



# Perceptions of A levels, GCSEs and Other Qualifications – Wave 11

Employers and Higher Education Institutions

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## **Executive Summary**

This report presents the findings from research undertaken by Opinion Leader on behalf of the Office for Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) to investigate the perceptions of GCSE and A level qualifications, and of Ofqual more generally, amongst employers and Higher Education Institutions.

Ofqual, and before this, its predecessor the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) has been conducting a similar research amongst teachers and the general public since 2003, though this has been the first time that a view from employers and from Higher Education Institutions has been sought. Therefore, wave 11 of this research represents the baseline of this particular part of the overall project.

### **Methodology**

A survey was conducted of employers and of Higher Education Institutions by telephone. The view of these groups was considered to be important as they are key 'users' of the qualifications and Ofqual wanted to know how far these met their needs. Overall 500 interviews were completed with members of staff at businesses in England who indicated that they were able to answer questions about recruitment policy and/or practice at their organisation. Businesses who said that they did not use the qualifications for recruitment purposes were not screened out as their opinions were considered to be valid. Businesses were selected at random from lists held by an approved sample supplier and fieldwork for this survey was undertaken between 19th November 2012 and 28th March 2013.

The survey of Higher Education Institutions comprised 182 interviews undertaken with those at institutions who indicated that they were responsible determining which prospective students were offered a place at their institution. At the start of fieldwork interviews were conducted with those in institutions which had been drawn from a list of all Higher Education Institutions in England provided by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). However, this approach was amended in the light of difficulties faced in achieving the required rate of response; while institutions on the original sample list continued to be called, additional potential respondents were encouraged to volunteer to be part of the research through Ofqual and UCAS communications. Fieldwork for the survey of Higher Education Institutions was conducted between 19th November 2012 and 18th March 2013.

## **Key findings**

### **Most employers and Higher Education Institutions were confident in the GCSE and A level systems.**

The majority of Higher Education Institutions and employers indicated that they were confident in both the GCSE and A level system; almost nine in ten (88 per cent) of Higher Education Institutions said that they were confident in the A level system while seven in ten (71 per cent) reported confidence in GCSEs. This compares favourably with the employer data. Two-thirds of those with 20 or more employees (67 per cent) reported confidence in A levels though a slightly greater proportion of this group reported confidence in GCSEs (69 per cent). More than half of employers with 19 or fewer employees agreed that they had confidence in both the A level and GCSE systems (54 per cent in each case).

Employers and Higher Education Institutions also indicated that they valued the qualifications. More than nine in ten Higher Education Institutions and a similar proportion of larger employers agreed that the GCSE is an important qualification for people to obtain for their future (94 per cent and 93 per cent respectively). Four in five Higher Education Institutions and a similar proportion of larger employers said the same regarding A levels (83 per cent and 79 per cent respectively). Around three quarters of smaller employers agreed that the A level is an important qualification for people to obtain for their future and similar proportions said the same regarding GCSEs (75 per cent and 77 per cent respectively).

The majority of Higher Education Institutions (78 per cent) agreed that the A level provides a reliable measure by which school leavers can fairly be compared to one another, while 72 per cent said the same about GCSEs. Employers were less likely than Higher Education Institutions to agree that A level and GCSE qualifications are reliable; 57 per cent of larger employers and 54 per cent of those that are smaller said that A levels are reliable, while 67 per cent of larger employers and 54 per cent of smaller employers said the same regarding GCSEs. Larger employers therefore differed to Higher Education Institutions in that they were more likely to say that they found GCSEs rather than A levels to be a more reliable measure of a candidate's abilities.

### **Higher Education Institutions were more likely than employers to use qualifications to make a judgement about a candidate. Employers were more likely to use the GCSE qualification than the A level. While academic attainment was important, other factors came into play when making a judgement about a candidate.**

More than four in five (84 per cent) Higher Education Institutions agreed that they routinely used A levels in order to make a judgement about offering a school leaver a

place at their institution and 87 per cent said that they routinely used GCSEs. Employers were less likely than Higher Education Institutions to say that they routinely used the qualifications in general, although employers indicated that they were more likely to use GCSEs than A levels when making a judgement about a candidate. A third of larger employers (34 per cent) and 38 per cent of smaller employers said that they used A levels, while 63 per cent and 51 per cent respectively said they used GCSEs.

The academic attainment of candidates was important for both employers and Higher Education Institutions. However, when the groups were asked without being prompted with a list of answers to say which factors were most important when making decisions about candidates, around a quarter of Higher Education Institutions mentioned 'academic attainment' generally (26 per cent), while 24 per cent mentioned A level qualifications and 21 per cent mentioned GCSEs. More important to Higher Education Institutions, however, were a candidate's reference or personal statement (39 per cent) and the candidate's general attitude to study (31 per cent).

Amongst larger employers two in five mentioned the candidate's general attitude to work while 35 per cent cited the candidate's previous experience as being important. Academic qualifications generally was a factor mentioned by a quarter (26 per cent) and GCSEs specifically by 18 per cent. Seven per cent mentioned A level qualifications specifically.

Amongst smaller employers almost a half (47 per cent) mentioned general attitude to work, while two in five (40 per cent) mentioned personality fit. Academic qualifications generally were mentioned by 14 per cent while one in ten mentioned GCSEs and 2 per cent mentioned A level qualifications specifically.

**There was evidence that confidence in Ofqual and in GCSEs had been affected by the GCSE incident, though results are inconsistent.**

Amongst Higher Education Institutions almost all had heard of the English GCSE incident and around three quarters of these (77 per cent) said that their confidence in GCSE exams had been affected negatively at least a little by it; 12 per cent said that their confidence had been affected 'a lot'.

Four in five larger employers (80 per cent) and a similar proportion of smaller employers (81 per cent) had heard of the English GCSE incident. Amongst those in larger employers and those in smaller employers who had heard of the incident, three in five said that their confidence had been affected at least a little (59 and 60 per cent respectively); 13 per cent said that their confidence had been affected 'a lot' in each case.

While 15 per cent of Higher Education Institutions disagreed that they had confidence in the GCSE system, this rose to more than a half (52 per cent) of Higher Education Institutions whose confidence had been affected 'a lot' by the English GCSE incident. Consistent with this, two thirds (65 per cent) of larger employers who were aware of the incident said that they had confidence in the GCSE system compared with 81 per cent of those who were unaware.

While the GCSE English grading controversy had some impact on perceptions, results were inconsistent and indicated that those who were engaged and used the qualification were simply more likely to be aware of the English GCSE incident. For example, more than four in five (85 per cent) of those Higher Education Institutions who said that their confidence has been impacted 'a lot' said that the GCSE qualification is a good indicator of the overall ability of a candidate compared with three quarters (74 per cent) of Higher Education Institutions.

**Higher Education Institutions were positive about Ofqual's effectiveness as a regulator while employers were not likely to know much about the organisation. Both employers and Higher Education Institutions felt it was important to have an organisation such as Ofqual regulating exams.**

When asked without prompting how much they knew about Ofqual, just fewer than two in five (37 per cent) Higher Education Institutions said that they knew 'a fair amount' or 'a lot' about the organisation. Fewer employers said the same; just 4 per cent of smaller employers and 8 per cent of larger employers said this while 39 per cent and 35 per cent respectively said that they know nothing at all.

Consistent with these findings, after being told about Ofqual and its role, more than nine in ten Higher Education Institutions, 36 per cent of smaller employers and 41 per cent of larger employers said that prior to the interview they were aware that Ofqual is the independent regulator of qualifications, examinations and assessments in England.

In accordance with the relative lack of awareness of Ofqual, around half of smaller employers and 57 per cent of larger employers did not have an opinion on whether or not Ofqual was effective at maintaining the standards of qualifications. Those in Higher Education Institutions however, were more able to give an opinion and in these institutions three quarters (74 per cent) said that Ofqual was effective.

Higher Education Institutions and larger employers were positive regarding the importance of having an organisation such as Ofqual independently regulating qualifications and exams. Almost all Higher Education Institutions said that it is important that an organisation such as Ofqual performs this role (98 per cent) compared with nine in ten large employers. Smaller employers were slightly less positive; three quarters said that having an organisation such as Ofqual is important.

**Employers were most likely to use their own professional networks for information about exams, while Higher Education Institutions were likely to use UCAS and awarding organisations.**

The sources of information used by employers and by Higher Education Institutions tended to be the sources that they would trust for information about exams. More than three quarters of smaller employers said that they would trust professional associations (77 per cent) and their own professional networks (76 per cent), while 93 per cent and 88 per cent of larger employers said the same about each of these organisations respectively. Half of smaller organisations and three quarters of larger organisations said that they would trust Ofqual as a source of information about exams.

Around three in five (58 per cent) of Higher Education Institutions said that they used UCAS as a source of information about qualifications, while 53 per cent mentioned awarding organisations and 32 per cent mentioned NARIC (the National Agency responsible for providing information, advice and expert opinion on qualifications worldwide). Around one in five (19 per cent) said that they used Ofqual as a source of information about qualifications.

- Amongst Higher Education Institutions, 97 per cent said that they would trust awarding organisations and 93 per cent said that they would trust Ofqual as a source of information about exams.

## **Introduction**

Opinion Leader was commissioned by Ofqual to undertake research measuring perceptions of A level and GCSE qualifications amongst employers and those responsible for admission of students to Higher Education Institutions. This research was carried out as part of an existing body of work that has previously looked to gather opinions of qualifications amongst teachers, parents and students. This year was the first time Ofqual commissioned such research with employers and Higher Education Institutions, and it anticipated that research amongst all of these audiences will continue in coming years.

This report details how the research was carried out and the findings. In the development of the research instruments, questions were tailored to suit the different types of respondent and new questions developed in order to investigate employer- or Higher Education Institution - specific concerns. While the main body of our work concerned A levels and GCSEs, our surveys also asked employers and Higher Education Institutions questions to discover levels of awareness of Ofqual itself, and perceptions of the organisation amongst their audiences.

### **Objectives of the research**

The objectives of the research were to investigate:

- Overall perceptions of, and confidence in, qualifications taken by young people, including A levels, GCSEs and other academic and vocational qualifications;
- Confidence in qualifications' standards and the examination system – both in its implementation and regulation;
- Awareness of, and ratings of, Ofqual.
- Specifically for employers, and also to some extent for Higher Education Institutions, the research was designed to investigate the way in which A level and GCSE qualifications are used in order to recruit school leavers or to make decisions about offering school leavers a place at a Higher Education Institution.

### **Research Background**

Debates around the ability of A level and GCSE qualifications to measure the abilities of school leavers accurately, and to differentiate between candidates in the context of perceived grade inflation have been on-going for several years. It is within this context that Ofqual has conducted research, aiming to measure perceptions of qualifications amongst teachers and the general public.



Wave 11 of the perceptions survey has been undertaken during a time of particular interest in the qualifications system with various changes to the way in which students are assessed being discussed widely in the media and in parliament. These discussions have come to a head in recent months with a Judicial Review into the GCSE English grading controversy of Summer 2012 and the Secretary of State's announcement that while GCSEs will be reformed, they will not be replaced with the English Baccalaureate Certificate.

While Ofqual and its predecessor the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) have explored perceptions of qualifications amongst teachers and the general public since 2003, this wave of research incorporates, for the first time, the views of Higher Education Institutions and employers. The inclusion of these audiences into the wider body of perceptions research aims to set a baseline reading of the role of the qualifications amongst those who most make use of them and to begin to construct some reliable data which might be tracked in future waves of research.

Employers' and Higher Education Institutions' perspectives were considered a valuable addition to Ofqual's existing perceptions studies.

The value of qualifications to employers has been a point of discussion since GCSEs replaced the O Level.<sup>1</sup> One purpose of both GCSEs and O Levels was to enable employers to measure the aptitude and suitability of candidates when recruiting to their organisation. Past research, and the tendency for individuals with higher level qualifications to earn more than those with fewer qualifications, has indicated that qualifications do play a part in employers' consideration when making decisions on recruitment decisions. That said, for some employers, qualifications do not offer substantive evidence as to the capability of prospective employees. For these employers, the ability to learn new vocational skills, or the disposition and manner of a candidate might be of greater importance.<sup>2</sup>

Other concerns about examinations (across a number of groups in society but amongst employers specifically) have included worries that qualifications simply prepare students for passing an examination, and complaints about the opportunities students have to re-sit examinations. In both of these cases, some employers have

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1 [https://cerp.aqa.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf\\_upload/CERP-RP-LM-01062011\\_0.pdf](https://cerp.aqa.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf_upload/CERP-RP-LM-01062011_0.pdf)

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[http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/48558/1/\\_Libfile\\_repository\\_Content\\_LSE%20British%20Politics%20and%20Policy%20Blog\\_2012\\_Aug\\_2012\\_TO\\_DO\\_blogs.lse.ac.uk-GCSEs\\_should\\_be\\_reformed\\_and\\_their\\_wider\\_role\\_radically\\_rethought.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/48558/1/_Libfile_repository_Content_LSE%20British%20Politics%20and%20Policy%20Blog_2012_Aug_2012_TO_DO_blogs.lse.ac.uk-GCSEs_should_be_reformed_and_their_wider_role_radically_rethought.pdf)

concerns about whether studying for qualifications sufficiently prepares students for the workplace.<sup>3</sup>

Higher Education Institutions have voiced similar concerns about qualifications in the past. Use of qualifications such as GCSEs or A Levels varies by institution type and the courses that it offers students, and so for some institutions, GCSEs and A Levels were not necessarily the minimum standard they would expect of candidates. Rather, they looked for other ways in which a candidate could demonstrate experience or a particular skill. Even where institutions do make use of GCSEs or A Levels to make admissions decisions, there may be other criteria alongside these that factor into their decision-making, especially given some institutions' doubts that students pick up many transferable skills by studying for these qualifications.<sup>4</sup>

Researching perceptions of the qualifications system in light of all this amongst these two audiences, therefore, was deemed important for the purposes of measuring attitudes of the usefulness and value of qualifications both to employers and Higher Education Institutions.

## **Methodology**

Opinion Leader conducted telephone interviews for both the employers' survey and that of Higher Education Institutions. A brief overview of the methodology for each audience is provided below with more detailed information on sample size, the use of quotas and the weighting of the data provided as an appendix to this document.

### **Employers Survey**

Overall Opinion Leader completed 500 interviews with members of staff at businesses in England who indicated that they were able to answer questions about recruitment at their organisation. In smaller organisations (1-19 employees) this person tended to be the managing director or owner of the company, while in larger businesses (20 employees or more) the person undertaking the interview tended to be someone working in the Human Resources Department. Interviews for the employers' survey were undertaken between 19<sup>th</sup> November and 28<sup>th</sup> March 2012.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://cerp.aqa.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf\\_upload/CERP-RP-LM-01062011\\_0.pdf](https://cerp.aqa.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf_upload/CERP-RP-LM-01062011_0.pdf)

<sup>4</sup>

[http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/48558/1/\\_Libfile\\_repository\\_Content\\_LSE%20British%20Politics%20and%20Policy%20Blog\\_2012\\_Aug\\_2012\\_TO\\_DO\\_blogs.lse.ac.uk-GCSEs\\_should\\_be\\_reformed\\_and\\_their\\_wider\\_role\\_radically\\_rethought.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/48558/1/_Libfile_repository_Content_LSE%20British%20Politics%20and%20Policy%20Blog_2012_Aug_2012_TO_DO_blogs.lse.ac.uk-GCSEs_should_be_reformed_and_their_wider_role_radically_rethought.pdf)

Sample for the survey was drawn from complete lists of businesses in the UK. At the time of drawing this sample it was assumed that it would be more difficult to achieve interviews with those in businesses with more than 250 employees, so twenty sample leads were drawn for every interview which was required with businesses of this size. For interviews with businesses with 249 employees or fewer, ten sample leads were drawn for each interview required.

When designing the sampling approach for the employers survey, the key aim was to finish with results which were representative of the population of businesses in England; a population which is heavily skewed in favour of smaller businesses. However, it was also an aim to include within the survey the views of a significant number of large organisations so that results for this sub-group could be compared to the rest of the population and to reflect the fact that the importance of the view of these organisations is commensurate with their size rather than with their number in the population.

For this reason, quotas for the minimum number of interviews to be undertaken with businesses of different sizes were set, with quotas for larger businesses over-representing their number in comparison to 'natural quotas' or what could be expected in a sample which reflected the profile of the overall population. After interviews had been completed a process of weighting was applied to the data in order to correct for the disproportionate quotas and to re-adjust results so that they could be said to be representative of the audience.

Similarly, separate quotas were set on the geographic location of the businesses included in the survey and weights were applied by region in order to make sure that results were representative. A further weight was also applied to adjust for an over-representation of interviews undertaken with organisations identified as working in 'educational services' in the final data and to correct results so that the incidence of these types of businesses was as might be expected in a proportionate sample.

The application of a process of weighting has some impact on the robustness of the final data. Due to the degree of skew in the natural population of businesses it was decided that a single set of data for employees would need to use weights which would have a great impact on the results which were obtained. In order to limit the impact of weighting on the data, the employers' survey was designed so that separate data-files were produced for businesses with 1-19 employees and for businesses with 20 or more employees. For this reason the results which are reported below often make this distinction between what are considered to be 'larger' and 'smaller' businesses.

## **Higher Education Institutions Survey**

Opinion Leader carried out 182 interviews with Higher Education Institution employees who indicated that they were responsible for making a decision regarding which school leavers get offered a place at their institution. At the time of designing the approach to the survey the interviews were exclusively due to be undertaken with departmental heads of admission at Higher Education Institutions. However, due to difficulties with contacting these individuals identified at the time of completing the interviews, a significant proportion were undertaken with those in centralised admission offices. Interviews for the survey of Higher Education Institutions were undertaken between 19<sup>th</sup> November 2012 and 18<sup>th</sup> March 2013.

The sample for the survey of Higher Education Institutions was originally drawn from a list of all Higher Education Institutions in England provided by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). In designing the approach towards achieving interviews with this sample, the original plan was to make sure that the profile of the final data was representative of the overall population in terms of two key factors. Firstly the 'type' of Higher Education Institution was considered in terms of four classifications; Russell Group institutions, other old (pre 1992) institutions, new (post 1992) institutions and Higher Education Institutions of 'other' institution type. Secondly, the general subject area of the department in which the person undertaking the interview was considered, with subject areas being divided into five general areas; life sciences and medicine, natural sciences, engineering and technology, social sciences and arts and humanities.

As with the survey of employers, quotas were set on these factors to make sure that the final data were representative in these terms, though unlike the employer's survey the quotas reflected the natural distribution and did not attempt to over-represent responses from any one group.

During the time in which interviews with Higher Education Institutions were being undertaken it became clear that it would not be possible to insist that interviews were completed only with those in subject departments and so quotas were relaxed to include interviewees from central admissions offices. Similarly, challenges with completing the required number of interviews in the timescales available meant that strict quotas were not applied in terms of Higher Education Institution type and that communications were sent out via Ofqual and the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) inviting people from Higher Education Institutions to put themselves forward to undertake interviews.

The change from interviewing in terms of strict quotas and from a sample list provided from an identifiable source, to allowing a proportion of Higher Education Institutions to volunteer to take part in the survey in response to communications is important to note when interpreting the Higher Education Institutions data. Its

potential impact on the data should be recognised as it moves the methodology from recruitment in terms of pre-defined conditions to a more 'self-selecting' approach whereby certain engaged individuals are able to put themselves forward to be included in the data. Results therefore could potentially over-represent the views of those types of respondents who are keen to share their view of Ofqual or of the qualifications.

Due to the small numbers of Higher Education Institutions who were originally recruited via the original sample list, it is not possible to provide data on whether those who might volunteer to be part of the research are more or less likely to have positive views of Ofqual or of the qualifications. Either of these situations might be assumed, or it might also be assumed that those who would be keen to take part would be more likely than others to hold more 'extreme' views at both ends of this spectrum. For the reason that adopting any of these positions would be based entirely on supposition, we do not try to offer a view of what the impact of this change might be.

When interviews with Higher Education Institutions were completed a weighting interviews with those working in central admission offices were undertaken it was not possible to apply the original weights for subject area to the data. However, weighting by Higher Education Institution type was applied in order to make results more closely represent that of the overall population.

## **Interpretation of the data**

When interpreting the findings, it is important to remember that the results are based on a sample, rather than the entire population, of Higher Education Institutions and employers in England. Consequently, results are subject to sampling tolerances and not all differences between sub-groups are statistically significant.

Differences between sub-groups which are considered to be 'significant' (those at the 95 per cent confidence interval) and those considered to be 'indicative' (those at confidence intervals of between 80 and 94 per cent) are reported in the text. Those differences which are statistically significant have been emboldened in order to make them obvious to the reader, while indicative findings remain unemboldened.

Very occasionally differences which are at a confidence interval less than 80 per cent are included, but only where the pattern of results is supported elsewhere. Where this occurs, this, and the reasons for including the result, is explained in the text. Similarly, where results are reported on unweighted (rather than effective) bases of less than 40 respondents the number of people making the response is indicated in parentheses.

Rules around the interpretation of findings also apply to differences in results between 'large' and 'small' employers. However, for reasons which are explained in

the technical details at appendix 1, the data for employers was split between these two groups and as such they should be treated as separate audiences. For this reason the results for these groups should be read in parallel and any differences should be treated as indicative rather than statistically significant unless the significance of the finding is indicated in the text or by emboldening.

Weighting data, whilst important in making sure that results are representative, can also introduce a “design effect” and results in an “effective base” that differs from the unweighted and weighted sample size. It is possible to recalculate the *effective* base by taking this distorting effect into account, and this is the figure which is used for statistical analysis and reported in the charts and tables.

## **Employers' Perceptions**

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### **Summary**

Overall, employers were positive about both GCSEs and A levels and in each case larger employers were more positive than smaller employers. Around seven in ten larger employers said that they were confident in both the A level and the GCSE system (67 per cent and 69 per cent respectively), while 54 per cent of smaller employers in each case felt the same.

Employers also indicated that they valued both GCSEs and A levels. More than nine in ten larger employers (93 per cent) and 77 per cent of smaller employers were of the view that the GCSE is an important qualification for people to obtain for their future. Four in five larger employers (79 per cent) and 75 per cent of smaller employers said the same regarding A levels.

Whilst employers claimed that A levels and GCSEs were valuable for potential candidates, a far smaller proportion said that these qualifications played a significant part in the decision making process of offering a place to a candidate. Around one-third (34 per cent) of larger employers said that they routinely used the A level qualification for making a judgement about a candidate for employment (compared with 79 per cent who said the A level was an important qualification for students to obtain for their futures). 38 per cent of smaller employers said the same and 75 per cent of smaller employers said the A level was an important qualification for students to obtain. GCSEs, however, tended to be used more commonly by employers when making a judgement about a candidate; used by 63 per cent of larger employers and 51 per cent of smaller employers.

Even so, when employers were asked for the most important things they took into consideration when considering offering a position to a candidate, neither GCSEs nor A levels featured in the top three most common responses. The most common unprompted responses from smaller organisations included general attitude to work and personality, while for larger organisations attitude to work and previous experience were the most important factors.

As might be expected, the majority of employers said that they did not know a great deal about Ofqual. 39 per cent of smaller employers said that they had never heard of Ofqual, and a similar proportion, 37 per cent, said that they had heard of the organisation but knew nothing about it. Awareness was only marginally higher among larger employers, with a little over one-third (35 per cent) admitting they knew nothing at all about Ofqual.

Despite these low levels of awareness of Ofqual's remit, employers clearly felt that it was important to have an independent organisation like Ofqual taking responsibility for the regulation of exams. 53 per cent of smaller and 57 per cent of larger employers felt that it was 'very important' that exams were independently regulated.

Employers of all sizes were most likely to obtain information about qualifications via general internet searches, with 27 per cent of larger and 29 per cent of smaller employers spontaneously saying so. When asked which sources of information were most influential on their understanding and perception of qualifications, however, both sets of employers said their own professional networks, professional associations and word of mouth were most important.

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## Perceptions of A levels

### Confidence in the A level system

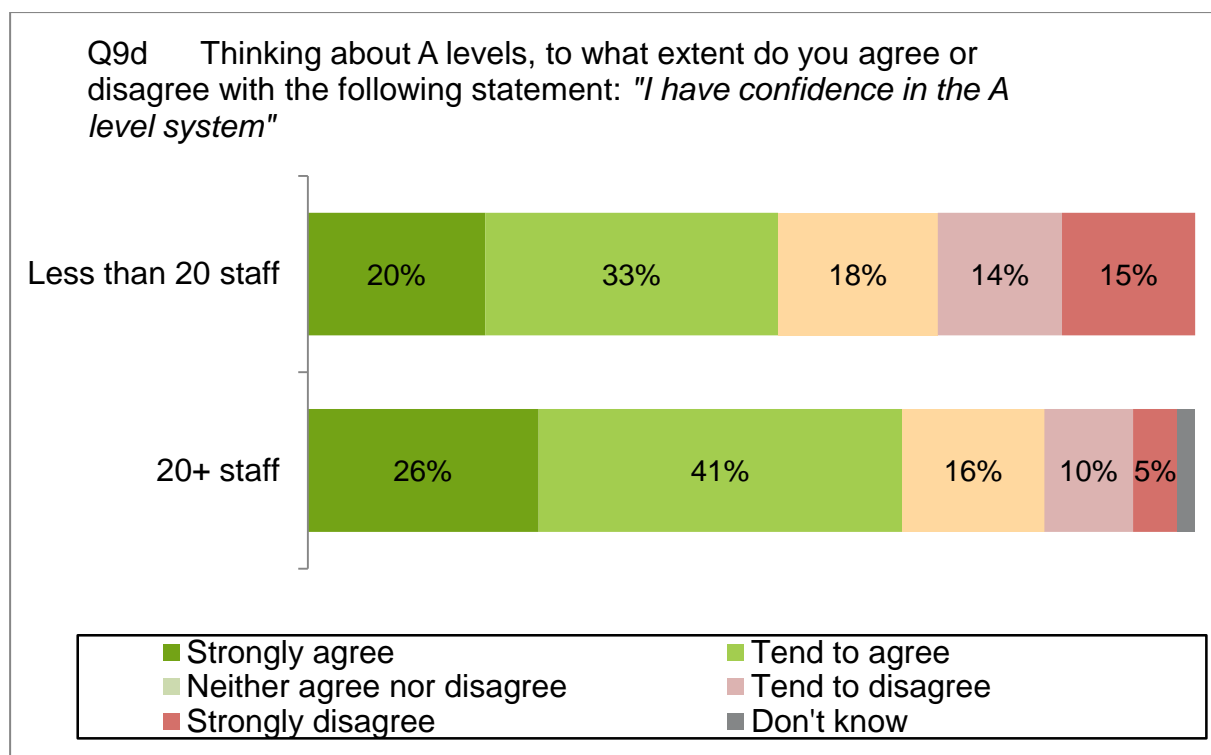
In order to ascertain the level of trust employers had in the A level system they were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement '*I have confidence in the A level system*'. Given events that had taken place in the last year, employers were also asked how their confidence in the system compared with twelve months ago.

Over half of employers agreed that they had confidence in the A level system, although there were some indicative differences according to employer size: 67 per cent of employers with 20 or more staff agreed with this compared with 54 per cent of employers with fewer than 20 staff. Smaller employers were also more likely to actively disagree that they had confidence in the system, with 29 per cent saying this compared with 16 per cent of larger employers. There was little variation in confidence levels depending on region (North, Midlands, and South).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, confidence in A levels tended to be higher amongst those employers who claimed they routinely used A levels to make a judgement about a candidate for employment (**84 per cent**) than amongst those who do not consider A levels when considering employing a candidate (**55 per cent**).



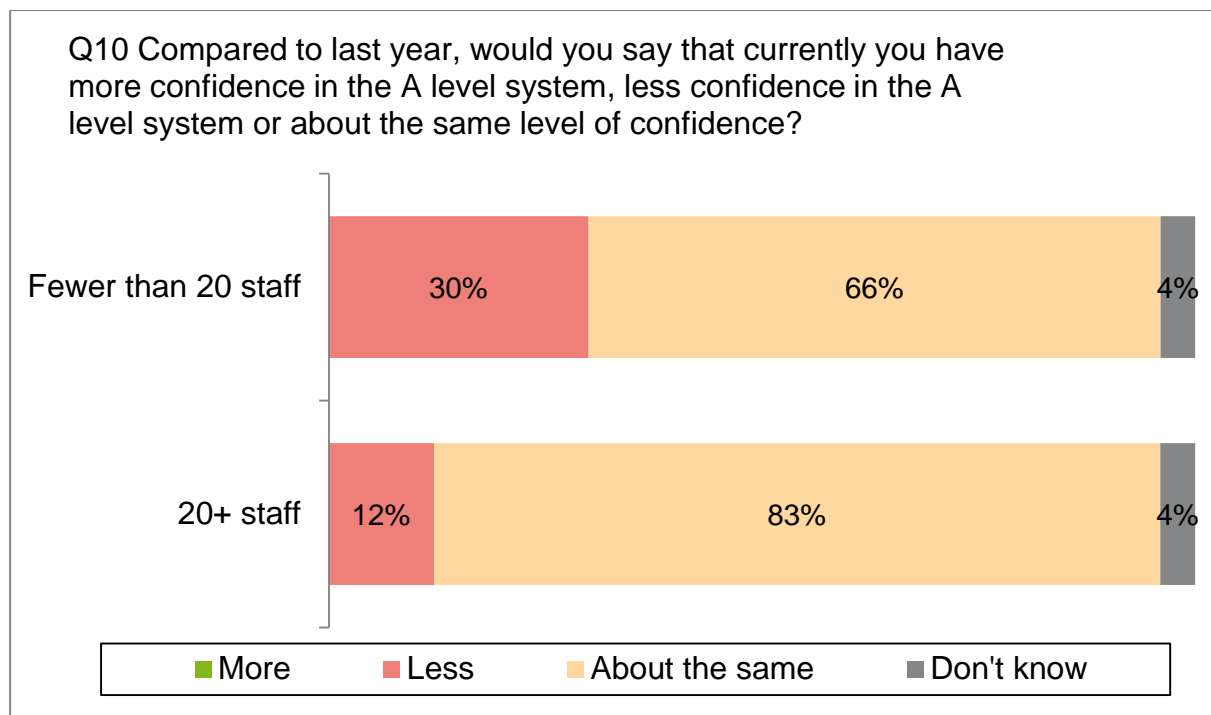
**Figure 1:** Employers' confidence in the A level system by business size



Effective base: 32 smaller employers; 217 larger employers (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

The majority of smaller employers, **66 per cent**, and employers with 20 or more employees (**83 per cent**) said that they had about the same level of confidence in the A level system now as they had a year ago. This clearly illustrates a difference in confidence levels according to business size. Furthermore, organisations with fewer than 20 employees were more likely to say their confidence had actually fallen, with **30 per cent** of this group saying their levels of confidence in A levels was lower than a year ago; this is compared with **12 per cent** of larger organisations. Interestingly, there was little variation amongst larger employers whose confidence in A levels had declined in the past year according to whether they routinely used them to make a judgement about a candidate for employment (16 per cent versus 11 per cent).

**Figure 2:** Changes in employers' confidence in A levels by business size



Effective base: 32 smaller employers; 217 larger employers (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

Even though confidence in A levels had fallen over the past year amongst some employers, this did not necessarily mean that they lacked confidence in the A level system overall. Although the finding is based on small numbers overall, 30 per cent of those smaller businesses whose confidence was lower than last year still had confidence in the A level system overall.

Findings indicate that lack of confidence in the system was related to the extent to which employers felt A level students were awarded the correct grade.

- Of the employers with 20 or more employees who had confidence in the A level system overall, 74 per cent believed that at least half of students got the correct grade.
- Of the employers with 20 or more employees who did not have confidence in the A level system overall, just 9 per cent believed that at least half of students got the correct grade.

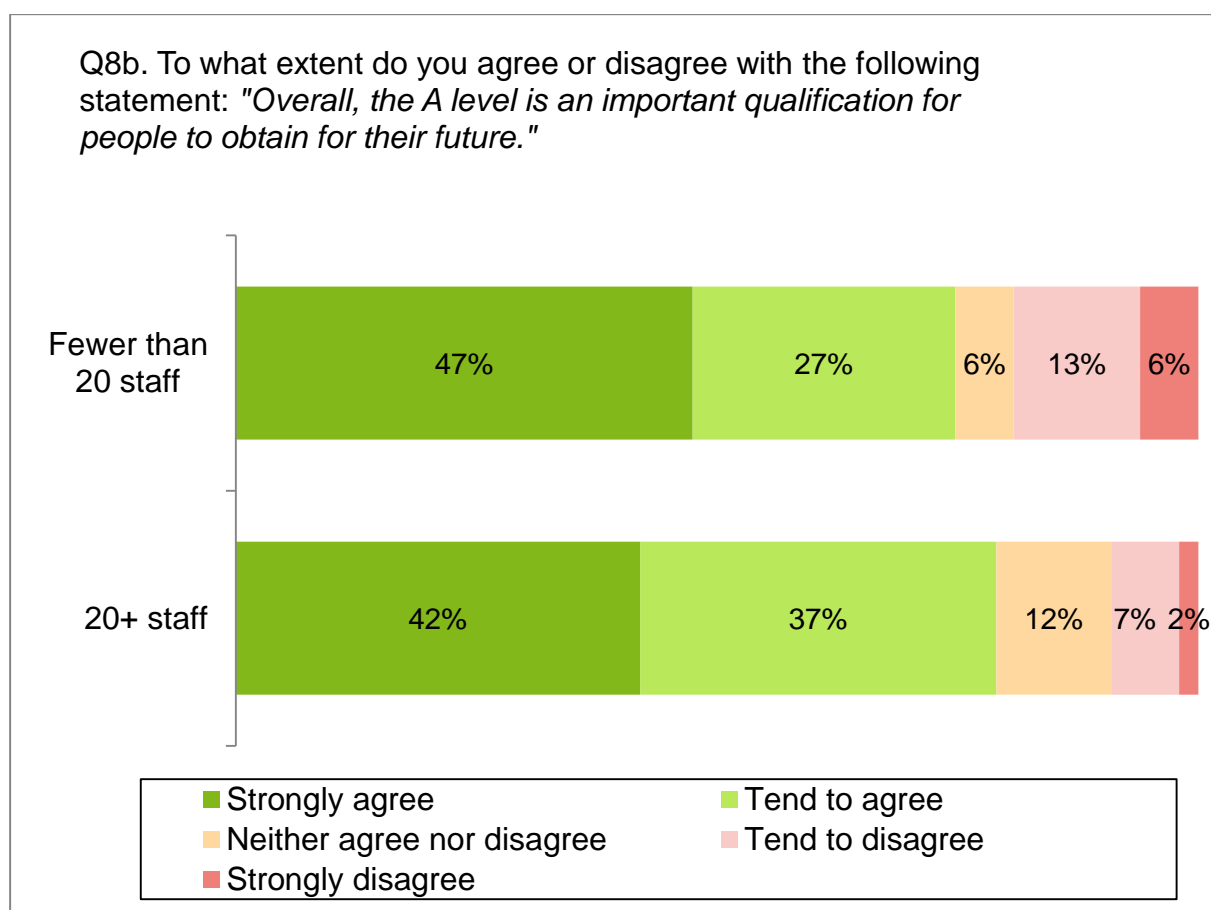
### Perceptions of the importance and value of the A levels

Given widespread debate amongst employers about the value of A levels and the skills they provide candidates, the survey asked them the extent to which they

considered A levels to be an important qualification for people to obtain for their future as well as the impact A levels had on their decision making process when considering a candidate for employment.

Most employers agreed that the A level is an important qualification for people to obtain for their future: 79 per cent of larger employers were in agreement with this statement, as were 75 per cent of smaller employers. Smaller employers, however, also displayed higher levels of disagreement with this statement: 19 per cent did not feel A levels were an important qualification for students to obtain compared with 9 per cent of those with 20 or more employees.

**Figure 3:** Employers' perceptions of A levels: importance of the qualification for students' in the future by business size



Effective base: 32 smaller employers; 217 larger employers (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

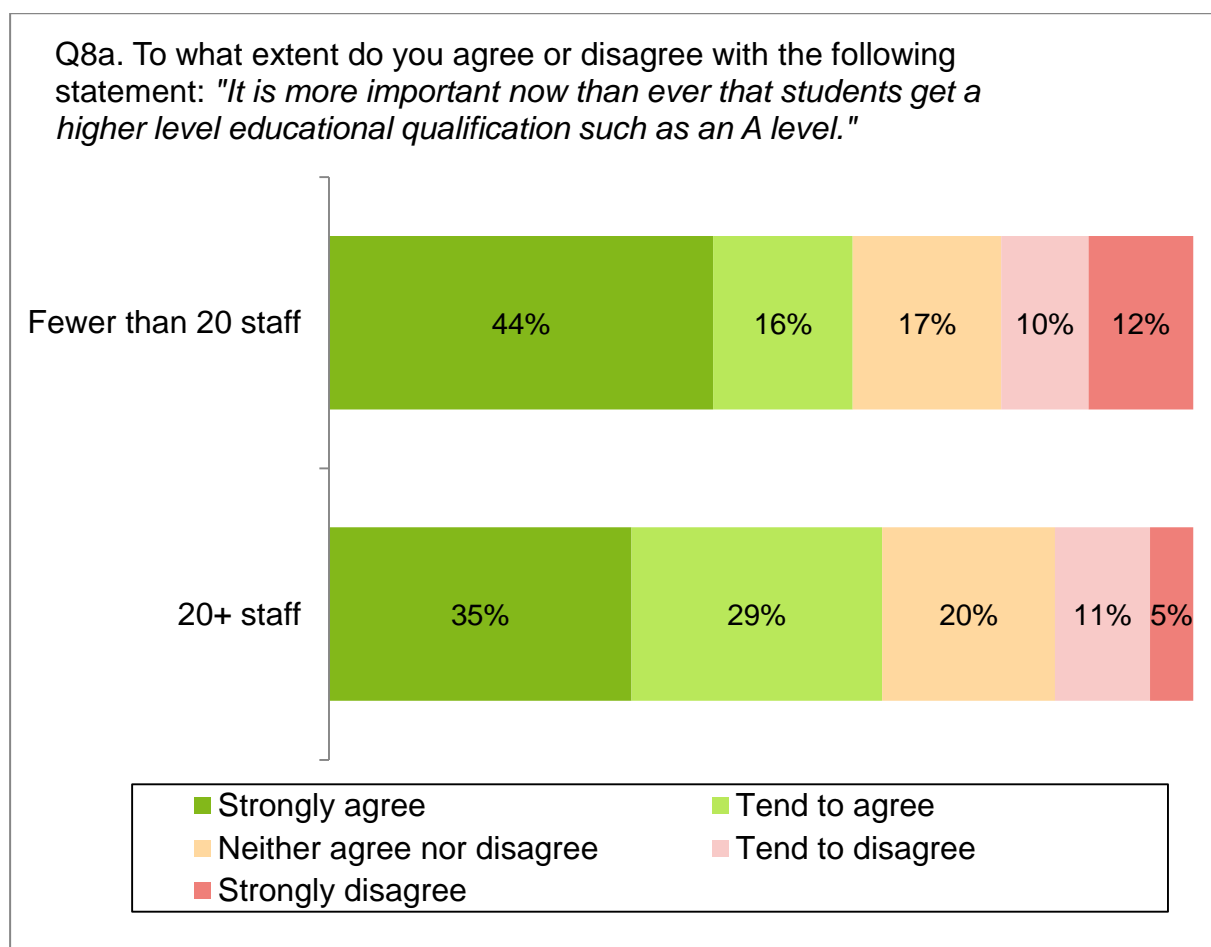
Employers that claimed to use A levels routinely when making a decision about whether to hire a candidate were also more likely to see it as an important qualification than those who did not place as much weight on A levels. For example, **60 per cent** of larger employers who routinely used A levels to determine candidates' suitability for a role strongly agreed that the A level is important for candidates to

obtain for their future. This compared with **28 per cent** of larger employers who did not use A levels routinely when making judgements about a candidate's suitability for a role.

Employers were less certain when considering whether it is now more important than ever that students get a higher level educational qualification. Only two-thirds (64 per cent) of larger employers agreed with this statement compared to four-fifths (79 per cent) who agreed that A levels are an important qualification for candidates to obtain for their future.

Results indicated that smaller employers were less likely to consider A levels important than larger employers: 22 per cent disagreed with the statement *It is more important now than ever that students get a higher level educational qualification such as an A level* compared with 11 per cent of businesses with 50 employees or more.

