, most of them are taking A levels. However, there are also technical and applied qualifications available and often students will take combinations of qualification types.

A levels or something more vocational?

It is possible to take just A levels, just vocational qualifications or to combine the two. All of these options can offer young people good opportunities and so it is important to look at them all, to think about where they lead and to consider which option is best for the individual.

³ Department for Education. (2016). *Participation of Young People in Education, Employment or Training*. London: Department for Education.

⁴ Department for Education (2018). *A level and other 16-18 results (revised): 2016/17*. Available from <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/a-level-and-other-16-to-18-results-2016-to-2017-revised> [Accessed 24th July 2018]. Note that this chart shows the total entries made for that qualification. There will frequently be overlaps; for example, a student might take an A level examination along with an Applied General, or a Level 2 Vocational Qualification along with a Maths and English GCSE.

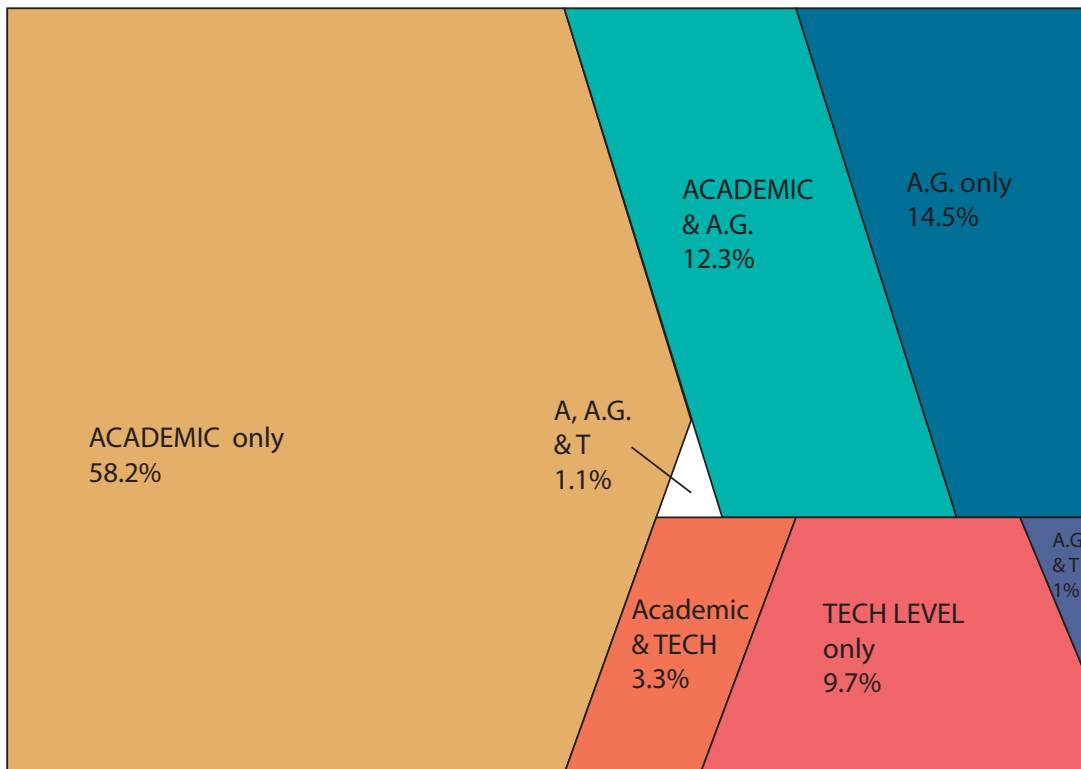
Figure 3 shows the proportion of students taking different qualifications. It divides qualifications into three types.

- **Academic** qualifications which consist predominantly of A and AS levels but also include the International Baccalaureate, Advanced Extension Award (AEA), Free Standing Maths, Extended Project (Diploma) qualifications and Core Maths at level 3.
- **Applied General (A.G.)**⁵ are rigorous level 3 qualifications that allow 16 to 19-year-old students to develop transferable knowledge and skills. They are for students who want to continue their education through applied learning.

- **Tech Levels (T)**⁶ are on a par with A levels and recognised by employers. They are for students aged 16+ that want to specialise in a specific industry or prepare for a particular job.

It is important that young people and their parents understand the differences between the qualifications available and how they fit into the academic, applied and tech categories. They can then use this to inform their decisions about which qualification, or combination of qualifications, are right for them.

Figure 3: The proportion of Level 3 students by qualification type⁷, indicative scale



⁵ Department for Education. (2018). Applied general qualifications. Available from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/2019-performance-tables-technical-and-vocational-qualifications/applied-general-qualifications> [Accessed 24th July 2018].

⁶ Department for Education. (2018). Tech levels. Available from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/2019-performance-tables-technical-and-vocational-qualifications/tech-levels> [Accessed 24th July 2018].

⁷ Department for Education. (2018). Statistics: 16 to 19 attainment. Available from <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-attainment-at-19-years> [Accessed 18th July 2018].

Supporting young people

What should I do at 16?

It can often be easiest to stay in school or to go to the local sixth form college but there are other options. More and more young people are studying at a further education college. The government is committed to continuing to improve the quality and status of vocational qualifications. Alternatively, there are a minority of young people who are going straight to work at the age of 16 with many of them pursuing Apprenticeships. This is another important option that everyone should consider.

What if I'm not ready to progress to A levels or another level 3 qualification?

Most young people move on to take a level 3 qualification at 16. However, if they haven't done very well in their GCSEs they may be encouraged to take or retake a level 2 qualification either instead of or alongside their A levels. If they are advised to do this they should ask about what options this qualification opens up for them to progress to level 3 in the future or to find a job after they've completed the qualification.

Should I do A levels or something more vocational?

It is possible to take just A levels, just vocational qualifications or to combine the two. All of these options can offer young people good opportunities and so it is important to look at them all, to think about where they lead and to consider which option is right for them.

3 | Choosing A levels

In this section we focus in on A levels and look at subject choice. Figure 4 shows the popularity of A levels, measured by candidates per subject.

