

# Uptake of level 3 qualifications in English schools 2015

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## Introduction

This report is a follow up to a previous report analysing the uptake of different qualifications by pupils at the end of Key Stage 5 (KS5) in English schools (Gill, 2015). The previous report looked at uptake in 2013/14. The current report is an update for 2014/2015.

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) for 2014/15. 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). It should be noted that for some qualifications, such as BTECs, 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 (including free schools), 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	97,473	24.7
Comprehensive	67,245	17.0
FE/Tertiary College	91,283	23.1
Grammar	9,390	2.4
Independent	38,438	9.7
Secondary Modern	3,275	0.8
Sixth Form College	77,338	19.6

There were a large number of different qualifications recorded in the KS5 extract of the NPD, 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).

## 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, Cambridge Technicals and VRQs (Vocationally Related Qualifications) were equivalent to various A level sizes, including 1.25, 1.5, 1.75, 2, 2.5, 2.75 and 3. 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	732,166	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	<b>732,166</b>
BTEC	70,858	129	39,888	78	21,404	0	138	49,050	0	<b>321,614</b>
VRQ	3,175	7,143	4,129	1,752	404	457	2,014	1,245	0	<b>33,138</b>
Applied A level	21,235	0	98	0	3,048	0	0	0	0	<b>27,478</b>
IB	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3,340	<b>18,370</b>
Cambridge Technical	5,983	0	640	0	1,551	0	0	455	0	<b>11,410</b>
Applied AS level (dbl)	3,829	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	<b>3,829</b>
Pre-U	3,320	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	<b>3,320</b>
Diploma	0	0	183	0	0	0	0	0	0	<b>275</b>

Figures 1 and 2 show the change in total volumes over time (excluding Pre-U and Diplomas because of their very small volumes). The results for 2008 to 2014 were taken from the previous reports looking at uptake over time (Gill, 2013, 2015). 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 322,000 in 2015). The volume of VRQs increased substantially until 2014, before declining in 2015. There was also a significant decline in Applied A levels.

