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# Candidates awarded the A\* grade at A level in 2016

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## Introduction

This report investigates the awarding of A\* at A level in 2016. 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<sup>1</sup>, 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 three 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)<sup>2</sup>

More specifically, this report investigates candidates who achieved these grades overall, by school type, by gender and by level of income-related 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.

## Data, variables and methods

Data was extracted from the National Pupil Database (NPD) for 2016. 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 income-related 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 263,670 A level candidates who were aged 17 or 18 at the start of the school year 2015/2016. In previous years' reports (e.g., Zanini, 2013; Gill, 2015) data was restricted to students in year 13. However, the 2016 NPD does not attribute the year group to KS5 students, so instead the data was restricted to students who gained an A level in the 2015/16 school year and who were aged 17 or 18 at the start of it. Consequently, the composition of the students included in these analyses may differ from previous years, and therefore comparisons between years must be interpreted with caution. A levels gained by these students in previous years were included to allow for exams taken in year 12 or earlier.

Students study A levels at several different types of school. In previous reports in this series, these were classified into seven groups. However, to better reflect variability among schools,

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<sup>1</sup> In reformed A levels (the first tranche of which will be awarded for the first time in 2017) assessment is linear and therefore there will be no 'A2' units. Instead A\* grades will be awarded based on overall marks from all papers taken.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

nine categories were used in this report<sup>3</sup> : Academy (Comprehensive); Academy (Modern); Academy (Selective); Comprehensive; Further Education (FE) College; Grammar; Independent; Secondary Modern; Sixth Form College. Candidates who gained qualifications at more than one school during KS5 were associated with their latest school (i.e. in 2015/16).

The level of income-related deprivation experienced by candidates was measured using the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI), obtained from the Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC), provided by the DfE. This index is based on the home postcode, and describes the percentage of children in a very small geographical area (Lower Layer Super Output Area or LSOA) living in low income families<sup>4</sup>. Candidates were divided into three equal groups (low, medium and high deprivation) using percentile values. As deprivation data was only available for less than 60% of candidates, results on deprivation cannot 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 2014 or 2012, obtained by Gill (2015) and Zanini (2013) 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.

## Results

### Candidates taking three or more A levels

Table 1a shows that 73.09% of candidates took three or more A levels in 2016, almost identical to the figure for 2014. Table 1b shows the same information, but excluding 138 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).*

<b>A levels taken</b>	<b>2012</b>		<b>2014</b>		<b>2016</b>	
	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Fewer than 3</b>	62,518	25.80	63,229	26.88	70,966	26.91
<b>3 or more</b>	179,760	74.20	171,985	73.12	192,704	73.09
<b>Total</b>	242,278	100	235,214	100	263,670	100