Myth

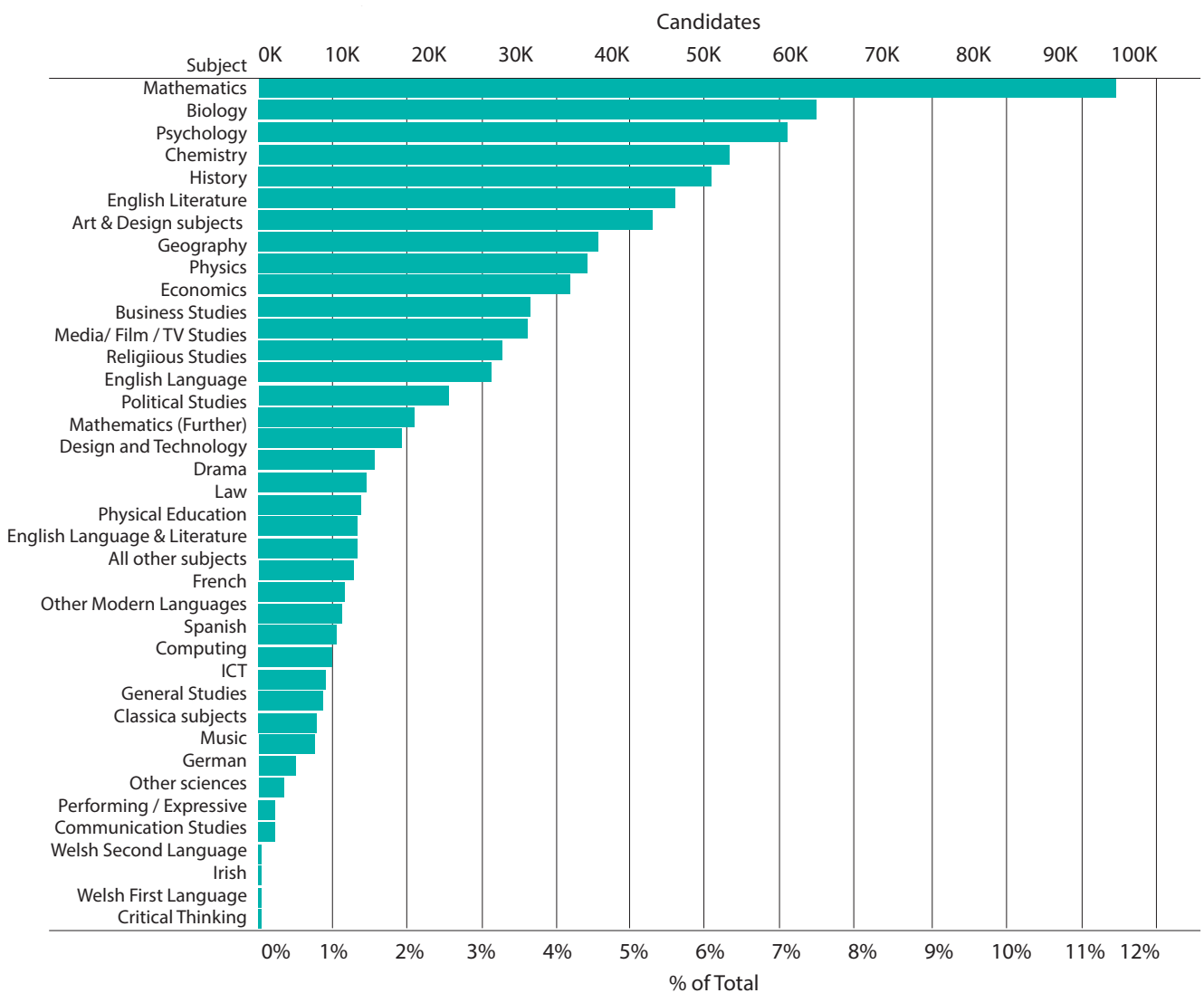
A levels only offer a narrow set of subject choices.

Fact

There are a wide range of options available at A level which should be able to appeal to diverse interests. However, most of the A levels taken are in one of the top six subjects (maths, biology, psychology, chemistry, history and English literature). Perhaps because of this it is difficult to find all of the possible options in any one institution.



Figure 4: A level candidates by subject⁸



This diagram shows there are a lot of different subjects that young people can choose at A level. However, at the moment a large proportion of people are clustered around popular subjects like maths, biology, psychology, chemistry, history and English literature. These top six subjects account for over half of all entries whilst the smallest 18 subjects account for just 10%.

⁸ The Joint Council for Qualifications. (2018). *A levels*. Available from <https://www.jcq.org.uk/examination-results/a-levels> [Accessed 24th July 2018].

Myth

Nobody is taking science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) A levels.

Fact

Despite ongoing concerns about the need for more science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) skills, these subjects are very popular with students. Maths is the most popular A level subject and the proportion of young people taking STEM subjects is increasing. STEM subjects make up 3 of the top 5 and 4 of the top 10 subjects.

Myth

Only boys take STEM subjects.

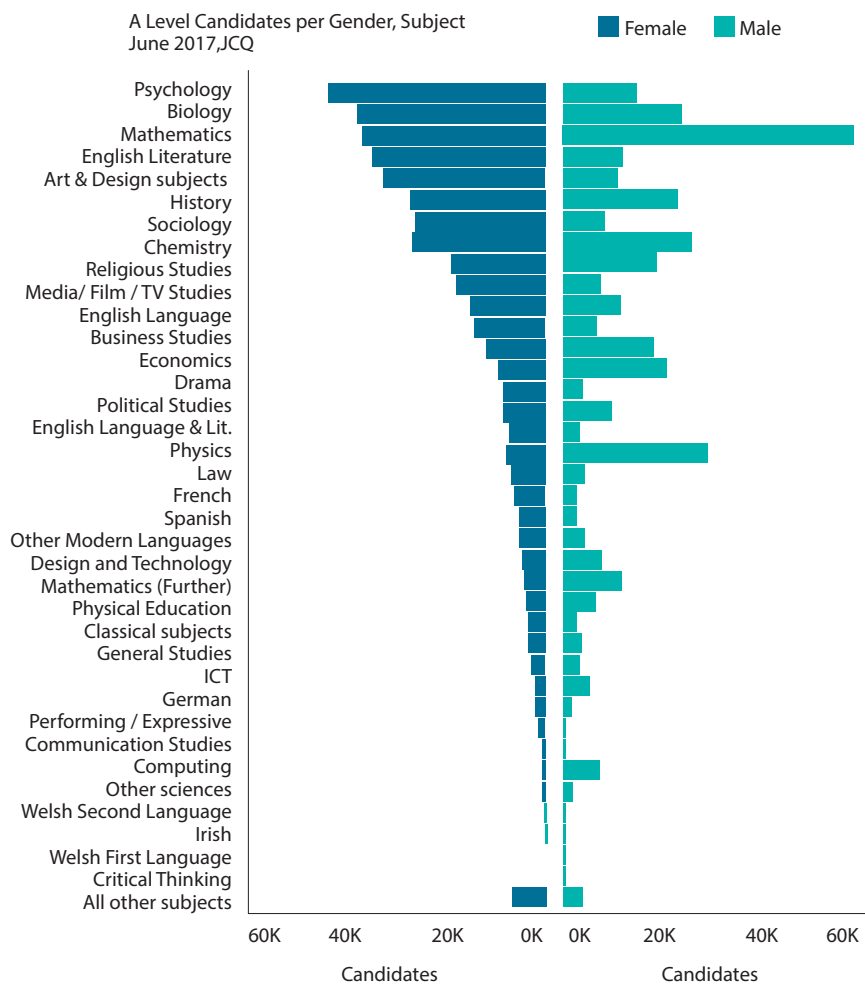
Fact

Boys are more likely to take STEM A levels than girls, but very large numbers of girls are taking these subjects. The gap between male and female participation in STEM is starting to narrow.

Mathematics is the clear leader in terms of number of candidate entries, accounting for 11.5% of all entries. Biology is the most popular science subject at A level, at 7.5% of all entries.

Many subjects have an unequal gender balance. Mathematics has 1 female for every 1.6 males – the ratio becomes more extreme for further mathematics at 1:2.6, physics is at 1:3.7 and the highest male-dominated subject is computing at 1:9.2. On the other side of the gender imbalance, Biology is a STEM subject which is more commonly taken by women than men (1 man for every 1.6 women). Psychology is the most popular subject with females and has a gender ratio of 1 male to every 3 females. Figure 5 shows the gender balance in different subjects.

Figure 5: A level candidates by gender⁹



⁹The Joint Council for Qualifications. (2018). A levels. Available from <https://www.jcq.org.uk/examination-results/a-levels> [Accessed 24th July 2018].

