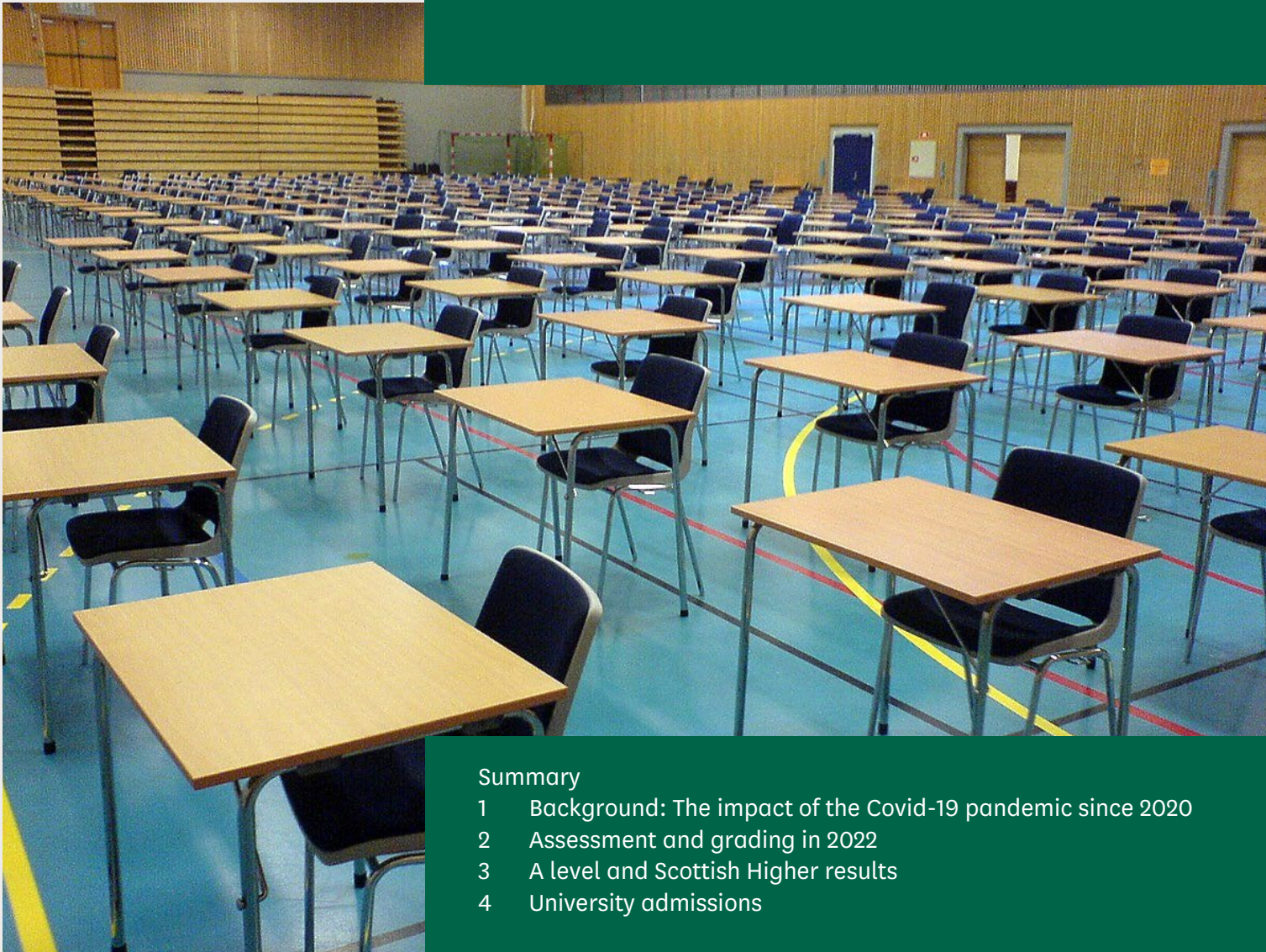


Research Briefing

18 October 2022

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A levels, Scottish Highers, and university admissions 2022



Summary

- 1 Background: The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic since 2020
- 2 Assessment and grading in 2022
- 3 A level and Scottish Higher results
- 4 University admissions

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Summary

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic since 2020

Pupils taking A levels, Scottish Highers, and Advanced Highers in the summers of 2020 and 2021 experienced significant disruption to their studies due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In response, course curriculums were reduced, and summer exams were cancelled.

In 2021, teacher assessed grades were used to determine A level and Scottish Higher results. This led to another annual increase in the highest grades awarded. In England, 44.3% of A level entries were awarded an A* or A in 2021. This compared with 38.5% in 2020, and 25.2% in 2019.

In 2020, final grades were initially to be awarded based on a moderated algorithm, which would ‘standardise’ grades awarded by teachers to combat grade inflation. Following considerable public pressure and accusations the algorithm was unfair, it was announced pupils would receive whichever was higher: the moderated algorithm grade or a teacher/centre assessed grade.

The number of applications for higher education reached a record level in 2021. Combined with the increase in the number of top grades awarded, many university courses were over-subscribed when unusually high numbers of students met their first choice offers.

Assessment and grading in 2022

2022 was the first year young people have taken exams and assessments in A levels, Scottish Highers, and other post-16 qualifications since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Adaptations were made to exams and coursework to acknowledge the disruption to pupils’ learning. These varied across the UK, but included some course content not being assessed, modifications to practical work and fieldwork, and advance notice on what topics would be examined to assist students with their revision.

Ofqual, the exams regulator in England, said 2022 would be a “transition year” back to lower pre-pandemic grade levels, with results reflecting a “midway point” between 2021 and 2019. This approach was similarly followed in Wales and Northern Ireland.

The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) said it adopted a more generous approach to grading Scottish Highers and Advanced Highers in 2022 than in a normal year, with results intended to be an “intermediary position” between 2021 and 2019.

A level and Scottish Higher results

The overall A-C pass rate for Scottish Highers was 78.9%, up from pre-pandemic level of 74.8% in 2019, but lower than rates in 2020 and 2021. There was a similar trend in Advanced Highers where the A-C pass rate in 2022 was 81.3%, above the level in 2019 (79.4%) but lower than in 2020 and 2021.

A level results in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2022 were better than the last time formal exams were held in 2019, but somewhat below the 2021 results. The proportion of A* grades was 14.6% in 2022 compared to 7.7% in 2019. A*/A grades improved from 25.4% to 36.4% and A*-C grades from 75.9% to 82.6% over the same period.

University admissions in 2022

It was anticipated 2022 would see higher application rates and increased competition for university places due to:

- continuing demographic change and more 18-year-olds in the population;
- universities being more circumspect in their offer-making following two years of pandemic-related ‘over recruitment’;
- a higher number of students choosing to defer their places from 2021;
- some higher achieving students from 2021 reapplying for the most competitive courses;
- fewer deferrals to 2023 due to changes to student finance from 2023/24.

On A level results day (18 August), around 375,000 applicants had a place at their first choice university, down from 396,000 on A level results day in 2021, but higher than in 2019, 2020 and any earlier year. This was 54.4% of applicants, lower than the 57.8% in 2021 and rates in 2020 (55.2%) and 2019 (55.7%). A further 51,300 applicants (7.3%) had been accepted at their second/other choice or through clearing and 99,300 (14.5%) were holding an offer. Around 164,000 (23.7%) were free to be placed in clearing or had gone direct to clearing. This number was 9% higher than in 2021 and 24% higher than in 2020.

There were broadly similar trends among UK applicants aged 18 with the proportion placed at their first choice down from 72.7% in 2021 to 65.3% in 2022. The number of these applicants free to be placed in clearing in 2022

was 33% higher than on the equivalent day in 2021 and 44% higher than in 2020.

Analysis of applications 28 days after A level results day (15 September) showed the number of applicants accepted at their second/other choice or through clearing had increased to 117,800. The number placed through clearing was 70,000, a 29% increase on 2021, but lower than numbers in 2020 and 2019. The total number of 18-year-olds with a placed had increased to a new record in 2022. The percentage of 18-year-olds placed by this date fell from 37.9% in 2021 to 37.3% in 2022. The 2022 level was still the second highest figure.

The number of UK 18-year-old applicants accepted at the more prestigious 'higher tariff' universities on A level results day 2022 was down by 12%. It increased by 5% in lower and 1% in medium tariff institutions. More students are placed through clearing at lower and middle tariff universities, so their relative positions had changed by 28 days after A level results day. The number placed at higher tariff institutions was 11% lower than on the equivalent date in 2021, while those placed at middle and lower tariff universities increased by 6% and 11% respectively. This meant more UK 18-year-olds were placed at middle than higher tariff universities for the first time since the pandemic.

