

Candidates awarded the A* grade at A-level in 2014

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1. Introduction

This report investigates the awarding of A* at A-level in 2014. In summer 2010 the A* grade was awarded at A-level for the first time and it was part of new A-level specifications including more demanding questions. The A* grade rewards exceptional performance at A2, and aims to differentiate between the highest achieving candidates. For this reason the A* grade is now commonly used in university offers.

Focusing on candidates taking 3 or more A-levels, the report looks at those candidates awarded with the following:

- three A* grades (or better);
- two A* grades and an A grade (or better);
- one A* grade and two A grades (or better);
- three A grades (or better);
- one A grade and two B grades (or better)¹

More specifically, this report investigates candidates who achieved these grades overall, by school type, by gender and by level of deprivation. Results are given both including and excluding General Studies and Critical Thinking (henceforth GS and CT respectively), because some Higher Education institutions or courses exclude these subjects from A-level offers. For the same reason, only non-applied A-levels are included.

2. Data, variables and methods

Data were extracted from the National Pupil Database (NPD) for 2014. The NPD is compiled for the Department for Education (DfE) from data supplied by the awarding bodies. It contains candidate details, such as gender, school type and level of deprivation, and the national examination results of all pupils within schools in England up to the age of 19. Records are only present if a candidate has sat an examination in a particular subject.

Results shown in the following pages are restricted to 235,214 A-level candidates who turned 18 in the school year 2013/2014. These accounted for approximately 81% of the total number of A-level candidates in the NPD, and some 36% of the population of the same age in England based on population estimates for 2014 (ONS, 2014).

School type categories were those given by the National Centre Number (NCN) database and the following types of schools were included in the study:

- City Academy;
- Comprehensive;
- FE Establishment;
- Independent;
- Other;
- Secondary Modern;
- Secondary Selective;
- Sixth Form College;
- Tertiary College.

¹ This group of candidates was included in the report because since 2013/14 universities are not limited in the number of such candidates they are allowed to recruit. Therefore it is of interest to see what types of candidates are included in this group.

Deprivation was measured using the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) for each candidate, obtained from the Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC), provided by the DfE. Candidates were divided into three equal groups (low, medium and high deprivation) using percentile values. As deprivation data were only available from less than 60% of candidates, results on deprivation could not be considered representative of the overall population of candidates.

Descriptive statistics are presented through tables and graphs. In some cases results referring to candidates who sat their examinations in 2012 or 2011, obtained by Zanini (2013) and Wilson (2012) respectively, are also presented. Where a candidate had taken the same subject examination twice (i.e. had re-sat the qualification) only the highest grade attained was included in the analysis.

3. Results

3.1. Candidates taking three or more A-levels

Table 1a shows that 73.1% of candidates took three or more A-levels in 2014, reflecting a slight downward trend over time. Table 1b shows the same information, but excluding 354 candidates who took only GS and CT, so that the total candidates figure in Tables 1a and 1b is different.

Table 1a: Number of A-level candidates taking three or more A-levels over time (all subjects).

<i>A-levels taken</i>	2011		2012		2014	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Fewer than 3	60,840	25.51	62,518	25.80	63,229	26.88
3 or more	177,643	74.49	179,760	74.20	171,985	73.12
Total	238,483	100	242,278	100	235,214	100

Table 1b: Number of A-level candidates taking three or more A-levels over time, excluding GS and CT.

<i>A-levels taken</i>	2011		2012		2014	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Fewer than 3	65,442	27.51	66,643	27.57	65,685	27.97
3 or more	172,432	72.49	175,083	72.43	169,175	72.03
Total	237,872	100	241,726	100	234,860	100

Figure 1 shows the distribution of A-level candidates across different school types. This shows that taking three or more A-levels varied according to the school type. Tables 1c and 1d show the number and proportion of candidates taking three or more A-levels by school type, including and excluding GS and CT, respectively. Across all subjects, the percentage of candidates taking three or more A-levels at Secondary Selective schools was around 93%. This number was slightly lower (87%) for those attending Independent schools, while it was considerably lower for those at FE Establishment (62%) and Secondary Modern schools (49%), in particular. These figures are similar when GS and CT are excluded.

