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Official Statistics

Background information for annual qualifications market report: academic year 2020 to 2021

Published 24 February 2022

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1. Purpose

This release provides information on the qualifications market in England for the academic year 2020 to 2021. For this report the 2020 to 2021 academic year is considered the start of October 2020 to the end of September 2021. It presents data on the number of qualifications available for award by recognised awarding organisations and certificates awarded for the qualifications. The data for previous years is also presented for comparison purposes.

2. Geographical coverage

This report presents data on the number of qualifications and certifications in England. Some statistics on certifications outside the UK for qualifications which are awarded in England are also reported.

3. External drivers

3.1 Coronavirus

A series of measures put in place in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic during the 2019 to 2020 and 2020 to 2021 academic years might have affected the trends in certifications of qualifications. On 18 March 2020, the Secretary of State for Education announced that exams in schools and colleges due to take place in summer 2020 would be cancelled to help fight the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19). On 31 March 2020, we received a [direction from the Secretary of State](#) which set out how the Government expected GCSE, AS and A levels to be awarded in summer 2020. As part of the [exceptional arrangements for exam grading and assessment in 2020](#), students [ultimately received the higher of a centre assessment grade or calculated grade for GCSE, AS and A level](#).

On 9 April 2020 we received a [direction from the Secretary of State](#) which set out how the Government expected vocational and technical qualifications, and general qualifications other than GCSE, AS and A levels, Extended Project Qualifications and Advanced Extension Awards in maths to be assessed and awarded in the coming weeks and months. Following this direction from the Secretary of State for Education, Ofqual published an [Extraordinary Regulatory Framework](#) (ERF) on 22 May 2020. The ERF put in place a framework to facilitate the issue of results in summer 2020 to learners taking vocational and technical qualifications in circumstances where normal assessments were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Following further consultation, Ofqual published the [Extended Extraordinary Regulatory Framework](#) (EERF) on 12 October 2020. This framework followed on from the ERF by allowing awarding organisations to adapt their qualifications in 2020 and 2021 in recognition of the fact that, although assessments may take place after summer 2020, learners may have experienced disruption to teaching, learning and assessment because of the pandemic.

In January 2021, the government announced its decision that, in the interests of fairness, exams would not take place as usual in schools and colleges in spring and summer 2021. A [letter of direction from the Secretary of State for Education](#) confirmed that in summer 2021, students taking GCSE, AS and A levels regulated by Ofqual should be awarded grades based on an assessment by their teachers. On 25 February 2021, following the direction from the Secretary of State and consultation on [how best to provide alternative arrangements to summer 2021 exams](#), Ofqual published [guidance for the arrangements](#) for undertaking assessments and the awarding process for vocational and technical qualifications and other general qualifications.

Following the direction from the Secretary of State and consultation, Ofqual also published the [Vocational and Technical Qualifications Contingency Regulatory Framework](#) (VCRF) on 24 March 2021. Like the ERF and EERF, the VCRF outlined the ways in which assessments could be adapted and how results should be determined. Where necessary and appropriate, awarding organisations were permitted to make adaptations to their qualifications and assessments. Some awarding organisations made changes to the delivery of their assessments, such as moving to online and remote assessment and invigilation. Other made changes to their assessment approach, for example, by replacing observation of practical skills with professional discussion. For some qualifications, in particular licence to practise qualifications, adaptations were not appropriate and so practical assessments had to be delayed due to public health measures. From January 2021, in line with government policy, awarding organisations were permitted to issue results based on Teacher Assessed Grades at either qualification or unit level for qualifications used for progression to higher or further study, or into employment.

Public health restrictions and other interventions due to the COVID-19 pandemic may also help explain some of the changes in certifications from the academic year 2019 to 2020 to the academic year 2020 to 2021, and some continuing trends over the last 2 years. For example, there was a range of mitigations implemented across vocational and technical qualifications, depending on their primary purpose. Some assessment carried on where possible, in line with public health requirements. The impact of centre closures and staff furlough are also likely to have affected the ability of awarding organisations to deliver qualifications and certificate as many learners as they would normally.