1 Background: The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic since 2020

1.1 A level and Scottish Higher awarding

Pupils taking A levels and Scottish Highers and Advanced Highers in the summers of 2020 and 2021 experienced significant disruption to their studies due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The online delivery of courses during lockdowns caused difficulties for some pupils, and when in-person teaching resumed, many pupils faced being repeatedly sent home due to Covid-19 outbreaks in their school.

In response, there was a reduction in course curriculums and summer exams were cancelled.

- In 2021, teacher-assessed grades were awarded across the UK, following some form of internal exams or coursework.
- In 2020, final grades were initially to be awarded across the UK by using a moderated algorithm, which would ‘standardise’ grades awarded by teachers. This was intended to mitigate the possibility of grade inflation. Following considerable public pressure amid accusations the algorithm was unfair, however, it was announced pupils would receive whichever was higher: the moderated algorithm grade or a teacher/centre assessed grade.

Detailed information on the assessment of A levels and Scottish Highers during the Covid-19 pandemic is available in the Library briefing: [Coronavirus: GCSEs, A Levels and equivalents in 2022](#).¹

2020-21

It was initially expected exams would go ahead in summer 2021, but on 4 January 2021, the then-Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, [announced AS and A level exams would be cancelled in England](#), and replaced by teacher/centre-assessed grades.²

¹ Commons Library briefing CBP 9045: [Coronavirus: GCSEs, A Levels and equivalents in 2022](#).

² Prime Minister’s Office, [Prime Minister’s address to the nation: 4 January 2021](#), 4 January 2021.

Following consultations, Ofqual and the Department for Education published two documents that set out how this would work for summer 2021.³ It was intended to be no easier or harder for a pupil to achieve a particular grade in 2021 compared to previous years, but grade inflation was evident when the results were released.

44.3% of A level entries in England were awarded A* or A in 2021. This compared with 38.5% in 2020, and 25.2% in pre-pandemic 2019. In independent schools, 70.1% of pupils achieved A and A* grades, which was much higher than any other type of education provider.⁴

Across the rest of the UK, it had also been hoped exams would be able to go ahead in 2021, but they were ultimately cancelled, and alternative arrangements put in place.

In Scotland, an Alternative Certification Model based on internal assessment, supported by quality assurance, was used to award Highers and Advanced Highers.⁵ In Wales, teacher-managed assessments, including some externally set and marked but delivered within a classroom environment, were used.⁶ In Northern Ireland, teachers were asked to use “the full breadth of evidence available” when determining grades.⁷

2019-20

There were no A level, Scottish Higher, or Advanced Higher examinations in summer 2020.

In England, following a [consultation in April 2020](#), it was decided grades would be decided using an algorithm. The plan was for exam boards to ‘standardise’ grades awarded by teachers through the use of historic school-performance data.⁸

This algorithm was intended to mitigate teacher bias and grade inflation. Following the release of results on 13 August, however, it appeared the algorithm had disadvantaged high-achieving pupils from historically low-performing institutions, often located in more deprived areas, while lower-achieving students from high-performing institutions saw their grades

³ Ofqual/ DfE, [Decisions on how GCSE, AS and A Level grades will be determined in summer 2021](#), 25 February 2021; Ofqual/DfE, [Decisions on alternative arrangements for the award of VTQ and other general qualifications in 2021](#), 25 February 2021.

⁴ More information is available in the Commons Library briefing CBP 9294, [University admissions 2021](#).

⁵ Scottish Government, [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) - education sector: Deputy First Minister statement 8 December 2020](#), 8 December 2020.

⁶ Welsh Government, [Written Statement: Update on General Qualifications in 2021](#), 16 December 2020.

⁷ NI Department of Education, [Statement on Alternative Awarding Arrangements - summer 2021](#), 2 February 2021.

⁸ Ofqual, [Exceptional arrangements for exam grading and assessment in 2020](#), April 2020.

inflated. This was a potential issue that had been highlighted in July 2020 by the House of Commons Education Select Committee.⁹

Subsequent public pressure prompted Ofqual, the exams regulator for England, to issue a statement on 17 August, which said [the previous algorithm system was to be withdrawn](#).¹⁰ Instead, pupils were either awarded the grade determined by the teacher, or the moderated grade, whichever was higher.

The original approach of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland to awarding qualifications in 2020 was similar to that proposed for England, in that it used a combination of teacher assessment and statistical moderation. Results in Scotland were released first. Following press reports that large numbers of pupils had received lower grades than they might have expected,¹¹ pupils were allowed to keep the higher of their teacher-assessed or moderated grade.¹² Wales and Northern Ireland ultimately took a similar approach.

1.2 University admissions

The number of applicants for higher education reached a record level in 2021, with UCAS reporting 682,010 applicants by 30 June 2021.¹³

The increase in the award of top-grade A levels meant unusually high numbers of students met their first choice offers, and there were more applicants placed at higher tariff providers (the third of institutions with the highest average entry qualifications) than at medium and lower tariff providers for the first time ever.¹⁴

The increase in university applicants, the difficulty in predicting grades, and the increase in the number of high grades awarded led to many courses being over-subscribed. Some universities offered incentives to students to defer their courses until 2022.¹⁵ The number of deferrals from UK students reached a record high of 32,550 in 2021, or 7.1% of accepted applicants.¹⁶

Medical and dental school places

The number of places available to study medicine and dentistry is capped and based on how many clinical placements are available in local hospitals. A

⁹ House of Commons Education Select Committee, [Getting the grades they've earned: Covid-19: the cancellation of exams and 'calculated' grades](#), 11 July 2020, HC 617 I-2019-21, paras 4-34.

¹⁰ Ofqual, [Statement from Roger Taylor, Chair, Ofqual](#), 17 August 2020.

¹¹ ["Scotland's results day: Thousands of pupils have exam grades lowered"](#), BBC News, 4 August 2020 (accessed 12 August 2022).

¹² Scottish Government, [Deputy First Minister - SQA 2020 results](#), 11 August 2020.

¹³ UCAS, [2021 cycle applicant figures – 30 June deadline](#), 8 July 2021.

¹⁴ UCAS, [Daily clearing analysis 7 September 2021](#).

¹⁵ ["University of Leeds students offered £10k and free housing to defer"](#), BBC News, 11 August 2021.

¹⁶ UCAS, [Undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2021](#)

record number of students applied to study medicine in 2021, a rise of more than 20% on the previous year.

In response, the UK Government increased the number of medical school places for the second year running in England, with an additional 9,000 places made available in total, depending on universities' capacity to expand.¹⁷

1.3 Higher education provision

The provision of higher education has been significantly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. In March 2020 and during subsequent national lockdowns, university campuses were closed to most students. Students were encouraged to move back home, and courses were delivered online.

The re-opening of many campuses in September 2020 was followed by a spike in Covid-19 cases among the student body, despite the mitigation measures put in place by universities. These included organising students into 'households', quarantining students who tested positive, and continuing to deliver most teaching online.

The unprecedented experience of higher education caused by the pandemic prompted complaints from students about a lack of support and calls for tuition fee refunds.

The following Library briefing papers set out how university provision evolved during the pandemic.

- [Coronavirus Bill: childcare and education settings](#), 20 March 2020
- [Coronavirus implications for the further and higher education sectors in England](#), 11 April 2020
- [Coronavirus: Update implications for the further and higher education sectors](#), 21 May 2020
- [Coronavirus: Easing lockdown restrictions in FE and HE in England](#), 2 September 2020
- [Coronavirus: Higher and further education back to campus in England in 2020/21?](#), 6 January 2021
- [Coronavirus: Student accommodation issues](#), 25 January 2021
- [Coronavirus: HE/FE return to campus in England 2021](#), 7 July 2021

¹⁷ [“Grade inflation forces ministers to pay for extra medical school places”](#), The Guardian, 5 August 2021.

2021/22

It was hoped students would have a more normal higher education experience in the 2021/22 academic year, with a return to face-to-face teaching for many. At the time, England's then-Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson, said he expected all universities to return to face-to-face teaching and "if universities are not delivering what students expect they should not be charged full fees."¹⁸

As autonomous institutions, universities are free to set fees within maximum fee limits determined by regulations, and most combined in-person teaching with aspects of online learning during the 2021/22 academic year. This is known as "blended learning", and according to the Russell Group (an association of 24 public research universities in the UK), it is likely to become more common:

Blended learning involves enhancing in-person lectures, seminars, small group discussions, tutorials, lab work and workshops with technology, digital learning or high-quality online materials for self-study.

Learning is personal and social, which is why in-person teaching is so important. And why our universities are looking to use digital to improve and not to replace on-campus teaching and learning [...]

Traditional lectures – where a lecturer talks to a large group of students – only made up a small proportion of teaching and learning pre-pandemic and are likely feature [sic] much less in the future.¹⁹

While students recognised there were benefits to remote learning, including flexibility and a better work/life balance, face-to-face teaching is a priority for many.²⁰

At the beginning of the 2021/22 academic year, universities also had to contend with twice-weekly testing for their students and staff and quarantine arrangements for international students arriving ahead of term.

