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## Policy Eye



### Highlights of week ending Friday 23 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 the turn of Level 2 and GCSE [results](#) this week where there's been considerable interest in the so-called 'forgotten third,' grade boundaries, extended Key stage 3s and the stress of exams generally. Summary details below.

In other education news this week, digests and discussion on last week's A' level exams have continued, with the [analysis](#) of entries and outcomes by Cairneagle Associates on the HEPI website an example of many useful reads. As for Clearing, this too has been in full swing following last week's A' level results with UCAS [reporting](#) record numbers. Elsewhere, the government has [set out](#) how T levels will be graded and what will be on the final certificate, quite a lot by all accounts, as well as what UCAS tariff points they will attract. It has also [announced](#) further expansion of the important National Retraining Scheme, the scheme that helps eligible adults gain new skills, which will be tested in two more regions shortly and rolled out in three more later this year.

Further afield, Ofsted [published](#) the results from its latest annual teachers' survey indicating a notable cooling off about Ofsted by teachers, the Association of Colleges (AoC) [lined up](#) ten priorities for the Treasury to consider as part of next month's spending round, and Mary Curnock Cook [wrote](#) an interesting blog on why she'd changed her tune on PQA (post qualification admissions) following UCAS's review into the whole thing when she was boss of UCAS a few years back.

But back to the headline news this week in the shape of the GCSE results. Most of the GCSEs are now in their reformed format, a further 25 were included this year, but questions remain about whether they're too demanding, how far they're suitable for all and that perennial one about whether we still need a full set of exams at age 16. The government may thus be reassured that both the pass rate and the percentage of papers achieving a top grade this year were up slightly. In terms of emerging themes, three stand out.

First, there're still concerns about the EBacc effect. Yes entries were up for EBacc subjects by 3.7% notably in some languages and humanities but the drop in D/T entries suggests non EBacc subjects may be suffering. Is, as the NAHT's Paul Whiteman put it, the concept of a general education at 16 being lost? Second, the English/maths resit issue remains live with the entry rate for 17 year olds up but a mixed story on the pass rate. Are the reformed Functional Skills the answer, should the try, try and try again resit policy be scrapped; Labour think so. And third, the strong performance by girls this year disproves the theory that they wouldn't be able to hack linear exams...they have, including in Physics.



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## Top headlines this week

- 'Spending Review: colleges need £1bn boost, says AoC.' ([Monday](#))
- 'T level study to be worth 3 A' levels.' ([Tuesday](#))
- 'Poorer pupils twice as likely to fail key GCSEs.' ([Wednesday](#))
- 'GCSE results: pass rates and top grades edge upwards.' ([Thursday](#))
- 'Why are pupils switching off from computing GCSE?' ([Friday](#))

## People/organisations in the news this week

### General Policy

- [Support for young people's mental health](#). The government announced some additional funding to help local community projects that support young people with their mental health needs
- [Bleak houses](#). The Children's Commissioner for England reported on the plight of children and families living in temporary accommodation including in some cases old office blocks and shipping containers, calling for more to be done at both a national and local level to provide such families with settled housing and support
- [Ageing carefully](#). The Centre for Social Justice published the sixth and last in its series on 'The Future of Work,' focusing on this occasion on older workers calling for training and support to enable more people to work in their later years and more contentiously, to consider raising the state pension age to 75 by 2035
- [Providing a new safety net for workers](#). The RSA's Future Work Centre examined the growing sense of economic insecurity felt by many as part of the new forms of work, arguing that it was time to develop a modern safety net built around better training and support and stable pay systems

### HE

- [An ex-evangelist repents](#). Former chief exec of UCAS Mary Curnock Cook reported on the last major review into PQA (post-qualification admissions) conducted by UCAS in 2011/12 and how it had turned her from being an advocate into a critic, arguing in a blog for Wonkhe that the solution lies in an expanded Clearing system
- [Supporting the new talent economy](#). John Fallon, CEO of Pearson outlined in a new article on LinkedIn how higher education can support the so-called 'new talent economy, pointing to three ways including championing service changes, expanding access and developing skills for future employment
- [Lifting debt sanctions](#). The University of Liverpool confirmed that it was lifting its sanctions that had seen debtor students barred from using the library and attending graduation following an intervention by the Competition and markets Authority (CMA)
- [Ivory towers](#). The FT reported on the changing nature of student accommodation with more private companies involved and a growth in PBSA (purpose built student accommodation) largely aimed at the international market



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## FE/Skills

- [T level update](#). The government issued a brief update on T levels outlining how the new grading system and certification will work and what UCAS points T levels are intended to attract
- [National Retraining Scheme update](#). The government announced that the Get Help to Retrain Scheme currently being trialled in Liverpool will roll out to two more areas, the N.E. and W. Midlands, and extend later this year to take in Leeds city region, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, and the S.W. LEP region
- [College funding](#). The Association of Colleges (AoC) followed up its recent Spending Review proposals with a set of 10 recommendations for the government to consider as part of its September spending round, including increased funding for 16-19, adult learning and apprenticeships
- [Discount travel for apprentices](#). The TUC called on the government to honour its 2017 manifesto pledge and provide discounted bus and train travel to help apprentices
- [Skills you need](#). James Palmer, the Mayor of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, outlined how the devolved adult education budget was helping the region develop the skills needed as well as providing for a new skills based university at Peterborough due to open in 2022

