

Young participation in higher education: A-levels and similar qualifications

To	Heads of HEFCE-funded higher education institutions Heads of further education providers
Of interest to those responsible for	Planning, Admissions, Widening participation, Advice to applicants to higher education
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Executive summary

Purpose

1. This report looks at the rates of young participation in higher education (HE) for pupils from English schools and colleges based on their attainment in terms of qualifications studied at the level prior to HE (known as Level 3 qualifications). The report also examines the extent to which a pupil's school and background affects their likelihood of progressing to HE at the ages of 18 or 19.
2. Interactive graphs accompany this document and provide more detailed data relating to some of the profiles and participation rates discussed here. They can be accessed on the HEFCE web-site at www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/wp/ourresearch/ypalevel/.

Context

3. Research to understand trends in HE participation among young people has previously looked at how participation changes over time, identifying changes at the national level, as well as differences in the young participation of men and women, and between people living in different parts of the country. Understanding how different Level 3 qualifications affect a pupil's likelihood of progression into HE forms part of HEFCE's ongoing programme of work in this area, and this report seeks to extend the existing evidence base to incorporate this additional dimension.
4. Prior educational attainment is a key consideration in terms of a student's pathway into higher education. Whether from academic or vocational qualifications, a prospective student's prior educational attainment is the main criterion used by higher education institutions (HEIs) to decide whether to make offers to or accept applicants. And in choosing a path beyond Level 3, prospective students themselves may judge the attainability of a place in HE on the basis of their educational attainment to date.
5. While it is our ambition to build as comprehensive an evidence base as we are able with regards to young participation in HE, we cannot provide a complete analysis of young participation generally. We are unable to consider participation in HE at institutions outside of the UK, HE in further education colleges outside of England, or HE delivered at a significant number of alternative providers in England. Nor have we reported here on the outcomes of Level 3 pupils

beyond their rates of participation in HE while young (on account of the timescales involved in tracking A-level 3 cohort through to HE attainment and employment destinations).

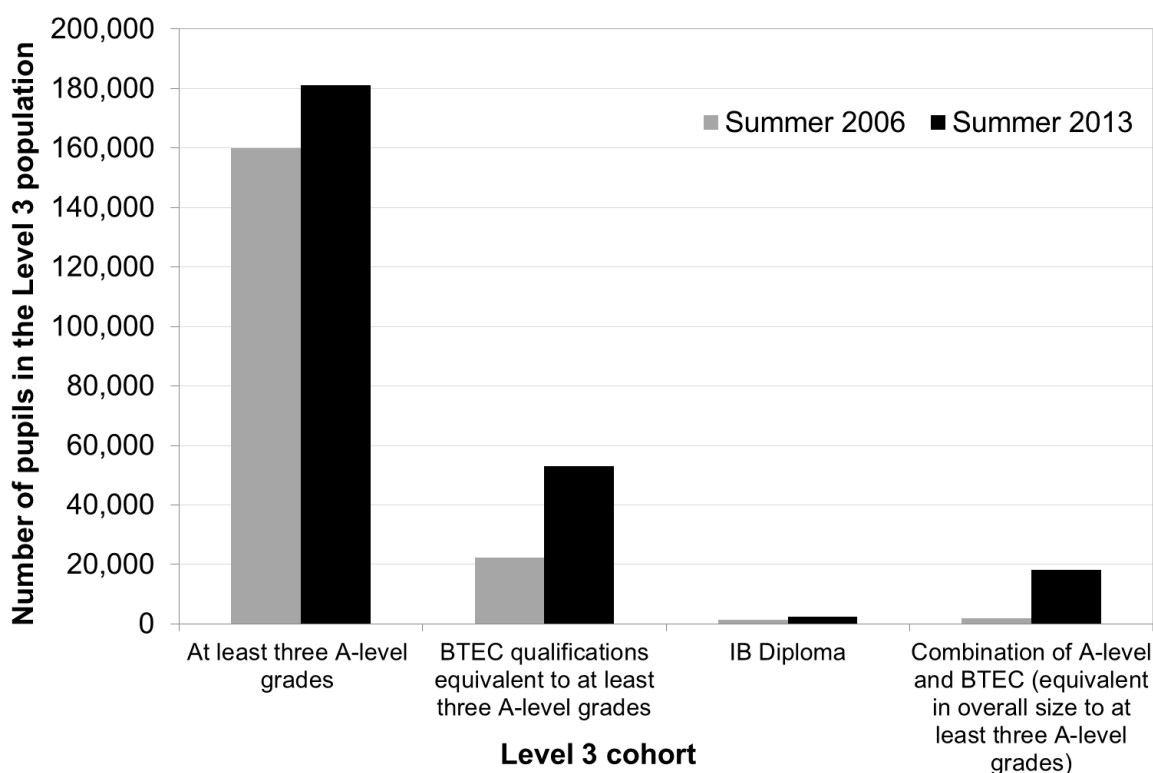
6. We have not attempted to identify the specific causes behind the findings reported in this document. Nor have we attempted to consider all of the factors that may influence or explain an individual's participation in HE. While we are aware that factors such as a pupil's ethnicity or socio-economic background can affect their propensity to participate in HE, these factors are not considered here because of limitations in the underlying pupil data. On this basis we have not attempted to model combined effects on a pupil's propensity to participate in HE. Instead we present simple univariate summaries, and make no comment as to whether other measurable factors or unobserved effects might be responsible for the patterns we have observed.

Key points

7. This study looks at all Key Stage 5 pupils from English schools and colleges who achieved A-level 3 qualification from school year 13 (typically aged 18) between summer 2006 and summer 2013. For each of the eight cohorts covered by this period we have observed the proportion of pupils who entered higher education within two academic years (typically before the age of 20).

