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Policy Eye



Highlights of week ending Friday 16 August 2019

(Welcome to Policy Eye, a weekly service from Policy Watch offering a regular round up of UK education headlines and stories from over the previous 7 days.)

The week summed up.

It's been results time of course for A' levels, level 3 BTEC and other qualifications and that has occupied most of the headlines this week one way or another. Summary details below.

Elsewhere in education this week, the Labour Party announced it would reform the university admissions system around post-qualification admissions (PQA.) The government too has been active, [reflecting](#) on the A' and technical education results, [wishing](#) Team GB well as it heads off to the World Skills competition and [confirming](#) the launch next week of its new Rail Saver for 16/17 year olds.

In other news, Greenwich University has attracted media headlines with its plans to tackle climate change, debate has continued about how to improve the education skills system with former DfE adviser Jon Yates [listing](#) his own starter for ten, a Conservative MP has [called](#) on the government to reinvigorate its Free Schools movement, and Teach First has [rebranded](#).

But back to the main news of the week and those important results. Headline details have as usual been well covered in the media but what are the emerging themes? So far, four stand out.

First, this is the third in a four year programme of using the new reformed versions of A' levels including notably this year, maths, so what impact, if any, is this having on entry trends? According to Ofqual entries overall have remained high with notable increases in sciences and computing along with Political Studies and Psychology. Maths remains the most popular subject but its entries as well as those for English subjects were all down this year, 12.3% overall for English where ASCL has [called](#) for a review. Some have blamed the more rigid GCSEs.

Second, what about the pass rate? Despite the changes this has remained the same as last year at 97.6% although that was 0.3% down on the year before but stability has been the essence.

Third, there has been some media comment about falls in the numbers of people gaining top grades. FFT Education Datalab [point to](#) the proportion of entries gaining an A or A* at 25.2% as being at 'its lowest level for years.' Some of this its suggested may be down to subject choices although there's been a rise in girls' performance at this level. Ofqual's [Paper](#) on variability in A' level results is also a helpful read here.

Fourth, the effects of all this on university entry are still being worked through and Clearing will continue to operate for some time but currently UCAS is [reporting](#) that a record number of 18 year olds in England, many from deprived areas, have been accepted for places through UCAS.



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Top headlines this week

- 'University bans hamburgers to tackle climate change.' ([Monday](#))
- 'Clearing becoming route of choice for university applicants.' ([Tuesday](#))
- 'Labour plans to scrap predicted grades system.' ([Wednesday](#))
- 'Female students outnumber males in A' level science entries.' ([Thursday](#))
- 'Top universities replace UK school leavers with foreign students.' ([Friday](#))

People/organisations in the news this week

General Policy

- [Travel Saver](#). The government announced the launch next week of the new 'Rail Saver' for 16-17 year olds, available online at £30 but able to save eligible 16/17 year olds 50% of the costs on most rail travel including peak and season tickets
- [Cyber security](#). The Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) updated its guidance to education providers about how to avoid cyber-attacks offering a checklist of key questions and citing the National Cyber Security Centre's 10 steps to cyber security which include the need for clear policies, monitoring and awareness
- [Labour market outlook](#). The CIPD and recruiting agency Adecco published their latest employer-based assessment of the labour market completed in June and showing employment confidence remaining high and pay expectations increasing but a concerning drop in the supply of low-skilled applicants
- [Time for demand](#). The New Economics Foundation called for a new focus on the demand side to help boost productivity and the economy, proposing among other things increased spending on public services, faster increases in the minimum wage and a new weekly national allowance for many adults

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- [Labour plans](#). Shadow Education Minister Angela Rayner announced that a Labour government would reform the current university admissions system and work with providers to establish a post-qualification admissions (PQA) version
- [PQA in perspective](#). Nick Hillman, Director of the HE Policy Institute (HEPI) provided a useful primer on PQA on the HEPI website setting many of the issues and views in context
- [YouGov poll on PQA](#). YouGov published the results of its snap poll on whether people should apply to uni after they have their exam results, showing a majority saying 'yes'
- [University aspirations](#). The Sutton Trust published the results of its annual Ipsos Mori poll of the university aspirations of young people finding just under two-thirds maintaining it's important to go to university but larger numbers suggesting that having the right connections and being confident help in getting on in life
- [Sharing and caring](#). The Office for Students called for views from anyone with an interest in higher education on how students could be more involved in its work



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- [Discovering uni](#). The Office for Students announced that it was launching a new student information website next month under the title 'Discovering Uni' and intended to help prospective students find all the information they might need on courses, outcomes, ratings and so on through one site
- [Costs and returns](#). The Association of Investment Companies published research to show how many parents (65%) were planning or already helping their children with university costs, how much debt uni graduates typically ended up with (£41,697) and how many students (50%+) were concerned about value for money
- [Post-uni blues](#). Cosmopolitan magazine ran an interesting article about how challenging it can be for some students after leaving university, often facing a new life of great uncertainty and fearing being left behind

FE/Skills

- [10 ways to improve technical education](#). Former government education adviser Jon Yates followed up his twitter trail last week on what was wrong with technical education by listing 10 ways in which it could be improved, ranging from more funding, to allowing more time to complete courses, to a return to polys
- [Closing the digital divide](#). Union learn published a new guide for union learning reps on how best to work with and support the development of digital skills in respective workplaces

