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Post-16 qualification pathways in England: uptake of Level 2 and Level 3 academic and vocational qualifications by students' backgrounds

Research Report

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This report examines the uptake of Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications among students in Key Stage 5 in England. It aims to provide an overview of uptake patterns in post-16 education, including the types and subjects of qualifications pursued, and how these vary based on student background characteristics. The study is particularly important given the ongoing reforms to vocational and technical qualifications, and aims to inform policymakers, educators, and awarding organisations about the uptake of different qualifications and how that differ by students' backgrounds.

Data and methods

The study used administrative data from the National Pupil Database (NPD), focusing on two cohorts of students completing Key Stage 5 in the academic years 2022/23 and 2023/24. Descriptive statistical analyses were conducted to explore overall qualification uptake, distribution across qualification types, and subject choices. Students were grouped according to whether they completed Level 2 qualifications only, Level 3 qualifications only, or a combination of both. Differences in uptake were examined across a range of student background characteristics, including prior attainment, income deprivation, special educational needs (SEN), ethnicity, and school type. In addition, multilevel logistic regression models were used to identify the key student level factors associated with the likelihood of completing Level 2 qualifications.

Results

The findings show that the majority of students (67%) completed only Level 3 qualifications in Key Stage 5, whereas approximately one-fifth completed only Level 2 qualifications, and a smaller proportion combined both levels. A Levels were by far the most commonly taken qualifications, with over half of students completing at least one, followed by Applied Generals as the most popular vocational option. Uptake of T Levels remained relatively low but increased between the 2023 and 2024 cohorts.

Level 2 qualifications were predominantly taken as part of GCSE resits, particularly in English and Mathematics. Students taking Level 2 qualifications only were more likely to combine GCSE resits with other Level 1/Level 2 vocational qualifications rather than taking BTECs or Cambridge Nationals.

Subject choices differed between qualification types. At Level 3, A Levels were concentrated in subjects such as Mathematics, Psychology, Biology, Chemistry, and History, while Applied Generals were more common in areas such as Social Science, Business Studies, Health Studies, and Sports Studies. At Level 2, vocational subject uptake was concentrated in practical and employment-oriented areas, including Health Studies, Electrical Installation, and Business Studies.

There were strong and consistent differences in qualification uptake by student characteristics. Students who completed Level 2 qualifications only were significantly more likely to have lower prior attainment at Key Stage 4, have special educational needs, come from more socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and attend further education (FE) colleges. In contrast, students

completing Level 3 qualifications only were more likely to have high prior attainment, no SEN, more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds, and to attend comprehensive schools. Gender differences were relatively small, and although descriptive statistics showed some variation by ethnicity, these differences were not significant once other factors were controlled for.

The regression analysis showed that prior attainment was a key predictor of Level 2 uptake in Key Stage 5, with students with low attainment having a substantially higher probability of completing Level 2 qualifications compared to high-attaining peers. SEN status and socio-economic disadvantage (including FSM eligibility and income deprivation) were also significantly associated with increased probability of Level 2 uptake. Overall, patterns were highly consistent across the two cohorts analysed.

Conclusions

The findings highlight substantial inequalities in post-16 education pathways and suggest that qualification uptake at Key Stage 5 is significantly shaped by prior attainment and socio-economic background. The prominence of GCSE resits among Level 2 qualifications indicates that a significant proportion of students enter Key Stage 5 without achieving foundational qualifications in Mathematics or English, which may limit their progression opportunities.

Additional support for students with SEN is also relevant, as they are disproportionately represented among those taking Level 2 qualifications and may face barriers to progression into higher-level study.

The findings also have implications for the design and delivery of post-16 education. The separation between academic and vocational subject choices suggests that pathways remain relatively distinct, with limited overlap. Policymakers may need to consider how reforms, including the expansion of T Levels and the introduction of V Levels, can better support progression and provide clearer, more integrated pathways across academic and technical routes. Finally, the variation in qualification uptake by school type, particularly for FE colleges which support lower-attaining and disadvantaged students, highlights the importance of ensuring adequate resourcing and support for these institutions.

It is important to continue monitoring qualification uptake patterns to assess the effects of ongoing reforms and to ensure that the post-16 education system promotes equitable access to high-quality learning opportunities for all students.

1. Introduction

Key Stage 5 education in England refers to the phase of education for those students aged 16 to 18 and represents an important transition period during which students can specialise in areas more aligned with their educational and career aspirations.

In the last few decades, the Department for Education (DfE) has implemented several strategies to increase student participation in post-16 education. Recent estimates indicate that 72.0% of 16-18-year-olds in England are in full-time education, including 83.6% of 16-17-year-olds and 48.5% of 18-year-olds (DfE, 2025a). In contrast, 6.2% of 16-17-year-olds and 14.5% of 18-year-olds are not in education, employment, or training (NEET) (DfE, 2025a). These differences by age reflect the statutory requirement in England for young people to remain in education or training until the age of 18[1].

Students in Key Stage 5 can choose between continuing their full-time education, starting an apprenticeship, or a combination of part-time study and employment. Those who remain in education can follow academic, vocational, or technical pathways.

Currently, the most popular route among 16-year-olds in England is studying Level 3 qualifications. In 2024, around 35% of 16-year-olds follow an academic pathway, that is, they take A or AS Level qualifications only, 25% study vocational qualifications or a mixed pathway combining A or AS Level qualifications and Applied Generals or other Level 3 qualifications, and only 3% study T Levels only (DfE, 2025b), although it is important to note that uptake is expected to increase following their recent introduction in 2020.

Some students in Key Stage 5 might continue to take Level 2 qualifications, especially if they have not achieved a grade 4 or above in their General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSE) Mathematics and English and therefore are required to resit them. In addition, prior studies suggest that students undertaking Level 2 qualifications in Key Stage 5 often struggle to progress to higher levels of education (Hupkau et al., 2017; Vidal Rodeiro, 2024), partly because many post-16 options are not available for students who have not passed their GCSE Mathematics and English. Similarly, students with lower attainment in Key Stage 4 are more at risk of not being in employment, education, or training (NEET), and those who start Key Stage 5 taking Level 2 qualifications are less likely to progress to Level 3 qualifications, compared to students who start Key Stage 5 taking Level 3 qualifications (Lupton et al., 2021).

Another option for students in Key Stage 5 is to complete vocational qualifications. Although vocational qualifications are not the most common pathway, there are thousands of students studying Level 2 and Level 3 vocational qualifications (DfE, 2025b). In response, the DfE has introduced several reforms aimed at strengthening the vocational education system. These reforms aim to better align qualification provision with the labour market demand and address skills shortages across sectors.

Given the ongoing reforms and policy efforts of the government to strengthen post-16 education, it is important to understand the qualification uptake by students in Key Stage 5, and whether uptake

[1] According to the Raising the Participation Age (RPA) legislation implemented in 2013. To read more about it, visit https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/commons-committees/Education/evidence-check-forum/Raising-participation-age.pdf

varies by student and school characteristics. Therefore, this report addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the uptake of Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications in Key Stage 5?
2. How does the uptake of Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications vary across student background characteristics?
3. Which student and school factors are associated with the uptake of Level 2 qualifications in Key Stage 5?

This report aims to provide insights into qualification pathways in Key Stage 5 that may be relevant to policymakers, schools, and awarding organisations.

2. Qualifications background

Students in Key Stage 5 might choose between academic qualifications, vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs), or a combination of both. Academic qualifications focus on theoretical knowledge and broad subject areas. These include Advanced Level qualifications (A Levels), which are Level 3 qualifications, in which students usually study three subjects. A Levels are commonly used to progress to university or other forms of higher education, or employment. In contrast, vocational and technical qualifications, which are offered in both Key Stage 4 and 5, focus more on practical work and hands-on skills needed for a particular industry. Examples of the later are Applied Generals or Tech Levels, which are Level 3 qualifications.

In recent decades, the DfE has introduced a series of reforms and consultations to improve the quality and rigor of vocational education in England. For example, following the recommendations of the Wolf Report (DfE, 2011), the DfE introduced new categories of vocational qualifications, increased training for mathematics teachers, and changed school performance tables. Later, as a response to the Sainsbury Report (DfE, 2016), which was related to technical education, apprenticeships were strengthened, funding was withdrawn for low-quality qualifications, and T Levels were introduced as a technical alternative to A Levels for post-16 students. T Levels were launched in 2020 as Level 3 vocational qualifications equivalent to three A Levels, with the aim of providing students with a combination of classroom learning and on-the-job experience with an employer, allowing students to put their learning into practice[2].

More recently, in 2025, the Government's Post-16 Education and Skills white paper (DfE, 2025c) proposed the introduction of Vocational Level (V Level) qualifications, which are planned to replace a range of Level 3 vocational qualifications for 16 to 19-year-olds. V Levels will sit alongside the A Levels and T levels, and they are planned to be launched in 2027.

These reforms were introduced partly in response to concerns about the alignment between post-16 education and labour market needs. The DfE has argued that there is a mismatch between the qualifications students pursue and the technical skills required in the economy, which may limit students' future employment opportunities and earning potential (DfE, 2025c). Therefore, reforming vocational and technical education has been viewed as essential to make sure students are receiving high-quality education and training.

[2] For more information about T Levels, see https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/introduction-of-t-levels/introduction-of-t-levels

Studies have shown important differences in progression across qualification pathways. For example, Applied General qualifications are associated with relatively high rates of progression compared to other vocational categories (Vidal Rodeiro & Vitello, 2023). In addition, there is a lot of movement between vocational and academic pathways between Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5 (Vidal Rodeiro & Vitello, 2023), suggesting that students' educational trajectories are not fixed. However, vocational education has often been viewed through a deficit lens, with vocational pathways perceived as lower status than academic routes (Shields & Masardo, 2015). Students taking vocational qualifications are also less likely to progress to higher education than students taking academic qualifications (Bursnall et al., 2019; Shields & Masardo, 2015).

Given the ongoing reforms to post-16 education in England, it is important to understand the uptake of qualifications in Key Stage 5 and the factors associated with different types of qualifications. Examining qualification uptake may help policymakers and educators understand how current reforms can shape student choices and progression opportunities.

3. Data and methods

3.1. Data

This study used data from the National Pupil Database (NPD), a database managed by the Department for Education that contains a wide range of information about students in schools and colleges in England. The NPD also includes qualification uptake for each academic year.

In this study, we focused on the Key Stage 5 attainment data for the academic years of 2022/23 and 2023/24 to explore possible differences in results by student cohorts. These were linked to the School Census of 2020/21 and 2021/22, respectively, to have information about the student background characteristics (e.g., sex, ethnicity, income deprivation, and Special Educational Needs (SEN)). For the 2022/23 academic year, students included in the analyses were those 18-year-olds at the end of Key Stage 5 in 2022/23 (i.e., finished Key Stage 4 in 2020/21). The exam sessions included in the analyses were winter 2021, summer 2022, winter 2022, and summer 2023. For the 2023/24 academic year, students included in the analyses were those 18-year-olds at the end of Key Stage 5 in 2023/24 (i.e., finished Key Stage 4 in 2021/22). The exam sessions included in the analyses were winter 2022, summer 2023, winter 2023, and summer 2024.

3.2. Qualification type

To identify the qualification type, the qualification and assessment code provided by the NPD was matched to the performance tables of qualifications in Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5 provided by the Department for Education, which included information about the qualification number, title, and type. The following qualifications were not included in the study: Entry Level Qualifications (ELQ), music/drama/dance, and Level 1 only qualifications.

The Level 2 academic qualifications included:

- General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) which are intended to equip 14-to-16-year-olds with a strong foundation for further academic study.

The Level 2 vocational and technical qualifications included:

- Vocational and technical qualifications included BTECs Level 2, Cambridge Nationals, Cambridge Technicals Level 2, and Other Level 1/Level 2 qualifications. For example, Cambridge Nationals are designed for 14-to-16-year-olds to develop applied knowledge and practical skills where appropriate, not usually acquired through general qualifications such as GCSEs (DfE, 2020), whereas the Cambridge Technicals Level 2 qualifications are rigorous technical qualifications for post-16 students to equip them with specialist knowledge and skills in a specific industry, enabling entry to an apprenticeship, employment, or progression to a Tech Level (DfE, 2017).

The Level 3 academic qualifications included:

- General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced levels (A Levels), which are academic qualifications that equip students with the knowledge, skills, and understanding needed to progress to undergraduate study at a higher education establishment.
- Other academic qualifications (e.g., Advanced Subsidiary (AS), Extended Project, Core Maths, or International Baccalaureate), which are standalone academic qualifications.

The Level 3 vocational and technical qualifications included:

- Applied Generals (i.e., BTEC Applied Generals, Cambridge OCR Applied Generals, and Other Applied Generals), which are rigorous advanced Level 3 qualifications that allow 16-to-19-year-old students to develop transferable knowledge and skills more focused on broad applied learning (DfE, 2017).
- Tech Levels (i.e., BTEC Tech Levels, Cambridge OCR Tech Levels, and Other Tech Levels) are rigorous advanced Level 3 technical qualifications, on a par with A Levels and recognised by employers. They equip post-16 students with specialist knowledge and skills in a specific industry, occupation, or technical role, enabling entry to an apprenticeship or other employment, or progression to a related higher education course (DfE, 2017).
- T levels are rigorous advanced Level 3 technical qualifications, equivalent to three A Levels, that prepare students for entry into skilled employment, an apprenticeship, or related technical study through further or higher education.

It is important to note that Cambridge OCR Applied Generals and Cambridge OCR Tech Levels are both under the umbrella of Cambridge Technical qualifications. Similarly, both BTEC Applied Generals and BTEC Tech Levels are Level 3 BTECs

In this study, qualifications were classified into 14 types:

- Level 2 qualifications:
    - BTEC Level 2
    - Cambridge Nationals
    - Cambridge Technicals Level 2
    - GCSEs
    - Other Level 1/Level 2 qualifications[3]

- Level 3 qualifications:
    - Academic non-A Levels

[3] This included qualifications such as Functional skills at Level 2, IGCSEs, end-point assessments Level 2, and WJEC Level 1/2 awards.

- A Levels
- BTEC Applied Generals
- BTEC Tech Levels
- Cambridge OCR Applied Generals
- Cambridge OCR Tech Levels
- Other Applied Generals
- Other Tech Levels
- T Levels

3.3 Methods

To answer the first research question (what is the uptake of Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications in Key Stage 5?), descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages were used. Note that students may take multiple qualification types. Because categories are not mutually exclusive, percentages in the tables and figures may add to more than 100%.

We investigated the type of qualifications completed by students in Key Stage 5. To further explore qualifications uptake, students were split into three groups:

- Group 1: Students completing Level 2 qualifications only
- Group 2: Students completing Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications
- Group 3: Students completing Level 3 qualifications only

We examined the type and the number of qualifications taken by students in each group. Subject uptake was also examined for Level 2 qualifications and the most common qualifications in Level 3 (e.g., A Levels and Applied Generals).

To answer the second research question (how does the uptake of Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications vary across student background characteristics?), descriptive statistics were used. We looked at the students' background characteristics of each of the three groups mentioned above. Furthermore, we also examined the qualification type uptake by student background characteristics.

Finally, to answer the third research question (which student and school factors are associated with the uptake of Level 2 qualifications in Key Stage 5?), multilevel logistic regression was used as these models account for the hierarchical structure of the data (students nested in schools). The outcome variable was an indicator of whether the student completed a Level 2 qualification in Key Stage 5 or not. The regression model was:

$$\log\left(\frac{p_{ij}}{1-p_{ij}}\right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 W_j + \beta_p^T X_{ij} + u_{0j}$$

Where p_{ij} indicates the probability of student i in school j completing a Level 2 qualification in Key Stage 5, β_0 is the grand mean intercept, β_1 represents a set of coefficients associated with the type of school, W_j represents the indicators of school type such as comprehensive, selective, and independent (more details about the variable categories are in Section 3.4), X_{ij} represents the student-level variables and β_p^T the set of coefficients associated with the student-level variables. Lastly, u_{0j} represents the random effect.

