

Geography A level and AS results 2016

Context

There have been two significant policy changes for many A level and AS examinations this year.

“... the AS in reformed subjects is now decoupled from the A level in England; and there are new AS specifications in England and Wales in a range of subjects. This year, A levels remain unaffected by reforms.” (JCQ, 2016b)

The Joint Council for Qualifications analysis of entry data shows:

- AS entries down 13.7% (down 1.9% in 2015) from 1,385,901 to 1,196,380
- AS outcomes in England reformed subjects are stable when compared with like-for-like equivalent AS 2015 outcomes
- A level entries down 1.7% (up 2.0% in 2015) from 850,749 to 836,705
- A level outcomes stable – 0.1 percentage point shift at A* and A*-A and unchanged at A*-E

The decline in AS entries is largely within the reformed subjects that have fallen overall by 24% although the falls are very variable with some as low as 10% and others as high as 40%. Comparisons of geography with other subjects at AS level should therefore consider whether the subject was reformed and decoupled in 2016. Art and Design; Biology; Business Studies; Chemistry; Computing; Economics; English; History; Physics; Psychology and Sociology were reformed. These policy changes will not be implemented for geography until 2017 so there appears to have been less impact on entries at AS level.

A level geography entries

Since 2015 the number of entries for geography A level decreased by 832 (down 2.3%) to 36363. The total number of A levels taken (all subjects) fell 1.7% from 850,749 to 836,705 while the cohort size of 18 year olds fell by 3.1%. The change in Geography entries was therefore broadly in line with overall entry patterns.

Geography stayed at 8th place in terms of entries (figure 1). The decrease in entries from females (-656) was greater than for males (-176). The traditional gender imbalance in favour of males that existed up until 2013 has now disappeared. The gender balance is now 50.0: 50.0 (F:M) with 19 more entries from females (figures 4a and 4b).

Female entries for all subjects are greater – ratio is 55.2:44.8 (F:M).

Geography performance for the top grades (A*/A) fell 1.3% from 27.5% to 26.2% (figure 2). The fall in A*/A grades for all subjects was 0.1% to 25.8% so performance in geography is still just above the national average. A* grades in geography fell by 1.1% to 6.0% which is considerably lower than the national rate of 8.1% for all subjects.

The gender gap in performance at A*/A grade reduced to 9.6% (10.7% in 2015) with 31.0% of females achieving A*/A grades compared to 21.4% of males (figures 4a and 4b).

For geography the overall pass rate (A*-E) fell to 99.0% with a gender difference of 0.5% in favour of females (99.2%). The national pass rate (A*-E) for all subjects was unchanged at 98.1%.

A level entries were 65.2% of the 2015 AS entries. This is a fall of 1.6% compared to 2015 and continues the downward trend from the high of 86.2% in 2008.

AS level

Geography as a non-reformed subject moved up to 7th place in terms of subject entries from 10th in 2015 (figure 5).

Entries for geography AS fell by 935 (-1.7%) (figure 6) to 54866 while nationally AS entries declined 13.7%. This was largely the result of the expected decline in entries for the reformed and decoupled AS levels.

There was little gender difference in the decrease with female entries down by -434 and male entries -501 (figures 7a, b and c). Gender imbalance was slightly reduced to 49.7:50.3 (F:M).

Performance in geography at the top grade (A) rose 0.7% to 22.4% while the overall pass rate (A-E) was 91.4% up 0.7% from 2015 (figure 5). The gender gap in performance in the top grades increased to 7.7% (6.1% in 2014) with 18.6% (no change) of males achieving an A grade compared to 26.3% of females (up 1.6%) (figures 7a,b and c).

A level geography entries

Key points 2016

- Geography is the 8th most popular A level subject with 36363 entries in 2016 (figure 1).
- Total geography entries decreased by 832 (figure 2).
- The A*-A geography pass rate fell by 1.3% to 26.2% in 2016
- The A*-E geography pass fell by 0.1% to 99.1%

Figure 1 Top GCE A level subjects in 2016 by entry

Ranking	Subject	% of total	Number of candidates
1 (1)	Mathematics	11.0	92163
2 (2)	English	10.1	84710
3 (3)	Biology	7.5	62650
4 (4)	Psychology	7.1	59469
5 (5)	History	6.5	54731
6 (6)	Chemistry	6.2	51811
7 (7)	Art and Design Subjects	5.2	43242
8 (8)	Geography	4.3	36363
9 (9)	Physics	4.2	35344
10 (10)	Sociology	4.1	33980