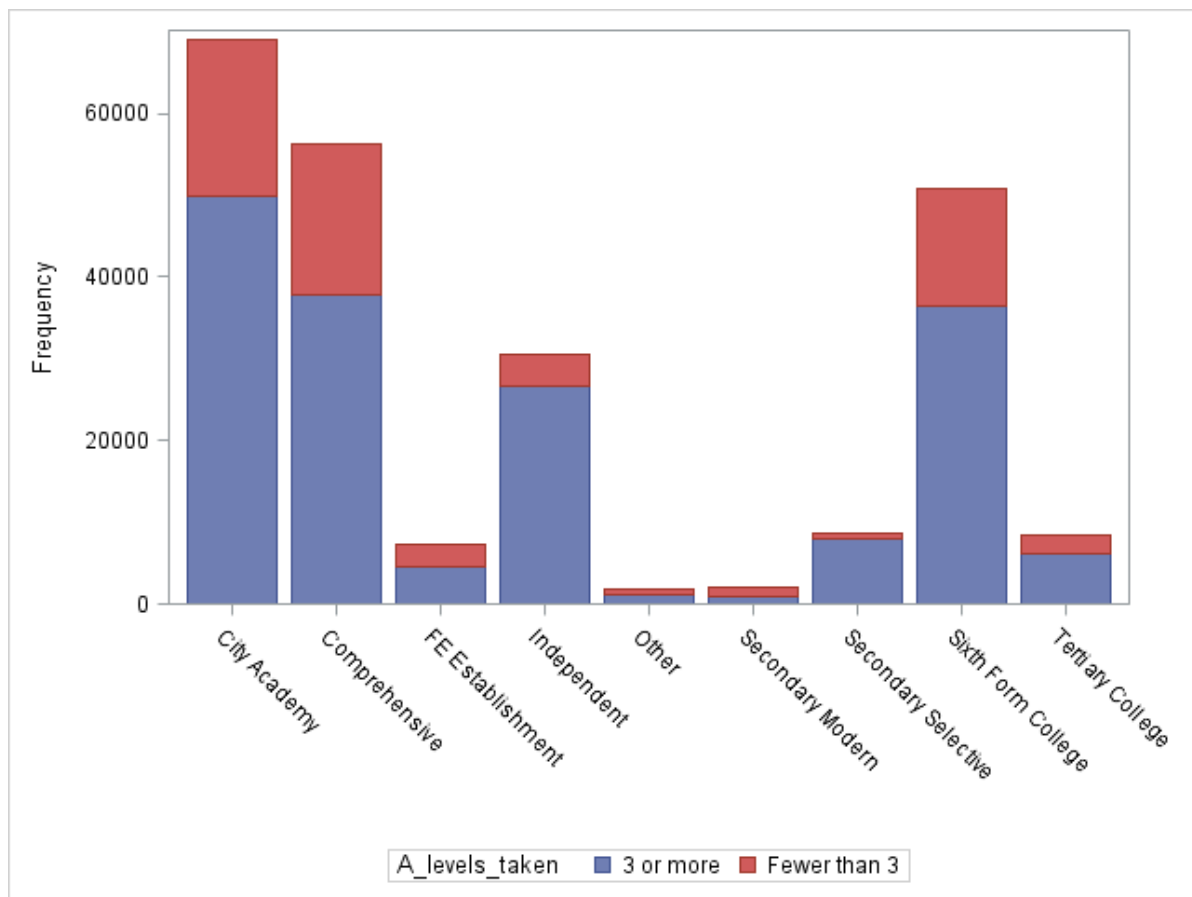


Figure 1: A-level candidates taking three or more A-levels in 2014 by school type (all subjects).

