

## Geography A level and AS results 2017

### Context

This is the first year of major changes in A level examinations but the changes at A level will not apply to Geography until 2018. It was however the first year of decoupled AS examinations for Geography where the examination will not count towards the final A level award. The change to linear examinations only applies to England. The arrangements for Northern Ireland and Wales are different. It is therefore important to recognise that year on year comparisons are more problematic.

The Joint Council for Qualifications (2017a) in their press statement reported:

*These results were awarded at a time of significant reform to A level and AS qualifications. In England and in Wales, this was the first year of award for the reformed A levels (13 subjects<sup>1</sup> in England and 14 in Wales). These subjects contain new content, to meet the requirements of Higher Education, and less non-exam assessment. In England, learners' achievements in the AS qualification no longer contribute to the linear A level qualification.*

☐

*This year also saw the first award for phase 2 of reformed AS subjects in England and Wales, and the first award for reformed AS qualifications in Northern Ireland. In Wales and Northern Ireland, the contribution of the AS to the A level has been reduced from 50% to 40% for the reformed qualifications.*

*These reforms across the UK are being phased over several years, with the third wave of reformed AS and A levels being taught from September 2017 in England and Wales. It is important to note that standards in A level and AS qualifications remain unchanged.*

The Joint Council for Qualifications analysis of entry data shows:

- Overall, A level results and entries remain steady during a period of significant reform ☐
- Proportion of A\* grades up 0.2 percentage points year on year to 8.3%; A\*-A up 0.5 ☐percentage points to 26.3%; and A\*-E down 0.2 percentage points to 97.9% ☐
- Decline in AS entries gathers pace, down 39.1%, making UK year on year comparisons of ☐AS outcomes unreliable ☐
- Interesting gender patterns emerging in reformed specifications, but too early to draw ☐firm conclusions ☐

<sup>1</sup> The reformed A Level subjects are: Art & Design, Biology, Business, Chemistry, Computer Science, Economics, English Language, English Literature, English Literature and Language, History, Physics, Psychology, Sociology, Welsh First Language☐

## **A level**

*There were 8,350 fewer A levels awarded in 2017 compared to 2016, a drop of 1.0% to 828,355. This decrease is less than the 1.7% fall in the number of 18 year olds in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.*

*Facilitating Subjects continued to represent over half of entries at A level, making up 51.7% of all entries compared to 51.1% in 2016 and 51.2% in 2015.*

*The proportion of A\* grades awarded across all subjects was up 0.2 percentage points year on year to 8.3%. At A\*-A there was an increase of 0.5 percentage points to 26.3%, and at A\*-E the proportion of awards was down 0.2 percentage points to 97.9%.*

*The 13 reformed subjects in England, which were assessed for the first time this year, showed a different pattern and outcomes are down slightly when compared to equivalent subjects in 2016. When comparing 18 year olds, which gives the most accurate year on year comparison, the proportion of A\* grades declined 0.5 percentage points to 7.2%; A\*-A went down 0.7 percentage points to 24.3%; and A\*-E went down 0.5 percentage points to 98.1%.*

*The year on year changes in the reformed subjects may be influenced by several factors including lower prior attainment for students taking these subjects in 2017, and it is not possible to draw accurate conclusions at this stage.*

*Although this data on reformed subjects helps explain performance in the new A levels in England, caution is needed when comparing with all subjects and with non-reformed subjects, since the subjects reformed in the first phase are not necessarily typical of all subjects in terms of their entries and past years' results. For example, amongst the unreformed subjects, mathematics has historically had higher outcomes, for legitimate reasons such as prior ability of the students.*

*This year's results have shown some interesting patterns emerging in the performance of males and females, especially in the reformed subjects in England. At the top grade (A\*), 18 year old females perform better than males (7.3% compared to 7.0%) and at A\*-A males and females perform the same (24.3%).*

*However, there is a suggestion that males are closing the gap. At A\*, whereas female outcomes at A\* went down 0.6 percentage points in the reformed subjects, males went down only 0.3 percentage points. There is a similar picture at grades A\*-A, with females dropping 1.1 percentage points but males only 0.2 percentage points.*

*It is too early to draw conclusions, especially as this is the first year of the reformed specifications, and we are also seeing a similar pattern in Wales, which has had different reforms. It will be interesting, as we continue to progress through the reform timetable, to see if this pattern becomes a trend and the gender performance gap is closed at A level.*

**JCQ 2017a Summer GCE Results Important Information**

**JCQ, 2017b GCE Press notice UK 2017**

## **A level Geography Entries**

Compared with 2016 entries for geography A level increased by 1451 (up 4.0%) to 37814. The total number of A levels taken (all subjects) fell 1.0% from 836,705 to 828,355 while the cohort size of 18 year olds fell by 1.7%. The change in Geography entries was therefore slightly different from overall entry patterns possibly because the examination had not changed. A clearer idea of trends will be seen with the 2018 entry.