3.2 Interests of users of qualifications

A range of factors influence the development and take-up of qualifications. There is a complex and dynamic relationship between those providing qualifications (awarding organisations), purchasers who teach or otherwise deliver the qualifications (schools, colleges and training providers), students, and 'end users' (employers and further and higher education providers). Government reforms of qualifications, performance measures, public funding policies and other requirements will all have a significant impact on many of these relationships.

Users of qualifications respond to incentives, many of which come into play because of government policy changes.

Awarding organisations respond to market demand for their qualifications, market opportunities, and to incentives to develop and deliver new qualifications to meet government policy requirements and to meet changing skills requirements.

In deciding which qualifications to offer, in addition to student needs and institutional priorities, schools and colleges are influenced by accountability measures and funding considerations. Decisions are often balanced against practical delivery considerations such as availability of teachers and student demand. Schools and colleges may be informed, advised and influenced by organisations in their networks, which can lead to changes to their choice of which qualifications to offer.

Employers are users and purchasers of many vocational and other qualifications and, therefore, have influence over market demand for qualifications, including which qualifications lead to securing and sustaining employment in their sectors. Employer demand for certain types or specific qualifications can influence which qualifications learners choose to take. Demand by employers is influenced by a range of factors including policy changes, licence to practice requirements, sector development and other wider economic changes.

Students may opt to study qualifications that will best help them progress in work or in higher or further education, according to their interests. Sometimes these relationships are very direct, such as many licence to practise schemes which depend on gaining a regulated qualification.

3.3 Change impacting upon the market in England - GCSE, AS and A level qualifications

GCSE, AS and A level reform

GCSEs, AS and A levels have undergone [major reform](#) in England which is likely to have impacted upon the qualifications market. Reformed GCSEs, AS and A levels started to be phased in for first teaching from 2015. The first results for the reformed AS levels were issued in 2016 and the first results for the reformed GCSEs and A

levels were issued in 2017. The reformed GCSE, AS and A level qualifications included in this statistical release are those that were available to certificate in the 2020 to 2021 academic year (November 2020 and summer 2021 exam series). All GCSEs, AS and A levels awarded in summer 2021 were reformed qualifications.

Resit opportunities

For legacy AS and A level qualifications there is one resit opportunity that awarding organisations are required to offer in the May or June of the year following the final award of the qualification. Certificates for resits are included in the number of certificates reported in this release.

AS decoupling

Changes to the structure of qualifications following the reforms have impacted upon the number of qualifications available and certificates awarded. AS qualification grades no longer contribute to A level grades and the decoupling of these qualifications has resulted in fewer candidates taking reformed AS qualifications. These structural changes have resulted in a reduction in the number of AS certificates awarded in England over the last 5 years.

Accountability reform

Changes to performance measures may have had an impact on the uptake of some qualifications.

From summer 2017, Level 1/Level 2 certificates were not included in government performance tables. The removal of Level 1/Level 2 certificates from performance tables has encouraged some centres to move back to GCSE qualifications in these subjects.

As part of changes to the [secondary accountability system announced in 2013](#), [Progress 8](#) and [Attainment 8](#) became the [key measures of performance](#) for all state-funded secondary schools and those colleges that offer KS4 education in England from 2016. They replaced the 5+ A*-C including English and mathematics headline measure and expected progress measures.

Progress 8 was introduced in 2016 and aims to capture the progress a pupil makes from the end of primary school to the end of secondary school. For English language and English literature, providing that both subjects are taken, the best score from these subjects is double weighted. The way that Progress 8 is calculated has encouraged uptake in the reformed English literature GCSE.

