

ANNUAL QUALIFICATIONS INSIGHT 2021



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Annual Qualifications Insight 2021

Chief Executive Foreword



CCEA plays a key role in supporting, recognising and rewarding learning throughout the years of compulsory education and beyond. We provide advice to government on curriculum and assessment, developing and administering a wide range of qualifications, including GCSE and A level courses. CCEA also acts as regulator for all general and vocational qualifications offered in Northern Ireland.

Each year CCEA generates a significant amount of data, charting participation and performance in Northern Ireland GCSE and GCE examinations. This Insight Report provides an in-depth look at trends and patterns, in both GCSE and A level, in more detail than we would normally be able to cover during the results period in August 2021.

The report contains analysis based on historic trends and patterns for GCSE and GCE qualifications over the last three academic years. It aims to promote discussion and engagement on educational matters, supporting policy makers, education professionals and industry to work together to improve education in Northern Ireland.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M Farragher', written in a cursive style.

Margaret Farragher
Interim Chief Executive
Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)

1 Executive Summary

1.1 Educational Context

On 6 January 2021, the Minister of Education, Peter Weir MLA, cancelled all CCEA GCSE, AS and A2 examinations scheduled for January, February, May and June 2021. Instead, by Formal Direction of the Minister, dated 2 March 2021, the approach to awarding grades in Summer 2021 was based on teacher professional judgements, with moderation (a quality assurance process carried out by CCEA).

In 2021, centres were asked to use a range of evidence to arrive at a professional and academic judgement of the standard at which each student was performing in the context of the specification for which they were entered and from this provide a Centre Determined Grade to CCEA. CCEA and the other awarding organisations (AOs) provided guidance and training for centres in determining grades. The quality assurance process ensured that schools and colleges determined grades in an appropriate and fair manner. Evidence to support grades was requested from every Northern Ireland centre by CCEA awarding organisation, and by English AOs and WJEC, as part of the quality assurance process. This quality assurance process was undertaken by AOs to ensure the awarding process in Summer 2021 was as robust as possible (see Section 2.3.2).

1.2 GCSE

1.2.1 Overall Entry

Across Northern Ireland¹, the 2021 entries for GCSE increased by 2.6% on 2020, going from 162,035 to 166,172. This follows a smaller increase of 0.4% between 2019 and 2020. Candidates took a total of 5,745,945 GCSEs across the Three Countries², meaning Northern Ireland accounts for 2.9% of the overall entry.

1.2.2 Overall Outcomes

In Northern Ireland, the proportion of entries awarded the A/7 grade increased by 3.6 percentage points from 2020 to 39.9%. The cumulative outcomes at A/7–C/4 grades remained broadly similar to last year, with a slight decrease of 0.2 percentage points to 89.6% this year.

In keeping with the trend observed in Northern Ireland, Three Country GCSE outcomes also increased. Statistics show that the proportion of GCSE entries achieving grades A/7 and A/7–C/4 has increased by 2.7 percentage points to 28.9% and 0.8 percentage points to 77.1%, respectively.

In Northern Ireland, female candidates' outcomes were higher than those of males by 13.9 percentage points at A/7, by 4.8 percentage points at A/7–C/4, and by 0.3 percentage points at A/7–G/1. Such an outcomes gap is a frequent finding at this level of study. This gender trend was also replicated across the Three Countries.

1.2.3 Mathematics and English

This year outcomes in Mathematics increased, with 81.5% of entries achieving A/7–C/4 grades – up 2.4 percentage points from 2020. Outcomes at A/7 also saw an increase, with an additional 0.8% of candidates (30.5%) achieving this grade in 2021.

Outcomes in English increased at grade A/7 by 1.5 percentage points to 29.8%. Outcomes at A/7–C/4 decreased slightly by 1.1 percentage points on last year (87.2% in 2020 to 86.1% in 2021).

¹ Please note this report includes information from all Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) awarded qualifications, not just CCEA (unless explicitly stated).

² 'Three Country' refers to England, Northern Ireland and Wales combined.

1.3 A Level

1.3.1 Overall Entry

Results issued to candidates in Northern Ireland in August 2021 showed a 3.8% increase in the number of A level entries, from 30,922 in 2020 to 32,111 in 2021.

The number of A levels taken in the Three Countries increased by 5.1% since last year, from 784,959 to 824,718.