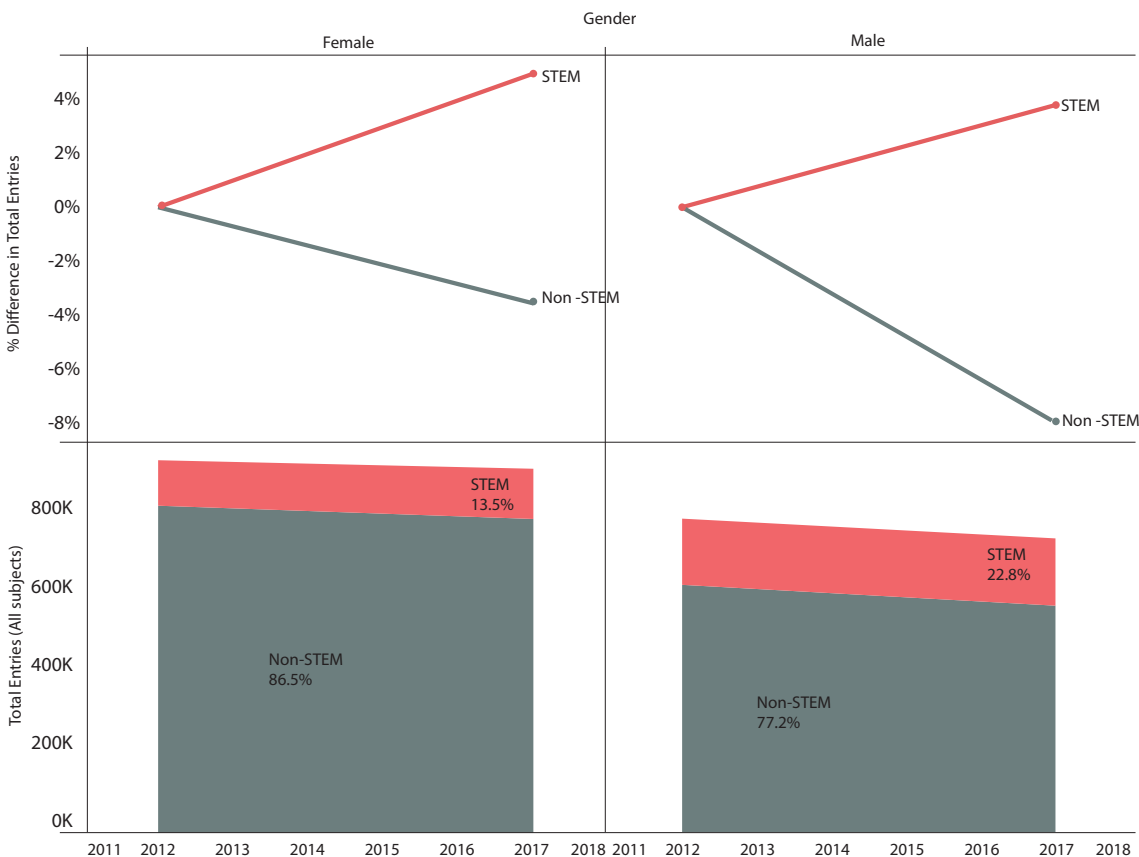
It is also worth noting that other research finds that socio-economic background also influences A level choices.¹⁰ Such differences, whether based on gender or other factors highlight the dangers of stereotyping. It is important that young people reflect on why they are making decisions and consider whether they are really making the right ones or just ‘going with the flow’.

As we have already discussed, one of the key areas where there are differences between the subject choices of young men and young women is in relation

to science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects. Women are less likely to choose STEM than men which is concerning as there are a range of career advantages attached to STEM subjects.

Over the past five years we have seen some good news with both the number and proportion of candidates for STEM subjects increasing overall and the proportion of women taking STEM rising faster for females (5.0%) than males (3.9%). This is helping to close the gender gap in STEM-subjects.¹¹

Figure 6: Changes in the number of STEM A levels by gender (2012-2017)¹²



¹⁰ Dilnot, C. (2016). How does the choice of A-level subjects vary with students' socio-economic status in English state schools?. *British Educational Research Journal*, 42(6), 1081-1106.

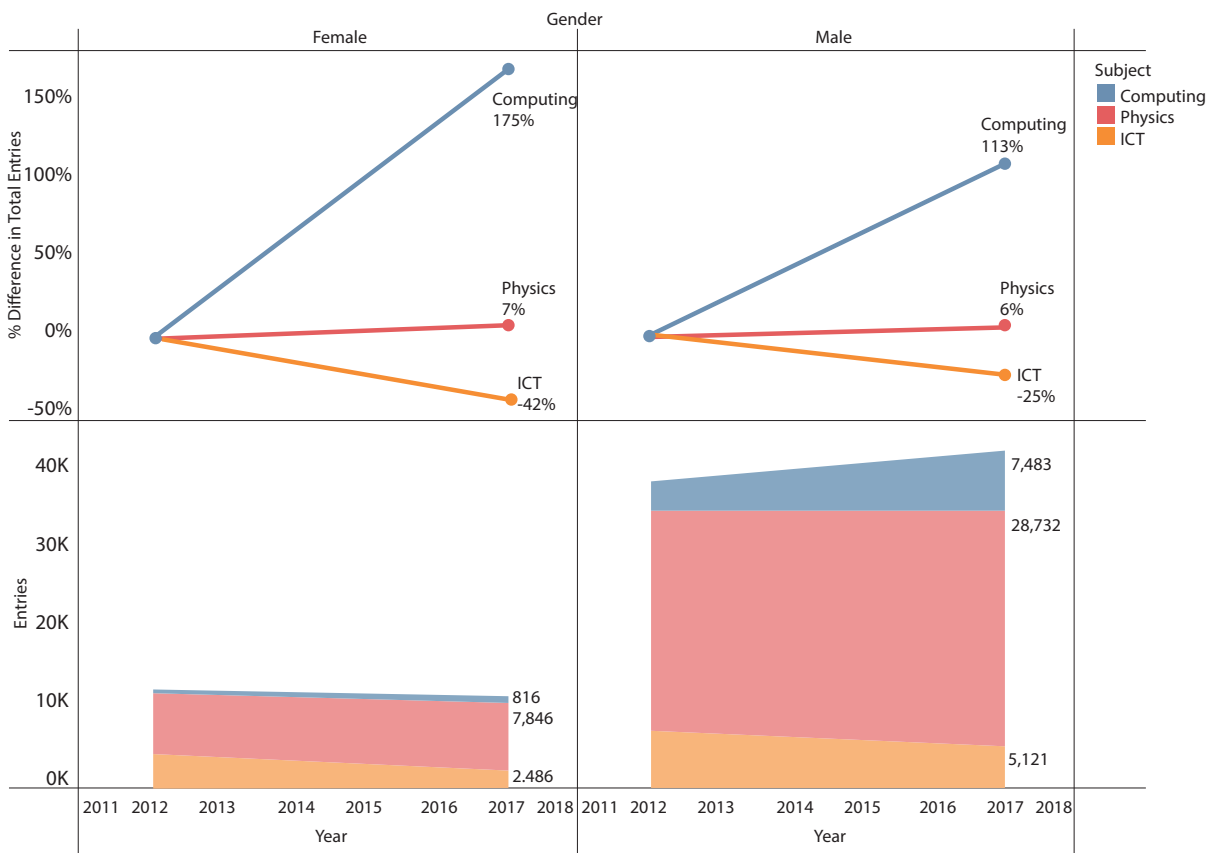
¹¹ Department for Education. (2016). *Employment and earnings outcomes of higher education graduates: experimental statistics using the Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data: further breakdowns*. Available from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/573831/SFR60_2016_LEO_main_text_v1.1.pdf [Accessed 24th July 2018].

¹² The Joint Council for Qualifications. (2018). *A levels*. Available from <https://www.jcq.org.uk/examination-results/a-levels> [Accessed 24th July 2018].