More information is available in the Library briefing [University admissions 2021](#).²¹

¹⁸ "[Williamson says universities must 'stand up' offers to students with in-person teaching – video](#)", The Guardian, 10 August 2021.

¹⁹ "[Blended learning at Russell Group universities](#)", Russell Group, 13 August 2021.

²⁰ UPP foundation, "[Student Futures Commission: Students prioritise a return to face to face teaching from September 2021](#)", May 2021.

²¹ Commons Library briefing CBP 9294, [University admissions 2021](#).

2

Assessment and grading in 2022

2022 was the first year young people took exams and assessments in Scottish Highers, Advanced Highers, A levels and other post 16 qualifications across the UK since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Most pupils who sat exams this year would have experienced the cancellation of their National 5s in Scotland or their GCSE exams in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland in 2020. They would have also experienced further disruption in the 2020/21 academic year when schools were closed.

In light of this disruption, there were some adaptations in place for 2022, including adjustments to non-assessed work and advance information on the focus of exams to help pupils revise.

Results in 2022 were expected to be lower than the previous two years but higher than the pre-pandemic results of 2019. Exam boards sought an intermediary or midway point, as part of a phased return to the grade levels seen before the pandemic.

Detailed information on the assessment of A levels and Scottish Highers/Advanced Highers in 2022 is available in the Library briefing: [Coronavirus: GCSEs, A Levels and equivalents in 2022](#).²²

2.1

England

In considering its approach to exams and assessments in 2022, the Department for Education said it was guided by the principles of “fairness, flexibility, and certainty”.²³

As well as these principles, the Government said its specific policy objectives regarding exams and assessments were that:

- students could progress successfully to the next stage of their education or to employment;
- every effort would be made to maintain the standard and rigour of qualifications;

²² Commons Library briefing CBP 9045: [Coronavirus: GCSEs, A Levels and equivalents in 2022](#).

²³ DfE, [Proposed changes to the assessment of GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2022](#), 30 September 2021.

- subject content, specified by DfE, which forms the foundation of the qualifications should not be changed.²⁴

In July 2022, Ofqual published a [blogpost giving some context to the grading and results](#) for GCSEs and AS and A levels in summer 2022.²⁵

Adaptations for 2022

In July 2021, Ofqual and the Department for Education published a [joint consultation on assessment arrangements for GCSEs, AS and A levels](#) in England in summer 2022.²⁶

The following adaptations to A level exams were then confirmed in September 2021:

- **Advance information:** Exam boards gave information on the focus of exams for most subjects to help students revise.
- **Practical work:** Non-exam assessment and fieldwork requirements were adjusted, with flexibility in some subjects, including AS level biology, chemistry, physics, and geology.
- **Art and design qualifications:** AS and A level art and design qualifications were assessed on the basis of a student’s portfolio only, rather than a task set by an exam board.

More information is available in the Department for Education publication: [Decisions: proposed changes to the assessment of GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2022](#).²⁷

A ‘transition year’ for results

In September 2021, Ofqual, the exams regulator for England, said 2022 would be a “transition year” for exams, qualifications, and grades.

In acknowledgement of the disruption to pupils’ learning, results in 2022 would reflect a “midway point” between 2021 and 2019.²⁸ Ofqual’s Chief Regulator, Dr Jo Saxton, said:

We want to get back quickly to the pre-pandemic standard, but in the interests of fairness, and balancing these objectives, we won’t do so in one jump. Instead, 2022 will be a transition year to reflect that we are in a pandemic recovery period and students’ education has been disrupted. In 2022 we will

²⁴ DfE, [Proposed changes to the assessment of GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2022](#), 30 September 2021.

²⁵ Ofqual, [Exam results 2022: 10 things to know about GCSE, AS and A level grades](#), 6 July 2022.

²⁶ Ofqual/DfE, [Proposed changes to the assessment of GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2022](#) (PDF), 12 July 2022.

²⁷ Ofqual/DfE, [Decisions: proposed changes to the assessment of GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2022](#), 30 September 2021.

²⁸ Ofqual, [Ofqual’s approach to grading exams and assessments in summer 2022 and autumn 2021](#), September 2021.

aim, therefore, to reflect a midway point between 2021 and 2019. In 2023 we aim to return to results that are in line with those in pre-pandemic years.²⁹

Ofqual said it had been guided by “fairness” in its thinking about exams for 2022, with the interests of students, including past and future students, underpinning its decisions.³⁰

Reaction

Consultation response

The consultation on assessment arrangements was available online for three weeks and received 6,725 responses, including from school and college staff (3,257), students (1,493), and education and training providers (518).³¹

Some of the things raised included:

- Many respondents said any changes to summer 2022 exams and assessments should be announced as soon as possible to provide staff sufficient time to plan.
- Some respondents expressed concern there were not more adaptations to A Level subjects compared to equivalent GCSE subjects.
- In light of difficulties in covering course content during remote learning, a number of other adaptations were suggested by respondents, including:
 - reducing subject content;
 - lengthening the time students had to complete exams;
 - dividing exams into shorter papers;
 - reducing the number of exam papers students had to complete;
 - allowing students to choose topics to respond to on the day of the exam.
- Some respondents said they had faced difficulties in covering the specification during remote learning, and reducing the number of exam papers, or allowing students to choose topics, would reduce pressure on students caused by missed learning time. Respondents also mentioned

²⁹ Ofqual, [Ofqual's approach to grading exams and assessments in summer 2022 and autumn 2021](#), September 2021.

³⁰ Ofqual, [Ofqual's approach to grading exams and assessments in summer 2022 and autumn 2021](#), September 2021.

³¹ Ofqual/DfE, [Consultation on proposed changes to the assessment of GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2022: Analysis of responses](#), 30 September 2021.

that the subject content across many GCSE, AS, and A level subjects should be reduced.

- A “small proportion of respondents” called for exams to be cancelled and students to be assigned teacher assessed grades, as in summer 2021.³²

Labour

In July 2021, responding to the Government’s announcement of plans for summer 2022, the then-Shadow Secretary of State for Education, Kate Green, criticised the fact the consultation on arrangements for 2022 had not been launched earlier, and asked why greater topic choice would only be available in some GCSE subjects.³³

Sector responses

In January 2022, the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) said the disruption caused to learning by the Covid-19 variant Omicron meant the adaptations in place for summer exams should be reviewed to consider whether they were sufficient and to ensure “trust in the fairness of the examination process”.³⁴

Sam Freedman, a Senior Fellow at the Institute for Government and a former adviser at the Department for Education, wrote an article for TES in January 2022 arguing while it was right exams should go ahead, the decision to address grade inflation this year should be reconsidered.³⁵ Other education commentators expressed concerns about the potential backlash if 2022 grades were markedly less generous than in 2020 and 2021.³⁶

Following the release of advance information in February 2022 to help students revise, the General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), Geoff Barton, said:

The publication of advance information about this summer’s exams is a vital step in treating students fairly after two years of disruption caused by the pandemic. However, it is also a complicated exercise involving an array of subjects across different exam boards.

Schools and colleges will be looking closely at how well this measure works and we will be studying their feedback over the next few days.

It is of paramount importance that this adaptation ensures this summer’s

³² Ofqual/DfE, [Consultation on proposed changes to the assessment of GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2022: Analysis of responses](#), 30 September 2021.

³³ [HC Deb \[Awarding Qualifications in 2021 and 2022\] 22 July 2021, c1175-76](#).

³⁴ [“Ministers urged to review exams plan amid covid disruption”](#), Schools Week, 25 January 2022 (accessed 3 August 2022).

³⁵ [“Why it’s time to ditch attempts to tackle exam inflation”](#), TES, 12 January 2022 (accessed 3 August 2022).

³⁶ [“Students facing ‘significant dial-down’ of GCSE and A-level grades, sparking backlash fears”](#), INews, 3 December 2021 (accessed 12 August 2021).

exams are as fair as possible in circumstances which have caused hugely variable levels of disruption to young people.³⁷

In August 2022, prior to A level results day, Andrew Hargreaves, a former director at UCAS and co-founder of dataHE (a consultancy that advises universities on admissions), suggested if results were lower than expected, many disadvantaged students may miss out on their university offers.³⁸

2.2

Wales

In March 2021, Qualifications Wales, the exams regulator in Wales, [announced there would be exams in summer 2022](#), but assessment requirements would be adapted to mitigate the lost face-to-face teaching and learning time during the pandemic.³⁹

In July 2021, WJEC, the Welsh exam board, consulted with learners, parents, schools, and colleges about proposed adaptations to assessments. These adaptations were confirmed in September 2021. They included some course content not being assessed and information on what would be assessed being provided in advance.⁴⁰

In October 2021, [Qualifications Wales announced it would follow the policy of Ofqual in England for results](#) and treat 2022 as a “transition year” to reflect the disruption to learning. It said:

In 2022 we will aim, therefore, for results to reflect broadly a midway point between 2021 and 2019. In 2023 we will aim to return to results that are in line with those in pre-pandemic years.