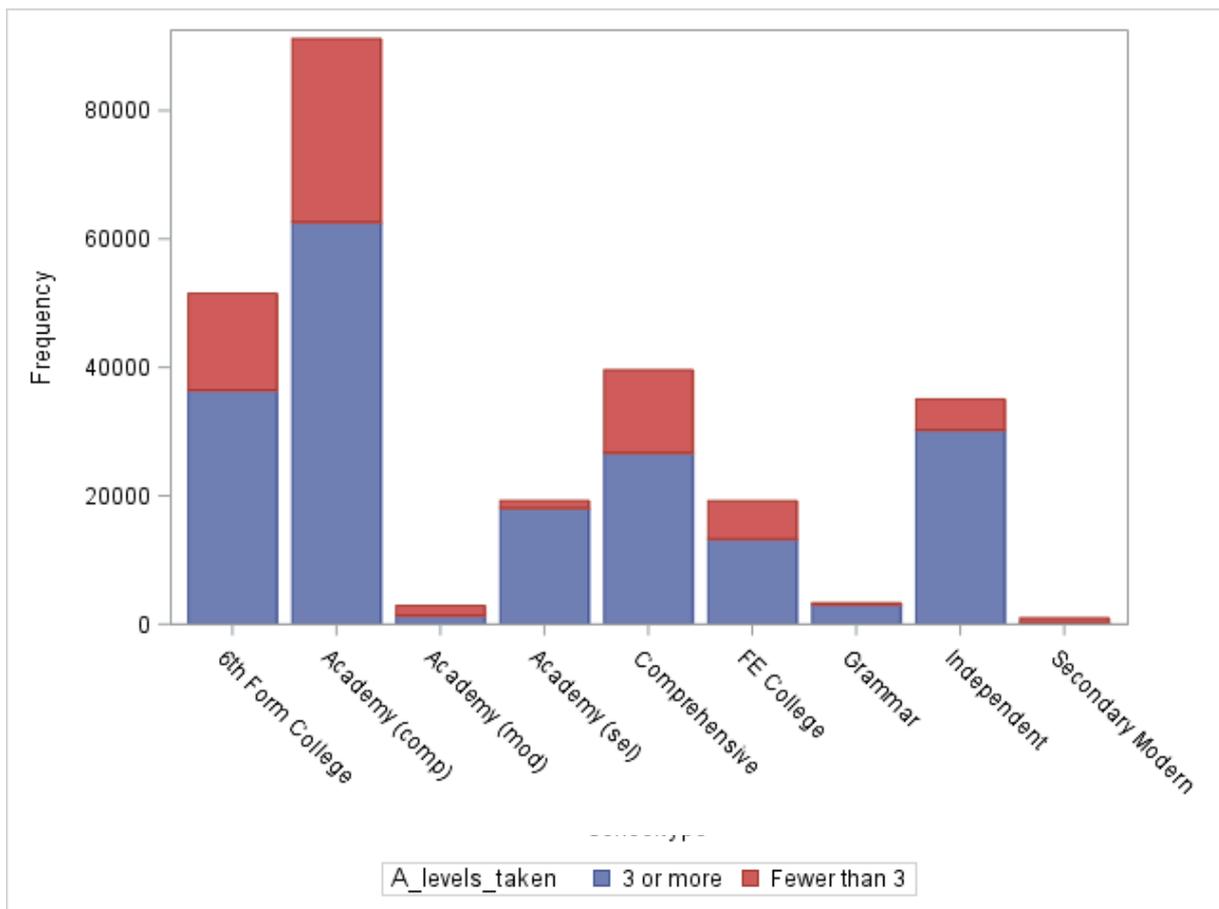
<sup>3</sup> New categories combine school type and selection policy, and are derived from Edubase, the Department for Education's register of educational establishments in England and Wales. Matching was carried out via the school's Unique Reference Number (URN). For further information, see Statistics Report No. 113 (Gill, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> For further information on IDACI calculation, including definitions of children, families, and income deprivation, see <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-indices-of-deprivation-2015-technical-report>

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

<b>A levels taken</b>	<b>2012</b>		<b>2014</b>		<b>2016</b>	
	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Fewer than 3</b>	66,643	27.57	65,685	27.97	72,492	27.51
<b>3 or more</b>	175,083	72.43	169,175	72.03	191,040	72.49
<b>Total</b>	241,726	100	234,860	100	263,532	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 was highest at selective academies and grammar schools (around 94%), followed by independent schools (86%). It was considerably lower at FE colleges (69%) and secondary modern schools (48% for academies and 35% for non-academies). These figures were similar when GS and CT were 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).*

<b>A levels taken</b>		<b>School type</b>									<b>Total</b>
		<b>Acad. (comp)</b>	<b>Acad. (mod)</b>	<b>Acad. (sel)</b>	<b>Comp</b>	<b>FE College</b>	<b>Gram.</b>	<b>Ind.</b>	<b>Sec. Mod.</b>	<b>6<sup>th</sup> Form College</b>	
<b>Fewer than 3</b>	<b>N</b>	28,540	1,521	1,132	12,890	5,916	192	4,770	639	15,027	70,627
	<b>%</b>	31.30	52.43	5.89	32.55	30.79	5.82	13.61	65.34	29.18	26.86
<b>3 or more</b>	<b>N</b>	62,651	1,380	18,102	26,713	13,295	3,108	30,282	339	36,479	192,349
	<b>%</b>	68.70	47.57	94.11	67.45	69.21	94.18	86.39	34.66	70.82	73.14
<b>Total</b>	<b>N</b>	91,191	2,901	19,234	39,603	19,211	3,300	35,052	978	51,506	262,976
	<b>%</b>	34.68	1.1	7.31	15.06	7.31	1.25	13.33	0.37	19.59	100