The number of candidates for STEM subjects has increased over the past five years; it has risen faster for females (5.0%) than males (3.9%), which is helping to close the gap in the overall number of STEM-subject candidates per gender; at 123k vs 170k in 2017. Non-STEM subjects, whilst dominating the number of entries, have experienced falls in the number of candidates, with males seeing over 10% fewer candidate subject entries. Population change can explain some of this reduction, with a slightly smaller cohort in 2017.

Despite some positive trends it isn't just a case of waiting for change to happen. If we look at three STEM subjects where there has been a long-term and substantial gender imbalance, computing, ICT and physics, there are scarce signs of improvement. Female entries to computing have grown rapidly, but from a very small base and do not even compensate for the drop in ICT entries. Physics has shown some growth, with the gender ratio here (1 female for every 3.7 males) staying the same over the past five years.

Figure 7: Change in number of A level candidates in computing, physics and ICT by gender



The static picture in relation to the most male dominated subjects suggests that there is a need to continue to encourage young women to consider these subjects and to address the barriers that are mitigating against them making these choices.

Supporting young people

What should I study at A level?

There are a wide number of options available to young people. These include many options that may not be available at their current school and new subjects that they may not have studied at GCSE. It is important for young people to reflect on these choices carefully and think about why they are interested in the qualifications that they are pursuing. They may also need to shop around to find a school or college that offers the A levels that they are most interested in.

Should I study a STEM subject?

The evidence tells us that science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects lead to some very good career outcomes. But, they aren't right for everyone. They should reflect on whether taking a STEM subject is the right decision for them and consider some of the possible career paths that might emerge from the A levels that they choose.

Should I cross the gender gap?

Boys and girls are still more likely to take some subjects than others. But, even the most extreme examples like psychology where there are three girls for every boy or physics where there are almost four boys for every girl, still have lots of young people making decisions that run counter to this. Academic subjects have no gender and all genders and types of people have the potential to do well at all subjects. What is more in many subjects longstanding patterns are changing. It is only going to change more if young people carry on following their interests rather than going with the stereotypes.

4 | Looking at grades

A levels are graded on a scale from A* to E. Everyone who studies A levels wants to get the best grade that they can, but A levels are very competitive. Only 9% of people achieve the coveted A* grades, while 15% achieve an E grade. Most people are somewhere in between with the highest proportion of people getting a B grade (27%). Figure 8 shows how A level grades break down.

Myth Everyone gets an A* these days.

Fact Only about a quarter of people get an A* or A in their A levels. Almost half get a C or below.

Figure 8: A level results of all students aged 16-18, 2016/17^{13 14}



¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-attainment-at-19-years>

¹⁴ 'Other' Includes ungraded, no award (absent/declined) and pending.

Myth

Some subjects are much harder than others.

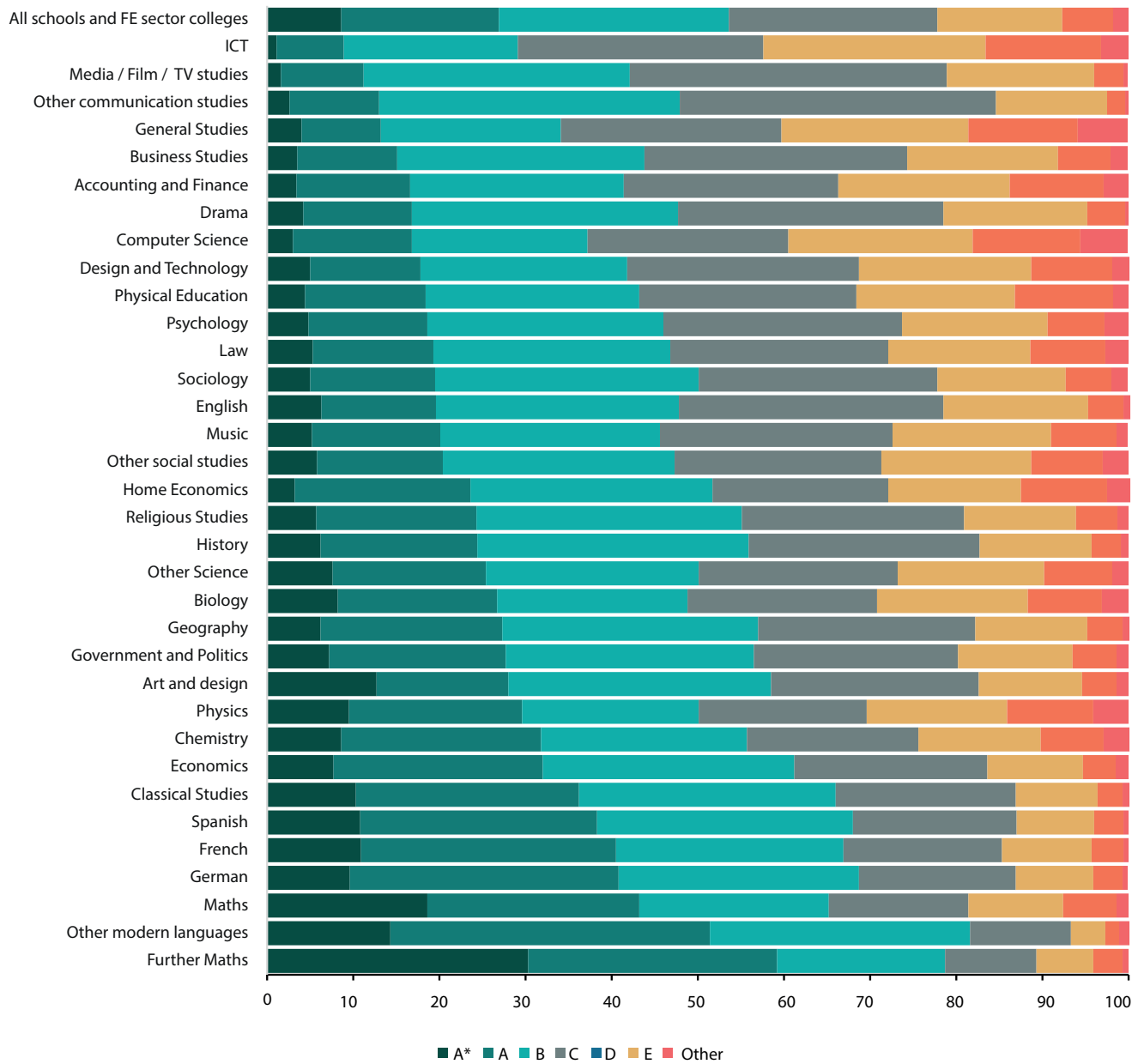
Fact

Opinion is divided on this question. Some subjects definitely have more students getting A* and A grades than others, but this may be about the kind of people who choose those subjects. It can be useful to understand where they ranked against other students who took the same subject, but they shouldn't use this as a guide to which is the 'easiest' subject.

The top level description of A level grades only tells part of the story. When we dig in further in figure 9 we can see that there are some big differences between the grades that young people are getting in different subjects.



Figure 9: A level results of all students aged 16-18 by subject and grade, 2016/17



The chart on the previous page shows the attainment at A-level of students in England, 2017. The higher up the vertical axis a subject is, the fewer A* or A grades are awarded. Further mathematics take the top prize for nearly 60% of all grades being in the highest bracket – this is something of an outlier and has a relatively small number of people studying this subject. Possibly the candidate intake for this, and certain other subjects, includes extremely able or dedicated students, perhaps identified through prior high attainment, who are likely to perform very well.

The highest placed top 5 subject is Maths with 43% of candidates for this A level getting an A or A*s. English in comparison has just 19.5% and has been decreasing steadily since 2010. The lowest proportion of top grades goes to ICT with 9% (computer science is at 17%).