Table 1c: Candidates taking three or more A-levels by school type (all subjects).

<i>A-levels taken</i>		<i>School type</i>									<i>Total</i>
		<i>Acad.</i>	<i>Compr.</i>	<i>FE Est.</i>	<i>Indep.</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Sec. Mod.</i>	<i>Sec. Sel.</i>	<i>Sixth F. Coll.</i>	<i>Tert. Coll.</i>	
Fewer than 3	N	19,196	18,317	2,773	3,816	744	1,077	570	14,188	2,461	63,142
	%	27.82	32.60	37.96	12.52	37.59	51.14	6.61	27.98	28.65	26.87
3 or more	N	49,799	37,876	4,532	26,670	1,235	1,029	8,059	36,513	6,128	171,841
	%	72.18	67.40	62.04	87.48	62.41	48.86	93.39	72.02	71.35	73.13
Total	N	68,995	56,193	7,305	30,486	1,979	2,106	8,629	50,701	8,589	234,983
	%	29.36	23.91	3.11	12.97	0.84	0.90	3.67	21.58	3.66	100

Note: For 231 candidates the school type is not available.

Table 1d: Candidates taking three or more A-levels by school type, excluding GS and CT.

<i>A-levels taken</i>		<i>School type</i>									<i>Total</i>
		<i>Acad.</i>	<i>Compr.</i>	<i>FE Est.</i>	<i>Indep.</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Sec. Mod.</i>	<i>Sec. Sel.</i>	<i>Sixth F. Coll.</i>	<i>Tert. Coll.</i>	
Fewer than 3	N	19,940	18,983	2,799	3,874	754	1,089	650	15,038	2,469	65,596
	%	28.94	33.87	38.32	12.71	38.10	51.71	7.54	29.71	28.75	27.96
3 or more	N	48,965	37,062	4,506	26,603	1,225	1,017	7,967	35,571	6,119	169,035
	%	71.06	66.13	61.68	87.29	61.90	48.29	92.46	70.29	71.25	72.04
Total	N	68,905	56,045	7,305	30,477	1,979	2,106	8,617	50,609	8,588	234,631
	%	29.37	23.89	3.11	12.99	0.84	0.90	3.67	21.57	3.66	100

Note: For 231 candidates the school type is not available.

3.2. Individual grades awarded

Tables 2a and 2b show the numbers and percentages of individual grades awarded, including and excluding GS and CT respectively. The total amount of grades awarded reflects that, on average, candidates took about 2.8 (=652,371/235,214) A-levels.

The tables show that 9% of grades awarded were A* grades in 2014, which was slightly higher than the results in 2011 and 2012. The percentages of candidates awarded A or A* in 2014 were similar to those reported in the two previous years.

Figure 2 shows the percentages of A* grades awarded to candidates from different schools. This percentage was higher for candidates attending Independent and Selective schools (19% and 13% respectively) than from other institutions.