**Figure 4:** Employers' perceptions of relative importance of A levels by business size



*Effective base: 32 smaller employers; 217 larger employers (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).*

### **Perceptions of the accuracy of A level grades**

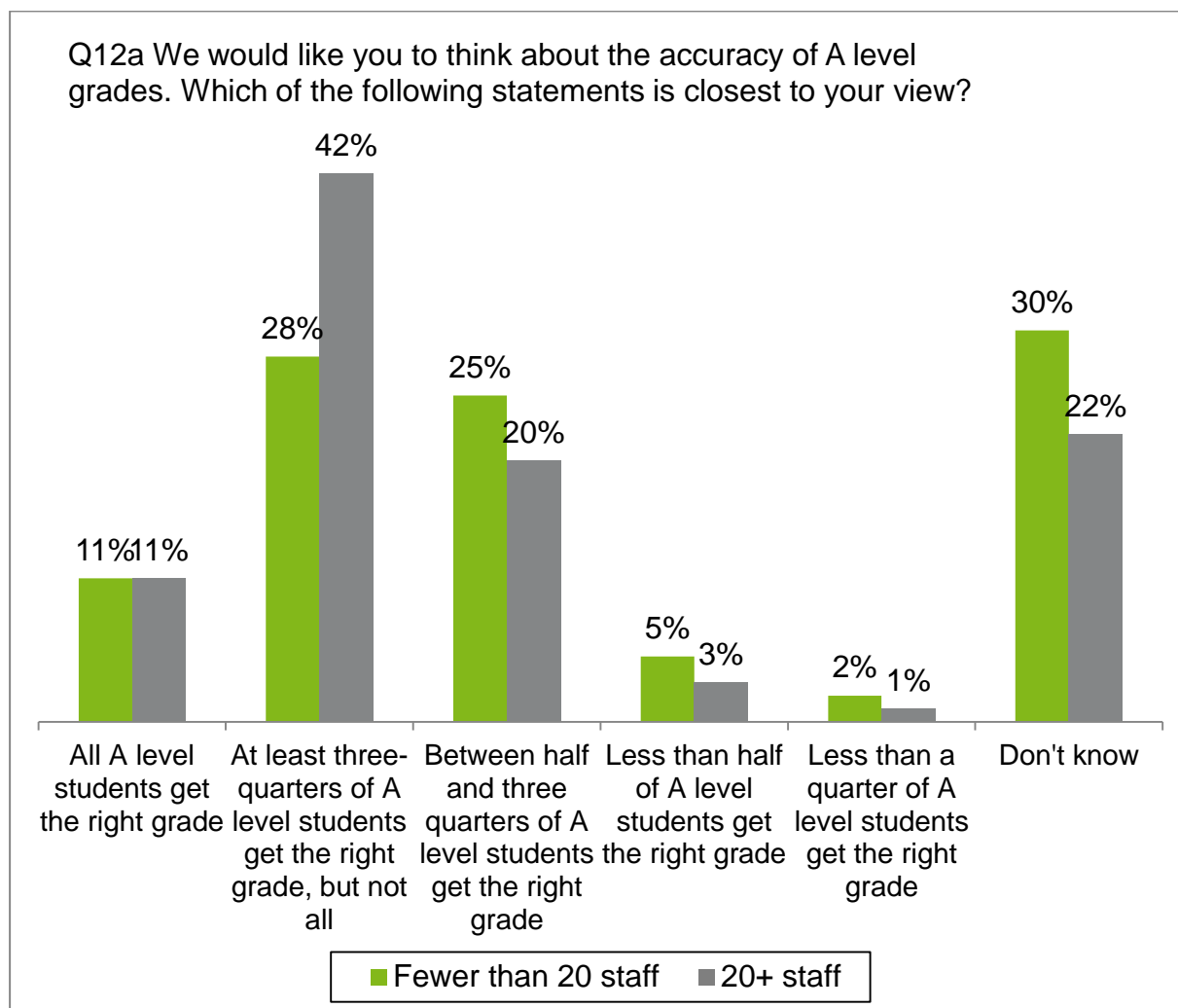
Employers' perceptions of the accuracy of A level grades – and specifically whether they felt A level students were awarded the correct grades – were also examined through the survey. In addition, employers were asked whether they believed A levels to be an accurate means of comparing candidates for employment as well as the extent to which they provided an accurate indication of candidates' ability.

When presented with a list of possible statements and asked about the accuracy of A level grades, around three-quarters (78 per cent of larger and 70 per cent of smaller employers) felt able to offer a view. The largest, 28 per cent of employers with 250+ employees, and smallest, 30 per cent of employers with between one and nine employees were the least confident (16 per cent).

The majority of larger employers who were able to offer their view about the accuracy of A levels said that they thought that the majority of A level students got the right grade (54 per cent). Results also suggest that larger employers are more likely than those that are smaller to feel that A levels are graded accurately, specifically 42 per cent of those with 20 or more employees said that at least three-quarters of students got the right grade compared with 28 per cent of smaller employers.

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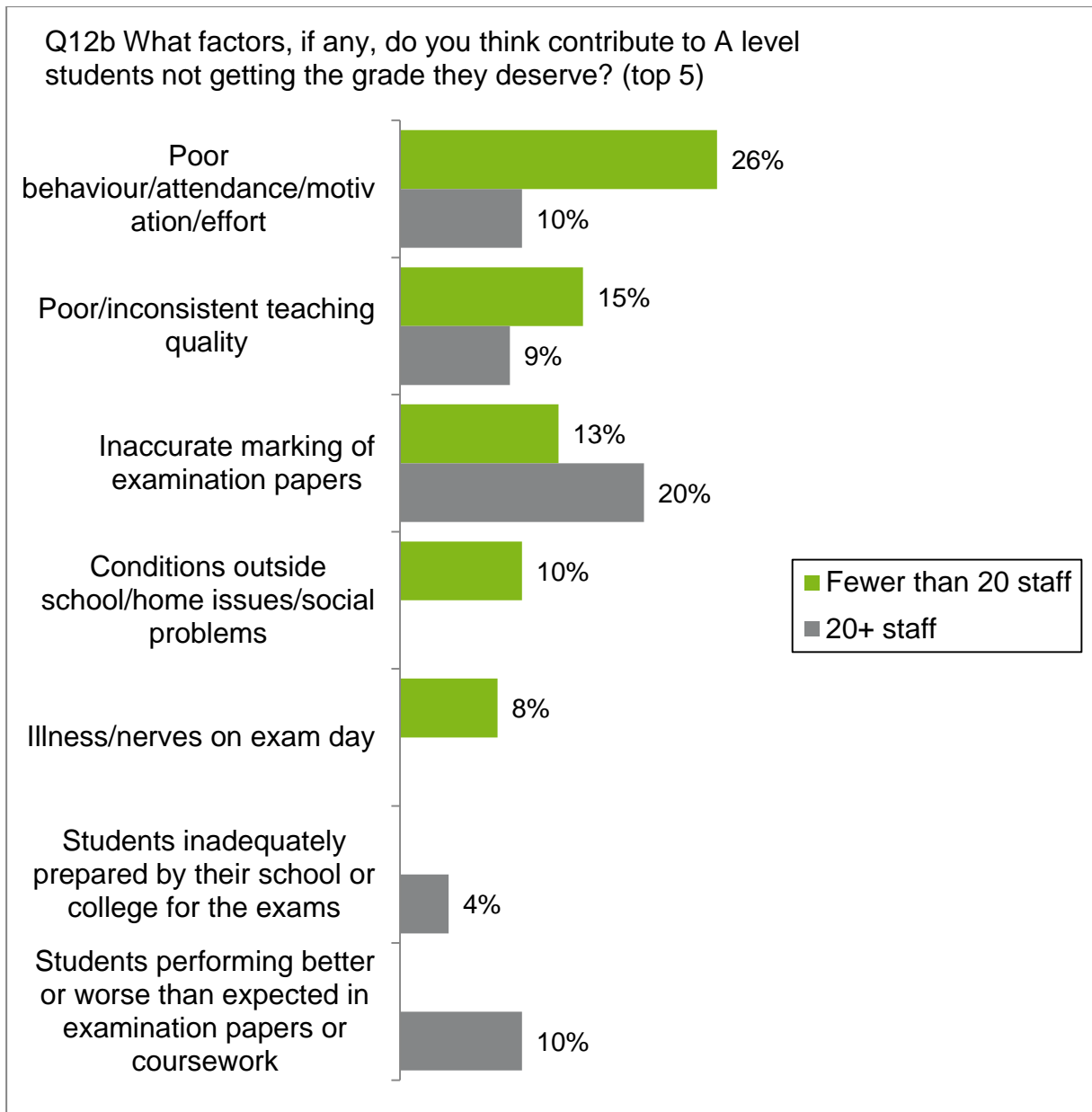
**Figure 5:** Employers' perceptions of the accuracy of A level grades by business size



Effective base: 32 smaller employers; 217 larger employers (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

As per figure 6, those who did not think that all A level students got the right grade were asked what factors they felt contributed to this. For businesses with fewer than 20 employees, the most commonly cited factor was poor behaviour, attendance or motivation on the part of the candidate, spontaneously mentioned by 26 per cent, followed by poor or inconsistent teaching quality mentioned by 15 per cent and inaccurate marking of exam papers, mentioned by 13 per cent. For businesses with 20 employees or more, inaccurate marking of exam papers was felt to be particularly significant (mentioned by 20 per cent) followed by students being inadequately prepared by schools or colleges for exams, poor behaviour, attendance or motivation and students performing better or worse than expected in exams or coursework (each mentioned by 10 per cent).

**Figure 6:** Employers' reasons for believing that A level students don't get the grade they deserve

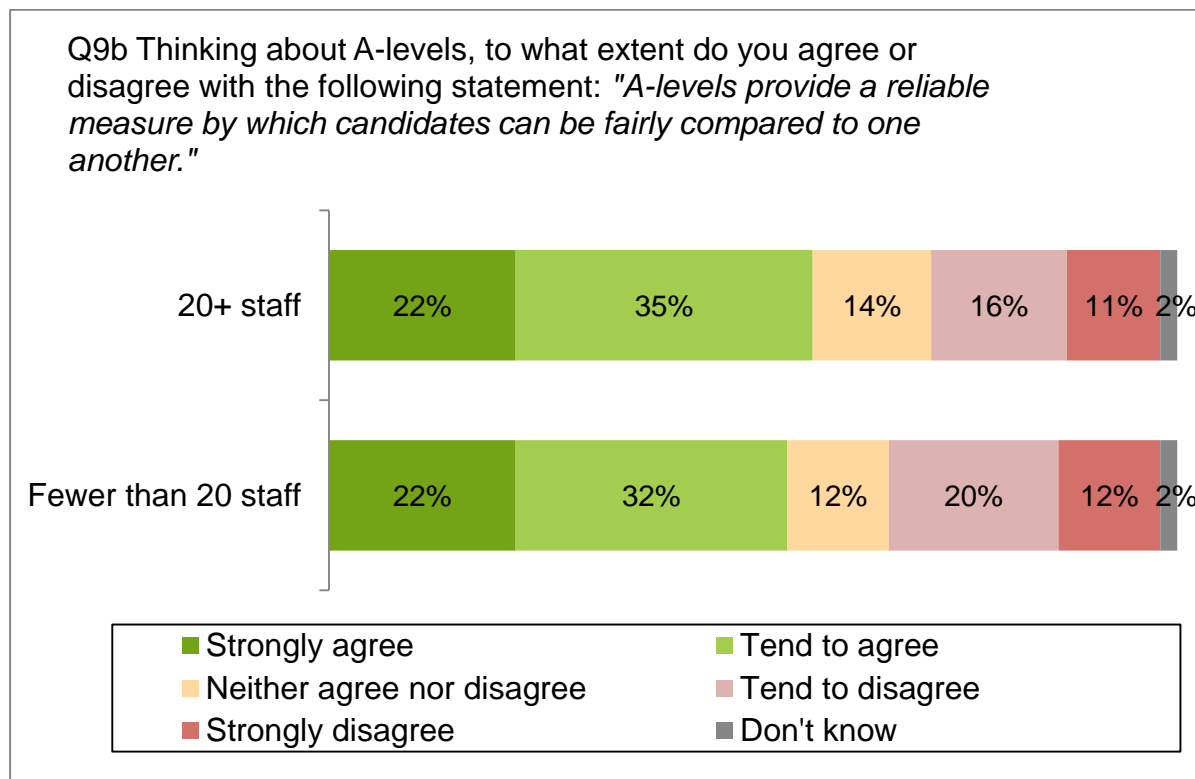


Effective base: 20 smaller employers; 147 larger employers (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

When asked whether A level results provide a reliable measure by which candidates can be compared amongst one another, the majority of employers agreed that they do act as a means of comparing candidates. Results indicate that the strength of positive feeling increased with the size of the business. Of those businesses with fewer than 20 employees, 32 per cent did not feel that A levels provide a reliable measure. This fell to 20 per cent amongst those with 50 or more employees. It should be noted, however, that even though employers felt A levels provided them with a means of comparing candidates, they were not amongst the most commonly used

criteria for employers when making a judgement about whether to hire a candidate or not.

**Figure 7:** Employers' perceptions of the reliability of A level grades by business size

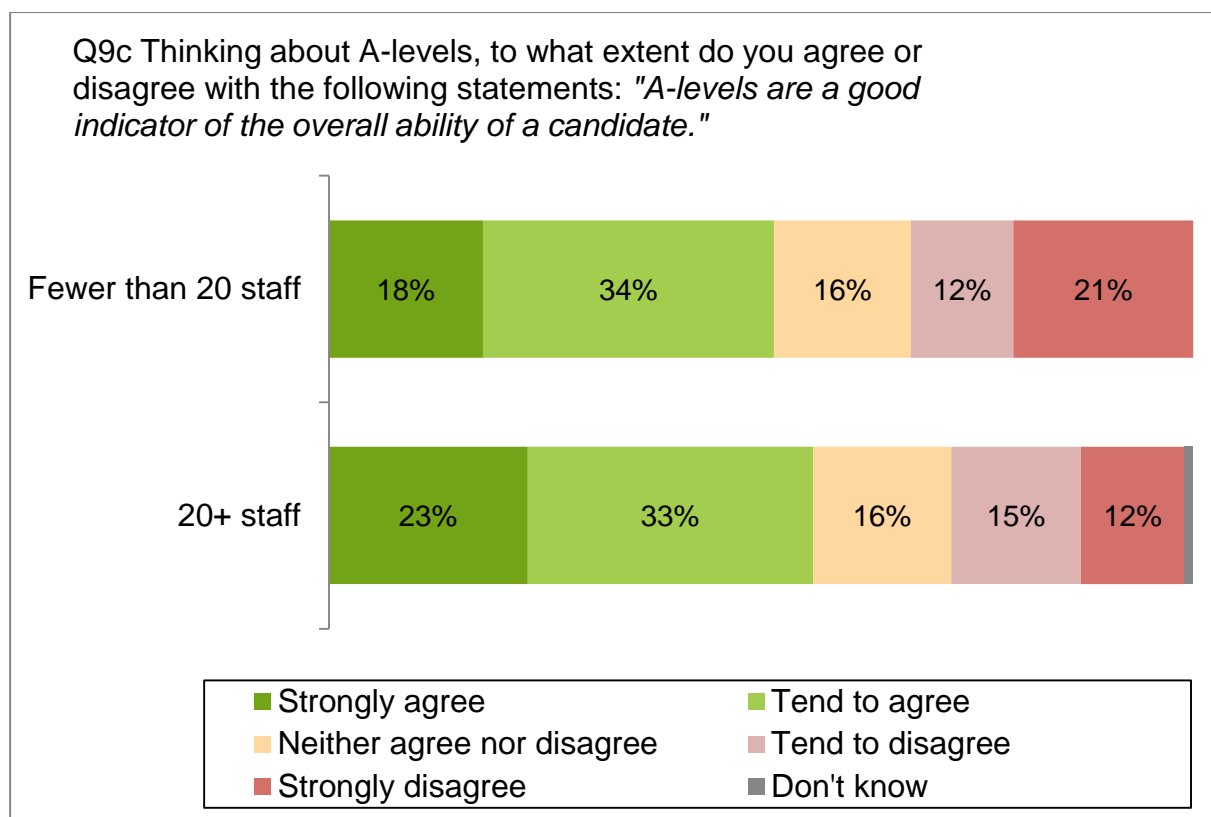


Effective base: 32 smaller employers; 217 larger employers (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

By region results were consistent regarding whether A levels provide a reliable comparable measure across candidates. More than a quarter (28 per cent) of companies with more than 20 staff in the North of England disagreed that A levels were a reliable measure across candidates compared with 26 per cent in the Midlands and a similar proportion in the South. Similarly, differences by business size, though more marked, were not great enough to be considered significant.



**Figure 8:** Employers' perceptions of A level grades as an indicator of candidates' ability by business size



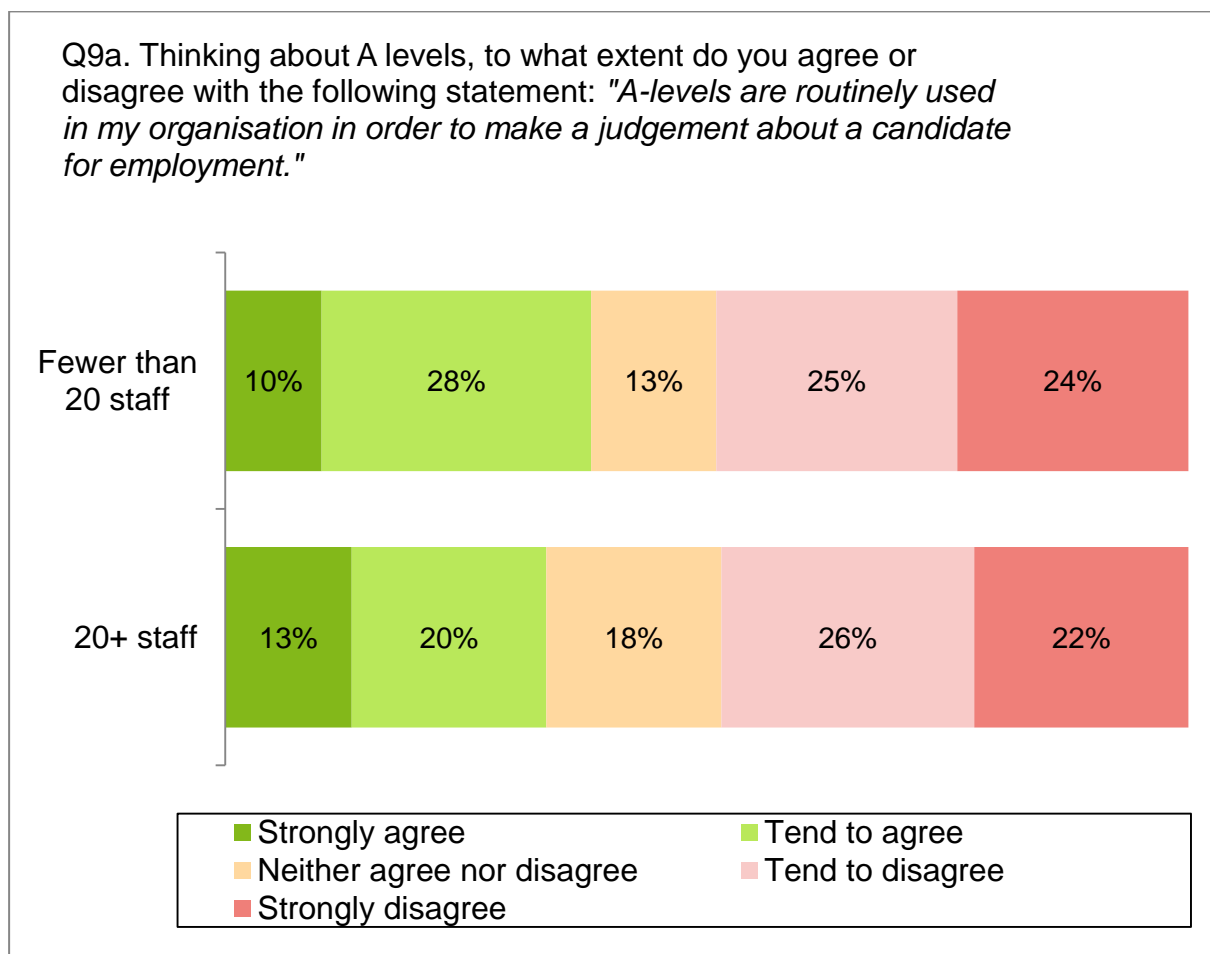
Effective base: 32 smaller employers; 217 larger employers (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

### Employers' use of A-level qualifications for recruitment purposes

The survey also covered the extent to which A level qualifications were used by employers when making a judgement about whether to offer a position to a candidate.

34 per cent of larger and 38 per cent of smaller employers said that they routinely used A levels in order to make a judgement about a candidate for employment. As has already been mentioned, however, A levels were not amongst the most commonly used criteria for employers when making decisions about whether to offer a job to a candidate.

**Figure 9:** Employers' use of A levels for recruitment purposes



Effective base: 32 smaller employers; 217 larger employers (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

### Employers' concerns about the A level system

Employers were asked whether they had any concerns about the A level system and to explain in their own words what these were.

The majority of employers, **65 per cent** of larger employers and **50 per cent** of smaller employers, said that they did not have any concerns. The topmost cited concern across employers was that A levels were too easy or not challenging enough; mentioned by 6 per cent of larger businesses and 15 per cent of smaller ones. For larger employers, incorrect grading was the next most common concern raised (by 4 per cent). This does not, however, appear to be related to the GCSE English grading controversy of Summer 2012: of the large employers that were aware of the incident, 4 per cent had concerns about the grading of A levels overall. This compared with 7 per cent of those who were not aware of the incident. Smaller businesses were also particularly concerned that A levels are 'not fit for purpose' and do not prepare school leavers for the workplace: 12 per cent of smaller organisations spontaneously raised this as a matter of concern.

## **Perceptions of GCSEs**

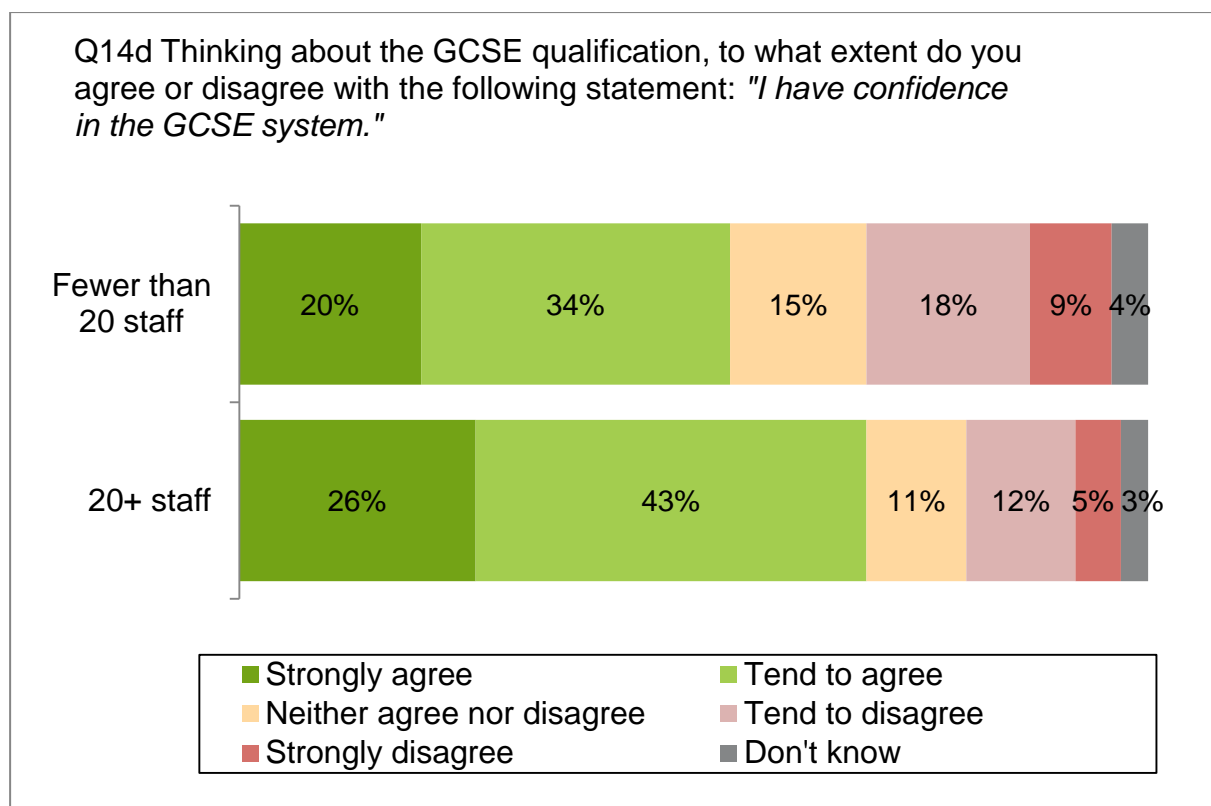
### **Confidence in the GCSE system**

Employers were asked the extent to which they agreed that they had confidence in the GCSE system as well as how central this qualification was in making an offer of employment to a school leaver. It was of particular importance to gauge employers' levels of confidence in GCSEs separately to A levels, as well as their usage of GCSEs in light of the GCSE English grading controversy of Summer 2012.

The majority of employers agreed that they had confidence in the GCSE system. Results indicate that confidence was higher amongst larger businesses than smaller ones; 69 per cent versus 54 per cent. A proportion of smaller employers actively disagreed that they had confidence in the GCSE system; 27 per cent – confidence levels that were similar to those for A levels.

While as a reflection of small base sizes, differences by region and business size were not great enough to be considered significant, the pattern of results suggested that larger businesses in the Midlands and South were more likely to report lower levels of confidence (22 per cent and 17 per cent respectively) than in the North (13 per cent). This pattern was repeated for employers with less than 20 employees, with around one-third in the Midlands and the South; 32 per cent (6) and 33 per cent (9) respectively, saying they did not have confidence in the GCSE system compared with 11 per cent (2) in the North.

**Figure 10:** Employers' confidence in the GCSE system by business size



Effective base: 32 smaller employers; 217 larger employers (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

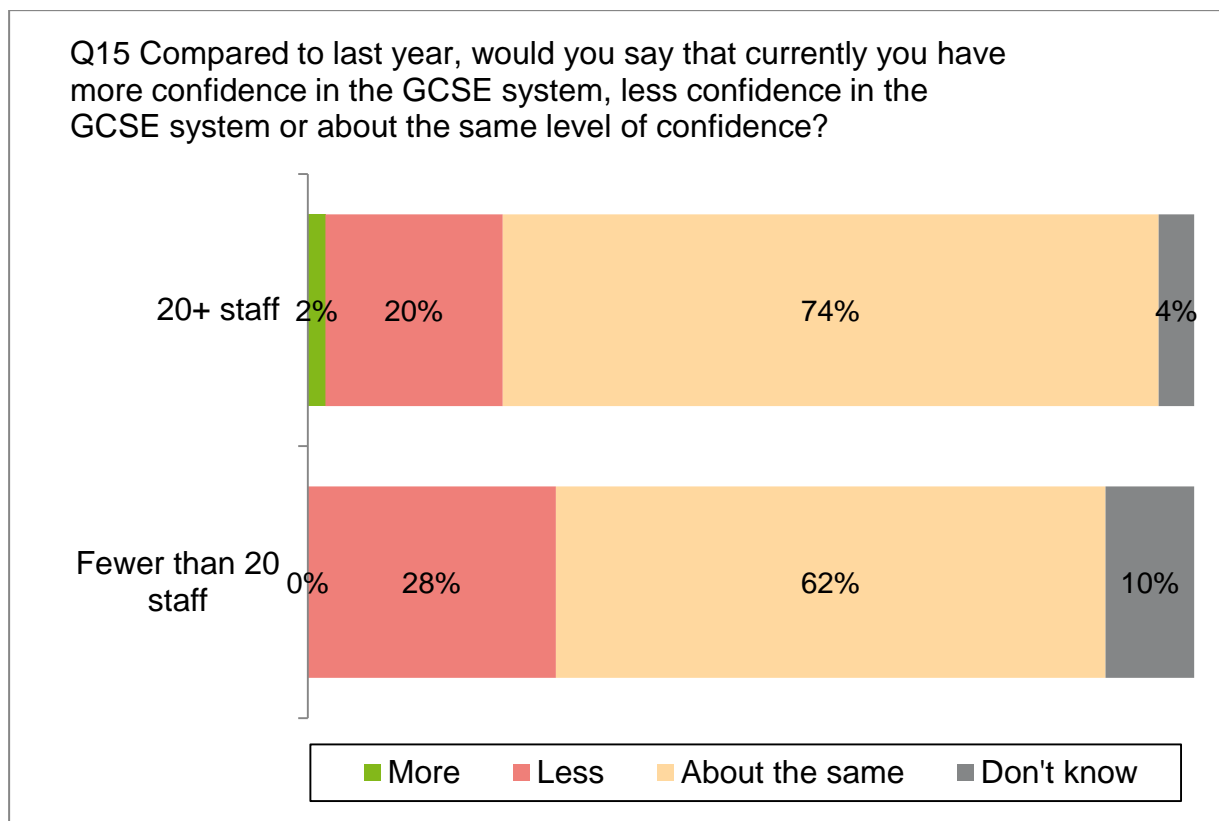
Again, as was the case for A levels, confidence in GCSEs was higher amongst employers that routinely used the qualification when forming a judgement about a potential candidate for employment. Among those with 20 or more employees, **80 per cent** who used GCSEs when making a decision about a candidate said they had confidence in the qualification compared with **69 per cent** of larger businesses overall.

Similarly, levels of confidence amongst businesses that spontaneously cited GCSEs as being one of the top three criteria they used when making a judgement about a candidate for employment seemed to be largely unshaken compared with last year. Fewer employers in this group (predominantly those with 20 or more employees) said they had experienced a decline in confidence in the past year than those who did not rely on the qualifications (12 per cent) compared with 27 per cent of those who did not cite GCSEs as one of the main criteria against which they judged a school leaver.

The majority of employers had the same level of confidence as they had a year ago; 74 per cent of those with 20 or more employees, and 62 per cent with fewer than 20 employees. This is perhaps unsurprising, given smaller employers' lower levels of

confidence in GCSEs overall. While differences are not great enough to be considered significant other results also illustrate this pattern. For instance, 28 per cent of smaller businesses reported lower levels of confidence compared with last year compared with 20 per cent of larger businesses. Where larger employers were concerned, this drop in confidence was greater than for A levels (12 per cent), although for smaller ones the drop in confidence in GCSEs was broadly in line with their confidence in A levels; 30 per cent.

**Figure 11:** Changes in employers' confidence in the GCSE system by business size



Effective base: 32 smaller employers; 217 larger employers (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

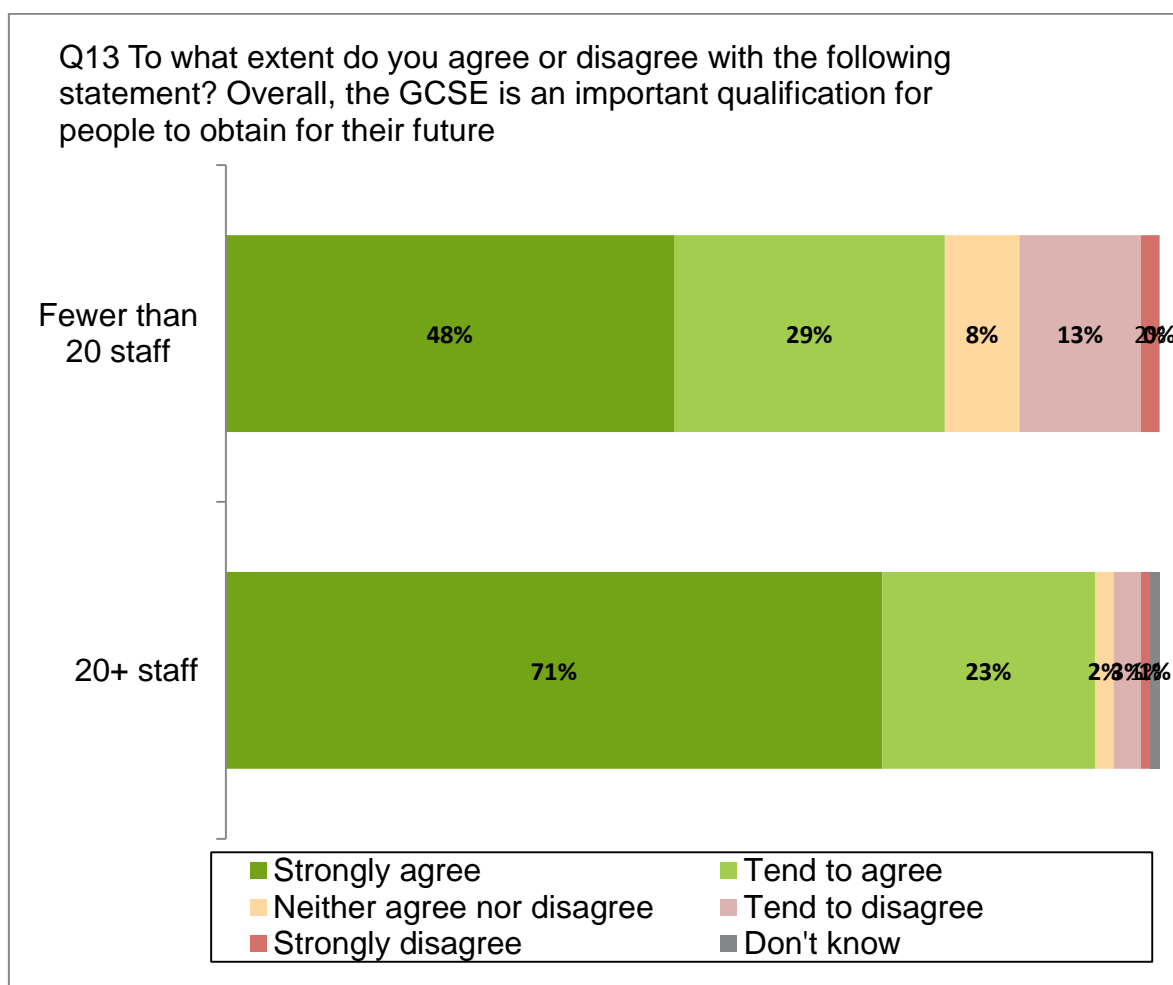
### Perceptions of the importance and value of the GCSE system

Again, as per A levels, employers were asked about their perceptions of the importance and value of GCSEs to school leavers for their future.

When asked the extent to which they agreed with the statement *Overall, the GCSE is an important qualification for people to obtain for their future*, the majority of employers agreed. Larger employers (who, as already seen, were more likely to report higher levels of confidence in the GCSE system overall) placed greater importance on the qualification for people to obtain for their future; **93 per cent** compared with smaller employers; **77 per cent**. The business size where agreement

that GCSEs were an important qualification for students to obtain was highest was organisations with 20-49 employees (where **74 per cent** provided the highest level of agreement – ‘strongly agree’). This was in contrast to businesses with fewer than 20 employees, of whom **48 per cent** strongly agreed with this statement.

**Figure 12:** Employers’ perceptions of the importance of GCSEs for students’ future by business size



Effective base: 32 smaller employers; 217 larger employers (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

### Confidence in the accuracy of the marking of GCSEs

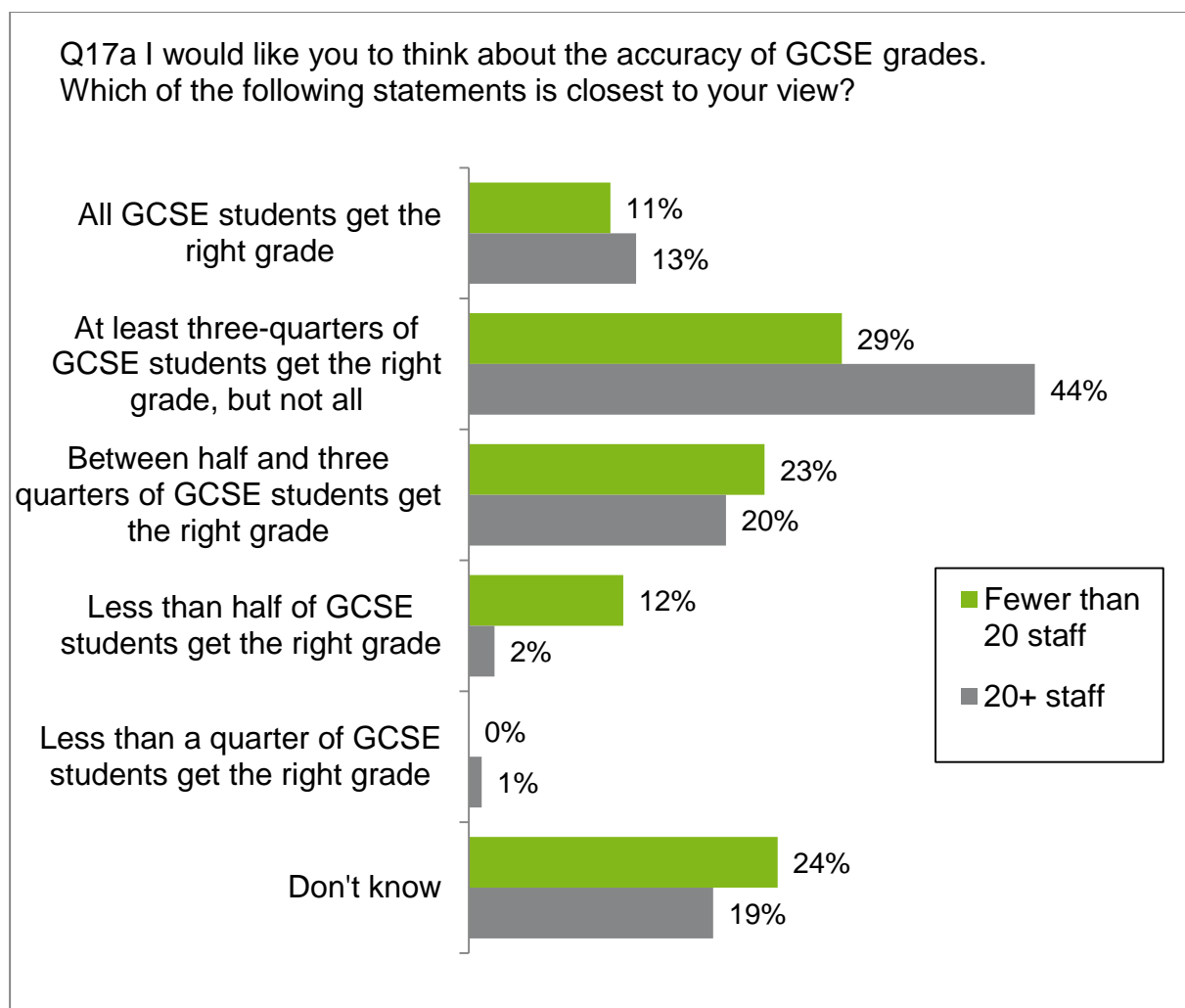
Employers were asked about the accuracy of GCSE grading and what proportion of students they felt were awarded the correct grade.

Only a small proportion of employers felt less than half of students were awarded the most appropriate grade. Once again, smaller employers were the least positive in this regard with **12 per cent** saying they felt less than half of students were given an accurate grade compared with **3 per cent** of larger employers. The most common

response amongst employers overall was that three-quarters of students are awarded the correct grade but not all. Larger businesses were more positive in this regard; 44 per cent, than smaller ones; 29 per cent. 13 per cent of larger and 11 per cent of smaller employers believed all students are awarded the correct grade. Interestingly, and as opposed to previous questions where there has been a relationship between employers' confidence, the value they place on GCSEs and their use of GCSEs when making a judgement about a candidate, there was no real difference between employers that used GCSEs and those who did not in their perception of how accurately they were graded.

The most common reason given by larger businesses as to why they did not feel all students were awarded the correct grade was incorrect marking of exam papers, spontaneously mentioned by 20 per cent. Inadequate preparation by a school or college and students' poor behaviour, attendance or motivation were the next most commonly given answers (12 per cent and 11 per cent respectively). Inaccurate marking was also mentioned by 10 per cent of smaller employers, but more importantly for them were poor quality teaching, mentioned by 14 per cent and the behaviour, attendance or motivation of the student, mentioned by 24 per cent.

**Figure 13:** Employers' perceptions of the accuracy of GCSE grades by business size



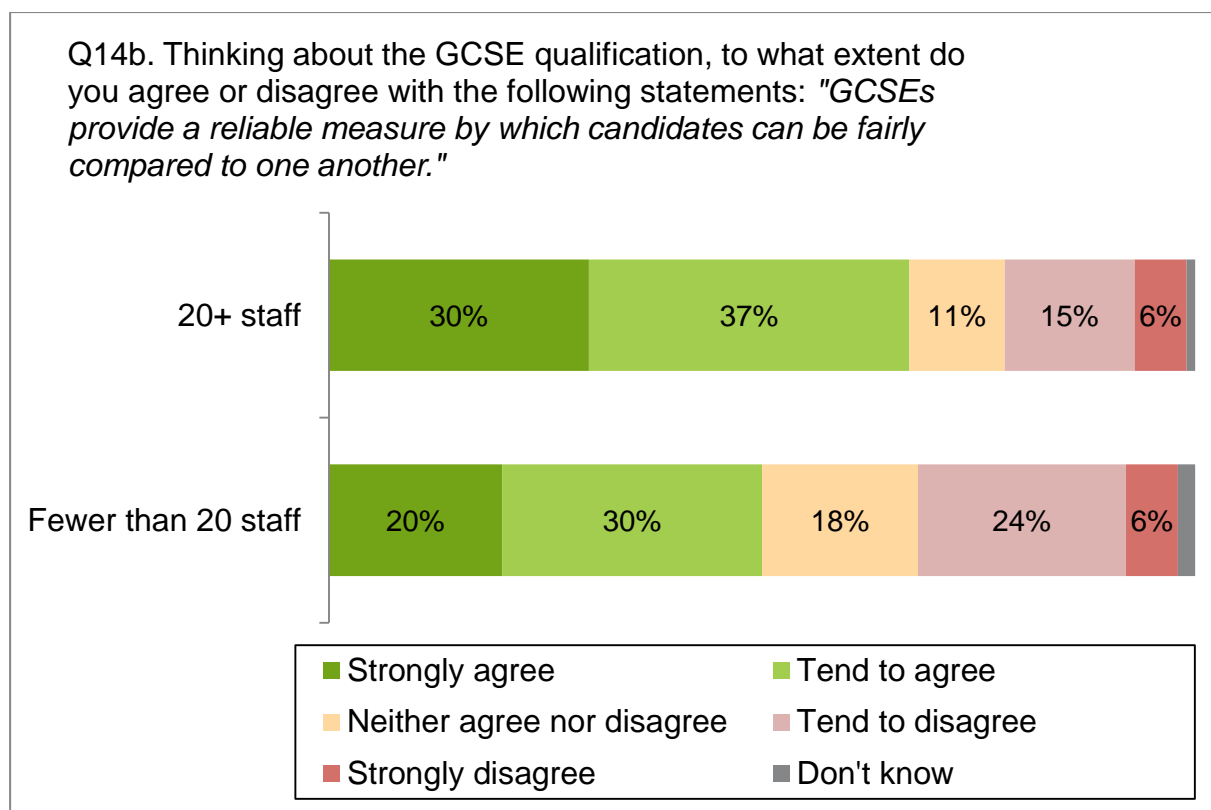
Effective base: 32 smaller employers; 217 larger employers (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

When asked whether GCSEs provide a reliable measure by which candidates could be fairly compared with each other, the majority of employers agreed. Results indicate that agreement was higher amongst larger employers, 67 per cent versus 50 per cent of smaller employers, which is perhaps unsurprising considering this group's propensity to use GCSEs when making decisions about candidates.