Schools

- [Guide to 2019 A' level results](#). Ofqual published full summary details of this year's A' level results in England along with useful explainers on grade boundaries and developments for individual subjects
- [Variability in A' level results 2017-2019](#). Ofqual provided a subject by subject guide of variability in A' level results for schools and colleges in England showing that overall, things have remained relatively stable
- [Turbo boosting Free Schools](#). Conservative MP and co-founder of the landmark Michaela School, Suella Braverman called on the government to re-energize its Free School programme, claiming that the programme had both slowed down and lost its 'excitement' and suggesting a number of ways that could revitalize things including changing the costing model and responding to demand
- [New look](#). Teach First launched its new web and logo intended to help clarify its role and services in helping build 'a fair education for all' based on three areas of activity: teacher development, school leadership, and supportive networks

Tweets(s) of the week.

- "It all started with a BTEC...I love this line from @stephbreakfast when interviewing @funkflex on @breakfast. There's a mini campaign in that! @LoveOurColleges" - @_aaronhussey



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- “One of the things about PQA is that the current system (and any fix to it like PQA) was designed for a system involving demand outstripping supply both at sector and provider level. We need to think about that before we just hurl PQA in and hope for the best” - [@jim_dickinson](#)
- “Perhaps sometimes teachers actually do need to tell pupils look ... this isn't your thing, and you should do something else” - [@grumpyteacher17](#)
- “Big city university campuses are not good places for businesses to collaborate because ‘you can't park,’ #THEAustralia Forum hears” - [@timeshighered](#)
- “Back to school spending is the third biggest retail event after Christmas and Black Friday according to market research company @mintelnews” - [@tes](#)
- “Third weekend of the holidays is the time when I finally feel safe not to use the nit comb #teacherlife” - [@samschoolstuff](#)
- “Idea: a crowdfunding campaign to bring back sunshine for this summer” - [@Sathnam](#)

Other stories of the week

- Going green. Goldsmiths, University of London has attracted considerable media interest this week for plans to do its bit to tackle climate concerns. The message that it was going to stop selling beef products such as hamburgers, for example, was reported on most media channels. It's actually doing much more than this. For example, it's also installing solar panels, switching energy supplier and introducing a levy on single use plastic cups. Full details can be seen in its official statement available [here](#)

Quote(s) of the week

- “It would be extremely difficult to manage the entire application process in the few weeks between A' level results in mid-August and the beginning of university terms in September or October, and it is likely we would need to rethink the entire calendar” – ASCL general secretary Geoff Barton responds to proposals to adopt a post-qualifications admissions system for higher education
- “That sort of funding won't be replaced immediately” – Shadow skills spokesman Gordon Marsden raises concerns about what will happen once the ESF (European Social Funding) funding is gone
- “These young people are an inspiration to the next generation and a reminder of the importance we must place on building a skilled workforce that will make sure we have a productive economy as we prepare for Brexit” – the Education secretary wishes Team GB well as they head to Kazan for the 2019 World Skills competition
- “Take your deadlines seriously” – the Education Guardian lists some ‘dos’ and ‘don'ts’ for new uni students
- “We support the idea that qualifications should be challenging but we do not think they should be grinding” – the general secretary of ASCL, Geoff Barton, responds to news that entries in A' level English subjects have dropped
- “This is not new, the issue has existed as long as qualifications have been marked and graded” – Ofqual responds to Sunday newspaper stories about issues with subjective marking
- “Once you've made your plans for different outcomes, ‘file’ them away in your mind and get busy with other things” – mental health ‘experts’ blog on the Ofqual site about how to cope with results days



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Number(s) of the week

- 97.6%. The overall pass rate at A' level this year, the same as for last year according to official figures
- 746,000. The total number of A level entries in England this year, according to figures from Ofqual
- 28.2%. The number of 18 year olds in the UK who have been accepted for a university place through UCAS so far, a record for results day according to UCAS
- 75%. The number of young people surveyed who felt that having connections was more important than anything else in getting on in life, according to the annual Ipsos Mori poll of young people's university aspirations commissioned by the Sutton Trust
- 3.9%. The estimated annual growth in average weekly earnings in the latest quarter, April – June 2019, although still not back to their pre-crisis peak, according to latest figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS)
- 41%. The number of employers surveyed who said they were finding it more difficult filling vacancies particularly low-skilled posts, according to the latest labour market survey from CIPD and Adecco
- £8.6bn. How much students will owe in loan interest alone within five years, according to figures released by the Labour Party
- 56%. How many people surveyed support a post-qualification admission system for higher education against 22% who don't and 22% who weren't sure according to a YouGov survey
- 246,000+. How many learners have completed a L3 BTEC currently this year, up 5,000 on the previous year, according to latest figures
- £186 a year. How much 16 and 17 year olds could save a year from the new Rail Saver, according to the Dept of Transport
- 21. The number of 'new style' reformed A' levels examined for the first time this summer, according to the listing from Ofqual

What to look out for next week

- GCSE results day (Thursday)
- 2019 World Skills Challenge opens (Thursday)