As in summer 2021, it is a priority that grades learners achieve support them to progress to the next stage of their learning and/or employment journey. On reaching the decision to take this approach, we have considered the interests of the summer 2022 learners and those in the past and in the future. We will continue to work with other regulators across the UK to align our approach for summer 2022 so that the grading process is fair for learners.⁴¹

³⁷ ASCL, [ASCL comment on the release of exam adaptation information](#), 7 February 2022.

³⁸ “[Fears of clearing chaos as A-level results predicted to be unexpectedly low](#)”, The Guardian, 14 August (accessed 15 August 2022).

³⁹ Qualifications Wales, [Information for learners](#) (PDF), 23 March 2021.

⁴⁰ WJEC, [AS/A Level Assessment Arrangements 2022](#).

⁴¹ Qualifications Wales, [Qualifications Wales confirms the summer 2022 grading approach](#), 6 October 2021.

2.3

Scotland

Pupils in Scotland generally take Highers and Advanced Highers, rather than A Levels as elsewhere in the UK.

There were a [number of modifications to the form and content of assessments](#) in Scotland in summer 2022, which varied by subject. These included:

- increased choice within assessments;
- removing course components in some subjects;
- reducing the volume of evidence to be submitted in coursework;
- providing advanced notice of topics to be examined in some areas.

For most National 5 to Advanced Higher courses, these were the same modifications put in place for 2020-21.

The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) said it adopted a more generous approach to grading Scottish Highers and Advanced Highers in 2022 than in a normal year, “to help ensure fairness for learners while maintaining standards.”⁴² Overall results were intended to be an “intermediary position” between 2021 and 2019.⁴³

2.4

Northern Ireland

A level exams went ahead in Northern Ireland in summer 2022, but some changes were made to the form and content of qualifications offered by the exam board CCEA.

On 17 May 2021, the Northern Ireland Education Minister made a [statement on arrangements for CCEA Qualifications in 2022](#). He outlined a number of adaptations following the disruption to their learning. These included:

- fewer examinations;
- reduced subject content to be examined;
- internal assessment tasks to be reduced for practical subjects;
- A level grades to be based on A2 (the second year of study of an A level) results only.⁴⁴

⁴² SQA, [National Qualifications 2022 Awarding — Methodology report](#) (PDF), August 2022, p8.

⁴³ SQA, [National Qualifications 2022 Awarding — Methodology report](#) (PDF), August 2022, p8.

⁴⁴ NI Department of Education, [Ministerial statement - CCEA Qualifications 2022](#), 17 May 2021.

Northern Ireland's Department of Education published an [FAQs document on arrangements for CCEA qualifications](#) in 2021-22.⁴⁵

On 22 November 2021, [CCEA announced it would follow regulators in England and Wales](#) and ensure results in 2022 are higher than those of pre-pandemic years. CCEA also said it would ensure “examiner judgement” is at the centre of the awarding process, to take account of the disruption to learning young people have experienced.⁴⁶

2.5

Appeals

England

In England, students can get their school or college to challenge an A level grade if they think there has been a mistake. Students can request the exam board reviews the marking of their exam entry. Students may have to pay a fee if they ask for a review and their grade is not changed as a result.

If students still think there has been a mistake after the review, they can ask their school or college to appeal the result.

Private candidates can contact the exam board directly, or contact the school or college that submitted their exam entry.

More information is available on GOV.UK at [Appeal against a GCSE, AS or A level grade or the result of a qualification](#).

Wales

In Wales, if a school or college believes WJEC, the Welsh exam board, have made an error in assessing a student's work, they can request a review on their behalf. If, following a review of marking, a school or college believes there is still an error, they can submit an appeal.

Private candidates can apply directly to WJEC.

More information is available at the WJEC website at [Unhappy with your results?](#)

Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, schools or colleges can similarly seek a review of students' results on their behalf. If a student is not happy with the outcome of a review, they can then apply for an appeal through their school or college.

⁴⁵ CCEA, [FAQs - Arrangements for CCEA Qualifications - 2022](#), 17 May 2021.

⁴⁶ CCEA, [CCEA Regulation 2022 Grading Approach](#), 22 November 2021.

More information is available at [CCEA's 2022 Post-Results Service](#).

2.6 Issues ahead of results day

Exam paper errors

In June and July 2022, there were reports of errors in exam papers for both GCSEs and A levels, as well as reports of exam content not being consistent with the advance information provided to pupils to help them revise.

In the case of A level exams, this included a WJEC A level English paper missing four pages,⁴⁷ and an AQA A level law paper with a 30-mark question on a topic not listed in advance information.⁴⁸

On 12 July 2022, the Chair of the Education Committee, Robert Halfon, [wrote to the Secretary of State for Education, James Cleverly, to raise concerns about the reports](#) (PDF). The letter said, considering the disruption caused by the pandemic, the consequences of errors were “more profound” this year. The committee made two recommendations to Ofqual:

- Exam boards should automatically issue full marks for questions where errors occurred, and ensure this decision is communicated to schools and pupils without delay.
- Ofqual should levy financial penalties on exam boards whose papers contained errors. Fines should be proportionate to the scale of the errors, and significant enough to act as a strong deterrent.⁴⁹

In a [letter to the committee on 1 July 2022](#) (PDF), Ofqual’s Chief Regulator had said only a “handful of errors” had emerged in relation to the provision of advance information for exams.⁵⁰ In the first instance, Dr Jo Saxton said Ofqual would make sure students were not disadvantaged, but “regulatory action” was something it would consider.

Exam boards have previously paid fines for mistakes in exam papers and breaching rules over re-marking exams.⁵¹

⁴⁷ “[A-levels: WJEC apologises after English exam blunder](#)”, BBC News, 8 June 2022 (accessed 2 August 2022).

⁴⁸ “[AQA sorry for ‘stress’ over A-level law question not in advance info](#)”, Schools Week, 16 June 2022 (accessed 2 August 2022).

⁴⁹ Education Committee, [Correspondence with the Secretary of State relating to errors made by exam boards in summer 2022](#), 12 July 2022.

⁵⁰ Ofqual, [Correspondence from Ofqual relating to the 2021-22 Summer Exams Series](#), 1 July 2022.

⁵¹ “[AQA to pay out £1.1m for ‘serious breaches’ on exam re-marks](#)”, Schools Week, 15 October 2019 (accessed 2 August 2022); “[OCR will be fined £175,000 for its Romeo and Juliet mix-up](#)”, Schools Week, 2 July 2018 (accessed 2 August 2022).

Chemistry A level paper 'leak'

On 20 June 2022, students on social media claimed to have recognised questions on the AQA A level chemistry paper 2, which they had sat that morning, from 'leaked' papers that had been posted online. Schools Week [reported AQA was investigating these claims](#).

On 22 June, [AQA published a statement on its website](#). It said AQA's 'exams integrity team' was investigating the leak but there were processes to ensure no pupils would be disadvantaged:

Unfortunately, it wouldn't have been possible to replace this paper before the exam as we wouldn't have had enough time to replace it with a suitable alternative.

We realise students might be concerned, but we'd like to reassure you that we have tried and tested things we can do to make sure no-one has an unfair advantage. An example of this is – once the paper has been marked – analysing how students have performed on this paper and identifying any performance that looks suspicious.⁵²

On 17 August 2022, it was reported [the A level paper had been stolen from a Parcelforce van](#) as it was in transit to a school. In an email seen by Schools Week, AQA said it had identified and disqualified students who had "full access" to the paper before the exam.⁵³ AQA also said images circulated on social media were of too poor quality to offer a "clear advantage", and "extensive analysis" had ruled out any "gain in marks or performance that would impact the grade boundaries".⁵⁴

Industrial action

Staff at exam board AQA undertook a 72-hour strike between Friday 29 July and Sunday 31 July in a dispute over pay. At the time, Unison said the action could result in delays for or students awaiting their GCSE and A-level results.⁵⁵

On 15 July 2022, in response to the announcement of industrial action, AQA said it had "robust plans in place" to ensure there would be no disruption to schools and pupils getting their results on time.⁵⁶

Staff went on strike again from 12 to 15 August, and also took action from 17 to 21 August, which included A level results day on Thursday 18 August. Those

⁵² AQA, [Update on A-level Chemistry Paper 2](#), 22 June 2022.

⁵³ "[Leaked AQA chemistry A-level paper was stolen from Parcelforce van](#)", Schools Week, 17 August 2022.

⁵⁴ "[Leaked AQA chemistry A-level paper was stolen from Parcelforce van](#)", Schools Week, 17 August 2022.

⁵⁵ Unison, [UK's biggest exam board AQA failing on pay](#), 24 June 2022.