1.3.2 Overall Outcomes

As with GCSE, Northern Ireland candidates' outcomes showed an upward trend at A level, with 15.8% of entries achieving the top A* grade and 50.8% attaining at least an A grade. Additionally, the overall A*–E pass rate remained high at 99.4%.

Northern Ireland results showed a gender difference at grade A*, which is 1.3 percentage points higher for females. Females also achieved higher outcomes at grades A*–A, A*–C and A*–E, by 4.2, 2.5 and 0.4 percentage points, respectively.

2 Introduction

2.1 Background/Rationale

This report contains a comparative analysis aimed at identifying trends in 16–18-year-old students' uptake of and outcomes in selected GCSE and A level subjects. Please note this report includes information from all Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) awarded qualifications, not just CCEA (unless explicitly stated). The analysis will cover the last three academic years. The aim of the report is to provide stakeholders with a summary of trends in GCSE, AS and A level outcomes.

2.2 Analysis

The Insight reports contain analysis, based on historic trends and patterns, for GCSE and GCE qualifications. Reports have been published annually since 2015 and have developed over the past seven years, highlighting CCEA's commitment to producing data for analysis and to show organisational transparency.

2.3 Educational Context

2.3.1 COVID-19 Pandemic and Awarding Arrangements in Summer 2021

On 6 January 2021, the Minister of Education, Peter Weir MLA, cancelled all CCEA GCSE, AS and A2 examinations scheduled for January, February, May and June 2021. Instead, by Formal Direction of the Minister, dated 2 March 2021, the approach to awarding grades in Summer 2021 was based on teacher professional judgements, with moderation (a quality assurance process carried out by CCEA).

2.3.2 CCEA Awarding Arrangements in Summer 2021

This alternative process relied on teacher professional judgement in the production of Centre Determined Grades. These grades were to be based on evidence derived from students' work and, once submitted, were quality assured through a rigorous sampling of evidence process conducted by CCEA.

The alternative awarding process for Summer 2021 was composed of five steps. These are outlined in Figure 1 overleaf.

Each of the five steps was designed to add robustness and rigour to the awarding process for Summer 2021.

Step 1: Guidance, information, and readiness

CCEA partnered with the Chartered Institute of Educational Assessors (CIEA) to provide training to centres on the Validity Chain, Standardising and Moderating, Using Data and the Summer 2021 Arrangements.

Head of Centre documentation was produced alongside sample Centre Determined Grade policies and checklists.

Subject-specific guidance was produced for 72 GCE and GCSE qualifications. Subject-specific webinars were also made available, targeted at Heads of Department and teachers.

Step 2: CCEA Assessment Resources (optional) and evidence gathering

To support schools in applying mark schemes consistently and accurately, 325 repurposed examination papers were made available across GCSE, AS and A level. CCEA adopted a flexible approach, permitting schools to use a range of different types of work as evidence, for example coursework, mock assessments, and homework.