Agreement was also lower among employers who had less confidence in GCSEs now compared with a year ago. Of the larger employers who said their confidence was about the same as last year, **37 per cent** agreed strongly that a GCSE was a reliable measure across candidates. This compared with **12 per cent** of those who said their confidence was lower. As with confidence levels, however, there were no marked differences in the levels of agreement that GCSEs act as a reliable measure across candidates by region.



**Figure 14:** GCSEs as a reliable tool for comparing candidates by business size



Effective base: 32 smaller employers; 217 larger employers (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

Overall agreement was higher for the statement *GCSEs are a good indicator of the overall ability of a candidate*. Of those with 20 or more employees, 67 per cent agreed whilst for smaller employers, there were lower levels of agreement, 56 per cent. However, for larger and smaller employers, agreement that GCSEs act as a good indicator of the overall ability of a candidate was higher than where A levels were concerned; 55 per cent of larger and 52 per cent of smaller businesses agreed with the same statement for A levels. This coupled with employers' tendency to make greater use of GCSEs than A levels when considering job applicants emphasises the difference in feeling towards GCSEs amongst employers than A levels.

### Employers' concerns about the GCSEs system

Employers were asked if they had any concerns about the GCSE system and they gave a range of spontaneous responses to this question.

The majority of employers, 59 per cent of larger and 57 per cent of smaller employers, had no concerns or could not think of any concerns in connection with GCSEs. Compared with A levels, this represented a decline in any concerns

amongst larger businesses of 7 percentage points from 65 per cent but an increase of 8 percentage points amongst smaller businesses from 50 per cent.

For businesses with 20 or more employees their main concerns included too many changes to GCSEs; the uncertain future of the qualification; and GCSEs being too easy (these issues were each mentioned by 5 per cent of larger businesses). For businesses with fewer than 20 employees, concerns about coursework and a feeling that the standard of the qualification was falling were the most commonly raised concerns (mentioned by 11 per cent and 9 per cent respectively).

### **Awareness and impact of the 2012 GCSE English grading controversy**

The following description of the GCSE English grading controversy in Summer 2012 was read out to respondents and employers were asked whether they had heard about it before the day of the interview.

*'The 2012 GCSE results were published in August. Ofqual carried out an initial inquiry after receiving complaints from some schools and colleges about their students not getting the GCSE English grades they expected. The initial inquiry found the exams students took in June were properly graded. However, students are able to take their GCSE English exam again if they want to in November this year.'*

Most employers had heard about this incident and awareness was similar across organisations of different sizes of organisation (80 per cent of those with 20 or more employees and 81 per cent of smaller employers). It was also similar by region, with 77 per cent of employers in the North, 79 per cent of employers in the South, and 85 per cent of employers in the Midlands stating they were aware of the incident.

Awareness of the incident does seem to have had an impact on some employers' feelings about GCSEs more broadly. Larger employers' confidence in the GCSE system overall, for example, was lower amongst those who were aware of the incident (65 per cent) than those who were not (81 per cent).

The findings of this survey, however, do not reveal a sustained or consistent pattern in awareness of the GCSE English grading controversy and employers' feelings about GCSEs. From Figure 15 below, results indicate that the incident does not appear to have affected the percentage agreeing that GCSEs provide a reliable measure about a candidate's suitability for employment, the overall ability of a candidate or the ratings of the proportion of candidates who get the correct grade. However, the credibility of GCSEs as a tool by which candidates can be fairly compared may have been affected by the incident: those aware of the incident were less likely to agree with this statement than those who were not aware (in the case of larger employers, **64 per cent** versus **76 per cent**).

**Figure 15:** Perceptions of the GCSE qualification by awareness of the GCSE English incident

Measure	Aware of incident	Not aware of incident
Effective base: Employers with 20 or more employees	180 (%)	38 (%)
Q14a GCSEs provide a reliable measure to make a judgement about a candidate for employment	65	54
Q14b GCSEs provide a reliable measure by which candidates can be fairly compared	64	76
Q14c GCSEs are a good indicator of the overall ability of a candidate	68	65
Q17a At least three-quarters of candidates get the correct grade	<b>48</b>	<b>30</b>

*Effective base: 180 larger employers aware of incident; 38 larger employers not aware of incident (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).*

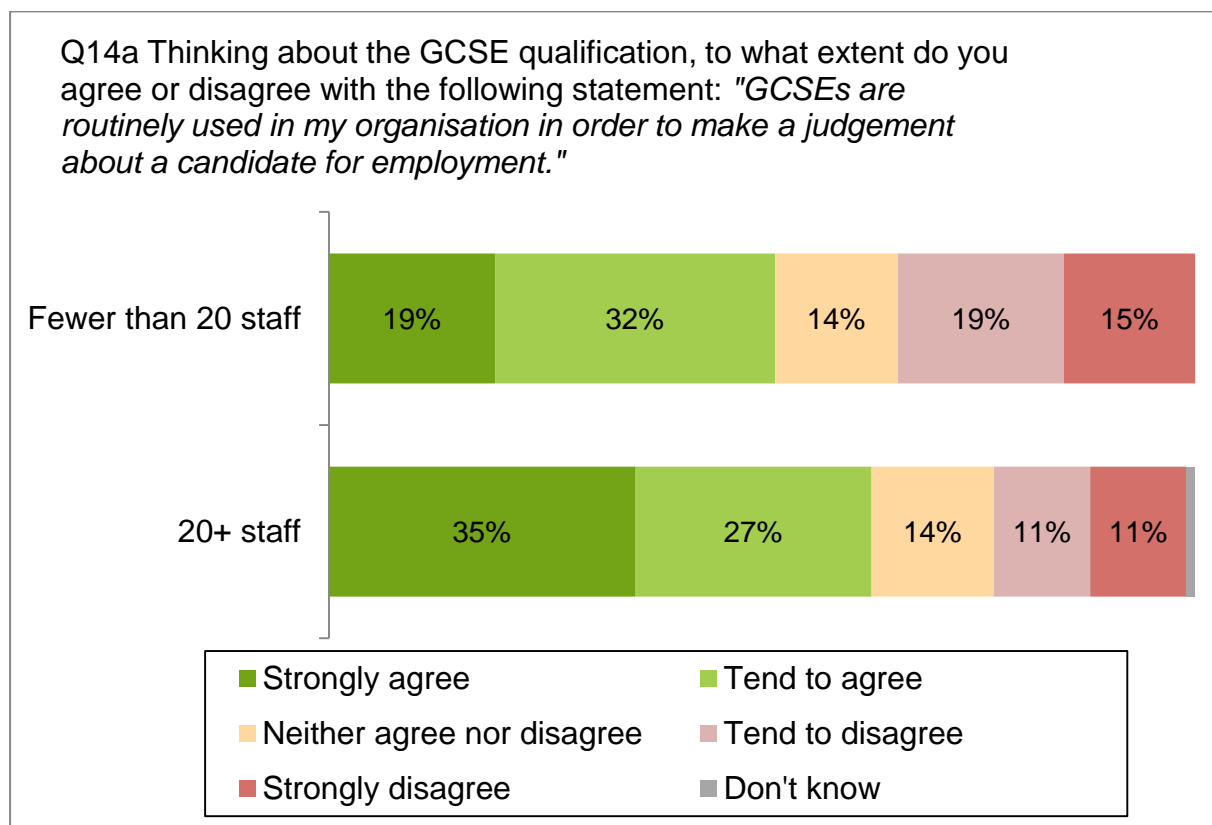
## Recruiting school leavers

### Employers' use of the GCSE qualification for recruitment purposes

Employers with fewer than 20 employees were less likely to agree that they made routine use of GCSEs when making judgements about candidates for employment. Just over half (51 per cent) did routinely make use of GCSEs compared with 63 per cent of larger employers. There was little variation in the use of GCSEs between employers with 20 employees and those with more than 250 employees.

Interestingly, reported routine use of GCSEs amongst employers seemed to be unaffected by their levels of confidence and whether their levels of confidence had changed in the past year. Almost seven in ten (69 per cent) of larger employers whose confidence had fallen in the past year said that they made routine use of GCSEs to judge candidates, compared with 63 per cent of employers whose confidence levels were about the same as last year.

**Figure 16:** Routine use of GCSE to judge candidates by business size



Effective base: 32 smaller employers; 217 larger employers (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

### How important are qualifications?

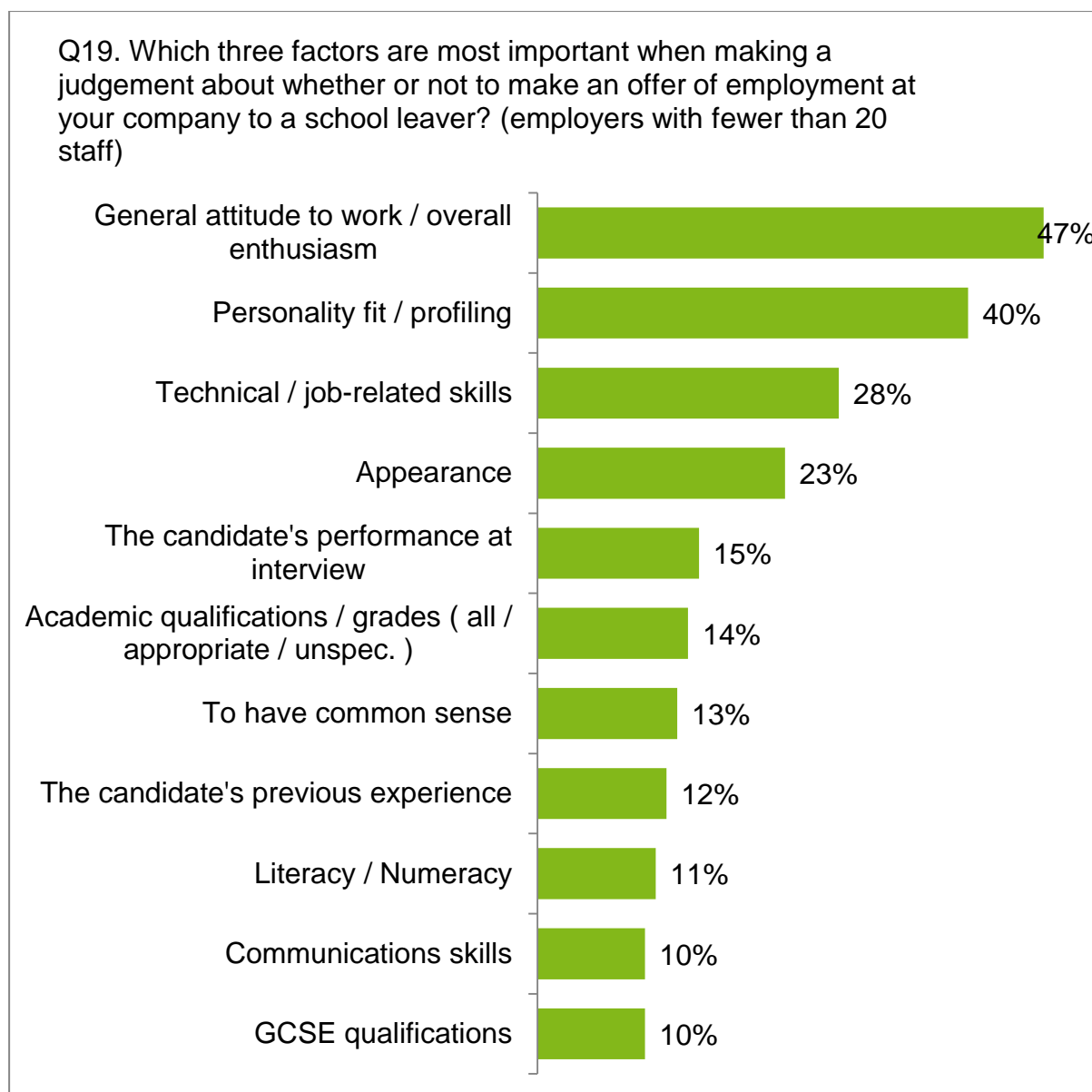
In order to get an idea of the importance of qualifications to employers in relation to other factors or candidate traits, employers were asked which factors they considered most important when making a judgement about an applicant.

When looking to recruit school leavers, the topmost important factor mentioned by all employers was general attitude to work and overall enthusiasm of the candidate. This was spontaneously mentioned by 47 per cent of smaller businesses and by 40 per cent of larger businesses. This is perhaps unsurprising given the historic and on-going debate about what is most important to employers and whether qualifications adequately provide employers with the confidence they need that a candidate embodies the requisite skills, ability or work ethic.

For businesses with more than 20 employees, the next most important factors were: the previous experience of the candidate (35 per cent), candidates' non-specified academic qualifications (26 per cent) and personality (25 per cent). GCSEs were specifically mentioned by 18 per cent of respondents from larger companies, and A levels were mentioned by just 7 per cent.

For businesses with fewer than 20 employees the most important factors after general attitude to work and overall enthusiasm included: the candidates' personality (40 per cent), their technical skills (28 per cent) and appearance (23 per cent). GCSEs specifically were mentioned by a smaller proportion (with 10 per cent of smaller businesses saying GCSEs were among the most important factors by which they judged a candidate); A levels were mentioned by 2 per cent. It should be noted, however, that academic qualifications in a non-specified sense were mentioned by 14 per cent of smaller employers, and vocational qualifications by 6 per cent.

**Figure 17:** Top factors considered when recruiting a school leaver



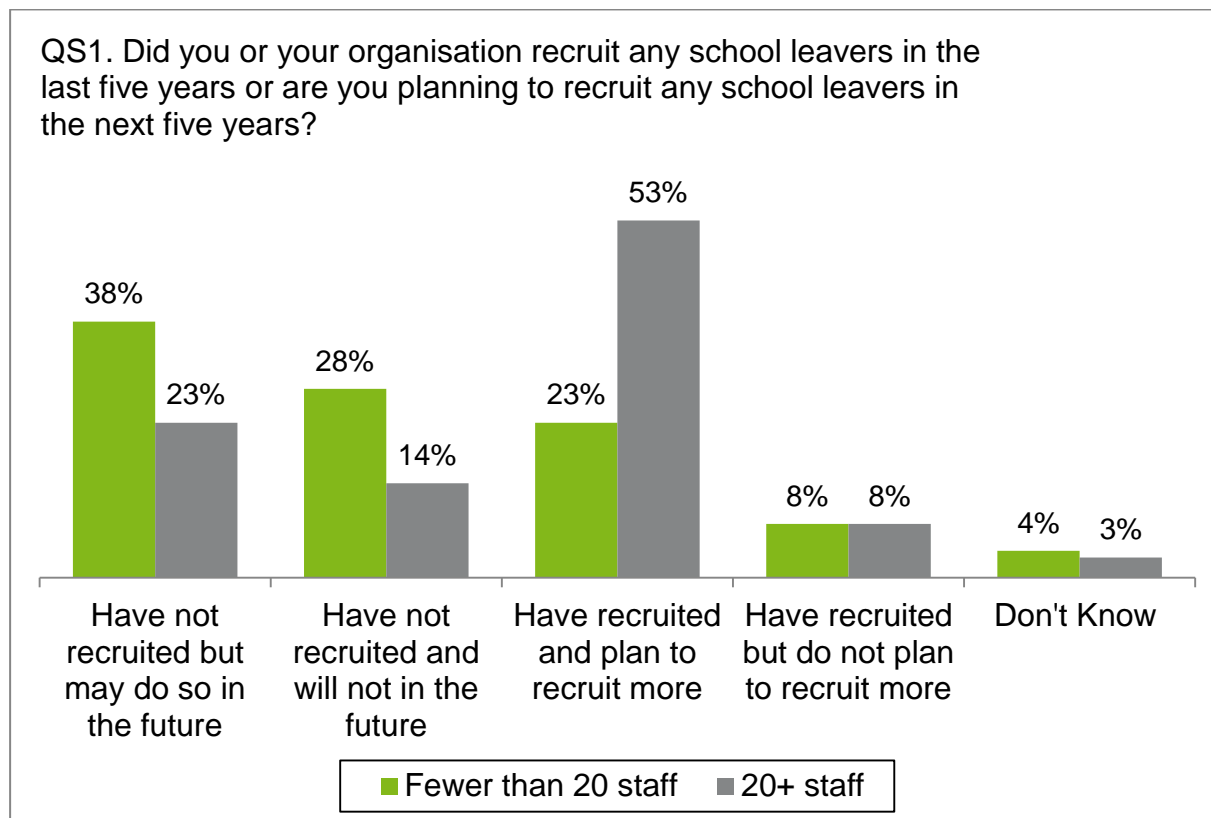
Effective base: 32 smaller employers (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

### Are employers planning to recruit school leavers?

Employers were asked how likely it was that they would employ school leavers in the next five years and there was a wide range of feeling reported from employers. The likelihood increased with the size of the company in that **77 per cent** of those with 250 or more employees said that they had recruited school leavers in the past and planned to recruit more compared with **23 per cent** of those with fewer than 20 employees.

Around one-quarter (**28 per cent**) of those with fewer than 20 employees said they had not recruited school leavers in the past and will not do so in the next five years. This compared with **14 per cent** of businesses with 20 or more employees.

**Figure 18:** Recruitment of school leavers by business size



Effective base: 32 smaller employers; 217 larger employers (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

## Awareness and perceptions of Ofqual

The survey also set out to determine the awareness and importance of Ofqual amongst employers.

Awareness of Ofqual amongst employers was limited. Looking specifically at businesses with fewer than 20 employees, when asked how much they knew about Ofqual, 4 per cent said that they knew a fair amount, 37 per cent said they had heard of it but knew nothing about it, and 39 per cent had never heard of it. Among larger employers 8 per cent claimed they knew at least a fair amount and the proportion stating they had never heard of Ofqual was 35 per cent.

When read the statement, *Ofqual is the independent regulator of qualifications, exams and assessments in England*, awareness amongst larger employers rose to 41 per cent. Similarly, awareness rose amongst smaller employers once provided with this statement, although this was lower at 36 per cent.

There was a strong sense that Ofqual's role was an important one. When asked whether it was important to have an organisation such as Ofqual independently regulating qualifications and exams, the majority of employers thought that this was very important, although again, larger businesses placed greater importance on the role of Ofqual: **90 per cent** described the role of Ofqual as either very important or fairly important compared with **74 per cent** of smaller businesses.

### **Effectiveness of Ofqual**

Following on from perceptions of Ofqual, employers were also asked to rate the organisation's effectiveness at maintaining the standards of qualifications and exams and explain their views.

When asked how effective Ofqual was at maintaining the standards of qualifications, half of employers did not feel able to give an opinion (57 per cent of larger employers and 52 per cent of smaller ones). For larger employers the balance of opinion was generally positive, with 33 per cent answering that Ofqual was effective compared with 10 per cent saying Ofqual was ineffective. Among smaller employers views were balanced (23 per cent effective, 25 per cent not effective). Looking just at those who were aware of Ofqual in the first instance, positive feeling about the effectiveness of Ofqual increased. Amongst larger employers 60 per cent of those aware of Ofqual and its role described it as effective and 13 per cent not effective. The proportion that felt unable to provide an opinion fell to 28 per cent. Similarly, amongst smaller employers who were aware of Ofqual and its role, the proportion with the view that Ofqual was effective rose to 39 per cent (9), as did the proportion who felt Ofqual was ineffective; 43 per cent (10). 18 per cent felt unable to give an opinion at all.

Those who did not think that Ofqual was effective were asked why they thought that this was the case. Amongst larger businesses this was driven primarily by what employers had read in the press with 27 per cent mentioning this as the reason for feeling Ofqual was ineffective. The next most common spontaneous sentiments expressed were the deterioration of grade standards and the GCSE English grading controversy (both mentioned by 15 per cent). Whilst it is clear that this incident has had a direct impact on some employers' perceptions of Ofqual, it is important to note that the incident did not necessarily negatively impact on the views of businesses that were aware of the incident. Of the larger businesses that were aware of the incident, 34 per cent still agreed that Ofqual was effective in its role. Interestingly, 28 per cent of larger businesses who were not aware of the incident rated Ofqual's performance as effective. This may indicate that those who are aware of Ofqual are



also engaged in the education system and are aware of the error that inevitably occurs in this area of work, and so do not attribute the incident to any failings of Ofqual.

Effectiveness, on the other hand, was driven by the perception amongst respondents that Ofqual had taken measures to maintain exam standards (mentioned by 20 per cent of larger businesses and 31 per cent of smaller ones). For larger businesses confidence in the exams system (14 per cent) and the accuracy of grade boundaries (18 per cent) were also important as indicators of the effectiveness of Ofqual. Amongst businesses with fewer than 20 employees, alongside maintaining exam standards and the ability to compare across students, it was also important (for 17 per cent of them) simply for an organisation like Ofqual to exist.

## **Information about exams and qualifications**

### **Sources of information used by employers**

The survey also established what sources of information employers used in order to find out about qualifications and which source tended to be the most influential in shaping their understanding.

The majority of employers said that it was vital for them to have access to information about qualifications in order to assist them with the recruitment of candidates. Those with 20 or more employees regarded this as very important (**48 per cent**) and a further 31 per cent felt it was fairly important. The importance of having access to information about qualifications was lower amongst smaller employers (who, as already seen, tended to make less use of and placed less confidence in GCSEs), with 44 per cent saying it was fairly important and **21 per cent** saying it was very important.

General online searching was clearly felt to be the most important source of information about exams for businesses, though professional associations, employers' own training departments and networks, and awarding organisations were also important sources of information about qualifications for employers.

**Figure 19:** Sources of information about exams used by employers

	Employers with fewer than 20 employees	Employers with 20 or more employees
Effective base	32 (%)	217 (%)
Internet / online search / Google	29	27
Professional associations	6	11
Awarding organisations/ Exam boards	9	7
Internal training team / department	6	8
Own professional networks	4	7
The candidate	7	6
Word of mouth	10	2
The media	4	3

*Effective base: 32 smaller employers; 217 larger employers (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).*

The most influential sources on perceptions of the quality of qualifications for larger employers were their own professional networks (9 per cent) and professional associations (7 per cent). For smaller employers, word of mouth was the most influential source (19 per cent).

### **Trusted sources of information about exams**

Respondents were read a list of sources and were asked how much they would trust them as a source of information about exams.

Employers with 20 or more employees were most likely to regard the awarding organisations as the source they would trust a great deal (45 per cent). Smaller

companies mentioned their own professional networks most frequently as the source they would trust a great deal (36 per cent).

For both larger and smaller employers a high degree of trust is placed in their professional associations (larger businesses 77 per cent say a great deal/fair amount of trust and smaller businesses 93 per cent) and professional networks (larger businesses 88 per cent say a great deal/fair amount of trust and smaller businesses 76 per cent).

Ofqual was trusted at least a fair amount by the majority of employers (74 per cent among those with 20 or more employees, 50 per cent among smaller employers). Of the smaller employers those who have heard of Ofqual trust the organisation as a source of information to a greater extent than those who had not heard of them; 57 per cent (13) as opposed to 45 per cent (18) trust Ofqual a great deal/fair amount.

**Figure 20:** Trusted sources of information about exams

Q6a. For each of the following sources of information, please tell me how much, if at all, you trust them as a source of information about exams..?

	Employers with 20 or more employees		Employers with fewer than 20 employees	
	Trust a great deal	Trust a great deal / a fair amount	Trust a great deal	Trust a great deal / a fair amount
Base	217	217	32	32
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
Awarding organisations / Exam Boards	45	<b>86</b>	31	<b>69</b>
Professional Associations	37	<b>93</b>	25	<b>77</b>
Ofqual	35	<b>74</b>	25	<b>50</b>
Own professional networks	33	88	36	76
The government	23	<b>77</b>	16	<b>52</b>
Chambers of commerce	22	64	26	56
Word of mouth	<b>8</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>66</b>
The media	1	23	5	36

Effective base: 32 smaller employers; 217 larger employers (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

## Perceptions of vocational qualifications

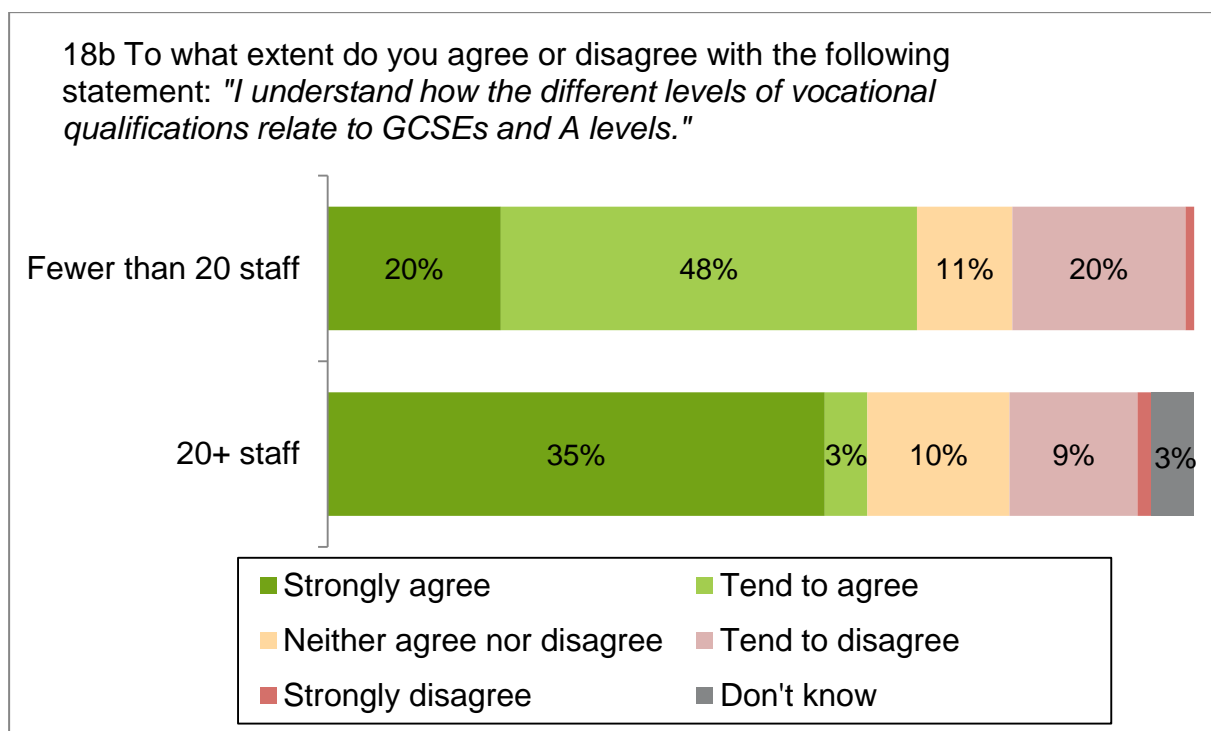
### Understanding the difference between GCSEs, A levels and vocational qualifications

The survey also asked the extent to which employers understood the difference between GCSEs, A levels and vocational qualifications.

Most employers said that they understood what was meant by the “level” of a vocational qualification. Claimed awareness increased with company size. Of those with fewer than 20 employees, **67 per cent** tended to agree that they knew what was meant by “level”. This increased to **87 per cent** among those with 50 or more employees. Of those with 50 or more employees over half (52 per cent) strongly agreed that they knew what was meant by “level”.

Around three-quarters of employers who said that they understood what was meant by the “level” of vocational qualification said that they understood how the different levels of vocational qualifications relate to GCSEs and A levels (78 per cent of those with 20 or more employees, 68 per cent of smaller employers). This figure increased with company size in that **88 per cent** of those with 250 or more employees said that they understood the difference.

**Figure 21:** Employers’ understanding of vocational qualifications by business size



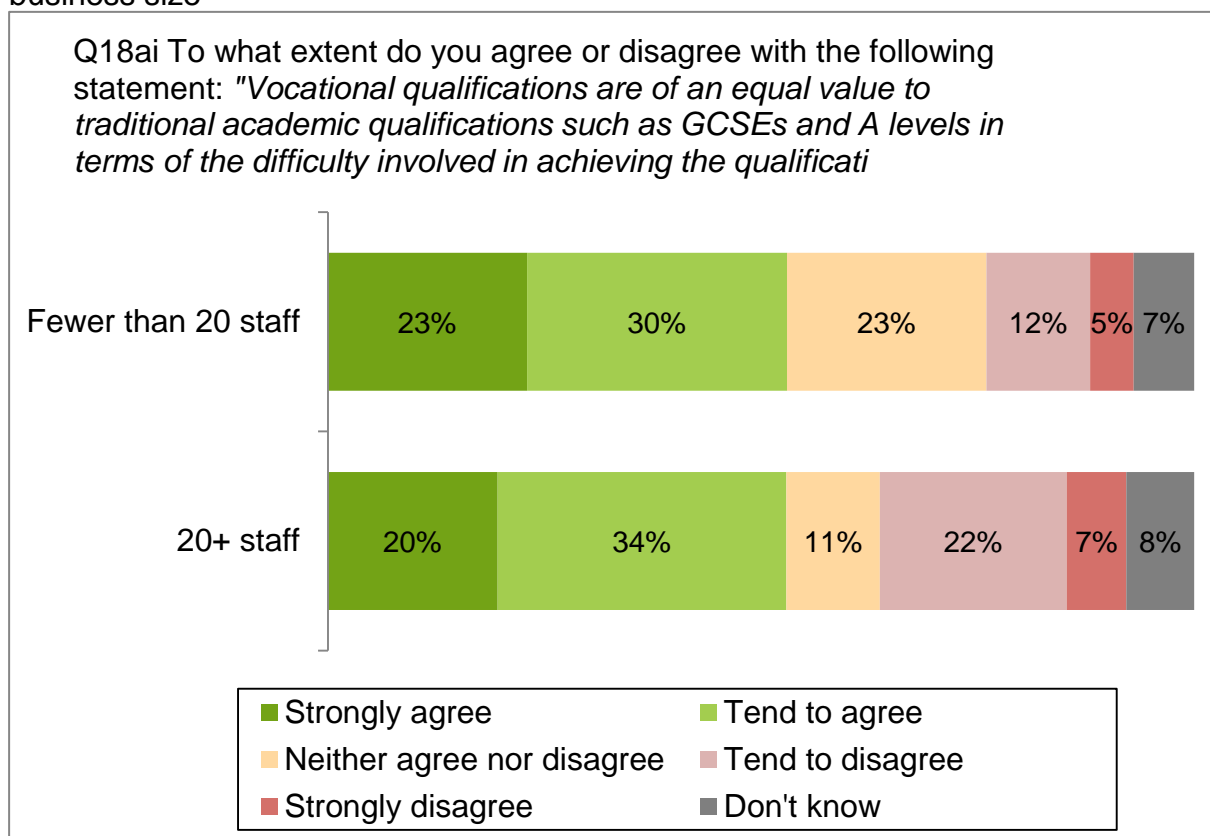
Effective base: 32 smaller employers; 217 larger employers (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

## Perceptions of vocational qualifications

When it came to rating their level of agreement with the statement, ‘*Vocational qualifications are of an equal value to traditional academic qualifications such as GCSEs and A levels in terms of the difficulty involved in achieving the qualification*’ there was very little variation in agreement according to size of the company. Just over half of businesses agreed (53 per cent overall).

Smaller employers were more likely than larger employers to select the middle ground of neither agree nor disagree (23 versus 11 per cent among those with 20 or more employees). Larger employers were more likely than the smaller to disagree (28 per cent versus 17 per cent).

**Figure 22:** Employers’ perception of the value of vocational qualifications by business size



Effective base: 32 smaller employers; 217 larger employers (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

## **Higher Education Institutions' Perceptions**

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### **Summary**

Overall Higher Education Institutions were positive both about A levels and GCSEs, though ratings of confidence for A levels were higher amongst Higher Education Institutions than for GCSEs. Nine out of ten institutions indicated that they had confidence in the A level system, while seven out of ten felt the same about GCSEs.

Higher Education Institutions also indicated that they placed value in A levels and GCSEs. More than three quarters of Higher Education Institutions agreed that it was more important now than ever that students get a higher grade qualification such as an A level, and nine out of ten said that they felt that the GCSE was an important qualification for people to obtain for their future.

Reflecting the value placed on A levels, more than four out of five Higher Education Institutions indicated that the qualification was routinely used to make a judgement about offering a school leaver a place, while around two thirds indicated that the A\* grade was useful when making such decisions.

Though Higher Education Institutions clearly do routinely make use of A levels, only two thirds said that A levels formed the minimum standard for candidates to be awarded a place at the institution. Rather, institutions placed greater weight on references, personal statements and general attitude to study than qualifications when making a judgement about a candidate.

Higher Education Institutions were also asked if institutions like theirs should be involved in the development of A levels; four out of five Higher Education Institutions said that there was a role for institutions to play in designing A levels.

Three-quarters of Higher Education Institutions said that they have confidence in the accuracy and marking of A level papers, while two-thirds said the same about GCSEs. Reflecting other measures which demonstrated overall confidence and value placed in GCSEs, 75 per cent of Higher Education Institutions felt that at least three quarters of A level students were awarded the right grade, while three in five said the same about GCSEs.

Almost all Higher Education Institutions were aware of the GCSE incident and there is some evidence that awareness has impacted negatively to some extent on Higher Education Institutions' confidence in the GCSE exam; around two in five Higher Education Institutions indicated that their confidence has been affected 'a lot' or a fair amount by the incident.

All Higher Education Institutions had heard of Ofqual and more than one-third said that they knew a 'fair amount' or a lot about the organisation. Three quarters felt that Ofqual was effective at regulating the exams system and maintaining the standards of qualifications.

Amongst Higher Education Institutions the most commonly used source of information about qualifications was UCAS, while Ofqual itself was used by one in five institutions. In terms of the sources of information that Higher Education Institutions said they would trust, awarding organisations were the highest ranking, being trusted by almost all Higher Education Institutions; Ofqual was trusted by more than 90 per cent of Higher Education Institutions, making it the second most trusted source of information.

Note: For the purposes of banding Higher Education Institutions together at sampling and analysis stages, we have segmented them under the traditional headings of:

- Russell Group: an association of 24 British public research universities established in 1994 to represent its members' interests, which include collaborative working amongst its members; leading in academic research; and attracting the most able staff and students.
  - Other Old (pre-1992): institutions that were classified as universities before 1992.
  - New (1992 onwards): institutions offering higher education courses, which were given university status in 1992 (formerly known as polytechnics).
  - Other Higher Education Institutions: institutions offering higher education courses that are not formally recognised as universities.
- 

## Perceptions of A levels

### Confidence in the A level system

In order to situate institutions' responses in the broader context, and because no historic data exists for this group of respondents, the survey asked how much confidence they had in the A level system, and also how this compared with last year.

Higher Education Institutions were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement '*I have confidence in the A level system*'. The response was positive with

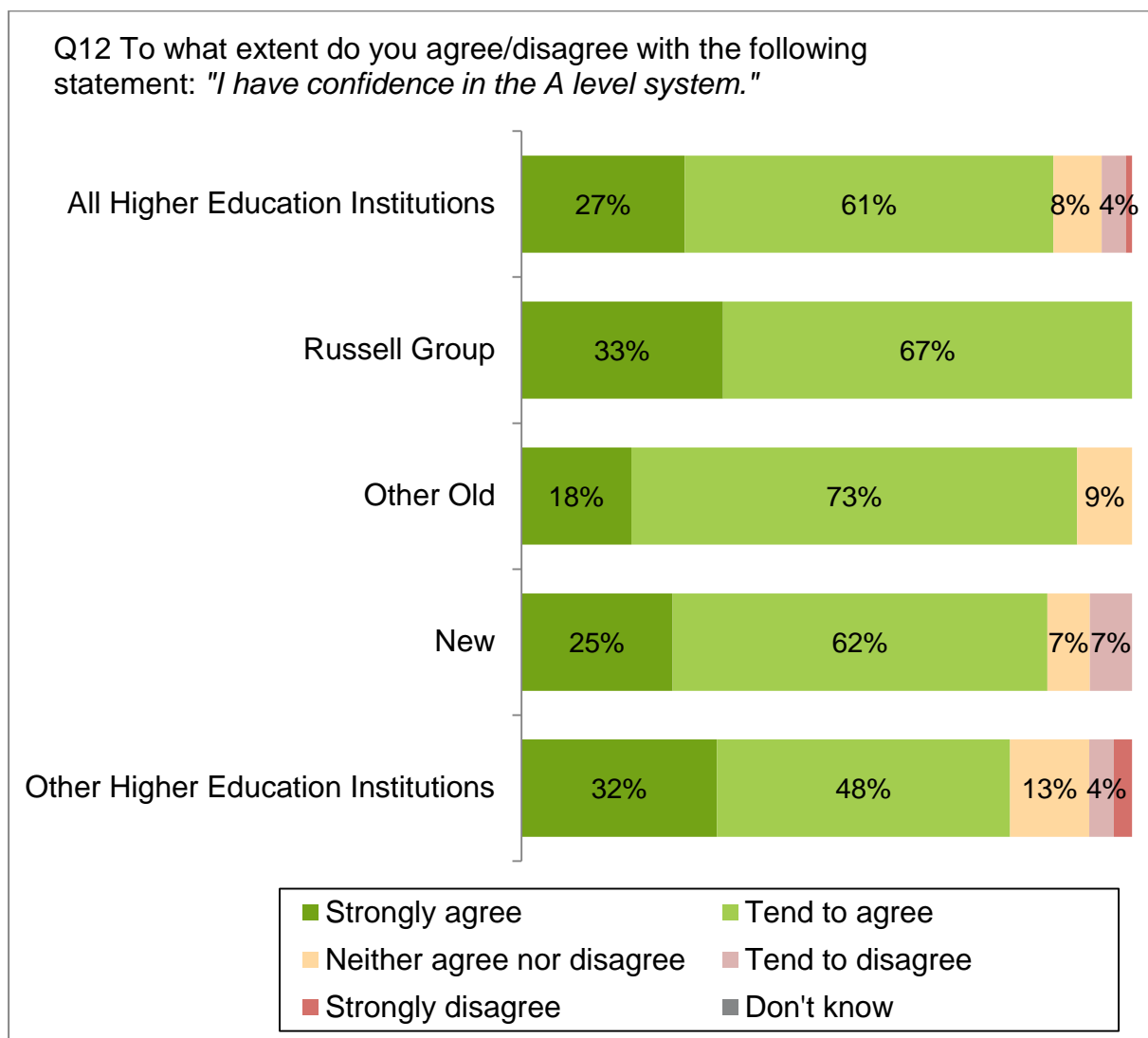


almost nine out of ten respondents (88 per cent) saying that they were in agreement with this statement.

All Russell Group institutions (27) said they had confidence in the A level system whilst Other Higher Education Institutions were less inclined than Higher Education Institutions in general to agree (**80 per cent**). Significantly, a similar proportion of respondents who said they felt A levels were graded accurately were also more likely to have confidence in the A level system (**94 per cent**), which would suggest that this was a strong indicator for respondents as far as confidence in the system as a whole was concerned.

Responses to this question varied very little amongst respondents who felt that Higher Education Institutions should play a greater part in developing A levels and those who did not.

**Figure 23:** Confidence in the A level system

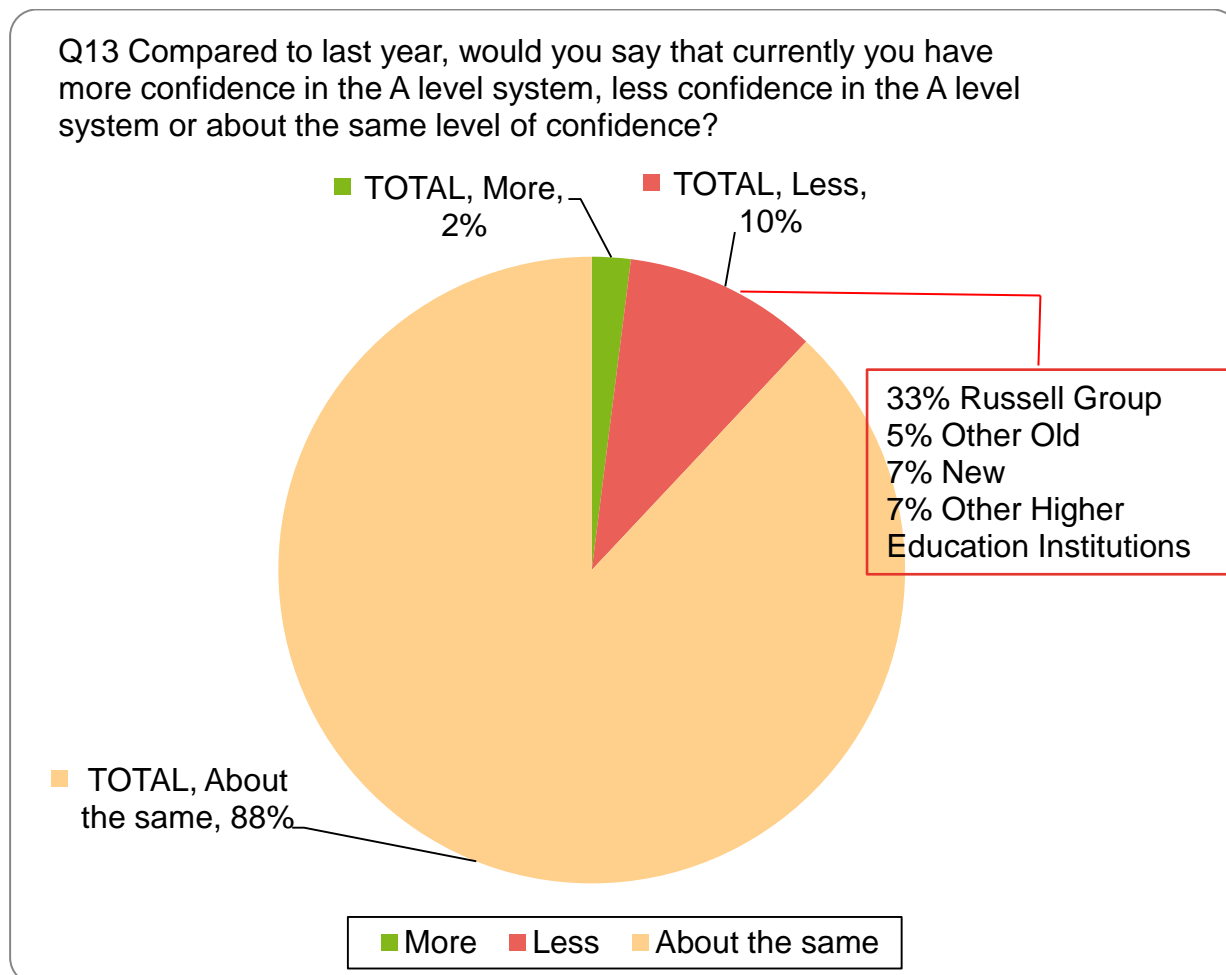


Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions: 24 Russell Group, 22 Other Old, 61 New, 75 Other Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

When thinking about whether their level of confidence in A level exams had changed in the past year, the vast majority (88 per cent) said they had the same amount of confidence. Whilst more Russell Group and Other Old institutions reported increased confidence in A level exams than last year, the proportion of these institutions saying their confidence had fallen was also higher than last year. Even where institutions reported that their confidence levels had fallen, however, this did not mean that Higher Education Institutions now had no confidence in A levels: all Russell Group institutions agreed that they had confidence in the A level system despite one-third of these institutions reporting lower levels of confidence than last year.