⁵⁶ AQA, [Delivering results on time – an update](#), 15 July 2022.

who went on strike included customer service workers, who would normally take calls from schools, parents, and pupils about the results.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Unison, [Exam board staff to strike on A-level results day, says UNISON](#), 8 August 2022.

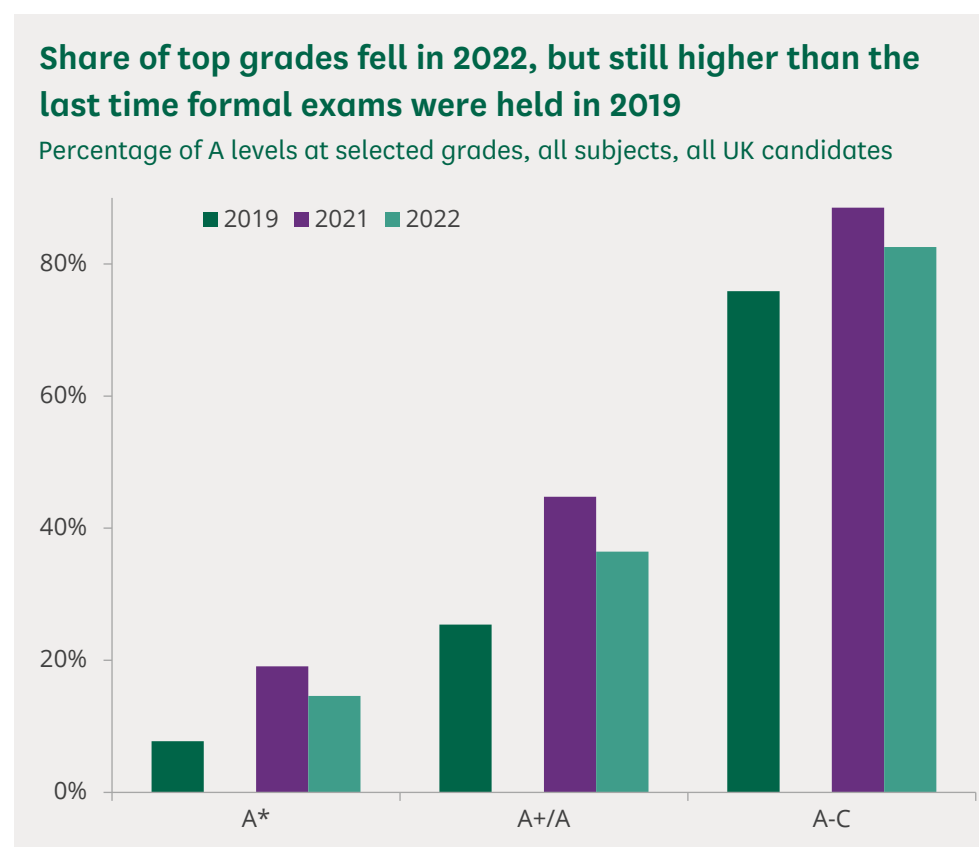
3 A level and Scottish Higher results

3.1 A levels

A Level results were announced on Thursday 18 August 2022.

Results

A level results in England, Wales and Northern Ireland were better than the last time formal exams were held in 2019, but somewhat below the 2021 results. These trends are summarised below.



Source: JCQ, [A Level Results - Summer 2022](#)

The proportion of A* grades was 14.6% in 2022 compared to 7.7% in 2019. A*/A grades improved from 25.4% to 36.4% and A*-C grades from 75.9% to 82.6% over the same period. The total number of candidates increased,

largely due to demographic changes. It was around 805,00 in 2019, 825,000 in 2021 and 849,000 in 2022.⁵⁸

Data on students in England (only) shows that the proportion awarded A*/A grades fell by the largest amount in 2022 (in percentage point terms) in Further Education Establishments (12.7 percentage points) and independent schools (12.3 points). The smallest falls were in sixth form colleges (3.4 points) and free schools (3.7 points). The largest improvement in these grades between 2019 and 2022 was in grammar schools (14.1 points) and independent schools (13.3 points).⁵⁹ Ofqual has also published data on [headline results by county](#) in England and is due to publish an equalities analysis in the autumn. The Department for Education will publish detailed data on A level results, including combinations of grades at a student level, local authority and institution level results and analysis by student characteristics from the autumn.

“[Six statistics that explain A-levels results day 2022](#)”, Times Higher Education, 18 August 2022

3.2 Scottish Highers/Advanced Highers

Pupils in Scotland generally take Highers and Advanced Highers, rather than A Levels as elsewhere in the UK. Results for Scottish Highers and Advanced Highers were announced on Tuesday 9 August 2022.

Results

The overall A-C pass rate for Highers was 78.9%, this was up from pre-pandemic levels of 74.8% in 2019 and 76.8% in 2018. There were no exams in 2020 and 2021 and results were primarily based on teacher judgements. The A-C pass rate was 89.3% in 2020 and 87.3% in 2021.

There was a similar trend in Advanced Highers where the A-C pass rate in 2022 was 81.3%, above the level in 2019 (79.4%) but lower than in 2020 (93.1%) and 2021 (90.2%).⁶⁰

Appeals

If a student’s final grade is lower than the estimate their school, college, or training provider submitted to the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) before the exam, they may be able to make an appeal directly to SQA, or through their school, college, or training provider.

⁵⁸ JCQ, [A Level Results - Summer 2022](#)

⁵⁹ Ofqual, [A level outcomes by centre type](#) (18 August 2022)

⁶⁰ SQA, [Attainment statistics 2022 -Statistical Summary](#).

Appeals can be prioritised if students have a conditional place at university or college, or in training or employment that depends on their grade.

More information is available on the SQA website at [Appeals 2022](#).⁶¹

3.3

Issues following results day

Vocational course results delayed

More than 10,000 BTEC results and 3,200 Cambridge Technical results were released to students late in the days after results day on 18 August. This meant some students faced delays in confirming their university places or missed out on places through clearing.⁶²

On 12 October 2022, at a [hearing of the Education Committee on exam results](#), the President of Workforce Skills at Pearson UK, Mike Howells, and the Chief Executive at OCR, Jill Duffy, both apologised for the delay in releasing results and said investigations were underway into why the delay had happened.⁶³

Private school grade inflation

Following significant falls in the number of A*/A grades awarded at A level in private schools this year compared to last year, when teachers awarded grades, Robert Halfon, the Conservative chair of the Education Committee, said it seemed such schools had “milked the system for all it was worth” during the pandemic.⁶⁴

At the Education Committee hearing on exam results, Robert Halfon asked Ofqual’s Chief Regulator, Dr Jo Saxton, whether this year’s exam results were evidence of private schools “gaming the teacher assessed system” in 2020 and 2021.⁶⁵

Jo Saxton said while comparing results in 2021 and 2022 was hard due to the difference in assessment, individual cases of malpractice were being investigated by exam boards:

As tempting as it is to make comparisons between 2021 results and 2022, it was a totally different form of assessment. That said, Ofqual takes all allegations of malpractice and cheating extremely seriously and we require the boards to investigate any credible evidence of malpractice and cheating. I know that there are also ongoing investigations. [...]

⁶¹ SQA, [Appeals 2022](#).

⁶² “[Clearing: 'BTEC results delay has cost my place'](#)”, BBC News, 23 August 2022 (accessed 18 October 2022).

⁶³ Education Committee, [Formal meeting \(oral evidence session\): Exam results 2022](#), 12 October 2022.

⁶⁴ “[Private schools in England accused of 'gaming the system' on lockdown exam results](#)”, The Guardian, 28 August 2022 (accessed 18 October 2022).

⁶⁵ Education Committee, [Formal meeting \(oral evidence session\): Exam results 2022](#), 12 October 2022.

we take all allegations of malpractice extremely seriously and I know that there are live investigations which I cannot talk further about. We require the boards to undertake the investigations. Ofqual does not directly do them, but we monitor the investigations that the boards are doing.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Education Committee, [Formal meeting \(oral evidence session\): Exam results 2022](#), 12 October 2022.

4 University admissions

4.1 Applications

It was anticipated 2022 would see higher application rates and increased competition for university places due to continuing demographic change, universities being more circumspect in their offer-making following two years of pandemic-related ‘over recruitment’, a higher number of deferrals in 2021, some higher achieving students from 2021 reapplying for the most competitive courses, and fewer students choosing to defer to 2023 due to changes to student finance from the 2023/24 academic year.

Demographic trends

For the second consecutive year, the number of 18-year-olds in the UK’s population has increased; a trend that is projected to continue throughout the rest of the decade, particularly in England and Wales.⁶⁷

In light of demographic trends, a [report by the Higher Education Policy Institute](#) suggested if higher education participation levels were to continue to increase at the average rate for the last 10 years, there would be demand for around **358,000** additional places by 2035.⁶⁸

Restrained offer-making by universities

The ability of universities to increase the number of available student places is constrained by staffing levels and campus infrastructure, which are both affected by the continued freeze on undergraduate home tuition fees,⁶⁹ and also general concerns about the quality of student experience. Some course numbers, including medicine and dentistry, are also constrained by the number of clinical placements available in a university’s local and surrounding area.