Geography stayed at 8<sup>th</sup> place in terms of entries (figure 1). The increase in entries from females (960) was greater than for males (491). The traditional gender imbalance in favour of males that existed up until 2013 has now disappeared. The gender balance is now 50.6: 49.4 (F:M) with 488 more entries from females (figures 4a and 4b).

*The imbalance of entries for all subjects is greater with more female entries. The ratio there is 54.8:45.2 (F:M).*

Geography performance for the top grades (A\*/A) increased by 0.5% from 26.2% to 26.7% (figure 2). The rise in A\*/A grades for all subjects was up 0.5% to 26.3% so performance in geography is still about the national average. A\* grades in geography fell by 0.1% to 5.9% which is still considerably lower than the national rate of 8.3% for all subjects.

The gender gap in performance at A\*/A grade increased slightly to 9.9% (9.6% in 2016) with 31.6% of females achieving A\*/A grades compared to 21.7% of males (figures 4a and 4b). For all subjects nationally this gap is almost non-existent.

For geography the overall pass rate (A\*-E) fell to 98.8% with a gender difference of 0.3% in favour of females (99.1%). The national pass rate (A\*-E) for all subjects fell by 0.2% to 97.9%.

A level entries for Geography were 68.9% of the 2016 AS entries. This is a rise of 2.7% compared to 2016 (65.2%) and reversed the downward trend from the high of 86.2% in 2008. This is the last year this comparison will be made because AS and A level will be decoupled in 2018.

## **AS level**

Entries for geography AS fell by 27249 (-49.7%) (figure 5) to 27617 while nationally AS entries declined by 39.1%. This was largely the result of the expected decline in entries for the reformed and decoupled AS levels in England.

In the first year of the reformed Geography AS the subject stayed in 7<sup>th</sup> place in terms of subject entries (figure 6).

There was a slightly larger decrease in male entries down by 13921 while female entries were down by 13328 (figures 7a, b and c). This slightly altered the gender balance in favour of females to 50.4:49.6 (F:M). The national balance of entries is 51.3:48.7 (F:M).

Performance in geography at the top grade (A) rose 0.1% to 22.5% while the overall pass rate (A-E) was 92.7% up 1.3% from 2016 (figure 5?). The gender gap in performance in the top grades decreased to 6.3% (7.7% in 2016) with 19.3% (up 0.7%) of males achieving an A grade compared to 25.6% of females (down 0.7%) (figures 7a,b and c).

## A level geography entries

### Key points 2017

- Geography is the 8<sup>th</sup> most popular A level subject with 37814 entries in 2017 (figure 1).
- Total geography entries increased by 1451 (figure 2).
- The A\*-A geography pass rate rose to 26.7% in 2017
- The A\*-E geography pass fell by 0.1% to 98.9%

**Figure 1 Top GCE A level subjects in 2017 by entry**

Ranking	Subject	% of total	Number of candidates
1 (1)	Mathematics	11.5	95244 (92163)
2 (2)	Biology	7.5	61908 (62650)
3 (3)	Psychology	7.1	58663 (59469)
4 (5)	Chemistry	6.3	52331 (51811)
5 (4)	History	6.1	50311 (54731)
6 (6)	English Literature *	5.6	46411 (48697)
7 (7)	Art and Design Subjects	5.3	43653 (43242)
8 (8)	Geography	4.6	37814 (36363)
9 (9)	Physics	4.4	36578 (35344)
10 (10)	Sociology	4.2	34607 (33980)

(2016 ranking in brackets.)  
brackets)

(2016 numbers in

\* In 2016 English Literature was reported with English language and was 2<sup>nd</sup> in the table

Sources: JCQ (2017c) GCE A level trends – Summer 2017; JCQ (2017a) GCE Results Summer 2017

## Geography A level trends 2007-17 (Figure 2)

In 2017

- there was a rise of 1451 entries (+4.0%) which compares favourably with the fall in total entries (-1.0%) and the fall in the 18 year old cohort (-1.7%).
- the share of geography entries as a proportion of national entries rose by 0.3% to 4.6%.
- The A\*-A pass rate rose by 0.5% to 26.7%.
- The overall pass rate (A\*-E) fell by 0.2% to 98.9%.