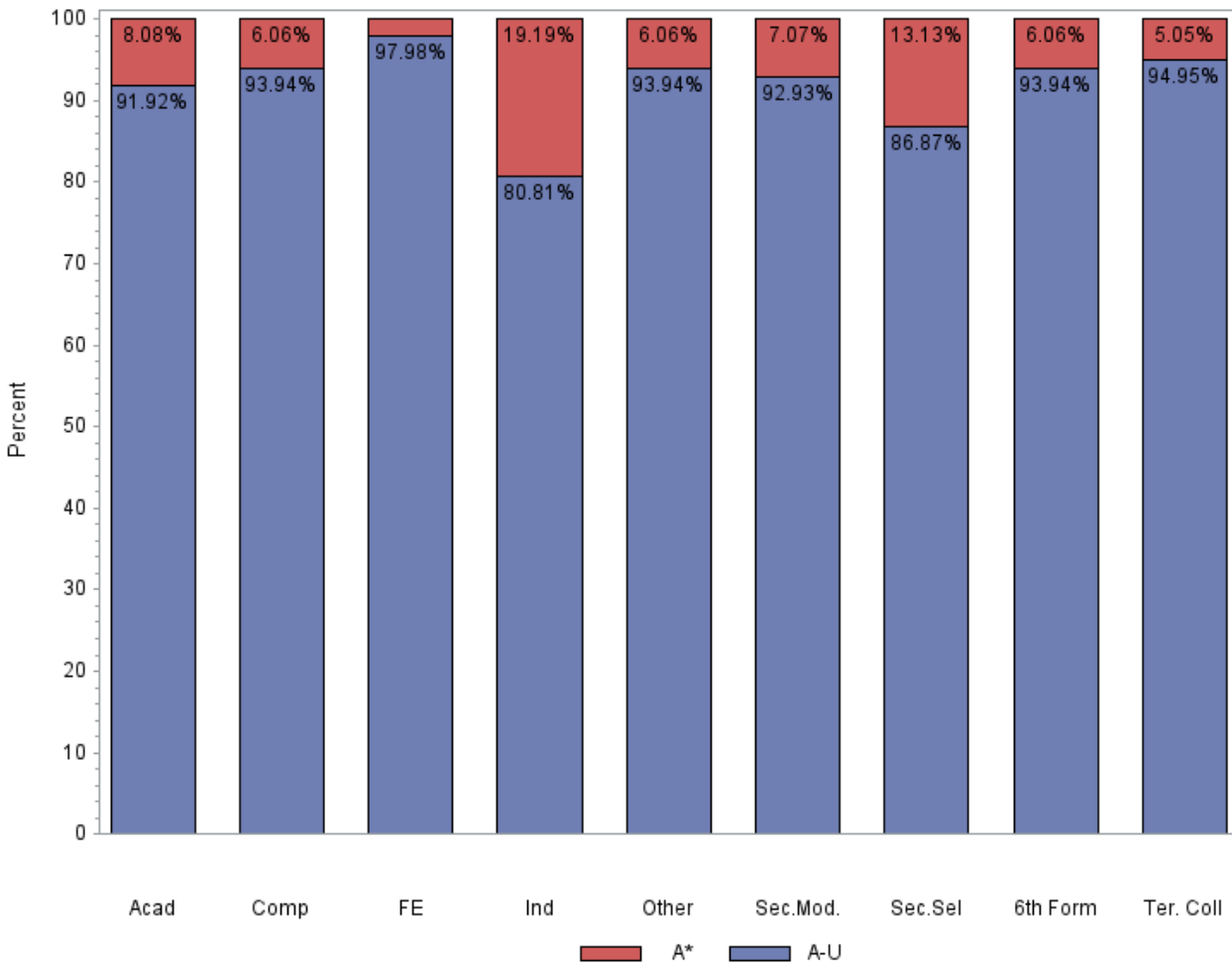
Table 2a: Results over time by grade (all subjects).

Grades	2011		2012		2014	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
A*	59,594	8.68	57,791	8.37	58,732	9.00
A	132,857	19.34	132,822	19.24	122,163	18.73
B	176,598	25.71	179,986	26.07	172,256	26.40
C	160,740	23.40	163,664	23.71	154,885	23.74
D	100,799	14.68	100,726	14.59	93,549	14.34
E	43,491	6.33	43,076	6.24	39,794	6.10
U	12,742	1.86	12,227	1.77	10,992	1.68
Total	686,821	100	690,292	100	652,371	100

Table 2b: Results over time by grade, excluding GS and CT.