The magnitude of the estimates of logistic regression models is difficult to interpret as estimates are on a log odds scale; however, their sign can be interpreted. Positive parameter estimates for a

continuous variable indicate that an increase in that variable is associated with an increase in the probability of the outcome variable (i.e., completing a Level 2 qualification in Key Stage 5), whereas negative estimates indicate that an increase in the variable is associated with a decrease in the probability of the outcome variable.

For categorical variables, the interpretation is slightly different. Positive parameter estimates indicate that being in that category is associated with a higher probability of the outcome variable, compared to the reference category, whereas a negative estimate indicates that being in that category is associated with a lower probability of the outcome variable, compared to the reference category. For example, if the parameter estimate for the variable female is negative, it means that females are less likely to complete a Level 2 qualification compared to males, holding other variables constant.

To make results more interpretable, probabilities were calculated and included in the Results section. Probabilities depict the model-based predicted probabilities of the outcome of students with certain background characteristics (female, White, without SEN, from the English language group, with medium prior attainment, from medium IDACI scores, non-eligible for FSM, and from comprehensive schools).

For example, if the probability is 6% for females, it means that females without SEN, White, from the English language group, with medium prior attainment, medium IDACI scores, non-eligible for FSM, and from comprehensive schools are predicted to have a 6% probability of completing a Level 2 qualification in Key Stage 5.

3.4 Background variables

The NPD includes detailed information about the student background characteristics. The following variables provided by the NPD were used in this study:

- Sex[4]: male or female.
- Ethnicity: Student major ethnic group divided into Asian (not Chinese), Black, Chinese, Mixed, Unclassified, White, and any other ethnic group.
- Language: Student's major language group divided into English, Other than English, and Unclassified
- Special Educational Needs (SEN): Student's major SEN provision groups included No identified SEN, SEN without a statement or SEN support, SEN with a statement or an Education, health and care plan, and unclassified.
- Prior attainment: Students' attainment in Key Stage 4 was measured using uncapped points per qualification entry (including equivalents), which was calculated by totalling up the points for each of the grades achieved on all of the GCSE and equivalent qualifications taken and dividing that by the number of qualifications. Students were then divided into terciles based on attainment score: low attainment, medium attainment, and high attainment.
- Income deprivation: the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Indices (IDACI-2019) score was used. It indicates the proportion of children living in income-deprived families in a Lower Layer Super Output Area (LSOA). This score is assigned to all students living in the LSOA. Hence, the IDACI score does not indicate how income deprived the student is (Ministry of

[4] In the School Census, this variable was recorded as 'gender' up to 2022-2023 and as 'sex' from 2023-2024 onwards.

Housing, Communities, and Local Government, 2025). The IDACI score was used to divide students into terciles: low deprivation, medium deprivation, and high deprivation.

- Free School Meals (FSM): This variable indicates whether a student has ever been recorded as eligible for free school meals on a school Census in the last 6 years.
- School type: The NPD provides the school or college's Unique Reference Number, where students completed their qualifications. The URN was used to match students to the register of educational centres from the Department for Education. Schools were classified into seven groups[5]: comprehensive schools, further education (FE) colleges, independent schools, secondary modern schools, selective schools, sixth form schools, and other (Gill, 2017).

3.5 Participants

In total, 515,231 18-year-old students at the end of Key Stage 5 in the academic year 2023/24 and 508,879 in the academic year 2022/23 were included in this study.

In the academic year 2023/24, half of the students in Key Stage 5 were female (50.8%), and 74.6% were in the English language group (Table 1). Regarding student ethnicity, most students were White (64.7%), followed by 11.6% Asian, and 6.1% Black. In relation to their SEN status, 79.9% of students did not have SEN identified, 9.6% had SEN without a statement, and 2.0% had SEN with a statement. Nearly two out of ten students in Key Stage 5 were eligible for free school meals and one-third of students attended a comprehensive school (36.9%) or a FE college (38.6%).

The student background characteristics in the 2023 cohort were highly similar to the student characteristics in the 2024 cohort.

[5] In relation to the school type variable: comprehensive academies were included in the comprehensive school category, whereas secondary modern academies were included in the secondary modern category, and selective academies were included in the selective school category. The 'other' school type category included city technology colleges, miscellaneous, free alternative provision, among others.

Table 1: Student background characteristics by cohort.

Characteristics		2023 cohort N	2023 cohort %	2024 cohort N	2024 cohort %
Sex	Female	258,185	50.7	261,819	50.8
	Male	250,686	49.3	253,373	49.2
	Missing	-	-	39	0.0
Ethnicity	Any Other Ethnic Group	9,640	1.9	10,062	2.0
	Asian	57,019	11.2	59,575	11.6
	Black	30,637	6.0	31,395	6.1
	Chinese	1,997	0.4	2,206	0.4
	Mixed	26,009	5.1	27,874	5.4
	White	330,434	64.9	333,236	64.7
	Unclassified	7,101	1.4	7,579	1.5
	Missing	46,042	9.0	43,304	8.4
Language group	English	377,082	74.1	384,203	74.6
	Other than English	84,465	16.6	86,175	16.7
	Unclassified	1,290	0.3	1,549	0.3
	Missing	46,042	9.0	43,304	8.4
SEN	No	405,061	79.6	411,545	79.9
	Yes, without a statement	47,519	9.3	49,430	9.6
	Yes, with a statement	9,842	1.9	10,418	2.0
	Unclassified	415	0.1	534	0.1
	Missing	46,042	9.0	43,304	8.4
Prior attainment	Low	169,627	33.3	171,744	33.3
	Medium	169,626	33.3	171,744	33.3
	High	169,626	33.3	171,743	33.3
IDACI	Low	153,944	30.3	156,952	30.5
	Medium	153,944	30.3	156,952	30.5
	High (most deprived)	153,944	30.3	156,952	30.5
	Missing	47,047	9.2	44,375	8.6
FSM eligibility	No	362,606	71.3	369,682	71.8
	Yes	99,797	19.6	101,706	19.7
	Missing	46,476	9.1	43,843	8.5
School type	Comprehensive	192,367	37.8	190,105	36.9
	Further education (FE) college	190,951	37.5	198,707	38.6
	Independent	34,471	6.8	33,149	6.4
	Other type of school	6,428	1.3	6,275	1.2
	Secondary Modern	5,763	1.1	5,684	1.1
	Selective schools	23,529	4.6	22,961	4.5
	Sixth form	46,270	9.1	46,337	9.0
	Missing	9,100	1.8	12,013	2.3
Total		508,879	100.0	515,231	100.0

Note: To ensure confidentiality of the data, counts below ten and percentages based on counts below ten have been suppressed and are denoted in the table with a "-".

4. Results

4.1 General uptake in Key Stage 5

To answer the first research question (what is the uptake of Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications in Key Stage 5?), the percentage of students who completed a qualification was calculated and disaggregated by qualification level and type.

Regarding Level 2 qualifications in the 2024 cohort, one-quarter of students in Key Stage 5 completed at least one GCSE, whereas 4.4% of students took BTEC Level 2 Technicals, 0.6% took Cambridge Technicals Level 2, and 0.1% completed Cambridge National qualifications (Table 2). Fifteen percent of students completed other Level 1 / Level 2 qualifications, such as Functional skills or IGCSEs. The 2023 cohort showed similar patterns with 22.1% of students completing GCSEs, 3.9% a BTEC Level 2 Technical, and 0.6% a Cambridge Technical Level 2. Notice that because categories are not mutually exclusive, percentages in the tables add to more than 100%.

In relation to Level 3 qualifications uptake, more than half of students of the 2024 cohort completed at least one academic qualification, with 53.6% completing an A Level and 16.1% sitting an academic non-A Level qualification such as AS Level, extended project diploma, or Core Maths. In addition, 16.6% of students sat at least one BTEC Applied Generals, 3.4% sat a Cambridge Applied Generals, and a smaller percentage of students completed a BTEC Tech Level 3 (1.6%), and a Cambridge Tech Level 3 qualification (1.0%). Only 1.7% of students in Key Stage 5 completed a T Level in 2024; however, T Level uptake almost doubled compared to the 2023 cohort. For the other qualifications, percentages in the 2023 cohort were similar to those in the 2024 cohort. Lastly, 12.3% of students completed at least one qualification that did not have information about its type as some qualification numbers in the NPD were not included in the DfE performance tables.

Table 2: General uptake in Key Stage 5 by qualification.

	2023 cohort		2024 cohort	
Qualifications	N	%	N	%
Level 2				
BTEC Level 2	19,870	3.9	22,623	4.4
Cambridge Nationals	338	0.1	284	0.1
Cambridge Technicals Level 2	2,986	0.6	2,968	0.6
GCSEs	112,638	22.1	127,855	24.8
Other Level 1/Level 2 qualifications	74,871	14.7	79,500	15.4
Level 3				
Academic non-A Levels	85,530	16.8	83,146	16.1
A Levels	276,860	54.4	276,309	53.6
BTEC Applied Generals	88,062	17.3	85,655	16.6
BTEC Tech Levels	9,339	1.8	8,006	1.6
Cambridge OCR Applied Generals	17,941	3.5	17,552	3.4
Cambridge OCR Tech Levels	5,876	1.2	5,264	1.0
Other Applied Generals	36,847	7.2	38,004	7.4
Other Tech Levels	10,258	2.0	9,099	1.8
T Levels	4,594	0.9	8,811	1.7
Qualification type missing	63,014	12.4	63,485	12.3

To further analyse qualification uptake, students were divided into three groups (Table 3): students completing Level 2 qualifications only (19.3% in 2024), students completing both Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications (13.3% in 2024), and students completing Level 3 qualifications only in Key Stage 5 (67.3% in 2024). The percentages were similar in the 2023 cohort, with slightly more students taking Level 3 qualifications only (69.5%) and fewer students taking Level 2 qualifications only (18.3%) and both levels (12.2%), compared to the 2024 cohort.

Table 3: Uptake in Key Stage 5 by group and cohort.

	2023 cohort		2024 cohort	
Group	N	%	N	%
Group 1: Level 2 qualifications only	93,035	18.3	99,672	19.3
Group 2: Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications	62,123	12.2	68,566	13.3
Group 3: Level 3 qualifications only	353,721	69.5	346,993	67.3

Related to the number of qualifications taken per student in Key Stage 5, on average, students in the 2024 cohort completed 3.2 qualifications (standard deviation (SD) = 1.5). For students who took Level 2 qualifications only, this number was 2.8 (SD = 1.8), with nearly 30% of students taking only one qualification and 25% taking two qualifications. Namely, over 50% of students who completed Level 2 qualifications only in Key Stage 5 took either one or two qualifications (Figure 1). Students who completed Level 3 qualifications only took 3.1 qualifications on average (SD = 1.2), with most students (46.5%) taking three qualifications and 21.5% taking four qualifications (Figure 1).

Students taking qualifications in both levels completed on average 4.3 qualifications (SD = 1.7), slightly higher than the other groups, with 27.8% of students taking four and 18.2% taking three qualifications. Furthermore, 40% of students in this group completed more Level 2 than Level 3 qualifications, whereas 24% sat the same number of qualifications in both levels, and 35% sat more Level 3 than Level 2 qualifications.

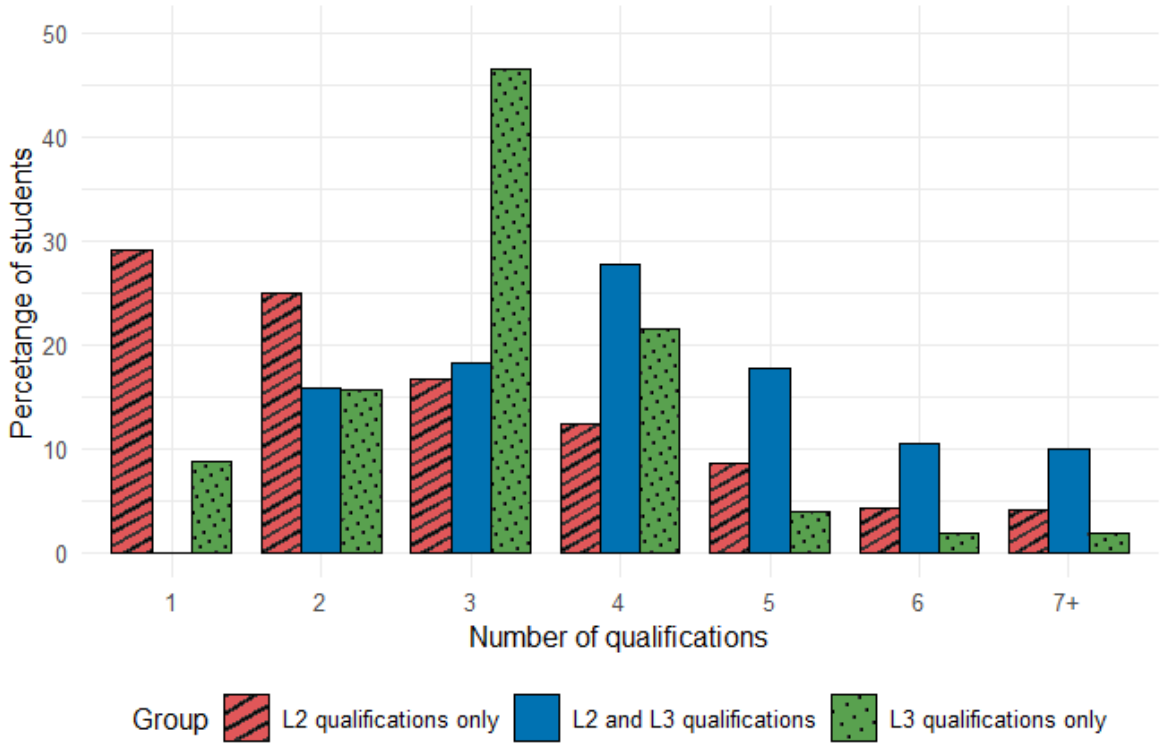


Figure 1: Number of qualifications completed in Key Stage 5 in 2024 by group.

The 2023 cohort showed a very similar pattern with students completing on average 3.2 qualifications (SD = 1.5) in Key Stage 5. Students taking Level 2 qualifications only completed on average 2.7 (SD = 1.8), with 32.3% of students taking only one qualification (Figure 2). Likewise, students completing Level 3 qualifications only took 3.1 exams on average (SD = 1.2), with most students (48.9%) taking three qualifications.