Over the last year the majority of subjects have seen only mild fluctuations in the rate of top grades issued, often with a gradual descent until 2016, and a recent dip e.g. chemistry or biology, or a slight rise, e.g. economics or history.

The point of understanding the grade profile of each subject is not to suggest that some subjects are necessarily easier than others. There has been a lot of research on this subject and experts are still divided on whether some subjects are harder than others. What is true is that perceptions about what is easier or harder, do influence decisions about what subject to take, but these decisions are not always based on a good understanding of the data.¹⁵ Certainly, further maths, where candidates are very likely to get a high grade, is not an easy option. But, looking at the breakdown of grades in this way helps to remind us that in some cases your grades will be compared against other people who have done the same subject as them, particularly when they progress on to the next stage of their career.

¹⁵ Cuff, B.J. (2017). *Perceptions of subject difficulty and subject choices: Are the two linked, and if so, how?* Coventry: Ofqual.

Supporting young people

What grade are you aiming for?

While studying it is useful for young people to have an idea of what grade they are aiming for. As they learn, they will build up a picture of their performance and get feedback from teachers. They should try and aim for a grade that is stretching, but realistic.

What grade did you get?

On results day it can be difficult for young people to put their grade into perspective. Particularly if they didn't get into your destination of choice or if they are surrounded by people who did better than them. It can be helpful to understand where they sit in the overall rankings. If they got an A* or A in psychology they are one of the top 20% in that subject. If they got the same grade in chemistry they are only one of the top 30%. Both are a great achievements, but they will open different doors. One of the most important things to remember is that most people are not getting A* or A grades, but that everybody moves on to the next stage of their career.

Should I retake?

When someone doesn't get the grade they want or expect, one possibility is to retake their exams the following year. Whether this is the right decision is up to them, but before making this commitment, they should really think about the following questions:

- Did they really do badly, or did they just not get what they expected?
- Does this change their plans, or could they still pursue the path that they wanted, perhaps at a different university?
- What new and interesting opportunities are out there now that they have the opportunity to think again?
- And critically, if they resat, are they sure they could do better next time?

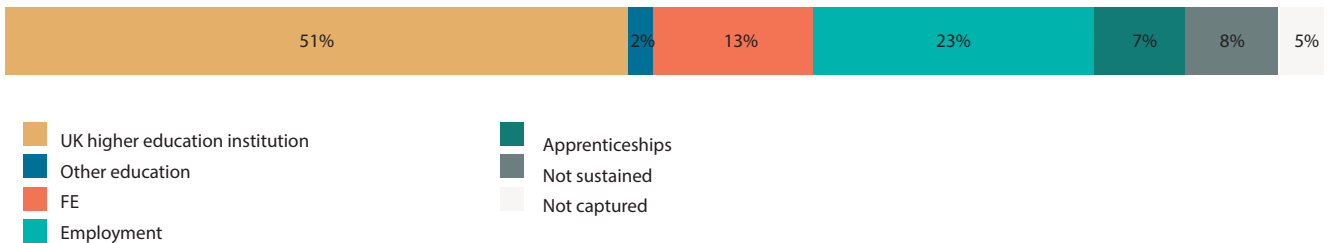
5 | Destinations after A level

One of the challenges with high stakes examinations like A levels is that they can often feel like an end in themselves. However, A levels and the other qualifications that young people study between 16 and 18 are just a step on their career journey. In this section we look at where people go after these qualifications finish.

Myth Everyone goes to university these days.

Fact Although the number of people who stay in education past 18 has been increasing only about half of young people are moving on from A levels or equivalent qualifications to go to university. About a quarter are going to work, with most of the rest pursuing a vocational qualification.

Figure 10: Post 18 (key stage 5) 2015/16 destinations for the 2014/15 cohort¹⁶



Using latest DfE Destinations data. Apprenticeships are often in conjunction with education or employment, so will lead to double counting.

¹⁶ Department for Education. (2018). Destinations of KS4 and KS5 pupils: 2016. Available from <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/destinations-of-ks4-and-ks5-pupils-2016> [Accessed 26th July 2018].

After receiving their A levels or other qualifications at 18 a majority of students (51%) go on to university (UK higher education institutions). Just under 1 in 4 students (23%) go into employment, making it the second most popular destination for young people. Interestingly, 13% of students go into further education presumably to either follow vocational routes or to retake previous qualifications. Only 7% of students take up Apprenticeships and the opportunity to learn on the job; a number marginally beaten by the 8% of students not in sustained education, which includes those not in education, employment or training (NEET).

Although just over half (51%) of students are reported to have entered Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in 2015, this figure has increased gradually over recent years as have other educational destinations. So, the top third HEIs, FE Colleges and Apprenticeships have all seen parallel increases in student arrivals over recent years. Educational destinations combined have seen an uplift from 59% in 2009/10 to 66% amongst all KS5 students.

We will now look in more depth at some of the possible destinations that young people take following their A levels.



University and higher education



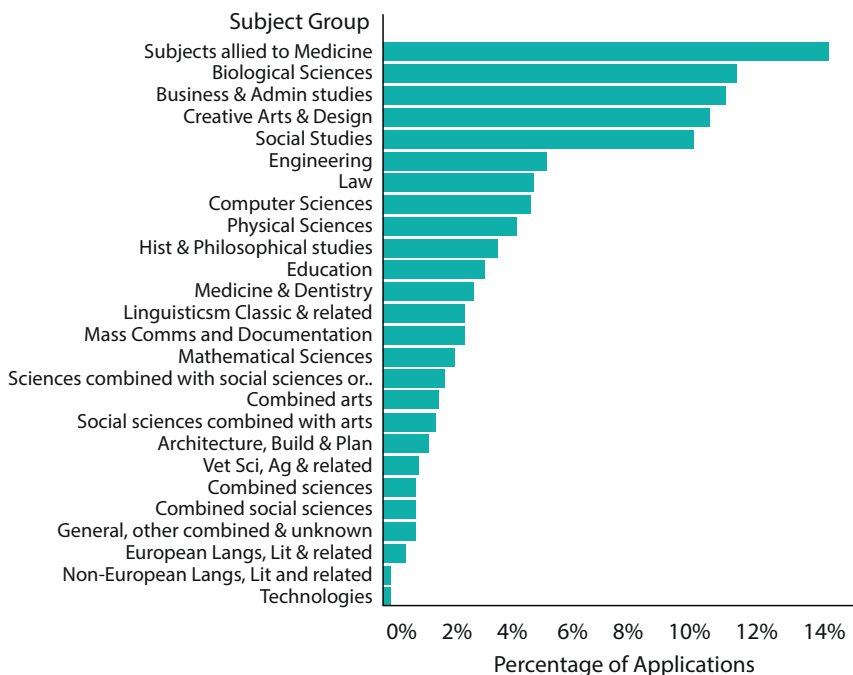
University is all about theory and abstraction. You don't learn anything that you can use in the real world.



There are a wide range of degree programmes. Many are very applied and lead directly into a career or group of careers. The generic skills that can be developed by all students are prized by employers even when they have done more theoretically based courses.

Approximately 208,000 2015 KS5 graduates entered Higher Education in 2016. As with A levels, applications for degrees are made across a wide range of subjects.

Figure 11: University applications by subject group



But also, as with A levels, the most popular subjects account for the majority of applications. In this case the top five subjects (subjects allied to medicine, biological sciences, business and admin studies, creative arts and design and social studies) account for over 50% of all degree programmes.

Myth

University isn't for people like me.