## Schools

- [Summer 2019 GCSE results](#). The Joint Council for Qualifications published its full set of results tables with accompanying press notice for this summer's GCSE results
- [Guide to GCSE results for England 2019](#). Ofqual published its overarching summary of this summer's GCSE results in England covering outcomes, grade boundaries, standard setting and summaries for some individual subject areas
- [Variability in GCSE results for schools and colleges 2017-2019](#). Ofqual reported on relative stability in school and college GCSE results over the last couple of years despite recent changes
- [NRT Annual Statement 2019](#). Ofqual reported on the use of the National Reference Test used to provide evidence on the performance of 16 yr olds in English and maths and taken this year in over 300 schools, eventually leading to no change to grade standards but only after some reflection around English
- [Working at a disadvantage](#). Teach First published the results of its report into the differences in GCSE results between those who attended schools in different types of community in England finding that those who attended schools in the poorest areas tended to end up with the poorest exam results
- [Tough on struggling students](#). ASCL published the results of its survey among school leaders about the 'new' GCSEs with most feeling that the negatives outweighed any positives and that low-ability pupils in particular had been hardest hit
- [Early starters](#). FFT Education Datalab looked into the issue of pupils starting GCSEs in Key Stage 3, suggesting that there had been a further slight increase this year, particularly in subjects such as English, Religious Studies and some modern languages but that the practice produced variable results
- [A' level analysis 2019](#). Mary Curnock Cook and Christoffer Fogtdal of Cairneagle Associates reported on entry trends and outcomes in this year's A' levels noting in particular the continuing gender attainment gap and raising questions about a drop in entries for English and maths
- [The A' level gender gap](#). The Education Policy Institute published an interactive chart to illustrate the gender gap in A' level attainment and entries over the last 20 years



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- [The view from here](#). Ofsted published the results of its recent survey of teachers' views, indicating that while most continued to believe that their inspections had been pretty much as expected, their opinions of Ofsted had fallen significantly since last year
- [Showing reliability](#). Amy Finch, Head of Strategic Evaluation at Ofsted, outlined the work that Ofsted was undertaking to ensure reliability in inspections looking at both reliability in judgements made and in inspection methods applied

## Tweets(s) of the week.

- "AI bot poses as essay writer for hire to catch contract cheaters" - [@timeshighered](#)
- "Unnervingly, all evening I've been receiving messages from school and college leaders – many of them veterans of the system – worrying about their GCSE results. We have to reduce this madcap pressure of accountability. Be assured it will be #ASCL\_UK's priority alongside funding" - [@RealGeffBarton](#)
- "English A level share of entries has fallen by a quarter since 2015. My analysis with [@Cairneagle](#) for [@HEPI\\_news](#) shows this is not correlated with new English GCSE, and not fully explained by matching swing to STEM" - [@MaryCurnockCook](#)
- "Schools Minister Nick Gibb insists that the new GCSEs which have been described as 'a joyless slog' by some teachers will leave students 'better prepared for the next stage' - [@SkyNews](#)
- "Schools (and exams in particular) are now one of the only times you are required to write by hand, elsewhere computers are the norm. Why is it important we continue to expect students to write long hand?" - [@KarenWespieser](#)
- "Top CEOs more likely to be called Stephen than to be women" - [@Independent](#)
- "Someone asked me if I liked reading Tolkien. Of course. It's a hobbit of mine" - [@MichaelRoseYes](#)

## Other stories of the week

- 'She's leaving home.' In the Beatles' famous song, she was meeting a man from the Motortrade whereas nowadays she and he, of course, are more likely to be heading off to uni. What is generally an exciting time for a young person can be often generate different emotions for parents, many of whom are left feeling empty. For those who suffer from 'empty nest syndrome' around this time of year, Mumsnet has some advice [here](#)
- The importance of meetings. An enormous amount has been written about meetings over recent years, most of it critical. This week The Guardian quoted a recent survey from design company, Moo, showing that the average worker in Britain spends 4.1 hours a week in meetings with about a third of this time wasted by waiting for someone to arrive. According to the article, meetings work best when they involve between five and nine people...any extra person above seven reduces the effectiveness of a decision making group by 10% apparently. A link to the article can be found [here](#)

## Quote(s) of the week

- "We don't want children to be overstressed. Testing and exams have always been part of an education system, there will always be some stress to them" – Schools Minister Nick Gibb answers media questions on GCSE results day



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- “The evidence that PQA might actually do more harm to those it was supposed to help was overwhelming and I backed down smartish” – Mary Curnock Cook on what her previous experience with PQA research had shown her
- “Students who have still to apply should do so as soon as possible as it can take six weeks to process an application” – the Student Loans Company urges students to get their finances sorted out as soon as possible
- “A student’s overall T level grade will be worked out from the grades they achieved on the core component and the occupational specialism(s)” –the government explains how the grading system will work for T levels
- “A costly and damaging experiment” – Lord Baker and other leading education figures condemn the EBacc in a letter to the current Education Secretary

## Number(s) of the week

- £28.5m. The amount in overpayments on student loans still waiting to be reclaimed, according to Research Professional News
- £1.1bn. The amount that the Association of Colleges (AoC) is proposing should be invested in colleges as part of the government’s forthcoming September spending round
- 144. The number of UCAS tariff points an overall Distinction in a T level will generate according to the latest update from the government which includes points listings for other T level grades
- 51%. The number of teachers who still think that an Ofsted inspection means doing extra and unnecessary work, according to Ofsted’s latest annual teachers’ survey
- 61%. The number of schools surveyed that start their GCSE work in Key Stage 3, according to a report from the National Education Union (NEU)
- 67.3%. The GCSE pass rate for England, Wales and N. Ireland this summer, up 0.3pp according to the latest set of figures
- 20.8%. The proportion of GCSEs awarded top grades (7 and above) this year, up slightly according to the latest official figures
- 837. How many pupils achieved a straight sweep of grade 9s in their GCSE results
- 22.2%. The number of successful admissions appeals for maintained schools in England 2018/19, according to latest figures released by the DfE

## What to look out for next week

- Final week before MPs return on 3 September