Current levels of confidence were also lower amongst those who reported concerns about the accuracy of marking of A level papers (20 per cent of respondents said their confidence was lower than the previous year).

**Figure 24:** Changing levels of confidence in the A level system



Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions: 24 Russell Group, 22 Other Old, 61 New, 75 Other Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

### Perceptions of the importance and value of the A level system

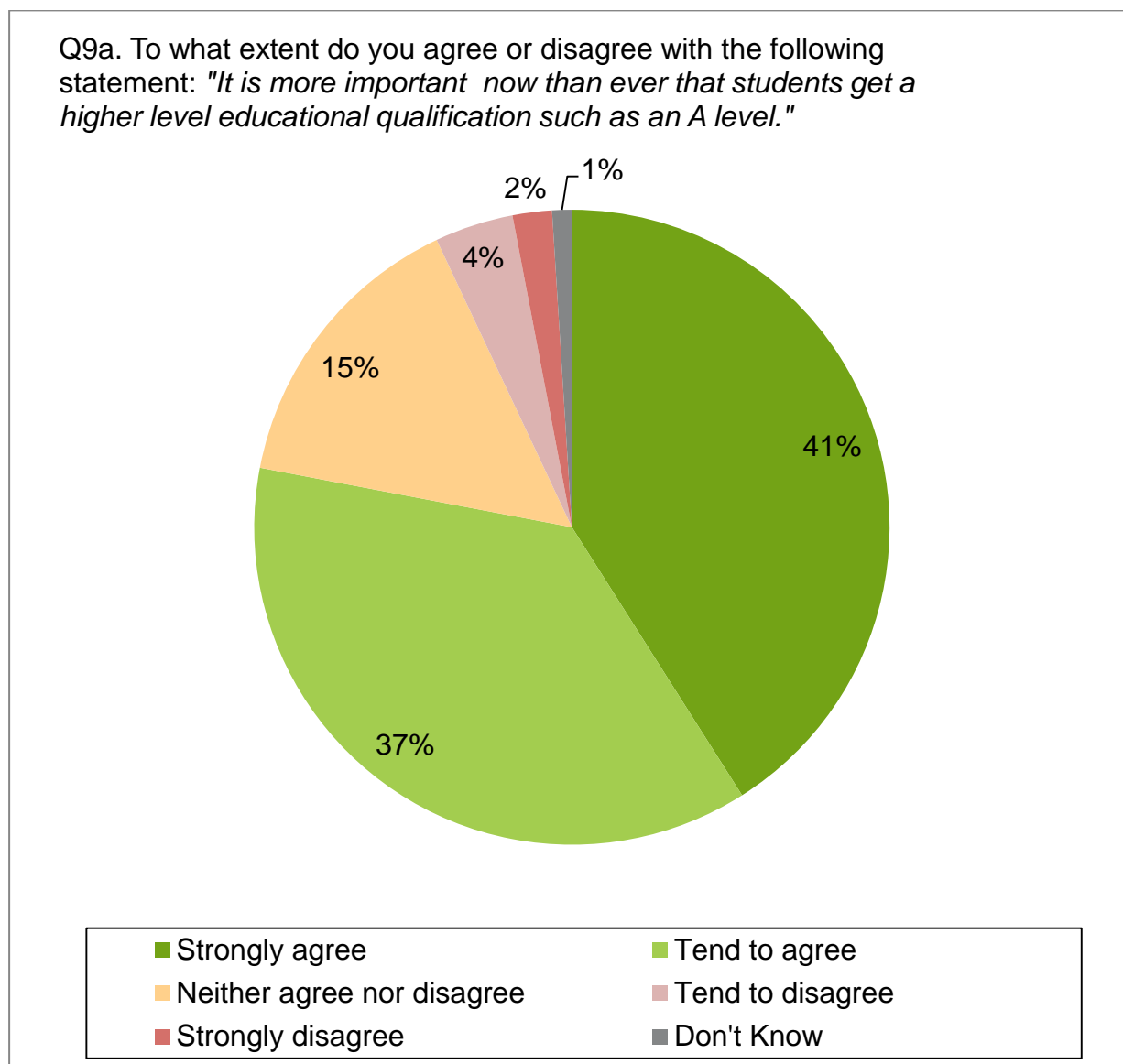
Institutions were also asked how valuable they felt A levels were to learners for their future.

When asked how strongly they agreed with the statement that *'It is more important now than ever that students get a higher level educational qualification such as an A level'*, respondents at Russell Group universities were in strongest agreement; 92 per cent (25) saying they agreed compared with an average of 78 per cent.

Agreement with the importance of higher level qualifications was also affected by the amount of faith respondents had in the way A levels were marked; with just 54 per cent (12) of those who expressed concerns about the marking of A levels agreeing with the importance of these qualifications and 25 per cent (5) actively disagreeing. Additionally, those who said they did not make use of A levels to make judgements about potential candidates placed less importance on candidates attaining qualifications such as A levels.

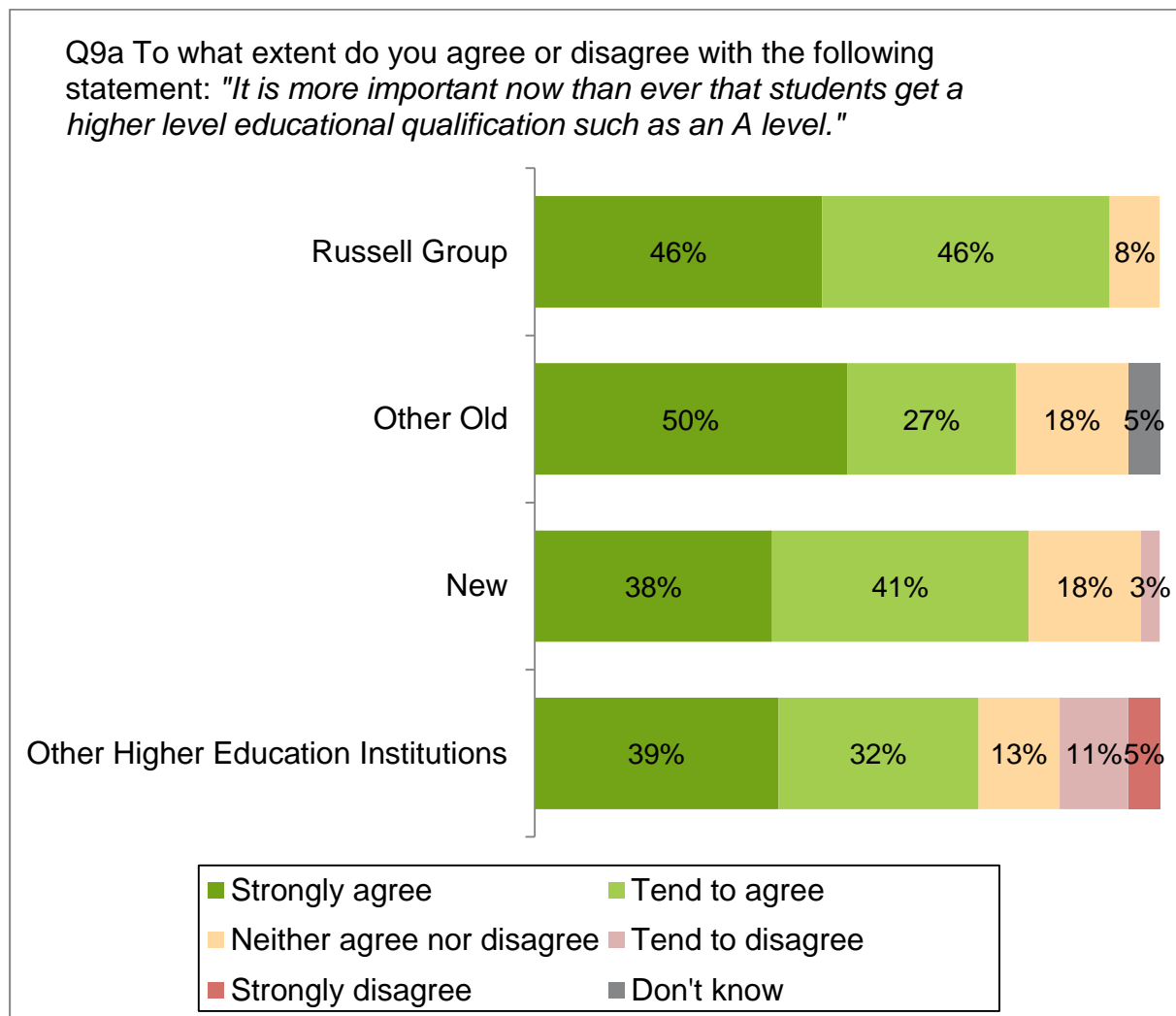
Differences by sub-group echoed those for the previous statement about the importance now rather than previously of students attaining a qualification such as an A level: institutions that did not make use of A levels when making judgements about potential candidates were less inclined to agree that the A level would be valuable to individuals in their futures; just over half – **56 per cent (7)**– of those who did not use A levels to make judgements about potential candidates thought the A level was an important qualification to obtain for the future.

**Figure 25:** Perceptions of the importance and value of the A level system



Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

**Figure 26:** Perceptions of the importance and value of the A level system by Higher Education Institution type



Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions: 24 Russell Group, 22 Other Old, 61 New, 75 Other Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

### Understanding how A levels are marked and graded

The survey also asked institutions how well they understood how A levels were marked and graded.

Compared with Higher Education Institutions generally, understanding of how A levels are marked was highest amongst Russell Group institutions - **92 per cent** (25) - and Other Old institutions (86 per cent). This also compares with just over two-thirds of New and Other Higher Education Institutions (both 67 per cent), which seems to

match the responses these Higher Education Institution types gave for how important they considered these qualifications to be. One in five Other Higher Education Institutions said they did not understand how A levels are marked.

Thinking about how A levels are graded, on the other hand, understanding was higher amongst all institution types, with all Russell Group institutions (27) aware of how A levels are graded compared with almost nine out of ten (88 per cent) of Other Higher Education Institutions.

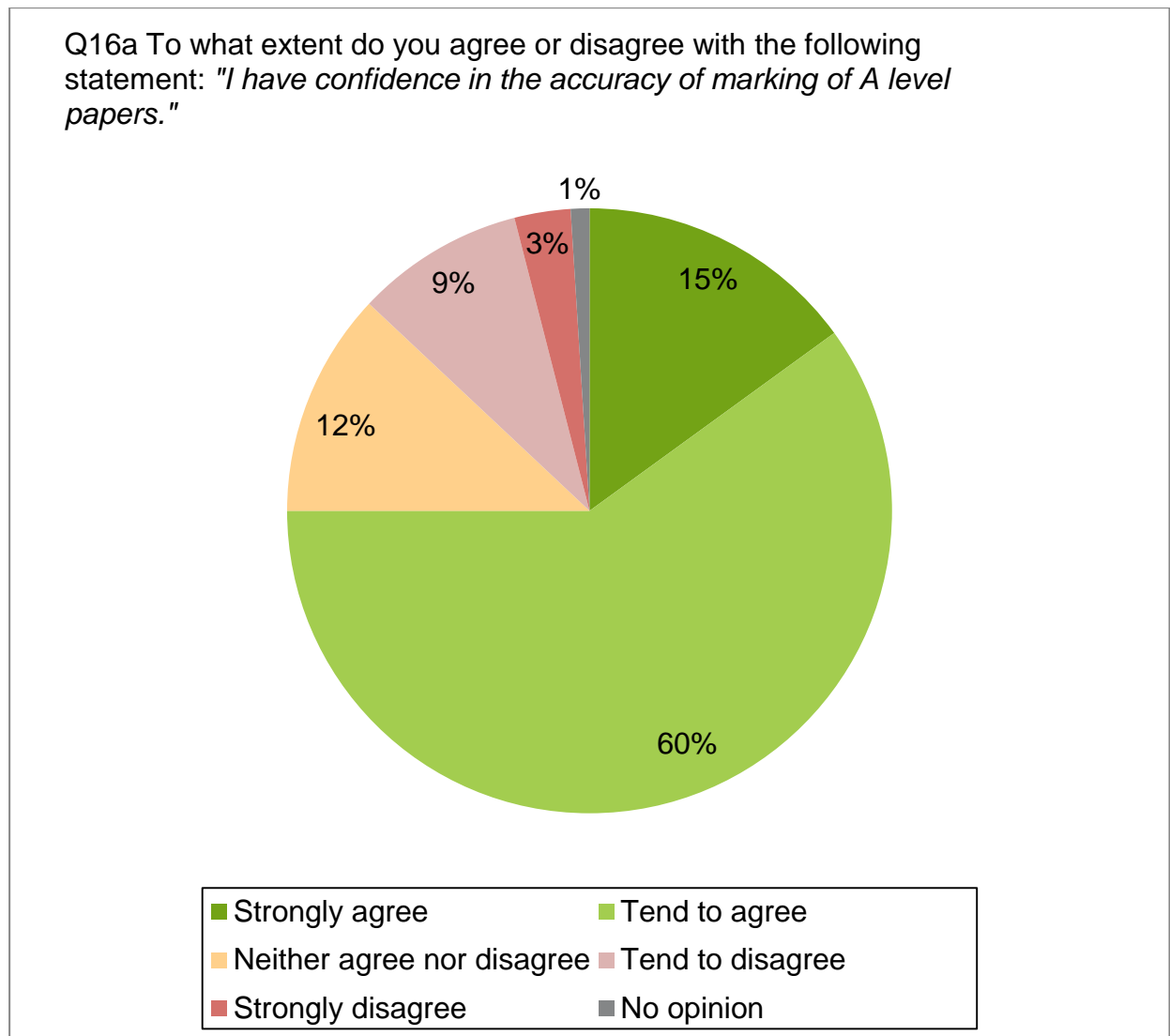
### **Confidence in the accuracy of marking of A level papers**

Confidence in the accuracy of marking was then explored as a subject in its own right, with some further probing for institutions' feelings about the quality of marking over the past two years.

Despite displaying the highest levels of agreement that A levels were important qualifications for candidates to attain, and also highest levels of understanding of how A level papers are marked and graded, only three-quarters of Russell Group institutions (20) said they had confidence in the accuracy of the marking of A levels. Compared with an average of 75 per cent overall, Other Old institutions reported highest levels of confidence in the accuracy of A level marking; 91 per cent (30).

There was a notable difference in the responses returned by those who use A levels to scrutinise candidates and those who do not, with **four-fifths** of respondents that do use A levels saying they had confidence in the way they are marked, compared with **44 per cent** (6) of those who do not use A levels. Almost half, 45 per cent (6), of those who do not use A levels to make judgements about potential candidates actively disagreed that they had confidence in the accuracy of the marking of A levels. Having said that, 42 per cent (8) of those who reported lower levels of confidence in A levels compared with last year, said they still had confidence in the accuracy of marking.

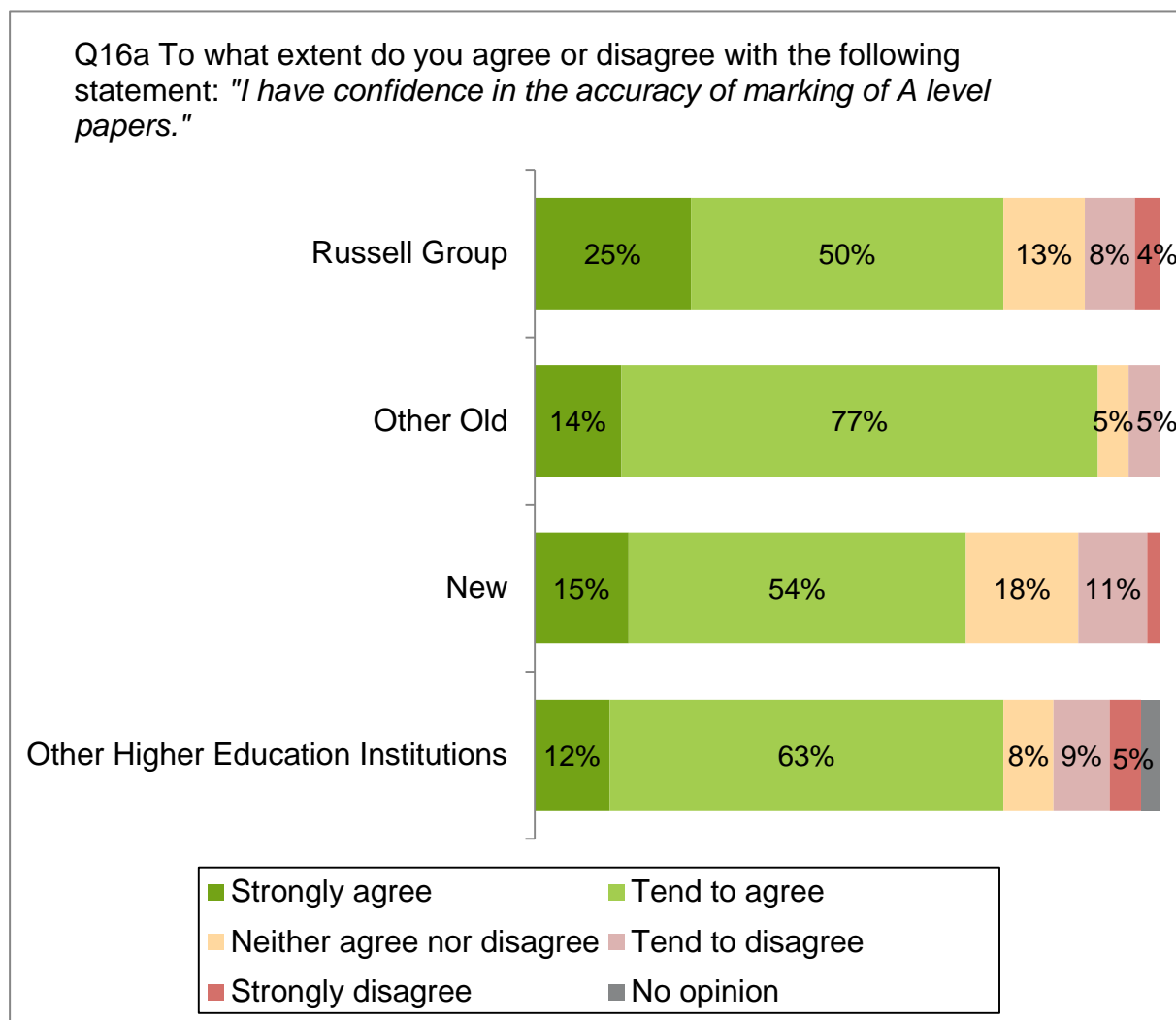
**Figure 27:** Confidence in the accuracy of marking of A level papers



Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).



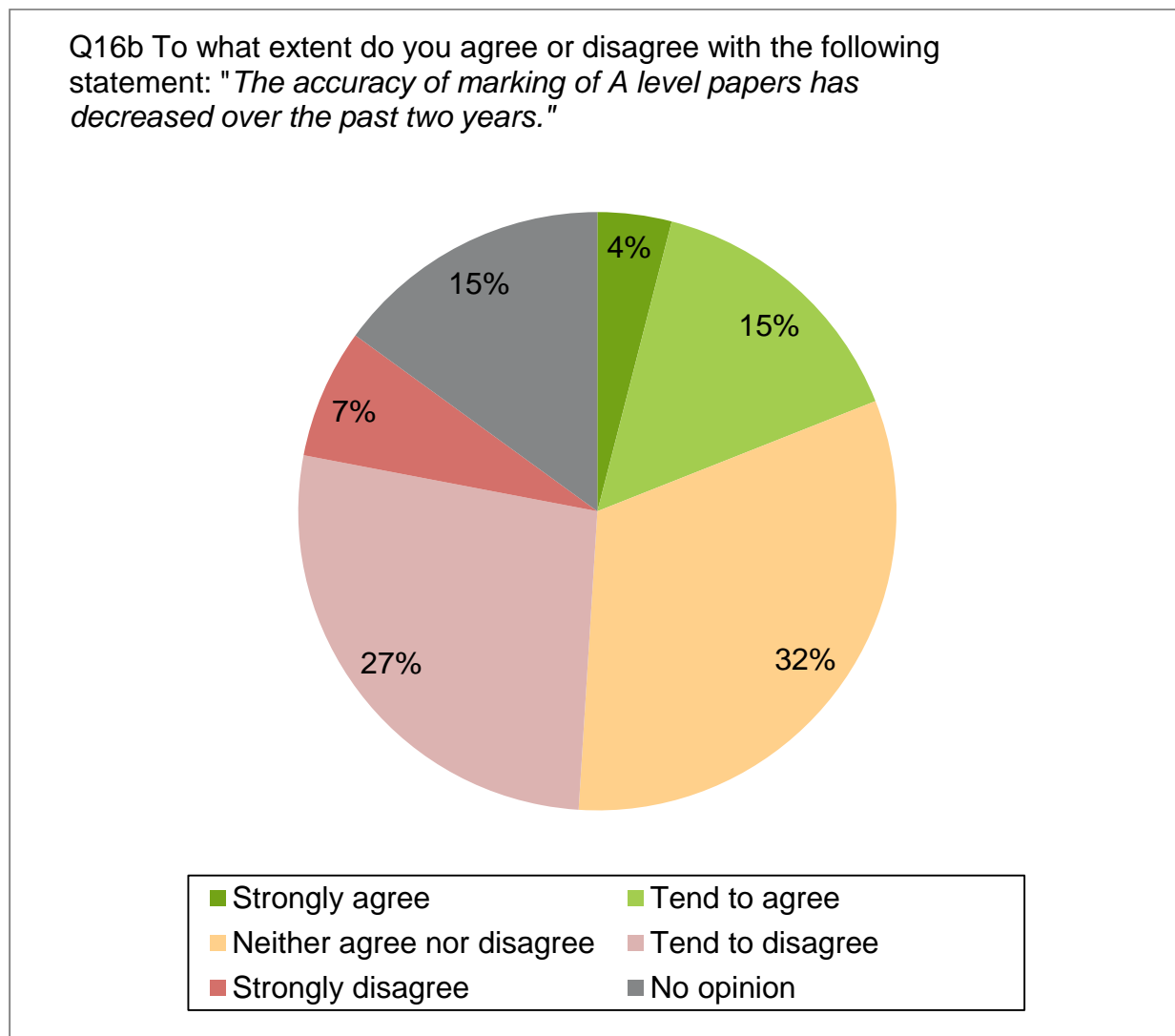
**Figure 28:** Confidence in the accuracy of marking of A level papers by Higher Education Institution type



Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions: 24 Russell Group, 22 Other Old, 61 New, 75 Other Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

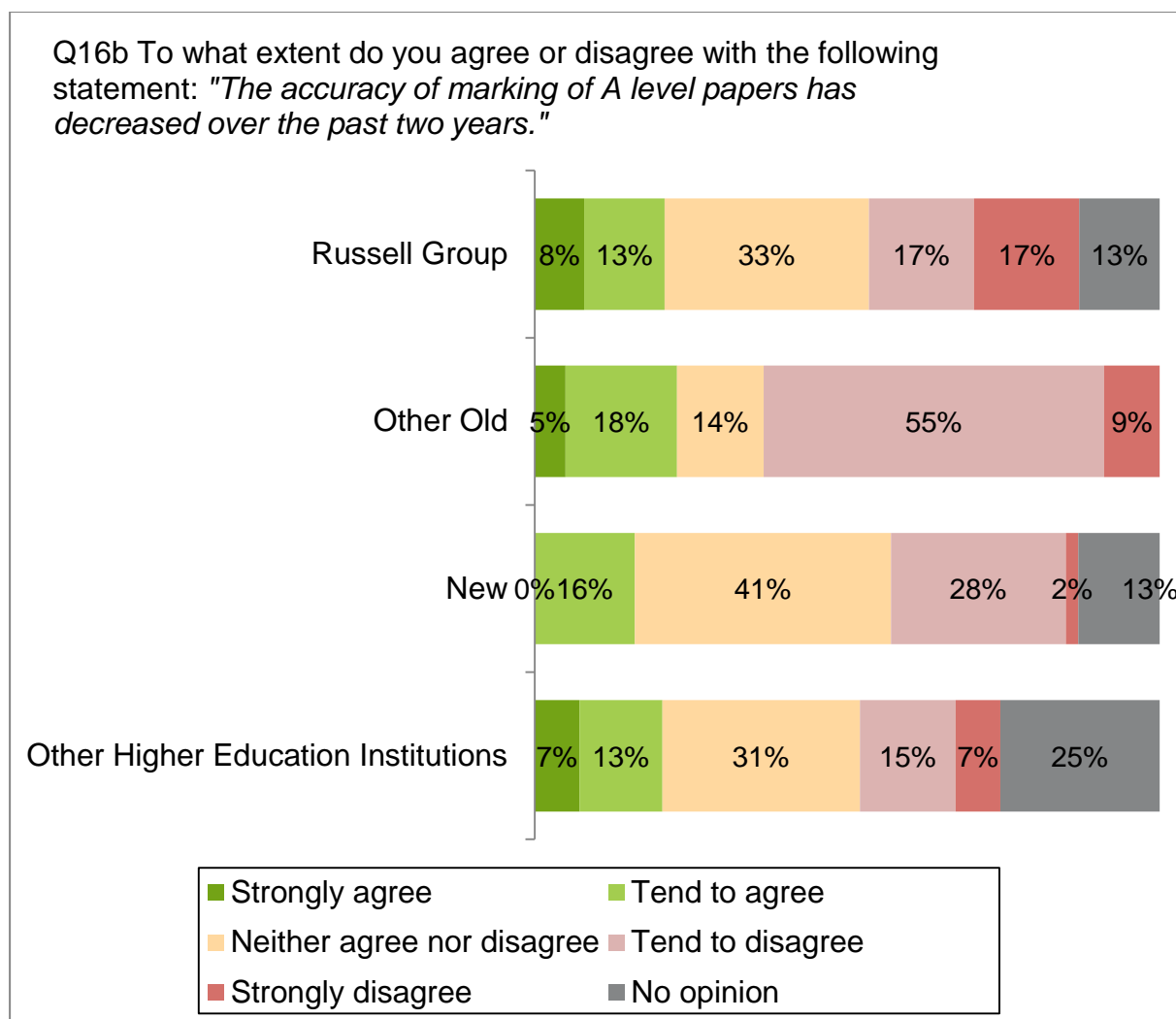
Fewer than one-in-five respondents felt that the accuracy of the marking of A levels had decreased in the past two years, although approaching half (47 per cent) said they either had no feelings either way or no opinion at all on the matter. Respondents were more likely to think the accuracy of marking had declined if their confidence in A levels overall had decreased compared with last year; **44 per cent** (8). Feeling that the accuracy of marking had declined was also higher amongst institutions that felt Higher Education Institutions ought to be involved in the development of A levels, with 22 per cent of this group saying accuracy had declined.

**Figure 29:** Changes in the levels of accuracy of A level marking



Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

**Figure 30:** Changes in the levels of accuracy of A level marking by Higher Education Institution type



Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions: 24 Russell Group, 22 Other Old, 61 New, 75 Other Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

Whilst the GCSE incident of last Summer was separate to the marking of A level papers, those aware of the GCSE incident, and those who admitted it had affected on their confidence either a lot or a fair amount were also more likely to disagree that A level papers were marked accurately. It is possible that the GCSE incident has had a negative impact on respondents' perceptions of the marking of qualifications more generally.

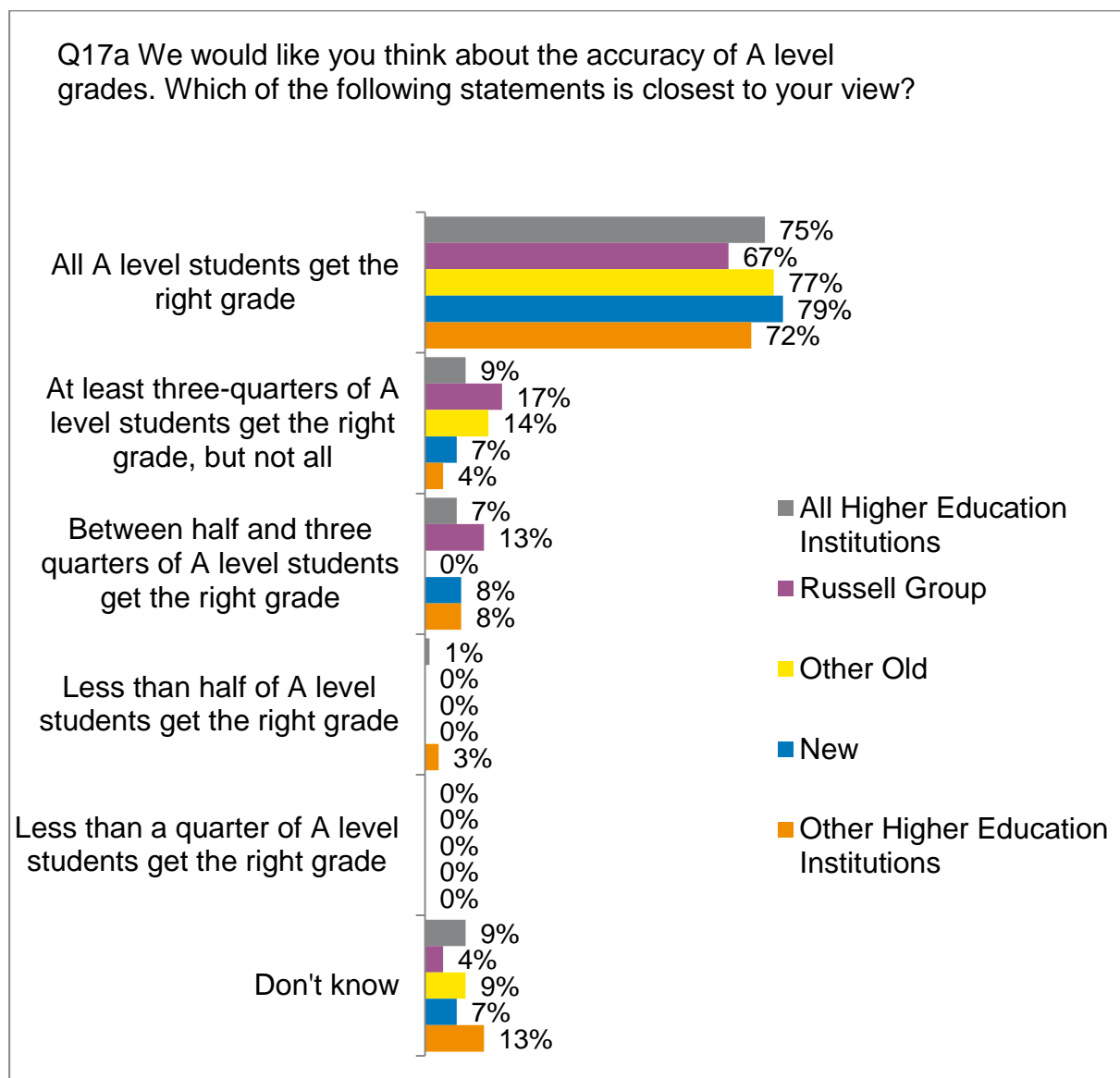
### Confidence in the accuracy and reliability of A levels

In addition to marking, the survey sought institutions' confidence in A levels as a comparator across candidates, and the incidence of students whose work was marked at an appropriate level.

Fewer than one-in-ten (9 per cent) respondents felt that all A level students were awarded the right grade, whilst the vast majority (75 per cent) said that at least three-quarters of A level students received the right grade. Russell Group institutions, along with New and Other Higher Education Institutions were amongst those answering that between half and three-quarters of A level students receive the right grade; 13 per cent (3), 8 per cent and 8 per cent respectively.

Respondents whose confidence in A levels had increased compared with last year were inclined to think that, at best, three-quarters of A level students received the right grade. For those whose confidence had fallen, one-quarter believed that between half and three-quarters of students are awarded the right grade. There was a similar story amongst respondents who did not feel A levels were marked accurately: all of these respondents were also in the camp that no more than three-quarters of students were awarded the appropriate grade.

**Figure 31:** Confidence in the accuracy of A levels



Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions: 24 Russell Group, 22 Other Old, 61 New, 75 Other Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

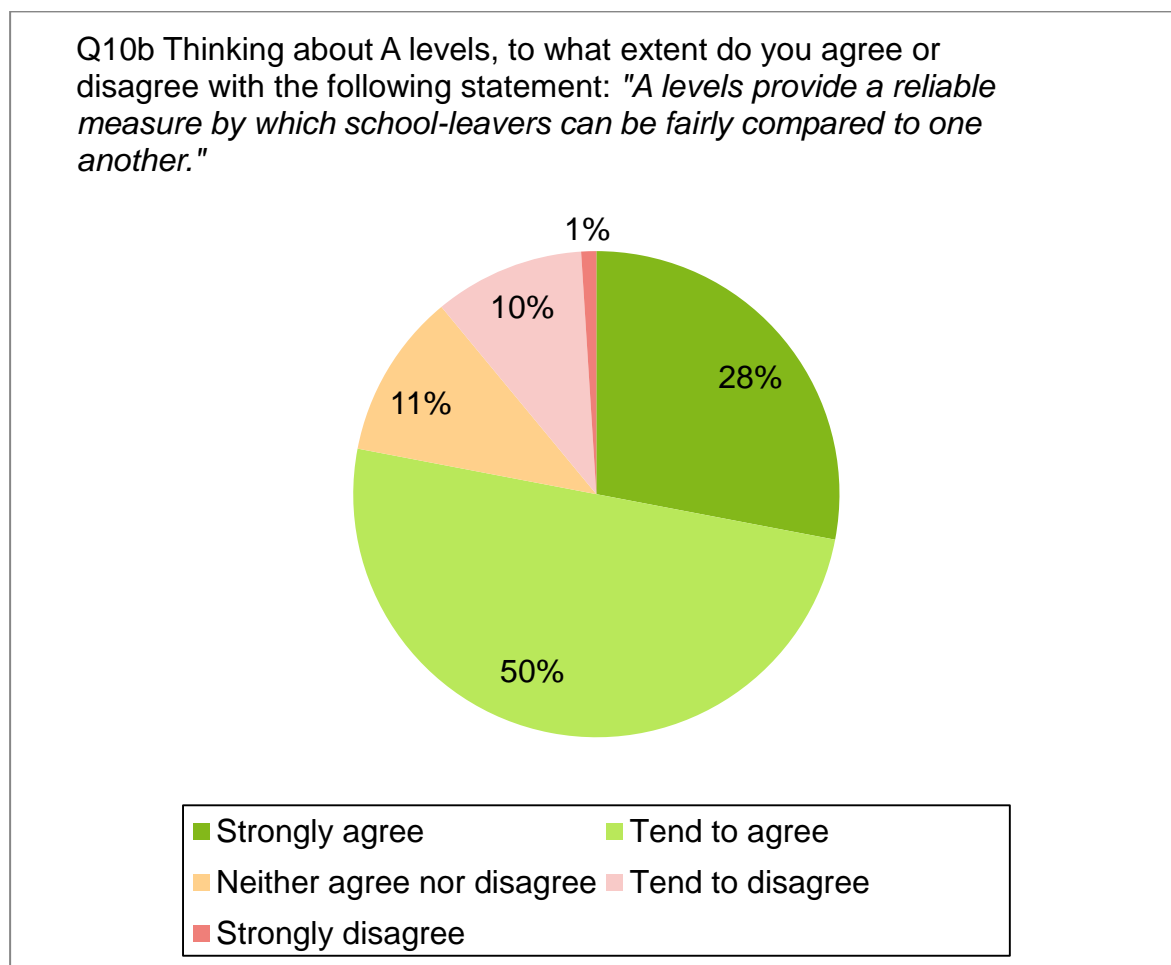
The reasons given by institutions that did not feel all students were awarded the correct grade included: inaccurate marking of papers (spontaneously mentioned by one-in-five respondents – 23 per cent), students’ conditions outside of school; for instance, home issues (mentioned by 22 per cent) and inconsistent teaching quality (mentioned by 15 per cent). These findings further reinforce the significance that accuracy of marking carries with regard to institutions’ overall perceptions of the qualifications system.

Even with all this in mind, over three-quarters of respondents (78 per cent) felt that A levels provided a reliable measure by which school leavers can be fairly compared to

one another. Furthermore, four-fifths felt that A levels were a good indicator of the overall ability of a school leaver. In relation to A levels acting as a good indicator of candidates' ability, Other Old Higher Education Institutions were more likely than Higher Education Institutions generally to agree; 95 per cent (31).

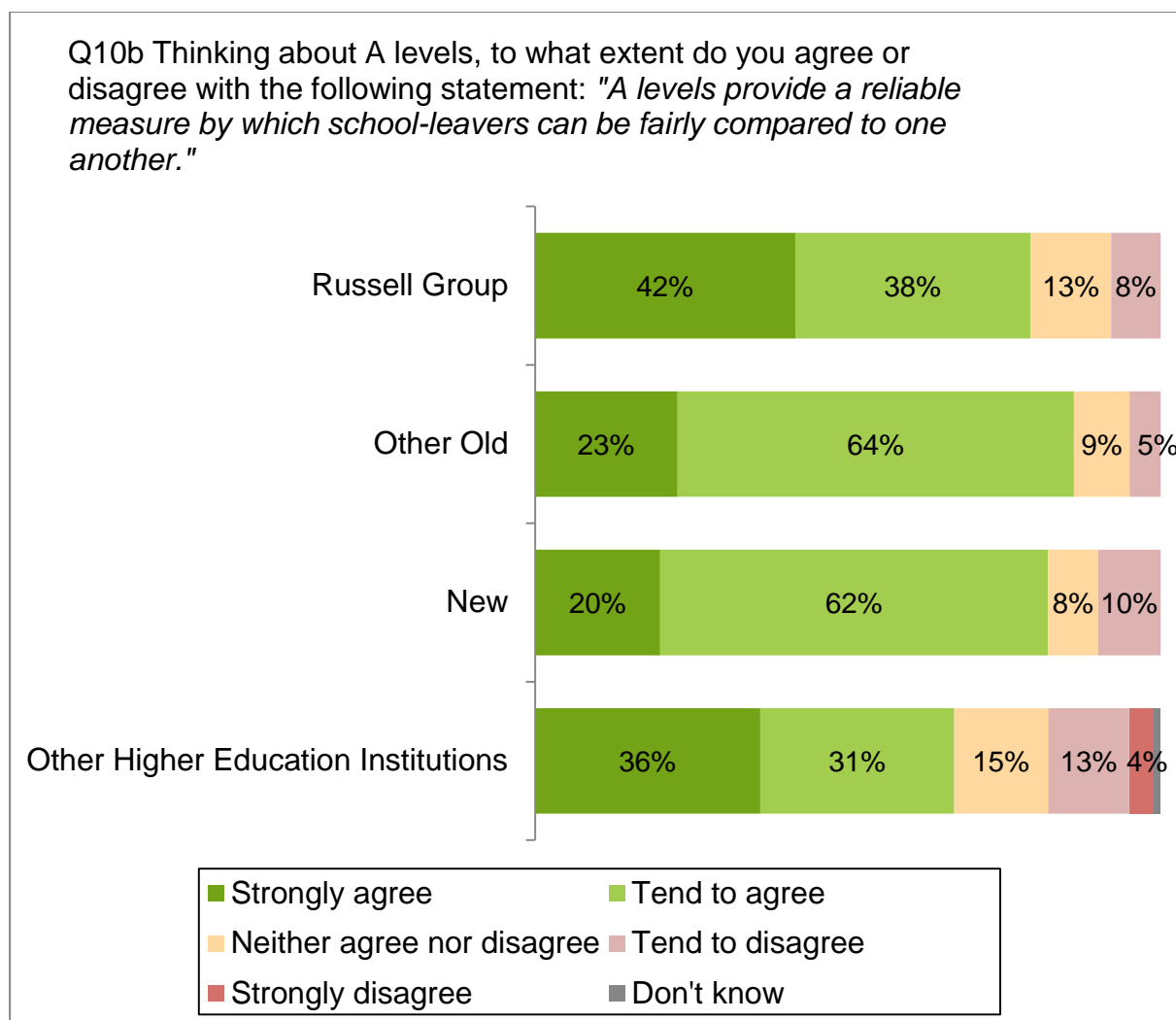
Unsurprisingly, agreement with both of these statements was also considerably higher amongst institutions that made use of A levels to make judgements about potential candidates; for instance, **82 per cent** of respondents who used A levels to compare candidates said they felt A levels provided a reliable measure to compare school leavers compared with **40 per cent** (5) of those who do not use A levels in this way. Once again, confidence in the accuracy of marking was particularly prominent amongst those who agreed that A levels provided a reliable measure across candidates (84 per cent). This is in contrast to respondents who did not feel A levels are accurately marked and who also had a tendency, **44 per cent** (9), to disagree that A levels were a useful cross-candidate comparator.