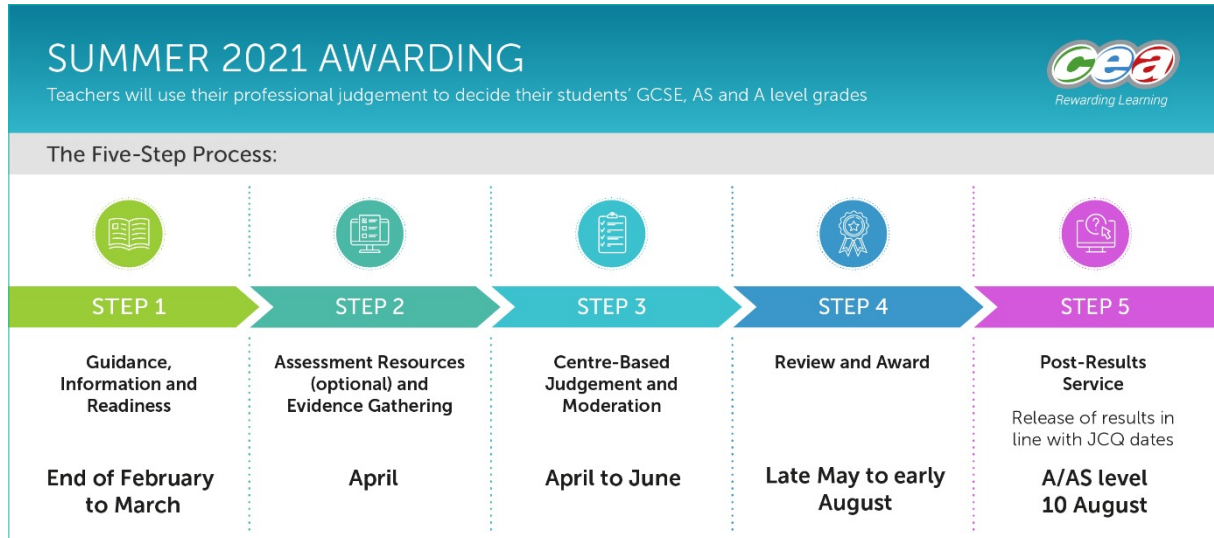


Figure 1: CCEA Five-Step Process to Summer 2021 Awarding

Step 3: Centre-based judgement and moderation

All centres submitted their Centre Determined Grades policy by 23 April for CCEA to review. All policies were reviewed by 7 May.

CCEA released its Centre Determined Grade application and guidance documentation on 28 April and supported centres to ensure the deadlines of GCE (21 May) and GCSE (4 June) were met.

Step 4: Review and award

Step 4 included the review of Centre Determined Grades submitted by centres through a sampling process conducted by CCEA.

CCEA then successfully awarded grades to GCE students on 10 August 2021 and GCSE students on 12 August 2021.

Step 5: Post-Results Service

The Post-Results Service acted as an appeal mechanism for students that wished to challenge their Centre Determined Grade. This service was put in place to ensure all students were awarded their grade with fairness, according to the guidance supplied by CCEA for the alternative awarding process in Summer 2021.

3 Entries

3.1 GCSE Entry Summary

Across Northern Ireland, entries for GCSE increased by 2.6% from 162,035 in 2020 to 166,172 in 2021. The total number of GCSEs taken across the Three Countries was 5,745,945 (an increase of 0.9% on 2020), meaning Northern Ireland candidates account for 2.9% of the overall entries. The proportionate age profile of GCSE candidates in Northern Ireland remains stable and roughly in line with 2020 (Table 1).

Table 1: Number (and percentage) of Northern Ireland GCSE Candidates Aged 15, 16 and 17 in 2020/21

Age	2019/20	2020/21	% Change
15 year olds	3,765 (2.3%)	3,003 (1.8%)	-0.5%
16 year olds	125,273 (77.3%)	130,287 (78.4%)	+1.1%
17 year olds	32,997 (20.4%)	32,882 (19.8%)	-0.6%
Total	162,035	166,172	+2.6%

Source: Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) – Provisional GCSE Full Course Results (Northern Ireland), 2020–2021

The five most popular subjects at GCSE in 2021 are detailed in the table below:

Table 2: Most Popular GCSE Subjects (by Percentage of Total GCSE Awards in 2020/21)³

	Overall	Males	Females
1	Science Double Award (9.9%)	Science Double Award (9.7%)	Science Double Award (10.1%)
2	Religious Studies (6.4%)	Religious Studies (5.7%)	Religious Studies (7.0%)
3	English Literature (6.1%)	English Literature (5.6%)	English Literature (6.6%)
4	History (4.5%)	History (4.8%)	History (4.3%)
5	Geography (3.8%)	Geography (4.3%)	Science (3.4%)

Source: JCQ – Provisional GCSE Full Course Results (Northern Ireland), 2021

3.1.1 GCSE Subject Categories

The entry for STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) increased by 3.9% from 2020. Proportional candidature increased from 41.4% in 2020 to 42.0% in 2021. The proportional split between male and female STEM candidates increased to 52.7%/47.3% (from 51.9%/48.1% in 2019/20), still in favour of male candidates.

Overall, the number of entries for Languages fell in 2021, with Spanish the only language that showed an increase in entries, increasing by 1.5% on 2020.

The Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences showed a consistent level of popularity of subject choice at GCSE. The proportion of the total candidature remained at 38.8%.

³ Mathematics and English have not been included in this table as these are compulsory subjects in most schools.