Grades	2011		2012		2014	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
A*	57,818	8.96	56,153	8.59	57,773	9.20
A	128,998	20.00	129,679	19.84	120,040	19.11
B	168,607	26.14	173,344	26.52	167,558	26.67
C	150,464	23.32	154,792	23.68	149,005	23.72
D	91,557	14.19	92,385	14.14	88,227	14.04
E	37,641	5.83	37,552	5.75	36,433	5.80
U	10,051	1.56	9,656	1.48	9,246	1.47
Total	645,136	100	653,561	100	628,282	100

Figure 2: A* grades at A-level certifications in 2014 by school type (all subjects).



3.3. A-level candidates by met criteria

Tables 3a and 3b show the proportion of candidates who met the five different combinations of A*, A and B grade criteria, including and excluding GS and CT. In the tables both the percentages calculated with respect to the total number of A-level candidates and to those candidates taking at least three A-levels are reported. For example, the number of candidates achieving at least three A-levels at A or better in 2014 was 29,071. This corresponds to 12.4% of the total number of candidates taking at least one A-level and 16.9% of those taking at least three A-levels.

Results show that the fraction of candidates achieving three A* (or better) was less than 3% of the total number of A-level candidates. About one candidate in eight taking three A-levels was awarded with one A* and two As (or better).

The comparison over time shows that figures in 2014 were generally slightly larger than those occurred in 2012 and smaller than those for 2011. In other words, the data do not reveal the presence of a clear trend.

The overall picture does not change when candidates taking only GS and CT are excluded.

Table 3a: Candidates achieving different grade criteria over time (all subjects).

<i>Met criteria</i>	2011			2012			2014		
	N	% ¹	% ²	N	% ¹	% ²	N	% ¹	% ²
A*A*A* or better	5,346	2.24	3.01	5,183	2.14	2.88	5,270	2.24	3.06
A*A*A or better	12,327	5.17	6.94	12,004	4.95	6.68	12,123	5.15	7.05
A*AA or better	22,916	9.61	12.90	22,315	9.21	12.41	21,715	9.23	12.63
AAA or better	31,694	13.29	17.84	31,312	12.92	17.42	29,071	12.36	16.90
ABB or better	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	62,736	26.67	36.48

Note: %¹ and %² are calculated with respect to the total number of A-level candidates and those candidates taking three A-levels or more, respectively.

Table 3b: Candidates achieving different grade criteria over time, excluding GS and CT.

<i>Met criteria</i>	2011			2012			2014		
	N	% ¹	% ²	N	% ¹	% ²	N	% ¹	% ²
A*A*A* or better	5,026	2.11	2.82	4,907	2.03	2.80	5,091	2.17	3.01
A*A*A or better	11,811	4.97	6.65	11,519	4.77	6.58	11,834	5.04	7.00
A*AA or better	22,030	9.26	12.40	21,543	8.92	12.31	21,257	9.05	12.57
AAA or better	30,516	12.83	17.18	30,264	12.53	17.29	28,438	12.11	16.81
ABB or better	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	61,670	26.26	36.45

Note: %¹ and %² are calculated with respect to the total amount of A-level candidates and those candidates taking three A-levels or more, respectively.

3.4. Gender

Tables 4a and 4b show the proportion of candidates within each gender who met the grade criteria described before, including and excluding GS and CT. The two tables report two different percentages: firstly, of those achieving each criterion, what was the percentage of males and females; secondly, what percentage of male and female A level candidates achieved each criterion. For example, Table 3a shows that 2,300 female candidates achieved at least three A-levels at A*. This number represents 1.76% of all female A-level candidates and 43.64% of all candidates who achieved at least three A-levels at A*.

It is worth noting that among the total A-level candidates over 55% were female. Roughly 52% of candidates achieving at least three As at A-level were female, while among those achieving three A* or better, the female candidates were fewer than 44%.

Table 4a: Candidates who met the A* and A grade criteria by gender (all subjects).