**Figure 32:** Confidence in the reliability of A levels



Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

**Figure 33:** Confidence in the reliability of A levels by Higher Education Institution type



Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions: 24 Russell Group, 22 Other Old, 61 New, 75 Other Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

### Perceptions of the A\* grade

Respondents to the survey were asked the extent to which they agreed with the statement 'The A\* grade at A level should help universities identify top students'. Overall 82 per cent of respondents agreed with this statement, with highest agreement amongst Russell Group and Other Old institutions; 96 per cent (26) and 95 per cent (31) respectively agreed with this statement compared with 75 per cent per cent of New and Other Higher Education Institutions.

This issue was explored further with a question asking about the usefulness of the A\* grade to Higher Education Institutions when making a judgement about whether to offer a candidate a place. Whilst Russell Group and Other Old Higher Education



Institutions were the institutions most in agreement, it was to a lesser extent with **88 per cent** (24) and 73 per cent (24) respectively compared with the result for Higher Education Institutions as a whole. The average of responses across these groups was less than 63 per cent, which was much lower than the earlier statement that the A\* grade should help universities identify top students. There seems to be a distinction in respondents' minds, between what the A\* grade should enable them to do and its current usefulness.

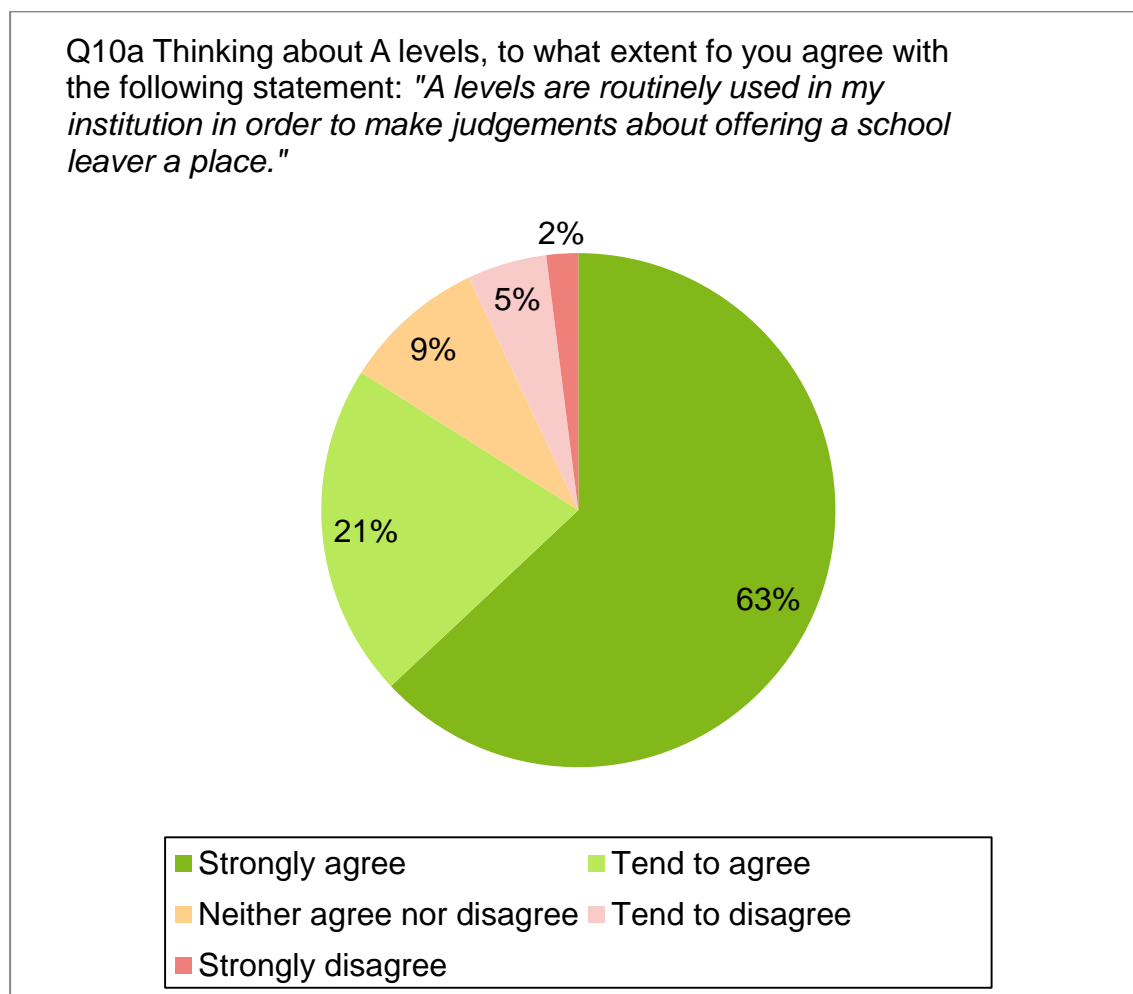
### **Use of the A-level qualification**

Institutions' use of A levels in order to make decisions about candidates, and the factors they considered most important when selecting potential candidates was another area explored by the survey.

Overall, 84 per cent of institutions said A levels were routinely used in order to make a judgement about offering a school leaver a place. The institution type that did not tend to use A levels to the same extent was Other Higher Education Institutions, where three in five respondents (**60 per cent**) agreed that A levels were routinely used, and one in five actively disagreed.

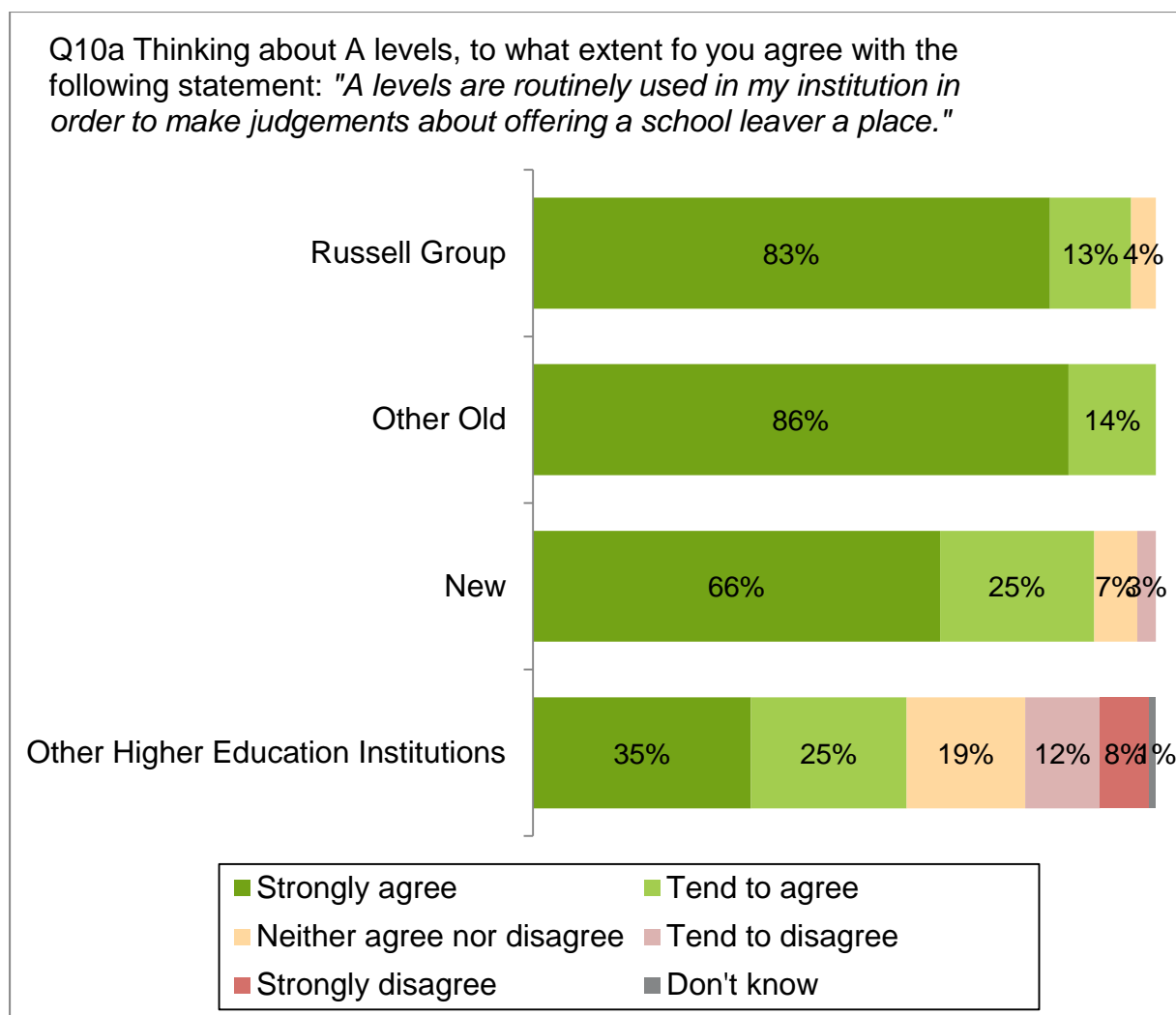
Use of A levels was also lower amongst respondents whose confidence in the qualification had fallen in the past year, with 73 per cent (14) saying they made use of A levels routinely and 14 (3) per cent saying they did not.

**Figure 34:** Use of the A level qualification to judge candidates



Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

**Figure 35:** Use of the A level qualification to judge candidates by Higher Education Institution type

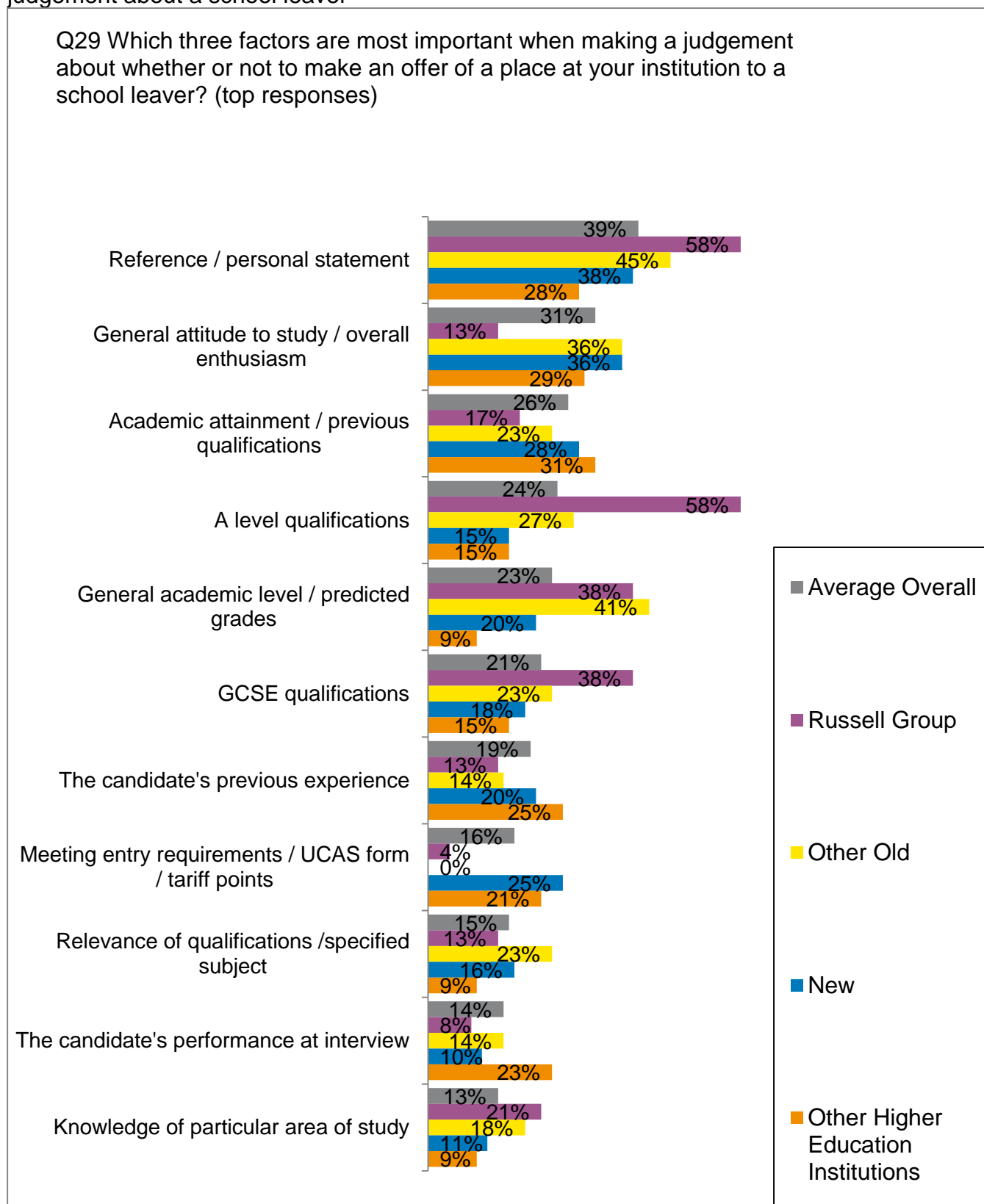


Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions: 24 Russell Group, 22 Other Old, 61 New, 75 Other Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

Even though over four-fifths of respondents said they routinely made use of A levels to make decisions about potential candidates, only two-thirds (67 per cent) said A levels formed the minimum standard for candidates to be awarded a place at an institution. This would suggest that A levels are considered to be a 'nice to have' by a number of institutions rather than a prerequisite for admitting candidates. Russell Group and Other Old Higher Education Institutions were most likely to regard A levels as a prerequisite; **92 per cent** (25) and **95 per cent** (31) respectively, whilst only **40 per cent** of Other Higher Education Institutions thought the same. Similarly, institutions were more likely to say they used the A level as a minimum standard for candidates if they also trusted in the accuracy of marking; **72 per cent** of those who trust the accuracy of marking compared with **41 per cent** (9) who said that they did not.

Respondents were also asked to comment on the three main factors they would take into consideration when making a judgement about offering a place to a school leaver. The top two unprompted responses were candidates' references or personal statement (39 per cent), and general enthusiasm and attitude to study (31 per cent). The next most common response was general academic attainment (26 per cent), which was mentioned more than A levels (24 per cent) and GCSEs (21 per cent) specifically. These qualifications were most important to Russell Group respondents whilst general attitude and performance at interview were of particular importance to Other Higher Education Institutions. Other qualifications mentioned by respondents as one of the top three factors they would consider when reviewing a candidate were Level 3 qualifications (8 per cent and mainly within the New Higher Education Institution group), vocational qualifications (8 per cent overall and mainly in the Other Old Higher Education Institution group), Level 2 qualifications (4 per cent overall and almost entirely in the New Higher Education Institution group), and AS level qualifications (3 per cent overall and mentioned by a small number of respondents in each institution type except Other Higher Education Institutions).

**Figure 36:** Factors which Higher Education Institutions consider important to make a judgement about a school leaver



Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions: 24 Russell Group, 22 Other Old, 61 New, 75 Other Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

### **Higher Education Institutions' role in developing A levels**

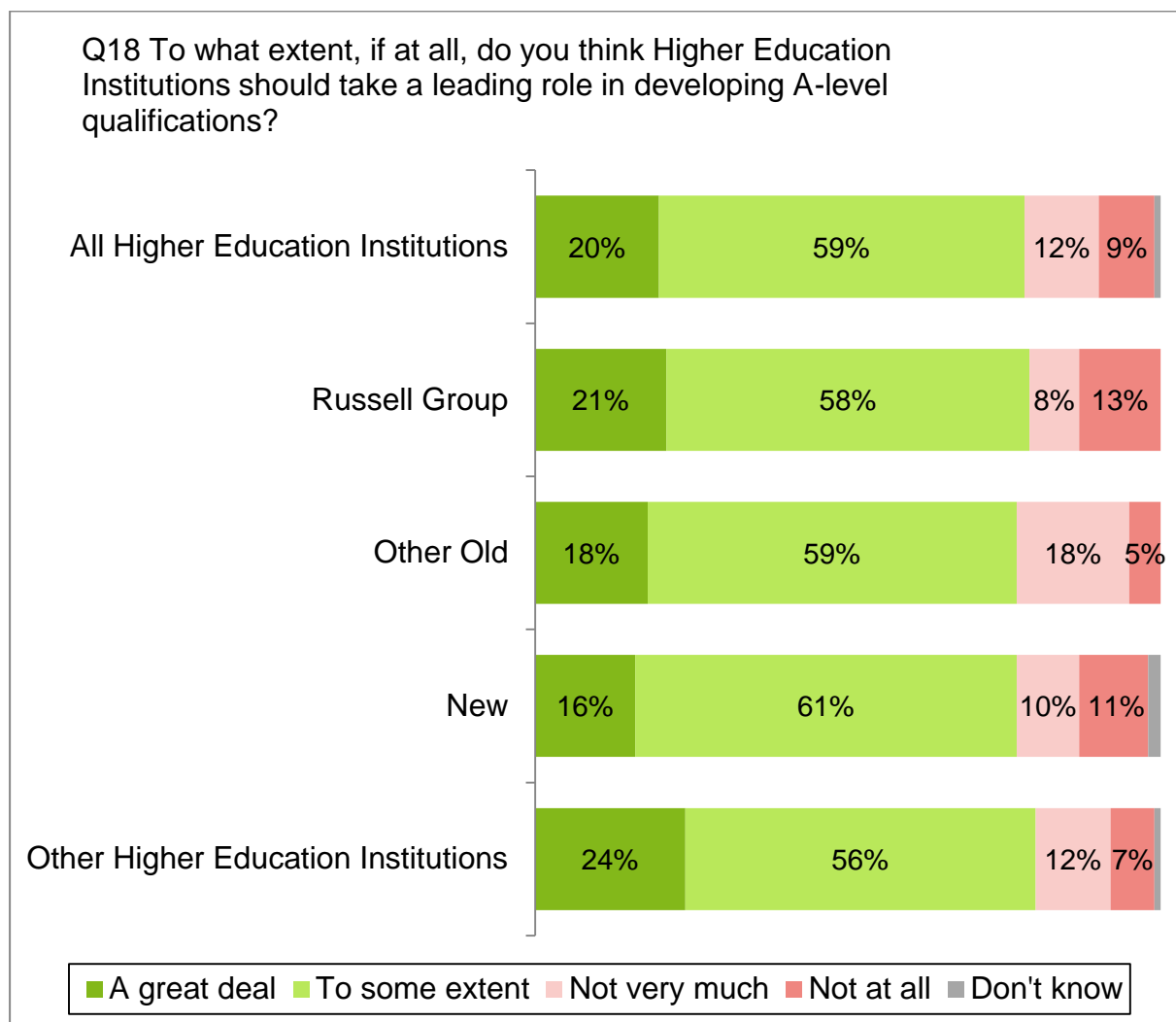
Another area covered by the questionnaire in light of recent controversy and public debate was the extent to which respondents felt Higher Education Institutions ought to play a part in developing qualifications.

Seventy nine per cent of respondents felt Higher Education Institutions ought to play a part in developing A levels, with the majority of these arguing that Higher Education Institutions should be involved to *some extent* rather than *a great deal* (**59 per cent** versus **20 per cent**). This feeling was quite evenly split across all Higher Education Institution types.

Amongst those that felt Higher Education Institutions had a part to play in developing A levels were respondents whose confidence in A levels had declined in the past year; where over three-quarters – 78 per cent (15) – of respondents felt Higher Education Institutions should take a leading role to some extent. It may be that waning confidence in the robustness of the A level system has resulted in a more proactive attitude on the part of some Higher Education Institutions in shaping qualifications so that they deliver what Higher Education Institutions need in order to make decisions about potential candidates.

Looking at subject departments, most respondents worked within a central admissions department and so felt unable to comment on the extent to which their department would be willing to take a leading role. The number of individuals responding on behalf of specific subject departments was too small for any firm conclusions to be drawn on this basis.

**Figure 37:** Role of department for developing A levels



Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions: 24 Russell Group, 22 Other Old, 61 New, 75 Other Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

### Higher Education Institutions' concerns about A levels

Higher Education Institutions were then asked to comment on whether they had any specific concerns about the A level system. More than a third of Higher Education Institutions (37 per cent) did not have any concerns about the qualification system, though 20 per cent mentioned that they felt that there were too many re-sits. Eighteen per cent felt that A levels are not fit for purpose and that they do not prepare students appropriately for higher education or for working life.

## **Perceptions of GCSEs**

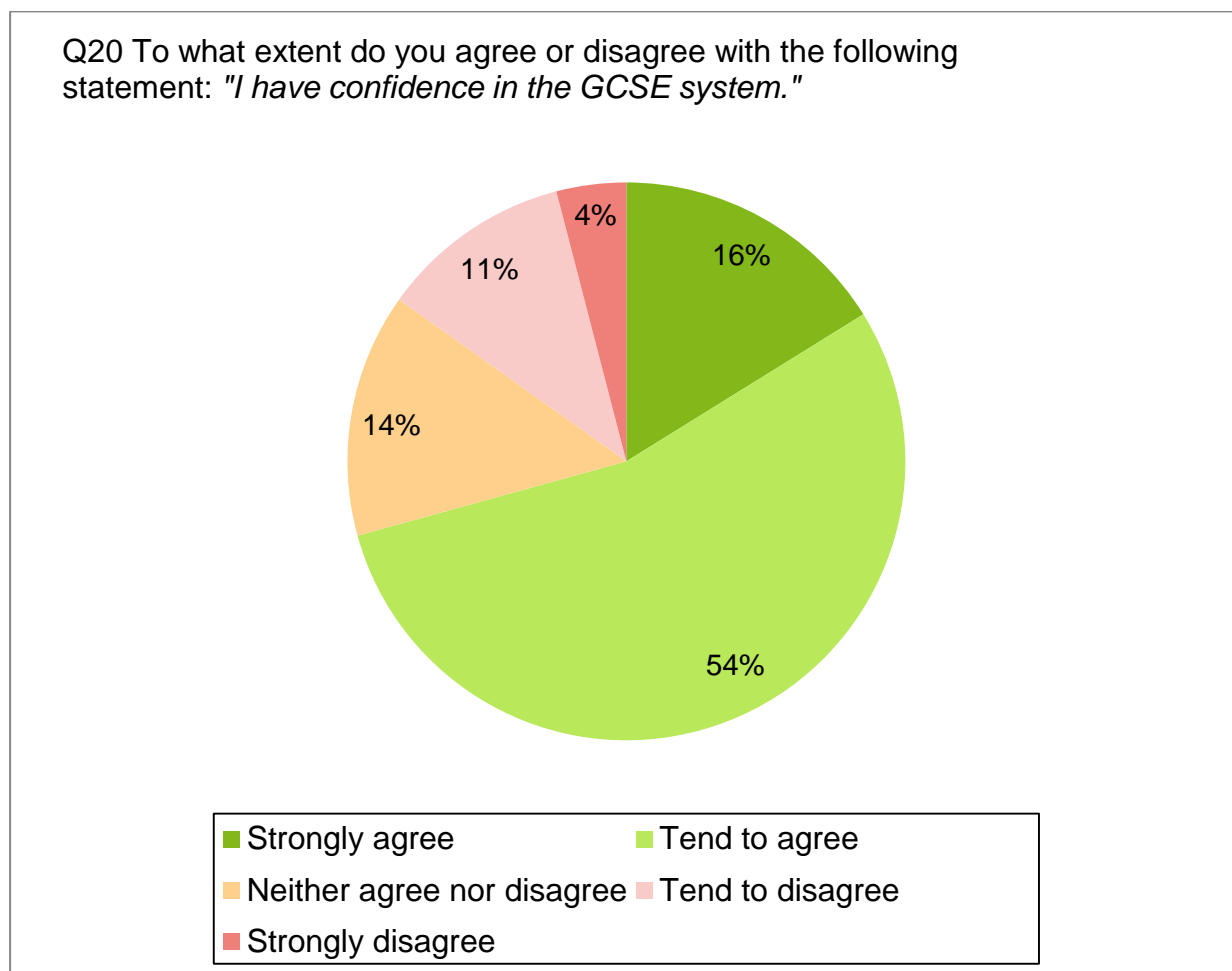
### **Confidence in the GCSE system**

Much in the same way as for A levels, respondents were asked how far they agreed that they had confidence in the GCSE system. The majority of respondents (71 per cent) were in agreement, although this was a notably lower proportion than where A levels were concerned (**88 per cent**). Russell Group institutions were more likely than Higher Education Institutions overall to have confidence in GCSEs; 88 per cent (24). Furthermore, those saying they felt Ofqual performed effectively had most confidence in the GCSE system (**74 per cent**).

Even half of the respondents whose confidence in GCSEs had fallen since last year were inclined to say they had confidence in the system (**52 per cent**), as were 70 per cent of those who were aware of the GCSE incident last Summer. Where respondents said this incident had affected their confidence a lot, the proportion of individuals saying they did not have confidence in the GCSE system increased to 52 per cent (11).

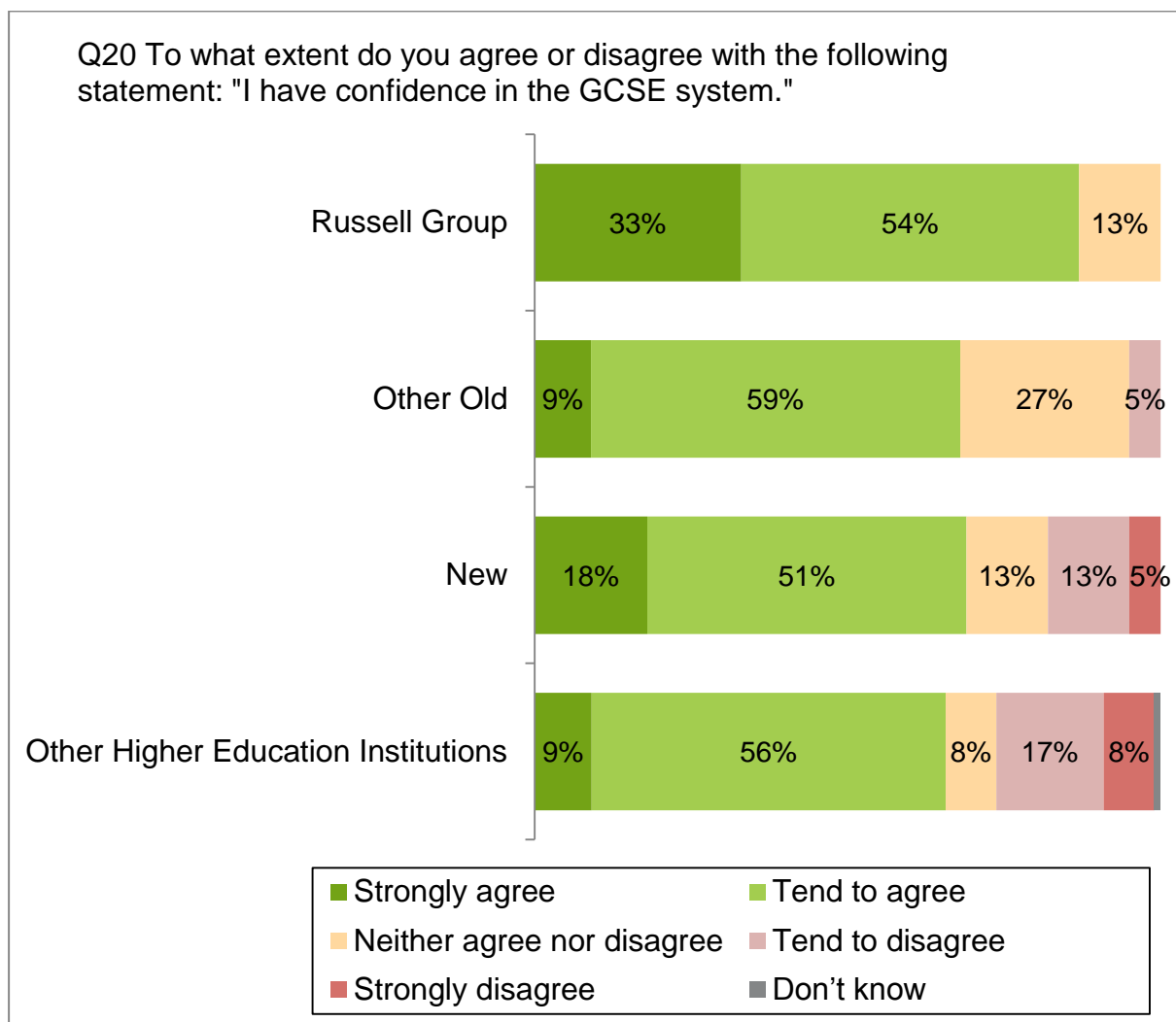


**Figure 38:** Confidence in the GCSE system



Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

**Figure 39:** Confidence in the GCSE system by Higher Education Institution type



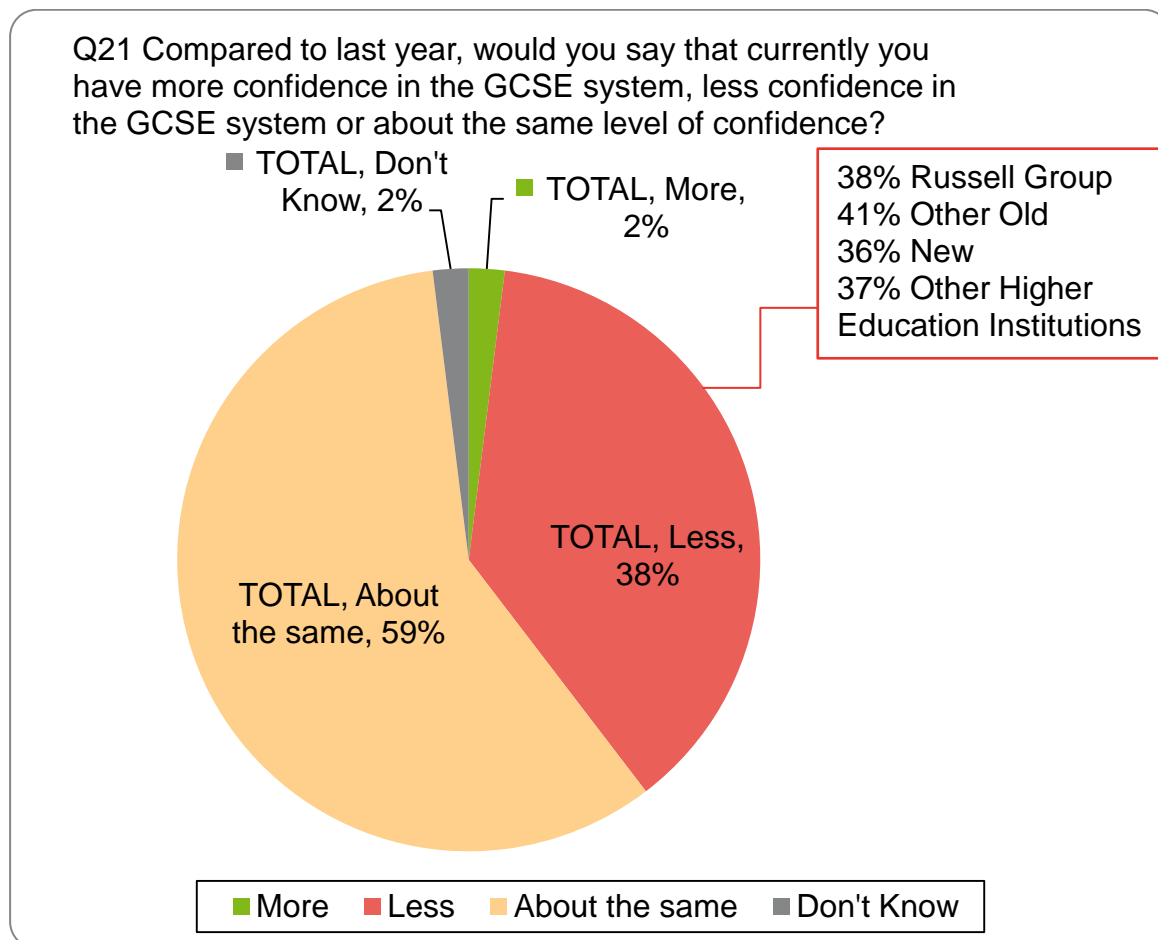
Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions: 24 Russell Group, 22 Other Old, 61 New, 75 Other Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

When asked whether their confidence in the GCSE system had changed in the past year, the most common response was that confidence was about the same (58 per cent) although this was lower than when respondents answered the same question for A levels (88 per cent). Almost two in five said their confidence was lower than a year ago, and this was particularly true of Other Old Higher Education Institutions. Those holding the view that Ofqual was ineffective were also more likely to say their confidence in the GCSE system had decreased in the past year; 64 per cent (8) compared with 36 per cent who thought Ofqual was effective.

The GCSE English grading controversy last Summer does seem to have had some impact on respondents' perceptions, although it has not been wholly negative. Over half (**58 per cent**) of those aware of the incident said that their confidence levels

were about the same compared with last year and 38 per cent of those aware said their confidence had fallen.

**Figure 40:** Changing confidence level changes in the GCSE system overall

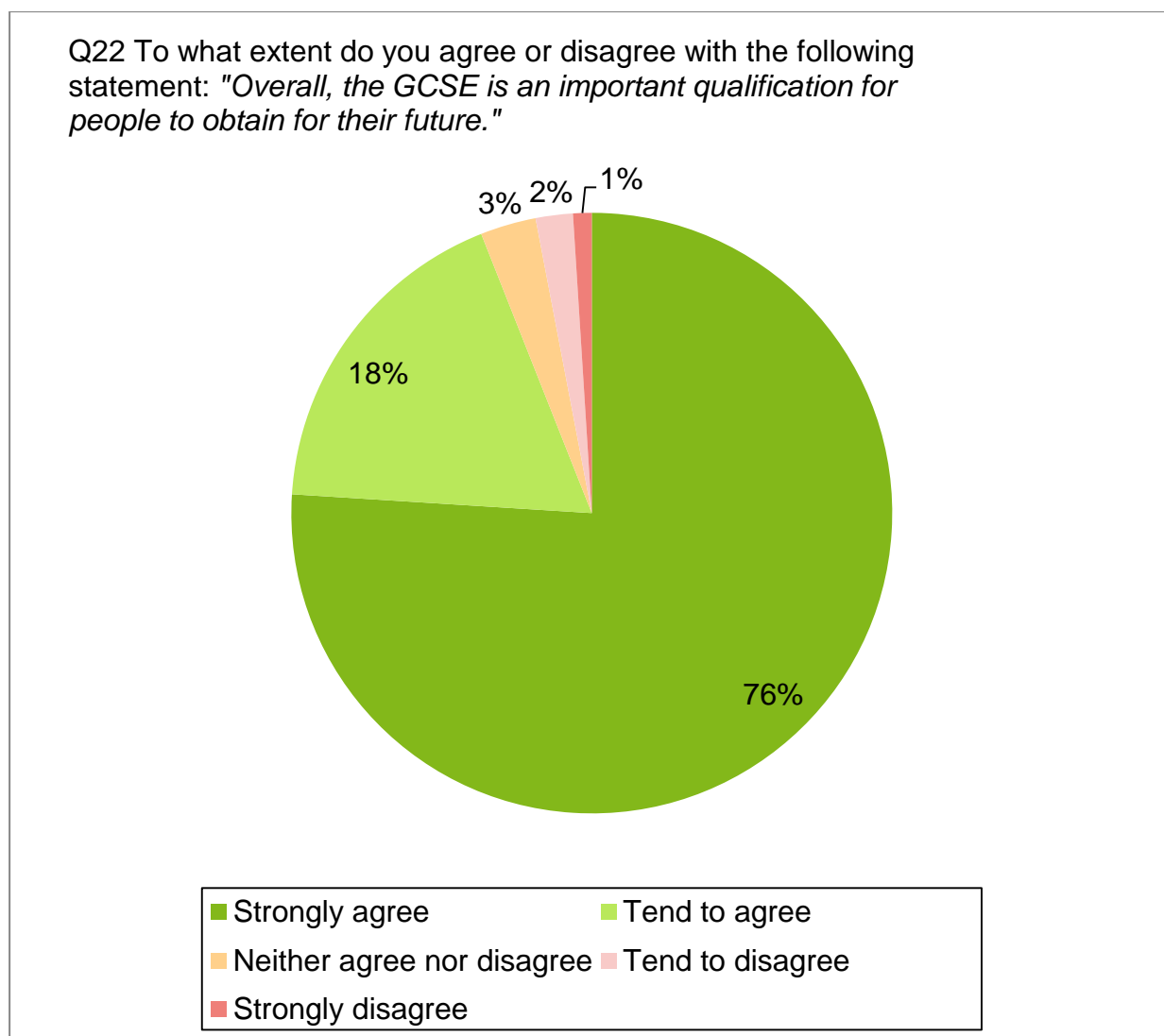


Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions: 24 Russell Group, 22 Other Old, 61 New, 75 Other Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

### Perception of the importance and value of the GCSE system

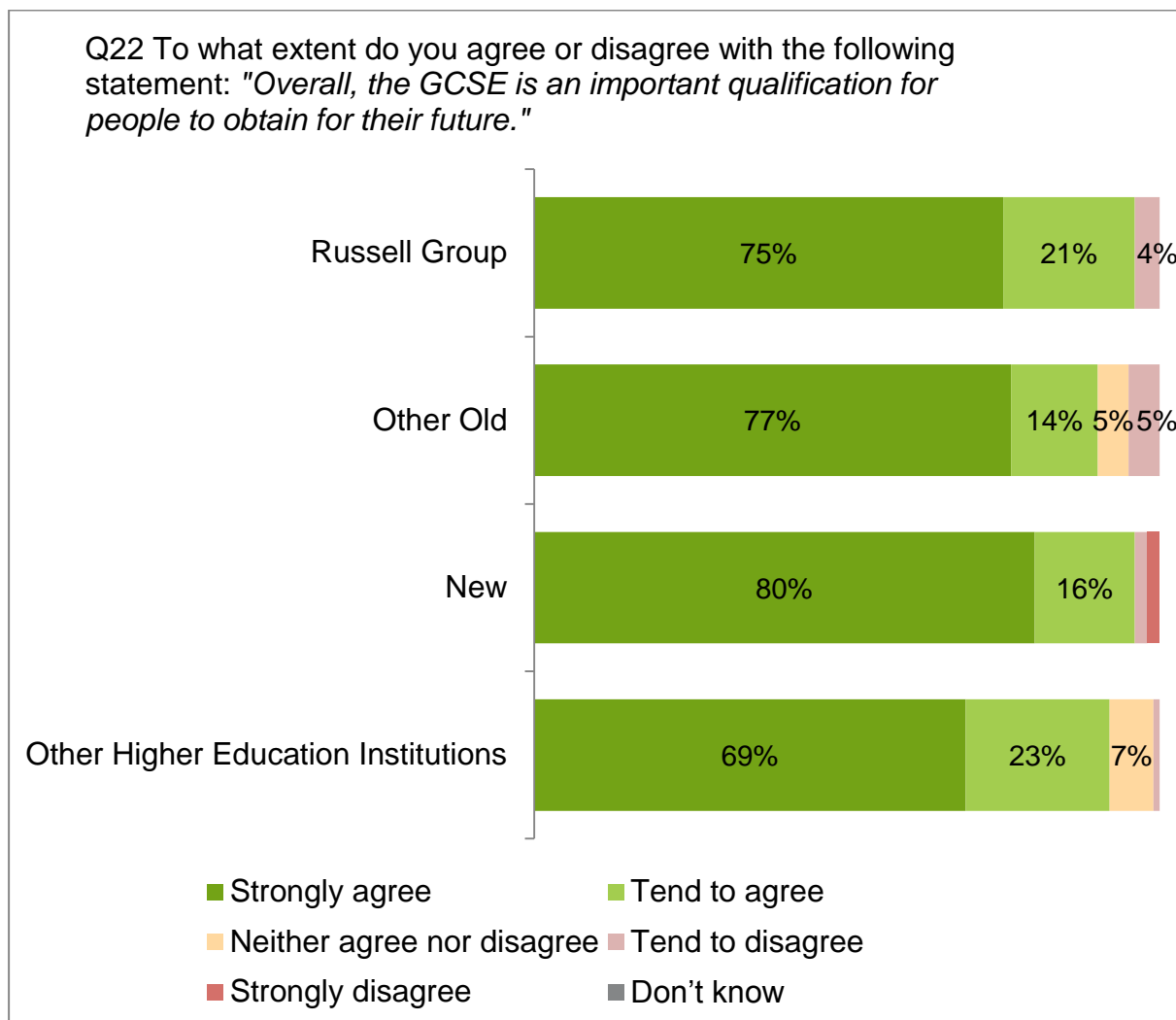
Almost all respondents (**94 per cent**) thought that the GCSE was an important qualification for people to obtain for their future with little variation by Higher Education Institution type. This was notably higher than when respondents were asked the same question of A levels, where 78 per cent agreed. Where respondents were not aware of Ofqual or were aware but felt it did not perform effectively, agreement about the importance of GCSEs was lower (**76 per cent** and **80 per cent** respectively).

**Figure 41:** Perceptions of the importance of GCSEs



Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

**Figure 42:** Perceptions of the importance of GCSEs by Higher Education Institution type



Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions: 24 Russell Group, 22 Other Old, 61 New, 75 Other Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

### Understanding how GCSEs are marked and graded

Around two-thirds of respondents said they understood how GCSEs were marked, and as for A levels, this seemed to be higher amongst Russell Group institutions; 79 per cent (22).