3.2 GCSE Entry Patterns and Changes

Table 3: Northern Ireland GCSE Entries by Subject (2018/19–2019/20)

	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	% change on last year
STEM				
Biology	3,971	3,939	3,949	+0.3
Chemistry	3,016	3,006	2,986	-0.7
Computing	458	419	448	+6.9
Design and Technology	3,816	3,711	3,654	-1.5
Engineering	507	376	331	-12.0
Further Mathematics	3,655	3,766	4,047	+7.5
ICT	3,876	3,481	3,234	-7.1
Mathematics	23,034	22,476	24,257	+7.9
Other Sciences	259	260	353	+35.8
Physics	2,842	2,842	2,837	-0.2
Science	5,879	5,893	6,134	+4.1
Science (Double Award)	15,840	16,094	16,518	+2.6
Other Technology	937	878	1,020	+16.2
Languages				
French	4,031	3,681	3,567	-3.1
German	788	835	692	-17.1
Irish	1,841	1,764	1,757	-0.4
Spanish	3,359	3,583	3,638	+1.5
Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences				
Art and Design	3,854	3,707	3,879	+4.6
Classical Subjects	141	171	188	+9.9
Drama	1,478	1,558	1,497	-3.9
English	20,894	22,061	22,506	+2.0
English Literature	9,930	10,233	10,168	-0.6
Geography	5,827	5,892	6,332	+7.5
History	6,893	7,168	7,504	+4.7
Music	1,379	1,404	1,389	-1.1
Performing and Expressive Arts	9	11	9	-18.2
Religious Studies	10,576	10,270	10,580	+3.0
Social Science Subjects	382	426	439	+3.1

	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	% change on last year
Other				
Business Studies	3,493	3,747	3,809	+1.7
Home Economics	4,412	4,504	4,895	+8.7
Media and Film Studies	1,529	1,366	1,392	+1.9
Physical Education	2,767	2,803	2,784	-0.7

Source: JCQ – Provisional GCSE Full Course Results (Northern Ireland), 2019–2021

3.3 A Level Entry Summary

3.3.1 A Level

In 2021, the overall A level entry increased by 3.8% in Northern Ireland. This equates to 1,189 more candidates. The Three Country A level entry increased by 5.1% (39,759 candidates).

Table 4: Three Country, Northern Ireland and CCEA A Level Entries (2019/20–2020/21)

	Northern Ireland	Three Country	CCEA
2019/20	30,922	784,959	26,237
2020/21	32,111	824,718	27,429
% Change	+3.8%	+5.1%	+4.5%

Sources: JCQ – Provisional A Level Full Course Results (Northern Ireland and Three Country), and CCEA Internal A Level Full Course Results, 2019–2021

The five most popular subjects at GCE A level in 2021 are detailed in the table below:

Table 5: Most Popular A Level Subjects (by Percentage of Total A Level Awards in 2020/21)

	Overall	Males	Females
1	Mathematics (9.8%)	Mathematics (13.2%)	Health and Social Care SA (12.5%)
2	Biology (8.7%)	History (8.4%)	Biology (9.6%)
3	Health & Social Care SA (8.4%)	Business Studies (7.9%)	Mathematics (7.4%)
4	History (6.5%)	Biology (7.4%)	Religious Studies (6.6%)
5	Business Studies (5.9%)	Physics (6.9%)	English Literature (5.9%)

Source: JCQ – Provisional A Level Full Course Results (Northern Ireland), 2021

STEM subjects such as Mathematics and Physics continued to have higher entries among male students, while Biology, Religious Studies and English Literature had the highest entries among female students.

A Level Subject Categories

In 2021, STEM entries increased by 5.8%, with increased entry in Physics (+20.4%), Mathematics (+5.9%), Biology (+5.6%) and Chemistry (+5.0%).

In terms of proportional entry, there was an increase in STEM entry (+0.7%) to 36.5% since 2019/20. STEM remained a popular subject category at A level, and Northern Ireland continued to have a high proportion of candidates taking STEM subjects in 2020/21.

The proportional entry for the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences increased from 45.4% in 2019/20 to 45.9% in 2020/21.⁴

Languages remained broadly similar with a slight decrease in entries, with the proportional entry decreasing from 3.9% to 3.7%.