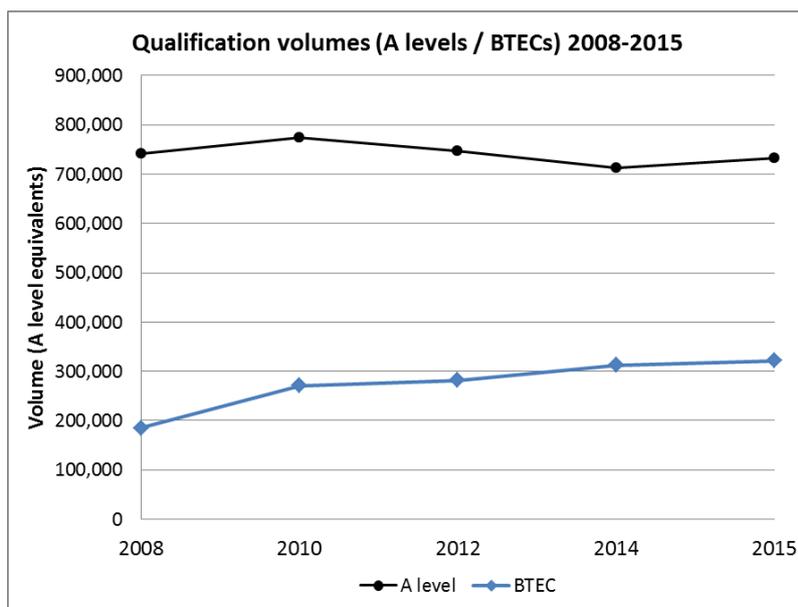


Figure 1: Volumes of A levels and BTECs taken by students 2008-2015

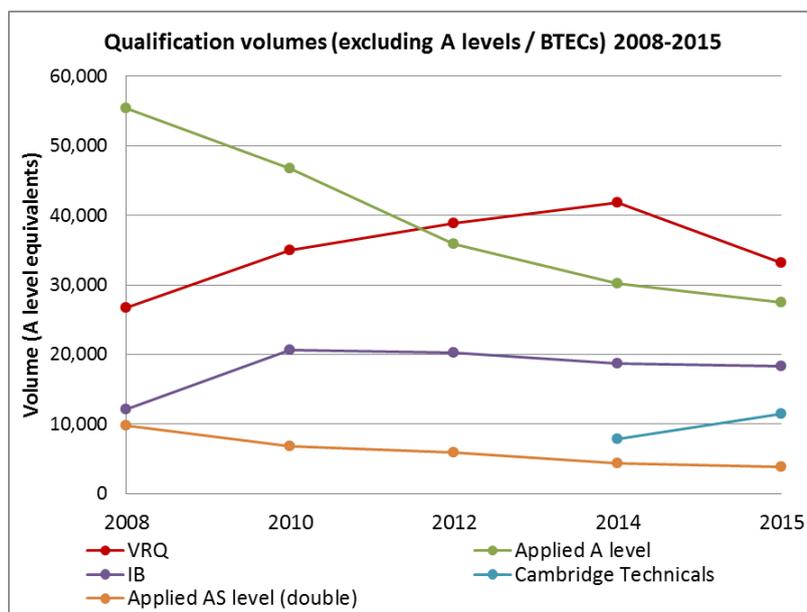


Figure 2: Volumes of level 3 qualifications (excluding A level and BTEC) taken by students 2008-2015

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 (64.0% of students), followed by BTECs (taken by 37.7% of students). None of the other qualifications were taken by more than 5.2% 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 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	85.9	84.7	21.3	94.9	92.6	62.7	74.4	<b>64.0</b>
Applied A level	9.1	9.5	0.8	2.0	1.0	8.5	6.1	<b>5.2</b>
Applied AS level	1.1	1.5	0.4	0.2	0.1	1.3	1.5	<b>0.9</b>
BTEC	23.4	26.6	68.6	1.3	4.3	52.9	34.0	<b>37.7</b>
Cambridge Tech	3.1	3.8	0.4	0.1	0.3	6.8	1.2	<b>1.8</b>
Diploma	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	<b>0.0</b>
IB	0.8	0.1	0.1	4.6	4.5	1.5	0.2	<b>0.8</b>
Pre-U	0.4	0.0	0.0	1.0	4.2	0.2	0.0	<b>0.5</b>
VRQ	0.6	0.6	13.0	0.1	0.2	2.1	1.4	<b>4.9</b>

### ***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 79 different combinations of qualifications taken by students.

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

Combination	Students	% Students
A level	213,843	51.3
BTEC	118,420	28.4
A level-BTEC	29,558	7.1
VRQ	18,284	4.4
A level-Applied A level	13,091	3.1
IB	3,291	0.8
A level-Cambridge Technical	2,816	0.7
A level-Applied A level-BTEC	2,181	0.5
Applied A level-BTEC	1,968	0.5
A level-Pre-U	1,826	0.4

Most students took only one qualification (they did not combine qualifications). Half of students took A levels only, followed by students taking BTECs only (28.4%). The most common combination of two or more qualifications was A level and BTEC (7.1%).

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 3<sup>1</sup> – mathematics, biology, psychology, history and English literature.

<sup>1</sup> 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	74,448	17.85	98.92
IB	549	0.13	0.73
Pre-U	268	0.06	0.36
Any	75,260	18.05	100.00

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 less than 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	23,937	24.56	99.63
	IB	88	0.09	0.37
	Pre-U	5	0.01	0.02
	Any	24,027	24.65	100.00
Comprehensive	A level	14,114	20.99	99.95
	IB	7	0.01	0.05
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	14,121	21.00	100.00
FE/Tertiary College	A level	3,715	4.07	99.76
	IB	9	0.01	0.24
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	3,724	4.08	100.00
Grammar	A level	3,890	41.43	98.76
	IB	49	0.52	1.24
	Pre-U	1	0.01	0.03
	Any	3,939	41.95	100.00
Independent	A level	14,679	38.19	95.97
	IB	356	0.93	2.33
	Pre-U	262	0.68	1.71
	Any	15,296	39.79	100.00
Secondary Modern	A level	430	13.13	98.85
	IB	5	0.15	1.15
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	435	13.28	100.00
Sixth Form College	A level	13,040	16.86	99.92
	IB	10	0.01	0.08
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	13,050	16.87	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	51,730	12.40	97.42
IB	1,310	0.31	2.47
Pre-U	61	0.01	0.11
Any	53,101	12.73	100.00

Again, almost all entries in biology were A levels, although there were more IB entries than in mathematics (over 1,300). There were just 61 Pre-U entries.

