

# A-level results show the patterns of disadvantage the government must tackle

August 17 2024, by Mary Richardson

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Hundreds of thousands of students have now nervously opened their A-level results. These handfuls of letter grades matter, and not just to the students themselves. They have far-reaching effects on our whole education system and public views on standards in education.

The impact of changes to assessment as a result of the pandemic are still being felt. In England, assessment returned to pre-pandemic grade boundaries in 2023, and this year the number of top grades awarded has risen.

In Wales and Northern Ireland, however, this was the first year assessment returned to [pre-pandemic standards](#). As a result, the number of top grades has fallen.

We are not "back to normal." Those of us working in education still do not really know the impact it has and will have on learners, learning and teaching. Exam results only give us one snapshot in time—a sample of what a student knows or can do. They cannot ever consolidate and represent the entirety of educational experiences. We should expect changes in education and its outcomes, such as A-level results; to expect absolute consistency is unrealistic.

## **Addressing disadvantage**

We should rightly celebrate the news that [27,600 of UK 18-year-olds](#) from the most disadvantaged backgrounds have accepted a degree place. But, despite this good news, a lack of opportunity persists.

The county-level data released by [Ofqual](#) today shows a persistent

geographical difference in attainment. The chances of a student achieving an A\* or A is higher if they live in the south-east of England compared to the north-east. While 35.6% of grades received in Surrey were A or A\*, only 21.5% of grades awarded in Lincolnshire were at A or above.

Other areas, such as the Isle of Wight and Bedfordshire, also showed significantly lower than average proportions of A grades. The full details of these inequalities will be published later in the year. They should form an important piece of evidence for the government's plans to challenge inequity.

The secretary of state for education, Bridget Phillipson, recently [announced her concern](#) about disadvantage being "baked-in" to the education system in England and promised to address this inheritance.

Concern about disadvantage is a public matter. As recent research from the [Sutton Trust](#) charity shows, more than 80% of those surveyed believed that a class gap exists in England today. More than 60% felt that [young people](#) from richer families had better opportunities at school and university.

Students in [private schools](#) continue to thrive: this year, they were more than [twice as likely](#) to achieve the top grades compared to their peers in state schools.

## **Start change early**

The "baking-in" of inequality is visible through national exam results like A-levels and GCSEs, but this does not begin in secondary school. Challenging and changing this disadvantage starts in the nursery.

Early-years education is the phase that anchors children to a positive

educational lifecycle. [Research shows](#) that it matters for all aspects of a child's development.

My hope is that the new government's commitment to change will include a new recipe for reform. One that sees life-long education as built on a strong early years experience that fosters engagement with education, to achieve (in more ways than just exam results) and to understand that learning is forever.

If you're receiving A-level results today, congratulations. This is the start of a new chapter. But don't feel labeled or constrained by your grades: they are just a small part of your educational identity.

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