Fact

University is the most popular destination following A levels. People of all types and all backgrounds are successful on all courses and at all types of universities. However, there are clear patterns which mean that some more advantaged people are over represented on some courses and at some universities. Lots of people including the government, universities and The Careers & Enterprise Company are campaigning to ensure that background becomes less and less important in the future.

When we drill further into the figures on university applications and acceptances we see similar patterns on gender and social background as we have already observed in relation to A levels. We can also notice some differences in terms of ethnicity and place of origin.

In terms of gender differences, the majority of university applications are made by women. Research by UCAS¹⁷ shows that women dominate in the biosciences, medicine and related subjects while men are far more likely to choose physics, maths, engineering and computing. Social sciences tend to be more equally distributed, but education and arts subjects also show many more women being accepted than men.

Data produced by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) shows that students socio-economic backgrounds also matter.¹⁸ So 39% of students come from 'managerial or professional' families, while only 18% comes from those in 'routine or semi-routine occupations' and almost none come from unemployed families. Other data show how your likelihood of attending university is also structured by where you live as well as what your parents do.¹⁹ This is true at both the neighbourhood level and at the level of region. For example, you are much more likely to go to university if you grow up in London (58%) than if you grow up in the South West (40%). Furthermore, recently the

gap between the capital and other regions has been widening.²⁰

Ethnicity also matters with White students (47%) less likely to go to university than other ethnic groups and Chinese students most likely to attend university (75%). However, these figures create a misleading picture of the university population as the White ethnic group is so much larger than all other ethnic groups.

Despite all of these inequalities, people from a wide range of backgrounds attend all universities. The government, the universities themselves and a wide range of other organisations are keen to make universities more equal. To some extent universities reflect the inequalities that exist in the society around them with students' prior attainment before university, their aspirations and career ambitions and their attitudes towards different subjects all driving some of these inequalities within higher education. Of course, universities should do more to be fair and inclusive, but change will also require young people to be assertive about challenging stereotypes, calling out injustices where they see them and following their interests despite the challenges.

¹⁷ UCAS. (2017). *End of Cycle Report 2017 – Patterns by Subject*. Available from <https://www.ucas.com/file/136531/download?token=A0UpZoEd> [Accessed 26th July 2018].

¹⁸ HESA. (2018). *HE undergraduate UK domiciled full-time student enrolments by participation characteristics 2012/13 to 2016/17*. Available from <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/sfr247/figure-5> [Accessed 26th July 2018].

¹⁹ HESA. (2018). *Who's studying in HE?* Available from <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he#accordion-commentary-4> [Accessed 26th July 2018].

²⁰ UCAS (2017). *End of Cycle Report 2017 – Patterns by Geography*. Available from <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/ucas-undergraduate-releases/ucas-undergraduate-analysis-reports/2017-end-cycle-report> [Accessed 26th July 2018].

Supporting young people

Should I go to university?

University is a good option for lots of young people, but there is also a danger to fall into it by default. University is just one option amongst many and the growth of options like higher and degree apprenticeships also have a lot to recommend them. It is worth them visiting some universities and thinking seriously about this, but also looking at the other options. Ultimately it is useful to be thinking a bit more long term about their career as this will help guide them on what the next step might be.

What should I study at university?

There are a wide range of subjects that can be studied at university. The most common groups of subjects are subjects allied to medicine, biological sciences, business studies, creative arts and design and social studies. But, these subjects only scratch the surface of what is on offer. This is why it is important them potential university courses well before they choose. Their A level subject can provide them with a good guide but there are a lot of new things out there as well.

Will I fit in at university?

Universities are generally quite diverse places. If they decide to go to university they can expect to meet a lot of people from different kinds of backgrounds. Indeed, learning to get along with people with different experiences and opinions is one of the opportunities that university offers. Depending on what course they choose to study and which university they attend they are likely to find more or less people from advantaged backgrounds. While it can be useful to know this, it is dangerous to make decisions on this basis as it is likely to exclude them from some great opportunities. It is much better for young people to commit to following their interests and challenging stereotypes and injustice wherever they see them.

Employment



No young people go to work at 18.

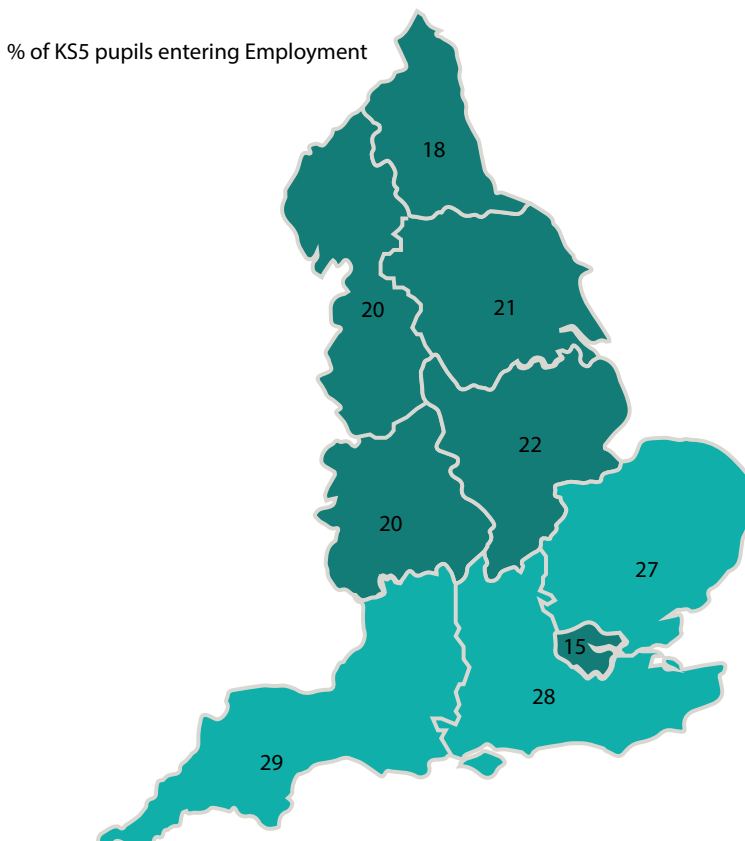


Around a quarter of young people finish their studies at 18 and move into work.

After higher education, employment is the second most popular destination for young people at the age of 18. Around a quarter of young people finish their studies at 19 and move into work. This figure has not changed significantly in recent years.

Where you live has a big influence on your likelihood of moving straight to work when you are 18. In the South West they are reporting 29% of students entering employment at the end of Key Stage 5 while in London this destination is only reported by 15%. Figure 12 shows the differences in employment destinations by region.

Figure 12: Differences in Key Stage 5 pupils employment outcomes by region



Myth

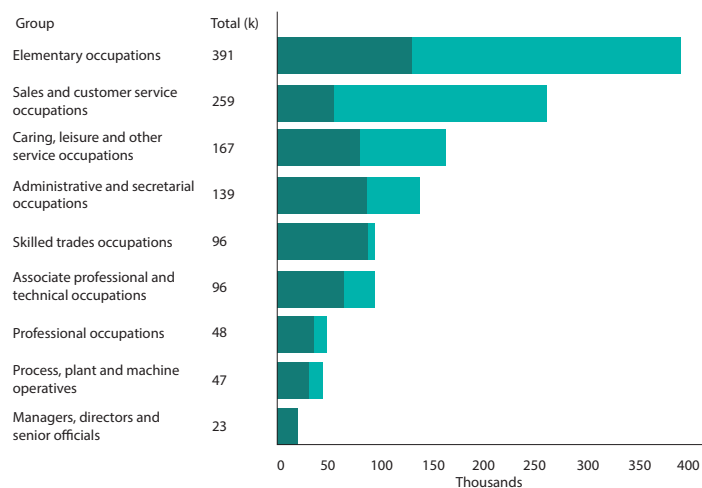
There are no decent jobs for young workers

Fact

Young people do face a challenging labour market. Finding a full-time, well paid job with good prospects can be difficult. However, while some young workers are in low-skill jobs, many others go onto skilled and professional jobs.