8. The key findings from this investigation largely focus on those pupils whose Level 3 achievement is equivalent to a minimum of three A-levels, and are as follows below. Figure A shows the size of the Level 3 populations discussed within these key findings, and their growth between summer 2006 and summer 2013. Interactive graphs accompany this document and provide access to further, detailed data relating to the profiles and participation rates discussed. They can be accessed on the HEFCE web-site at www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/wp/ourresearch/ypalevel/.

Figure A: Size of Level 3 populations whose achievement is equivalent to a minimum of three A-levels



The proportion of pupils achieving the highest grades at A-level has remained broadly static between summer 2006 and summer 2013.

9. Although absolute numbers of A-level pupils achieving the highest grades (including AAA, as well as A*A*A*, A*A*A and A*AA for cohorts after 2008-09) have increased by more than 5,000 since summer 2006, to 30,975 in summer 2013, these pupils continue to represent a similar proportion of the cohort. Having accounted for 16 per cent of pupils with at least three A-level grades in summer 2006, in summer 2013 the proportion achieving the highest grades was only one percentage point higher, at 17 per cent.

The number and proportion of pupils holding a BTEC National or a combination of Level 3 qualifications has risen since summer 2006.

10. The number of pupils whose Level 3 attainment has been obtained solely from one type of Level 3 BTEC National qualification almost doubled, from 25,515 in summer 2006 to 48,425 in summer 2013. Having accounted for 10 per cent of the overall 2005-06 Level 3 cohort, they made up 17 per cent of the equivalent 2012-13 cohort.

11. Meanwhile the number of pupils holding a combination of Level 3 qualifications more than tripled in the same period, from 6 per cent of the overall Level 3 cohort (14,460 pupils) to 16 per cent (48,625 pupils).

12. Within this, the numbers of pupils holding a combination of A-level and BTEC qualifications has increased tenfold, from 2,100 in summer 2006 to 21,000 in summer 2013. The vast majority of pupils holding this combination of qualifications have an achievement equivalent, in overall size, to at least three A-level grades. There was particular growth in pupils achieving one 'one-grade' BTEC and two A-level grades.

13. Similar growth has been found in the numbers of pupils who hold only BTEC qualifications at Level 3, but who hold more than one type (or a mixture) of BTEC. From 1,125 in summer 2006 numbers increased to 18,140 in summer 2013.

The proportion of pupils achieving the highest grades at BTEC has increased since 2005-06.

14. The proportion of pupils holding Level 3 BTEC qualifications equivalent to three A-levels who achieved the highest grades of three distinctions (DDD) or above increased by 21 percentage points between summer 2006 and summer 2013, from 17 per cent of the cohort to 38 per cent.

Pupils with A-levels or International Baccalaureate (IB) Diplomas generally have higher HE participation rates than those with other Level 3 qualifications.

15. The young participation rate for the cohort completing in summer 2011 was 79 per cent for pupils with A-levels and 80 per cent for those with IBs. (We acknowledge that the young participation rates observed for pupils holding an IB Diploma may be understated if international entries to HE study – which cannot be counted in this study – are more common among this cohort.) The rate for pupils with BTEC qualifications was 41 per cent in the same year. 64 per cent of those holding a combination of A-level and BTEC qualifications entered HE while young.

Pupils holding Level 3 qualifications in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects have higher rates of young participation in HE than those who did not study STEM subjects.

16. For those pupils achieving at least three A-levels, there have been increases in the occurrence of mathematics and science subjects among their best three A-levels: between summer 2006 and summer 2013 numbers grew by around 25,000 in each subject area (or by 63 per cent and 30 per cent respectively). This study also finds that at least 90 per cent of pupils with Mathematics, Further mathematics, Biology, Chemistry or Physics as one of their top three A-levels in summer 2011 entered HE while young.

17. Meanwhile, BTEC pupils with STEM subjects among their highest three grades increased in number more than threefold in the same period, to almost 20,000. Such pupils in the summer 2011 cohort were found to have a young participation rate of 50 per cent: four percentage points higher than the equivalent rate for BTEC pupils who had no STEM subjects among their highest three grades.

18. Of those pupils studying a combination of A-level and BTEC qualifications, pupils with STEM A-level(s) and non-STEM BTEC(s) had the highest young participation rate of 73 per cent. Those with the opposite combination of non-STEM A-level(s) and STEM BTEC(s) had the lowest rate (66 per cent).

Young participation rates are found to differ across the English regions for pupils holding A-levels and similar qualifications.

19. Disparities of as much as 27 percentage points were observed in the young participation rates of pupils from different regions, and these differences are found to become larger as pupils' attainment decreases. With the exception of those holding IB Diplomas, pupils from the North East and London regions were consistently seen to have some of the highest participation rates. For pupils holding IB Diplomas, young participation rates were highest among those from the South West and the South East.

20. At a national level, pupils with higher attainment from Level 3 qualifications were found to have higher rates of young participation in HE than those pupils with lower attainment. Nationally, we find that 94 per cent of pupils who achieved at least three A-levels at grades ABB or higher progressed into HE while young: this proportion was 79 per cent among equivalent pupils whose A-level attainment was lower than ABB.

21. Young participation rates among pupils with different attainment levels were also seen to vary by region. Among pupils with at least three A-level grades the largest difference is for those from the South East and the South West, where 93 per cent of pupils with grades of ABB or higher progressed to HE while young, compared with 75 per cent among pupils with lower grades. The smallest difference is among pupils gaining their A-levels from schools and colleges in London, where the young participation rates were 93 per cent and 82 per cent respectively.

Action required

22. This document is for information only.