

Uptake of level 3 qualifications in English schools 2014

Statistics Report Series No.86

Tim Gill

April 2015

Research Division
Assessment, Research and Development
Cambridge Assessment
1 Regent Street, Cambridge, CB2 1GG

Introduction

This is an update to a report looking at the uptake of different level 3 qualifications between 2008 and 2012 in English schools (Gill, 2013). The current report is for 2014 only. The purpose of this report is to give an overall picture of uptake at level 3, rather than focussing on one or two qualifications (e.g. A levels).

Uptake of a subject is usually defined as the percentage of students (who take the qualification in at least one subject) taking a particular subject (either in the current, or a previous year); for example, the percentage of A level students taking an A level in English. However, as this report looks at multiple qualifications we define uptake as the percentage of all students (at the end of KS5) taking a particular subject in a particular qualification.

Data

The data for these analyses were taken from the National Pupil Database (NPD). This is a database held by the Department for Education, consisting of results for all students in all qualifications and subjects in schools and colleges in England. The Key Stage 5 (KS5) extract of the NPD was used, consisting of all students who were at the end of KS5 (i.e. in year 13).¹ It should be noted that for some qualifications, such as BTECs and OCR Nationals, entries are only included in the NPD for students who achieved at least a pass.

It is of interest to investigate patterns of uptake in different types of school, so most of the analyses were broken down into the following school types: comprehensive, academy, FE/tertiary college, grammar, independent, secondary modern and sixth form college. Table 1 presents the number of (year 13) students in each school type.

Table 1: Number and percentage of students in different school types

School type	Students (n)	Students (%)
City Academy	84,074	21.1
Comprehensive	70,096	17.6
FE/Tertiary College	92,508	23.3
Grammar	9,285	2.3
Independent	36,536	9.2
Secondary Modern	3,720	0.9
Sixth Form College	71,666	18.0

There were a large number of different qualifications recorded in the KS5 extract of the NPD in all three years, but not all of these were included in this report. To make the analyses more manageable only KS5 qualifications that are worth at least the same as an A level were included. Only students in year 13 were included in this report, but any level 3 qualifications that these students took in previous years were counted (once only, so retakes were ignored).

¹ Free schools are also included in this category

Results

Overall volumes

Table 2 summarises the volume of level 3 qualifications taken by students in year 13. This is broken down by the size of the qualification in terms of A level equivalence, with an overall total volume (= sum of (number taken x equivalent size)) for each qualification type. Thus A levels were available as a single size only, whereas BTECs, OCR Nationals and VRQs were equivalent to various A level sizes, including 1.25, 1.5, 1.75, 2.25, 2.5, 2.75 and 3.25. The International Baccalaureate (IB) was recorded in the NPD as 5.5 A levels.

There were some equivalent sizes (2.25, 3.25, 3.5) with very few entries and these have been excluded from the table (although not from the total volumes calculation).

Table 2: Number of level 3 qualifications taken by students in year 13, by type and A level equivalent size

Qualification	A level equivalent size									Total volume
	1	1.25	1.5	1.75	2	2.5	2.75	3	5.5	
A level	712,891	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	712,891
BTEC	60,546	84	25,934	55	22,961	0	218	55,392	0	312,457
VRQ	4,758	8,528	3,916	2,531	684	857	2,333	1,775	0	41,770
Applied A level	22,821	0	67	0	3,654	0	0	0	0	30,230
IB	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3392	18,656
Cambridge Tech	4,040	0	356	0	1,158	0	0	314	0	7,832
Applied AS level (dbl)	4,296	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4,296
Pre-U	3,239	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3,239
OCR Nat	1,743	0	0	0	550	0	0	74	0	3,065
Diploma	0	0	193	0	0	0	0	0	0	290

Figures 1 and 2 show the change in total volumes over time (excluding Pre-U and Diplomas because of their very small volumes). The data for 2008 to 2012 was taken from the previous report looking at uptake over time (Gill, 2013). A levels and BTECs are presented in a separate graph because their volumes were much greater than the other qualifications.

The numbers of A levels taken changed relatively little over the period. There was a large increase in the volume of BTECs taken (up from 185,000 in 2008 to 312,000 in 2014). The volume of VRQs also increased substantially over the period, whilst there was a significant decline in Applied A levels. OCR Nationals showed an increase up until 2012, before a substantial decline. However, a new suite of vocational qualifications (Cambridge Technicals) was recently launched by OCR, with volumes of 7,832 in 2014.