Writing in a blog for the Higher Education Policy Institute in June 2022, the UCAS Chief Executive, Clare Marchant, said universities and colleges had responded to the increase in applications by [exercising more restraint in their offer-making](#). This was partly in response to growth in student numbers over the last two years.

⁶⁷ HEPI, [Demand for Higher Education to 2035](#), October 2020, p11.

⁶⁸ HEPI, [Demand for Higher Education to 2035](#), October 2020.

⁶⁹ [“Tuition fee freeze in England tightens screw on universities”](#), Financial Times, 8 March 2022 (accessed 15 August 2022).

Commenting on the number of offers made to students ahead of September 2022, Clare Marchant said:

[T]he overall offer rate is 66.4 per cent, compared to 72.0 per cent in 2019, and this is also an indication of future cycles as universities and colleges adapt to having more applicants.

This reduced offer rate means fewer students that applied to higher tariff universities are holding four or more offers at high tariff universities compared to last year.⁷⁰

Among higher tariff universities, which require applicants to have more UCAS points than other institutions, the proportion of applications that resulted in an offer were down from 60.5% in 2021 to 55.1% for 2022. In the case of medicine and dentistry courses, fewer than 16% of applications to study resulted in an offer in 2022, down from 20.4% in 2021.

Reporting in the Guardian has highlighted [several students predicted to gain A* grades in their A levels](#), who, in previous years might have expected to receive offers from many of their preferred institutions, have received several rejections.⁷¹

It was suggested in an article for Times Higher Education that the [more restrained offer-making by universities seen during 2022's admissions cycle may continue in future years](#), "as financial uncertainties converge with the realities of post-pandemic recovery and changing demographics".⁷²

Competitive courses and high-achieving students

In an article for the higher education platform Wonkhe from October 2021, the Head of Data and Analysis at UCAS, Richard O'Kelly, noted [demand was strong for the most competitive undergraduate courses](#). These include courses at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, as well as medicine, dentistry, and veterinary medicine/science courses across the UK. He said:

In total, 77,810 people have applied to these courses, up from 76,940 twelve months ago. While that's a one per cent increase, it follows a massive 12 per cent increase between the 2020 and 2021 cycles, so demand remains significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels.⁷³

⁷⁰ "[Five things on my mind for Confirmation and Clearing 2022](#)", HEPI, 15 June 2022 (accessed 11 August 2022).

⁷¹ "[First post-Covid school leavers face fight for fewer university places](#)", The Guardian, 11 June 2022 (accessed 12 August 2022).

⁷² "[A-level results: cautious university offer-making 'here to stay'](#)", THE, 12 August 2022 (accessed 12 August 2022).

⁷³ "[The latest UCAS data shows demand staying strong for medicine and Oxbridge](#)", Wonkhe, 28 October 2021 (accessed 11 August 2022).

These figures included an increase in students from the 2021 cycle reapplying, when 19,500 students achieved top A level grades equivalent to three A*s (between 2012 and 2019, this figure was around 5,500 students).⁷⁴

Changes to student finance

In February 2022, the Government concluded its review of post-18 education and funding in England and announced several reforms to student loan repayment terms.

Some of these reforms affected existing borrowers, but a wider range of changes will be introduced for new students from 2023/24. These include a lower repayment threshold, increasing the loan repayment term from 30 to 40 years, and a lower interest rate.

Overall, the reforms will mean higher lifetime repayments from all borrowers, but the increase will be greater for those starting in 2023/24 (a **30%** increase compared to 24% for current borrowers). The highest increase in repayments will be for those on middle and lower earnings, while the highest earners see lower lifetime repayments.⁷⁵

Applicants in 2022 who defer their entry for a year will face the new repayment terms. The prospect of higher loan repayments could reduce the number of students choosing to defer, and so increase the number competing for a place starting in 2022.

Application statistics

Applications for 2022 up to the 26 January ‘equal consideration’ deadline were down by around 6,000, or 1%, compared to the same point in the 2021 cycle. There were particularly large falls among older applicants, with drops of 11% among those aged 21-24, 19% for 25-29-year-olds, and 15% for those aged 30 or older.

There was a 4% increase in applicants aged 18, boosted by a rise in the proportion applying and an underlying increase in the number of 18-year-olds in the population. Applicants from the EU were down by **19%** after a large fall in 2021. Brexit-related changes in fees and loan eligibility have continued to reduce their numbers. Overseas applicants from outside the EU were up by 5%.⁷⁶

The pre-clearing deadline for applications is 30 June and the total number of applicants at this date in 2022 was 683,650, up by 1,600, or 0.2%, on the same date in 2021. The earlier pattern of applicants by age continued with a 4% increase among 18-year-olds and falls of 8% among 21-24-year-olds, 16%

⁷⁴ “[End of cycle: increased grades in 2021 will create increased competition for places in 2022](#)”, Wonkhe, 9 December 2021 (accessed 12 August 2022).

⁷⁵ DfE, [Higher education policy statement & reform consultation. Equality analysis](#) (February 2022)

⁷⁶ UCAS, [2022 cycle applicant figures -26 January deadline](#)

among 25-29 year olds and 10% among those aged 30 and older. The UK application rate for 18-year-olds reached a new high of 44.1%. Applicants from the EU were down by 18%, those from other overseas countries increased by 9%.⁷⁷

UCAS drew attention to the record application rate among 18-year-olds from the most 'disadvantaged' areas.⁷⁸ This increased from **27.0%** in 2021 to **28.8%** in 2022, while the rate among those from the most advantaged areas was unchanged at 59.5%. The chief executive of UCAS said:⁷⁹

It's really encouraging to see students from disadvantaged backgrounds apply in record numbers, despite the disruption the pandemic has caused to young people's education.

UCAS' analysis shows that universities and colleges are continuing to support the progression of these students with targeted offer-making that we predict will see record numbers of disadvantaged students start university and college in the autumn.

4.2

Admissions

A level results day

On A level results day (18 August), around 375,000 applicants had a place at their first-choice university, down from 396,000 on A level results day in 2021, but higher than in 2019, 2020, and any earlier year. This was 54.4% of applicants, lower than the 57.8% in 2021 and rates in 2020 (55.2%) and 2019 (55.7%).

A further 51,300 applicants (7.3%) had been accepted at their second/other choice or through clearing and 99,300 (14.5%) were holding an offer.

Around 164,000 (23.7%) were free to be placed in clearing or had gone direct to clearing. This number was 9% higher than in 2021 and 24% higher than in 2020.