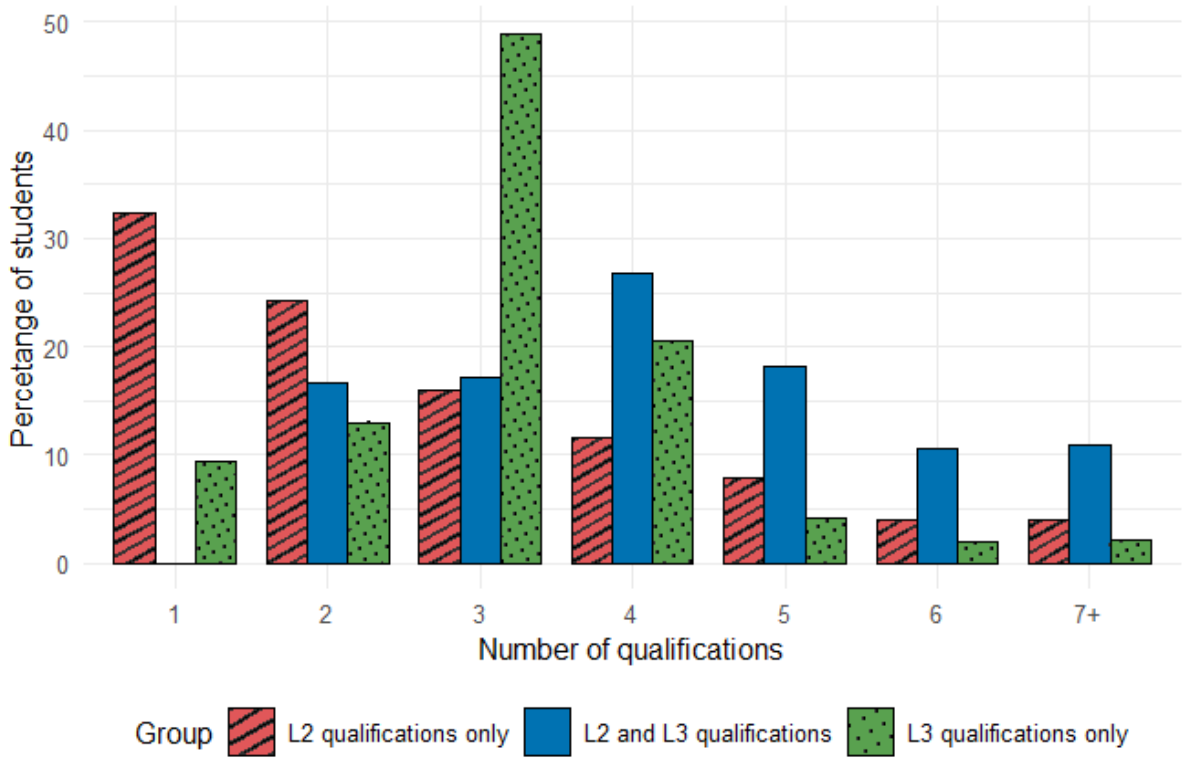


Figure 2: Number of qualifications completed in Key Stage 5 in 2023 by group.

4.2 Level 2 qualifications uptake in Key Stage 5

To further explore the uptake of Level 2 qualifications, we focused on the type of qualifications taken by group 1 (Level 2 qualifications only) and group 2 (Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications). Most 2024 cohort students who completed Level 2 qualifications only in Key Stage 5 completed at least one GCSE (78.5%), 14.7% completed a BTEC, 2% took a Cambridge Technical qualification, and 0.2% took a Cambridge National. Half of the students (52.5%) completed other Level 1 / Level 2 qualifications (Figure 3).

Nearly all students in group 1 who sat a GCSE in Key Stage 5 were resitting their GCSE English or Mathematics (99.5%). Students in the 2023 cohort followed the same pattern (Figure 4).

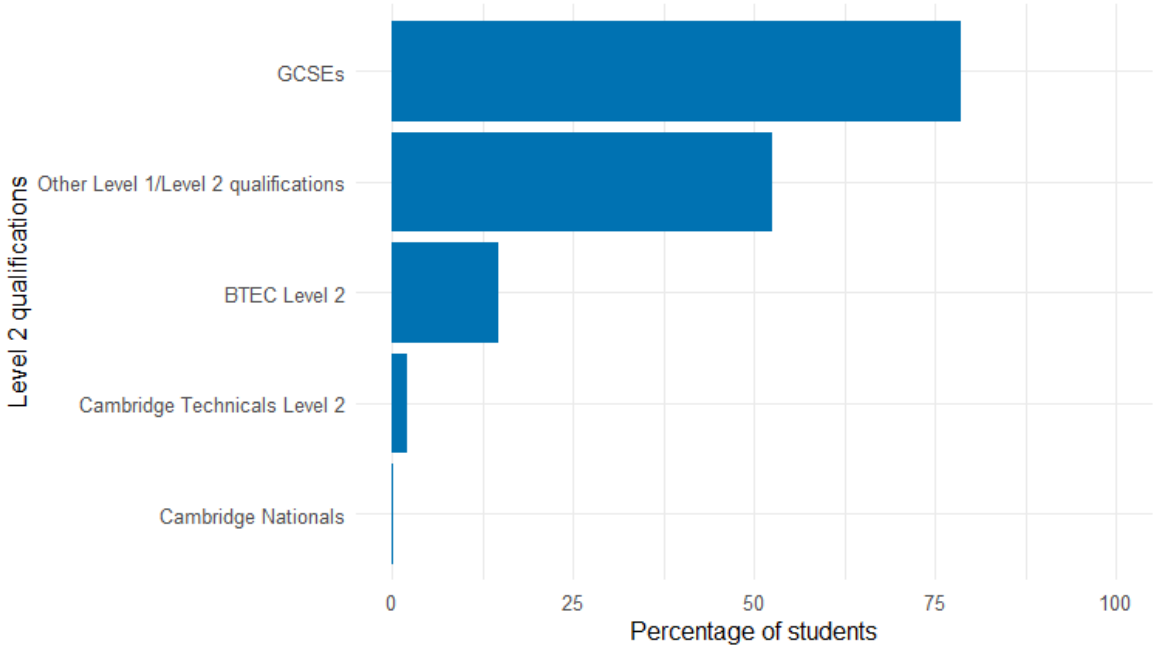


Figure 3: Uptake of qualifications among 2024 cohort students who completed Level 2 qualifications only, by type of qualification.

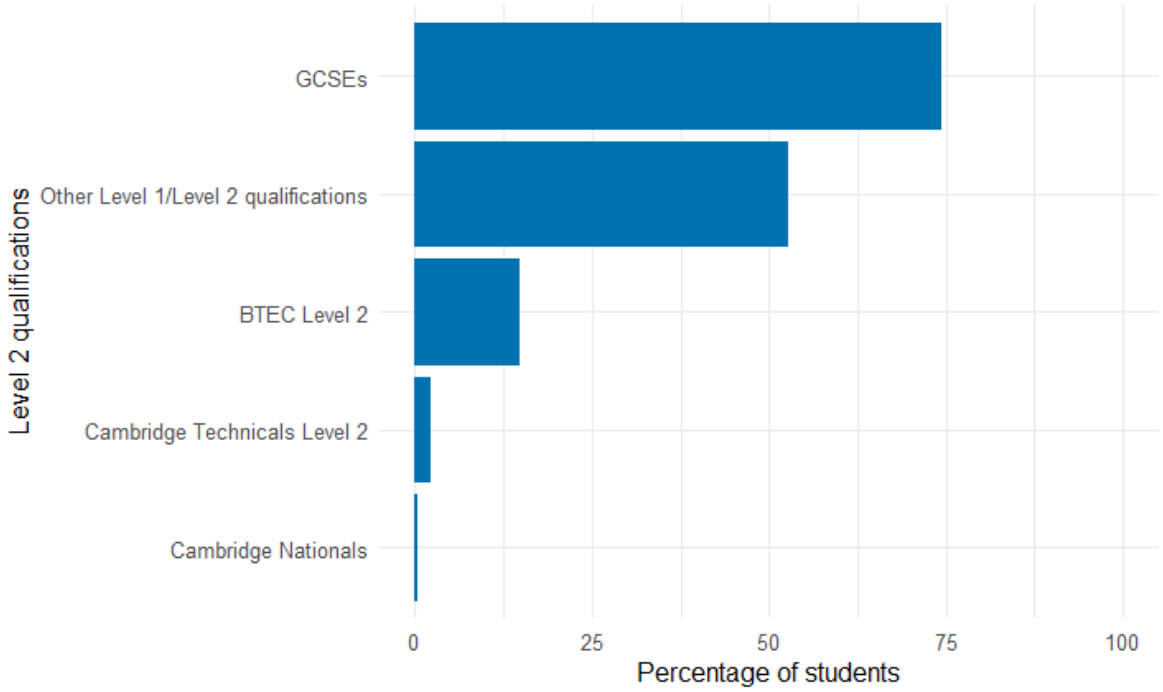


Figure 4: Uptake of qualifications among 2023 cohort students who completed Level 2 qualifications only, by type of qualification.

Most students taking both Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications in Key Stage 5 sat at least one GCSE (72.3%), whereas 39.6% sat other Level 1 / Level 2 qualifications. In addition, 30.3% of students sat BTEC Applied Generals, 28.0% took A Level qualifications (Figure 5).

Similar to group 1, almost all students completing GCSEs were resitting their GCSE English or Mathematics.

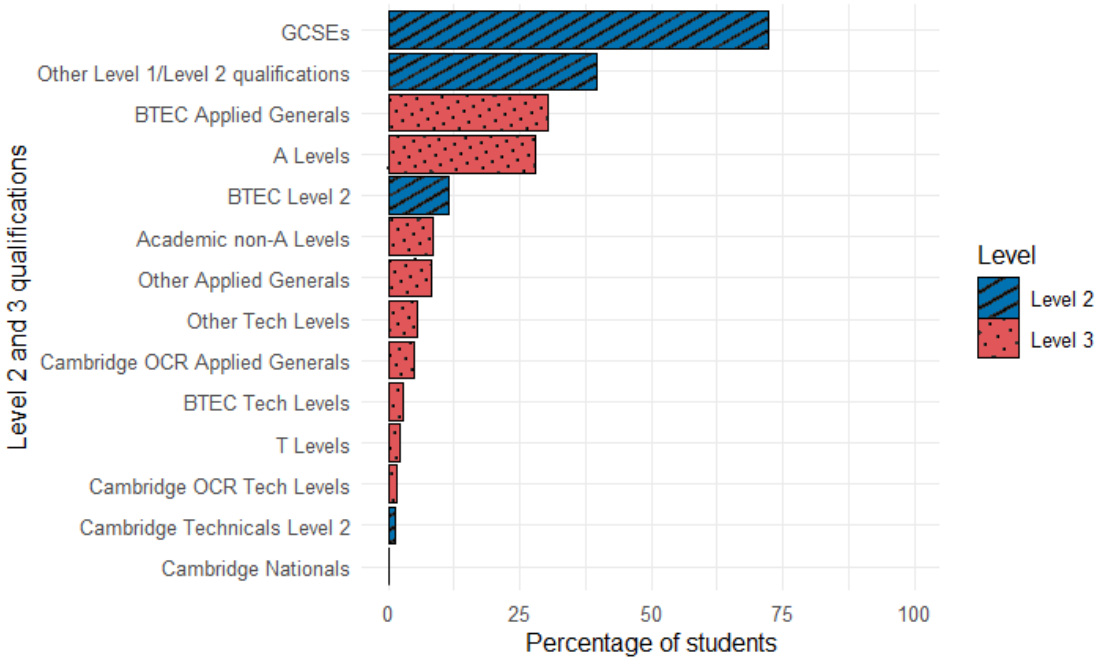


Figure 5: Uptake of qualifications among 2024 cohort students who completed Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications, by type of qualification.

Students in the 2023 cohort showed very similar results, except for a slightly lower percentage of students completing T Levels compared to 2024 (Figure 6).

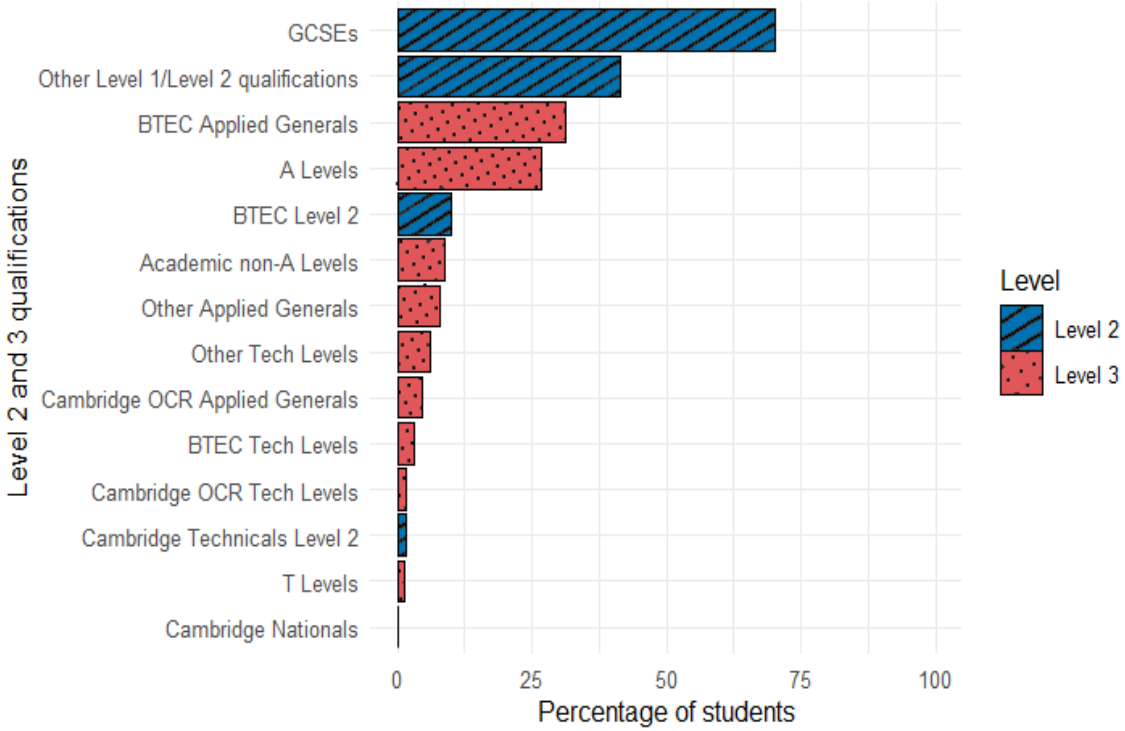


Figure 6: Uptake of qualifications among 2023 cohort students who completed Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications, by type of qualification.

4.3 Level 3 qualifications uptake in Key Stage 5

Most students in Key Stage 5 were taking Level 3 qualifications only as shown in Table 3. Among these students, 74.1% of the 2024 cohort completed A Levels, followed by 22.3% who completed academic non-A Level qualifications, and 18.7% who sat BTEC Applied Generals (Figure 7). Only 4.1% complete Cambridge Applied Generals and 1.2% Cambridge Tech Levels.

Students in the 2023 cohort showed similar patterns, with slightly lower T Level uptake compared to 2024 (Figure 8).

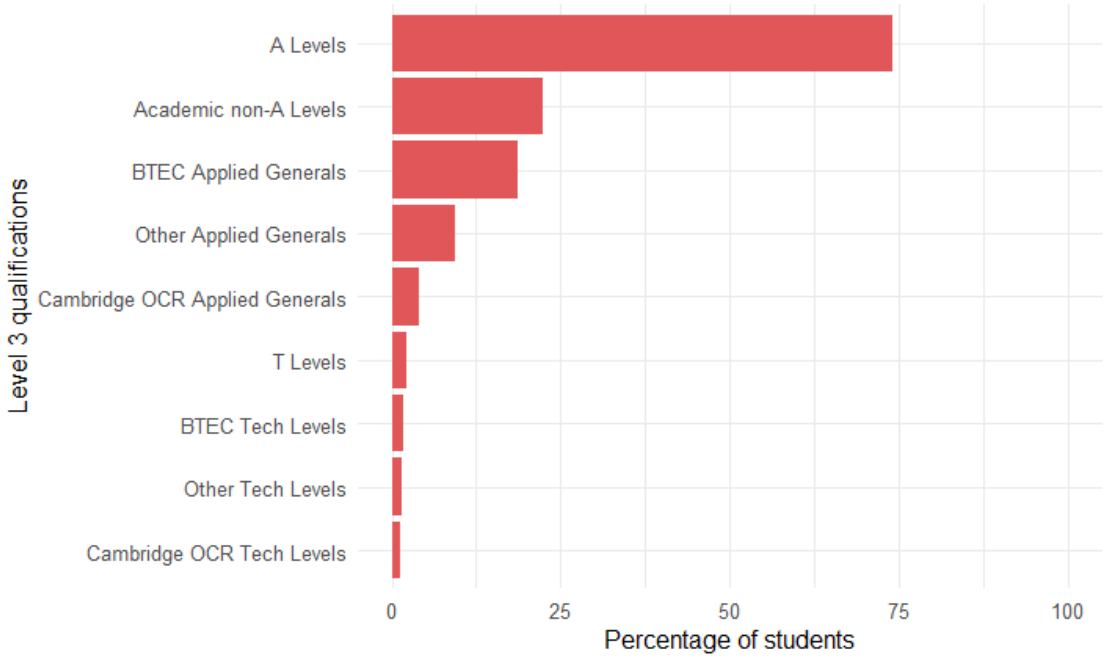


Figure 7: Uptake of qualifications among 2024 cohort students who completed Level 3 qualifications only, by type of qualification.