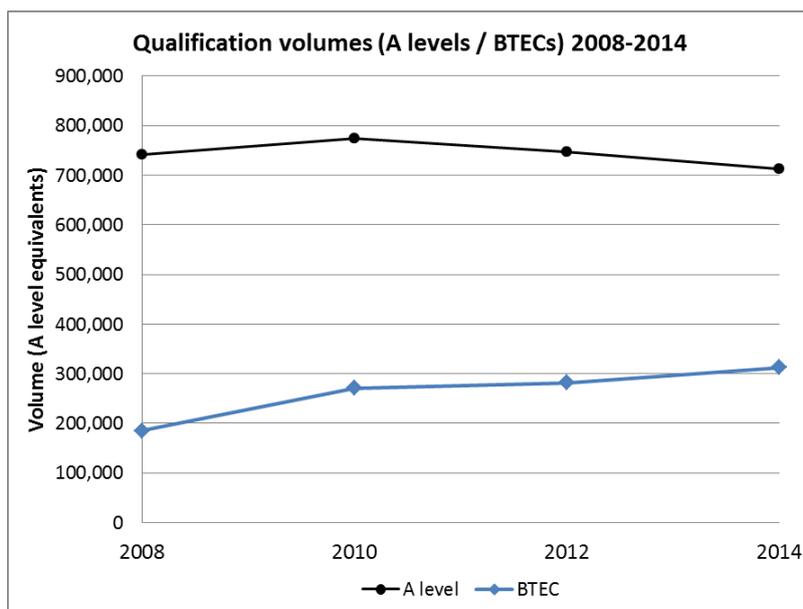


Figure 1: Volumes of A levels and BTECs taken by students 2008-2014

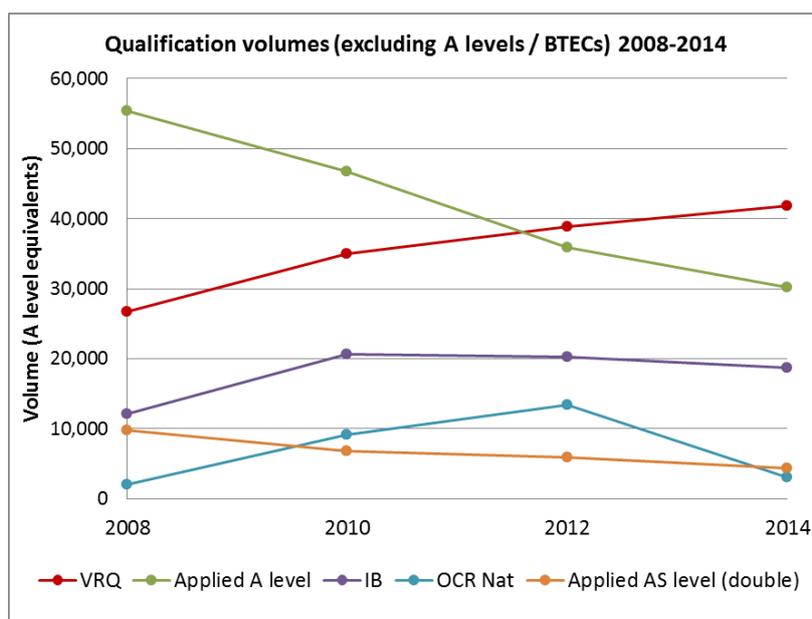


Figure 2: Volumes of level 3 qualifications (excluding A level and BTEC) taken by students 2008-2012

Table 3 presents the uptake of the different qualifications, by students in each school type, and overall. A levels were by far the most likely qualification to be taken at level 3 (64.1% of students), followed by BTECs (taken by 36.3% of students). None of the other qualifications were taken by more than 6.4% of students. Grammar and independent school students were the most likely to take A levels, whilst those in FE/tertiary colleges and secondary modern schools were the most likely to take BTECs. VRQs were most likely to be taken by FE/tertiary college students and both OCR Nationals and Cambridge Technicals were most likely to be taken in secondary modern schools. Pre-U and IB were most likely to be taken in independent or grammar schools.

Table 3: Uptake of level 3 qualifications, by school type (% of year 13 students)

Qualification	Acad	Comp	FE/Ter	Grammar	Ind	Sec Mod	6th Form	All
A level	86.2	85.3	21.9	95.0	92.6	59.1	76.4	64.1
Applied A level	9.9	10.9	1.0	2.3	1.3	11.3	7.4	5.9
Applied AS level	1.4	1.9	0.5	0.2	0.0	2.0	1.6	1.1
BTEC	21.9	25.2	66.0	1.1	4.0	51.9	31.3	36.3
Diploma	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0
IB	0.9	0.2	0.2	4.6	4.5	0.7	0.2	0.9
OCR National	1.1	1.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	2.9	0.3	0.5
Cambridge Tech	2.4	2.8	0.2	0.1	0.2	5.8	0.6	1.3
Pre-U	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.9	4.1	0.1	0.0	0.5
VRQ	1.5	1.1	16.2	0.1	0.2	2.8	1.9	6.4

Combinations of qualifications taken by students

Table 4 presents the top 10 most common combinations of qualifications taken by students. It is a sign of the variety of qualifications available currently that there were 105 different combinations of qualifications taken by students.