*Note: For 694 candidates the school type was not available.*

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

<b>A levels taken</b>		<b>School type</b>									<b>Total</b>
		<b>Acad. (comp)</b>	<b>Acad. (mod)</b>	<b>Acad. (sel)</b>	<b>Comp</b>	<b>FE College</b>	<b>Gram.</b>	<b>Ind.</b>	<b>Sec. Mod.</b>	<b>6<sup>th</sup> Form College</b>	
<b>Fewer than 3</b>	<b>N</b>	29,237	1,537	1,279	13,210	5,928	219	4,823	644	15,276	72,153
	<b>%</b>	32.08	53.05	6.65	33.39	30.86	6.64	13.76	66.05	29.67	27.45
<b>3 or more</b>	<b>N</b>	61,895	1,360	17,947	26,356	13,283	3,080	30,226	331	36,207	190,685
	<b>%</b>	67.92	46.95	93.35	66.61	69.14	93.36	86.24	33.95	70.33	72.55
<b>Total</b>	<b>N</b>	91,132	2,897	19,226	39,566	19,211	3,299	35,049	975	51,483	262,838
	<b>%</b>	34.67	1.10	7.31	15.05	7.31	1.26	13.33	0.37	19.59	100

*Note: For 694 candidates the school type was not available.*

## 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 2.7 (= 716,966 / 263,670) A levels.

The tables show that 8.5% of grades awarded were A\* grades in 2016, which was slightly lower than the results in 2014. The percentage of candidates awarded A or A\* in 2016 (26.6%) was slightly lower than in either 2014 or 2012.

Figure 2 shows the percentages of A\* grades awarded to candidates from different schools. This percentage was higher for candidates attending independent schools, grammar schools or selective academies (17%, 14% and 14% respectively) than for candidates from other institutions.

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

<b>Grades</b>	<b>2012</b>		<b>2014</b>		<b>2016</b>	
	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>A*</b>	57,791	8.37	58,732	9.00	60,985	8.51
<b>A</b>	132,822	19.24	122,163	18.73	129,936	18.12
<b>B</b>	179,986	26.07	172,256	26.40	192,505	26.85
<b>C</b>	163,664	23.71	154,885	23.74	175,789	24.52
<b>D</b>	100,726	14.59	93,549	14.34	103,620	14.45
<b>E</b>	43,076	6.24	39,794	6.10	42,004	5.86
<b>U</b>	12,227	1.77	10,992	1.68	12,127	1.69
<b>Total</b>	690,292	100	652,371	100	716,966	100

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

<b>Grades</b>	<b>2012</b>		<b>2014</b>		<b>2016</b>	
	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>A*</b>	56,153	8.59	57,773	9.20	60,470	8.57
<b>A</b>	129,679	19.84	120,040	19.11	128,872	18.27
<b>B</b>	173,344	26.52	167,558	26.67	190,204	26.97
<b>C</b>	154,792	23.68	149,005	23.72	172,693	24.49
<b>D</b>	92,385	14.14	88,227	14.04	101,026	14.32
<b>E</b>	37,552	5.75	36,433	5.80	40,578	5.75
<b>U</b>	9,656	1.48	9,246	1.47	11,408	1.62
<b>Total</b>	653,561	100	628,282	100	705,251	100