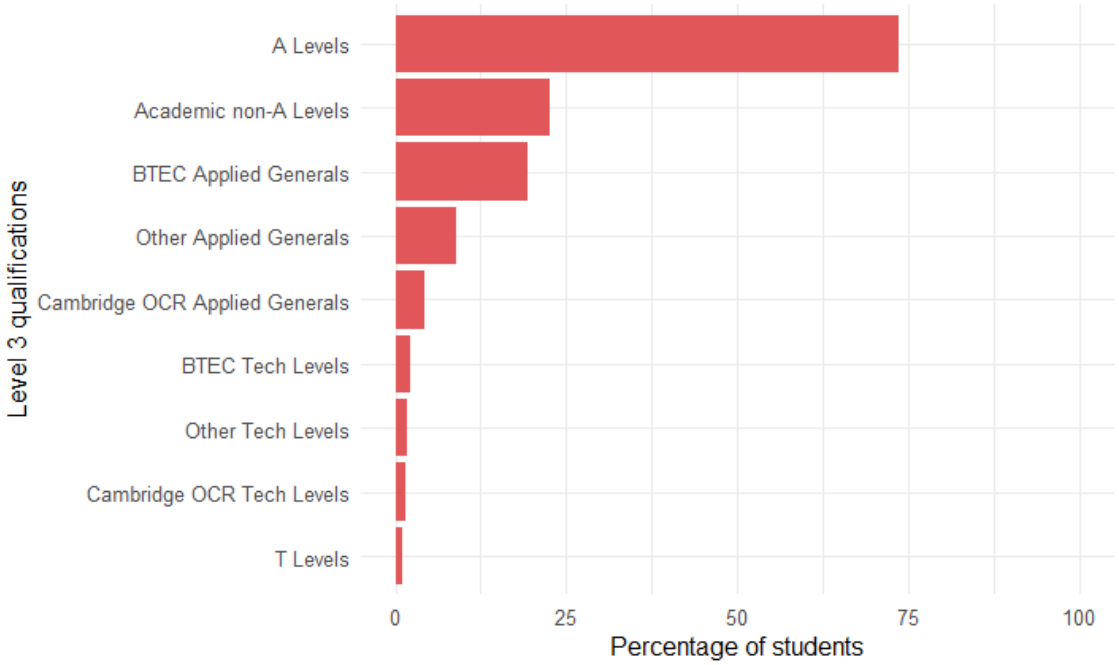


Figure 8: Uptake of qualifications among 2023 cohort students who completed Level 3 qualifications only, by type of qualification.

Among students who completed Level 3 qualifications only, across both 2023 and 2024 cohorts, nearly 64% completed only academic qualifications, 20% completed both academic and vocational qualifications, and 17% completed vocational qualifications only (Table 4).

Table 4: Uptake of academic and vocational qualifications by students who completed Level 3 qualifications only.

	2023 cohort		2024 cohort	
Pathways	N	%	N	%
Academic	206,491	63.5	204,104	63.9
Vocational	54,464	16.7	52,621	16.5
Academic and vocational	64,367	19.8	62,845	19.7

4.4 Subject Uptake in Key Stage 5

To continue examining qualification uptake in Key Stage 5, subject areas pursued by students were reported. We looked at the subject uptake of Level 2 qualifications of students in either group 1 or 2, excluding GCSEs as nearly all students (over 95%) in these groups were resitting their GCSE Mathematics or English.

There was a wide range of subjects taken with 227 in total. The following figure shows subjects with an uptake of at least 1,000 students, excluding GCSEs. Overall, most students in the 2024 cohort who took Level 2 qualifications in Key Stage 5 chose subjects related to ‘Health Studies’, ‘Electrical installation’, ‘Basic communication skills’, ‘Business Studies’, and ‘Art & Design’ (Figure 9).

In contrast, in 2023, there was a lower number of students pursuing a Level 2 qualification in ‘Health Studies’, and a significant increase in the number of students studying ‘Public Health Information’ (Figure 10).

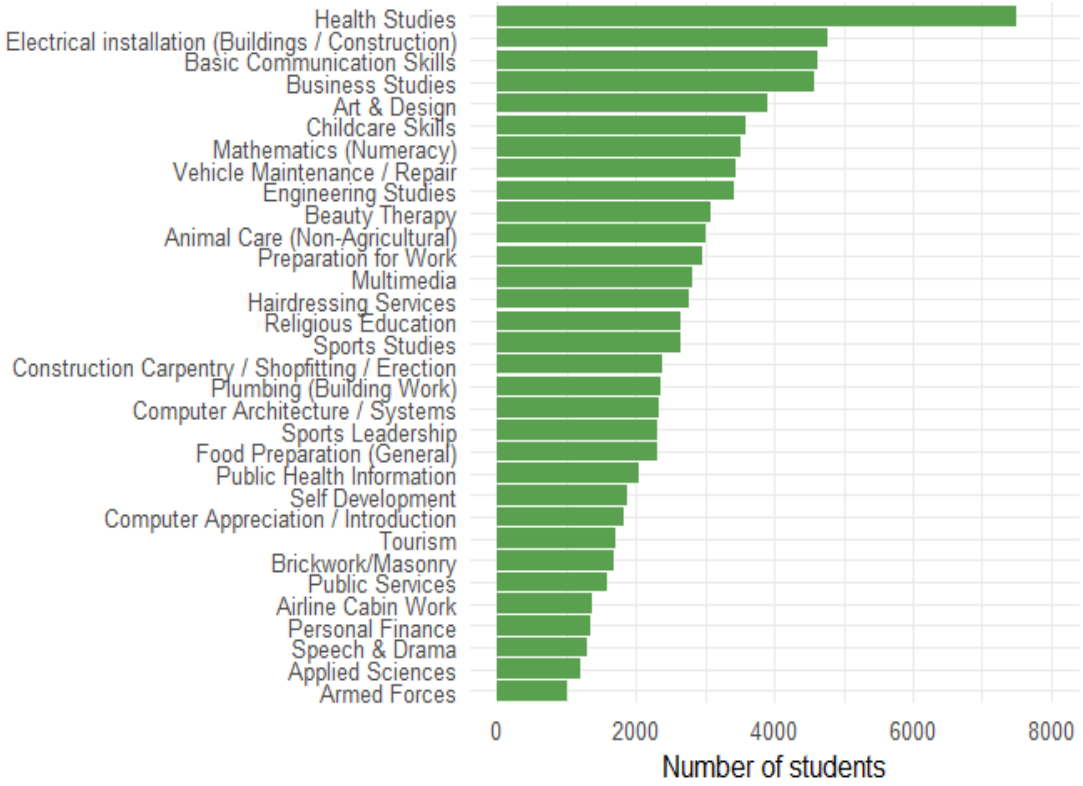


Figure 9: Subject uptake of non-GCSE Level 2 qualifications in Key Stage 5 – 2024 cohort.

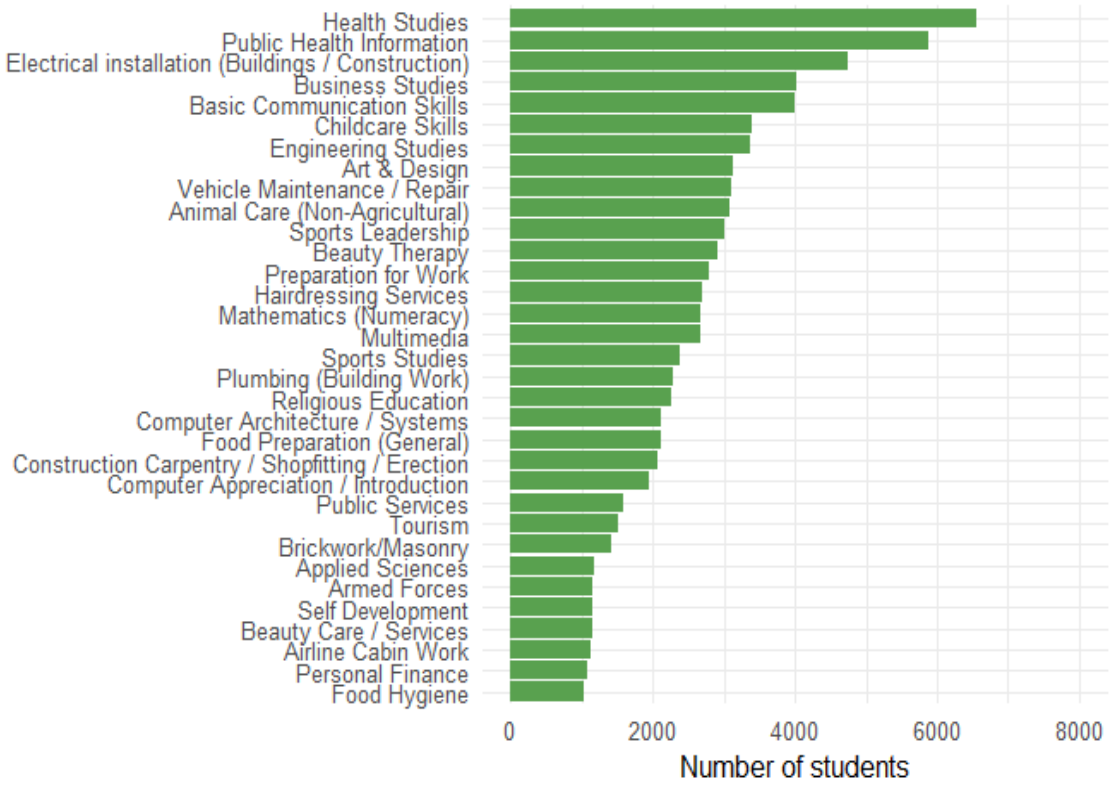


Figure 10: Subject uptake of non-GCSE Level 2 qualifications in Key Stage 5 – 2023 cohort.

In relation to the subject uptake of students taking Level 3 qualifications only, we looked at A Levels and Applied Generals separately as they were the two most common types of qualification taken in Level 3, as shown in Table 2.

A Level qualification subjects with an uptake of at least 1,000 students are shown in the following figures. Most students in Key Stage 5 who completed only Level 3 qualifications sat A Levels in Mathematics, Psychology, Biology, Chemistry, and History (Figures 11 and 12). There were no major differences in subject uptake of A Levels between the 2023 and 2024 cohorts.

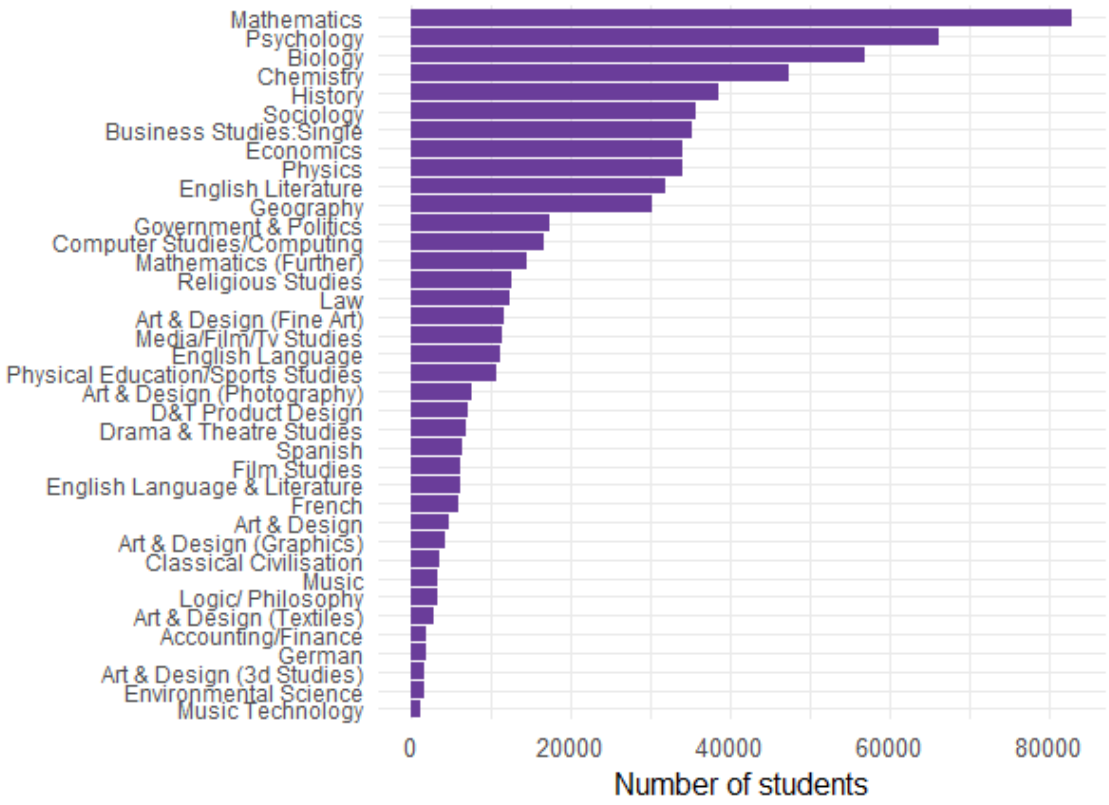


Figure 11: Subject uptake of A Levels among 2024 cohort students who completed Level 3 qualifications only.

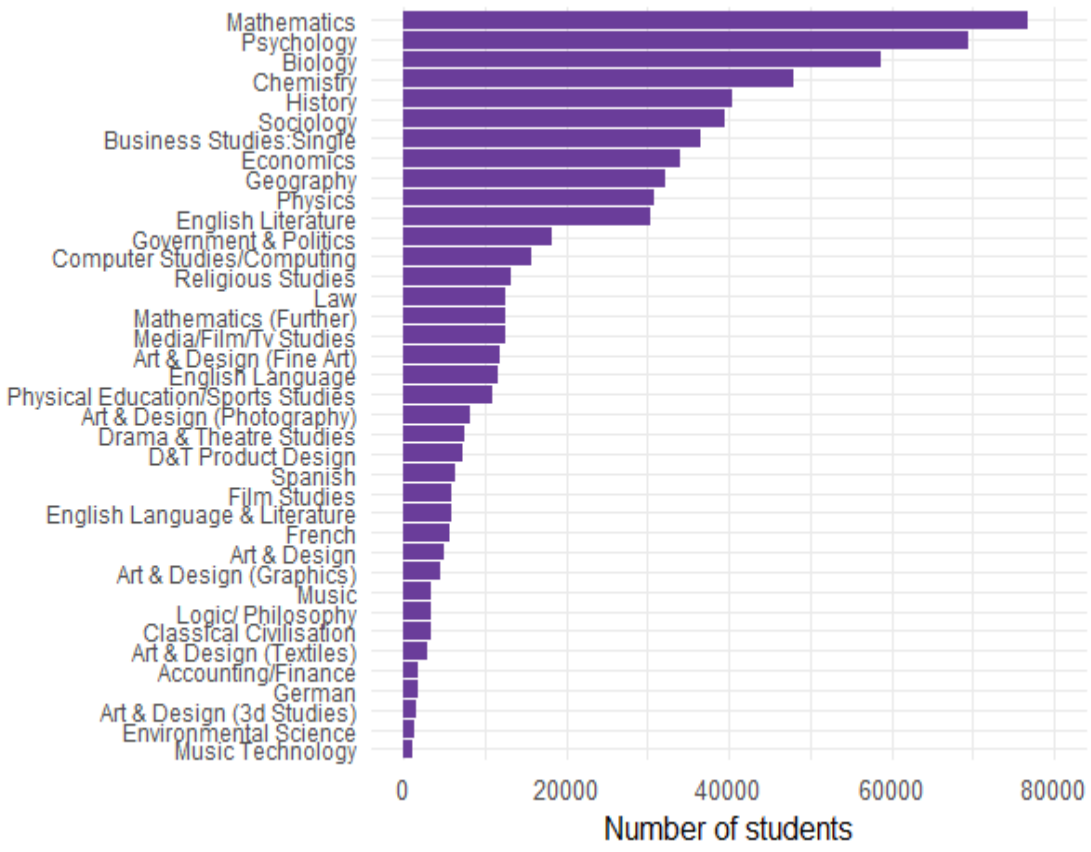


Figure 12: Subject uptake of A Levels among 2023 cohort students who completed Level 3 qualifications only.

