

Progression to further study or employment of students who leave post-16 education with A level grades which have “little currency”

Conference Abstract

Carmen Vidal Rodeiro

Tim Gill

BERA conference, 9–11 September 2025

Author contact details:

Carmen Vidal Rodeiro & Tim Gill
Cambridge University Press & Assessment
Research Division
Shaftesbury Road
Cambridge
CB2 8EA
UK

carmen.vidalrodeiro@cambridge.org
tim.gill@cambridge.org
<https://www.cambridge.org/>

As a department of the university, Cambridge University Press & Assessment is respected and trusted worldwide, managing three world-class examination boards, and maintaining the highest standards in educational assessment and learning. We are a not-for-profit organisation.

Cambridge University Press & Assessment is committed to making our documents accessible in accordance with the WCAG 2.1 Standard. We're always looking to improve the accessibility of our documents. If you find any problems or you think we're not meeting accessibility requirements, contact our team: [Research Division](#)
If you need this document in a different format [contact us](#) telling us your name, email address and requirements and we will respond within 15 working days.

How to cite this publication:

Vidal Rodeiro, C.L., & Gill, T. (2025, September 9–11). *Progression to further study or employment of students who leave post-16 education with A level grades which have "little currency"* [Paper presentation]. Annual Conference of the British Educational Research Association (BERA), University of Sussex, UK

Abstract

Introduction and aim of the research

In England, A-levels are the most popular qualification taken by students post-16. They can lead to further study, university, training, or work. Students usually take three or more A-levels over two years. However, not all A-level students achieve good grades. For example, in 2023, 7.3% of all A-levels were graded E (the lowest grade available).

What happens to students who leave school/college with A-levels at grade E? Are their opportunities for progression different from those of students with better grades? Do they have good progression outcomes and/or good labour market returns?

Recent research has looked at destination measures for several cohorts of students who completed education in England and provided information about what young people were doing in the following twelve months after leaving education (e.g., Anderson and Nelson, 2021; Robinson and Bunting, 2021). However, research on progression based on the qualifications achieved during post-16 study and the performance on them is very limited. Through this work we seek to add to the area of research that investigates the relationship between 16-19 qualifications and education/employment destinations. In particular, we aim to understand the destinations of students who leave education with grades which have little currency (e.g., grade E) in their A-levels.

Data and Methods

Research on post-16 education and labour market pathways is possible using the Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data, which connects individuals' education with their employment, benefits and earnings. In the current research, we used the LEO data to select students who achieved their A-levels between 2004/05 and 2011/12. The focus was on students with at least two A-levels and who achieved: 'E grades in all of them' or 'D or E grades in all of them'.

Students were followed-up until 2019/20 (e.g., those in the 2004/05 cohort for 15 years; those in the 2011/12 cohort for eight) and their destinations identified. These included, amongst others, sustained education and sustained employment.

Outcomes for the students in the groups of interest were compared to those of other groups: students with two or more A-levels, all at grades C or above; students with other qualifications (e.g., BTECs).

Descriptive statistics, overall and broken down by students' characteristics such as gender or socio-economic deprivation, were produced to show progression. For example, we produced tables/graphs showing the percentages of young people (amongst the groups of interest and the comparators) in each destination outcome, by year after completion of their post-16 education (Year 1 to Year 15). We also carried out multilevel logistic regression analyses, with two different outcomes: being in sustained education or being in sustained employment, after controlling for individual-level characteristics and cohort.

Findings

As expected, in the first few years after completing post-16 education, students with low A-level grades (best grade E) had the lowest progression to sustained education. The opposite pattern was observed for the progression to sustained employment: students with low A-level grades had the highest progression in the first few years after completing their

education (followed very closely by students with BTEC qualifications) and those with the best A-level grades (lowest grade C) had the lowest. However, after six or seven years, the likelihood of being in sustained education or in sustained employment was fairly similar for all types of students.

Females progressed at higher rates than males to sustained education and to sustained employment. The gender gap in progression to sustained education was slightly wider for the students with the lowest A-level grades and narrowed over time. On the contrary, the gender gap in progression to sustained employment increased over time and was generally the widest for students with the highest A-level grades.

There were some differences, by the student's level of deprivation, between the different groups of students when looking at progression to sustained employment. For the students with the lowest A-level grades, those in the low deprivation category had the highest rates of progression to sustained employment and those in the high deprivation category had the lowest. In contrast, for students with the highest A-level grades, differences in progression were fairly small. Progression to sustained education was similar for all types of students, independently of their level of deprivation.

Conclusions

The outcomes of this work provide evidence for policy decision-making which is likely to benefit young people in England. As students with poor outcomes at the end of compulsory education should not be forgotten, knowing their destinations will help understand what happens to them and whether policy changes/interventions are needed to improve their prospects.

References

- Anderson, O. and Nelson, M. (2021). *Post 16 education and labour market activities, pathways and outcomes*. London: Department for Education.
- Robinson, D. and Bunting, F. (2021). *A narrowing path to success? 16-19 curriculum breadth and employment outcomes*. London: The Royal Society: Education Policy Institute.

Full report

Vidal Rodeiro, C.L., & Gill, T. (2025). *Progression of students who leave post-16 education with low A level grades*. Cambridge University Press & Assessment. Available at <https://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/Images/740185-progression-of-students-who-leave-post-16-education-with-low-a-level-grades.pdf>