3.4 A Level Entry Patterns and Changes

Table 6: Northern Ireland A Level Entries by Subject (2018/19–2020/21)

	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	% change on last year
STEM				
Biology	2,570	2,639	2,786	+5.6%
Chemistry	1,648	1,771	1,860	+5.0%
Computing	317	346	338	-2.3%
Design and Technology	878	742	799	+7.7%
Further Mathematics	172	155	178	+14.8%
ICT	1,061	871	750	-13.9%
Mathematics	2,899	2,959	3,134	+5.9%
Other Sciences	588	541	611	+12.9%
Physics	1,121	1,040	1,252	+20.4%
Languages				
French	358	333	322	-3.3%
German	69	90	90	-
Irish	291	315	325	+3.2%
Spanish	458	474	451	-4.9%
Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences				
Art and Design	862	867	796	-8.2%
Classical Subjects	78	86	49	-43%
Drama	352	337	361	+7.1%
English Literature	1,741	1,698	1,497	-11.8%
Geography	1,619	1,536	1,872	+21.9%
History	1,731	1,712	2,097	+22.5%
Law	20	14	7	-50.0%
Music	296	261	231	-11.5%

⁴ Please note that Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences now include Health and Social Care Single Award and Double Award entries for the last three years. Double Award is counted as two entries.

	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	% change on last year
Performing and Expressive Arts	185	242	221	-8.7%
Political Studies	1,050	1,059	1,014	-4.2%
Psychology	497	476	507	+6.5%
Religious Studies	1,853	1,801	1,689	-6.2%
Sociology	831	825	882	+6.9%
Health and Social Care (SA)	2,172	2,351	2,682	+14.1%
Health and Social Care (DA)	796	776	824	+6.2%
Other				
Business Studies	1,939	1,941	1,899	-2.2%
Media and Film Studies	1,091	1,067	934	-12.5%
Physical Education	533	502	495	-1.4%

Source: JCQ – Provisional A Level Full Course Results (Northern Ireland), 2019–2021

4 Grade Outcomes

4.1 GCSE Outcomes

4.1.1 Overall

This section reports on the GCSE grades issued in Northern Ireland, England and Wales, from A/7 to G/1. It considers all GCSE qualifications and the grades awarded by all the AOs. Overall, in 2021, there was a 3.6 percentage point increase at A/7 from 36.3% to 39.9% for Northern Ireland candidates. Outcomes at grades A/7–C/4 showed a 0.2 percentage point decrease to 89.6% (Table 7).

Table 7: Three Country and Northern Ireland (NI) GCSE Outcomes in 2020/21 (and 2019/20) [and 2018/19]

	Northern Ireland	Three Country
%A/7	39.9 (36.3) [30.5]	28.9 (26.2) [20.8]
%A/7-C/4	89.6 (89.8) [82.2]	77.1 (76.3) [67.3]
%A/7-G/1	99.2 (99.7) [98.8]	99.0 (99.6) [98.3]

Source: JCQ – Provisional GCSE Full Course Results (Northern Ireland and Three Country), 2019–2021

In Northern Ireland, female candidates continued to outperform males: at A/7 by 13.9 percentage points, at A/7-C/4 by 4.8 percentage points, and at A/7-G/1 by 0.3 percentage points. This gender trend is similar across the Three Countries.

Table 8: Three Country and Northern Ireland (NI) GCSE Outcomes by Gender in 2020/21 (and 2019/20)

2020/21	Males		Females	
	NI	Three Country	NI	Three Country
%A/7	32.7 (29.4)	24.4 (22.2)	46.6 (42.8)	33.4 (30.2)
%A/7-C/4	87.1 (87.6)	73.6 (72.3)	91.9 (91.9)	80.6 (80.2)
%A/7-G/1	99.0 (99.7)	98.7 (99.5)	99.3 (98.8)	99.2 (99.7)

Source: JCQ – Provisional GCSE Full Course Results (Northern Ireland and Three Country), by gender, 2019–2021

4.1.2 English and Mathematics

Mathematics and English are compulsory subjects in most schools. For this reason, Mathematics and English Language are detailed separately in this section, as well as being assessed in their respective subject categories.

Below is information on GCSE candidates' outcomes in Mathematics and English.