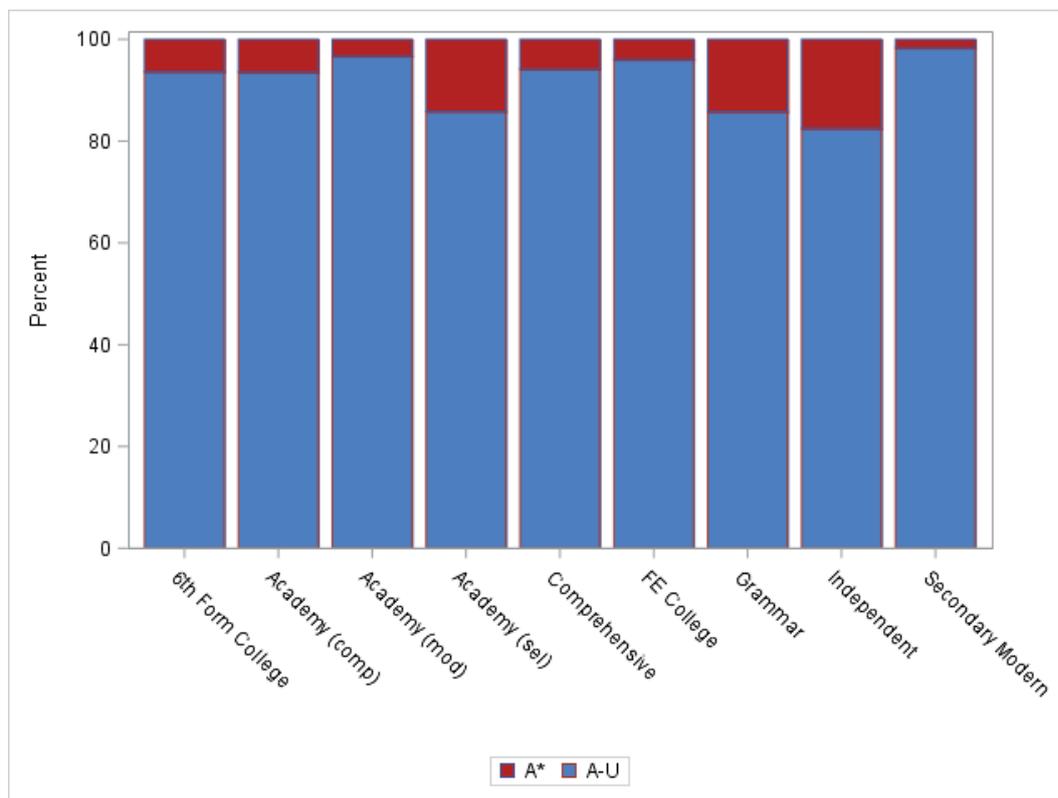


Figure 2: A\* grades at A level certifications in 2014 by school type (all subjects).

### 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, two different percentages are reported (the percentage of the total number of A level candidates and the percentage of those candidates taking at least three A levels). For example, the number of candidates achieving at least three A levels at A or better in 2016 was 29,634. This represents 11.2% of the total number of candidates taking at least one A level and 15.4% of those taking at least three A levels.

Results show that the percentage of candidates achieving three A\* (or better) was less than 2% of the total number of A level candidates. Just over 11% of A level candidates achieved at least three As. The overall picture does not change with GS and CT A levels excluded.

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

Met criteria	2012			2014			2016		
	N	% <sup>1</sup>	% <sup>2</sup>	N	% <sup>1</sup>	% <sup>2</sup>	N	% <sup>1</sup>	% <sup>2</sup>
A*A*A* or better	5,183	2.14	2.88	5,270	2.24	3.06	5,030	1.91	2.61
A*A*A or better	12,004	4.95	6.68	12,123	5.15	7.05	12,065	4.58	6.26
A*AA or better	22,315	9.21	12.41	21,715	9.23	12.63	22,104	8.38	11.47
AAA or better	31,312	12.92	17.42	29,071	12.36	16.90	29,634	11.24	15.38
ABB or better	n/a	n/a	n/a	62,736	26.67	36.48	66,546	25.24	34.53

Note: %<sup>1</sup> and %<sup>2</sup> 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.**

<b>Met criteria</b>	<b>2011</b>			<b>2012</b>			<b>2014</b>		
	<b>N</b>	<b>%<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>%<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>%<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>%<sup>2</sup></b>
<b>A*A*A* or better</b>	4,907	2.03	2.80	5,091	2.17	3.01	4,958	1.88	2.60
<b>A*A*A or better</b>	11,519	4.77	6.58	11,834	5.04	7.00	11,912	4.52	6.24
<b>A*AA or better</b>	21,543	8.92	12.31	21,257	9.05	12.57	21,845	8.29	11.43
<b>AAA or better</b>	30,264	12.53	17.29	28,438	12.11	16.81	29,272	11.11	15.32
<b>ABB or better</b>	n/a	n/a	n/a	61,670	26.26	36.45	65,984	25.04	34.54

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

## 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 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 4a shows that 2,125 female candidates achieved at least three A levels at A\*. This number represents 1.45% of all female A level candidates and 42.25% of all candidates who achieved at least three A levels at A\*.