Table 4: Most popular combinations of level 3 qualifications taken by students

Combination	Students	% Students
A level	202,528	50.9
BTEC	107,504	27.0
A level-BTEC	26,727	6.7
VRQ	21,419	5.4
A level-Applied A level	13,959	3.5
IB	3,347	0.8
A level-Applied A level-BTEC	2,310	0.6
A level-Applied A level-Applied AS level (dbl)	2,090	0.5
BTEC-VRQ	2,073	0.5
Applied A level-BTEC	1,919	0.5

Most students took only one qualification (they did not combine qualifications). Half of students took A levels only, followed by students taking BTECs only (27%). The most common combination of two or more qualifications was A level and BTEC (6.7%).

Appendix A presents the 5 most common combinations in each school type.

Uptake of individual subjects

This section presents the uptake of the five most popular subjects at level 3² – mathematics, biology, psychology, history and chemistry.

² Level 3 qualifications are dominated by A levels so these subjects were all A levels.

Mathematics

Table 5 presents the uptake of different mathematics qualifications.

Table 5: Uptake of different mathematics qualifications

Qualification	Students	% of all students	% of all taking mathematics
A level	71,566	18.0	98.8
IB	589	0.1	0.8
Pre-U	274	0.1	0.4
Any	72,425	18.2	100.0

Very few students took an alternative to A level in mathematics. Students were more likely to take an IB than a Pre-U.

Table 6 breaks down the uptake by different school types. IB entries were highest in independent schools, with more than half of all IB entries (although still only 1% of independent school students). All but 6 entries for Pre-U were from independent schools.

Table 6: Uptake of different mathematics qualifications, by school type

	Qualification	Students	% of all students	% of all taking mathematics
Academies	A level	21,025	25.01	99.51
	IB	98	0.12	0.46
	Pre-U	6	0.01	0.03
	Any	21,129	25.13	100.00
Comprehensive	A level	15,041	21.46	99.89
	IB	17	0.02	0.11
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	15,058	21.48	100.00
FE/Tertiary College	A level	3,944	4.26	99.65
	IB	14	0.02	0.35
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	3,958	4.28	100.00
Grammar	A level	3,891	41.91	98.73
	IB	51	0.55	1.29
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	3,941	42.44	100.00
Independent	A level	13,723	37.56	95.62
	IB	364	1.00	2.54
	Pre-U	267	0.73	1.86
	Any	14,352	39.28	100.00
Secondary Modern	A level	425	11.42	100.00
	IB	0	0.00	0.00
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	425	11.42	100
Sixth Form College	A level	12,889	17.98	99.89
	IB	14	0.02	0.11
	Pre-U	1	0.00	0.01
	Any	12,903	18.00	100.00

Biology

Table 7 presents the uptake of different biology qualifications.

Table 7: Uptake of different biology qualifications

Qualification	Students	% of all students	% of all taking biology
A level	52,316	13.2	97.4
IB	1,303	0.3	2.4
Pre-U	97	0.0	0.2
Any	53,714	13.5	100.0

Again, almost all entries in biology were A levels, although there were more IB entries than in mathematics (over 1,300). There were almost 100 Pre-U entries.

Table 8 breaks down uptake levels by school type. IB entries were most common in independent schools, followed by academies and grammar schools. Almost all Pre-U entries were in independent schools.

Table 8: Uptake of different biology qualifications, by school type

	Qualification	Students	% of all students	% of all taking biology
Academies	A level	15,893	18.90	98.28
	IB	278	0.33	1.72
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	16,171	19.23	100.00
Comprehensive	A level	11,746	16.76	99.57
	IB	51	0.07	0.43
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	11,797	16.83	100.00
FE/Tertiary College	A level	3,104	3.36	97.27
	IB	87	0.09	2.73
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	3,191	3.45	100.00
Grammar	A level	2,883	31.05	94.62
	IB	166	1.79	5.45
	Pre-U	2	0.02	0.07
	Any	3,047	32.82	100.00
Independent	A level	8,051	22.04	92.12
	IB	594	1.63	6.80
	Pre-U	95	0.26	1.09
	Any	8,740	23.92	100.00
Secondary Modern	A level	340	9.14	97.14
	IB	10	0.27	2.86
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	350	9.41	100.00
Sixth Form College	A level	9,796	13.67	99.22
	IB	77	0.11	0.78
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	9,873	13.78	100.00

Psychology

Table 9 presents the uptake of different psychology qualifications. Just below 600 students took an IB qualification, with 15 taking a Pre-U.