For the Applied General qualifications, subjects with an uptake of at least 1,000 students are shown in the following figures. Most students in Key Stage 5 completing only Level 3 qualifications completed Applied Generals in ‘Social Science’, ‘Business Studies’, ‘Health Studies’, ‘Applied Science’, and ‘Sports Studies’ (Figures 13 and 14). There were no major differences between cohorts in the subject uptake of Applied General qualifications.

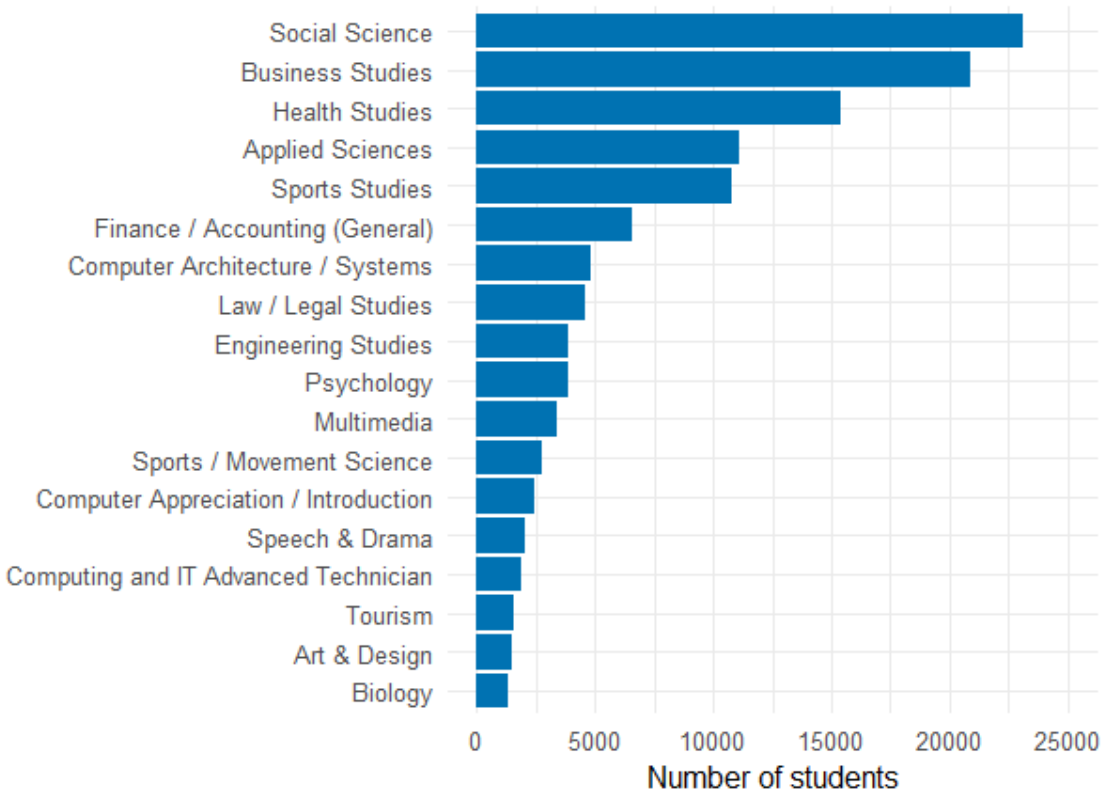


Figure 13: Subject uptake of Applied Generals among 2024 cohort students who completed Level 3 qualifications only.

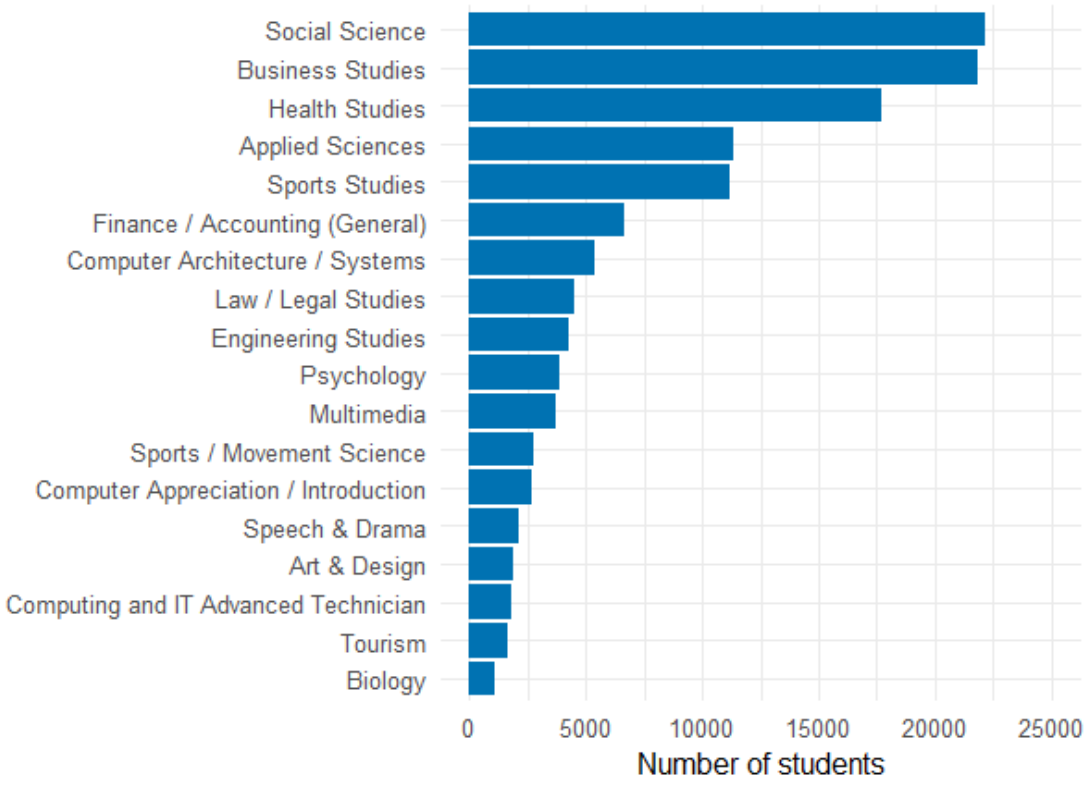


Figure 14: Subject uptake of Applied Generals among 2023 cohort students who completed Level 3 qualifications only.

4.5 Students' characteristics and qualification uptake

To answer the second research question (how does the uptake of Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications vary across student background characteristics?), descriptive statistics were calculated. Table 5 shows the students' characteristics of the 2024 cohort in Key Stage 5 by group.

Some differences were noticeable across groups. There were more male than female students completing Level 2 qualifications only in Key Stage 5, whereas in groups 2 and 3, this pattern was reversed, with more female than male students completing a mixture of Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications, or Level 3 qualifications only. In relation to SEN status, 29% of students taking Level 2 qualifications only had special education needs (either with or without a SEN statement), whereas only 6.5% of students taking Level 3 qualifications only had special education needs.

Additionally, students taking Level 2 qualifications only were mostly White (78.3%). There were 8.3% Asians, 5.7% Mixed, 5.6% Black, 0.1% Chinese, and 1.8% from any other race. The ethnic and racial composition was somewhat different for students completing Level 3 qualifications only, as there was a lower proportion of White students and a higher proportion of Asian and Chinese students in that group.

Regarding student socio-economic background, most students taking Level 2 qualifications only in Key Stage 5 were from the most deprived backgrounds (46.1% were in the top tertile of the IDACI score, and 38.4% were eligible for free school meals). In contrast, most students taking Level 3 qualifications only were from the least deprived backgrounds (28.1% were in the top tertile and 15.3% were eligible for free school meals).

The percentage of low and medium attainers was significantly higher in the group who completed Level 2 qualifications only, compared to the other two groups, especially the group taking Level 3 qualifications only. Furthermore, only 0.7% of students in group 1 were students with high attainment, whereas roughly half of the students (47.3%) who completed Level 3 qualifications only were high attainers.

In relation to the uptake by type of school, among students taking Level 2 qualifications only, 86.4% attended FE colleges and 7.5% comprehensive schools. In contrast, among students taking qualifications in both levels, 56.2% were in FE colleges and 27.3% in comprehensive schools. This difference was larger in group 3, where 22.7% of students attended FE colleges and 48.6% attended comprehensive schools. Results for the 2023 cohort were very similar (see Appendix A).

Table 5: Students' background characteristics in Key Stage 5 by uptake group – 2024 cohort.

Characteristics		Level 2 qual. only N	%	Level 2 and 3 qual. N	%	Level 3 qual. only N	%
Sex	Female	40,529	40.7	36,645	53.4	184,645	53.2
	Male	59,140	59.3	31,917	46.6	162,316	46.8
Ethnicity	Any Other Ethnic Group	1,748	1.8	1,775	2.8	6,539	2.1
	Asian	7,944	8.3	8,292	13.0	43,339	14.2
	Black	5,380	5.6	6,100	9.6	19,915	6.5
	Chinese	118	0.1	237	0.4	1,851	0.6
	Mixed	5,463	5.7	4,098	6.4	18,313	6.0
	White	74,590	78.3	43,138	67.8	215,508	70.6
Language group	English	82,040	84.9	50,245	77.9	251,918	81.5
	Other than English	14,537	15.1	14,265	22.1	57,373	18.5
SEN	No	68,073	70.5	53,562	82.8	289,910	93.5
	Yes, without a statement	21,934	22.7	9,467	14.6	18,029	5.8
	Yes, with statement	6,607	6.8	1,626	2.5	2,185	0.7
Prior attainment	Low	90,564	90.9	42,503	62.0	38,677	11.1
	Medium	8,361	8.4	19,251	28.1	144,132	41.5
	High	747	0.7	6,812	9.9	164,184	47.3
IDACI	Low	20,226	21.0	17,315	26.8	119,411	38.5
	Medium	31,811	33.0	21,727	33.6	103,414	33.4
	High	44,443	46.1	25,549	39.6	86,960	28.1
FSM eligible	No	59,531	61.6	47,495	73.5	262,656	84.7
	Yes	37,079	38.4	17,160	26.5	47,467	15.3
School type	Comprehensive	7,268	7.5	18,435	27.3	164,402	48.6
	Further education (FE)	84,090	86.4	37,917	56.2	76,700	22.7
	Independent	412	0.4	2,267	3.4	30,470	9.0
	Secondary modern	367	0.4	784	1.2	4,533	1.3
	Selective	22	0.0	1,001	1.5	21,938	6.5
	Sixth form	3,623	3.7	6,681	9.9	36,033	10.6
	Other	1,509	1.6	421	0.6	4,345	1.3

Some of the largest gaps associated with students' characteristics and qualification uptake were further examined, specifically, gaps by sex, SEN status, prior attainment, income deprivation, FSM eligibility, and school type were examined. For example, 23.3% of male students in 2024 were in Group 1 completing Level 2 qualifications only, whereas 15.5% of female students were in Group 1. Likewise, 64.1% of male students were in Group 3 (Level 3 qualifications only), whereas 70.5% of female students were in Group 3. Results for the 2023 followed the same pattern.

The qualification uptake in 2024 did not differ much between female and male students (Figure 15). The most common qualification for male and female students was the A Levels, although the percentage taking at least one was higher for females (57.3%) than for males (49.8%). In addition, 26.7% of male students took at least a GCSE, whereas this was 23.0% for females. Results for the 2023 cohort indicated the same trend (Figure 16).

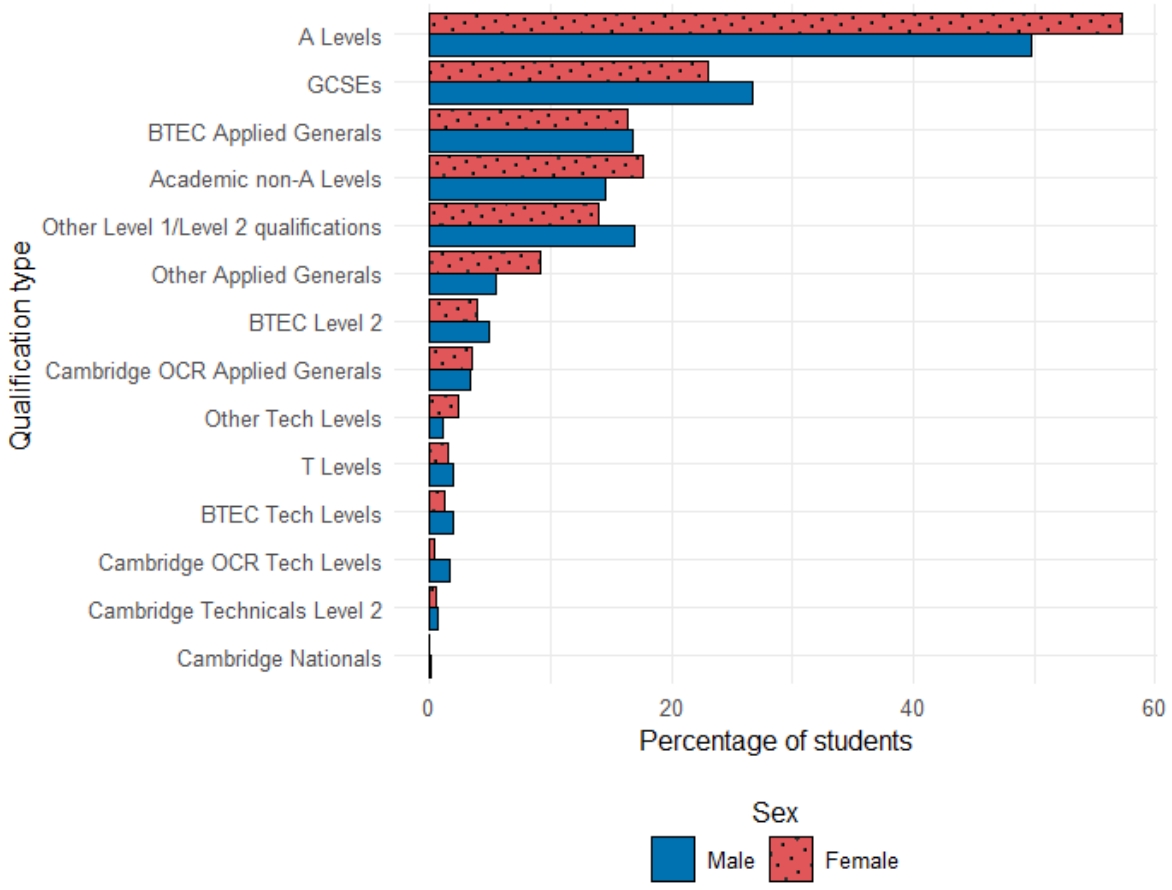


Figure 15: Uptake of qualifications among 2024 cohort students in Key Stage 5 by sex.