The overall number of A level geography entries was relatively stable between 2007 and 2014 with annual fluctuations less than  $\pm 900$  entries. In 2015 there was a large increase in entries in England, although the cohort size fell. AS numbers had risen in 2014-15 following the increase in GCSE entries in England in 2012-14 associated with the introduction of the EBacc accountability measure for English schools. This appeared to encourage some English schools to alter their option choice systems to the advantage of geography. There has also been a move towards facilitating subjects<sup>2</sup> in England in recent years.

**Figure 2: Trends in A level geography entry between 2007 and 2017**

Year	Entries	% of total entry	A*	A	B	C	D	E	A*-E	A*/A	Change from previous year
2007	31653	3.9		27.3	27.5	23.7	14.4	5.8	98.7	27.3	-869
2008	31714	3.8		28.6	27.7	23.7	13.7	5.1	98.8	28.6	61
2009	32227	3.8		27.3	27.5	23.7	14.4	5.8	98.7	27.3	513
2010	32063	3.8	6.8	23.4	27.6	23.1	13.4	4.5	98.8	30.2	-164
2011	31226	3.6	7.1	23.0	27.9	23.6	13.3	4.1	99.0	30.1	-837
2012	32005	3.7	6.3	22.8	29	24.6	12.6	3.9	99.2	29.1	779
2013	32872	3.9	5.6	22.9	29.4	24.5	12.7	4.1	99.2	28.5	867
2014	33007	4.0	6.3	21.2	29.3	24.9	13.1	4.4	99.2	27.5	135
2015	37195	4.4	7.1	20.4	29.5	24.6	13.6	4.0	99.2	27.5	4188
2016	36363	4.3	6.0	20.2	29.7	25.6	13.4	4.1	99.1	26.2	-832
2017	37814	4.6	5.9	20.8	29.7	25.3	13.0	4.1	98.9	26.7	1451

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- <sup>2</sup> Some A level subjects are more frequently required for entry to degree courses than others. These subjects are commonly known as 'Facilitating Subjects' which are: Biology; Chemistry; English Literature; Geography; History; Maths and Further Maths; Modern and classical languages; Physics.

□

### A level entries by Country (figure 3)

In 2017:

- England had an increase (+1516) in entries while Wales (-195) and Northern Ireland (-162) had decreases.
- As a proportion of the total entry A level Northern Ireland had 5.5%, Wales 4.6% and England 4.5% .
- Entries in Northern Ireland and Wales have fallen to their lowest number since 2008 while entries in England are at their highest.

**Figure 3: Geography A level entries by country 2008-2017**

Year	England	Northern Ireland	Wales	UK (not Scotland)	Change England	Change NI	Change Wales	Change UK
2008	28029	1915	1770	31714	274 0.9%	-200 -9.3%	-13 -0.7%	61 0.2%
2009	28360	2001	1866	32227	331 1.1%	86 4.0%	96 5.0%	513 1.5%
2010	28525	1806	1732	32063	165 0.5%	-195 -9.1%	-134 -7.0%	-164 -0.5%
2011	27604	1878	1744	31226	-921 -3.0%	72 3.3%	12 0.6%	-837 -2.4%
2012	28430	1868	1707	32005	826 2.7%	-10 -0.5%	-37 -1.9%	779 2.3%
2013	29126	2001	1745	32872	696 2.3%	133 6.2%	38 2.0%	867 2.5%
2014	29476	1896	1635	33007	350 1.2%	-105 -4.9%	-110 -5.7%	135 0.4%
2015	33414 4.3%	1974 6.1%	1807 5.0%	37195 4.4%	3938 13.0%	78 3.6%	172 9.0%	4188 12.2%
2016	32765 4.3%	1864 5.9%	1734 4.9%	36363 4.3%	-649 -2.1%	-110 -5.1%	-73 -3.8%	-832 -2.4%
2017	34281 4.5%	1702 5.6%	1539 4.6%	37814 4.6%	1516 5.0%	-162 -7.5%	-195 -10.2%	1451 3.8%