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

<b>Met criteria</b>	<b>Number meeting criterion</b>		<b>Of those meeting criterion...</b>		<b>% of A level students meeting criterion</b>	
	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>% Male</b>	<b>% Female</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>
<b>A*A*A* or better</b>	2,905	2,125	57.75	42.25	2.48	1.45
<b>A*A*A or better</b>	6,300	5,765	52.22	47.78	5.38	3.93
<b>A*AA or better</b>	10,738	11,366	48.58	51.42	9.17	7.76
<b>AAA or better</b>	14,062	15,572	47.45	52.55	12.00	10.63
<b>ABB or better</b>	29,118	37,428	43.76	56.24	24.86	25.54
<b>Total A level candidates</b>	117,136	146,533	44.43	55.57	100	100

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

<b>Met criteria</b>	<b>Number meeting criterion</b>		<b>Of those meeting criterion...</b>		<b>% of A level students meeting criterion</b>	
	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>% Male</b>	<b>% Female</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>
<b>A*A*A* or better</b>	2,881	2,077	58.11	41.89	2.46	1.42
<b>A*A*A or better</b>	6,240	5,672	52.38	47.62	5.33	3.87
<b>A*AA or better</b>	10,639	11,206	48.70	51.30	9.09	7.65
<b>AAA or better</b>	13,913	15,359	47.53	52.47	11.89	10.49
<b>ABB or better</b>	28,908	37,076	43.81	56.19	24.70	25.31
<b>Total A level candidates</b>	117,058	146,473	44.42	55.58	100	100

It is interesting to note that whilst over 55% of the total A level candidates were female, fewer than 43% of those achieving three A\*s or better were female. Just over half (52.55%) of candidates achieving at least three As at A level were female.

### **School Type**

Tables 5a and 5b show the number and proportion of candidates within each type of school who met the five different grade criteria, including and excluding GS and CT. The highest proportion achieving three A\* grades or better were in independent schools (5.59%), grammar schools (4.73%) or selective academies (4.69%). The lowest proportions were in secondary modern schools (0% in non-academies and 0.28% in academies) and FE colleges (0.45%).

Similarly, percentages achieving at least three grade As were much higher in independent schools (26.52%), grammar schools (23.85%) and selective academies (25.19%) than in secondary modern schools (1.02% in non-academies and 2.45% in academies) and FE colleges (4.34%).

### **Deprivation**

Tables 6a and 6b show the number and percentage of candidates within each deprivation group 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. For example, 2.23% of A level candidates in the low deprivation group achieved three A\* grades or better, compared with just 0.85% in the high deprivation group.

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

<i>Met criteria</i>	<i>School type</i>																	
	<b>Acad. (comp)</b>		<b>Acad. (mod)</b>		<b>Acad. (sel)</b>		<b>Comp</b>		<b>FE College</b>		<b>Gram.</b>		<b>Ind.</b>		<b>Sec. Mod.</b>		<b>6<sup>th</sup> Form College</b>	
	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>A*A*A* or better</b>	979	1.07	8	0.28	903	4.69	365	0.92	87	0.45	156	4.73	1,960	5.59	0	0.00	562	1.09
<b>A*A*A or better</b>	2,614	2.87	27	0.93	2,061	10.72	1,007	2.54	282	1.47	339	10.27	4,183	11.93	2	0.20	1,531	2.97
<b>A*AA or better</b>	5,089	5.58	56	1.93	3,621	18.83	2,022	5.11	599	3.12	593	17.97	7,096	20.24	8	0.82	2,980	5.79
<b>AAA or better</b>	6,879	7.54	71	2.45	4,846	25.19	2,738	6.91	833	4.34	787	23.85	9,296	26.52	10	1.02	4,111	7.98
<b>ABB or better</b>	17,903	19.63	224	7.72	9,237	48.02	7,253	18.31	2,589	13.48	1,506	45.64	16,975	48.43	41	4.19	10,698	20.77
<b>Total A level candS</b>	<b>91,191</b>		<b>2,901</b>		<b>19,234</b>		<b>39,603</b>		<b>19,211</b>		<b>3,300</b>		<b>35,052</b>		<b>978</b>		<b>51,506</b>	