(2015 ranking in brackets)

JCQ (2016c)

Geography A level trends 2007-16 (Figure 2)

In 2016

- there was a fall of 832 entries (-1.7%) which is largely in line with the fall in entries (-2.1%) and slightly smaller than the fall in the 18 year old cohort (-3.1%)
- the share of geography entries as a proportion of national entries fell by 0.1% to 4.3%
- the A*-A pass rate fell by 1.3% to 26.2%
- the overall pass rate (A*-E) fell by 0.1% to 99.1%. This is the first fall since 2012.

The overall number of A level geography entries was relatively stable between 2007 and 2016 with annual fluctuations less than ± 900 entries.

The one exception was 2015 where there was a large increase in entries in England, although the cohort size fell. This followed an increase in AS numbers in 2014-15. There was an increase in GCSE entries in England in 2012-14 associated with the introduction of the EBacc accountability measure for English schools. This appeared to encourage some English schools to alter their option choice systems to the advantage of geography. There has also been a move towards 'facilitating subjects' in England in recent years.

Figure 2: Trends in A level geography entries between 2007 and 2016

Year	Entries	% of total entry	A*	A	B	C	D	E	A*-E	A*/A	Change from previous year
2007	31653	3.9		27.3	27.5	23.7	14.4	5.8	98.7	27.3	-869
2008	31714	3.8		28.6	27.7	23.7	13.7	5.1	98.8	28.6	61
2009	32227	3.8		27.3	27.5	23.7	14.4	5.8	98.7	27.3	513
2010	32063	3.8	6.8	23.4	27.6	23.1	13.4	4.5	98.8	30.2	-164
2011	31226	3.6	7.1	23.0	27.9	23.6	13.3	4.1	99.0	30.1	-837
2012	32005	3.7	6.3	22.8	29	24.6	12.6	3.9	99.2	29.1	779
2013	32872	3.9	5.6	22.9	29.4	24.5	12.7	4.1	99.2	28.5	867
2014	33007	4.0	6.3	21.2	29.3	24.9	13.1	4.4	99.2	27.5	135
2015	37195	4.4	7.1	20.4	29.5	24.6	13.6	4.0	99.2	27.5	4188
2016	36363	4.3	6.0	20.2	29.7	25.6	13.4	4.1	99.1	26.2	-832

A level entries by country (figure 3)

In 2016:

- All three countries had a decrease in entries. England and Wales had the smallest percentage decrease because of the much larger overall entry.
- Entries in both Northern Ireland and Wales were 5.9% of the total cohort entries. This is down 0.2% from 2015.
- Entries in England are lower as a proportion of total entries at 4.3%
- Entries in Northern Ireland and Wales have remained relatively stable throughout this period with year on year changes of less than ± 200 ($\pm 10\%$)
- Changes in entries in England have usually been less than $\pm 2\%$ apart from 2015 with the large increase (+13%) probably because of the increased interest in facilitating subjects for University entrance in England.

Figure 3: Geography A level entries by country 2008-2016

Year	England	Northern Ireland	Wales	UK (not Scotland)	Change England	Change NI	Change Wales	Change All
2008	28029	1915	1770	31714	274 0.9%	-200 -9.3%	-13 -0.7%	61 0.2%
2009	28360	2001	1866	32227	331 1.1%	86 4.0%	96 5.0%	513 1.5%
2010	28525	1806	1732	32063	165 0.5%	-195 -9.1%	-134 -7.0%	-164 -0.5%
2011	27604	1878	1744	31226	-921 -3.0%	72 3.3%	12 0.6%	-837 -2.4%
2012	28430	1868	1707	32005	826 2.7%	-10 -0.5%	-37 -1.9%	779 2.3%
2013	29126	2001	1745	32872	696 2.3%	133 6.2%	38 2.0%	867 2.5%
2014	29476	1896	1635	33007	350 1.2%	-105 -4.9%	-110 -5.7%	135 0.4%
2015	33414 4.3%	1974 6.1%	1807 6.1%	37195 4.4%	3938 13.0%	78 3.6%	172 9.0%	4188 12.2%
2016	32765	1864	1734	36363	-649	-110	-73	-832

