

# Annual Qualifications Insight 2015

## Executive Summary

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## Chief Executive Preface



CCEA is a unique education organisation. We bring together the areas of curriculum, examinations and assessment. We report to the Department of Education and work with a wide range of organisations, including educational bodies, employers and industry, to advise on and create economically and socially relevant learning opportunities.

Each year, we produce a significant amount of information and analysis about GCSE and GCE qualifications, using data from across Northern Ireland and our own qualification results.

We present much of this information and analysis to the media and public during the summer months. However, we believe a detailed analysis of this data and projection is of interest to a narrower educational audience.

With this in mind, we have developed the first Annual Qualifications Insight Report. It contains analysis and a broad forecast, based on historic trends and patterns, for GCSE and GCE qualifications. It aims to promote discussion and engagement on educational matters. Alongside the report, we are hosting a series of Insight events aimed at providing a platform for further discussion among industry, business, policy makers and educationalists.

This report and the supporting events will contribute to the ongoing dialogue and help to inform policy makers, education professionals and industry so that we can improve education together.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Justin Edwards". The signature is written in a cursive style.

**Justin Edwards**  
Chief Executive  
Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)

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# Executive Summary

## N. Ireland GCSE Results 2015

- Improved GCSE results – an increase in A\*–C grades.
- Performance in Mathematics and English continues to rise.
- Males show notable improvement, but females still ahead.
- Increases in participation across the STEM subjects.

Figures released in August 2015 show students making steady improvement in GCSE examinations with increases in entries gaining grades A\*–C.

The proportion of entries awarded A\*–C grades has risen by 0.7 percentage points this year to 78.7%. Entries achieving A\*–A have improved 0.4 percentage points to 28.6%, and the number of entries achieving the top A\* grade now sits at 9%, a slight rise of 0.1 percentage points on 2014.

This year performance in Mathematics improved with 66.6% of entries awarded A\*–C, up 0.4 percentage points on 2014. Performance in English also improved with A\*–C grades now representing 75.8% of entries in the subject, a considerable rise of 2.8 percentage points.

Males have made a notable contribution to this year's rise in performance with the percentage of male entries achieving A\*–C rising a full percentage point in 2015 to 75.1%. Females are still well ahead in GCSE performance with 82.2% of all female entries gaining the A\*–C grades, up 0.5 percentage points on last year.

The total number of entries in GCSE examinations in N. Ireland has fallen by 0.8% to 171,325. This is in line with an overall drop in the Year 12 student cohort.

In 2015, the proportion of entries in STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) has grown by 3%. This figure is being driven by Mathematics (up 3.3%) and ICT (up 6.3%). There were also rises in the percentage of the overall entry taking Biology, Chemistry and Physics.

Overall, entries for languages fell in 2015, with the exception of Spanish, which rose by 7%. There were also falls in entries for languages across the combined Three Countries (England, N. Ireland and Wales).

### Three Country GCSE results are stable.

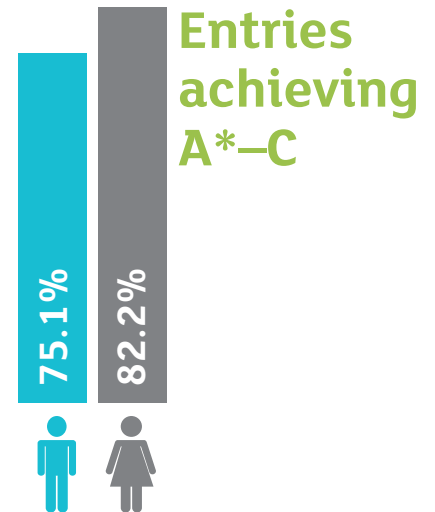
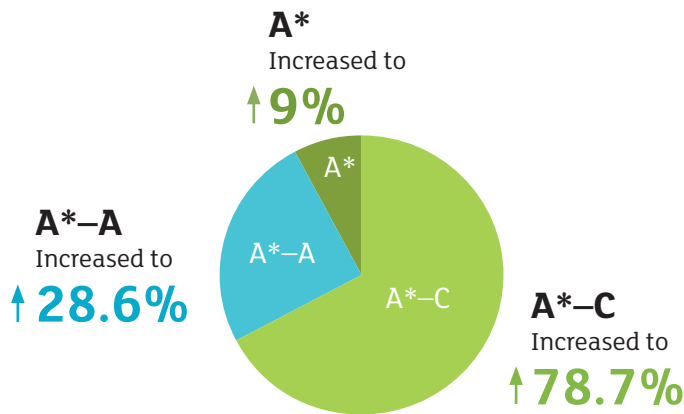
There is little change in the Three Country results compared with last year:

- Grade A\* declines marginally 0.1 percentage point to 6.6%.
- Grades A\*–A follow the same pattern, falling 0.1 percentage point to 21.2%.
- Grades A\*–C increase 0.2 percentage points to 69.0%.

The number of GCSEs increased 1.2 percent to 5,277,604:

- As expected, 16 year olds made up the greatest proportion of entries, increasing 1.7% to 4,544,077 (the Three Countries 16-year-old cohort was down 1.5% year on year).
- Significantly, the number of entries from 17 year olds increased 18.2% to 309,846.
- Entries by 15 year olds dropped 13.4% to 423,681.