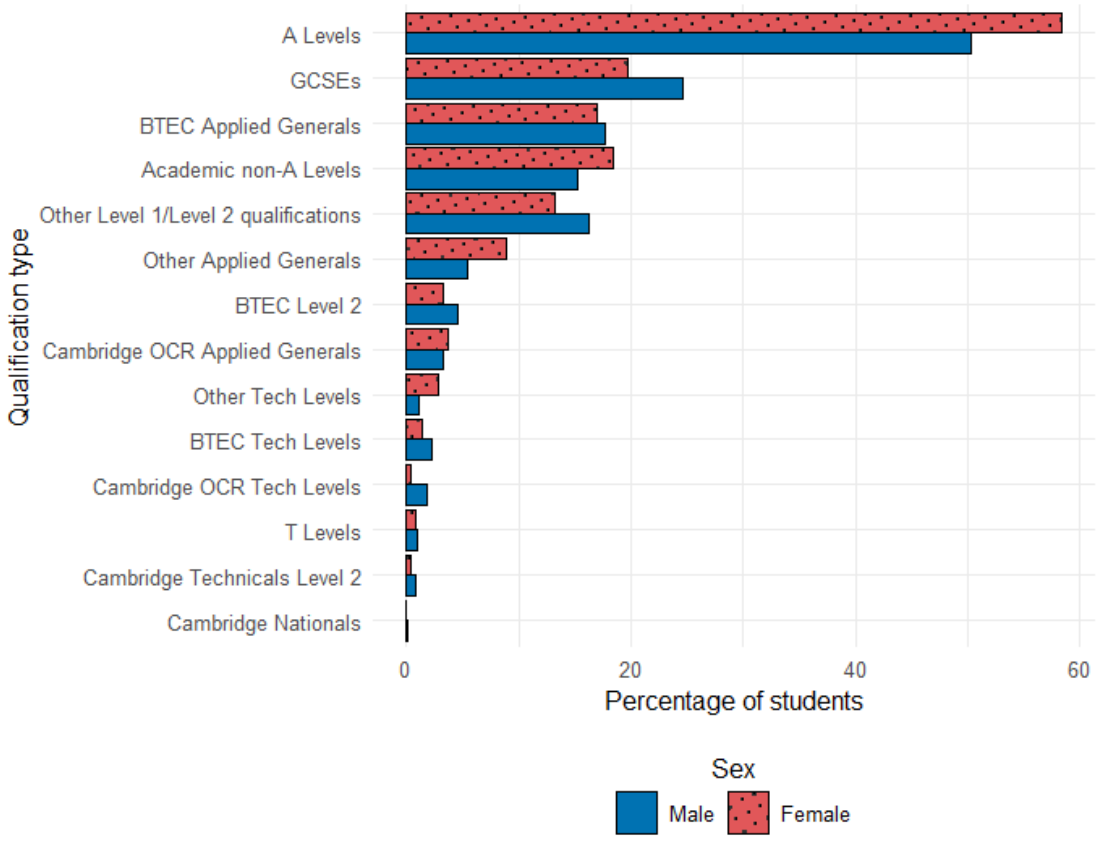


Figure 16: Uptake of qualifications among 2023 cohort students in Key Stage 5 by sex.

Related to the student SEN status, roughly half (47.7%) of the 2024 cohort students with SEN (with or without a statement) took Level 2 qualifications only in Key Stage 5, and 33.8% took Level 3 qualifications only. In contrast, 16.5% of students without SEN took Level 2 qualifications only, and 70.4% took Level 3 qualifications only in Key Stage 5.

In relation to the type of qualifications, 56% of the students with SEN took GCSEs, 29.3% took other Level 1 / Level 2 qualifications, and 22.6% took GCE A Levels in Key Stage 5 (Figure 17). Conversely, most students without SEN took at least one A Level (55.2%), 21.9% took at least a GCSE, and 18% took BTEC Applied Generals. Results for the 2023 cohort were similar, where most students with SEN completed GCSEs and most students without SEN completed A Levels (Figure 18).

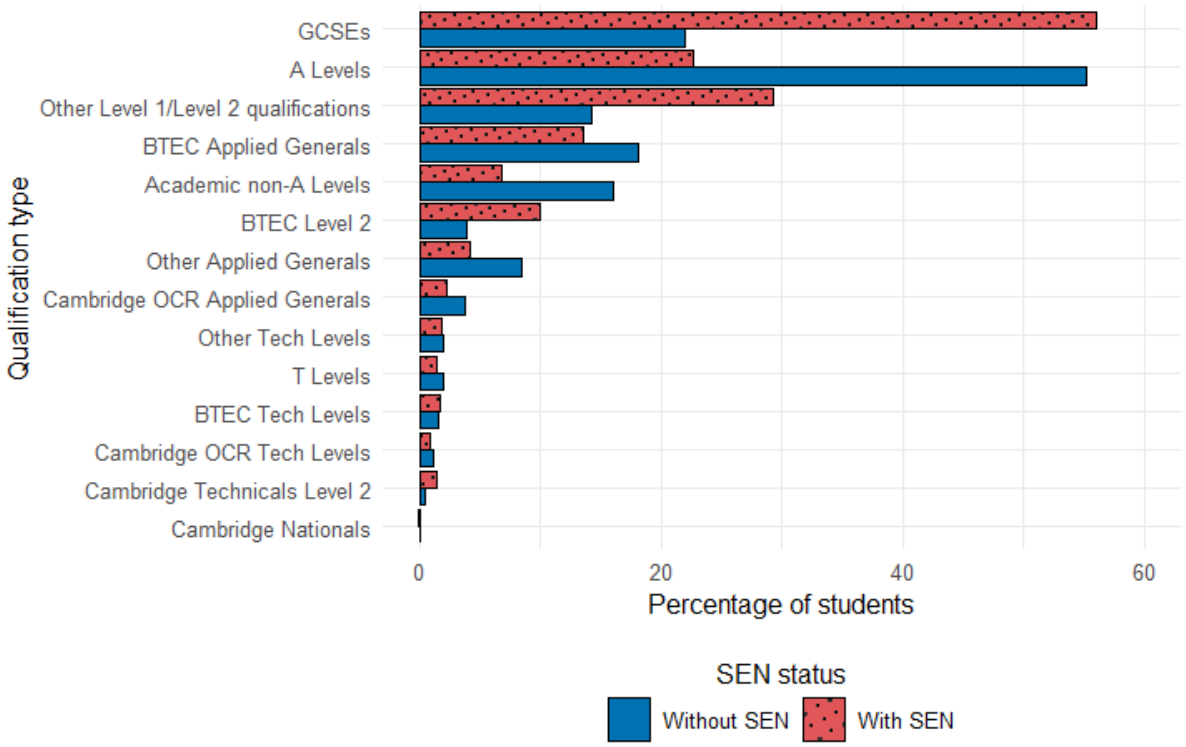


Figure 17: Uptake of qualifications among 2024 cohort students in Key Stage 5 by SEN status.

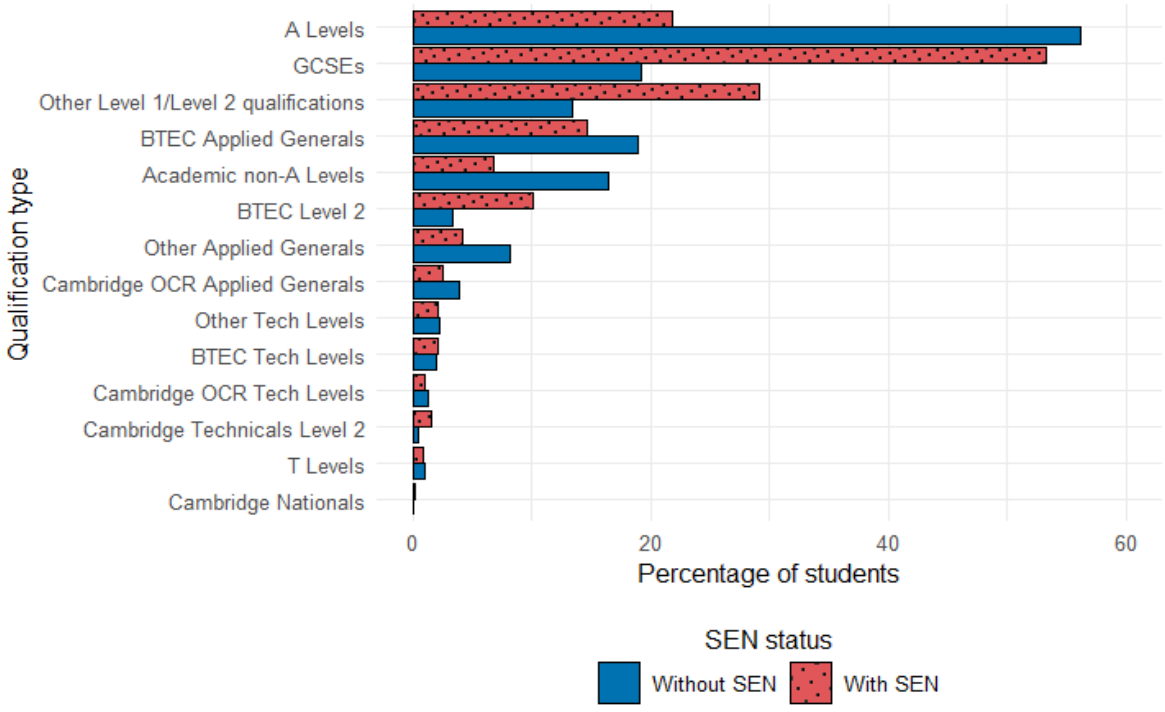


Figure 18: Uptake of qualifications among 2023 cohort students in Key Stage 5 by SEN status.

In relation to students' socioeconomic status, free school meal (FSM) eligibility and the IDACI score were examined. There were large gaps in the percentage of students in each group by FSM eligibility. For example, 71.0% of students non-eligible for FSM were taking Level 3 qualifications only, whereas this percentage was 46.7% for students eligible for FSM. Furthermore, 16.1% of

students non-eligible for FSM took Level 2 qualifications only in Key Stage 5, whereas this percentage was 36.5% for students FSM-eligible.

Furthermore, 56.5% of the students who were non-eligible for FSM mostly took at least one A Level, 21.4% took at least a GCSE, 17.3% took BTEC Applied Generals, and 16.4% took other academic non-A Level qualifications (Figure 19).

In contrast, most students who were eligible for FSM completed GCSEs (43.6%) in Key Stage 5, followed by A Levels (31.5%), other Level 1 / Level 2 qualifications (23.7%), and BTEC Applied Generals (18.2%). The 2023 cohort followed the same patterns as the 2024 cohort (Figure 20).

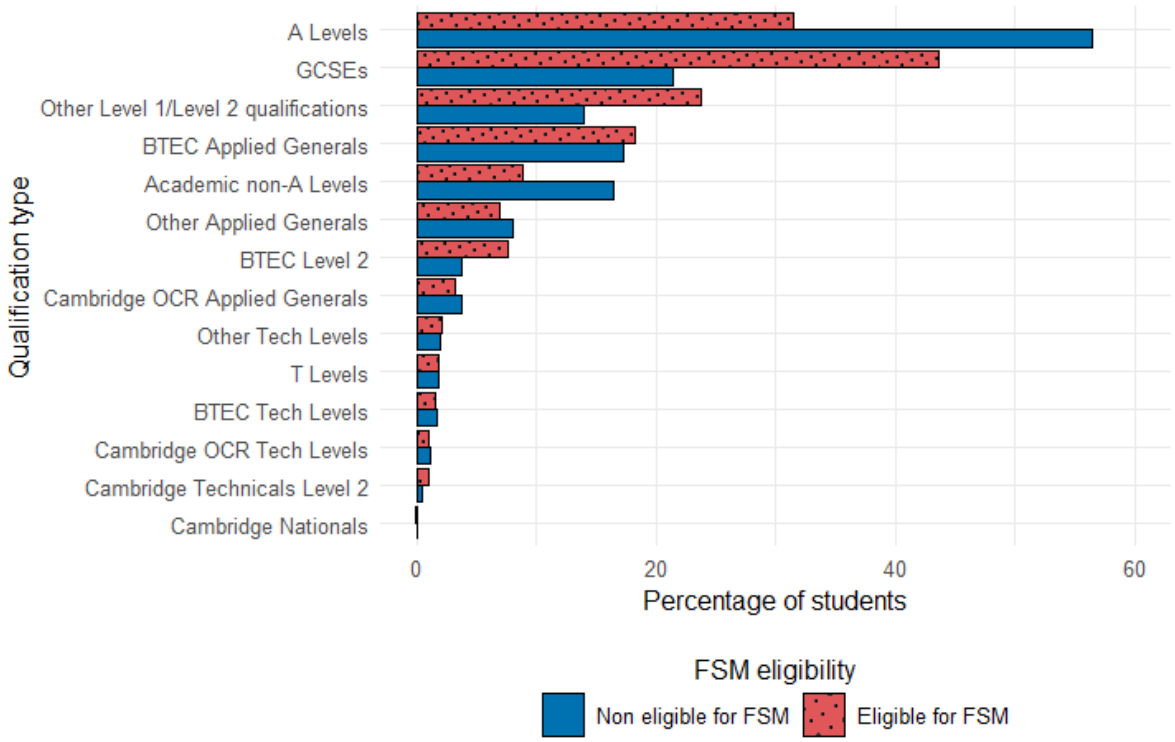


Figure 19: Uptake of qualifications among 2024 cohort students in Key Stage 5 by FSM eligibility.

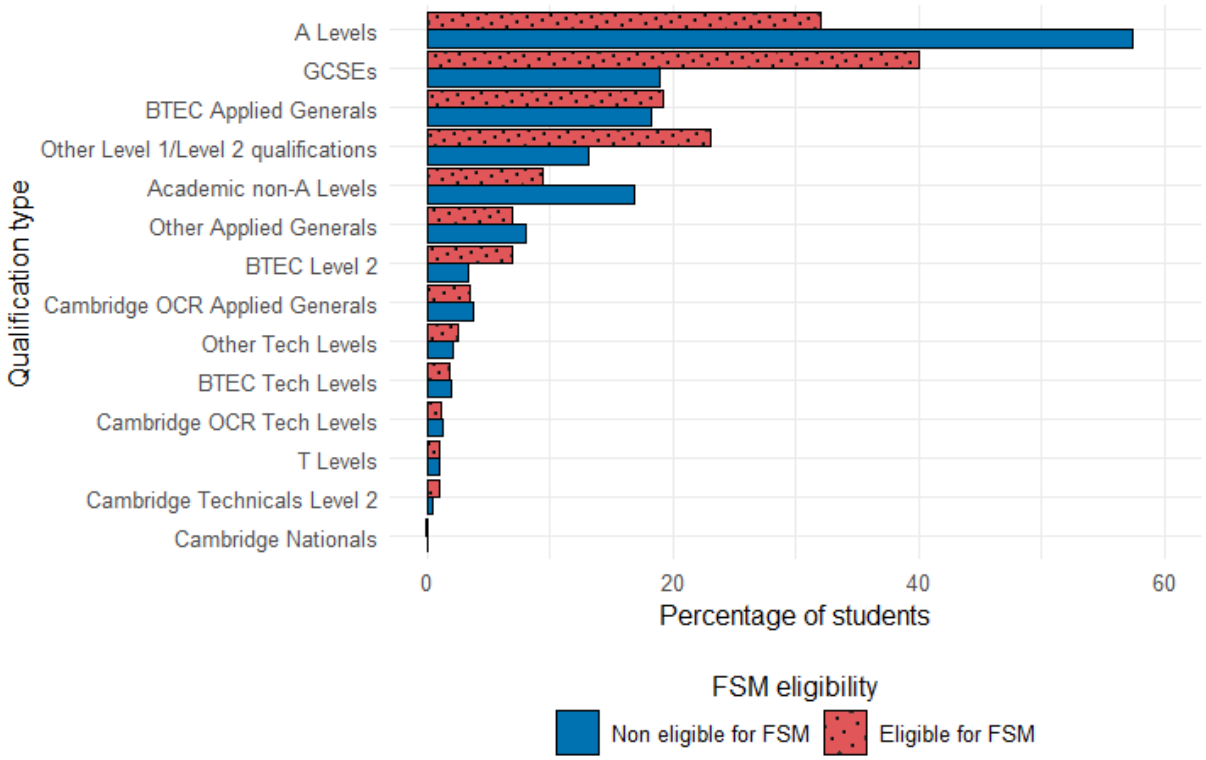


Figure 20: Uptake of qualifications among 2023 cohort students in Key Stage 5 by FSM eligibility.