Progress 8 and Attainment 8 measures, as well as the government's separate measure of students entering [English Baccalaureate](#) (EBacc) subjects, may also further encourage centres to focus on the delivery of EBacc subjects. This most likely explains the [decrease in certificates awarded in non-EBacc subjects](#), as the calculation includes only a maximum of 3 non-EBacc GCSEs.

Please note, all [performance measures have been suspended](#) for the 2020 to 2021 and 2019 to 2020 academic years, as part of steps taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.4 Change impacting upon the market in England - Vocational and other qualifications

Performance tables

It is possible that we continue to see the effect of changes to [performance tables](#), first introduced for reporting in performance tables in 2017 to 18. Information on the

changed requirements can be found in the [technical guidance for awarding organisations](#).

For Applied General and Tech Level qualifications, demand for the reformed qualifications in 2017 to 18 did not match that of the pre-existing qualifications. For the last 2 years we have seen a trend of increasing demand for the reformed qualifications and reducing demand for the pre-existing qualifications. We expect this trend to continue as funding is withdrawn for pre-existing qualifications.

2021 was another exceptional year and saw the introduction of a [Vocational and Technical Qualifications Contingency Regulatory Framework](#). For nearly all qualifications in vocational qualifications performance table, awarding organisations were able to either adapt their assessments, issue calculated results or issue results based on Teacher Assessed Grades (from January 2021).

Qualification type

Regulated qualifications are classified into different qualification types. The qualification type classification is selected by the awarding organisation offering the qualifications. Qualification types provide information which complements that provided by the sector subject area characterisation. Qualification type categorisation can give an indication of a number of features, such as the nature of the qualification, the type of assessment, the qualification level and guided learning hours.

In order to improve consistency in the way qualifications are classified, we revised qualification types as outlined in our [letter to awarding organisations](#) alongside [guidance on how to classify qualifications](#). Qualifications are now classified into 3 categories: i) general, ii) life and personal skills, and iii) vocational, technical and professional. Table 1 gives a further breakdown of the new structure of qualification types. In the new structure, we removed qualification types that did not identify a coherent group of qualifications and also cut across other types or described a qualification using other information in the regulatory framework. We added types where necessary to cover the broadest range of qualifications that we regulate. No changes were made for those qualification types where there are qualification specific regulatory requirements. This includes, but is not limited to, GCSEs, AS and A levels, Functional Skills, and end-point assessments.

Table 1: Structure of qualification types

Broad qualification type	Specific qualification type	Status
General	Advanced Extension Award	Regulatory type
General	GCE A level	Regulatory type
General	GCE AS level	Regulatory type
General	GCSE (9 to 1)	Regulatory type
General	GCSE (A* to G)	Regulatory type
General	Project	Regulatory type
General	Other General Qualification	Other qualification type
General	Free Standing Mathematics Qualification	Retired type
General	Principal learning	Retired type
Life and Personal Skills	English for Speakers of Other	Regulatory type

	Languages	
Life and Personal Skills	Functional Skills	Regulatory type
Life and Personal Skills	Essential Skills (Northern Ireland)	Regulatory type
Life and Personal Skills	Other Life Skills	Other qualification type
Life and Personal Skills	Key Skills	Retired type
Life and Personal Skills	Basic Skills	Retired type
Vocational, Technical and Professional	Technical Qualification	Regulatory type
Vocational, Technical and Professional	End-Point Assessment	Regulatory type
Vocational, Technical and Professional	Occupational Qualification	Other qualification type
Vocational, Technical and Professional	Vocationally-Related Qualification	Other qualification type
Vocational, Technical and Professional	Performing Arts Graded Examinations	Other qualification type
Vocational, Technical and Professional	Other Vocational	Other qualification type
Vocational, Technical and Professional	General National Vocational Qualification	Retired type
Vocational, Technical and Professional	Vocational Certificate of Education	Retired type
Vocational, Technical and Professional	National Vocational Qualification	Retired type

With revisions to qualification types, some qualifications under a particular category have had their qualification type changed. Table 2 provides examples of the changes we expected awarding organisations to make in 2018, where the left-hand column gives the old qualification types and the right-hand column gives the expected new categories for each of the old qualification types.

