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Effects of AS/A level reforms in England: extra insights from the National Pupil Database

Conference Paper Abstract

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Abstract

Hundreds of thousands of 16-18 year olds in England take Advanced Subsidiary (AS) and Advanced (A) level qualifications each year in over 2000 schools/colleges, especially for university entry. Recent reforms have changed the nature and structure of these qualifications, which may have consequences for curricula, pedagogy and student progression.

Previously, A levels consisted of AS and A2 units, usually assessed in consecutive years, with AS units worth half of the total A level marks. The reforms removed AS units from the A level and made decoupled AS levels available as optional separate qualifications. The decoupling raised questions about the future of AS levels in particular, because students no longer needed them to obtain A levels. Since 2013 various surveys have attempted to understand teachers' views on these decoupled AS levels, and findings converged on a trend of decreasing usage. While these surveys have provided valuable insights, the sample sizes often prevented finer-grained analyses. The National Pupil Database (NPD) is one of the largest educational datasets in England, including all students from state schools. Because of its comprehensiveness and breadth, the NPD enabled us to investigate uptake of AS levels in more depth, especially moderating factors such as student and centre characteristics.

The results showed wide variation in provision of decoupled AS levels. Whether or not centres offered them was, to some extent, associated with centre size (number of students) and centre type (e.g., grammar schools, academies). However, there was notable diversity within these groups; many centres chose an all-or-none approach to offering these qualifications. Decreases in AS entries were not exclusive to particular groups of students but larger decreases were found amongst students with certain characteristics, including those with lower prior attainment. Together, the NPD analyses revealed a more complex and diverse pattern of AS level provision than previously suggested.