Table 9: Three Country and Northern Ireland GCSE Outcomes in English in 2020/21 (and 2019/20)

2020/21	Overall		Males		Females	
	NI	Three Country	NI	Three Country	NI	Three Country
%A/7	29.8 (28.3)	22.3 (18.9)	20.7 (18.7)	16.1 (13.2)	38.9 (37.9)	29.0 (25.1)
%A/7-C/4	86.1 (87.2)	73.9 (71.5)	81.5 (82.9)	68.1 (64.8)	90.7 (91.5)	80.1 (78.7)
%A/7-G/1	98.9 (99.6)	98.5 (99.6)	98.6 (99.4)	98.2 (99.5)	99.1 (98.8)	98.9 (99.7)

Source: JCQ – Provisional GCSE Full Course Results (Northern Ireland), 2021

There was an increase of 1.5 percentage points to 29.8% at the A/7 grade in GCSE English for Northern Ireland. Outcomes at grades A/7–C/4 showed a 1.1 percentage point decrease to 86.1%. Outcomes at grades A/7–G/1 decreased by 0.7 percentage points. In Northern Ireland, female candidates continued to outperform males: at A/7 by 18.2 percentage points, at A/7–C/4 by 9.2 percentage points and at A/7–G/1 by 0.5 percentage points.

Table 10: Three Country and Northern Ireland GCSE Outcomes in Mathematics in 2020/21 (and 2019/20)

2020/21	Overall		Males		Females	
	NI	Three Country	NI	Three Country	NI	Three Country
%A/7	30.5 (29.7)	21.0 (19.1)	28.5 (26.7)	20.8 (19.5)	32.5 (32.5)	21.3 (18.7)
%A/7-C/4	81.5 (79.1)	69.4 (66.6)	80.9 (78.6)	68.7 (65.7)	82.2 (79.6)	70.0 (67.5)
%A/7-G/1	98.2 (99.4)	98.3 (99.3)	98.3 (99.3)	98.2 (99.2)	98.1 (99.4)	98.5 (99.4)

Source: JCQ – Provisional GCSE Full Course Results (Northern Ireland), 2021

GCSE Mathematics candidates' outcomes in Northern Ireland showed an increase of 0.8 percentage points at the A/7 grade. Grades A/7–C/4 show a 2.4 percentage point increase to 81.5%. Grades A/7–G/1 decreased by 1.2 percentage points to 98.2%.

In Northern Ireland, female GCSE Mathematics candidates continued to outperform males: at A/7 by 4.0 percentage points and at A/7–C/4 by 1.3 percentage points. Males outperformed females at A/7–G/1 by 0.2 percentage points.

4.1.3 GCSE Outcomes Summary

Table 11: Cumulative (%) A7–C4 Grades for GCSE in Northern Ireland (2020/21)

	Overall	Change on Last Year	Male	Female
STEM				
Biology	97.1	-0.3	97.2	97.0
Chemistry	98.4	-0.1	98.1	98.8
Computing	97.3	-1.2	97.1	98.6
Design and Technology	88.0	-1.7	86.0	93.0
Engineering	77.9	-0.8	76.7	92.3
Further Mathematics	98.0	-0.8	97.3	98.7
ICT	91.7	-1.1	90.2	94.8
Mathematics	81.5	+2.5	80.9	82.2
Other Sciences	88.4	+0.3	87.6	91.1
Physics	98.4	-0.5	98.1	98.7
Science	82.3	+1.4	80.7	84.2
Science (Double Award)	93.3	+0.1	91.8	94.6
Other Technology	76.2	+0.4	76.5	69.2
Languages				
French	94.6	+1.4	91.9	96.2
German	94.8	+2.2	93.5	96.3
Irish	97.5	-0.5	96.2	98.4
Spanish	95.1	-0.4	92.7	96.7
Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences				
Art and Design	92.4	+0.2	88.1	94.3
Classical Subjects	97.3	+0.3	96.9	97.8
Drama	91.2	-4.6	87.6	92.9
English	86.1	-1.1	81.5	90.7
English Literature	96.5	-1.2	94.5	98.1
History	89.3	-0.6	86.3	92.5
Music	96.1	-1.8	96.1	96.1
Religious Studies	92.2	+0.4	88.3	95.1
Social Science Subjects	87.5	+3.7	86.9	87.8
Geography	91.0	+0.7	88.6	93.9
Performing and Expressive Arts	100.0	0.0	0.0	100.0
Other				
Business Studies	90.7	0.0	89.1	92.5
Home Economics	88.9	-1.3	80.2	90.5
Media and Film Studies	85.6	-3.7	84.6	86.9
Physical Education	94.5	-0.8	93.1	96.8

Source: JCQ – Provisional GCSE Full Course Results (Northern Ireland), 2021

Overall, Northern Ireland candidates' outcomes increased at GCSE with 39.9% of GCSE entries achieving at least an A/7 grade – an increase of 3.6 percentage points from last year. The number of entries achieving grades A/7 to C/4 remained largely similar to last year's with a slight decrease of 0.2 percentage points to 89.6% this year.