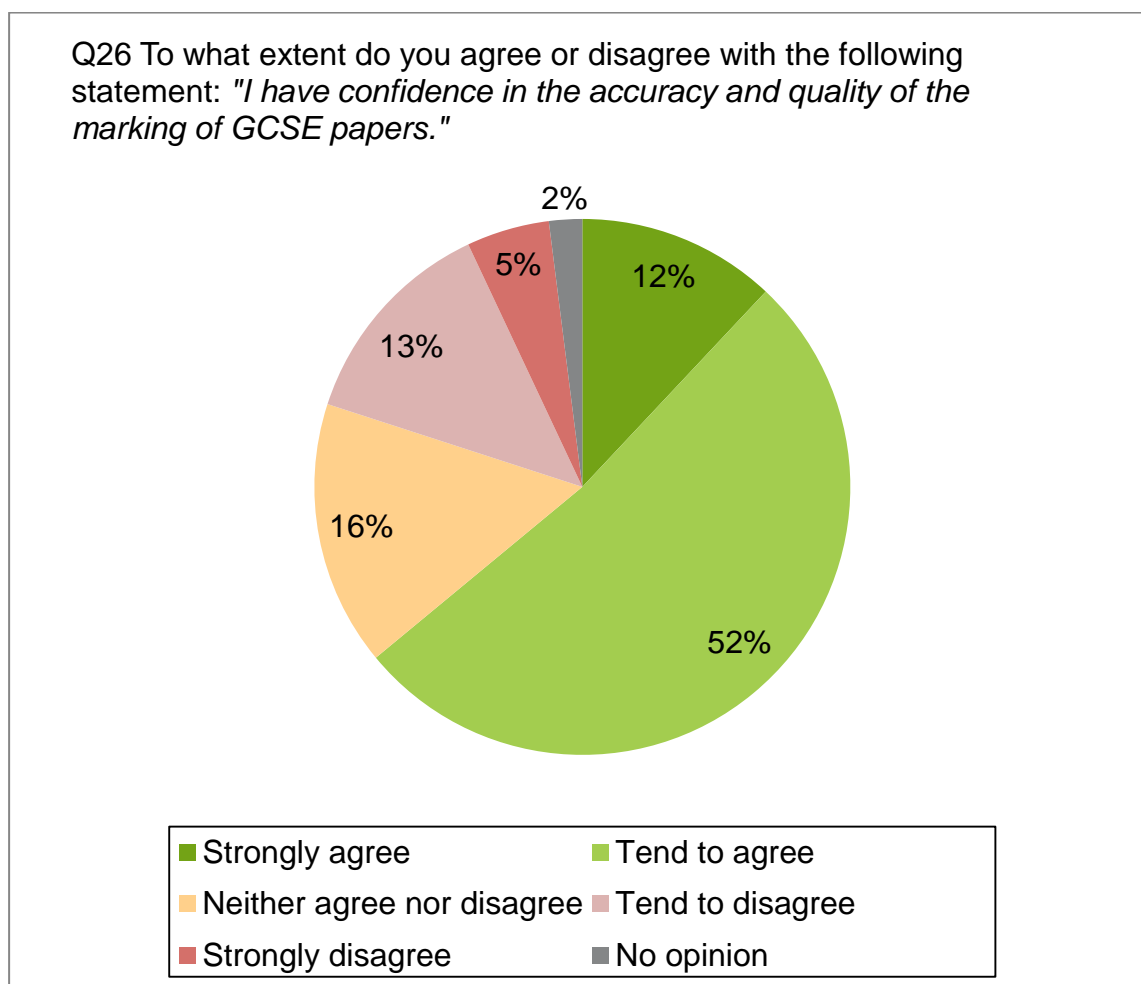
Awareness of how GCSEs are graded was considerably higher (82 per cent): Russell Group institutions displayed higher levels of awareness once again; 92 per cent (25).

Respondents, whose confidence in GCSEs was lower than the previous year, were more likely to report a lack of awareness of the way in which GCSEs were graded.

### Confidence in the accuracy of marking of GCSE papers

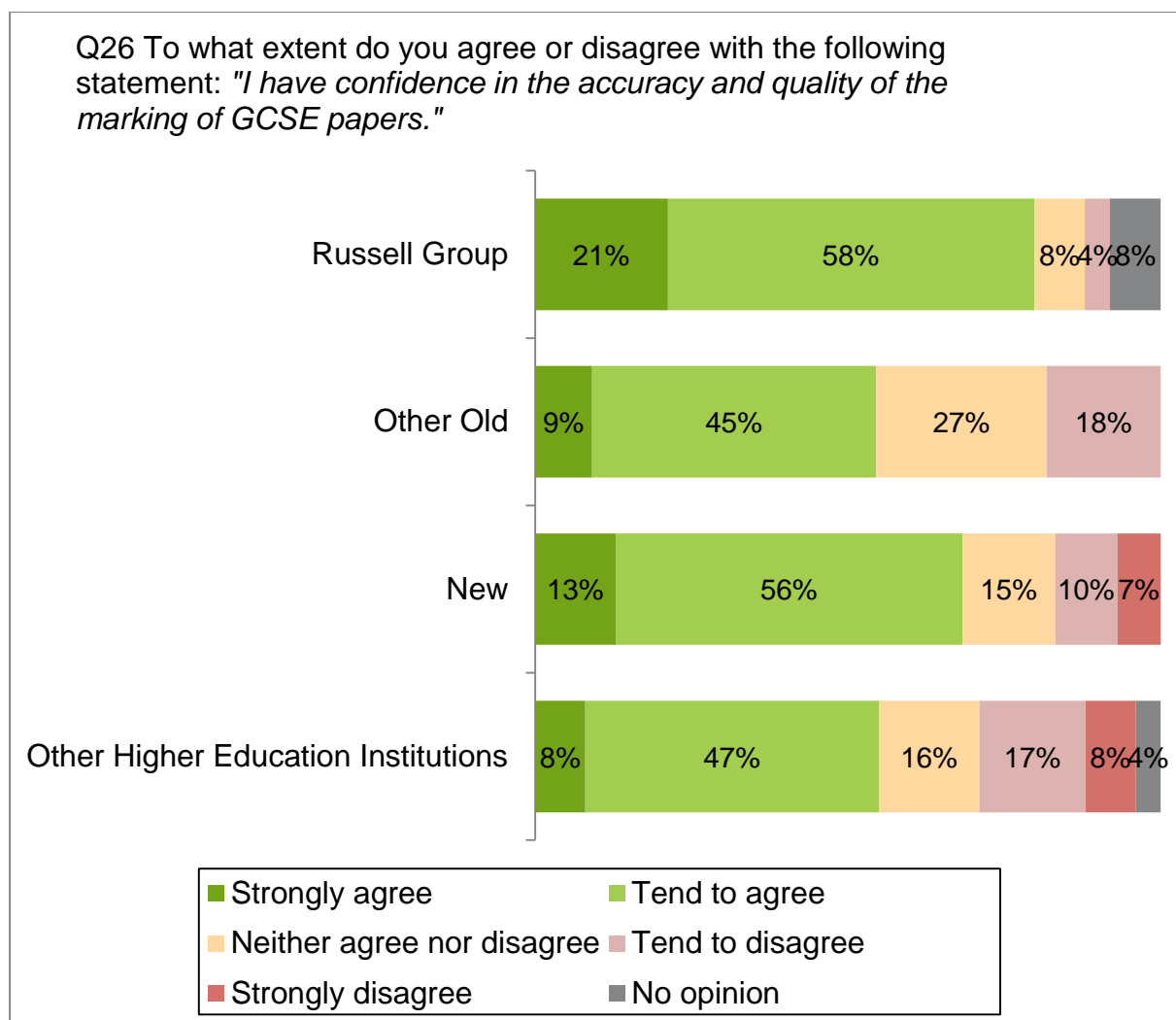
Around two-thirds of respondents agreed that they had confidence in the accuracy and quality of the marking of GCSE papers with just over one-in-nine respondents providing the strongest level of agreement. Russell Group institutions once again fell into this group; 79 per cent (22) overall agreed that they had confidence in the accuracy and quality of marking. Unsurprisingly, two-in-five (**39 per cent**) of those whose confidence in GCSEs overall was lower than the previous year actively disagreed that they had confidence in the accuracy and quality of marking, as did those who acknowledged the GCSE English controversy of last Summer had impacted on their confidence a great deal; **66 per cent** (15).

**Figure 43:** Confidence in the accuracy of the marking of GCSE papers



Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

**Figure 44:** Confidence in the accuracy of the marking of GCSE papers by Higher Education Institution type



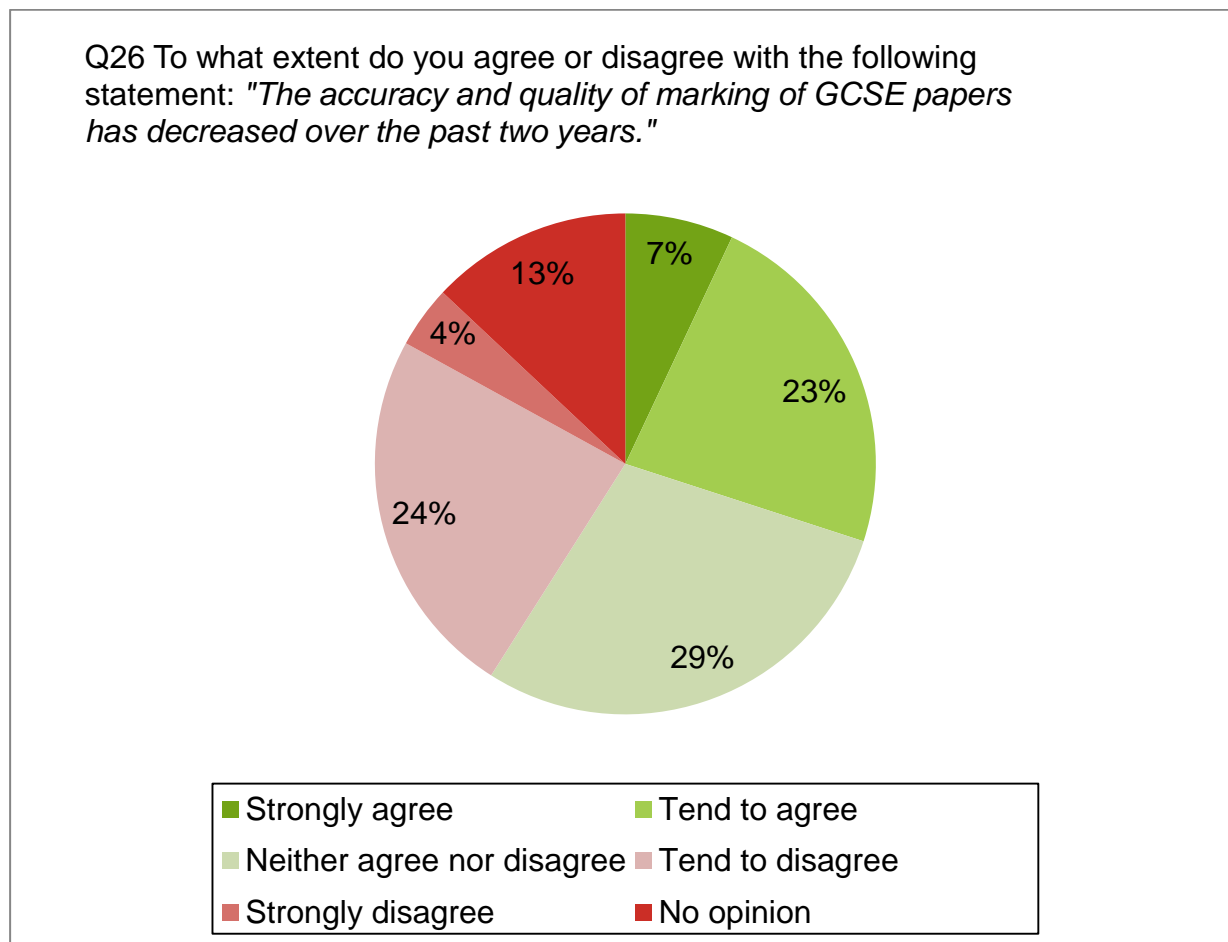
Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions: 24 Russell Group, 22 Other Old, 61 New, 75 Other Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

Opinion was fairly evenly split when respondents were asked whether they felt the accuracy and quality of marking of GCSE papers had decreased over the past two years, with one-in-three (30 per cent) agreeing this was the case and 28 per cent disagreeing. The proportion of respondents disagreeing that the quality of the marking of GCSEs had declined in the past two years, was much higher than for A levels. Russell Group institutions and Other Old Higher Education Institutions had the greatest feeling that the quality of marking of GCSEs had *not* declined in the past couple of years, with 42 per cent (11) and 32 per cent (10) disagreeing respectively.

Additionally, it seems that the GCSE incident of last Summer may not have been the sole cause for respondent's belief that the quality of GCSE marking had declined in the past couple of years: half of those who said that the incident last Summer had not

had any impact on their confidence at all still felt that the quality and accuracy of the marking of GCSEs had declined in recent years.

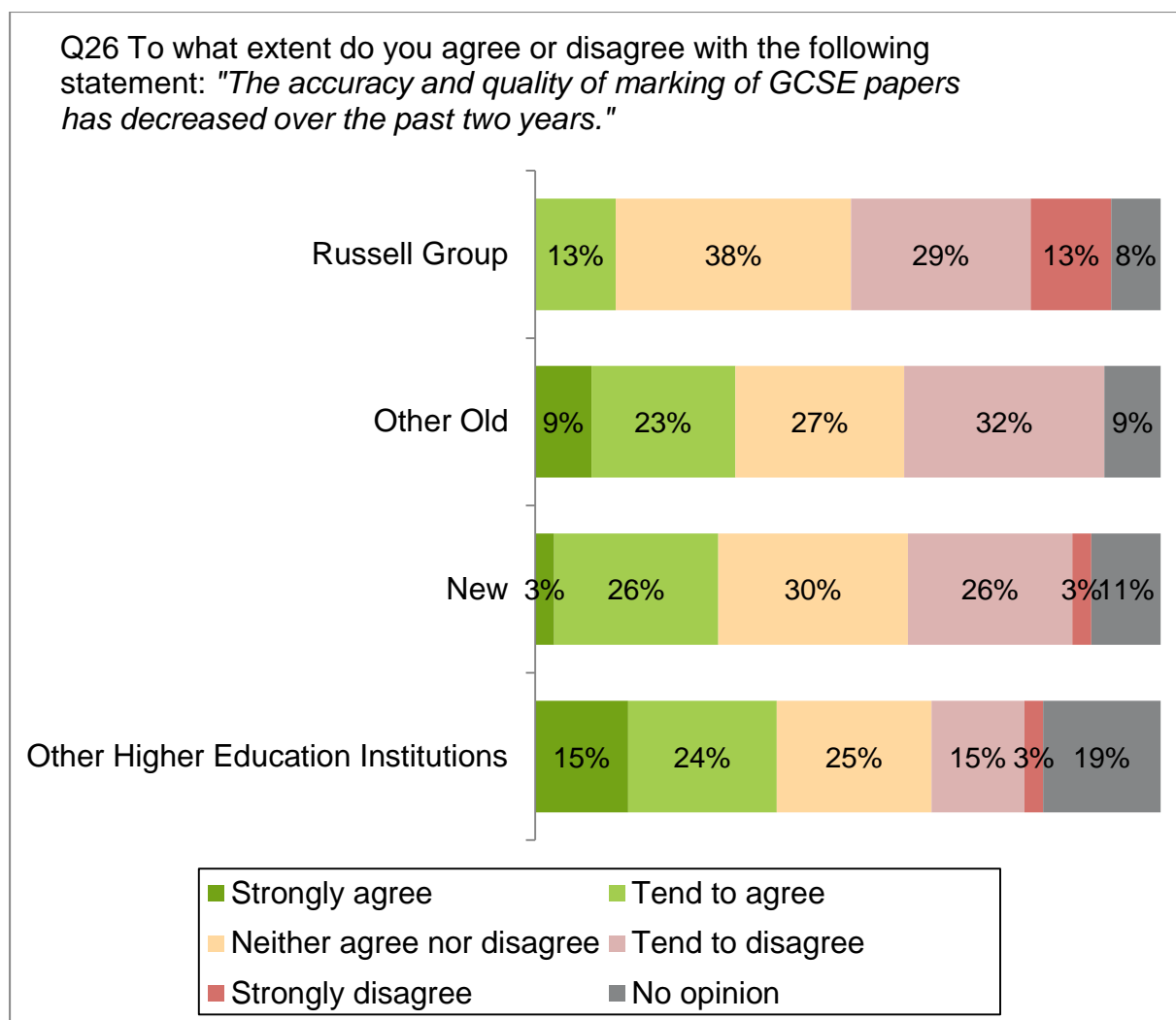
**Figure 45:** Changing levels of accuracy and quality of GCSE marking



Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).



**Figure 46:** Changing levels of accuracy and quality of GCSE marking by Higher Education Institution type



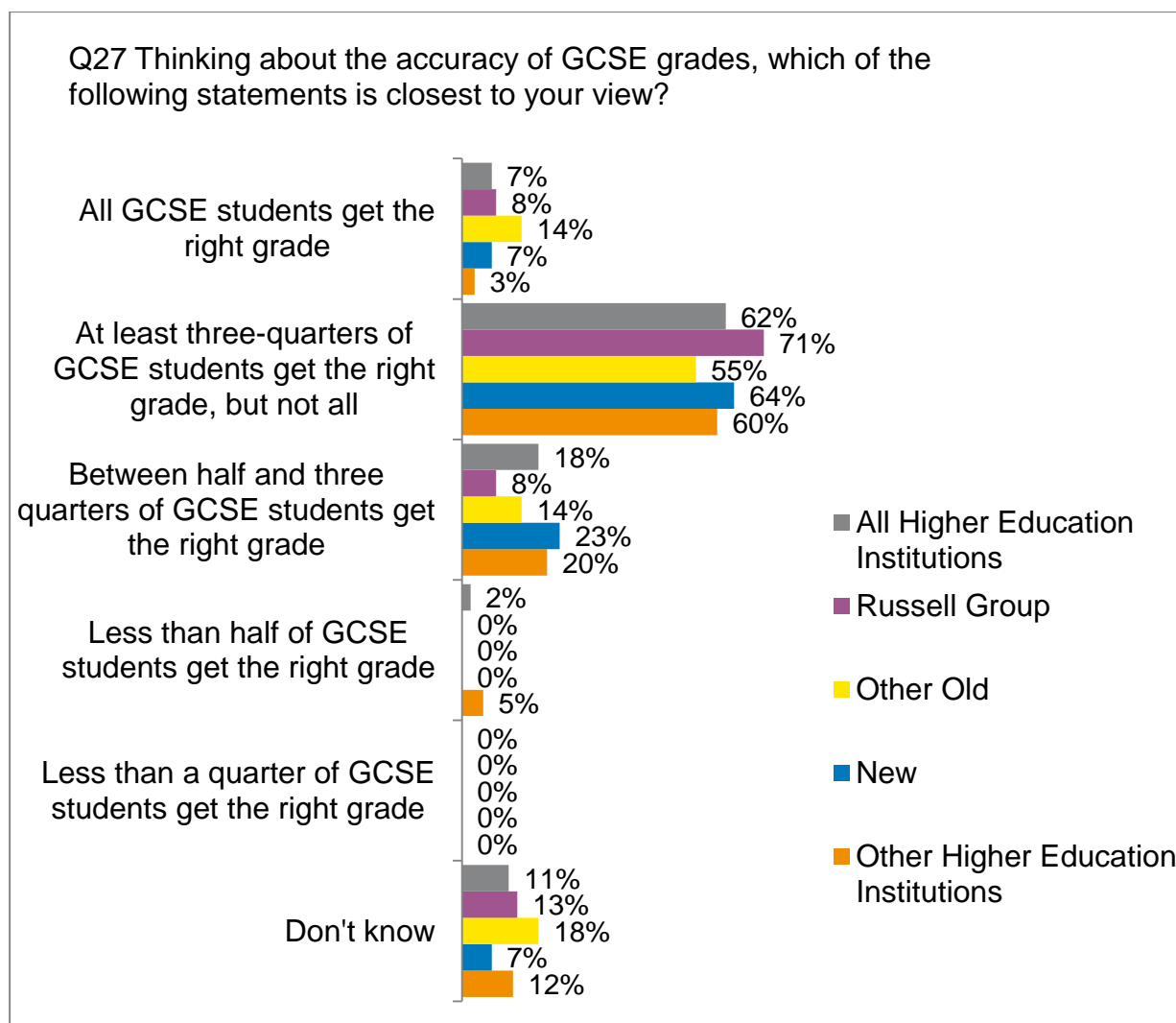
Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions: 24 Russell Group, 22 Other Old, 61 New, 75 Other Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

### Confidence in the accuracy and reliability of GCSEs generally

Just 7 per cent of respondents thought that all GCSE students are awarded the right grade; the majority (62 per cent) were of the view that at least three-quarters of students but not all received the correct grade. Other Higher Education Institutions were the only group where some respondents (5 per cent) thought fewer than half of GCSE students received the right grade. The belief that fewer than three-quarters of GCSE students receive the correct grade was also more prevalent amongst respondents whose confidence had been hardest hit by the GCSE incident over the Summer, with 58 per cent (13) who said their confidence had been affected a lot saying so.

When asked for the reasons why they did not feel that all students were awarded the appropriate grade, the topmost spontaneous answers were: inaccurate marking of exam papers (20 per cent); inconsistent teaching quality (18 per cent) and conditions for students outside of school (17 per cent).

**Figure 47:** Confidence in the accuracy of GCSEs



Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions: 24 Russell Group, 22 Other Old, 61 New, 75 Other Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

### Higher Education Institutions' concerns about GCSEs

Two in five Higher Education Institutions (39 per cent) have no concerns about the GCSE qualification. However, those in Higher Education Institutions specifically mentioned the Summer 2012 GCSE English grading controversy and other issues involving specific subject areas (10 per cent cited these issues in each case). Grade

boundary issues and the incorrect marking of exam papers were also mentioned by Higher Education Institutions (7 per cent in each case).

### **Awareness and impact of the English GCSE incident 2012**

Almost all respondents had heard about the GCSE incident over Summer 2012, the only exceptions falling within the Other Higher Education Institution category. Of these, almost two-fifths of respondents said it had affected their confidence at least to some extent, with 12 per cent saying it had affected their confidence a lot. Almost one-quarter (23 per cent), however, said that the incident had not had any impact on their confidence in the GCSE system at all.

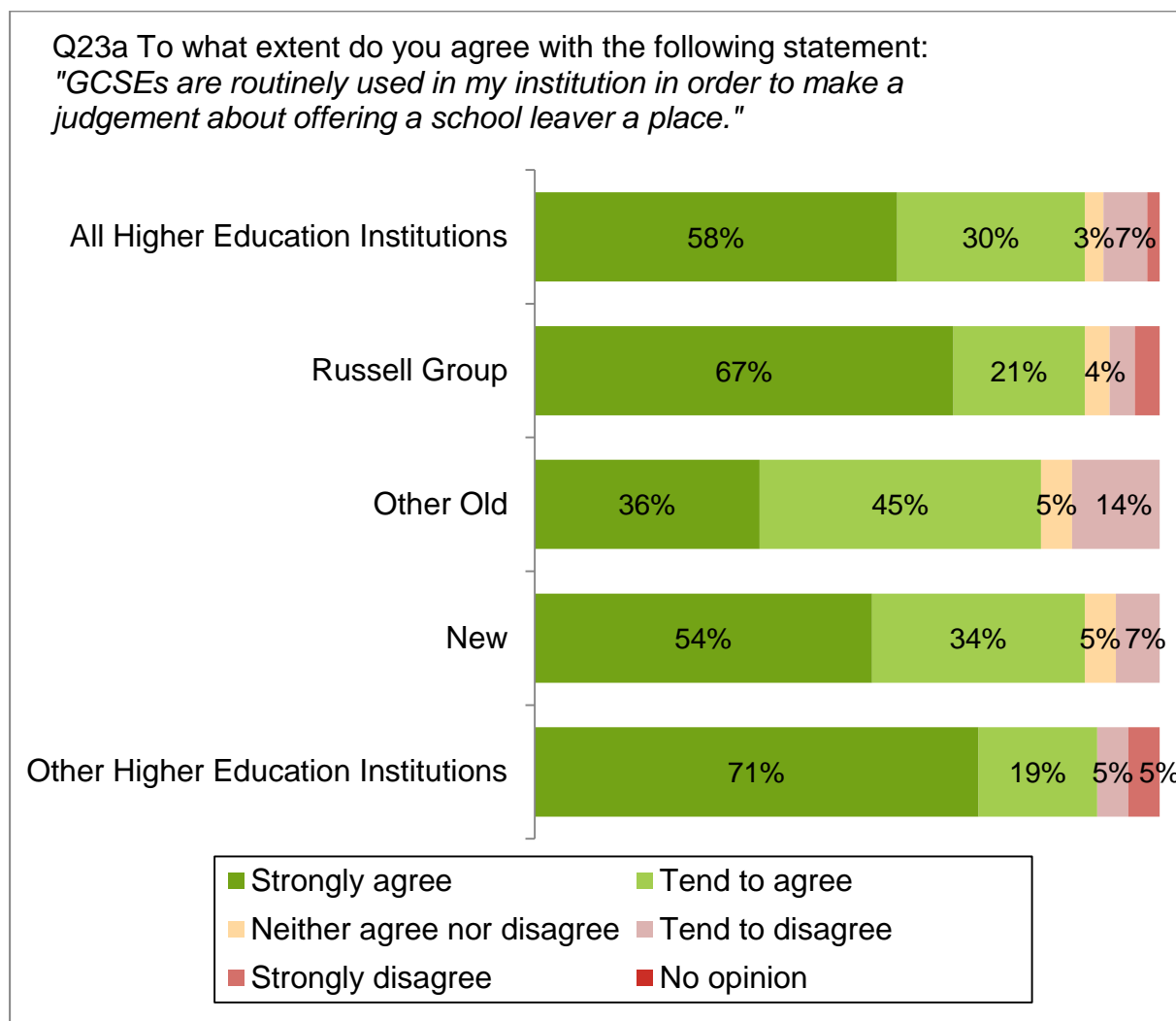
As has already been seen, however, the GCSE English grading controversy seems to have had some impact (in some cases, quite considerably so) on respondents' overall perceptions of and confidence in the GCSE system. Two thirds of respondents whose confidence was most strongly affected reported lower levels of confidence in the way in which GCSE exams were marked; **66 per cent** (15) and **52 per cent** in the system overall (11). It is important, not to overstate the impact this incident might have had on respondents' perceptions: for some respondents there were reasons other than the GCSE incident for feeling that the quality of marking had declined in recent years and similarly not all of those whose confidence had been affected by the GCSE incident said that their confidence in the system overall was lower. The incident and the impact it had on institutions' confidence in the GCSE system did not seemingly have any effect on institutions' use of GCSEs to scrutinise candidates.

## **Recruiting school leavers**

### **Use of the GCSE qualification**

GCSEs were routinely used by almost nine out of ten respondents (88 per cent) when making a judgement about whether to offer a candidate a place, which is not very different from the use of A levels (84 per cent). Other Higher Education Institutions returned the strongest level of agreement that they routinely used GCSEs, with **71 per cent** answering 'strongly agree'. Other Old institutions were least likely to make use of GCSEs when looking at recruiting school leavers, with 82 per cent (27) overall agreeing that they would do so. There was little variation amongst groups that had heard of the GCSE incident last Summer and their use of GCSEs currently.

**Figure 48:** Use of GCSEs to judge candidates by Higher Education Institution type



Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions: 24 Russell Group, 22 Other Old, 61 New, 75 Other Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

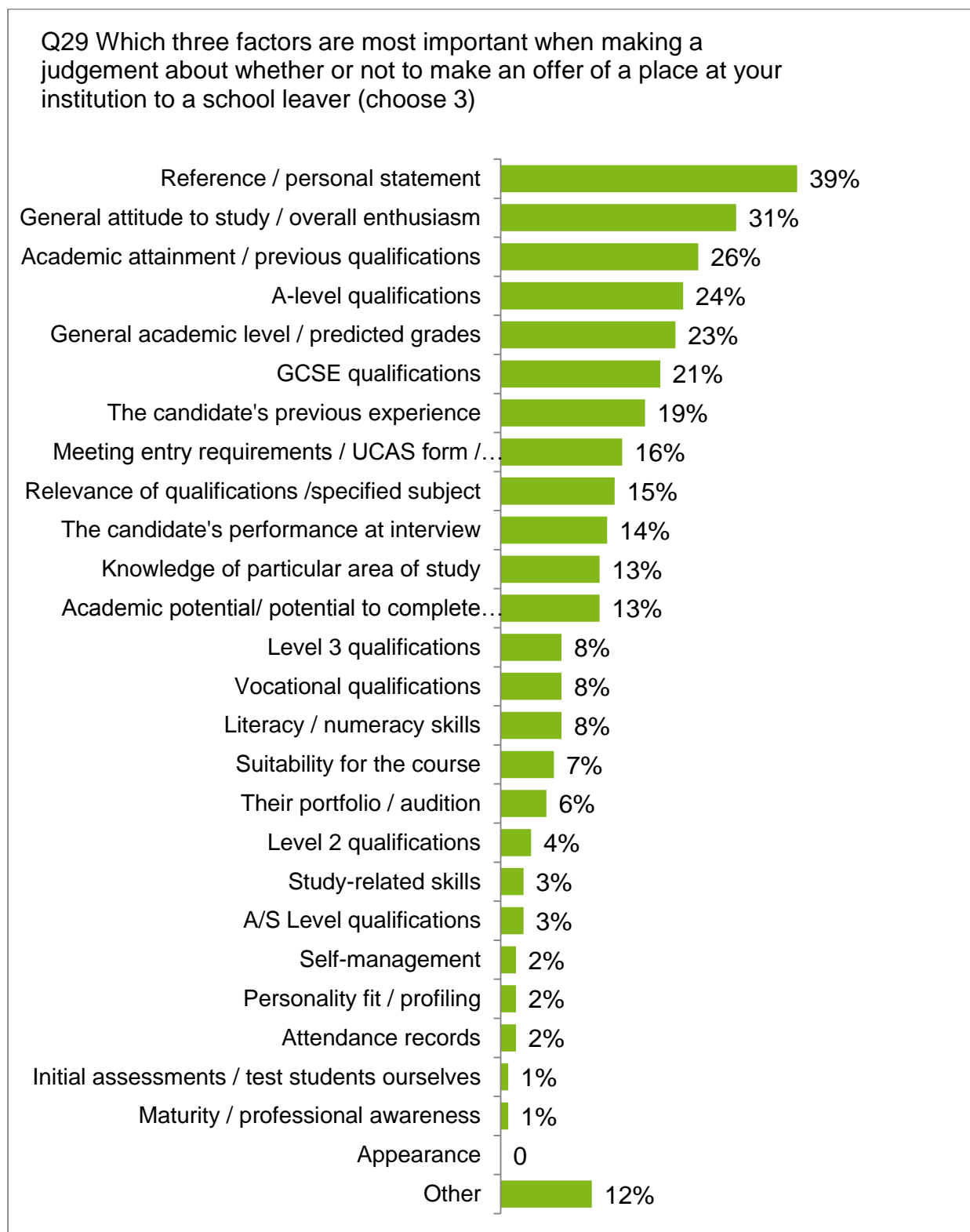
Higher Education Institutions were less likely to say that they considered GCSEs to form the minimum requirement for the recruitment of candidates than they were to say the same regarding A levels. For example 58 per cent (16) of Russell Group and 50 per cent of Other Old institutions (16) considered GCSEs to form the minimum requirement compared with 92 per cent (25) and 95 per cent (31) for these two groups when thinking about A levels. GCSEs formed the minimum standard for 61 per cent of Higher Education Institutions overall.

Other Higher Education Institutions, in addition to using GCSEs as the minimum standard also placed great weight on candidates' performance at interview (20 per cent), their attitude and overall enthusiasm (16 per cent) and previous experience (15 per cent). It is important to note here, however, that Higher Education Institutions admit students of all ages and not just school leavers.

### **How important are qualifications?**

When making judgements about recruiting school leavers, Higher Education Institutions rated the candidate's personal statement as the most important factor overall, with 39 per cent rating this as one of their top three. Next most important was the candidate's general attitude and enthusiasm (31 per cent) and academic attainment and previous qualifications (26 per cent). A level and GCSEs were not amongst the top three, but did both feature in the top 6 factors overall (GCSEs rated important by 21 per cent and A levels by 24 per cent). Higher Education Institutions tended to be more interested in candidates' overall performance at GCSE and A level rather than which particular subject they studied, with just 15 per cent of Higher Education Institutions saying they would consider the relevance of the subject being studied by candidates.

**Figure 49:** Rated top three factors for school leaver judgement overall



Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions: 24 Russell Group, 22 Other Old, 61 New, 75 Other Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

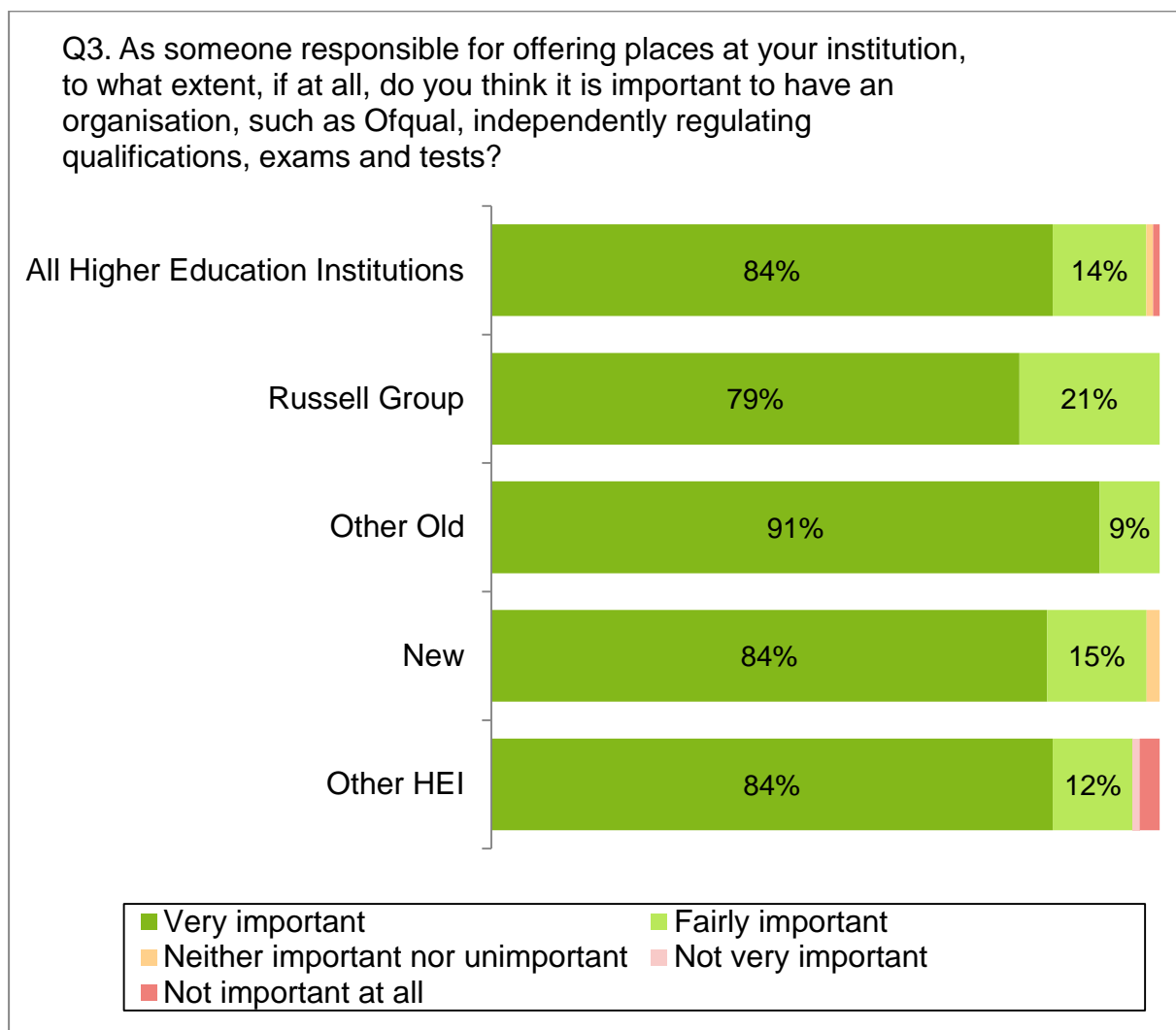
## **Awareness and perceptions of Ofqual**

Encouragingly, 99 per cent of respondents said they had at least heard of Ofqual with over one-third saying they knew a fair amount or a lot. Once given a full explanation of Ofqual's role and respondents were asked whether they had been aware of this role prior to the interview. The proportion of respondents saying they were aware of Ofqual and its role increased to 95 per cent.

While differences were not great enough to be considered to be statistically significant, Other Old institutions appeared to have the greatest knowledge of Ofqual when compared to other Higher Education Institutions.

Almost all respondents felt it was important to have an organisation like Ofqual regulating the exams system (98 per cent), and the vast majority of respondents at this question said it was 'very important'.

**Figure 50:** Perceived importance of Ofqual by Higher Education Institution type



Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions: 24 Russell Group, 22 Other Old, 61 New, 75 Other Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

### Effectiveness of Ofqual

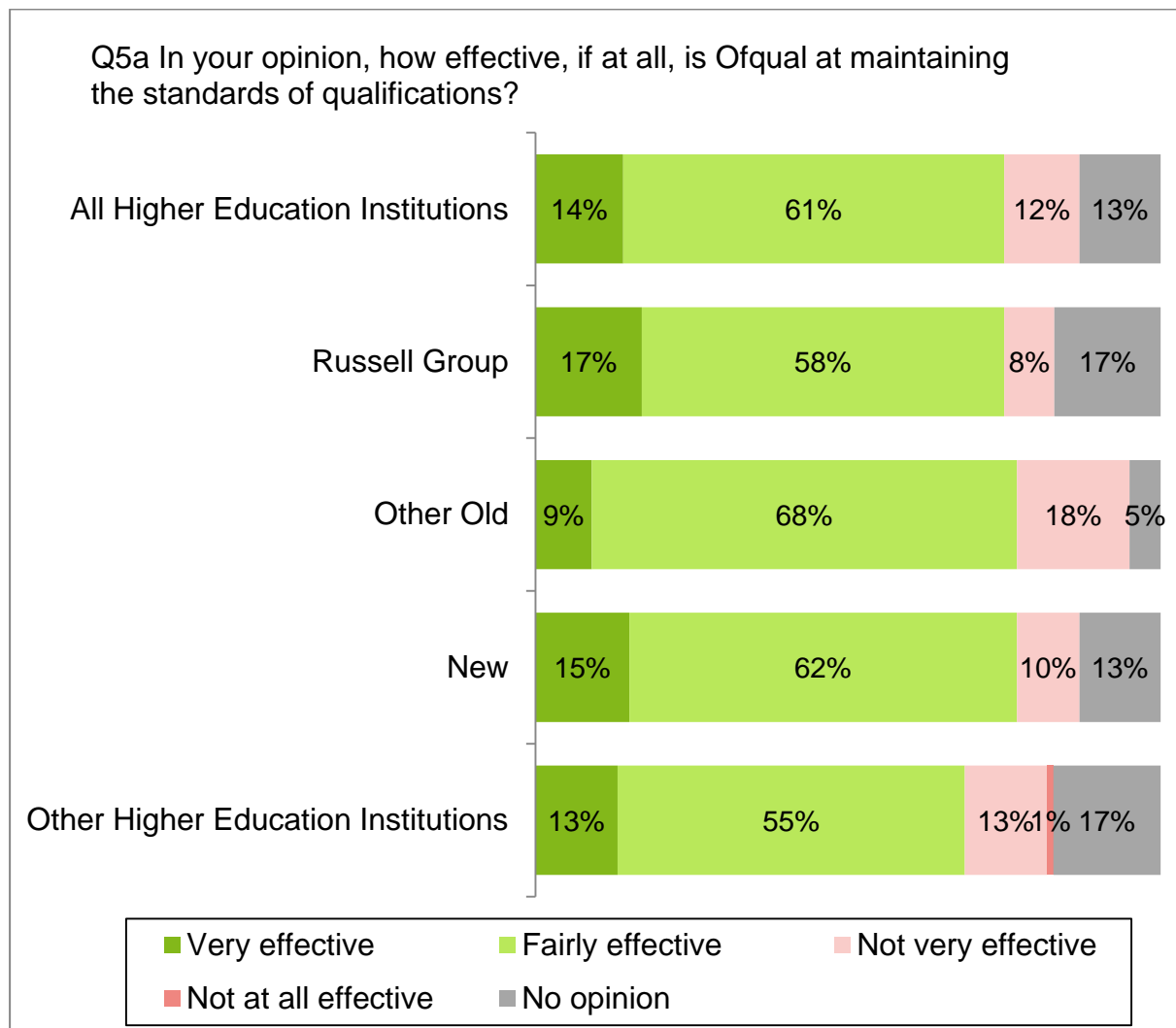
Almost three-quarters of respondents felt that Ofqual was effective at regulating the exams system, and just 7 per cent disagreed. New institutions were most likely to think Ofqual was effective (77 per cent) compared with Other Higher Education Institutions (65 per cent).

Where there was awareness of the GCSE incident last Summer, just 7 per cent of respondents felt Ofqual performed ineffectively, and this tended to be concentrated amongst those who said their confidence had been affected a fair amount or a lot.



When thinking about Ofqual’s performance in maintaining the standards of qualifications, a similar proportion (74 per cent) said Ofqual performed effectively, although the proportion thinking otherwise rose to 13 per cent.

**Figure 51:** Effectiveness of Ofqual by Higher Education Institution type



Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions: 24 Russell Group, 22 Other Old, 61 New, 75 Other Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

The reasons spontaneously given by those who were positive about the effectiveness of Ofqual at maintaining the standards of qualifications included: awareness of measures taken by Ofqual to make sure that standards are comparable (21 per cent); and in making changes to the exam system (21 per cent). Conversely, the reasons given by those who did not think Ofqual performed effectively at maintaining the standards of qualifications were: the GCSE English grading controversy of last Summer which was mentioned by 25 per cent (6); and the sheer scale of Ofqual’s remit, which some respondents felt meant it could not realistically play an effective role; 16 per cent (4).