So for the near 100,000 KS5 graduates entering employment annually, which sectors do they go into and is it on a part-time or full-time basis? We examine the data by looking at it in two ways; by Occupation (what job you do) and by Sector (what industry you work in).

Figure 13: 18-21 year old employment by sector



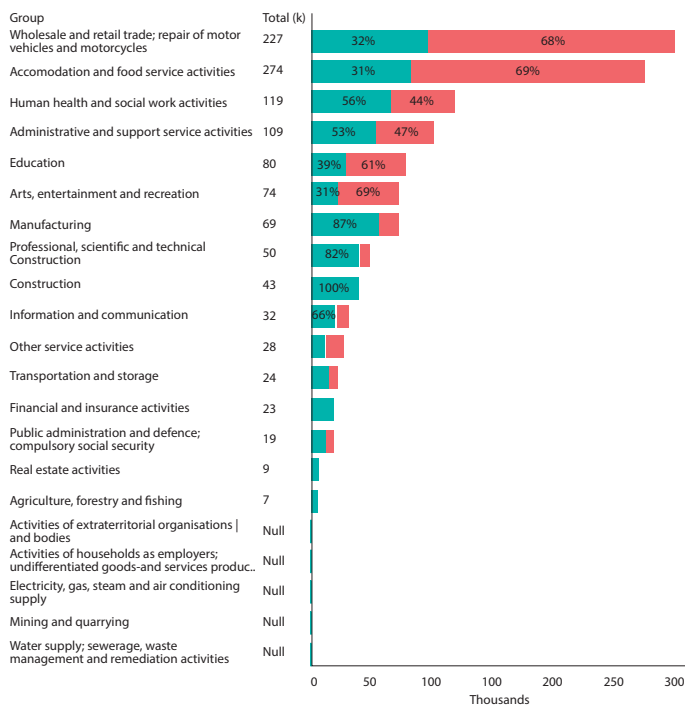
Sum of Thousands for each Group broken down by Occ/Ind and Pt/Ft/Total. Color shows details about Pt/Ft/Total. Details are shown for Pt/Ft/Total. The view is filtered on Occ/Ind and Pt/Ft/Total. The Occ/Ind filter keeps OCC. The Pt/Ft/Total filter keeps FT and PT. ASHE 2017, ONS. Confidence levels for individual entries at the Occupational group or Industry sector are frequently low (or withheld if a very low sample), therefore figures are shown to provide broad guidance only.

Overall 52% of jobs for this age group are part-time. This compares to 28% of all jobs across all age groups. In some cases, this may mean that the people doing them are combining them with studying either part-time or full-time. In other cases, part-time work might denote under-employment or mixing working with caring responsibilities. Generally, it is the lower skilled roles (the Elementary and Sales & Customer Service occupations) which are dominated by part-time work.

These two types of job account for just over half of all jobs for this age group, however they make up the bulk (70%) of part-time roles. Broadly speaking, occupations requiring greater skill levels are much more likely to provide full-time roles.

Looking now at the sectors where young people work. Figure 14 shows that young people are spread across a range of sectors.

Figure 14: Employment of 18-21 year olds by sector



Sum of Thousands for each Group broken down by Occ/Ind and Pt/Ft/Total. Color shows details about Pt/Ft/Total. Details are shown for Pt/Ft/Total. The view is filtered on Occ/Ind and Pt/Ft/Total. The Occ/Ind filter keeps Occ. The Pt/Ft/Total filter keeps FT and PT. ASHE 2017. ONS. Confidence levels for individual entries at the Occupation group or industry sector are frequently low (or withheld if a very low sample), therefore figures are shown to provide broad guidance only.

Two industry sectors dominate employment for the 18-21 age group; Wholesale and Retail trade. Repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles is the largest sector accounting for 23% of the total (with Retail accounting for 80% of this sector and 93% of its part-time jobs). Accommodation and food service activities' covers another 22% of all roles, with a heavy preference for part-time roles.

Those sectors providing a greater proportion of full-time positions generally require skilled work, for example Manufacturing or 'Professional, scientific and technical activities', however these sectors are relatively small employers.

Supporting young people

Should I look for a job?

Lots of young people move into work after they finish their studies at 18. There are a range of opportunities out there. Ideally they will look for something that offers them the money that they need, but also provides opportunities for further training and progression. Lifelong learning is an important part of developing their career and good employers in all sectors will offer them opportunities to develop while working.

How can I get a decent job?

It is important for young people to think about what they are looking for from working life. Not everyone wants the same thing. But, most people will be looking for something that gives them the money that they need, but also provides opportunities for further training and progression. Young people should ask questions about development and progression when looking at the jobs that are available.

Future education

Myth

If you haven't got good qualifications by the time you're 18, you'll never get them.

Fact

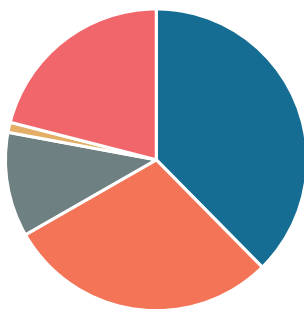
There are lots of opportunities to retake GCSEs, A levels or to take new qualifications after someone turns 18. While it is important to do as well as possible between 16 and 18, this is not the only chance! Over 70% of learners in further education are over 18.

Destination data shows that 13% of the Key Stage 5 students who graduated in 2014/15 went to an FE college as their next destination. This is roughly 48,000 young people. Although the number of over 19 year old students in FE colleges has been declining in recent years, this is still one of the major destinations for young people at 19. Around 18% of the further education population are aged 19-24.

Post-19 learners in FE colleges are doing a wide range of different things. Some are retaking qualifications, others are exploring new areas often with a stronger vocational focus. Further education colleges offer a range of courses often going up to degree level. Figure 15 shows how the qualifications that post 19 learners are doing break down by level.

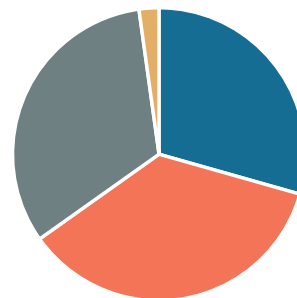


Figure 15: Further education learners (19+) by level (2014/2015)²¹



■ Level 1 & Entry ■ Level 2 ■ Level 3 ■ Level 4, 5 or Higher ■ Other

Figure 15: Further education participation (19-24) by level (2014/2015)²²



■ Full Level 2 ■ Full Level 3 ■ English and maths ■ Other Levels

Supporting young people

Should I stop learning after 18?

Progression in a young person’s career is strongly linked to their ability to keep on learning. Even if they haven’t done very well at school, it is important not to close the door on learning. They will find that lots of other people are pursuing qualifications in further education after the age of 19. Further education colleges offer a very different learning environment to schools and may suit them better.

²¹ Department for Education (2018). Adult (19+) Overall Participation (aims) by Level (2010/11 to 2014/15) - Total Number of Aims. Available from https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/665791/201617_FE_and_Skills_Participation_demographic_tool.xlsx [Accessed 26th July 2018].

²² Department for Education (2018). Adult (19+) Overall Participation (aims) by Level (2010/11 to 2014/15) - Total Number of Aims. Available from https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/665791/201617_FE_and_Skills_Participation_demographic_tool.xlsx [Accessed 26th July 2018].