## GCSE Entries



## Performance in Mathematics and English

### Mathematics



↑ 0.4% Increase  
**66.6%**  
awarded  
**A\*-C**

### English



↑ 2.8% Increase  
**75.8%**  
awarded  
**A\*-C**

## STEM Subjects

The proportion of entries in **STEM subjects** has grown by

**3%** Mathematics increased by 3.3%  
ICT increased by 6.3%



## Languages

Overall fall in entries for languages in 2015 with the exception of Spanish, which rose by

**7%**



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# Executive Summary

## GCE A Level

- **Mathematics now the most popular A Level in N. Ireland.**
- **Female entry is responsible for the increases in STEM subjects.**
- **High performance maintained, N. Ireland continues to be the top performing region in the Three Country comparison.**

GCE A Level results issued to students in N. Ireland in August 2015 show an increase in numbers taking A Levels in N. Ireland this year, driven by a notable rise in entries in Mathematics. The subject is now the most popular A Level, accounting for 1 in 10 of all N. Ireland A Level entries. Entries in Mathematics rose by 8.6%. Overall A Level entries rose by 2.5% from 31,600 in 2014 to 32,390 this year.

Participation in the STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) remains strong. Along with Mathematics, there were increases in numbers taking Design and Technology, up 8.8%, and ICT, up by 4.5%. Of particular interest is an increase this year in the number of females taking A Levels in STEM subjects, with increases in Biology (+5.7%), Chemistry (+3.3%), Physics (+2.1%), Mathematics (+10.6%) and Design and Technology (+24.5%).

Students continue to perform strongly at A Level, with the overall A\*–E pass rate rising slightly by 0.1 percentage point to 98.2%. There was also a small increase in those awarded the top grade, with 7.6% of entries receiving an A\*, up 0.3 percentage points on last year. The percentage of entries achieving A\*–A fell slightly to 29.3%, down by 0.6 percentage points. While females still account for the majority of A\*s awarded (7.8%), this year the percentage of males achieving the highest grade rose by 0.6 percentage points to 7.4%.

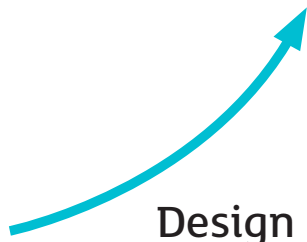
The Three Country results (England, N. Ireland and Wales) show there is stability across the grades at A Level, with the A\* remaining unchanged at 8.2 percent of all awards; A\*–A declining marginally by 0.1 percentage point to 25.9 percent; and A\*–E rising by 0.1 percentage point to 98.1 percent.

The number of A Levels taken in the Three Countries has risen 2.0% compared with 2014, from 833,807 to 850,749. This is despite a 1.1 percent fall in the 18-year-old cohort.

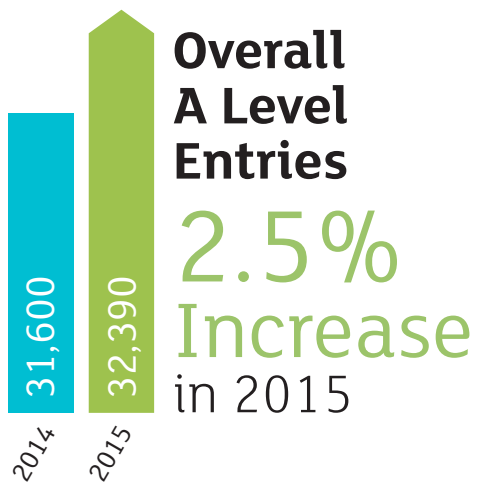
There is also an increase in the largest entry subject, Mathematics (up 3,895). Mathematics remains the most popular A Level in the Three Countries, with 10.9 percent of all entries. English is second with 10.5 percent and Biology third with 7.4 percent.

## STEM Subjects

Increase this year in the number of females taking A Levels in STEM subjects



Biology **+ 5.7%**  
 Chemistry **+ 3.3%**  
 Physics **+ 2.1%**  
 Mathematics **+ 10.6%**  
 Design & Technology **+ 24.5%**



Increase in numbers taking:



**Design & Technology** up **8.8%**

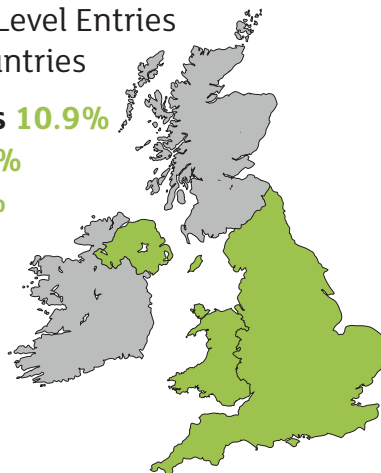


**ICT** up **4.5%**

## Three Countries

Most Popular A Level Entries in the Three Countries

1. **Mathematics 10.9%**
2. **English 10.5%**
3. **Biology 7.4%**



**7.6%** 

of entries receiving an A\* – A 0.3% increase on last year

For further information or copies about this report, please contact:

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