	4.3%	5.9%	5.9%	4.3%	-2.1%	-5.1%	-3.8%	-2.4%
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Gender: A level

Figure 4a Male entries for geography 2007-2016

Year	Entries	% TOTAL ENTRY	A*	A	B	C	D	E	A-E	A*-A	% male
2007	17343	4.2	na	22.8	26.6	25.2	16.8	7	98.4	22.8	54.8
2008	17195	4.5	na	24.6	26.9	25.3	15.5	6.2	98.5	24.6	54.2
2009	17531	4.5	na	25.2	27.8	24.6	15.2	6.1	98.9	25.2	54.4
2010	17333	4.4	5.1	20.7	27.2	24.9	15.3	5.4	98.6	25.8	54.1
2011	16739	4.2	5.5	19.8	27.9	25.3	15.3	5	98.8	25.3	53.6
2012	16784	4.2	4.7	19.4	28.1	27.2	14.9	4.6	98.9	24.1	52.4
2013	16776	4.3	4.3	19.2	28.5	26.9	14.9	5.2	99	23.5	51.0
2014	16489	4.3	4.8	17.5	28.3	27.4	15.5	5.4	98.9	22.3	50.0
2015	18348	4.8	5	17.1	28.7	27.1	16	5	98.9	22.1	49.3
2016	18172	4.8	4.3	17.1	29.3	27.6	15.5	4.9	98.7	21.4	50.0

Figure 4b Female entries for geography 2007-2016

Year	Entries	% TOTAL ENTRY	A*	A	B	C	D	E	A-E	A*-A	% female
2007	14310	3.3	na	32.7	28.8	21.9	11.5	4.2	99.1	32.7	45.2
2008	14519	3.2	na	33.3	28.7	21.7	11.7	3.8	99.2	33.3	45.8
2009	14696	3.2	na	35.9	28.3	20.7	10.9	3.5	99.3	35.9	45.6
2010	14730	3.2	8.8	26.6	28.1	21	11.1	3.6	99.2	35.4	45.9
2011	14487	3.1	9	26.5	28.1	21.7	10.9	3.2	99.4	35.5	46.4
2012	15221	3.3	8.1	26.6	30	21.6	10.2	3	99.5	34.7	47.6
2013	16096	3.5	7.0	26.6	30.5	21.9	10.5	3.0	99.5	33.6	49.0
2014	16518	3.6	7.8	25.0	30.1	22.6	10.6	3.3	99.4	32.8	50.0
2015	18847	4	9.2	23.6	30.2	22.3	11.1	3.1	99.5	32.8	50.7
2016	18191	3.9	7.7	23.3	30.1	23.6	11.2	3.3	99.2	31.0	50.0

- Female entries have increased rapidly since 2010. This has altered the traditional male imbalance in entries. In 2016 there were 19 more female entries giving a ratio of 50.0:50.0 (F:M). Total entries for A level are skewed towards females (55:45)
- Females continue to perform better at the higher grades. A*: 7.7%; A*-A: 31.0%
- Male performance at higher grades A*: 4.8%; A*-A: 21.4%

AS geography entries 2016

Figure 5: Top AS subjects in 2016

Ranking	Subject	% of total entries	Number of candidates
1 (1)	Mathematics	13.6	162741
2 (2)	English	8.0	95538
3 (3)	Biology	7.2	86506
4 (4)	Psychology	7.0	83228
5 (5)	Chemistry	6.1	73414
6 (6)	History	5.1	61304
7 (10)	Geography	4.6	54866
8 (7)	Physics	4.6	54619
9 (9)	Sociology	4.1	49313
10 (11)	Business Studies	3.6	43087

(2015 ranking in brackets.)

Geography moved up to 7th place but all the other subjects in the top 10, except Mathematics, are reformed and de-coupled.

The reformed and de-coupled subjects are: Art & Design, Biology, Business Studies, Chemistry, Computer Science, Economics, English Literature, English Language, English Literature and Language, History, Physics, Psychology, Sociology, Welsh First Language.