### Entries by Gender: A level (figures 4a and 4b)

- Female entries have increased rapidly since 2010. This has altered the traditional male imbalance in entries. In 2017 there were 488 more female entries giving a ratio of 50.6:49.4 (F:M). Total entries for A level are skewed towards females (54.8:45.2)
- Females continue to perform better in geography at the higher grades. A\*: 7.6%; A\*-A: 31.6%
- Male performance at higher grades A\*: 4.2%; A\*-A: 21.7%

**Figure 4a Male entries for geography 2007-2016**

Year	Entries	% TOTAL ENTRY	A*	A	B	C	D	E	A-E	A*-A	% male
2007	17343	4.2	na	22.8	26.6	25.2	16.8	7	98.4	22.8	54.8
2008	17195	4.5	na	24.6	26.9	25.3	15.5	6.2	98.5	24.6	54.2
2009	17531	4.5	na	25.2	27.8	24.6	15.2	6.1	98.9	25.2	54.4
2010	17333	4.4	5.1	20.7	27.2	24.9	15.3	5.4	98.6	25.8	54.1
2011	16739	4.2	5.5	19.8	27.9	25.3	15.3	5	98.8	25.3	53.6
2012	16784	4.2	4.7	19.4	28.1	27.2	14.9	4.6	98.9	24.1	52.4
2013	16776	4.3	4.3	19.2	28.5	26.9	14.9	5.2	99	23.5	51.0
2014	16489	4.3	4.8	17.5	28.3	27.4	15.5	5.4	98.9	22.3	50.0
2015	18348	4.8	5	17.1	28.7	27.1	16	5	98.9	22.1	49.3
2016	18172	4.8	4.3	17.1	29.3	27.6	15.5	4.9	98.7	21.4	50.0
2017	18663	5.0	4.2	17.5	29.2	27.6	15.2	5.1	98.8	21.7	49.4

**Figure 4b Female entries for geography 2007-2016**

Year	Entries	% TOTAL ENTRY	A*	A	B	C	D	E	A-E	A*-A	% female
2007	14310	3.3	na	32.7	28.8	21.9	11.5	4.2	99.1	32.7	45.2
2008	14519	3.2	na	33.3	28.7	21.7	11.7	3.8	99.2	33.3	45.8
2009	14696	3.2	na	35.9	28.3	20.7	10.9	3.5	99.3	35.9	45.6
2010	14730	3.2	8.8	26.6	28.1	21	11.1	3.6	99.2	35.4	45.9
2011	14487	3.1	9	26.5	28.1	21.7	10.9	3.2	99.4	35.5	46.4
2012	15221	3.3	8.1	26.6	30	21.6	10.2	3	99.5	34.7	47.6
2013	16096	3.5	7.0	26.6	30.5	21.9	10.5	3.0	99.5	33.6	49.0
2014	16518	3.6	7.8	25.0	30.1	22.6	10.6	3.3	99.4	32.8	50.0
2015	18847	4.0	9.2	23.6	30.2	22.3	11.1	3.1	99.5	32.8	50.7
2016	18191	3.9	7.7	23.3	30.1	23.6	11.2	3.3	99.2	31.0	50.0
2017	19151	4.2	7.6	24.0	30.2	23.2	10.9	3.2	99.1	31.6	50.6

## AS geography entries 2017

Figure 5: Top AS subjects in 2017

Ranking	Subject	% of total entries	Number of candidates
1 (1)	Mathematics	22.0	160540
2 (3)	Biology	5.3	38744
3 (4)	Psychology	5.0	36755
4	Media / Film / TV Studies	5.0	36344
5 (5)	Chemistry	4.5	32909
6	Mathematics (Further)	3.8	27980
7 (7)	Geography	3.8	27617
8 (6)	History	3.8	27587
9 (7)	Physics	3.5	25331
10 (9)	Sociology	3.3	24022

(2016 ranking in brackets.)

Geography stayed in 7<sup>th</sup> place although it is now a reformed and de-coupled subject in England. The numbers entering fell from 54866 to 27617 a fall of 49.7%

*The decline in the number of candidates taking AS qualifications gathered pace this year, with a 39.1% drop in entries. This follows a 13.7% drop in 2016. These UK figures are mainly being driven by changes in England. Schools, colleges and students are making these choices across all subject areas, especially those that have already been reformed and are decoupled from the A level in England.*

*The decoupling of the AS and A level qualifications is of course a significant driver in this change in England, however, there may be other explanations such as a switch to the Extended Project Qualification, which saw a 12.4% increase year on year (35,608 to 40,013). However, the AS continues to be valued by many and in 2017 more than 700,000 entries were made. Interestingly, Further Mathematics has an opposite trend and grew 4.6% year on year to 27,980 entries. Mathematics continued to have a high entry with 160,450 entries.*

