

EBEA Briefing – Issue 5, 2017.

Trends in GCSE and AS/A level entries

GCSE Provisional figures released by Ofqual show there were 87,450 entries for GCSE business in 2017, down by about 4% from 2016, and 5,700 in economics, down by 7%. The decreases in business and economics were less than the fall in entries across all non-EBacc subjects (11%). Subjects that are going to be discontinued in GCSE in the future, such as leisure and tourism, saw very substantial falls in entries. EBacc subjects showed an overall increase of 9%, mainly due to a rise in entries for English language and literature. There has been a steady decline in entries in business since 2015 but entries in economics, albeit from a small base, have been increasing until this year. The evidence indicates that the EBacc and Progress/Attainment 8 measures have some impact on GCSE entries in business and economics but at the moment it is not a dramatic one. The decline in entries in business may have to some extent been cushioned by schools switching from vocational business courses, such as Btec and OCR nationals, to GCSE due to external examinations playing a larger part in their assessment.

AS There has been a very considerable decline of 42% in AS entries across all subjects between 2016 and 2017. This is thought to have been primarily caused by the decoupling of AS from A level, so that AS results no longer contribute to the final A level grade. It may also have been caused by funding issues which have made it difficult for schools and colleges to run separate AS and A level groups, even though the qualifications were designed so that they could be co-taught. The decline in entries in business (57%) and in economics (60%) has been even more significant. It is clear that many schools and colleges have abandoned AS and are just teaching two year A level courses. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the decision on whether or not to teach AS is often taken by senior managers on a school and college wide basis. It remains to be seen as to what impact this will have on results.

A level Overall, entries for A level have remained more or less stable between 2016-2017. However, in business entries in 2017 rose to 32,550, an increase of 12.6% from 2016, and in economics they rose to 29,450, an increase of 3.6%. The significant increase in business entries may have been caused to some extent by schools and colleges switching away from vocational courses as more external examinations have been introduced. The number of entries in economics has been growing rapidly in recent years to being only around 3,000 fewer than in business. Ten years ago entries in economics were less than half those in business. The growth in economics may have been caused by the negative attitude of some Russell group universities towards business as an entry qualification compared to economics. More positively, it may also have been caused by an increased interest in economics sparked by events over the past few years and the high employment rate and earnings of graduates in economics. These changes all have important implications for the recruitment and training of teachers. It is not known what proportion of teachers teaching A level economics have degrees in economics. The EBEA has been attempting to look into the supply and demand for economics and business teachers but has been hampered by the lack of official information.

Adjusting GCSE and AS/A level grade boundaries for new qualifications

Ofqual sent a letter to schools and colleges in June 2017 setting out procedures for establishing grade boundaries in new GCSEs and AS/A levels. In it there is recognition of the fact that students

taking a new qualification tend to do less well than similar students in previous years. Ofqual has asked awarding bodies to take this into account so that students are not treated unfairly by sitting a new qualification. It states that students who would have got a grade B in the 2016 A level examinations should get a grade B in the 2017 awards. This raises interesting questions about standards. The new A levels (and GCSEs) are meant to be more rigorous than their predecessors. Also, the AS qualification, which was at a lower level than A level, counted for half the A level award. However, students will apparently achieve the same grades on what amounts to more challenging courses! There is perhaps some logic to this while there is a mix of reformed and unreformed GCSEs and AS/A levels but what are the implications for the future?

Contribute to Ofqual's evaluation of new GCSEs and AS/A levels

Ofqual is setting up a number of workshops to gather teachers' perspectives on the assessment of the new GCSEs and AS/A levels. It is keen to involve teachers who have experienced teaching the new courses. The first workshops are being held in November at the University of Warwick. Ofqual will cover travel expenses and provide lunch. EBEA members are strongly urged to apply which you can do through the Ofqual website.

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