Table 9: Uptake of different psychology qualifications

Qualification	Students	% of all students	% of all taking psychology
A level	49,111	12.4	98.8
IB	579	0.1	1.2
Pre-U	15	<0.1	<0.1
Any	49,705	12.5	100.0

Table 10 breaks down the uptake by different school types. Academy schools had the highest IB uptake in terms of numbers (185), with grammar schools having the highest percentage uptake (5.13% of psychology students).

Table 10: Uptake of different psychology qualifications, by school type

	Qualification	Students	% of all students	% of all taking psychology
Academies	A level	14,476	17.22	98.74
	IB	185	0.22	1.26
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	14,661	17.44	100.00
Comprehensive	A level	12,627	18.01	99.83
	IB	21	0.03	0.17
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	12,648	18.04	100.00
FE/Tertiary College	A level	4,660	5.04	98.58
	IB	67	0.07	1.42
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	4,727	5.11	100.00
Grammar	A level	1,719	18.51	94.87
	IB	93	1.00	5.13
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	1,812	19.52	100.00
Independent	A level	3,415	9.35	96.06
	IB	125	0.34	3.52
	Pre-U	15	0.04	0.42
	Any	3,555	9.73	100.00
Secondary Modern	A level	376	10.11	100.00
	IB	0	0.00	0.00
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	376	10.11	100.00
Sixth Form College	A level	11,270	15.73	99.40
	IB	68	0.09	0.60
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	11,338	15.82	100.00

History

Table 11 presents the uptake of different history qualifications. There were over 800 entries for the IB and 358 for the Pre-U.

Table 11: Uptake of different history qualifications

Qualification	Students	% of all students	% of all taking history
A level	44,327	11.1	97.4
IB	839	0.2	1.8
Pre-U	358	0.1	0.8
Any	45,520	11.4	100.0

Table 12 breaks down uptake by school type. Uptake of IB history (as a percentage) was highest in independent (4.9%) and grammar schools (5.6%). The majority of Pre-U entries were in independent schools (277), although there were a reasonable number in academy schools (77).

Table 12: Uptake of different history qualifications, by school type, in 2009/10

	Qualification	Students	% of all students	% of all taking history
Academies	A level	13,433	15.98	98.12
	IB	180	0.21	1.31
	Pre-U	77	0.09	0.56
	Any	13,690	16.28	100.00
Comprehensive	A level	10,810	15.42	99.71
	IB	31	0.04	0.29
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	10,841	15.47	100.00
FE/Tertiary College	A level	2,693	2.91	97.89
	IB	58	0.06	2.11
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	2,751	2.97	100.00
Grammar	A level	1,725	18.58	94.21
	IB	102	1.10	5.57
	Pre-U	4	0.04	0.22
	Any	1,831	19.72	100.00
Independent	A level	6,718	18.39	91.30
	IB	363	0.99	4.93
	Pre-U	277	0.76	3.76
	Any	7,358	20.14	100.00
Secondary Modern	A level	414	11.13	98.10
	IB	8	0.22	1.90
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	422	11.34	100.00
Sixth Form College	A level	8,174	11.41	99.38
	IB	51	0.07	0.62
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	8,225	11.48	100.00

Chemistry

Table 13 presents the uptake of different chemistry qualifications. Almost 1,000 students took an IB in the subject, with around 150 taking a Pre-U.

Table 13: Uptake of different chemistry qualifications

Qualification	Students	% of all students	% of all taking Chemistry
A level	44,139	11.1	97.5
IB	966	0.2	2.1
Pre-U	153	<0.1	0.3
Any	45,254	11.4	100.0

The breakdown by school type (Table 14) showed the IB to be most popular in independent schools (5.23% of students taking chemistry) and grammar schools (5.19%). Almost all of the Pre-U entries were in independent schools (149 students).