## **Information about qualifications**

### **Sources of information about qualifications**

The most commonly used source of information used by respondents to obtain information about qualifications was UCAS, used by 58 per cent of respondents. For Other Old institutions, however, awarding organisations were most commonly used; 64 per cent (21). Ofqual itself was used by one in five (19 per cent) respondents, mainly within the Russell Group and New institutions.

Awarding organisations and Ofqual were the two sources most influential where respondents' perceptions of qualifications were concerned, with 17 per cent saying awarding organisations were most influential on their perceptions, and 6 per cent saying Ofqual. Interestingly, whilst Russell Group institutions were most likely to use Ofqual as a source of information about exams, they were not at all likely to mention Ofqual as an influence on their perceptions of qualifications.

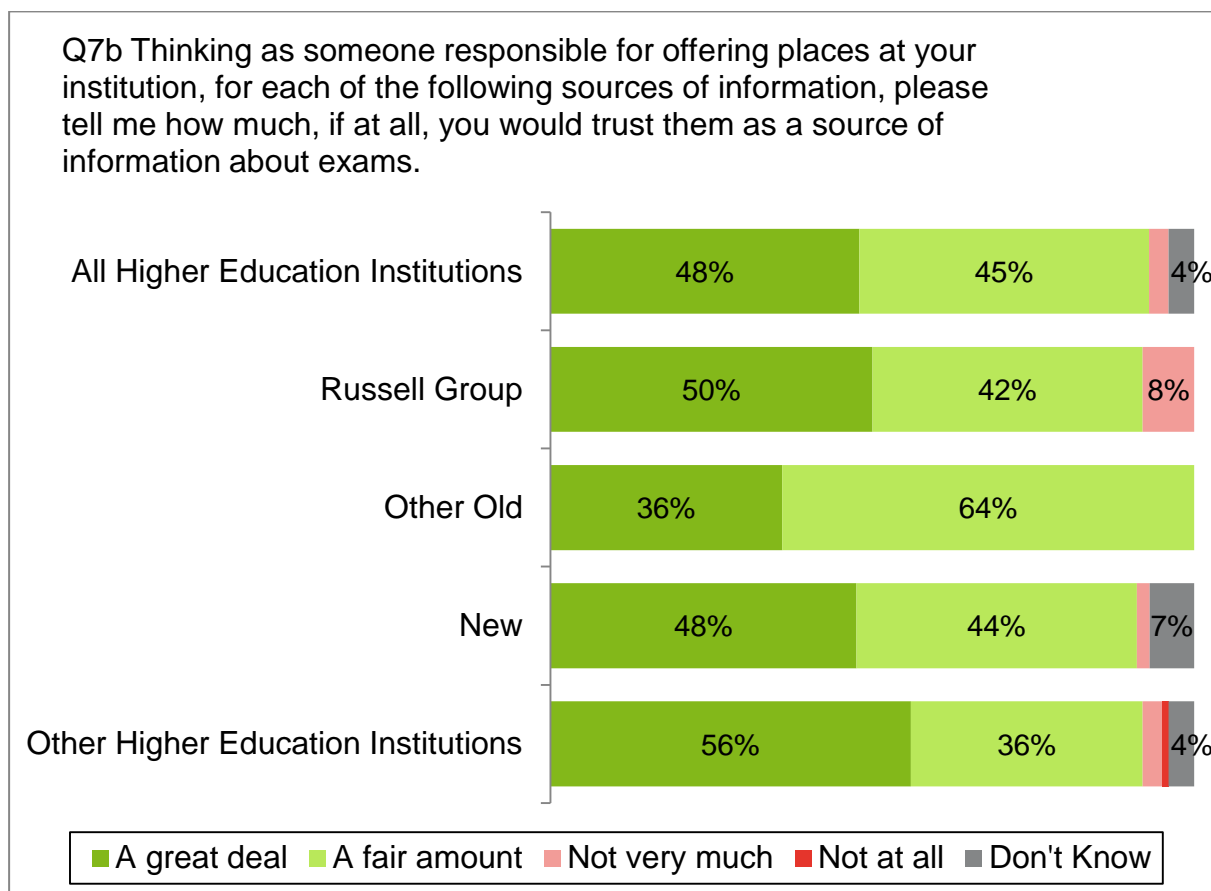
Almost all respondents felt it was important to have access to information about qualifications in order to help them recruit candidates to their institutions: 97 per cent said this was important, with the vast majority overall stating it was 'very important' (88 per cent). Russell Group institutions were the group overall with the lowest feeling that this was important, with 92 per cent (25) saying so and 8 per cent (2) actively disagreeing. This is particularly interesting considering Russell Group institutions were the group most likely to make use of qualifications as a measure of candidates when looking to admit school leavers.

### **Trusted sources of information**

The most trusted sources of information were awarding organisations, with 97 per cent of respondents saying they trusted this source either a great deal or a fair amount. This is perhaps unsurprising given respondents tended to use these as a source of information about exams.

Ofqual was trusted by 93 per cent of respondents, but active distrust was highest amongst Russell Group institutions; 8 per cent (2).

**Figure 52:** Trust in Ofqual by Higher Education Institution type



Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions: 24 Russell Group, 22 Other Old, 61 New, 75 Other Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

## Vocational qualifications

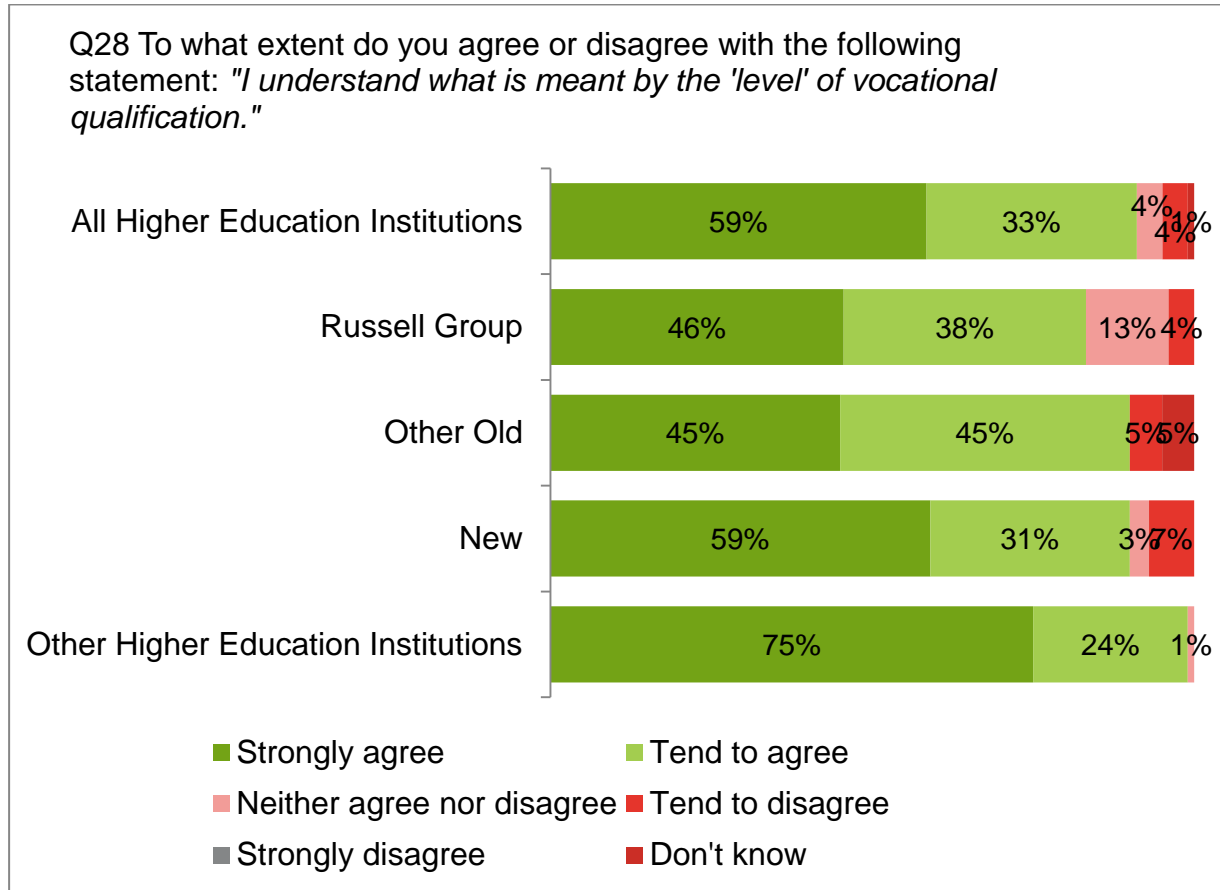
### Understanding of vocational qualifications

Over nine out of ten respondents claimed they understood what was meant by the 'level' of vocational qualification (92 per cent). Understanding was higher amongst Other Higher Education Institutions; **99 per cent**, than amongst Russell Group institutions; **83 per cent** (23), which is unsurprising as Russell Group institutions tended most commonly to use qualifications like A levels to make decisions about prospective candidates. Similarly, all of those who did not use qualifications like A levels to make decisions about prospective candidates understood what was meant by the 'level' of vocational qualifications.

Understanding was slightly lower when respondents were asked how different levels of vocational qualifications related to GCSEs and A levels (90 per cent). Compared with Higher Education Institutions generally, it was Other Old institutions that had

lowest levels of awareness with **20 per cent** (6) saying they did not understand this statement, and New and Other Higher Education Institutions had the highest levels of understanding (95 per cent and 93 per cent respectively).

**Figure 53:** Understanding of vocational qualifications



Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions: 24 Russell Group, 22 Other Old, 61 New, 75 Other Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

## **Conclusions**

### **Perceptions and use of GCSE and A level qualifications**

Perceptions of GCSE and A level qualifications are generally positive amongst employers and Higher Education Institutions.

Confidence in the qualifications system is high, particularly amongst larger employers and Higher Education Institutions. These groups are also amongst those more likely to make use of qualifications when making a recruitment/admissions decision. Conversely, those respondents actively reporting a lack of confidence in the qualifications system tend not to consider qualifications to as great an extent when comparing candidates. One of the main drivers of confidence for respondents is the accuracy of marking and whether students are awarded the correct grade. When asked what concerns, if any, they had about the qualifications system, employers and Higher Education Institutions mention inaccurate marking, whilst only a very small proportion believe that all students are awarded the correct GCSE and/or A level grade. Coupled with this, another spontaneously mentioned reason given for being concerned about qualifications is it being too easy to get a good grade.

Respondents largely report similar levels of confidence in the qualifications system compared with last year. Those who report lower levels of confidence tend not to use A levels or GCSEs to any great extent when making recruitment/admissions decisions. Having said that, this does not mean that these respondents have lost all confidence in the qualifications system, and they appreciate their value to students.

The extent to which respondents value GCSE and A level qualifications, unlike the pattern in confidence, seems to be connected to a lesser extent with usage. The majority of respondents agree that GCSE and A level qualifications are valuable for candidates, but do not necessarily make great use of these qualifications when making recruitment/admissions decisions. There are some further interesting variations between employers and Higher Education Institutions: for employers, GCSEs are the qualification of greater value for students, whilst for Higher Education Institutions, A levels are of greater value. This links to Higher Education Institutions' greater propensity to use A levels as a minimum standard for considering applicants.

Consistent with their use of GCSEs and A levels, Higher Education Institutions strongly indicate that it is important for them to have access to information about the qualifications. Willingness to get involved with the development of qualifications, however, is greater amongst those institutions whose confidence in qualifications – and the accuracy of marking – is lower.

Having said that, A Levels and GCSEs are not very often mentioned as one of the top-three criteria employers or Higher Education Institutions use, despite their levels

of confidence and agreement that these qualifications were valuable. When asked in an unprompted way to indicate those aspects which are most important when making decisions about candidates, employers mentioned general attitude and enthusiasm over regulated qualifications such as A levels and GCSEs. These findings accord with some informal conversations held with employers in the design of the questionnaire. During these discussions employers indicated that GCSEs were more likely to be used as they tend to cover a broader range of subjects and therefore provided a wider measurement of the overall abilities of the candidate. Higher Education Institutions most commonly mention academic attainment more generally, alongside candidate references and personal statements.

### **Impact of GCSE incident**

There is some indication that confidence in Ofqual has been affected by the English GCSE incident. For example, those in Higher Education Institutions who say that their confidence has been affected ‘a great deal’ consistently return the most negative views of Ofqual and ratings of the qualifications.

Around a third of employers and a quarter of Higher Education Institutions who are aware of the English GCSE incident say that their confidence in the qualification has not been affected by it and both for employers and for Higher Education Institutions the awareness of the incident is having a negligible impact on results. Indeed amongst employers, those who are aware of the incident tend to value the GCSE qualification more than those who are not aware, considering it to be reliable and a good indicator of the ability of a candidate.

The confidence respondents have in Ofqual, as well as their propensity to trust the regulator as a source of information about examinations, is indicative of the short-term impact of the English GCSE incident on their perceptions – with the exception of those whose confidence had been shaken the greatest. For Higher Education Institutions specifically, results suggest that awareness of the incident has not had a negative impact on future behaviour in terms of the institutions looking for alternative ways to assess the quality of prospective candidates.

### **Reputation of Ofqual**

Ofqual is a well-known and well-respected organisation among Higher Education Institutions. The vast majority say that it is important that an organisation such as Ofqual exists and around three quarters say that Ofqual is effective in both maintaining and regulating the examinations system.

While this is the case, Higher Education Institutions say that they tend to get information on qualifications from UCAS and from awarding organisations rather than from Ofqual –Employers tend to be less aware of Ofqual than Higher Education Institutions. However, the majority feel that it is important to have an organisation

such as Ofqual performing the role that it does. Consistent with their low levels of awareness, employers are unlikely to mention Ofqual in terms of those sources of information that they use to find out about information about qualifications and mention their own professional networks and training departments in terms of important and influential sources of information about exams and qualifications.

## **Appendix A: Technical Details**

### **Methodology**

Opinion Leader carried out interviews by telephone for both the survey of employers and that of Higher Education Institutions. Full details of the methodology used for each of these audiences, including a discussion of the sampling approach are provided below.

### **Survey of employers**

Five hundred telephone interviews were conducted with those who indicated that they would be able to answer questions about the recruitment practices at their organisation. In larger businesses this tended to be a representative in the HR department while at smaller employers this was usually the owner of the business.

Interviews for the survey of employers were undertaken between 19<sup>th</sup> November 2012 and 28<sup>th</sup> March 2013.

### **Sample design and quotas**

The overall aim of the sampling approach for employers was to provide data which would accurately represent the view of businesses in England as a whole. While it was felt that achieving 500 interviews would provide a robust reading of the view of businesses generally, particular efforts were made in the design of the sample and in weighting the data after fieldwork to make sure that the profile of achieved interviews reflected that of the overall population.

A particular challenge with regards to the survey of employers concerned the fact that while the population of businesses in England is heavily skewed towards smaller organisations, it was felt to be especially important to capture the view of larger organisations in a robust manner since their influence in the employment market is commensurate with their size. It was therefore decided that the survey would adopt the approach of setting quotas by business size which would over-represent numbers of larger businesses and then weighting data back to the profile of the overall population in order that aggregated data is representative of the population as a whole.

In order to adjust results in this way, a single set of data would need to employ large weights which would impact on the accuracy of the results. For this reason it was decided to split the sample into two and to provide results for 'smaller organisations' (i.e. those businesses with 1-19 employees) and 'larger organisations' (i.e. those businesses with 20 or more employees) separately. The final quotas for numbers of interviews by size of business which were set are illustrated in figure 54 below.



**Figure 54:** Distribution of business in England by size

Number of employees	No. business in England	% Total population	Proportionate quota	Suggested quota	Weighting factor
<b>1-19 employees</b>					
1-9	872,440	90.08%	54	30	1.80
10-19	96,065	9.92%	6	30	0.20
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>968,505</b>		<b>60</b>	<b>60</b>	
<b>20+ employees</b>					
20-49	45,875	62.11%	273	125	2.19
50-249	22,835	30.92%	136	140	0.97
250+	5,150	6.97%	31	175	0.18
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>73,860</b>		<b>440</b>	<b>440</b>	

Source: Opinion Leader

As well as setting quotas by size of business, the geographical location of the organisation was also taken into account. Geographical quotas were set by Government Office Region, aggregated into 'North', 'Midlands' and 'South'. These quotas were set separately to those for business size and the two were not designed to 'interlock', that is quotas for business size were not calculated within regional categories. Regional quotas are illustrated below. During fieldwork the achievement of interviews by Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) was monitored to make sure that the achieved sample contained interviews with people working in a range of industries.

**Figure 55:** Distribution of businesses in England by region

Region (aggregated)	No. business in England	% Total population	Proportionate quota	Suggested quota	Weighting factor
<b>1-19 employees</b>					
North	238,330	25%	15	15	0.98
Midlands	291,395	30%	18	20	0.90
South	438,780	45%	27	25	1.09
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>968,505</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>60</b>	
<b>20+ employees</b>					
North	19,360	26%	115	110	1.05
Midlands	22,405	30%	134	130	1.03
South	32,095	44%	191	200	0.96
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>73,860</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>440</b>	<b>440</b>	

Source: Opinion Leader

Businesses to be contacted to take part in the survey were drawn at random from lists held by an approved sample supplier. While uniform rates of response across geographical region were expected, it was assumed that it would be more difficult to achieve interviews with those in the largest organisations. For that reason ten times the number of interviews required with businesses of 1-249 employees was drawn and twenty times the number of interviews required was drawn for businesses with 250 or more employees.

### Fieldwork

Interviewers were instructed by the project team to try to speak to the person at the business directly responsible for the recruitment of school leavers. At larger organisations this tended to be the HR manager or someone working in this department, while for smaller organisations this was often the owner of the business themselves.

At the start of fieldwork adjustments were made to initial quotas as, contrary to initial expectations, it became clear that contacting someone available to complete the interview at smaller organisations was more challenging than achieving interviews at larger organisations. Speaking with interviewers at the time, it appeared that this was because those whose main role at organisations was the recruitment of staff were easier to contact and to convince to complete the survey than those who had multiple responsibilities, such as the business owner. It is the final quotas, after these minimal adjustments, which are shown at figure 55.

Similarly, during fieldwork the businesses selected for inclusion in the final sample were screened to make sure that they had either recruited a school leaver in the last five years, or that they intended to do so in the next five years. However, this approach had the result of screening out respondents in significant numbers which would have impacted on survey timings. Consequently, this question was removed as a screener to the questionnaire and re-positioned at the end of the survey as a final check of results. After moving this question a quarter (27%) of businesses with 1-19 employees and one in five businesses with 20 or more employees (19%) said that they had not recruited a school-leaver and that they did not intend to recruit more.

### **Weighting**

As indicated above, weights were applied to the data gathered from businesses to correct for the quotas which deliberately over-sampled larger businesses in order to achieve greater numbers of interviews in these organisations for analysis. Therefore, the weights applied used the population profile (described above) to make aggregated data representative of business in England. Weights were applied in terms of business size and geographical location, with the final weight being the product of that applied to account for these two factors. The profile of the achieved sample and the weighting factors which were applied are described in figure 56 and in figure 57 below.

**Figure 56:** Achieved sample and associated weights for business size

Number of employees	No. business in England	% Total population	Proportionate quota	Achieved (unweighted)	Weighting factor
<b>1-19 employees</b>					
1-9	872,440	90.08%	55	31	1.77
10-19	96,065	9.92%	6	30	0.20
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>968,505</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>61</b>	
<b>20+ employees</b>					
20-49	45,875	62.11%	273	127	2.14
50-249	22,835	30.92%	136	131	1.04
250+	5,150	6.97%	31	181	0.17
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>73,860</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>439</b>	<b>439</b>	

Source: Opinion Leader

**Figure 57:** Achieved sample and associated weights for region

Region (aggregated)	No. business in England	% Total population	Proportionate quota	Achieved (unweighted)	Weighting factor
<b>1-19 employees</b>					
North	238,330	25%	15	22	0.68
Midlands	291,395	30%	18	12	1.53
South	438,780	45%	28	27	1.02
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>968,505</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>61</b>	
<b>20+ employees</b>					
North	19,360	26%	115	104	1.11
Midlands	22,405	30%	133	122	1.09
South	32,095	44%	191	213	0.90
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>73,860</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>439</b>	<b>439</b>	

Source: Opinion Leader

At the time of data processing a disproportionate number of interviews were identified as having been undertaken with those businesses working in 'educational services industries'. In the unweighted data for 1-19 employers businesses working in this industry accounted for 8% of the businesses rather than for 1% which might be expected in a proportionate sample, while in the 20+ employees' data they accounted for 27% as opposed to the 12% which might be expected. For this reason a further weight was also applied to correct for this and to render the incidence of these types of businesses as might be expected in a proportionate sample.

## **Survey of Higher Education Institutions**

Opinion Leader carried out one hundred and eighty two telephone interviews with those at Higher Education Institutions who indicated that they were responsible for making a decision regarding which school leavers get offered a place at their institution. As far as possible efforts were made to complete interviews with those working within specific departments at Higher Education Institutions, though a large proportion of interviews were undertaken with those in central admissions departments.

Interviews for the survey were undertaken between 19<sup>th</sup> November 2012 and 18<sup>th</sup> March 2013

### **Sample design and quotas**

The aim at the stage of sample design for the survey of Higher Education Institutions was to deliver 200 interviews in total and to make sure that the overall profile of these interviews was representative of the population of Higher Education Institutions in England. It was felt that the most relevant aspects of Higher Education Institutions, which would be taken into account at the sample design stage, was the Higher Education Institution ‘type’ and the subject area of the department in which the survey respondent was working.

Classifications for Higher Education Institution type were set in accordance with the way in which these organisations are segmented in studies of a similar nature. Four classifications are often used, these being:

- Russell Group universities
- Other old universities
- New (post 1992) universities; and
- Other Higher Education Institutions

In terms of subject area Higher Education Institutions were divided into five classifications defined as per the QS World University Rankings<sup>5</sup>:

- Life sciences and medicine;
  - Natural sciences;
  - Engineering and technology;
  - Social sciences; and
  - Arts and humanities
- The profile of the population of Higher Education Institutions in England was ascertained via a list of Higher Education Institutions provided by the Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA). This information is summarised in figure 58 below. For Higher Education Institution type the numbers provided the number of institutions of this kind in the overall population, while for subject area the numbers indicated are numbers of students (in thousands) taking courses in these subject areas. Figure 58 also displays the quotas which were set prior to fieldwork. No particular groups were oversampled for analysis purposes.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.topuniversities.com/courses>

**Figure 58:** Higher Education Institution population profile and quotas set

Type / Subject area	No. of institutions / Students*	% Total population	Proportionate quota	Suggested quota	Weighting factor
<b>Higher Education Institution type</b>					
Russell Group	20	15%	30	30	1.00
Other Old	24	18%	36	35	1.03
New	51	39%	77	75	1.02
Other Higher Education Institution	38	29%	57	60	0.95
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>200</b>	
<b>Subject area</b>					
Life sciences and medicine	211214.56	23%	46	45	1.03
Natural sciences	44780.59	5%	10	10	0.98
Engineering and technology	112951.92	13%	25	25	0.99
Social sciences	283727.765	31%	62	60	1.04
Arts and humanities	257614.505	28%	57	60	0.94
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>910289.34</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>200</b>	

Source: Opinion Leader

\*Thousands



## **Fieldwork**

- Original proposals were to draw 80 institutions at random from the list supplied by HESA and then to ask interviewers to attempt to interview 2-3 people working in different departments within the same institution. It was felt that once an initial interview had been completed, it would prove less of a challenge to achieve subsequent interviews. However, during fieldwork, it became obvious that different departments within Higher Education Institutions work very independently and that heads of department were not in contact across institutions.

Moreover, the interviewing team had significant difficulties in getting through various gatekeepers within institutions, and, as well as finding it a challenge undertaking interviews within departments, also found that they were contacting the same gatekeepers several times in order to achieve subsequent interviews. This had begun to test the good-will of some contacts and had the impact of slowing the time that fieldwork was expected to take.

In order to address these issues, strict quotas were relaxed, as was the need for achieving interviews with those working within departments rather than with those in central admissions offices. While these actions were taken, further efforts were also made to append personal contact details to the sample list so that interviewers could go directly to named individuals as opposed to having to contact central admissions.

All these efforts did have some positive effects, but failed to increase the rate of response to a degree which would make sure the achievement of all 200 interviews in the time available. For this reason Ofqual and the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) were asked to advertise the survey in their newsletters and those responding were screened for their involvement in making decisions regarding admissions and re-contacted to undertake interviews.

In interpreting the results for Higher Education Institutions the change from interviewing in terms of strict quotas and from a sample list provided from an identifiable source, to allowing a proportion of Higher Education Institutions to volunteer to take part in the survey in response to communications is important to note. Its potential impact on the data should be recognised as it moves the methodology from recruitment in terms of pre-defined conditions to a more 'self-selecting' approach whereby certain engaged individuals are able to put themselves forward to be included in the data. Results therefore could potentially over-represent the views of those types of respondents who are keen to share their view of Ofqual or of the qualifications.

Due to the small numbers of Higher Education Institutions who were originally recruited via the original sample list, it is not possible to provide data on whether

those who might volunteer to be part of the research are more or less likely to have positive views of Ofqual or of the qualifications. Either of these situations might be assumed, or it might also be assumed that those who would be keen to take part would be more likely than others to hold more 'extreme' views at both ends of this spectrum. For the reason that adopting any of these positions would be based entirely on supposition, we do not try to offer a view of what the impact of this change might be.

### **Weighting and representativeness**

At the close of fieldwork 182 interviews had been completed. However, the fieldwork process had meant that some considerable amendments had been made to the overall approach. The most significant change had been that rather than being drawn randomly and being encouraged to participate by interviewers, respondents had been allowed to opt-in to the survey. The 'self-selecting' nature of the final sample needs to be reflected upon when interpreting the findings as those expressing an interest in being involved may have had particular views to promote which are not necessarily representative of the population as a whole.

Similarly, large numbers of interviews had been undertaken with those in central admissions departments which had not originally been part of the project scope. This had knock-on effects to the proposed weighting scheme as this had not been accounted for. Weighting for Higher Education Institution type was applied to the final dataset; the achieved number of interviews by Higher Education Institution type and associated weighting factor is described in figure 59 below.

**Figure 59:** Achieved sample and associated weights for Higher Education Institution type

Type / Subject area	No. of institutions / Students*	% Total population	Proportionate quota	Achieved	Weighting factor
<b>Higher Education Institution type</b>					
Russell Group	20	15%	27	24	1.14
Other Old	24	18%	33	22	1.49
New	51	39%	70	61	1.14
Other Higher Education Institution	38	29%	52	75	0.69
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>182</b>	<b>182</b>	

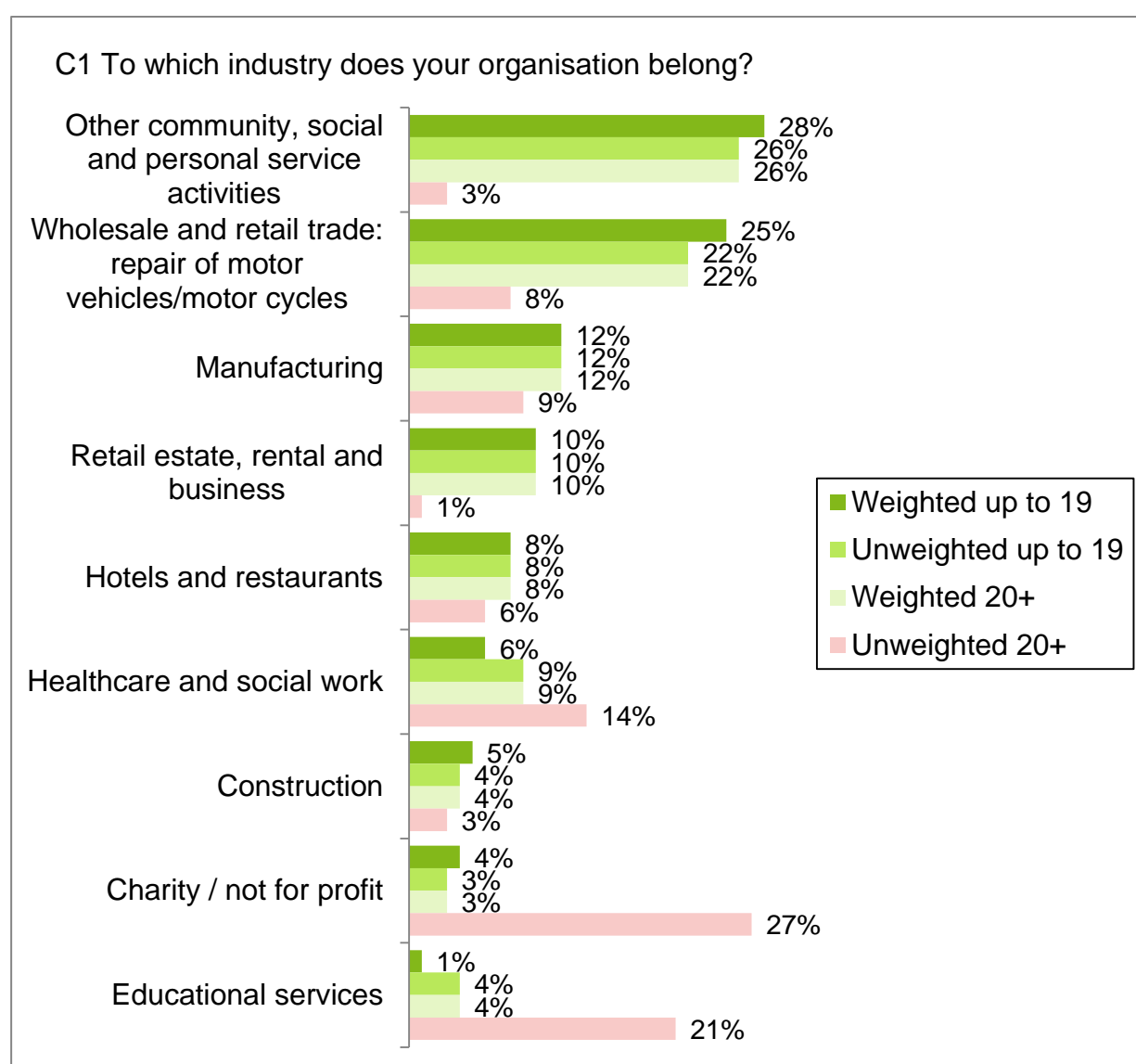
## Appendix B: Sample Profile

The weighted and unweighted profile of the achieved sample for each of the surveys is indicated below.

### Survey of employers

Figure 60 below indicates the breakdown of the employers sample by industry. The large proportion of businesses working in 'educational services' was corrected in the weighted data.

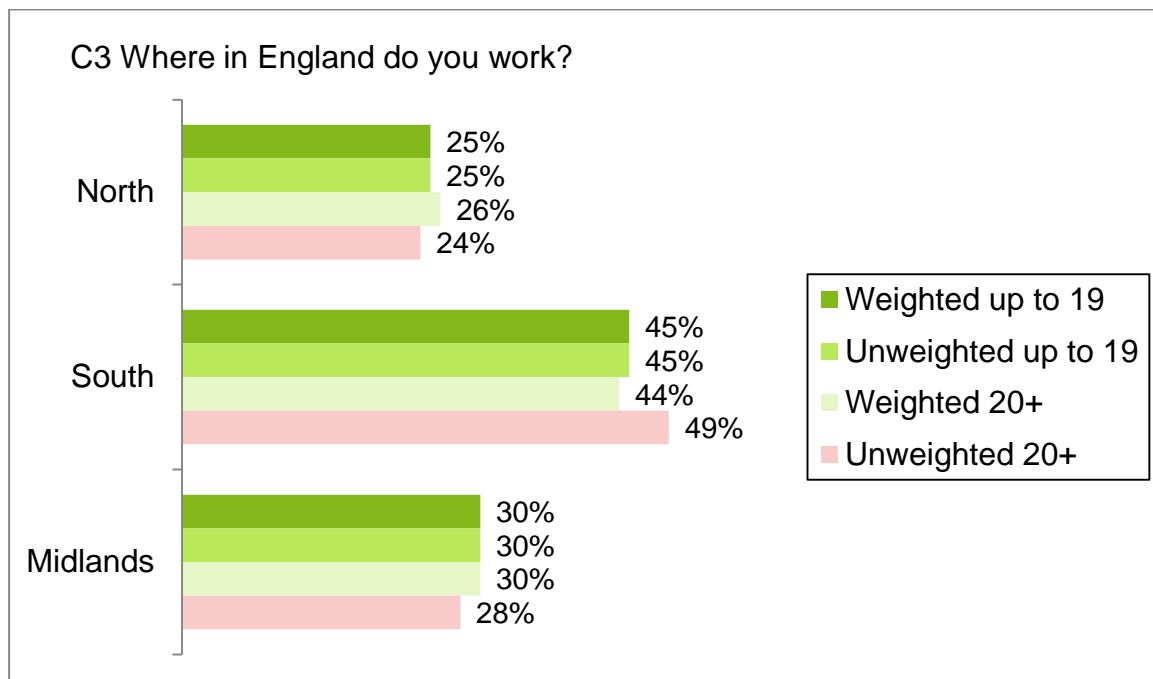
**Figure 60:** Employers sample by industry



Effective base: 32 smaller employers; 217 larger employers (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

A sample was drawn in proportion to the distribution of businesses by geographical location so small weights were required to weight the achieved sample profile back to that of the population as a whole.

**Figure 61:** Employers sample by location

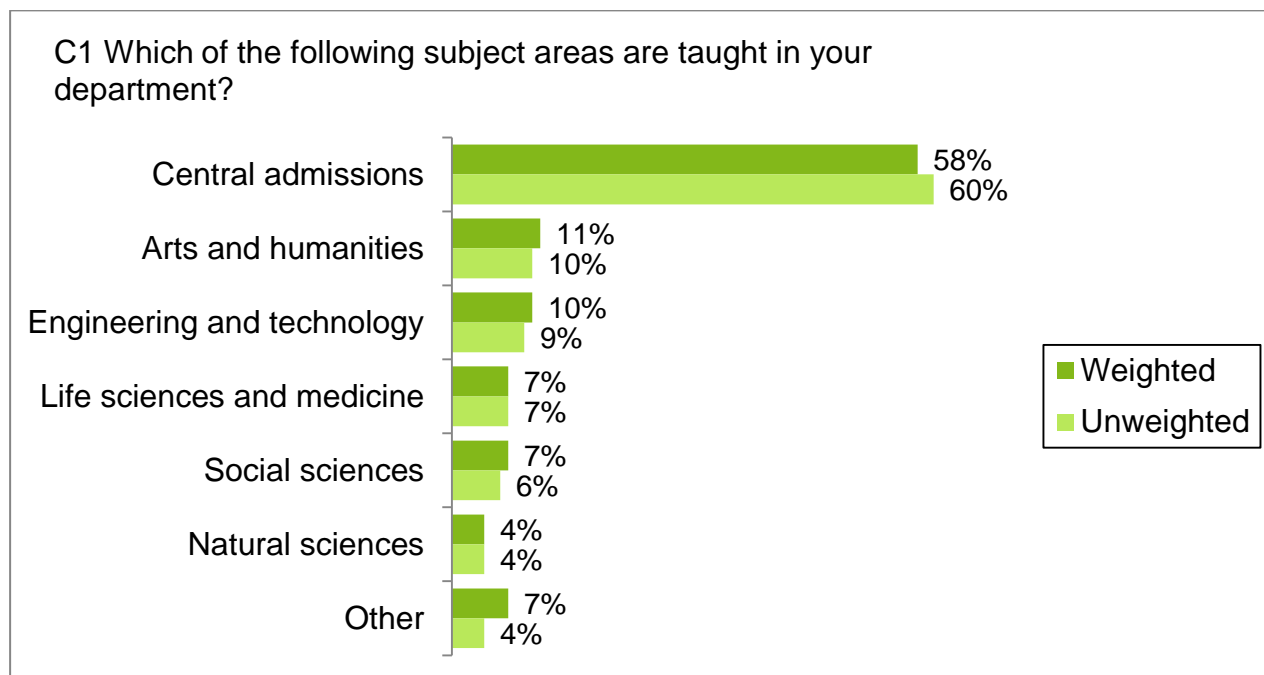


Effective base: 32 smaller employers (15 North, 7 Midlands, 14 South); 217 larger employers (47 North, 66 Midlands, 107 South), (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

## Survey of Higher Education Institutions

Figure 62 below indicates the breakdown of the Higher Education Institutions sample by department. As indicated above, significant proportions of interviews were undertaken in central admissions departments.

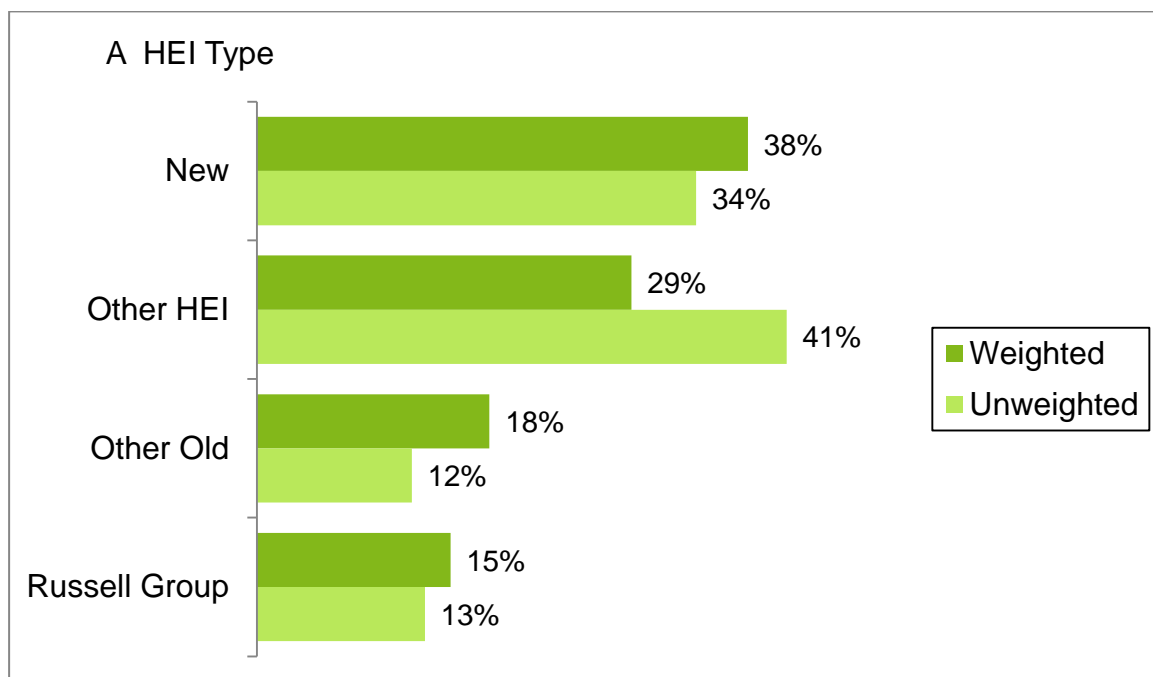
**Figure 62:** Higher Education Institutions sample by department



Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions: 11 Life sciences and medicine, 7 Natural sciences, 15 Engineering and technology, 11 Social sciences, 18 Arts and humanities, 103 Central admissions, 7 Other (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).

Figure 63 below indicates the profile of the Higher Education Institutions sample by Higher Education Institution type. Weighting was applied in order to make sure that the achieved sample profile by Higher Education Institution type reflected that of the overall population.

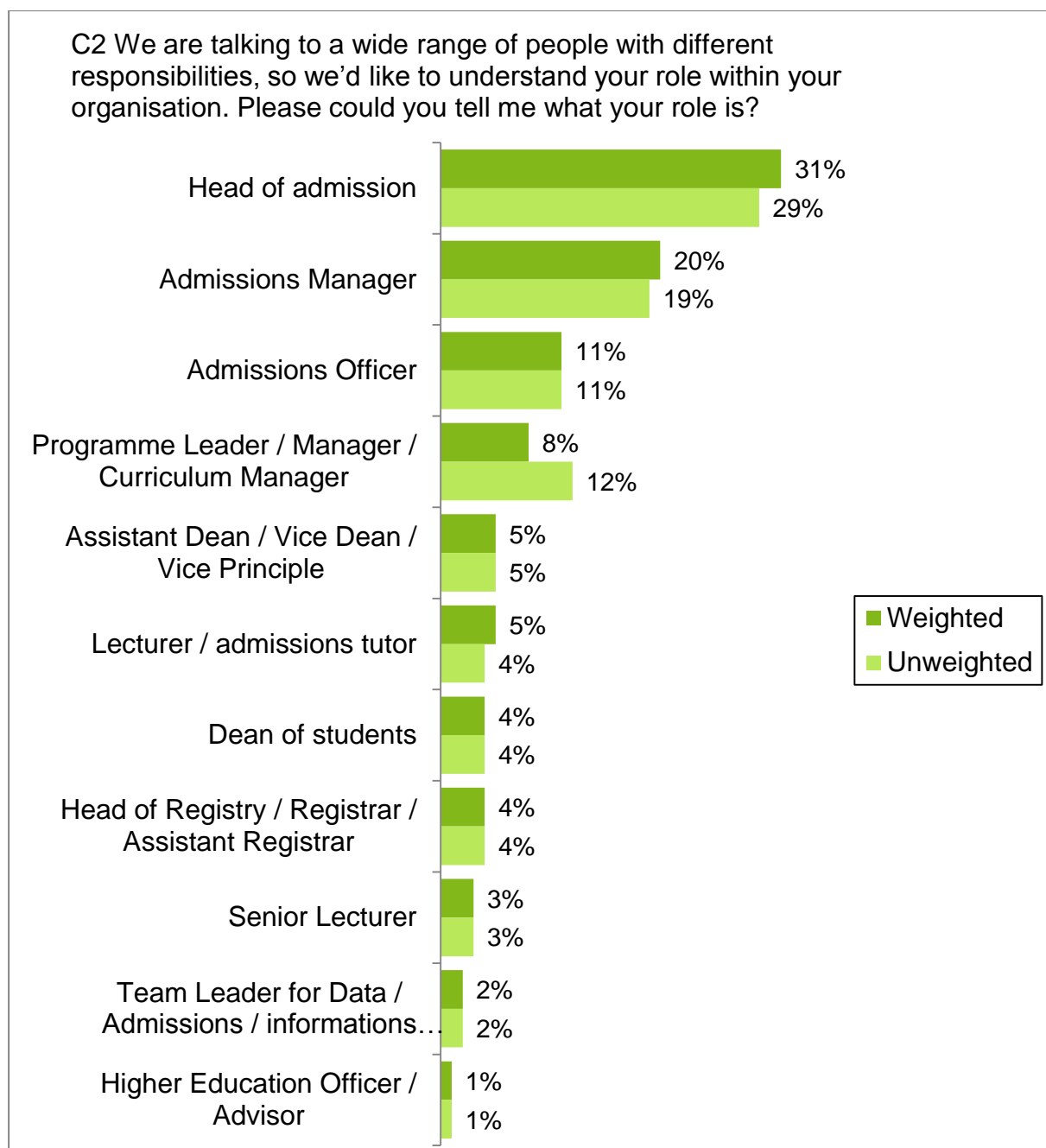
**Figure 63:** Higher Education Institution sample by Higher Education Institution ‘type’



*Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions: 24 Russell Group, 22 Other Old, 61 New, 75 Other Higher Education Institutions (Nov 2012-Mar 2013).*

The majority of Higher Education Institution interviews were undertaken with the institution’s Head of admissions. Figure 64 below indicates the profile of the Higher Education Institutions sample by job role of interviewee.