Students also showed significant differences in the qualification uptake by IDACI score. As students were more income-deprived, the percentage of students who took Level 2 qualifications only increased, and the percentage of students who took Level 3 qualifications only decreased. Regarding the type of qualification (Figure 21), most students from the low IDACI category (least disadvantaged backgrounds) took GCE A Levels (63%) and non-A Level academic qualifications (18.7%). Around half of students with an IDACI score in the middle tercile (medium) took at least an A Level (50.8%), and 26.0% took at least a GCSE in Key Stage 5. Lastly, almost 40% of students in the most income-deprived group took an A Level, followed by 35.5% of students taking a GCSE. Results in 2023 showed the same pattern (Figure 22).

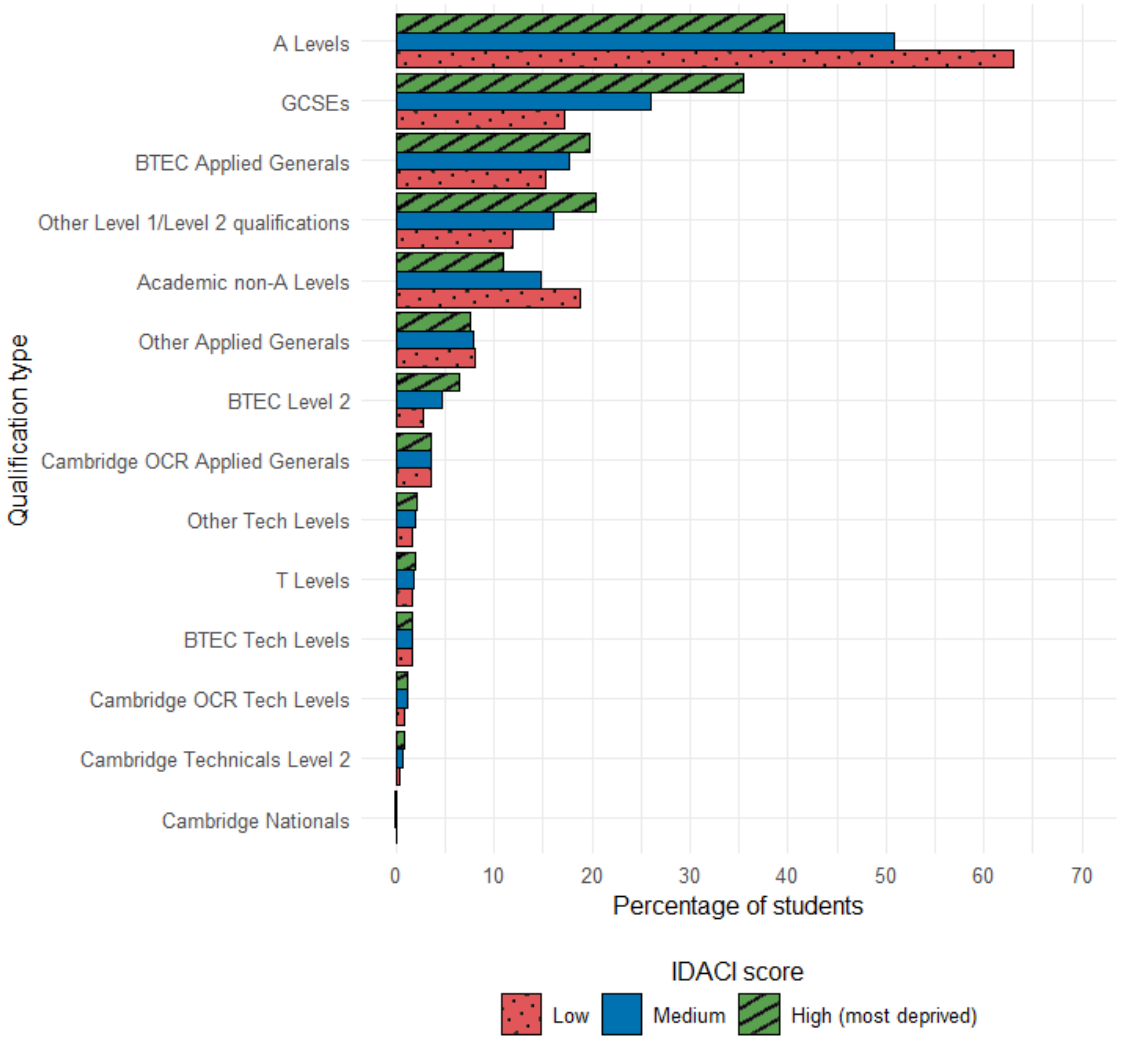


Figure 21: Uptake of qualifications among 2024 cohort students in Key Stage 5 by IDACI scores.

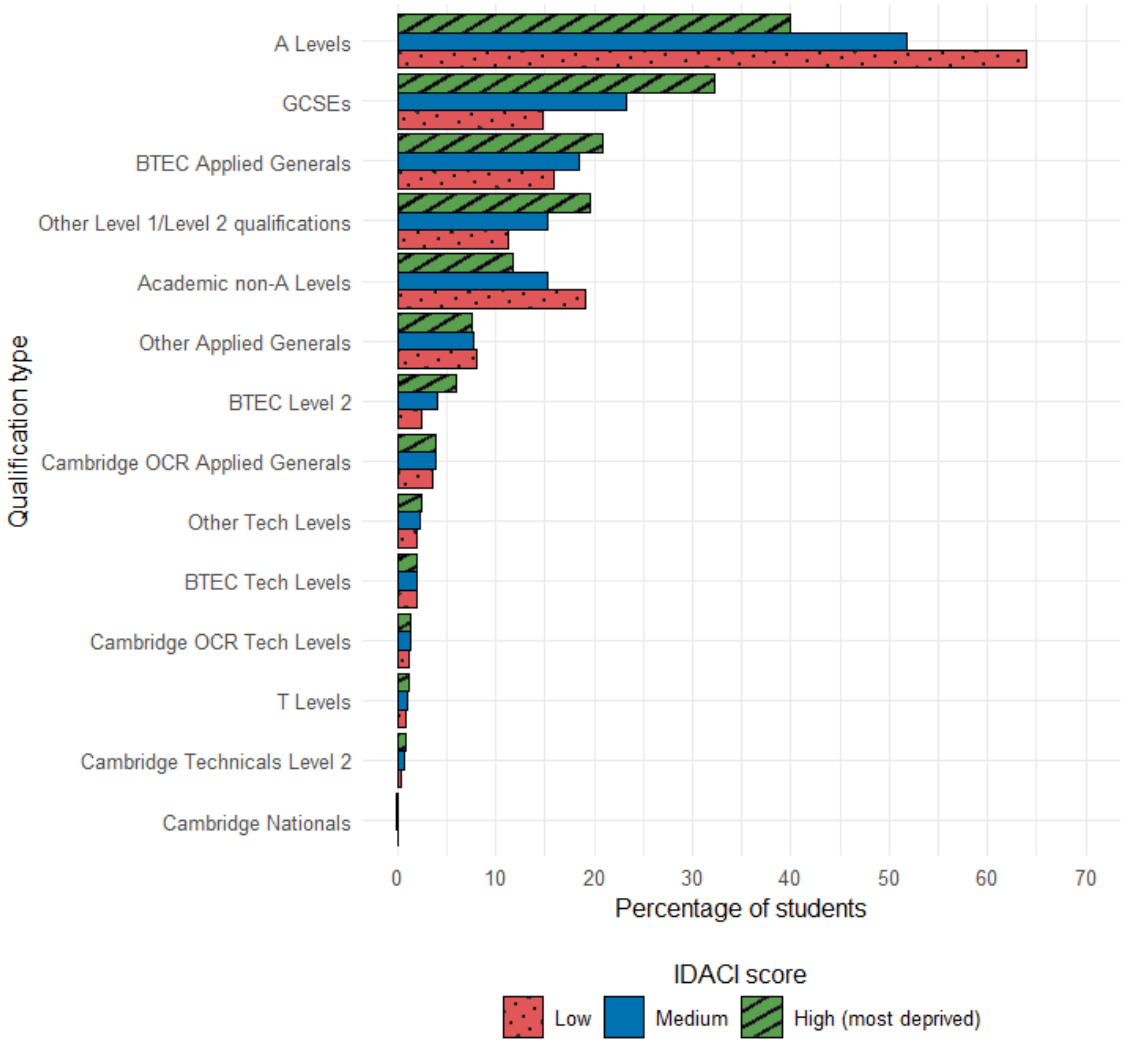


Figure 22: Uptake of qualifications among 2023 cohort students in Key Stage 5 by IDACI scores.

In relation to Key Stage 4 attainment, large differences were found in the uptake of qualifications. For example, 52.7% of students with low prior attainment were completing Level 2 qualifications only in Key Stage 5, and 22.5% were completing Level 3 qualifications only. Conversely, only 4.9% of students with a medium Key Stage 4 attainment were completing Level 2 qualifications only, and the vast majority of students with a medium prior attainment were completing Level 3 qualifications only (83.9%). Lastly, 9 out of 10 students with high attainment were taking Level 3 qualifications only, and only 0.4% were taking Level 2 qualifications only. The same trend was observed in the 2023 cohort.

There were also substantial differences in the uptake of specific qualifications. Nearly all students (92.2%) with high Key Stage 4 attainment took at least one A Level qualification in Key Stage 5, as opposed to the 9.4% of students with low Key Stage 4 attainment (Figure 23). Students with high prior attainment were also most likely to be taking at least one GCE non-A Level qualification (30.5%). Most students with a medium Key Stage 4 attainment were taking A Level qualifications (59.2%), followed by BTEC Applied Generals. Lastly, the majority of students with low Key Stage 4 attainment were taking GCSEs (65.5%) and other Level 1 / Level 2 qualifications. We can observe the same pattern in 2023 (Figure 24).

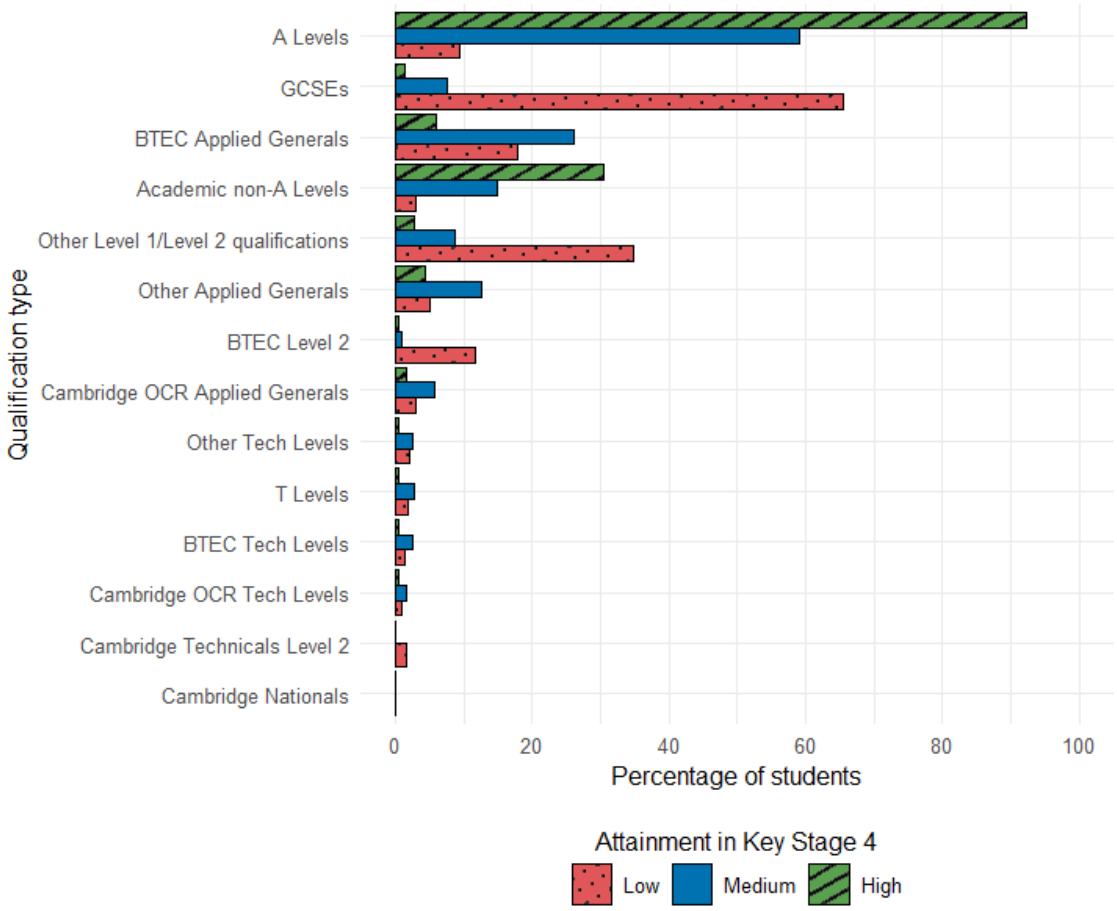


Figure 23: Uptake of qualifications among 2024 cohort students in Key Stage 5 by attainment in Key Stage 4.

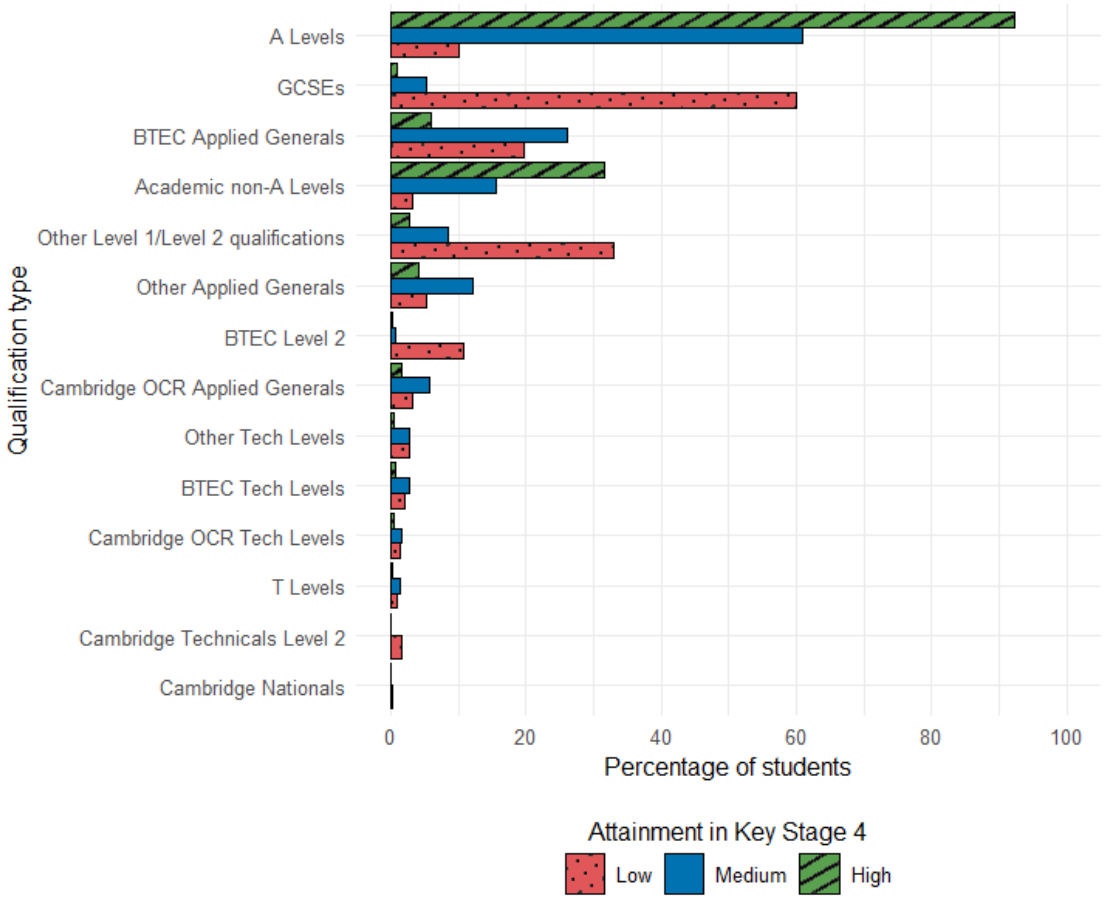


Figure 24: Uptake of qualifications among 2023 cohort students in Key Stage 5 by attainment in Key Stage 4.