When comparing reformed subjects in England taken by 17 year olds, the extent of the decline in AS entries varies significantly across subjects - between 10.9% in Computer Science and 38.4% in Art & Design. The exact reason for the spread in decline cannot be determined from this data, although it could possibly be related to whether or not candidates studied the subject at GCSE. For example, subjects such as Sociology and Business Studies, which have low GCSE take up, have relatively small reductions in AS entries (16.2% and 14.8% respectively). Conversely, subjects with high GCSE take up, such as English and Art and Design, have a greater reduction in

entries (30.2% and 38.4% respectively).

As the reforms to AS qualifications take effect, there is a mixed economy in the specifications students have taken. Some will have sat unreformed subjects either as a first sitting or a re-sit, others will have re-sat legacy specifications of subjects that have been reformed (mainly 18 year olds), and many will have taken the first sitting of the reformed AS subjects (mainly 17 year olds).

(JCQ, 2016b)

AS Geography 2016: Key points:

- There were 935 less entries for geography AS level overall (-1.7%)
- The percentage obtaining A grades increased by 0.7%.
- The share of total entries has increased 0.6% to 4.6 % of total AS levels sat
- Overall number of AS entries decreased by 13.7% reflecting the change to reformed and decoupled AS examinations for many subjects. Geography will be reformed in 2017.

Figure 6: Trends in AS level geography entries between 2006 and 2016

Year	Geography entries	Change	% of all entries	A	B	C	D	E	A-E
2006	37031	-1115	3.4	22.6	19.8	20.0	16.9	11.5	90.8
2007	36777	-254	3.3	23.0	20.0	20.3	16.3	11.2	90.8
2008	37413	636	3.3	23.3	19.8	20.3	16.1	11.3	90.8
2009	38253	840	3.2	24.5	19.0	19.3	16.0	11.6	90.4
2010	36819	-1434	3.1	24.4	19.3	19.9	16.1	11.1	90.8
2011	45302	8483	3.7	23.7	19.5	20.0	16.1	10.6	89.4
2012	45923	621	3.8	23.9	19.7	20.1	15.6	10.6	89.4
2013	47586	1663	3.5	23.6	20.1	20.1	16.0	10.1	89.9
2014	55677	8091	3.9	23.3	20.1	20.6	16.0	10.5	90.5
2015	55801	124	4.0	21.7	20.1	21.5	16.9	10.5	90.7
2016	54866	-935	4.6	22.4	20.7	21.3	16.5	10.5	91.4

Gender: AS-level

- Male entries in 2016 decreased by 501 while female entries decreased by 434
- The gender ratios of entries have shifted to 50.3:49.7 (M:F) compared with 54:46 in 2010.
- The performance at A grade stayed the same for males (18.6%) but increased 1.6% to 26.3% for females

Figure 7a: Geography AS entries by gender 2010-2016

Geography entries	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010	Change 2015-2016
AS Males	27610	28111	28222	24467	24080	24332	19842	-501
AS Females	27256	27690	27455	23119	21843	20970	16978	-434
AS Total	54866	55801	55677	47586	45923	45302	36819	-935

Figure 7b: Geography AS Performance - Male entries for geography 2012-2016

Year	Entries	Change	% OF TOTAL ENTRY	A	B	C	D	E	A-E	% male
2012	24080	-252	3.8	19.2	18.5	21.1	17.2	12.2	88.2	52.4
2013	24467	387	3.9	19.0	19.2	21.2	17.8	11.3	88.5	51.4
2014	28222	3755	4.3	19.1	19.4	21.3	17.6	11.9	10.7	50.7
2015	28111	-111	4.4	18.6	19.6	22	18	11.5	10.3	50.4
2016	27610	-501	5.0	18.6	19.9	22.0	18.0	11.7	90.2	50.3

Figure 7c: Performance: Female entries for geography 2012-2015

Year	Entries	Change	% OF TOTAL ENTRY	A	B	C	D	E	A-E	% female
2012	21843	873	3	29.0	21.1	19.1	13.7	8.9	91.8	47.6
2013	23119	1276	3.2	28.4	21.1	19.0	14.0	8.8	91.3	48.6
2014	27455	4336	3.6	27.6	20.9	19.8	14.4	9.1	91.8	49.3
2015	27690	235	3.7	24.7	20.8	21	15.7	9.5	8.3	49.6
2016	27256	-434	4.3	26.3	21.5	20.6	14.9	9.3	92.6	49.7

References

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