

Analysis of entries and attainment in GCSE and A-Level
geography – methodology

Methodology document for the Royal Geographical Society

1. Methodology

Overview

This work has been completed by analysing the Department for Education's National Pupil Database.

Coverage includes all those completing GCSEs (or regulated international GCSEs) and A-Levels in state-funded or independent establishments in England for the period 2009/10 to 2017/18¹. State-funded establishments includes special schools and alternative provision.

Percentages have been calculated based on the following denominators:

- **GCSE entries:** the total number of pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 in the year under consideration
- **GCSE grades:** GCSE geography entrants
- **A-Level entries:** the total number of students who entered one or more A-Levels in the year under consideration
- **A-Level entries:** A-Level geography entrants

Qualification reform

GCSE

All GCSEs in England have been reformed in recent years, which has involved a move from A*-G grades to 9-1 grades. Grades are not directly comparable, except at a number of key grade thresholds:

- achieving a grade 7 or above is equivalent to achieving a grade A or above
- achieving a grade 4 or above is equivalent to achieving a grade A or above
- achieving a grade 1 or above is equivalent to achieving a grade G or above

A table displaying how all grades relate to one another [can be found here](#).

The reformed, 9-1 geography GCSE was first entered by pupils in 2018.

International GCSEs regulated by Ofqual have also been included. These were eligible for inclusion in school performance tables up until 2017; after this point state schools had a strong incentive not to take these qualifications. In addition, there are unregulated international GCSEs which have never been eligible for inclusion in school performance tables. These have been, and continue to be, predominantly taken in the independent sector.

A-Level

All A-Levels in England have been reformed in recent years, though this has involved no change to the grade structure.

The reformed geography A-Level was first entered by pupils in 2018.

¹ Throughout this report, years refer to year in which the academic year finished – that is, 2010 refers to 2009/10, for example.

Average point scores

GCSE

The points awarded for each GCSE grade differed over the period under consideration. To allow comparison, all average point scores have been put in terms of points awarded from 2017 onwards, ranging from 8.5 for an A* grade through to 1 for a G grade.

Grade	Points
A*	8.5
A	7
B	5.5
C	4
D	3
E	2
F	1.5
G	1
U	0

A-Level

The points awarded for each A-Level grade also differed over the period under consideration. To allow comparison, all average point scores have been put in terms of points awarded from 2016 onwards, ranging from 60 for an A* grade through to 10 for an E grade.

Grade	Points
A*	60
A	50
B	40
C	30
D	20
E	10
U	0

2. Data definitions

2.1 Pupil characteristics

Gender

As recorded in Department for Education datasets.

Source: National Pupil Database

Disadvantage

GCSE

Whether a pupil has been eligible for free school meals at any point in the previous six years.

Free school meals data is only collected for pupils in the state sector – so disadvantage information is not available for a group of pupils who were in the independent sector for the entirety of Year 6 to Year 11.

Source: National Pupil Database

A-Level

Free school meals do not exist post-16. Disadvantage status is therefore calculated based on students' final six years in education up to age 16.

Free school meals data is only collected for pupils in the state sector – so disadvantage information is not available for a group of pupils who were in the independent sector for the entirety of Year 6 to Year 11.

Source: National Pupil Database

Ethnicity

Major ethnicity grouping. Ethnicity data is not available for all post-16 establishment types, therefore information on ethnicity has been pulled from students' final six years in education up to age 16.

Ethnicity data is only collected for pupils in the state sector – so is not available for a group of pupils who were in the independent sector for the entirety of Year 6 to Year 11.

Source: National Pupil Database

Prior attainment

GCSE

Pupils' attainment at Key Stage 2. For the period 2010-2016 this is based on English and maths test results; for the period 2017-2018 this is based on reading and maths test results (adjusted so that proportions in each of the prior attainment bands are similar to those pre-2017).

Prior attainment data is only available for pupils who completed Key Stage 2 tests. It is not available for the majority of those who were in the independent sector in Year 6, where KS2 tests are not commonly taken, as well as pupils newly arrived in England since Year 6.

Source: National Pupil Database

A-Level

Students' attainment at Key Stage 4, calculated based on average point score of English and maths GCSEs (or the score for a single subject if only one was taken).

Prior attainment data is only available for pupils who completed Key Stage 4 tests. It is available for the majority of those who were in the independent sector in Year 11, but not for pupils newly arrived in England since Year 11.

Source: National Pupil Database

2.2 Establishment characteristics

Region

Government office region of the establishment.

Source: Department for Education *Get Information About Schools* service

Area type

Office for National Statistics classification of the area in which the establishment is located.

Source: Department for Education *Get Information About Schools* service

Coastal

Whether the establishment is within 5.5km of the coast.

Source: Department for Education *Get Information About Schools* service

Opportunity area

Whether the establishment is located within one of the Department for Education's opportunity areas, based on local authority districts:

- West Somerset (E07000191)
- Norwich (E07000148)
- Fenland and East Cambridgeshire (E07000010, E07000009)
- Blackpool (E06000009)
- Scarborough (E07000168)
- Derby (E06000015)
- Doncaster (E08000017)
- Stoke-on-Trent (E06000021)
- Oldham (E08000004)
- Ipswich (E07000202)
- Hastings (E07000062)
- Bradford (E08000032)

Source: Department for Education *Get Information About Schools* service, DfE [opportunity areas dataset](#)

School free school meals quintile (GCSE only)

Quintile in which the school falls when schools are put into bands based on the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals in the year under consideration. Quintiles are calculated separately for mainstream schools, special schools and alternative provision.

Source: Department for Education [Schools, pupils and their characteristics](#) releases

Admissions policy (GCSE only)

Department for Education classification of the establishment's admissions policy.

Secondary moderns are those schools which self-define as such. In reality, the group of schools that could be considered secondary moderns [is some way broader](#).

Source: Department for Education *Get Information About Schools* service

Establishment type (A-Level only)

Department for Education classification of the category of further education which the establishment falls into.

Source: Department for Education *Get Information About Schools* service

Governance

Department for Education classification of the establishment's governance.

Source: Department for Education *Get Information About Schools* service

Inspection rating

Most recent Ofsted rating at the start of the academic year in question.

Source: [Ofsted management information, 2009/10-2017/18](#)