Table 2: Change of qualification types

Current category	New category
Advanced Extension Award	No change
End-Point Assessment	No change
English for Speakers of Other Languages	No change
Entry Level	English for Speakers of Other Languages

Entry Level	Essential Skills (Nothern Ireland)
Entry Level	Other General Qualification
Entry Level	Other Life Skills
Free Standing Mathematics Qualification	Other General
Functional Skills	No change
GCE A level	No change
GCE AS level	No change
GCSE (9 to 1)	No change
GCSE (A* to G)	No change
Higher Level	Occupational Qualification
Higher Level	Vocationally-Related Qualification
Key Skills	No change
National Vocational Qualification	Occupational Qualification
Occupational Qualification	No change
Other General Qualification	English for Speakers of Other Languages
Other General Qualification	Essential Skills (Nothern Ireland)
Other General Qualification	Occupational Qualification
Other General Qualification	Other General Qualification
Other General Qualification	Other Life Skills
Other General Qualification	Other Vocational
Other General Qualification	Performing Arts Graded Examination
Other General Qualification	Vocationally-Related Qualification
Principal Learning	No change
QCF	English for Speakers of Other Languages
QCF	Essential Skills (Nothern Ireland)
QCF	Occupational Qualification
QCF	Other General Qualification
QCF	Other Life Skills
QCF	Other Vocational
QCF	Performing Arts Graded Examination
QCF	Vocationally-Related Qualification

Vocationally-Related Qualification	English for Speakers of Other Languages
Vocationally-Related Qualification	Occupational Qualification
Vocationally-Related Qualification	Vocationally-Related Qualification
Vocationally-Related Qualification	Other Life Skills
Vocationally-Related Qualification	Other Vocational

As part of the removal of the regulatory arrangements for the QCF, the term 'QCF' has been removed from qualification titles. The only exception where 'QCF' may still be used in a qualification title is for some Technical and Applied General qualifications, where appropriate. This is to differentiate between pre-existing qualifications and those changed to meet government's Performance Table requirements.

Awarding organisations were requested to review, and where appropriate amend, the qualification types of their qualifications to fit with our revised list. These revised qualification types have been available since 1 October 2018 and awarding organisations were given until 31 October 2018 to amend their qualification types. Some awarding organisations are still migrating their qualifications over to the new categories and so we may still report on old qualification types until this migration is complete.

Funding changes for post 19-year-olds

The [funding rules](#) for an academic year for vocational qualifications aimed at students who are over 19 years of age may have had some effect on the number of certificates awarded in that academic year.

Functional Skills qualifications

From 1 September 2019 a [reformed suite of English and maths Functional Skills qualifications \(FSQs\)](#) have become available, which is likely to have impacted upon the FSQs market and certifications.

[A temporary flexibility](#) was introduced by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) in February 2020, changing how and when English and mathematics FSQs were required to be taken. This have impacted upon the number of certificates awarded. Also, a move away from apprenticeship frameworks, which included FSQs in ICT, to apprenticeship standards which do not include FSQs in ICT, is also likely to have impact on certifications for those qualifications.

The number of students achieving GCSEs in English and mathematics by the age of 16 during the COVID-19 pandemic may also have affected FSQ entries and so certifications.

Technical Awards and Technical Certificates

We would expect the introduction of T Levels to have an impact on the number of certificates awarded for Applied General and Technical qualifications. They are being introduced in phases and are expected to replace most Tech Levels when fully implemented. The first T Levels in Construction; Digital; and Education and Childcare were introduced for first teaching from September 2020 (certificating in 2022) with T Levels in Health and Science being available from September 2021. T Levels in Business and Administration; Engineering and Manufacturing; and Legal, Finance and Accounting will be available from September 2022. The full suite of T Levels is expected to be available from November 2023.