*The decline in AS entries makes year on year UK outcome comparisons unreliable and they should be made with caution.*

(JCQ, 2017b)



### AS Geography 2017: Key points:

- There were 27249 less entries for geography AS level overall (-49.7%)
- The percentage obtaining A grades increased by 0.1% to 22.5%.
- The share of total entries decreased by 0.8% to 3.8 % of total AS levels sat which is nearer the traditional level of entry at AS
- Overall number of AS entries decreased by 39.1% reflecting the continued change to reformed and decoupled AS examinations for many subjects in England. Geography was in the second group of subjects reformed in 2017.
- In Northern Ireland and Wales AS grades still contribute to A level grades although the proportion has been reduced to 40% from 50%

**Figure 6: Trends in AS level geography entries between 2006 and 2016**

Year	Geography entries	Change	% of all entries	A	B	C	D	E	A-E
2006	37031	-1115	3.4	22.6	19.8	20.0	16.9	11.5	90.8
2007	36777	-254	3.3	23.0	20.0	20.3	16.3	11.2	90.8
2008	37413	636	3.3	23.3	19.8	20.3	16.1	11.3	90.8
2009	38253	840	3.2	24.5	19.0	19.3	16.0	11.6	90.4
2010	36819	-1434	3.1	24.4	19.3	19.9	16.1	11.1	90.8
2011	45302	8483	3.7	23.7	19.5	20.0	16.1	10.6	89.4
2012	45923	621	3.8	23.9	19.7	20.1	15.6	10.6	89.4
2013	47586	1663	3.5	23.6	20.1	20.1	16.0	10.1	89.9
2014	55677	8091	3.9	23.3	20.1	20.6	16.0	10.5	90.5
2015	55801	124	4.0	21.7	20.1	21.5	16.9	10.5	90.7
2016	54866	-935	4.6	22.4	20.7	21.3	16.5	10.5	91.4
2017	27617	-27249	3.8	22.5	21.9	22.1	16.8	9.4	92.7

## Gender: AS-level 2017

- Male entries in 2017 decreased by 13689 while female entries decreased by 13928
- The gender ratios of entries have shifted to being more female for the first time; 50.4:49.6 (F:M) compared with 46:54 in 2010.
- Performance at all grades A-D improved slightly.
- Females still outperform males at grade A but the gap narrowed to 6.3% from 7.7% in 2016.

**Figure 7a: Geography AS entries by gender 2010-2016**

Geography entries	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	Change 2016-2017
AS Males	13689	27610	28111	28222	24467	24080	24332	-13921
AS Females	13928	27256	27690	27455	23119	21843	20970	-13328
AS Total	27617	54866	55801	55677	47586	45923	45302	-27241

**Figure 7b: Geography AS Performance - Male entries for geography 2012-2016**

Year	Entries	Change	% OF TOTAL ENTRY	A	B	C	D	E	A-E	% male
2012	24080	-252	3.8	19.2	18.5	21.1	17.2	12.2	88.2	52.4
2013	24467	387	3.9	19.0	19.2	21.2	17.8	11.3	88.5	51.4
2014	28222	3755	4.3	19.1	19.4	21.3	17.6	11.9	10.7	50.7
2015	28111	-111	4.4	18.6	19.6	22	18	11.5	10.3	50.4
2016	27610	-501	5.0	18.6	19.9	22.0	18.0	11.7	90.2	50.3
2017	13689	-13921	3.9	19.3	21.3	22.4	18.1	10.7	91.8	49.6

**Figure 7c: Performance: Female entries for geography 2012-2015**

Year	Entries	Change	% OF TOTAL ENTRY	A	B	C	D	E	A-E	% female
2012	21843	873	3	29.0	21.1	19.1	13.7	8.9	91.8	47.6
2013	23119	1276	3.2	28.4	21.1	19.0	14.0	8.8	91.3	48.6
2014	27455	4336	3.6	27.6	20.9	19.8	14.4	9.1	91.8	49.3
2015	27690	235	3.7	24.7	20.8	21	15.7	9.5	8.3	49.6
2016	27256	-434	4.3	26.3	21.5	20.6	14.9	9.3	92.6	49.7
2017	13928	-13328	3.7	25.6	22.5	21.7	15.4	8.6	93.8	50.4

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Paul Weeden

August 2017