Apprenticeships

Myth

Apprenticeships are just for traditional industrial jobs.

Fact

Around 7% of young people progress to apprenticeships at 18 or 19. They are pursuing a wide range of programmes at different levels of skill (including some high level opportunities in ICT). The most popular types of Apprenticeship are in business, administration and law and health, public services and care. The more traditional Apprenticeship sector of engineering and manufacturing is the third most popular option, tying with retail and commercial Apprenticeships.

Apprenticeships combine work, on the job training and study. They are paid roles where you work alongside experienced staff to develop job-specific skills over 1 to 5 years (depending on level)²³. Around 7% of students progress from Key Stage 5 to Apprenticeships. This was 28,000 young people in 2015/2016. The government are keen to see this number go up and would like more young people to be pursuing Apprenticeships in the future.

For 19-24 year olds on Apprenticeships in 2016/17, 50% were on an Intermediate programme (GCSE level), 44% on Advanced (A -level equivalent) and 5% at the most-skilled Higher level.²⁴

The four most popular sectors dominate Apprenticeships, accounting for 84% of all Apprenticeships. Most popular is business, administration and law. (28% of total), with 1 in 10 programmes at the Higher level – which is over half of all Higher level apprenticeships. Health, public services and care is at 24% followed by engineering and manufacturing technologies and retail and commercial enterprise, both on 16%. Whilst information and communication technology accounts for only 4% of the overall total, it provides nearly 1 in 5 of the Higher level programmes.

²³ Department for Education. (2018). Become an apprentice. Available from <https://www.gov.uk/apprenticeships-guide> [Accessed 26th July 2018].

²⁴ Department for Education and the Education and Skills Funding Agency. (2018). FE data library: Apprenticeships. Available from <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/fe-data-library-apprenticeships> [Accessed 26th July 2018].

Supporting young people

Should I do an apprenticeship at 18?

In many ways Apprenticeships combine the best of both worlds. They allow their work and start to earn money, whilst also allowing them to continue to learn and develop their skills. If they can find an Apprenticeship in an area that they are interested in it is worth investigating. However, Apprenticeships are more difficult to find in some areas than others, so if this is a route that they are interested in they should seek out some help and advice about the best way to get into an Apprenticeship. Careers advisers at their school or college should be able to help with this.

Not in education, employment or training

Myth

Loads of young people are sitting around doing nothing.

Fact

Less than 10% of young people aren't in education, employment or training (NEET) six months after they finish key stage 5. This number has been dropping over recent years. Of those who are NEET around half are actively looking for work, with the rest often having more complex personal circumstances.

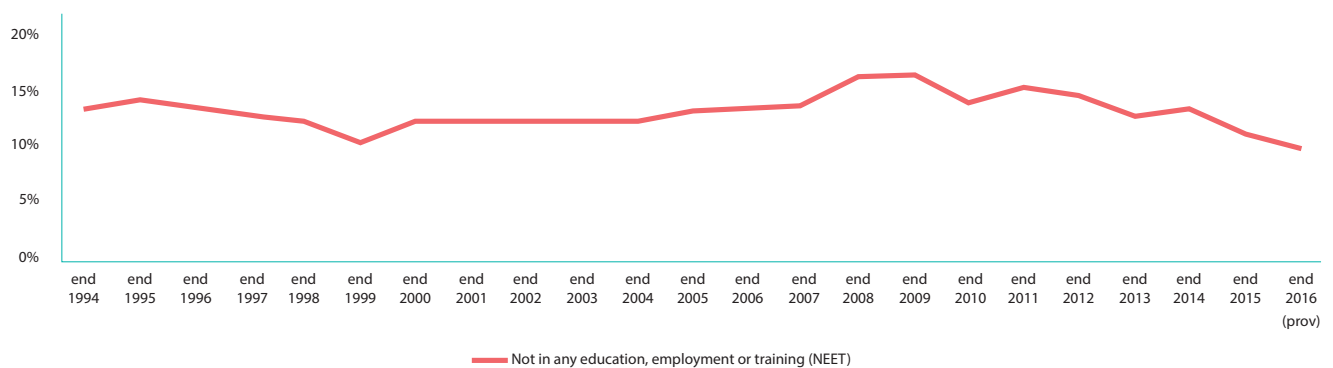
The government measure the number of young people who do not manage to sustain a destination after they finish Key Stage 5. This includes both those who have started something and dropped out and those who have not managed to find anything to do. Around 8% of Key Stage 5 students from 2014/15 fell into this category (roughly 32,000).

The latest data²⁵ shows an estimated 9.8% of all 18-year-olds in England are not in any education, employment or training, with more males (11.1%) than females (8.4%). There are two components of the NEET figure; those unemployed but actively looking for work and those who are inactive – these are equally split in the 2016 data.

The number of NEET young people in England has been falling over the last few years.

²⁵ Department for Education. (2017). Participation in education, training and employment: 2016. Available from <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/participation-in-education-training-and-employment-2016> [Accessed 26th July 2018].

Figure 16: The number of NEET young people over time



Young people may have a wide range of reasons why they are NEET. These might include temporary NEET status following dropping out from a course or losing a job, caring responsibilities, mental or physical health problems as well as career indecision. Most young people will move on from a period of being NEET to re-enter education or work. However, long periods of NEET can have negative effects that can last across your lifetime.²⁶

Supporting young people

What should I do if I have nothing to do?

One of the challenges of leaving school or college is that young people lose a lot of the structure that they have been used to since they first went to school at the age of four or five. It is easy to allow a short break after they finish their studies to stretch out into an extended period of inactivity. For other young people ending up not in education, employment or training might come as a result of dropping out of a course that hasn't worked out or perhaps because they have been ill or have been looking after a sick parent or sibling. If they find themselves in the situation of being inactive it is important for them to look for help and figure out what options are open to them. Applying for jobs is a good start, as is investigating courses at the local FE college or university. They may also find a visit to the National Careers Service or Jobcentre Plus will put them in touch with some expert help to get active again.

²⁶ Ralston, K., Feng, Z., Everington, D., & Dibben, C. Do young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) experience long term occupational scarring? A longitudinal analysis over 20 years of follow up. *Contemporary Social Science*, 11(2-3), pp.203-221.

Conclusions

This paper has shown how powerful data can be in informing career decisions. The decisions that young people make about their careers at 16 and 18 are important moments in building a career. It is important that young people have good information and that they are not operating on the basis of myths and misinformation.

At The Careers & Enterprise Company we are committed to putting data and research into the hands of young people and those that support them in making career decisions. We absolutely endorse the statement by the Gatsby Charitable Foundation that:

Every pupil, and their parents, should have access to good-quality information about future study options and labour market opportunities.²⁷

In our previous research we have highlighted how difficult it can be for young people to engage with information and integrate what it tells them into their decision making²⁸. That is why we have focused in this paper on dispelling some of the common myths and providing people with the tools to see what is actually going on. It is also why we have provided some points for reflection to help young people to think through the implications of this data for themselves.

Going forwards we are going to be doing a lot more work on the destinations that young people go to. We want to help young people to understand what they should do to allow them to achieve the destination that they want and also help them to choose destinations when they are not sure what way they want to go. At the moment it can be difficult to compare different types of destination and to think through the consequences of these different choices. We hope that this report has provided some further clarity on this and promise that we will continue to share information, provide help in interpreting what it means and continue to work with all of our partners to transform the lives of the next generation.

²⁷ Gatsby Charitable Foundation. (2014). *Good Career Guidance*. London: Gatsby Charitable Foundation, p.7.

²⁸ The Careers & Enterprise Company. (2016). *Moments of Choice*. London: The Careers & Enterprise Company.

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