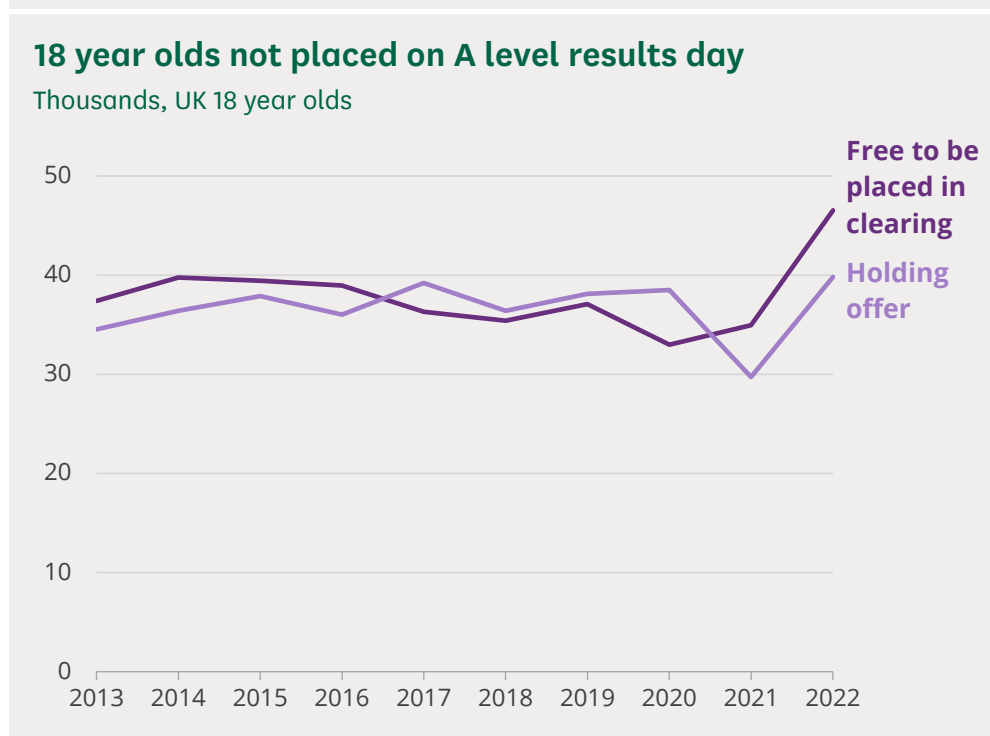
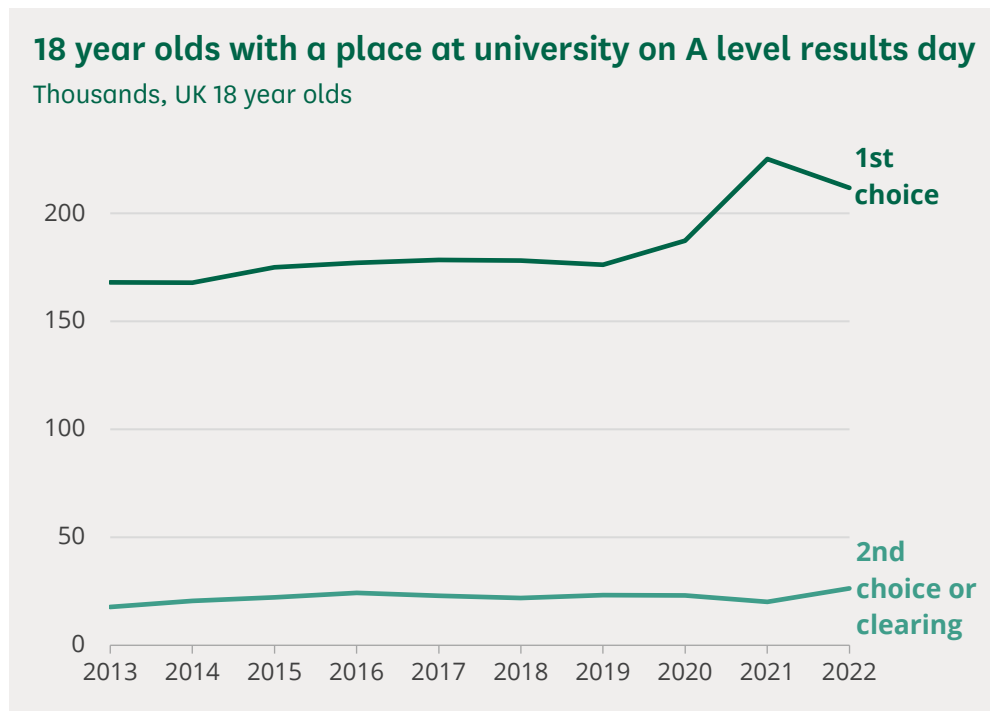
Trends for UK 18-year-olds are shown in the following charts. The proportion placed at their first choice is down from 72.7% in 2021 to 65.3% in 2022. The number of these applicants without a place or offer, and hence free to be placed in clearing, in 2022 was 33% higher than on the equivalent day in 2021 and 44% higher than in 2020. The number holding an offer also increased by 33% in 2022, but this took it back to similar levels as in 2019 and 2020.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ UCAS, [2022 cycle applicant figures -30 June deadline](#).

⁷⁸ The fifth of local areas with the lowest levels of historical participation in higher education.

⁷⁹ UCAS, [Record applications from disadvantaged students to higher education](#) (14 July 2022).

⁸⁰ Applicants with an offer at 30 June which has yet to be resolved.



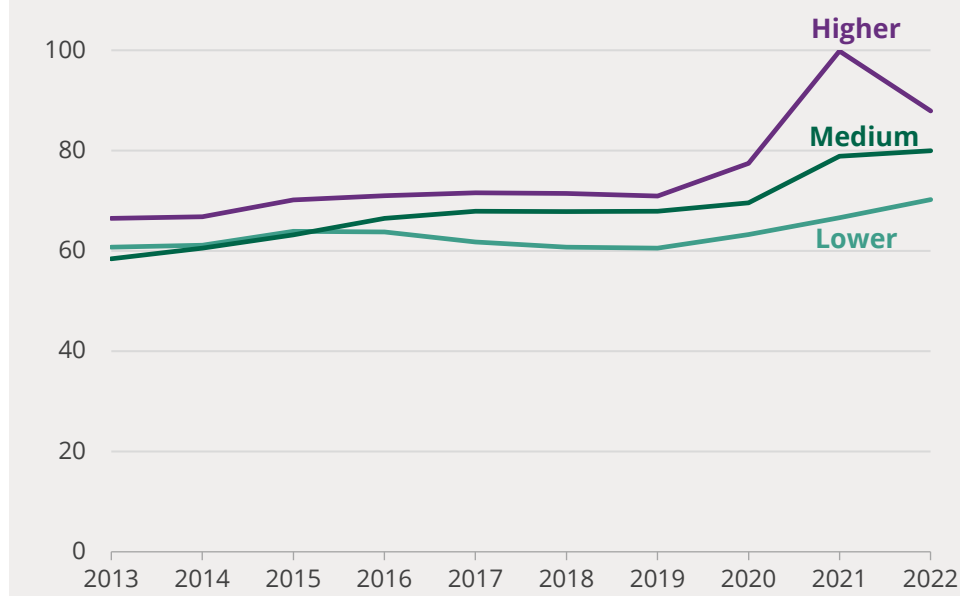
Source: UCAS, [Daily clearing analysis 2022](#) (18 August 2022)

The number of accepted applicants can also be analysed by the ‘tariff level’ of universities. There are three tariff groups; higher, medium, and lower, which refer to average grades of students admitted.

The number of accepted home 18 year old applicants on A level results day fell by 12% in the more prestigious ‘higher tariff’ universities, while it increased by 5% in lower and 1% in medium tariff institutions. The following chart shows that trends are affected by unusually high numbers of acceptances at higher tariff universities in 2021.

Drop in students placed at more prestigious universities on A level results day in 2022

Thousands of UK 18 year olds placed by tariff group of institution

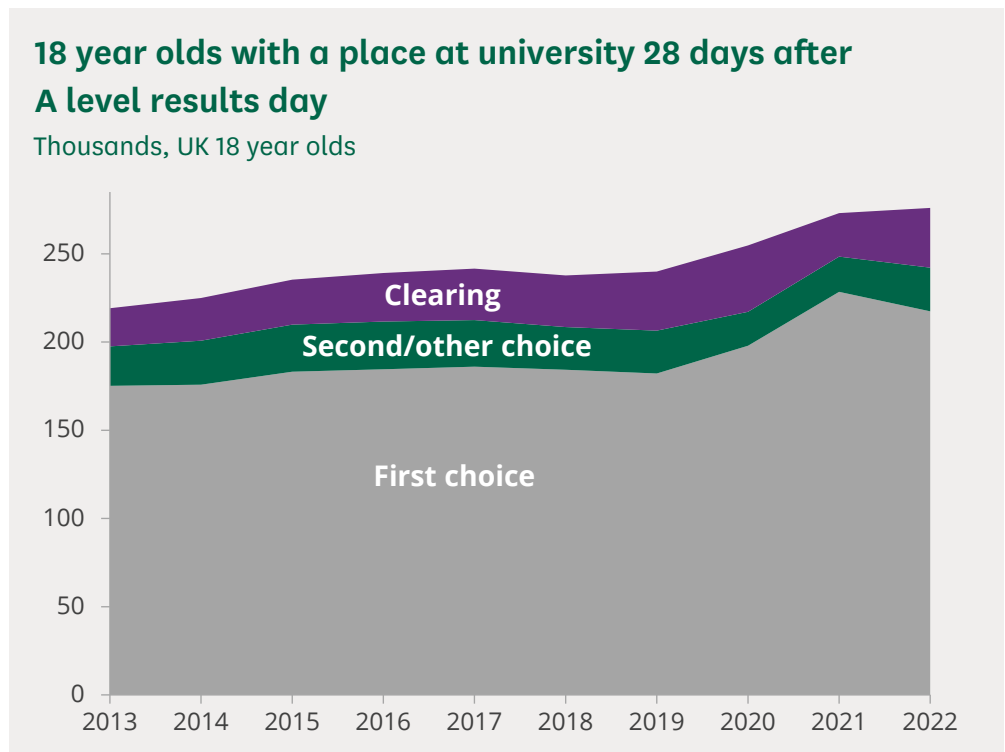


Source: UCAS, [Daily clearing analysis 2022](#) (18 August 2022)