<i>Met criteria</i>	Male		Female		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
A*A*A* or better	N	2,970 56.36	2,300 43.64	5,270 100		
	% (of A-level candidates)	. 2.84	. 1.76	. 2.24		
A*A*A or better	N	6,239 51.46	5,884 48.54	12,123 100		
	% (of A-level candidates)	. 5.97	. 4.5	. 5.15		
A*AA or better	N	10,625 48.93	11,090 51.07	21,715 100		
	% (of A-level candidates)	. 10.17	. 8.49	. 9.23		
AAA or better	N	13,849 47.64	15,222 52.36	29,071 100		
	% (of A-level candidates)	. 13.25	. 11.65	. 12.36		
ABB or better	N	27,770 44.26	34,966 55.74	62,736 100		
	% (of A-level candidates)	. 26.57	. 26.75	. 26.67		
Total A-level candidates	N	104,516 44.43	130,698 55.57	235,214 100		
	% (of A-level candidates)	. 100	. 100	. .		

Table 4b: Candidates who met the A* and A grade criteria by gender, excluding GS and CT.

<i>Met criteria</i>	Male		Female		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
A*A*A* or better	N	2,919 57.34	2,172 42.66	5,091 100		
	% (of A-level candidates)	. 2.8	. 1.66	. 2.17		
A*A*A or better	N	6,150 51.97	5,684 48.03	11,834 100		
	% (of A-level candidates)	. 5.9	. 4.35	. 5.04		
A*AA or better	N	10,476 49.28	10,781 50.72	21,257 100		
	% (of A-level candidates)	. 10.04	. 8.26	. 9.05		
AAA or better	N	13,633 47.94	14,805 52.06	28,438 100		
	% (of A-level candidates)	. 13.07	. 11.34	. 12.11		
ABB or better	N	27,364 44.37	34,306 55.63	61,670 100		
	% (of A-level candidates)	. 26.23	. 26.28	. 26.26		
Total A-level candidates	N	104,320 44.42	130,540 55.58	234,860 100		
	% (of A-level candidates)	. 100	. 100	. .		

3.5. School Type

Tables 5a and 5b show the proportion of candidates within each type of school who met the five different grade criteria, including and excluding GS and CT. Almost 60% of candidates (58.6% = 31.1% + 27.5%) who achieved at least three As at A-levels attended an Independent or a City Academy institution. Only 7.2% of the candidates who got three grade As or better attended a Secondary Selective school.

However, considering percentages by met criteria does not account for the number of candidates attending these institutions (Figure 1 above). Percentages calculated on the total number of A-level candidates in each school type shows that 11.6% of candidates at City Academies got at least three As, compared with 29.6% of Independent school candidates and 24.3% of Secondary Selective school candidates.

However, it is clear that there was a similar pattern across different schools: the proportion of candidates who got three A*s was around 40-50% of those who met the two A* or better criteria and these were just over half of those with one A* and two As or better.

3.6. Deprivation

The IDACI score measures the level of deprivation experienced by children living in a very small geographical area in England. It takes into account the level of deprivation in terms of economic, social and housing issues, allowing each area to be ranked relative to one another. Unfortunately, this measure was missing for around 40% of candidates. For the remaining candidates the 33rd and 66th percentiles of the distribution of the IDACI score were used to split the level of deprivation into three groups characterised by a low, medium or high level of deprivation.

Tables 6a and 6b show the number and percentage of candidates within each deprivation level who achieved grades at each of the five criteria considered so far. It is clear that the numbers of candidates achieving each criterion was higher in the low deprived group than in the medium deprived group and higher in the medium deprived group than the high deprived group. More than twice as many candidates from a low deprived area achieved three A* grades or better than candidates from a high deprived area. A similar pattern was found for each of the other criteria, suggesting that candidates' performances were associated with the level of deprivation of the area where they live.

Table 5a: Candidates who met the A* and A grade criteria by school type (all subjects).