Table 8 breaks down uptake levels by school type. The highest number of IB entries was in independent schools, followed by academies and grammar schools. 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	17,433	17.88	98.27
	IB	307	0.31	1.73
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	17,740	18.20	100.00
Comprehensive	A level	10,531	15.66	99.74
	IB	27	0.04	0.26
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	10,558	15.70	100.00
FE/Tertiary College	A level	2,762	3.03	98.08
	IB	54	0.06	1.92
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	2,816	3.08	100.00
Grammar	A level	2,752	29.31	94.60
	IB	157	1.67	5.40
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	2,909	30.98	100.00
Independent	A level	7,773	20.22	91.91
	IB	623	1.62	7.37
	Pre-U	61	0.16	0.72
	Any	8,457	22.00	100.00
Secondary Modern	A level	308	9.40	92.22
	IB	26	0.79	7.78
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	334	10.20	100.00
Sixth Form College	A level	9,696	12.54	99.28
	IB	70	0.09	0.72
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	9,766	12.63	100.00

## Psychology

Table 9 presents the uptake of different psychology qualifications. Just below 600 students took an IB qualification, with 16 taking a Pre-U.

Table 9: Uptake of different psychology qualifications

Qualification	Students	% of all students	% of all taking psychology
A level	51,807	12.42	98.86
IB	583	0.14	1.11
Pre-U	16	<0.01	0.03
Any	52,406	12.57	100.00

Table 10 breaks down the uptake by different school types. Independent schools had the highest IB uptake in terms of numbers (161), with grammar schools having the highest percentage uptake (6.80% 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	17,005	17.45	99.06
	IB	158	0.16	0.92
	Pre-U	4	0.00	0.02
	Any	17,167	17.61	100.00
Comprehensive	A level	11,951	17.77	99.88
	IB	14	0.02	0.12
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	11,965	17.79	100.00
FE/Tertiary College	A level	4,458	4.88	99.31
	IB	31	0.03	0.69
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	4,489	4.92	100.00
Grammar	A level	1,699	18.09	93.20
	IB	124	1.32	6.80
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	1,823	19.41	100.00
Independent	A level	3,773	9.82	95.62
	IB	161	0.42	4.08
	Pre-U	12	0.03	0.30
	Any	3,946	10.27	100.00
Secondary Modern	A level	339	10.35	97.98
	IB	7	0.21	2.02
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	346	10.56	100.00
Sixth Form College	A level	12,011	15.53	99.60
	IB	48	0.06	0.40
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	12,059	15.59	100.00

## History

Table 11 presents the uptake of different history qualifications. There were over 800 entries for the IB and 409 for the Pre-U.

Table 11: Uptake of different history qualifications

Qualification	Students	% of all students	% of all taking history
A level	48,310	11.58	97.56
IB	801	0.19	1.62
Pre-U	409	0.10	0.83
Any	49,520	11.87	100.00

Table 12 breaks down uptake by school type. Uptake of IB history (as a percentage) was highest in independent (4.6%) and grammar schools (4.8%). The majority of Pre-U entries were in independent schools (365), although there were a reasonable number in academy schools (41).

Table 12: Uptake of different history qualifications, by school type

	Qualification	Students	% of all students	% of all taking history
Academies	A level	16,197	16.62	98.70
	IB	172	0.18	1.05
	Pre-U	41	0.04	0.25
	Any	16,410	16.84	100.00
Comprehensive	A level	10,784	16.04	99.78
	IB	24	0.04	0.22
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	10,808	16.07	100.00
FE/Tertiary College	A level	2,950	3.23	98.60
	IB	42	0.05	1.40
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	2,992	3.28	100.00
Grammar	A level	1,893	20.16	95.22
	IB	95	1.01	4.78
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	1,988	21.17	100.00
Independent	A level	6,845	17.81	90.61
	IB	344	0.89	4.55
	Pre-U	365	0.95	4.83
	Any	7,554	19.65	100.00
Secondary Modern	A level	389	11.88	97.49
	IB	10	0.31	2.51
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	399	12.18	100.00
Sixth Form College	A level	8,872	11.47	99.24
	IB	65	0.08	0.73
	Pre-U	3	0.00	0.03
	Any	8,940	11.56	100.00

## English literature

Table 13 presents the uptake of different English literature qualifications. Almost 1,700 students took an IB in the subject, with around 550 taking a Pre-U.