On average, 89.9% of STEM entries obtained at least a grade C/4. Female students' outcomes were higher than those of males in almost all STEM subjects at grades A/7 to C/4, with the only exceptions being Biology and Other Technology (see Table 11).

GCSE candidates' outcomes remained strong in Languages. On average, 95.5% of entries obtained at least a grade C/4 at GCSE. Female students' outcomes remained higher than those of males in all GCSE Languages at grades A/7 to C/4.

Female students' outcomes were higher than those of males at the C/4 grade in all subjects in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences category. The average outcome in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at C/4 was 92.7% this year.

4.2 CCEA Outcomes

Almost 29,000 individual GCSE students received results from CCEA in Summer 2021. Table 12 shows cumulative outcomes at each grade for males and females, as well as overall.

Table 12: CCEA GCSE Grading Outcomes (2020/21)⁵

	A*	A	B	C*	C	D	E	F	G	U
Male	10.2%	32.5%	54.8%	70.5%	87.0%	93.3%	96.7%	98.2%	99.0%	100.0%
Female	18.2%	46.6%	67.7%	80.2%	91.9%	95.9%	97.9%	98.8%	99.3%	100.0%
Total	14.3%	39.8%	61.5%	75.5%	89.5%	94.6%	97.3%	98.5%	99.2%	100.0%
(161,447)	23,087	41,169	35,034	22,603	22,603	8234	4359	1937	1130	1291

Source: JCQ – Provisional GCSE Full Course Results (Northern Ireland), 2021

The grade A* aligns to grade 9 in the English grading system⁶ and therefore reflects exceptional performance. In 2021, 14.3% of candidates achieved this top grade.

Grade A is aligned with grades 7 and 8 in England. In total, 39.8% of entries were awarded grade A and above in 2021.

Grade B aligns to grade 6 in England and in 2021, 61.5% of candidates were awarded at least a grade B.

⁵ Please note that Table 12 shows the percentage and number of GCSE **entries** (not the number of students) that were awarded each of the grades listed **or above**. Double Award Science is included as two grades.

⁶ Grade A* is aligned to the level of achievement consistent with Grade 9 in England, and C* is aligned to the level of achievement consistent with Grade 5.

4.3 A Level Outcomes

4.3.1 Overall

Table 13: Three Country, Northern Ireland (NI) and CCEA A Level Outcomes in 2020/21 (and 2019/20) [and 2018/19]

	Northern Ireland	Three Country	CCEA
%A*	15.8 (13.5) [8.0]	19.1 (14.3) [7.7]	16.6 (14.5) [8.9]
%A–A	50.8 (43.3) [29.4]	44.8 (38.5) [25.4]	52.5 (45.2) [32.2]
%A–E	99.4 (99.8) [98.4]	99.5 (99.7) [97.6]	99.4 (99.9) [98.5]

Source: JCQ – Provisional A Level Full Course Results (Northern Ireland and Three Country), and CCEA Internal A Level Full Course Results, 2021

In Northern Ireland, there was a 2.3 percentage point increase in outcomes at grade A*, and an increase of 7.5 percentage points at grades A*–A since last year. There was a decrease of 0.4 percentage points in the overall pass rate (A*–E). Similar trends can be seen in the CCEA results, with a 2.1 percentage point increase at grade A*, and a 7.3 percentage point increase at grades A*–A since 2019/20. There was a 0.5 percentage point decrease in the overall pass rate. In the Three Countries there was an increase at grade A* of 4.8 percentage points on the previous year, and an increase of 6.3 percentage points at grades A*–A. The overall pass rate declined by 0.5 percentage points on 2019/20.

Table 14: Northern Ireland and CCEA A Level Outcomes by Gender in 2020/21 (and 2019/20)

	Northern Ireland		Three Country		CCEA	
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
% A*	15.1 (13.7)	16.4 (13.4)	18.4 (14.2)	19.7 (14.4)	15.5 (14.5)	17.2 (14.5)
% A*–A	48.3 (41.3)	52.5 (44.6)	42.1 (36.7)	46.9 (39.9)	49.2 (42.5)	54.8 (47.1)
% A*–E	99.2(99.8)	99.6 (99.9)	99.3 (99.7)	99.6 (99.8)	99.2 (99.8)	99.6 (99.9)

Source: JCQ – Provisional A Level Full Course Results (Northern Ireland and Three Country) and CCEA Internal A Level Full Course Results, by gender, 2021

Like 2020, A level results in Northern Ireland for 2021 showed that females obtained higher outcomes than males in the majority of grades.