Met criteria	School type																				
	Academy		Compr.		FE Est.		Indep.		Other		Sec. Mod.		Sec. Sel.		Sixth F. Coll.		Tert. Coll.		Total		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
A*A*A* or better	N	1,375	26.1	646	12.3	22	0.4	2,010	38.2	17	0.3	34	0.7	421	8.0	659	12.5	83	1.6	5,267	100
	% (A-I. cand.)	.	2.0	.	1.2	.	0.3	.	6.6	.	0.9	.	1.6	.	4.9	.	1.3	.	1.0	.	.
A*A*A or better	N	3,251	26.8	1,708	14.1	68	0.6	4,156	34.3	46	0.4	72	0.6	906	7.5	1,685	13.9	221	1.8	12,113	100
	% (A-I. cand.)	.	4.7	.	3.0	.	0.9	.	13.6	.	2.3	.	3.4	.	10.5	.	3.3	.	2.6	.	.
A*AA or better	N	5,888	27.1	3,210	14.8	137	0.6	7,016	32.3	93	0.4	123	0.6	1,563	7.2	3,235	14.9	439	2.0	21,704	100
	% (A-I. cand.)	.	8.5	.	5.7	.	1.9	.	23.0	.	4.7	.	5.8	.	18.1	.	6.4	.	5.1	.	.
AAA or better	N	7,979	27.5	4,420	15.2	193	0.7	9,029	31.1	118	0.4	156	0.5	2,096	7.2	4,463	15.4	599	2.1	29,053	100
	% (A-I. cand.)	.	11.6	.	7.9	.	2.6	.	29.6	.	6.0	.	7.4	.	24.3	.	8.8	.	7.0	.	.
ABB or better	N	18,012	28.7	11,145	17.8	695	1.1	15,837	25.3	325	0.5	296	0.5	3,969	6.3	10,846	17.3	1,568	2.5	62,693	100
	% (A-I. cand.)	.	26.1	.	19.8	.	9.5	.	52.0	.	16.4	.	14.1	.	46.0	.	21.4	.	18.3	.	.
Total A-level candidates	N	68,995	29.3	56,193	23.9	7,305	3.1	30,486	13.0	1,979	0.8	2,106	0.9	8,629	3.7	50,701	21.6	8,589	3.7	234,983	100
	% (A-I. cand.)	.	100	.	100	.	100	.	100	.	100	.	100	.	100	.	100	.	100	.	.

Note: For 231 candidates the school type is not available.

Table 5b: Candidates who met the A* and A grade criteria by school type, excluding GS and CT.

Met criteria	School type																				
	Academy		Compr.		FE Est.		Indep.		Other		Sec. Mod.		Sec. Sel.		Sixth F. Coll.		Tert. Coll.		Total		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
A*A*A* or better	N	1,320	25.9	623	12.2	22	0.4	1,978	38.9	16	0.3	33	0.7	400	7.9	613	12.1	83	1.6	5,088	100
	% (A-I. cand.)	.	1.9	.	1.1	.	0.3	.	6.5	.	0.8	.	1.6	.	4.6	.	1.2	.	1.0	.	.
A*A*A or better	N	3,138	26.5	1,667	14.1	68	0.6	4,129	34.9	45	0.4	72	0.6	874	7.4	1,611	13.6	221	1.9	11,825	100
	% (A-I. cand.)	.	4.6	.	3.0	.	0.9	.	13.6	.	2.3	.	3.4	.	10.1	.	3.2	.	2.6	.	.
A*AA or better	N	5,688	26.8	3,139	14.8	136	0.6	6,983	32.9	92	0.4	123	0.6	1,518	7.1	3,128	14.7	439	2.1	21,246	100
	% (A-I. cand.)	.	8.3	.	5.6	.	1.9	.	22.9	.	4.7	.	5.8	.	17.6	.	6.2	.	5.1	.	.
AAA or better	N	7,715	27.2	4,332	15.2	193	0.7	8,977	31.6	117	0.4	156	0.6	2,037	7.2	4,294	15.1	599	2.1	28,420	100
	% (A-I. cand.)	.	11.2	.	7.7	.	2.6	.	29.5	.	5.9	.	7.4	.	23.6	.	8.5	.	7.0	.	.
ABB or better	N	17,612	28.6	10,944	17.8	695	1.1	15,775	25.6	325	0.5	293	0.5	3,860	6.3	10,558	17.1	1,566	2.5	61,628	100
	% (A-I. cand.)	.	25.6	.	19.5	.	9.5	.	51.8	.	16.4	.	13.9	.	44.8	.	20.9	.	18.2	.	.
Total A-level candidates	N	68,905	29.3	56,045	23.9	7,305	3.1	30,477	13.0	1,979	0.8	2,106	0.9	8,617	3.7	50,609	21.6	8,588	3.7	234,631	100
	% (A-I. cand.)	.	100	.	100	.	100	.	100	.	100	.	100	.	100	.	100	.	100	.	.

