

## Education update – Monday 9 October

(Below is a summary of some of the main education news stories from the last week. They do not reflect the opinions of *The Exams Office*)

### Subject choices based more on enjoyment than 'difficulty', Ofqual finds

**Subject choices at GCSE and A level are driven by range of factors with pupils more likely to choose subjects because they find them enjoyable and useful than because they are less "difficult", new research suggests.**

Exams regulator Ofqual has published new analysis which shows that, in advising GCSE and A Level pupils on which subjects to take, teachers base this on what they think their students will enjoy and find useful for future education and employment.

Pupils said their perceptions of the difficulty of individual subjects were not the main basis of their decisions. They said they would often be willing to overlook difficulty where they enjoyed a subject or needed it for university or career ambitions. The study did find that teachers sometimes discourage students from taking subjects that might be too difficult for them - but only in specific circumstances, based on the particular pupil.

Ofqual's research concluded that subject choices appear to be primarily driven by "a triad of perceptions: enjoyment, usefulness, and difficulty (with perceptions being mostly person-specific)."

The research did find, however, that entry criteria policies were often based upon general notions of subject difficulty, which served to prevent students from taking subjects they would find too difficult.

In addition, some schools also chose not to offer certain subjects because they were seen to be too difficult, again preventing uptake in those areas. Students also recognised that they were sometimes discouraged by their teachers, parents, and friends from choosing subjects that were thought to be too difficult for them.

For more details visit the [TES website](#)

### Students affected by 'inaccurate' exam grades, leading headteacher warns

**Students are having their careers blighted because over a third of exam grades in certain subjects are "inaccurate", a leading headteacher has warned. Chris King, chairman of the Headmasters' & Headmistresses' Conference (HMC) has urged school leaders to rise up and tackle the issue.**

Addressing heads of the world's leading independent schools at HMC's annual conference in Belfast, Mr King said that there is "great uncertainty" that students are receiving an accurate grade in their GCSEs and A-levels.

"True to its word, Ofqual has begun to tackle this too," he said. "But the size of the problem is unnerving and cannot be condoned by school leaders through silence.

This summer, Ofqual published research about marking consistency, where they looked at a sample of GCSE and A-level exam papers in a range of subjects over the past four years. They found that the grades awarded to around 30% of English and Geography students were inconsistently awarded - meaning that the grade awarded by ordinary examiners deviated from the "definitive" grade as determined by a group of senior examiners.

The research, published in a presentation titled Quality of marking - confidence and consistency, found that up to 40% of History paper grades were inconsistently awarded, while for Religious Studies it was between 30 and 40%.

For more details visit the [Telegraph Education website](#)

## Pearson merges Edexcel exams and textbook publisher

**Education firm Pearson has merged its schools publishing and UK exams arms, but insists it has “robust firewalls” to prevent staff developing tests from also writing textbooks. Pearson’s UK schools learning team, which decides the content of its textbooks, has been merged with the Edexcel exam board. However, it has insisted it will continue to comply with strict rules surrounding endorsements of textbooks by exam boards.**

In 2011, the relationship between exam boards and textbook publishers came to light after an undercover investigation by the Daily Telegraph found evidence that representatives of some exam boards were directly involved in marketing books published by “partner” companies.

The Pearson merger means the same part of its business will be responsible for producing textbooks and writing exam questions, but its spokesperson said different personnel would work on each project, and would not have access to each other’s work.

For more details visit the [Schools Week website](#)

## Ofsted to inspect outstanding schools more often

**Ofsted is bringing back its “state-of-the-nation” reports and will inspect more ‘outstanding’ schools, according to a new corporate strategy released today on its 25th anniversary. In its new five-year corporate strategy that will run until 2022, the inspectorate says it will publish more “national survey reports and research” that “aggregate the insights from inspections”. These will show “what ‘good’ providers are doing to lead to positive outcomes”.**

Schools Week understands these could even focus on a particular subject or a sector such as special educational needs.

Geoff Barton, the general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, welcomed the return of national subject reports, which he said had been “very helpful” when he was a head of English. “The knowledge that inspection builds up will be fed back into the system,” he said, rather than “wasted”.

To generate these reports, Ofsted intends to inspect a greater proportion of ‘outstanding’ schools to bring best practice to light. This will mean fewer inspections can be carried out elsewhere, so the interval between inspecting ‘good’ providers “may, within legislative limits, lengthen”, the report concedes.

For more details visit the [Schools Week website](#)

## FSM pupils falling away in phonics

**The achievement gap in phonics has grown between pupils qualifying for free school meals and their wealthier peers, government data has revealed. In this summer’s exams, 68% of pupils eligible for free school meals met the expected standard in phonics, compared with 84% of all other pupils.**

This marked a one-percentage-point increase in the attainment gap this year\* compared with 2016, reversing the previous trend.

Between 2015 and 2016, the gap between FSM pupils and all others narrowed by one percentage point, and a similar decrease was recorded in 2014 and 2015.

But the government’s release on the phonics screening check and key stage 1 assessments in England for 2017 showed the performance of FSM-eligible pupils decreased from 69% in 2016 to 68% this year, while the performance of all other pupils increased from 83% last year to 84% this year.

For more details visit the [Schools Week website](#)