*Note: For 694 candidates the school type was not available.*

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

<i>Met criteria</i>	<i>School type</i>																	
	<b>Acad. (comp)</b>		<b>Acad. (mod)</b>		<b>Acad. (sel)</b>		<b>Comp</b>		<b>FE College</b>		<b>Gram.</b>		<b>Ind.</b>		<b>Sec. Mod.</b>		<b>6<sup>th</sup> Form College</b>	
	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>A*A*A* or better</b>	965	1.06	8	0.28	878	4.57	351	0.89	87	0.45	154	4.67	1,952	5.57	0	0.00	553	1.07
<b>A*A*A or better</b>	2,578	2.83	27	0.93	2,012	10.46	981	2.48	281	1.46	336	10.18	4,161	11.87	2	0.21	1,515	2.94
<b>A*AA or better</b>	5,019	5.51	56	1.93	3,544	18.43	1,970	4.98	598	3.11	581	17.61	7,072	20.18	8	0.82	2,957	5.74
<b>AAA or better</b>	6,781	7.44	70	2.42	4,735	24.63	2,672	6.75	830	4.32	770	23.34	9,268	26.44	10	1.03	4,073	7.91
<b>ABB or better</b>	17,717	19.44	218	7.53	9,096	47.31	7,139	18.04	2,589	13.48	1,494	45.29	16,931	48.31	41	4.21	10,639	20.67
<b>Total A level candS</b>	<b>91,132</b>		<b>2,897</b>		<b>19,226</b>		<b>39,566</b>		<b>19,211</b>		<b>3,299</b>		<b>35,049</b>		<b>975</b>		<b>51,483</b>	

*Note: For 694 candidates the school type was not available.*

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

<i>Met criteria</i>	Number meeting criterion				Of those meeting criterion...				% of A level students meeting criterion			
	Missing	High	Medium	Low	% Missing	% High	% Medium	% Low	Missing	High	Medium	Low
<b>A*A*A* or better</b>	2,625	445	801	1,159	52.19	8.85	15.92	23.04	2.45	0.85	1.52	2.23
<b>A*A*A or better</b>	6,027	1,168	2,064	2,806	49.95	9.68	17.11	23.26	5.63	2.24	3.92	5.40
<b>A*AA or better</b>	10,729	2,327	3,940	5,108	48.54	10.53	17.82	23.11	10.03	4.46	7.49	9.84
<b>AAA or better</b>	14,321	3,239	5,256	6,818	48.33	10.93	17.74	23.01	13.38	6.21	9.99	13.13
<b>ABB or better</b>	30,473	8,720	12,233	15,120	45.79	13.10	18.38	22.72	28.48	16.72	23.26	29.12
<b>Total A level cand</b> s	107,011	52,149	52,590	51,920	40.59	19.78	19.95	19.69	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>	Number meeting criterion				Of those meeting criterion...				% of A level students meeting criterion			
	Missing	High	Medium	Low	% Missing	% High	% Medium	% Low	Missing	High	Medium	Low
<b>A*A*A* or better</b>	2,608	437	787	1,126	52.60	8.81	15.87	22.71	2.44	0.84	1.50	2.17
<b>A*A*A or better</b>	5,988	1,145	2,028	2,751	50.27	9.61	17.02	23.09	5.60	2.20	3.86	5.30
<b>A*AA or better</b>	10,681	2,292	3,865	5,007	48.89	10.49	17.69	22.92	9.98	4.40	7.36	9.65
<b>AAA or better</b>	14,252	3,191	5,148	6,681	48.69	10.90	17.59	22.82	13.32	6.12	9.80	12.88
<b>ABB or better</b>	30,370	8,649	12,066	14,899	46.03	13.11	18.29	22.58	28.39	16.60	22.96	28.71
<b>Total A level cand</b> s	106,983	52,116	52,545	51,888	40.60	19.78	19.94	19.69	100	100	100	100

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