Table 14: Uptake of different chemistry qualifications, by school type

	Qualification	Students	% of all students	% of all taking Chemistry
Academies	A level	12,920	15.37	98.81
	IB	153	0.18	1.17
	Pre-U	3	0.00	0.02
	Any	13,075	15.55	100.00
Comprehensive	A level	9,403	13.41	99.54
	IB	43	0.06	0.46
	Pre-U	.	0.00	0.00
	Any	9,446	13.48	100.00
FE/Tertiary College	A level	2,345	2.53	96.66
	IB	80	0.09	3.30
	Pre-U	1	0.00	0.04
	Any	2,426	2.62	100.00
Grammar	A level	2,632	28.35	94.81
	IB	144	1.55	5.19
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	2,776	29.90	100.00
Independent	A level	7,851	21.49	93.04
	IB	441	1.21	5.23
	Pre-U	149	0.41	1.77
	Any	8,438	23.10	100.00
Secondary Modern	A level	278	7.47	96.86
	IB	9	0.24	3.14
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	287	7.72	100.00
Sixth Form College	A level	8,382	11.70	99.27
	IB	62	0.09	0.73
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	8,444	11.78	100.00

Uptake of individual subjects in other level 3 qualifications

Finally the uptake of the most common subjects to be taken in other popular qualifications (BTECs, Applied A levels and VRQs) is summarised below. These are worth reporting as they make up a substantial percentage of the volume of qualifications taken at level 3.

Tables 15 to 17 present the 10 most popular subjects taken in these qualifications in the three different years.

Table 15: Uptake of popular BTEC subjects

Subject	Students	Uptake (% of all students)
Sports Studies	20,769	5.2
Business Studies	19,647	4.9
Computer Appreciation / Introduction	17,086	4.3
Health Studies	16,902	4.3
Applied Sciences	11,052	2.8
Art & Design	9,764	2.5
Multimedia	9,684	2.4
Public Services	8,429	2.1
Speech & Drama	5,489	1.4
Tourism	5,106	1.3

Table 16: Uptake of popular Applied A level subjects

Subject	Students	Uptake (% of all students)
Health & Social Care	7,467	1.9
Applied Business	6,693	1.7
Applied ICT	5,521	1.4
Applied Science	2,806	0.7
Travel & Tourism	1,514	0.4
Performing Arts	1,054	0.3
Applied Art & Design	545	0.1
Leisure & Recreation	407	0.1
Media: Communication & Production	313	0.1
Applied Engineering	222	0.1

Table 17: Uptake of popular VRQ subjects

Subject	Students	Uptake (% of all students)
Childcare Skills	5,250	1.3
Beauty Therapy	2,306	0.6
Hairdressing Services	2,292	0.6
Art & Design	1,802	0.5
Vehicle Maintenance / Repair	1,294	0.3
Animal Husbandry: Specific Animals	1,100	0.3
Finance / Accounting (General)	1,079	0.3
Food Preparation (General)	1,039	0.3
Construction Carpentry / Shopfitting / Erection	901	0.2
Electrical installation (Buildings / Construction)	814	0.2

Reference

Gill, T. (2013). *Uptake of level 3 qualifications in English schools 2008-2012. Statistics Report Series No.59.* Cambridge Assessment. Available at <http://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/Images/150207-uptake-of-level-3-qualifications-in-english-schools-2008-2012.pdf>

Appendix A: Most common combinations of level 3 qualifications by school type

Table A1: Most popular combinations of qualifications taken, by school type

	Combination	Students	% Students
Academy	A level	55,980	66.2
	A level-BTEC	7,839	9.3
	BTEC	7,442	8.8
	A level-Applied A level	5,008	5.9
	A level-Applied A level-BTEC	851	1.0
Comprehensive	A level	44,967	63.4
	A level-BTEC	7,784	11.0
	BTEC	7,171	10.1
	A level-Applied A level	4,363	6.2
	A level-Applied A level-BTEC	831	1.2
FE/Tertiary College	BTEC	64,081	63.7
	A level	17,187	17.1
	VRQ	14,441	14.4
	A level-BTEC	2,136	2.1
	BTEC-VRQ	1,079	1.1
Grammar	A level	8,483	91.0
	IB	410	4.4
	A level-Applied A level	190	2.0
	A level-Pre-U	82	0.9
	A level-BTEC	63	0.7
Independent	A level	31,924	86.2
	IB	1,614	4.4
	A level-Pre-U	1,172	3.2
	A level-BTEC	685	1.8
	BTEC	650	1.8
Secondary Modern	A level	1,240	32.9
	BTEC	1,139	30.3
	A level-BTEC	558	14.8
	A level-Applied A level	185	4.9
	BTEC-Cambridge Technical	75	2.0
Sixth Form College	A level	44,096	58.7
	BTEC	16,503	22.0
	A level-BTEC	6,859	9.1
	A level-Applied A level	3,404	4.5
	VRQ	818	1.1