Table 13: Uptake of different English literature qualifications

Qualification	Students	% of all students	% of all taking English literature
A level	44,859	10.76	95.24
IB	1,696	0.41	3.60
Pre-U	552	0.13	1.17
Any	47,102	11.29	100.00

The breakdown by school type (Table 14) showed the IB to be most popular in independent schools (10.97% of students taking English literature) and grammar schools (9.52%). Almost all of the Pre-U entries were in independent schools (407 students) or academies (140).

Table 14: Uptake of different English literature qualifications, by school type

	Qualification	Students	% of all students	% of all taking English literature
Academies	A level	15,245	15.64	96.64
	IB	390	0.40	2.47
	Pre-U	140	0.14	0.89
	Any	15,775	16.18	100.00
Comprehensive	A level	10,793	16.05	99.50
	IB	54	0.08	0.50
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	10,847	16.13	100.00
FE/Tertiary College	A level	2,597	2.84	97.71
	IB	61	0.07	2.29
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	2,658	2.91	100.00
Grammar	A level	1,892	20.15	90.48
	IB	199	2.12	9.52
	Pre-U	5	0.05	0.24
	Any	2,091	22.27	100.00
Independent	A level	6,012	15.64	83.38
	IB	791	2.06	10.97
	Pre-U	407	1.06	5.64
	Any	7,210	18.76	100.00
Secondary Modern	A level	375	11.45	94.46
	IB	22	0.67	5.54
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	397	12.12	100.00
Sixth Form College	A level	7,475	9.67	98.60
	IB	106	0.14	1.40
	Pre-U	0	0.00	0.00
	Any	7,581	9.80	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)
Business Studies	23,417	5.6
Sports Studies	21,940	5.3
Computer Appreciation / Introduction	20,143	4.8
Health Studies	19,873	4.8
Applied Sciences	13,566	3.3
Multimedia	10,657	2.6
Art & Design	9,434	2.3
Public Services	9,140	2.2
Speech & Drama	6,041	1.4
Engineering Studies	5,999	1.4

Table 16: Uptake of popular Applied A level subjects

Subject	Students	Uptake (% of all students)
Health & Social Care	7,171	1.7
Applied Business	6,587	1.6
Applied ICT	4,425	1.1
Applied Science	2,748	0.7
Travel & Tourism	1,408	0.3
Performing Arts	854	0.2
Applied Art & Design	347	0.1
Leisure & Recreation	327	0.1
Media: Communication & Production	285	0.1
Applied Engineering	229	0.1

Table 17: Uptake of popular VRQ subjects

Subject	Students	Uptake (% of all students)
Childcare Skills	3,678	0.9
Beauty Therapy	1,913	0.5
Hairdressing Services	1,785	0.4
Vehicle Maintenance / Repair	1,141	0.3
Animal Husbandry: Specific Animals	1,108	0.3
Art & Design	928	0.2
Food Preparation (General)	862	0.2
Electrical installation (Buildings / Construction)	779	0.2
Construction Carpentry / Shopfitting / Erection	658	0.2
Sports Studies	510	0.1

## 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>

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## 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	64,670	66.3
	A level-BTEC	9,825	10.1
	BTEC	9,572	9.8
	A level-Applied A level	5,335	5.5
	A level-Cambridge Technical	1,201	1.2
Comprehensive	A level	42,673	63.5
	A level-BTEC	7,811	11.6
	BTEC	7,446	11.1
	A level-Applied A level	3,643	5.4
	A level-Cambridge Technical	1,042	1.5
FE/Tertiary College	BTEC	59,293	65.0
	A level	16,497	18.1
	VRQ	10,919	12.0
	A level-BTEC	2,172	2.4
	BTEC-VRQ	810	0.9
Grammar	A level	8,553	91.1
	IB	397	4.2
	A level-Applied A level	168	1.8
	A level-Pre-U	92	1.0
	A level-BTEC	62	0.7
Independent	A level	33,014	85.9
	IB	1,673	4.4
	A level-Pre-U	1,298	3.4
	A level-BTEC	796	2.1
	BTEC	737	1.9
Secondary Modern	A level	1,089	33.3
	BTEC	945	28.9
	A level-BTEC	640	19.5
	A level-Applied A level	153	4.7
	A level-Cambridge Technical	69	2.1
Sixth Form College	A level	45,157	58.4
	BTEC	17,353	22.4
	A level-BTEC	7,776	10.1
	A level-Applied A level	2,897	3.7
	VRQ	830	1.1