The gender gap in outcomes at grade at A* was 1.3 percentage points, and 4.2 percentage points for grades A*–A, in favour of females.

Overall, 99.6% of females and 99.3% of males in the Three Countries obtained a pass grade (grades A*–E). In Northern Ireland, 99.2% of males and 99.6% of females obtained a pass grade in 2021.

In Northern Ireland, the proportion of female candidates achieving a grade A* was 3.3 percentage points lower than the Three Country figure, while the pass rate grades A*–E showed parity. Male candidates in Northern Ireland were also 3.3 percentage points behind the Three Country figure at grade A* and 0.1 percentage points ahead at grades A*–E.

4.3.2 A Level Outcomes Summary

Table 15: Cumulative (%) A*–C Grades for A Level (2020/21)

	Overall	Change on Last Year	Male	Female
STEM				
Biology	94.9	+0.7	92.9	96.0
Chemistry	94.5	-1.7	93.3	95.2
Computing	95.0	-1.6	94.7	96.2
Design and Technology	92.7	-0.3	91.9	94.6
Further Mathematics	98.3	-1.7	97.7	100.0
ICT	94.7	+3.9	93.4	97.2
Mathematics	93.9	-2.2	92.4	95.8
Physics	92.5	-2.4	92.1	93.6
Other Sciences	89.2	-1.4	86.8	91.3
Languages				
French	97.2	-1.0	96.8	97.4
German	98.9	-1.1	97.3	100.0
Irish	98.2	+0.7	96.7	99.0
Spanish	98.0	-0.5	99.4	97.2
Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences				
Art and Design	96.9	+0.3	94.5	97.6
Classical Subjects	93.9	-2.6	88.9	100.0
Drama	99.7	-0.3	99.0	100.0
English Literature	94.1	-1.2	91.2	95.1
History	94.9	0.0	94.9	94.9
Psychology	88.8	-0.9	81.3	90.4
Music	99.1	+0.3	100.0	98.7
Performing and Expressive Arts	96.4	-0.7	97.1	96.1
Political Studies	93.9	-0.4	94.5	93.2
Religious Studies	96.0	-0.2	91.3	97.6
Sociology	91.4	-1.3	88.5	92.0
Geography	95.1	+0.2	93.1	96.9
Law	85.7	+21.4	75.0	100.0
Health and Social Care SA	95.6	-1.3	91.1	96.2
Health and Social Care DA	93.9	+5.3	87.5	94.2
Other				
Business Studies	94.1	-0.1	92.8	95.6
Media and Film Studies	93.3	-1.5	93.6	92.9
Physical Education	97.2	-0.2	96.6	98.0

Source: JCQ – Provisional GCE A Level Results (Northern Ireland), 2021

In Northern Ireland, 15.8% of candidates achieved an A*, while 50.8% achieved grades A*–A. At the A* grade, female candidates' outcomes were higher than those of males by 1.3 percentage points. Across the A level suite of specifications, females continued to outperform males at A* to C in most subjects.

On average, 94.0% of the STEM candidature obtained at least a grade C. Females outperformed males in all STEM subjects at grades A*–C.

Languages remained the subject area with the highest outcomes, with 98.1% of candidates achieving at least a grade C.

On average, 94.4% of all Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences candidates were awarded at least a grade C at this level.

Further Mathematics was the subject with the highest outcomes at A*, with 61.8% of the cohort attaining an A*.

5 Conclusions

This report presents a detailed summary analysis of GCSE, AS and A level subjects and grade outcomes for the period 2018/19–2020/21. It outlines similarities and differences in entry figures for male and female candidates in Northern Ireland and highlights notable entry patterns.

The report also presents grade outcome data over the same period. However, when comparing outcomes from 2019/20 and 2020/21 with previous years, it is important to take into consideration the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the exceptional circumstances under which these grades have been awarded. Therefore, the trends identified, though useful, are not like for like as the last examined year was 2018/19.

Nevertheless, it is hoped that the information contained in this report, and previous reports, will encourage discussions among various stakeholders, including educationalists, policy makers and employers and help inform future debate.

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