**Figure 64:** Higher Education Institution sample by job role



Effective base: 170 Higher Education Institutions



## **Appendix C: Questionnaires**

### **Employers survey questionnaire**

Intro:

**ASK FOR THE BEST PERSON TO SPEAK TO WHO COULD GIVE AN OVERALL PERSPECTIVE ON RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING AT THE ORGANISATION.**

**Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I'm calling from Opinion Leader, an independent research agency, on behalf of Ofqual the independent regulator of qualifications, exams and assessments in England and vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland. We are carrying out a survey for Ofqual on employers' perceptions of GCSEs, A levels and other qualifications.**

**Can I just check, are you able to answer questions about your organisation's policies and procedures relating to recruitment and the skills and training requirements of new starters on joining your organisation?**

- |          |            |   |
|----------|------------|---|
| <b>1</b> | <b>Yes</b> | <b>Continue</b>   |
| <b>2</b> | <b>No</b>  | <b>Ask to be transferred to the correct person. If not possible at that time, call back later. If refused, thank and close.</b> |

**The survey will take around 15 minutes to complete, depending on your answers. All your answers will remain confidential and anonymous, in accordance with the Market Research Society Code of Conduct.**

**Your call will be monitored and recorded for the purpose of quality control by Ofqual, Opinion Leader and their partners.**

**Would now be convenient time?**

- |   |     |  |
|---|-----|--|
| 1 | Yes | Continue to C1                         |
| 2 | No  | Make an appointment to call back later |

Classification section:

**Just before we begin, I'd like to ask a few questions about your business or organisation to ensure that we speak to a representative sample. For the purposes of this interview we will refer to the place that you work as 'your organisation.' By this we mean the branch or office location that you work in.**

ASK ALL

**C1 To which industry does your organisation belong to?**

READ OUT IF NECESSARY

SINGLE CODE

- |    |   |
|----|---|
| 1  | Agriculture, hunting and forestry                                 |
| 2  | Fishing   |
| 3  | Mining and quarrying  |
| 4  | Manufacturing   |
| 5  | Electricity / Gas / Water supply                                  |
| 6  | Construction  |
| 7  | Wholesale and retail trade: repair of motor vehicles/motor cycles |
| 8  | Hotels and restaurants  |
| 9  | Transportation storage and communication                          |
| 10 | Financial intermediation and insurance                            |
| 11 | Retail estate, rental and business                                |
| 12 | Public administration and defence                                 |
| 13 | Educational services  |
| 14 | Healthcare and social work  |
| 15 | Other community, social and personal service activities           |
| 16 | Private households with employed persons                          |
| 98 | Other (PLEASE SPECIFY)  |
| 99 | Don't Know (DO NOT READ OUT)                                      |

ASK ALL

**C2** Approximately how many people are employed by your whole organisation in England, including but not exclusively the branch or office location you currently work at? READ OUT IF NECESSARY

SINGLE CODE

- |   |              |
|---|--------------|
| 1 | Less than 10 |
| 2 | 10-19        |
| 3 | 20-49        |
| 4 | 50-249       |
| 5 | 250-499      |
| 6 | 500-999      |
| 7 | 1000-4999    |
| 8 | 5000+        |

ASK ALL

**C3** Where in England do you work?

SINGLE CODE

READ OUT IF NECESSARY

- |   |                          |
|---|--------------------------|
| 1 | East of England          |
| 2 | East Midlands            |
| 3 | Greater London           |
| 4 | North East               |
| 5 | North West               |
| 6 | South East               |
| 7 | South West               |
| 8 | West Midlands            |
| 9 | Yorkshire and The Humber |

ASK ALL

**C4** Is your location the headquarters or a local branch/office?

INTERVIEWER INSTRUCTION: If the business only has one location. Code this as 'Head office'.

SINGLE CODE

- |   |                       |
|---|-----------------------|
| 1 | Head office           |
| 2 | Branch / local office |

ASK ALL

**C5** We are talking to a wide range of people with different responsibilities, so we'd like to understand your role within your organisation. Please could you tell me your role or which type of department you work in?

DO NOT READ OUT, BUT PROBE AS PER PRE CODE AS NECESSARY

SINGLE CODE

- 1 Human Resources
- 2 Managing Director
- 3 Director
- 4 Business Owner
- 98 Other type of role / department (PLEASE BRIEFLY DESCRIBE)
- 99 Don't Know (DO NOT READ OUT)
- 96 Refused (DO NOT READ OUT)

I would like to begin by asking you some questions about Ofqual.

ASK ALL

**Q1. How much, if anything, do you know about Ofqual?**

READ OUT. SINGLE CODE ONLY

Know a lot
Know a fair amount
Know just a little
Heard of but know nothing about
Never heard of

**Ofqual is the independent regulator of qualifications, exams and assessments in England and vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland. Their aim is to ensure that learners get the results they deserve, and that the qualifications they receive count, both now and in the future.**

ASK ALL

**Q2. Before today, were you aware that Ofqual is the independent regulator of qualifications, exams and assessments in England?**

SINGLE CODE ONLY

DO NOT READ OUT

Yes, I was aware of this.
No, I was not aware of this.
Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL

**Q3. As an employer, to what extent, if at all, do you think it is important to have an organisation, such as Ofqual, independently regulating qualifications and exams?**

SINGLE CODE ONLY  
READ OUT

Very important
Fairly important
Neither important nor unimportant
Not very important
Not important at all

ASK ALL

**Q4a. In your opinion, how effective, if at all, is Ofqual at maintaining the standards of qualifications?**

READ OUT

SINGLE CODE ONLY

Very effective
Fairly effective
Not very effective
Not at all effective
No opinion [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL WHO SAY NOT VERY/ NOT AT ALL EFFECTIVE AT Q4a

**Q4b. You said that you do not think that Ofqual is effective at maintaining the standards of qualifications. Why do you say this?**

MULTICODE OK. DO NOT PROMPT. PROBE FULLY

Changes to GCSE
Changes to A levels
Things that I have heard about / read in the media about Ofqual
Introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) certificate
A level results - students getting higher grades than they deserve
A level results - A level grades continuing to rise
GCSE results - students getting higher grades than they deserve
GCSE results - GCSE grades continuing to rise
Changes to performance tables
Moving floor targets (e.g. the level under which schools are considered to be underperforming)
Inconsistent marking
Inconsistent grading

Summer 2012 English GCSE issues
Other SPECIFY
Don't know
None of these

ASK ALL WHO SAY VERY/ FAIRLY EFFECTIVE AT Q4a

**Q4c. You said that you think that Ofqual is effective at maintaining the standards of qualifications. Why do you say this?**

MULTICODE OK. DO NOT PROMPT. PROBE FULLY

Previous experience of Ofqual
Things that I have heard about / read in the media about Ofqual
I have confidence in the exams system
Measures taken by Ofqual to assess grade inflation
Measures taken by Ofqual to make sure standards are comparable
Measures taken by Ofqual to maintain standards in GCSEs
Measures taken by Ofqual to maintain standards around A levels
Measures taken by Ofqual to ensure that marking is consistent / reliable
Improving students' performance
Other SPECIFY
Don't know

ASK ALL

**Q5a. As an employer, what, if anything, do you use as sources of information about qualifications?**

MULTICODE OK. DO NOT PROMPT

- a) The Government
- b) The Department of Education
- c) Ofqual - the exams regulator
- d) Awarding organisations / Exam boards
- e) The media
- f) Professional associations
- g) Word of mouth
- h) Own professional networks
- i) Chambers of commerce (IF REQUIRED: that is local organisations of businesses whose goal is to further their interests)
- j) Other [PLEASE SPECIFY]
- k) Other [PLEASE SPECIFY]
- l) Other [PLEASE SPECIFY]

m) SINGLE CODE None of the above

ASK ALL WHO MENTION 2 OR MORE SOURCES AT Q5a

**Q5b. And which of these would you say is most influential on your perceptions of the quality of qualifications?**

SINGLE CODE ONLY

PRESENT RESPONSES FROM PREVIOUS QUESTION

ASK ALL

**Q6. Again, thinking as an employer, for each of the following sources of information, please tell me how much, if at all, you would trust them as a source of information about exams: a great deal, a fair amount, not very much or not at all.**

SINGLE CODE

READ OUT & ROTATE a) to H):

- a) The Government
- b) Ofqual - the exams regulator
- c) Awarding organisations / Exam boards
- d) The media
- e) Professional associations
- f) Word of mouth
- g) Own professional networks
- h) Chambers of commerce (IF REQUIRED: that is local organisations of businesses whose goal is to further their interests)

A great deal

A fair amount

Not very much

Not at all

Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL

**Q7. To what extent, if at all, do you feel that it is important for you to have access to information about qualifications in order to assist you with the recruitment of candidates to your company?**

SINGLE CODE

READ OUT

Very important
Fairly important
Neither important nor unimportant
Not very important
Not important at all
Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

I'd now like you to think about the A level exam system in its broadest sense

ASK ALL

**Q8. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?**

SINGLE CODE. READ OUT & ROTATE a&b:

- a) It is more important now than ever that students get a higher level educational qualification such as an A level
- b) Overall, the A level is an important qualification for people to obtain for their future

READ OUT

Strongly agree
Tend to agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Tend to disagree
Strongly disagree
Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL

**Q9. Thinking about A levels, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:**

READ OUT. ROTATE STATEMENTS B, C AND D

- a) A levels are routinely used in my organisation in order to make a judgement about a candidate for employment
- b) A levels provide a reliable measure by which candidates can be fairly compared to one another
- c) A levels are a good indicator of the overall ability of a candidate
- d) I have confidence in the A level system



Strongly agree
Tend to agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Tend to disagree
Strongly disagree
Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL

**Q10. Compared to last year, would you say that currently you have more confidence in the A level system, less confidence in the A level system or about the same level of confidence?**

SINGLE CODE ONLY. REPEAT RESPONSES IF NECESSARY. IF RESPONDENT MENTIONS SLIGHTLY MORE CONFIDENCE, PROBE THEM WITH 'Is that more confidence or about the same?'

More
Less
About the same
Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]
ASK ALL

**Q11. Do you have any concerns about the current A level exams system? If so, what are they?**

MULTICODE OK. DO NOT PROMPT.

Yes:

- Incorrect grading and marking of exam papers
- The outcome of an enquiry or appeal about a result
- Timetabling of exams
- Heavy workload
- Too many exams
- Lack of information/ knowledge about standards
- Ability of the system to cope with large numbers of papers
- Too much pressure/ stress on teachers
- Too much pressure/ stress on students
- Uncertainty over awarding of A\* grade
- Other (PLEASE WRITE IN)

No concerns

SINGLE CODE

Don't know

ASK ALL

**Q12a. We would like you to think about the accuracy of A level grades. Which of the following statements is closest to your view?**

SINGLE CODE ONLY, READ OUT

- a) All A level students get the right grade
- b) At least three-quarters of A level students get the right grade, but not all
- c) Between half and three quarters of A level students get the right grade
- d) Less than half of A level students get the right grade
- e) Less than a quarter of A level students get the right grade
- f) Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL EXCEPT THOSE WHO SAY A (ALL STUDENTS GET THE RIGHT GRADE) AT Q12a.

**Q12b. What factors, if any, do you think contribute to A level students not getting the grade they deserve?**

MULTICODE OK. DO NOT PROMPT. PROBE FULLY

Students performing better or worse than expected in exam papers or coursework
Inaccurate marking of exam papers
Exam papers poorly designed
Coursework poorly designed
Students inadequately prepared by their school or college for the exams
Students inadequately prepared by their school or college for coursework
Poor timetabling of exams
Grade boundaries not properly set
Other SPECIFY
Don't know
None of these

I'd now like you to think about GCSEs.

ASK ALL

**Q13. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?**

SINGLE CODE. READ OUT

**Overall, the GCSE is an important qualification for people to obtain for their future**

Strongly agree
Tend to agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Tend to disagree
Strongly disagree
Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL

**Q14. Thinking about the GCSE qualification, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:**

READ OUT. ROTATE STATEMENTS B, C AND D

- a) GCSEs are routinely used in my organisation in order to make a judgement about a candidate for employment
- b) GCSEs provide a reliable measure by which candidates can be fairly compared to one another
- c) GCSEs are a good indicator of the overall ability of a candidate
- d) I have confidence in the GCSE system

Strongly agree
Tend to agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Tend to disagree
Strongly disagree
Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL

**Q15. Compared to last year, would you say that currently you have more confidence in the GCSE system, less confidence in the GCSE system or about the same level of confidence?**

SINGLE CODE ONLY. REPEAT RESPONSES IF NECESSARY. IF RESPONDENT MENTIONS SLIGHTLY MORE CONFIDENCE, PROBE THEM WITH 'Is that more confidence or about the same?'

More
Less
About the same
Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL

**Q16. Do you have any concerns about the current GCSE exams system? If so, what are they?**

MULTICODE OK. DO NOT READ OUT

Yes:

- Incorrect grading
- Incorrect marking of exam papers
- Outcome of an enquiry or appeal about a result
- Timetabling of exams
- Heavy workload
- Too many exams
- Lack of information/ knowledge about standards
- Ability of the system to cope with large numbers of papers
- Too much pressure/ stress on teachers
- Too much pressure/ stress on students
- Other (PLEASE WRITE IN)

No concerns

Don't know

ASK ALL

**Q17a. I would like you to think about the accuracy of GCSE grades. Which of the following statements is closest to your view?**

READ OUT. SINGLE CODE ONLY

- a) All GCSE students get the right grade
- b) At least three-quarters of GCSE students get the right grade, but not all
- c) Between half and three quarters of GCSE students get the right grade
- d) Less than half of GCSE students get the right grade
- e) Less than a quarter of GCSE students get the right grade
- f) Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL EXCEPT THOSE WHO SAY A (ALL STUDENTS GET THE RIGHT GRADE) AT Q17a.

**Q17b. What factors, if any, do you think contribute to GCSE students not getting the grade they deserve?**

MULTICODE OK. DO NOT PROMPT. PROBE FULLY

Students performing better or worse than expected in exam papers or controlled assessment
Inaccurate marking of exam papers
Exam papers poorly designed
Coursework poorly designed
Students inadequately prepared by their school or college for the exams

Students inadequately prepared by their school or college for controlled assessment
Poor timetabling of exams
Grade boundaries not properly set
Other SPECIFY
Don't know
None of these

**INTERVIEWER READ OUT**

**NOW THINKING ABOUT VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS WHICH ARE TAUGHT IN SCHOOLS AND SIXTH FORM COLLEGES; BY 'VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS' WE MEAN QUALIFICATIONS THAT PREPARE STUDENTS FOR A SPECIFIC TYPE OF JOB.**

ASK ALL

**Q18a. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?**

READ OUT. SINGLE CODE ONLY FOR EACH

- a) Vocational qualifications are of an equal value to traditional academic qualifications such as GCSEs and A levels in terms of the difficulty involved in achieving the qualification**
  
- b) I understand what is meant by the 'level' of vocational qualification**

Strongly agree
Tend to agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Tend to disagree
Strongly disagree
Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK THOSE WHO STRONGLY AGREE / TEND TO AGREE WITH STATEMENT b  
AT Q18a

**Q18b. And to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement**

READ OUT. SINGLE CODE

- a) I understand how the different levels of vocational qualifications relate to GCSEs and A levels**

Strongly agree
Tend to agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Tend to disagree
Strongly disagree
Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL

**Q19. Which three factors are most important when making a judgement about whether or not to make an offer of employment at your company to a school leaver?**

PROBE FULLY. ALLOW SELECTION OF UP TO THREE ONLY. DO NOT READ OUT

The candidate's previous experience
The candidate's performance at interview
Personality fit / profiling
Appearance
Self-management
Technical / job-related skills
A-level qualifications
GCSE qualifications
Vocational qualifications
General attitude to work / overall enthusiasm
Knowledge of particular business area
Literacy / Numeracy
Employability type skills
Customer awareness
Other [PLEASE SPECIFY]
Other [PLEASE SPECIFY]
Other [PLEASE SPECIFY]

ASK ALL

**Q20a. The 2012 GCSE results were published in August. Ofqual carried out an initial inquiry after receiving complaints from some schools and colleges about their students not getting the GCSE English grades they expected. The initial inquiry found the exams students took in June were properly graded. However,**

**students are able to take their GCSE English exam again if they want to in November this year. Before today, had you heard about this incident?**

SINGLE CODE ONLY

Yes
No

IF YES AT Q20a

**Q20b. To what extent, if at all, has your confidence in GCSE exams been affected by this incident?**

SINGLE CODE ONLY

READ OUT

A lot
A fair amount
A little
Not at all
Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL

**S1 And finally, did you or your organisation recruit any school leavers in the last five years or are you planning to recruit any school leavers in the next five years?**

READ OUT

SINGLE CODE

1	Have recruited and plan to recruit more
2	Have recruited but do not plan to recruit more
3	Have not recruited but may do so in the future
4	Have not recruited and will not in the future
99	Don't Know (DO NOT READ OUT)

Thank and close

## Higher Education Institutions survey questionnaire

Intro:

ASK FOR THE BEST PERSON TO SPEAK TO WHO COULD GIVE A PERSPECTIVE ON THE WAY IN WHICH DEPARTMENTS MAKE A JUDGEMENT ON WHICH CANDIDATES ARE OFFERED A PLACE AT THE INSTITUTION.

**Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I'm calling from Opinion Leader, an independent research agency, on behalf of Ofqual the independent regulator of qualifications, exams and assessments in England and vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland. We are carrying out a survey for Ofqual on Higher Education Institutions' perceptions of GCSEs, A levels and other qualifications.**

**Am I able to speak to the person in the [DRAW FROM SAMPLE] department who makes decisions about offering school leavers a place in your institution?**

WAIT TO BE TRANSFERRED TO THE RIGHT PERSON

**Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I'm calling from Opinion Leader, an independent research agency, on behalf of Ofqual the independent regulator of qualifications, exams and assessments in England and vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland. We are carrying out a survey for Ofqual on employers' perceptions of GCSEs, A levels and other qualifications.**

**Can I just check, are you able to answer questions about the process by which departments come to make a judgement on whether or not a school leaver is offered a place at your institution?**

1	Yes	Continue
2	No	Ask to be transferred to the correct person. If not possible at that time, call back later. If refused, thank and close.

**The survey will take around 15 minutes to complete, depending on your answers. All your answers will remain confidential and anonymous, in accordance with the Market Research Society Code of Conduct.**

**Your call will be monitored and recorded for the purpose of quality control by Ofqual, Opinion Leader and their partners.**



**Would now be convenient time?**

1	Yes	Continue to C1
2	No	Make an appointment to call back later

Classification section:

**Just before we begin, I'd like to ask a few questions about your institution to ensure that we speak to a representative sample.**

ASK ALL

**C1 Which of the following subject areas are taught in your department?**

READ OUT

SINGLE CODE

1	Life sciences and medicine
2	Natural sciences
3	Engineering and technology
4	Social sciences
5	Arts and humanities
98	Other (PLEASE SPECIFY)
99	Don't Know (DO NOT READ OUT)

ASK ALL

**C2 We are talking to a wide range of people with different responsibilities, so we'd like to understand your role within your organisation. Please could you tell me what your role is?**

DO NOT READ OUT, BUT PROBE AS PER PRE CODE AS NECESSARY

SINGLE CODE

1	Head of admission
2	Dean of students
98	Other (PLEASE BRIEFLY DESCRIBE)
99	Don't Know (DO NOT READ OUT)
96	Refused (DO NOT READ OUT)

I would like to begin by asking you some questions about Ofqual.

ASK ALL

**Q1. How much, if anything, do you know about Ofqual?**

READ OUT. SINGLE CODE ONLY

Know a lot
Know a fair amount
Know just a little
Heard of but know nothing about
Never heard of

**Ofqual is the independent regulator of qualifications, exams and assessments in England and vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland. Their aim is to ensure that learners get the results they deserve, and that the qualifications they receive count, both now and in the future.**

ASK ALL

**Q2. Before today, were you aware that Ofqual is the independent regulator of qualifications, exams and assessments in England?**

SINGLE CODE ONLY

Yes, I was aware of this.
No, I was not aware of this.
Don't know

ASK ALL

**Q3. As someone responsible for offering places at your institution, to what extent, if at all, do you think it is important to have an organisation, such as Ofqual, independently regulating qualifications, exams and tests?**

SINGLE CODE ONLY

READ OUT

Very important
Fairly important
Neither important nor unimportant
Not very important
Not important at all
Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL

**Q4. In your opinion, how effective, if at all, is Ofqual at regulating the exams system?**

READ OUT. SINGLE CODE ONLY

Very effective
Fairly effective
Not very effective
Not at all effective
No opinion [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL

**Q5a. In your opinion, how effective, if at all, is Ofqual at maintaining the standards of qualifications?**

SINGLE CODE ONLY

READ OUT

Very effective
Fairly effective
Not very effective
Not at all effective
No opinion [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL WHO SAY NOT VERY/ NOT AT ALL EFFECTIVE AT Q5a

**Q5b. You said that you do not think that Ofqual is effective at maintaining the standards of qualifications. Why do you say this?**

MULTICODE OK. DO NOT PROMPT. PROBE FULLY

Changes GCSE/ A levels
Things that I have heard about Ofqual / read in the media about Ofqual
Things colleagues have told me
Introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) certificate
A level results - students getting higher grades than they deserve
A level results - A level grades continuing to rise
GCSE results - students getting higher grades than they deserve
GCSE results - grades continuing to rise
Changes to performance tables
Moving floor targets (e.g. the level under which schools are considered to be underperforming)
Inconsistent marking
Inconsistent grading
Summer 2012 English GCSE grade boundary issues

Other SPECIFY
Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]
None of these [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL WHO SAY VERY/ FAIRLY EFFECTIVE AT Q5a

**Q5c. You said that you think that Ofqual is effective at maintaining the standards of qualifications. Why do you say this?**

MULTICODE OK. DO NOT PROMPT. PROBE FULLY

Previous experience of Ofqual
Things that I have heard about Ofqual / read in the media about Ofqual
Things colleagues have told me
I have confidence in the exams system
Measures taken by Ofqual to address grade inflation
Measures taken by Ofqual to make sure standards are comparable
Measures taken by Ofqual to maintain standards in GCSEs
Measures taken by Ofqual to maintain standards around A levels
Measures taken by Ofqual to ensure that marking is consistent/reliable
Improving students' performance

Other SPECIFY

Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

None of these [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL

**Q6a. As someone responsible for offering places at your institution, what, if anything, do you use as sources of information about qualifications?**

MULTICODE OK. DO NOT PROMPT

- a) The Department for Education (DfE)
- b) The Government
- c) Ofqual - the exams regulator
- d) Awarding organisations / Exam boards
- e) The media
- f) Professional associations
- g) Other
- h) Other
- i) Other
- j) SINGLE CODE None of the above [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL WHO MENTION 2 OR MORE SOURCES AT Q6a

**Q6b. And which of these would you say is most influential on your perceptions of the quality of qualifications?**

SINGLE CODE ONLY

PRESENT RESPONSES FROM PREVIOUS QUESTION

ASK ALL

**Q7. Again, thinking as someone responsible for offering places at your institution, for each of the following sources of information, please tell me how much, if at all, you would trust them as a source of information about exams: a great deal, a fair amount, not very much or not at all.**

SINGLE CODE

READ OUT & ROTATE a) to e):

- a) The Department for Education (DfE)
- b) Ofqual - the exams regulator
- c) Awarding organisations / Exam boards
- d) The media
- e) Professional associations

A great deal
A fair amount
Not very much
Not at all
Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL

**Q8. To what extent, if at all, do you feel that it is important for you to have access to information about qualifications in order to assist you with the recruitment of candidates to your institution?**

SINGLE CODE

READ OUT

Very important
Fairly important
Neither important nor unimportant
Not very important
Not important at all
Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

I'd now like you to think about the A level exam system in its broadest sense.

ASK ALL

**Q9. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?**

SINGLE CODE. READ OUT & ROTATE:

- a) It is more important now than ever that students get a higher level educational qualification such as an A level**
- b) Overall, the A level is an important qualification for people to obtain for their future**
- c) The A\* grade at A level should help universities identify top students**

READ OUT

Strongly agree
Tend to agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Tend to disagree
Strongly disagree
Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL

**Q10. And again, thinking about A levels, to what extent do you agree or disagree with these following statements:**

READ OUT. ROTATE STATEMENTS B-D

- a) A levels are routinely used in my institution in order to make a judgement about offering a school leaver a place**
- b) A levels provide a reliable measure by which school leavers can be fairly compared to one another**
- c) A levels are a good indicator of the overall ability of a school leaver**
- d) A Level qualifications set the minimum standard we would expect for someone to have a place at this institution**

Strongly agree
Tend to agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Tend to disagree
Strongly disagree
Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL

**Q11. To what extent is the A\* grade useful when making a judgement about whether to offer a candidate a place at your institution?**

SINGLE CODE ONLY

READ OUT

Very useful
Fairly useful
Not very useful
Not at all useful
Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL

**Q12. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?**

SINGLE CODE ONLY FOR EACH READ OUT & DO NOT ROTATE

**a) I have confidence in the A level system**

Strongly agree
Tend to agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Tend to disagree
Strongly disagree
Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL

**Q13. Compared to last year, would you say that currently you have more confidence in the A level system, less confidence in the A level system or about the same level of confidence?**

SINGLE CODE ONLY. REPEAT RESPONSES IF NECESSARY. IF RESPONDENT MENTIONS SLIGHTLY MORE CONFIDENCE, PROBE THEM WITH 'Is that more confidence or about the same?'

More
Less
About the same
Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL

**Q14. Do you have any concerns about the current A level exams system? If so, what are they?**

MULTICODE OK. DO NOT PROMPT.

Yes:

- Incorrect grading of exam papers
- Incorrect marking of exam papers
- The outcome of an enquiry or appeal about a result
- Timetabling of exams
- Heavy workload
- Too many exams
- Lack of information/ knowledge about standards
- Ability of the system to cope with large numbers of papers
- Too much pressure/ stress on teachers
- Too much pressure/ stress on students
- Uncertainty over awarding of A\* grade
- Other (PLEASE WRITE IN)

---

No concerns

SINGLE CODE

Don't know

ASK ALL

**Q15. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?**

SINGLE CODE ONLY FOR EACH READ OUT & DO NOT ROTATE

INTERVIEWER: IF RESPONDENT IS UNSURE WHAT IS MEANT BY MARKING:  
By marking we mean the process of giving a student credit for their right answers according to the requirements set out in a mark scheme.

INTERVIEWER: IF RESPONDENT IS UNSURE ABOUT WHAT IS MEANT BY GRADING, READ OUT: By grades we mean the overall performance categories (for instance A\*, A, B, C, D) into which students are grouped

**a) I understand how A levels are marked**

**b) I understand how A levels are graded**

Strongly agree
Tend to agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Tend to disagree
Strongly disagree
Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL



**Q16. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?**

- a) I have confidence in the accuracy of the marking of A level papers  
b) The accuracy of marking of A level papers has decreased over the past two years

Strongly agree
Tend to agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Tend to disagree
Strongly disagree
No opinion [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL

**Q17a. We would like you to think about the accuracy of A level grades. Which of the following statements is closest to your view?**

SINGLE CODE ONLY. READ OUT

- g) All A level students get the right grade  
h) At least three-quarters of A level students get the right grade, but not all  
i) Between half and three quarters of A level students get the right grade  
j) Less than half of A level students get the right grade  
k) Less than a quarter of A level students get the right grade  
l) Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL EXCEPT THOSE WHO SAY A (ALL STUDENTS GET THE RIGHT GRADE) AT Q17a.

**Q17b. What factors, if any, do you think contribute to A level students not getting the grade they deserve?**

MULTICODE OK. DO NOT PROMPT. PROBE FULLY

Students performing better or worse than expected in exam papers or coursework
Inaccurate marking of exam papers
Exam papers poorly designed
Coursework poorly designed
Students inadequately prepared by their school or college for the exams
Students inadequately prepared by their school or college for coursework
Poor timetabling of exams
Grade boundaries not properly set
Other SPECIFY
Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

None of these [DO NOT READ OUT]
---------------------------------

ASK ALL

**Q18. To what extent, if at all, do you think Higher Education Institutions should take a leading role in developing A level qualifications?**

SINGLE CODE ONLY

READ OUT

A great deal
To some extent
Not very much
Not at all
Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL

**Q19. And to what extent, if at all, would your subject department take a leading role in developing A level qualifications if it had the opportunity?**

SINGLE CODE ONLY

READ OUT

A great deal
To some extent
Not very much
Not at all
Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

I'd now like you to think about GCSEs.

ASK ALL

**Q20. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?**

SINGLE CODE ONLY READ OUT SCALE AND STATEMENT

**I have confidence in the GCSE system**

Strongly agree
Tend to agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Tend to disagree
Strongly disagree

Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]
------------------------------

ASK ALL

**Q21. Compared to last year, would you say that currently you have more confidence in the GCSE system, less confidence in the GCSE system or about the same level of confidence?**

SINGLE CODE ONLY. REPEAT RESPONSES IF NECESSARY. IF RESPONDENT MENTIONS SLIGHTLY MORE CONFIDENCE, PROBE THEM WITH 'Is that more confidence or about the same?'

More
------

Less
------

About the same
----------------

Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]
------------------------------

ASK ALL

**Q22. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?**

SINGLE CODE. READ OUT

**Overall, the GCSE is an important qualification for people to obtain for their future**

Strongly agree
----------------

Tend to agree
---------------

Neither agree nor disagree
----------------------------

Tend to disagree
------------------

Strongly disagree

Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL

**Q23. And again, thinking about the GCSE qualification, to what extent do you agree or disagree with these following statements:**

READ OUT. ROTATE STATEMENTS B-D

**a) GCSEs are routinely used in my institution in order to make a judgement about offering a school leaver a place**

**b) GCSEs provide a reliable measure by which candidates can be fairly compared to one another**

**c) GCSEs are a good indicator of the overall ability of a candidate**

**d) GCSE qualifications set the minimum standard we would expect for someone to have a place at this institution**

<b>Strongly agree</b>
<b>Tend to agree</b>
<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>
<b>Tend to disagree</b>
<b>Strongly disagree</b>
Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL

**Q24. Do you have any concerns about the current GCSE exams system? If so, what are they?**

MULTICODE OK. DO NOT READ OUT

Yes:

Incorrect grading
Incorrect marking of exam papers
Outcome of an enquiry or appeal about a result
Timetabling of exams
Heavy workload
Too many exams
Lack of information/ knowledge about standards
Ability of the system to cope with large numbers of papers
Too much pressure/ stress on teachers
Too much pressure / stress on students
Other (PLEASE WRITE IN)
No concerns
Don't know

ASK ALL

**Q25. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?**

SINGLE CODE ONLY FOR EACH READ OUT & DO NOT ROTATE

INTERVIEWER: IF RESPONDENT IS UNSURE WHAT IS MEANT BY MARKING:  
By marking we mean the process of giving a student credit for their right answers according to the requirements set out in a mark scheme.

INTERVIEWER: IF RESPONDENT IS UNSURE ABOUT WHAT IS MEANT BY GRADING, READ OUT: By grades we mean the overall performance categories (for instance A\*, A, B, C, D) into which students are grouped.

**a) I understand how GCSEs are marked**

**b) I understand how GCSEs are graded**

Strongly agree
Tend to agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Tend to disagree
Strongly disagree
Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL

**Q26. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?**

**a) I have confidence in the accuracy and quality of the marking of GCSE papers**

**b) The accuracy and quality of marking of GCSE papers has decreased over the past two years**

Strongly agree

Tend to agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Tend to disagree

Strongly disagree

No opinion [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL

**Q27a. I would like you to think about the accuracy of GCSE grades. Which of the following statements is closest to your view?**

READ OUT. SINGLE CODE ONLY

a) All GCSE students get the right grade

b) At least three-quarters of GCSE students get the right grade, but not all

c) Between half and three quarters of GCSE students get the right grade

d) Less than half of GCSE students get the right grade

e) Less than a quarter of GCSE students get the right grade

f) Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL EXCEPT THOSE WHO SAY A (ALL STUDENTS GET THE RIGHT GRADE) AT Q27a.

**Q27b. What factors, if any, do you think contribute to GCSE students not getting the grade they deserve?**

MULTICODE OK. DO NOT PROMPT. PROBE FULLY

Students performing better or worse than expected in exam papers or controlled assessment
Inaccurate marking of exam papers
Exam papers poorly designed
Coursework poorly designed
Students inadequately prepared by their school or college for the exams
Students inadequately prepared by their school or college for controlled assessment
Poor timetabling of exams
Grade boundaries not properly set
Other SPECIFY
Don't know
None of these

**INTERVIEWER READ OUT**

**NOW THINKING ABOUT VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS WHICH ARE TAUGHT IN SCHOOLS AND SIXTH FORM COLLEGES; BY 'VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS' WE MEAN QUALIFICATIONS THAT PREPARE STUDENTS FOR A SPECIFIC TYPE OF JOB.**

ASK ALL

**Q28a. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?**  
READ OUT. SINGLE CODE

**a) *I understand what is meant by the 'level' of vocational qualification***

Strongly agree
Tend to agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Tend to disagree
Strongly disagree
Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK THOSE WHO STRONGLY AGREE / TEND TO AGREE AT Q28a

**Q28b. And to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement**

READ OUT. SINGLE CODE

**b) I understand how the different levels of vocational qualifications relate to GCSEs and A levels**

Strongly agree
Tend to agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Tend to disagree
Strongly disagree
Don't know [DO NOT READ OUT]

ASK ALL

**Q29. Which three factors are most important when making a judgement about whether or not to make an offer of a place at your institution to a school leaver?**

ALLOW SELECTION OF UP TO THREE ONLY. DO NOT READ OUT

The candidate's previous experience
The candidate's performance at interview
Personality fit / profiling
Appearance
Self-management
Study-related skills
A level qualifications
GCSE qualifications
Vocational qualifications
General attitude to study / overall enthusiasm
Knowledge of particular area of study
Other [PLEASE SPECIFY]
Other [PLEASE SPECIFY]
Other [PLEASE SPECIFY]

ASK ALL

**Q30a. And finally, the 2012 GCSE results were published in August. Ofqual carried out an initial inquiry after receiving complaints from some schools and colleges about their students not getting the GCSE English grades they expected. The initial inquiry found the exams students took in June were properly graded. However, students are able to take their GCSE English exam**

**again if they want to in November this year. Before today, had you heard about this incident?**

Yes

No

IF YES AT Q30a

**Q30b. To what extent, if at all, has your confidence in GCSE exams been affected by this incident?**

A lot
A fair amount
A little
Not at all
Don't know

Thank and close



## Appendix D: Statistical reliability

Respondents represent only samples of total populations, so we cannot be certain that the figures obtained are exactly those we would have if everybody had taken part (“true values”). However, we can predict the variation between the sample results and the true values from knowledge of the size of the samples on which results are based and the number of times a particular answer is given. The confidence with which we make this prediction is usually chosen to be 95 per cent - that is, the chances are 95 in 100 that the true value will fall within a specified range. The table below illustrates the predicted ranges for different sample sizes and percentage results at the “95% confidence interval”.

**Figure x:** Sampling tolerances by sample size

Size of sample on which survey result is based	Approximate sampling tolerances applicable to percentages at or near these levels		
	10% or 90%	30% or 70%	50%
	+/-	+/-	+/-
<b>50</b>	8.3	12.7	13.9
<b>100</b>	5.9	9.0	9.8
<b>200</b>	4.2	6.4	6.9
<b>500</b>	2.6	4.0	4.4

For example, with a sample size of 200 where 50 per cent give a particular answer, the chances are 19 in 20 that the true value (which would have been obtained if the whole population had been interviewed) will fall within the range of +6.9 percentage points from the sample result (i.e., between 43.1 per cent and 56.9 per cent).

## Appendix E: Glossary of terms

**Base size:** The number of respondents answering the question.

**BTEC:** These are qualifications offered across a range of vocational subjects and levels including business studies and engineering. For the purposes of this survey, these qualifications are included as part of the grouping termed *mixed qualifications*.

**Design effect:** bias resulting from adjustments made to the sample to make it representative of the population.

**Effective base:** When sampling is undertaken, it creates a '*design effect*' which can impact the reliability of the information collected. The effective base size is the base size that is left when removing this effect. It is used for significance testing.

**Freestanding Mathematics (or Freestanding Maths):** a suite of mathematical qualifications available at levels 1 to 3. They are often taken by students who have taken their GCSE mathematics a year early. For the purposes of this survey, these are included as part of the grouping termed *other academic qualifications*.

**General Qualifications:** GCSE, and GCE AS and A level.

**Grading:** The process of grouping students into overall performance categories (for instance A\*, A, B, C, D, E, F, G).

**IB:** International Baccalaureate – A qualification studied by 16 – 19 year olds in which students learn six subjects; three at a standard level and three at a higher level. The qualification also includes an extended essay element. For the purposes of this survey, this qualification is included as part of the grouping termed *other academic qualifications*.

**iGCSE:** International General Certificate of Secondary Education – An unregulated qualification studied by 14 – 16 year olds as an alternative to a GCSE. For the purposes of this survey, these qualifications are included as part of the grouping termed *other academic qualifications*.

**“Level” of vocational qualification:** Qualifications are assigned a level from Entry then Level 1 through to Level 8. Further details may be found at:  
<http://ofqual.gov.uk/popups/explaining-qualifications/>

- Entry: this includes entry level certificates and foundation learning tier pathways
- Level 1: includes GCSEs graded D - G, the Foundation Diploma, and level 1 NVQs, Key Skills, Functional Skills and BTEC awards

- Level 2: includes GCSEs graded A\* - C, the Higher Diploma and level 2 NVQs, Key Skills, Functional Skills and BTEC awards
- Level 3: includes AS/A levels, the Advanced and Progression Diploma and level 3 NVQs, Key Skills and BTEC awards
- Level 4: includes Certificates of higher education, level 4 NVQs and Key Skills and the BTEC Professional Awards
- Level 5: includes Diplomas of higher education, Foundation degrees, Higher National Diplomas and BTEC Professional Awards
- Level 6: includes Bachelor degrees, graduate certificates, the National Diploma in Professional Production Skills and BTEC Advanced Professional Awards
- Level 7: includes Masters degrees, postgraduate certificates and BTEC Advanced Professional Awards
- Level 8: includes Doctorate

**Marking:** the process of giving a student credit for their right answers according to the requirements set out in a mark scheme.

**Mixed qualifications:** For the purposes of this survey, these include BTECs, OCR Nationals and Principal Learning. They are regarded as mixed qualifications as they provide a mixture of vocational and academic components. Available across a range of levels, they are designed to provide the same degree of difficulty (depending upon level) as for example GCSEs and A levels.

**OCR Nationals:** These are qualifications designed to provide learners with sector-specific industry-related qualifications to support entry to work or progression to further study. For the purposes of this survey, these qualifications are included as part of the grouping termed *other academic qualifications*.

**Other academic qualifications:** For the purposes of this survey, these qualifications include iGCSEs, the International Baccalaureate, the Pre-U and Freestanding Mathematics. They are defined as qualifications which are taught in schools and colleges to young people aged 14-19, which are not GCSEs or A levels and include academic content.

**Pre-U:** The Pre-U is a qualification for 16 – 19 year olds designed as an alternative to the current A Level qualification. For the purposes of this survey, this qualification is included as part of the grouping termed *other academic qualifications*.

**Principal Learning:** Originally a core component of the Diploma qualification, Principal Learning is a standalone qualification in its own right. The qualification is sector-based and subject-related and includes 50 per cent of practical (applied) learning. For the purposes of this survey, these qualifications are included as part of the grouping termed *mixed qualifications*.

**Sample Frame:** The way that the population is structured before a sample for the survey is drawn.

**Sampling tolerances:** When using a sample for a survey rather than surveying the whole population, results can be expected to differ slightly. The difference between the two is known as the sampling tolerance and is established by ascertaining the standard deviation. For the purposes of this survey, the tolerance (or confidence level) used is at the 95 per cent level.

**Statistically significant:** If a result is termed statistically significant, it is unlikely to have occurred randomly. The process of determining whether a result is statistically significant is known as significance testing.

**Stratified Sample:** A sample which has been divided into sub-groups, for example regions or type of institution. These sub-groups may consist of equal numbers across all or some might be higher or lower than others.

**Vocational Qualifications:** Qualifications which are designed to allow learners to learn in a way that suits them, and give learners the skills that employers are looking for.

**Weighting:** The process of making some respondents in a survey more or less important than others to accurately reflect their position in the population being surveyed.

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