Applicant status 28 days after A level results day

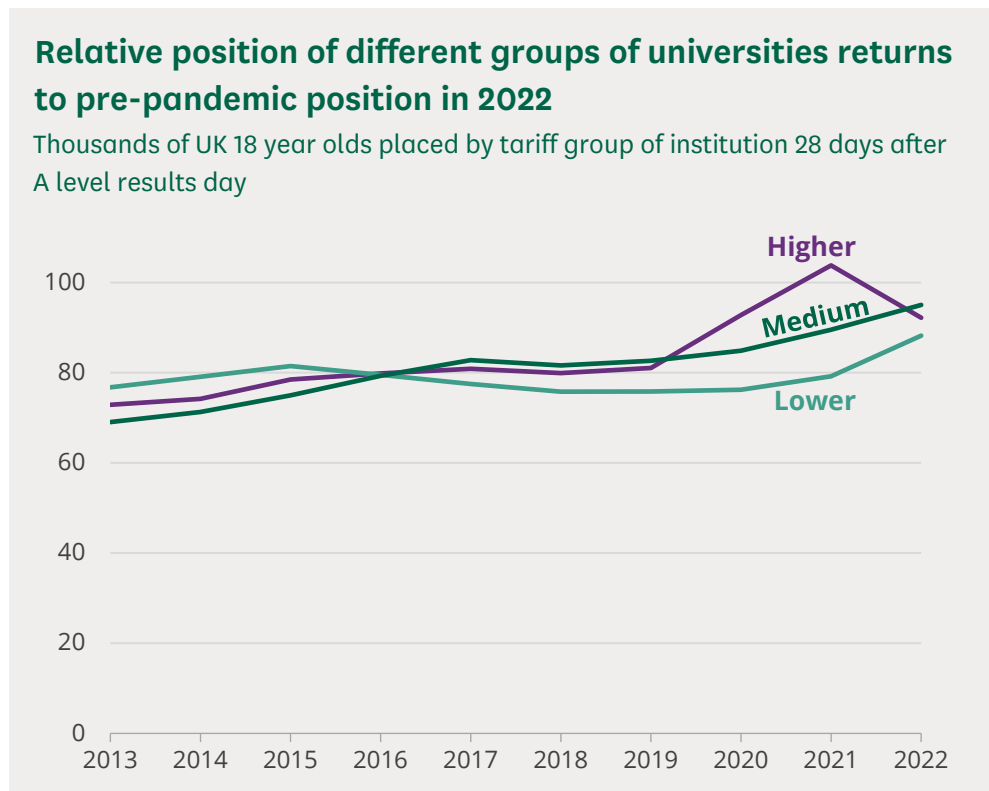
Analysis of applications 28 days after A level results day (15 September) showed the number of applicants accepted at their second/other choice or through clearing had increased to 117,800. The number placed through clearing was 70,000, a 29% increase on the same date in the 2021 cycle, but lower than numbers in 2020 and 2019.

The following chart looks at UK 18-year-olds only and shows that the total number placed in 2022 reached a new record level. The increase in students placed through clearing or at their second choice in 2022 outweighed the drop in students placed at their first-choice university. The percentage of 18-year-olds placed by this date fell from 37.9% in 2021 to 37.3% in 2022. The 2022 level was still the second highest figure.



Source: UCAS, [Daily clearing analysis 2022](#) (15 September 2022)

More students are placed through clearing at lower and middle tariff universities, so the pattern shown in the next chart is different to the A level results day chart.



Source: UCAS, [Daily clearing analysis 2022](#) (15 September 2022)

The number of 18-year-old UK students placed at more ‘prestigious’ higher tariff institutions fell by 11%, while those placed at middle and lower tariff universities increased by 6% and 11% respectively. This meant that more of these students were placed at middle tariff universities for the first time since the pandemic.

Clair Marchant, Chief Executive of UCAS, said in a [blog piece](#) on these data that the 2022 application cycle felt like a return to normal. She explained most of the applicants “[f]ree to be placed in clearing” (not placed or holding an offer) either withdrew from or did not respond to an offer made earlier in the cycle.⁸¹ A record high of 98% of UK 18-year-olds received one or more offer in 2022. The entry rate among young people from the most disadvantaged areas had increased during the pandemic and into 2022. UCAS had not seen any evidence that international students had displaced UK applicants.⁸²

UCAS will publish final numbers of accepted applicants towards the end of the year. These are likely to include a relatively small number of additional applicants who were placed after 15 September.

4.3 Starting university in Autumn 2022

Accommodation shortages

After a similar issue last year,⁸³ demand for student accommodation in many UK cities has again been significantly greater than supply in 2022. This has caused problems for students in their first year of university, who might typically live in university halls, but also for students in later years who are more likely to seek accommodation through the private rental market.

First-year students in Manchester are currently living in accommodation in Liverpool and Huddersfield, with students at Manchester Metropolitan University being offered money to accept accommodation in neighbouring cities.⁸⁴ Similarly, students at the University of the West of England (UWE), and other universities in Bristol, have been housed in Newport, Cheltenham, and Bath because their institutions do not have the means to accommodate them.⁸⁵ There is evidence to suggest commuter students have poorer

⁸¹ Their number increased to a record 44,500 UK 18-year-olds 28 days after A level results day in 2022

⁸² [“Five things we have learned from the 2022 application cycle”](#), Wonkhe, 22 September 2022 (accessed 18 October 2022).

⁸³ See the Commons Library briefing, [Attending university in 2021: A Level results and autumn provision](#), September 2021, pp17-18.

⁸⁴ [“‘Devastated’ UK students forced to live in neighbouring cities in university accommodation crisis”](#), The Guardian, 10 September 2022 (accessed 6 October 2022).

⁸⁵ [“Students who earned places at university in Bristol find themselves living in Newport”](#), Wales Online, 6 October 2022 (accessed 7 October 2022).

outcomes and are less engaged and satisfied with their academic experience than their peers.⁸⁶

The increased demand and reduced supply for student housing in many university cities have been attributed to:

- elevated student numbers following several years of higher grades and more students meeting their offers;⁸⁷
- a higher-than-normal number of deferred students from 2021, who, in some cases, were offered free university accommodation to defer their place to 2022;⁸⁸
- landlords leaving the student rental market and converting their properties into more lucrative Airbnbs and holiday lets;⁸⁹
- students being priced out of accommodation due to their incomes not keeping pace with increasing private rental prices.⁹⁰

Living cost pressures

In September 2022, the National Union of Students published a report on student living costs that argued: “Students and learners are facing a devastating set of economic circumstances that are impacting their health, their wellbeing and their ability to study.”⁹¹

The Russell Group of universities has called on the Government to uplift maintenance loans in line with current inflation and to consider the reintroduction of maintenance grants.⁹² Universities UK has similarly called on the Government to bring back maintenance grants to avoid “significant health and wellbeing challenges as well as educational impacts” for students.⁹³

⁸⁶ HEPI, [Homeward Bound: Defining, understanding and aiding ‘commuter students’](#), 13 December 2018.

⁸⁷ [“‘I felt like an outcast’: Inside the student accommodation crisis”](#), Dazed, 27 September 2022 (accessed 6 October 2022).

⁸⁸ [“University of Leeds students offered £10k and free housing to defer”](#), BBC News, 11 August 2021 (accessed 6 October 2022).

⁸⁹ [“‘Devastated’ UK students forced to live in neighbouring cities in university accommodation crisis”](#), The Guardian, 10 September 2022 (accessed 6 October 2022).

⁹⁰ [“Durham’s private housing market reaching ‘breaking point’”](#), Palatinat, 4 October 2022 (accessed on 7 October 2022).

⁹¹ NUS, [Student Cost of Living Report](#), September 2022, p8.

⁹² Russell Group, [Russell Group urges Government not to forget students in cost-of-living support](#), 20 September 2022.

⁹³ [“Universities call for return of maintenance grants for students in England”](#), The Guardian, 8 September 2022 (accessed 6 October 2022).

Information for students on financial support to help with their living costs is available in the Commons Library casework article [Cost of living support for students](#).

Maintenance loans

The Government increased the maximum maintenance loan amount for undergraduate students in England by 2.3% for the academic year 2022/23. This was substantially lower than CPI inflation of at least 8.1%.⁹⁴

The annual uprating for maintenance support is based on forecast inflation. This means that, unlike benefit uprating, these cuts will not automatically be caught up for in future increases. Higher inflation than originally forecast in 2022/23 means there will be a real cut of 7% in maximum support levels. The real terms cut in the two years to 2022/23 is even larger at just over 11%, or around £1,100 for those from the poorest households, if inflation at the midpoint of the academic year is used for these calculations.

The real cuts in 2021/22 and 2022/23 mean that students are less likely to cover their living costs without additional finance to supplement their maintenance support. The Institute for Fiscal Studies recently examined this issue and proposed possible remedies.⁹⁵ More information can also be found in the Commons Library briefing [The value of student maintenance support](#).⁹⁶

⁹⁴ OBR, [Economic and fiscal outlook – March 2022](#), 23 March 2022, Supplementary economy table 1.7. Annual CPI inflation to Q1 2023.

⁹⁵ Institute for Fiscal Studies, [Student living cost support cut to lowest level in seven years](#), 15 June 2022.

⁹⁶ Commons Library briefing, [The value of student maintenance support](#); National Union of Students, [Student Cost of Living Report](#), September 2022.

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