Note: For 231 candidates the school type is not available.

Table 6a: Candidates who met the A* and A grade criteria by deprivation level (all subjects).

<i>Met criteria</i>		Missing		High		Medium		Low		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
A*A*A* or better	N	2,729	51.78	504	9.56	833	15.81	1,204	22.85	5,270	100
	% (of A-level candidates)	.	2.86	.	1.08	.	1.79	.	2.58	.	.
A*A*A or better	N	6,046	49.87	1,332	10.99	2,020	16.66	2,725	22.48	12,123	100
	% (of A-level candidates)	.	6.34	.	2.86	.	4.33	.	5.84	.	.
A*AA or better	N	10,681	49.19	2,485	11.44	3,719	17.13	4,830	22.24	21,715	100
	% (of A-level candidates)	.	11.20	.	5.33	.	7.98	.	10.36	.	.
AAA or better	N	14,068	48.39	3,437	11.82	5,024	17.28	6,542	22.50	29,071	100
	% (of A-level candidates)	.	14.76	.	7.37	.	10.77	.	14.03	.	.
ABB or better	N	28,561	45.53	8,600	13.71	11,467	18.28	14,108	22.49	62,736	100
	% (of A-level candidates)	.	29.96	.	18.44	.	24.59	.	30.26	.	.
Total	N	95,330	40.53	46,629	19.82	46,628	19.82	46,627	19.82	235,214	100
A-level candidates	% (of A-level candidates)	.	100	.	100	.	100	.	100	.	.

Table 6b: Candidates who met the A* and A grade criteria by deprivation level, excluding GS and CT.

<i>Met criteria</i>		Missing		High		Medium		Low		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
A*A*A* or better	N	2,654	52.13	483	9.49	798	15.67	1,156	22.71	5,091	100
	% (of A-level candidates)	.	2.79	.	1.04	.	1.71	.	2.48	.	.
A*A*A or better	N	5,945	50.24	1,295	10.94	1,951	16.49	2,643	22.33	11,834	100
	% (of A-level candidates)	.	6.24	.	2.78	.	4.19	.	5.68	.	.
A*AA or better	N	10,542	49.59	2,435	11.46	3,588	16.88	4,692	22.07	21,257	100
	% (of A-level candidates)	.	11.07	.	5.23	.	7.71	.	10.08	.	.
AAA or better	N	13,852	48.71	3,370	11.85	4,866	17.11	6,350	22.33	28,438	100
	% (of A-level candidates)	.	14.55	.	7.24	.	10.45	.	13.64	.	.
ABB or better	N	28,,212	45.75	8,468	13.73	11,194	18.15	13,796	22.37	61,670	100
	% (of A-level candidates)	.	29.63	.	18.19	.	24.05	.	29.64	.	.
Total	N	95,223	40.54	46,546	19.82	46,546	19.82	46,545	19.82	234,860	100
A-level candidates	% (of A-level candidates)	.	100	.	100	.	100	.	100	.	.

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