Apprenticeships end-point assessments

The numbers of qualifications and certifications of apprenticeships end-point assessments (EPAs) are not included in the release. Ofqual collects data for the Annual Qualifications Market Report from awarding organisations. The awarding organisations that conduct EPAs do not issue certificates for the completion of EPAs. Instead, they request certificates on behalf of apprentices, which are issued by the Education and Skills Funding Agency under Section A3 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.

4. Data source

Information on qualifications (covering title, type, awarding organisation, sector subject area and level) is taken from [Ofqual's Register of Regulated Qualifications](#), referred to as the Register in this release. The Register gives information on regulated qualifications and recognised awarding organisations in England. Data reported in this report was extracted from the Register on the 20 January 2022.

Data on the number of certificates awarded are sent by awarding organisations to Ofqual.

The number of qualifications and certificates awarded in all specifications for GCSEs, AS and A levels taken in England is sent to Ofqual annually by the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) on behalf of the regulated awarding organisations, which includes the GCSE, AS and A level awarding organisations. GCSE certificates cover full course and short course. A level includes A level applied double award and A level applied single award. Similarly, AS includes AS applied double award and AS applied single award. The data reported here reflects those students who received certificates and therefore does not include those who were unclassified or were absent.

5. Limitations

Data are collected at the earliest point available, which is the first day of the next reporting period. This reduces the time between the activity and reporting on the activity. The main source of potential error is in the information provided by awarding organisations. Ofqual cannot guarantee the number of certificates submitted is correct, although awarding organisations are expected to provide the correct data. Ofqual compares the data over time and checks for systematic issues. The figures reported in this release reflect the certificates issued by awarding organisations at the time of data collection.

6. Quality assurance

Quality assurance procedures are carried out as explained in the [Quality Assurance Framework for Statistical Publications](#) published by Ofqual to ensure the accuracy of the data and to challenge or question it, where necessary. Publication may be deferred if the statistics are not considered fit for purpose.

7. Revisions

For vocational and other qualifications, once published, data are not usually subject to revision, although subsequent releases may be revised to insert late data or to correct an error. Qualifications may also be re-categorised to a different type, level, sector subject area or awarding organisation. In some cases, data may be amended to reflect the new categorisation. For GCSE, AS and A level certificates we collect provisional data for the latest academic year from JCQ at the point when it is reasonably complete, although final certificate numbers may be slightly different and will be updated in the next release of this publication.

8. Confidentiality and rounding

In accordance with Ofqual's [rounding policy](#), figures in the statistics and commentary for the number of certificates issued are rounded to the nearest 5 for ease of understanding. If the value is between 1 and 4, it is represented as 0~. A 0 represents zero achievements. We use unrounded values to derive percentages. As a result of rounded figures, the percentages shown in charts and tables may not necessarily add up to 100. In the datasets published alongside this publication, the figures are rounded to the nearest 5 (values between 1 and 4 are represented as 0~). A 0 represents zero achievements. This is to ensure the data does not reveal an individual student.

9. Status

These statistics are classified as official statistics.

Related publications

This statistical release presents annual data. There will be some overlap between the figures in this release and those in Ofqual's [Vocational and Other Qualifications Quarterly publications](#).

A number of other statistical releases and publications relate to this one, including: - [Statistics: GCSEs \(key stage 4\) collection](#) - [Statistics: 16 to 19 attainment collection](#) - [Statistics: further education and skills](#)

For any related publications for qualifications offered in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland please contact the respective regulators – [Qualifications Wales](#), [CCEA](#) and the [Scottish Qualifications Authority](#) (SQA).

Useful Links

- [Report and data tables](#) accompanying this release
- [Definitions of important terms](#) used in this release
- [Policies and procedures](#) that Ofqual follows for production of statistical releases

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