In relation to the school type, there were some clear differences in some types of schools. For example, 42.3% of students attending FE colleges took Level 2 qualifications only, compared to 0.1% of students attending selective schools. In addition, 38.6% of students attending FE colleges took Level 3 qualifications only, whereas over 90% of students attending selective schools or independent schools did so.

Since most students in Key Stage 5 were enrolled in FE colleges or comprehensive schools (see Table 1 about student characteristics), qualification uptake was further examined for those two types of school (Figure 25 and 26). In 2024, eight out of ten students in comprehensive schools took A Levels in Key Stage 5, 22% took non-A Level academic qualifications, and 21.2% of students took BTEC Applied Generals. Conversely, most students attending FE colleges completed GCSEs (46.7%), other Level 1/Level 2 qualifications (32.4%), BTEC Applied Generals (14.7%), and A Levels (10.5%).

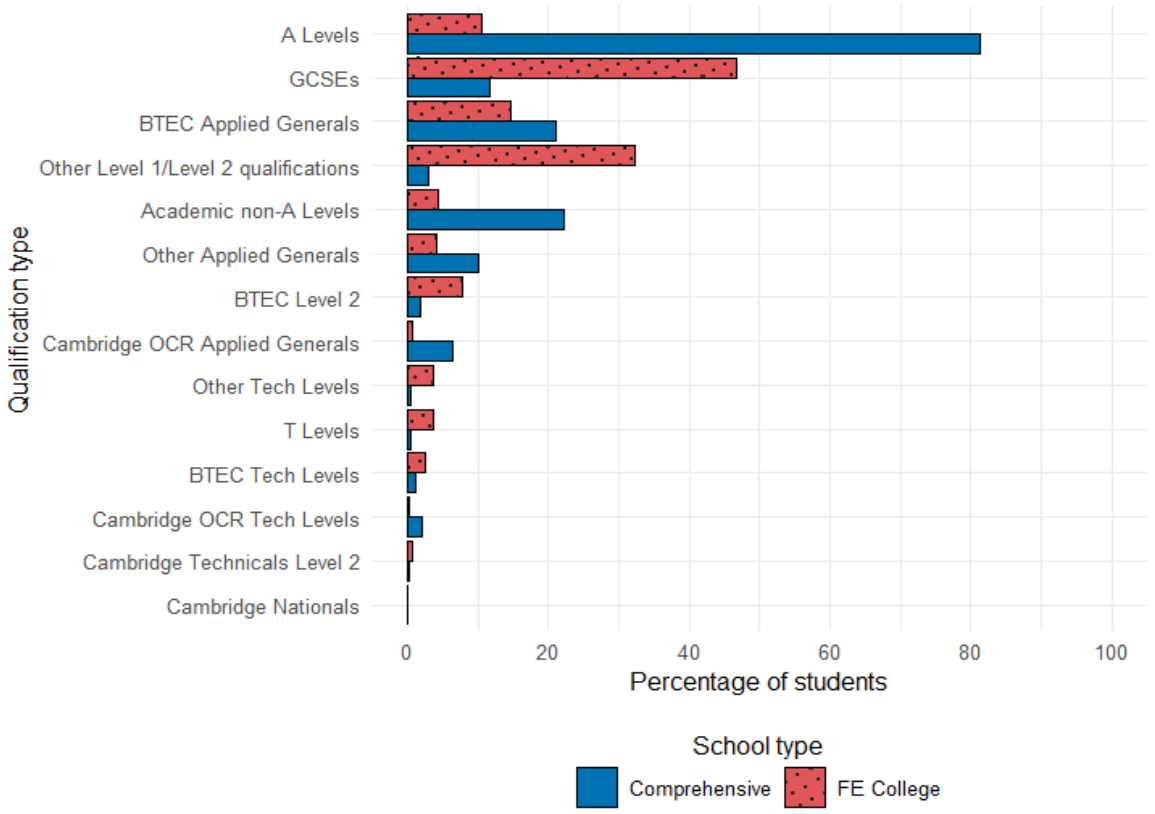


Figure 25: Uptake of qualifications among 2024 cohort students in Key Stage 5 school type.

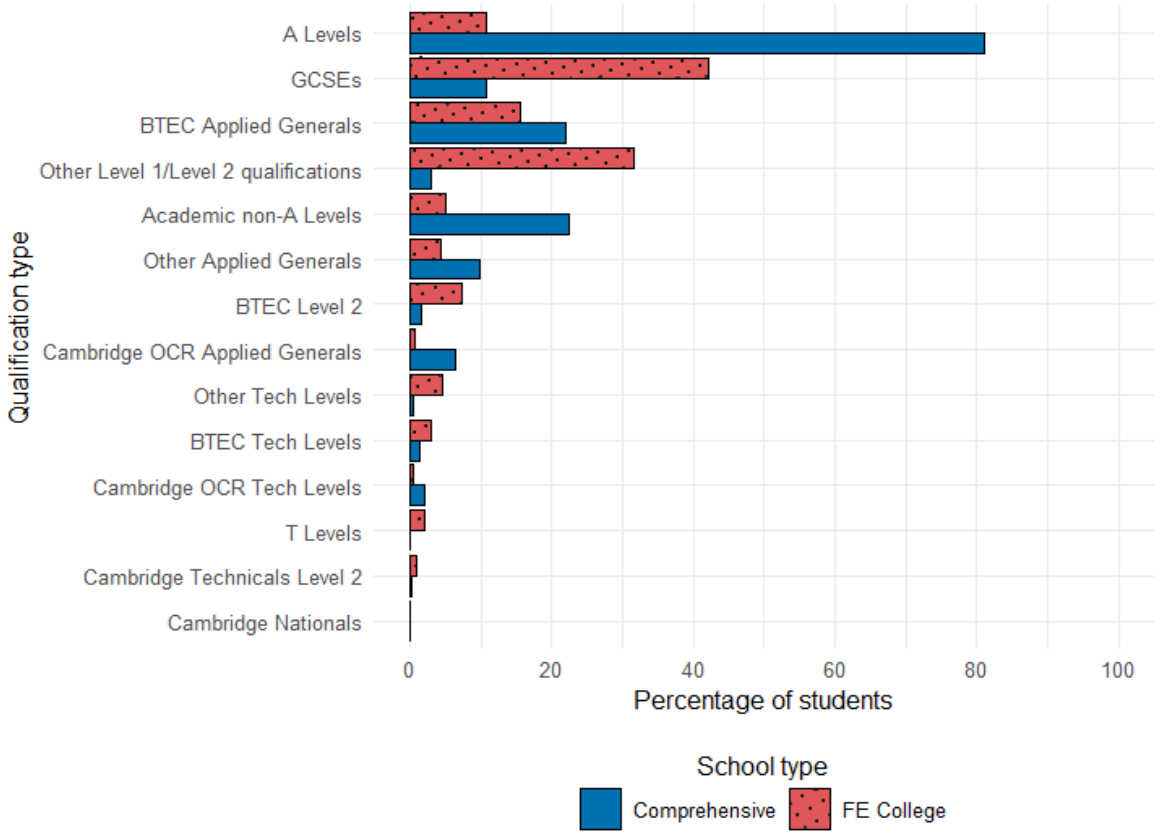


Figure 26: Uptake of qualifications among 2023 cohort students in Key Stage 5 school type.

4.6 Regression Analysis

In the previous section, the qualification uptake in Key Stage 5 was examined by each student characteristic separately. In this sub-section, to answer the third research question (which student and school factors are associated with the uptake of Level 2 qualifications in Key Stage 5?), we examined the extent to which students' background characteristics together were associated with completing Level 2 qualifications in Key Stage 5.

To address that question, multilevel logistic regression models were used as described in Section 3.3. For the analysis, the 'unclassified' category in the ethnicity, group language, and SEN status variables were treated as missing information and students with SEN with and without a statement were collated into one group. The results of the analyses are presented in the table and figures below.

Table 6 shows the parameter estimates of each variable after accounting for the other students' background characteristics for the 2024 cohort (see 2023 results in Appendix B). Although estimates are expressed on a logit scale, positive coefficients indicate a higher likelihood of completing Level 2 qualifications in Key Stage 5 relative to the reference group, whereas negative coefficients indicate a lower likelihood relative to the reference group. When using large datasets, such as the NPD, estimates are more likely to be statistically significant as, for example, regression coefficients are estimated with more precision and small differences are easier to detect. Therefore, in the following analyses, both the statistical significance and magnitude of the regression coefficients should be considered, as estimates close to zero, even if statistically significant, indicate little practical differences.

For example, students with SEN and eligible for FSM were more likely to complete a Level 2 qualification in Key Stage 5 compared to students without SEN and non-eligible for FSM, after accounting for all other variables in the model. Students with low or medium prior attainment were more likely to complete Level 2 qualifications, compared to students with high attainment in Key Stage 4. Likewise, students with high or medium levels of income deprivation were more likely to complete a Level 2 qualification, compared to students from less income-deprived backgrounds.

There were substantial differences between students from FE colleges, compared to students from comprehensive schools. Students enrolled in FE colleges were more likely to take a Level 2 qualification in Key Stage 5, relative to students in comprehensive schools. Students from the English language group were also less likely to take a Level 2 qualification compared to students from the non-English language group. Lastly, no practical differences were found between female and male students or among ethnic groups. Results were very similar for both the 2023 and 2024 cohort.

To further examine the regression results, probabilities were calculated for the student in Key Stage 5 with the following characteristics: female, White, without SEN, from the English language group, with medium prior attainment, from medium IDACI scores, non-eligible for FSM, and from comprehensive schools. Figures below show the probabilities for the characteristics with the largest differences only.

Table 6: Regression analyses results of completing a Level 2 qualification in Key Stage 5 among 2024 cohort students.

Variable	Category	Estimate	Standard Error	p-value	Prob.	95% conf. interval for the probabilities
Intercept	Intercept	-3.50	0.03	0.000		
Sex	Female	0.03	0.01	0.005	6.50	[6.2, 6.9]
	[Male]				6.40	[6.1, 6.7]
Ethnicity	Any Other Ethnic Group	0.12	0.03	0.001	7.30	[6.7, 7.9]
	Asian	-0.09	0.02	0.000	6.00	[5.7, 6.4]
	Black	0.00	0.02	0.883	6.50	[6.1, 6.9]
	Chinese	0.21	0.08	0.012	8.00	[6.8, 9.3]
	Mixed	0.03	0.02	0.216	6.70	[6.3, 7.1]
	[White]				6.50	[6.2, 6.9]
Language group	English	-0.20	0.02	0.000	6.50	[6.2, 6.9]
	[Other than English]				7.80	[7.4, 8.3]
SEN	Yes	0.75	0.01	0.000	12.90	[12.3, 13.6]
	[No]				6.50	[6.2, 6.9]
Prior attainment	Low	3.67	0.02	0.000	47.20	[45.8, 48.5]
	Medium	1.12	0.02	0.000	6.50	[6.2, 6.9]
	[High]				2.20	[2.1, 2.4]
IDACI	Low	-0.23	0.01	0.000	5.80	[5.6, 6.1]
	Medium	-0.11	0.01	0.000	6.50	[6.2, 6.9]
	[High]				7.30	[6.9, 7.6]
FSM eligible	Yes	0.30	0.01	0.000	8.60	[8.1, 9]
	[No]				6.50	[6.2, 6.9]
School type	Further education (FE)	1.67	0.07	0.000	27.00	[24.5, 29.7]
	Independent	0.42	0.09	0.000	9.60	[8.1, 11.3]
	Secondary modern	0.19	0.12	0.121	7.80	[6.3, 9.6]
	Selective	-0.15	0.09	0.106	5.70	[4.8, 6.7]
	Sixth form	0.61	0.14	0.000	11.40	[9, 14.3]
	Other	2.06	0.11	0.000	35.40	[30.7, 40.5]
	[Comprehensive]				6.50	[6.2, 6.9]

Figure 27 shows that the probability of completing a Level 2 qualification was 47.2% for students with a low attainment in Key Stage 4, whereas for students with a high attainment, the probability was only 2.2%, and those with medium attainment had a probability of 6.5% of taking a Level 2 qualification in Key Stage 5.

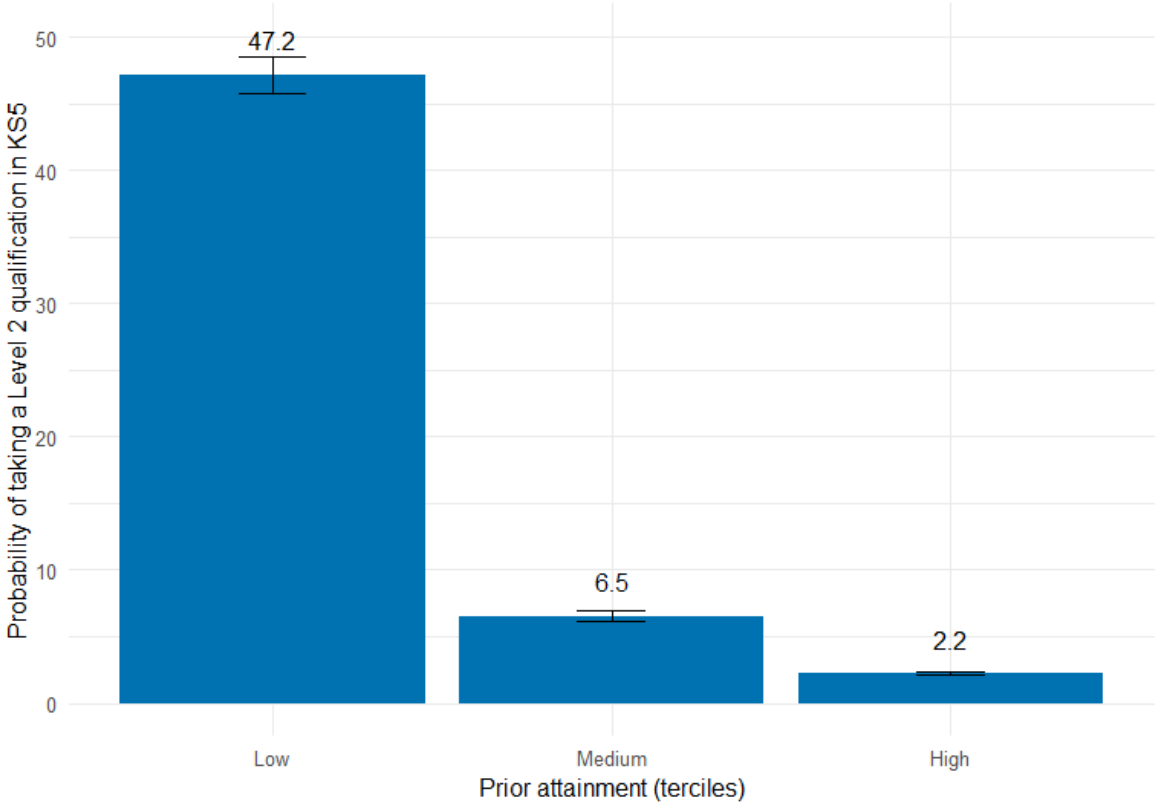


Figure 27: Probability of student completing a Level 2 qualification in Key Stage 5 by prior attainment – 2024 cohort[6].

Figure 28 shoes that students with SEN (12.9%) had a higher probability of completing a Level 2 qualification relative to students without SEN (6.5%).

[6] Sex = female, IDACI = medium, SEN = no, ethnicity = White, school type = comprehensive, language group = English, FSM= No.

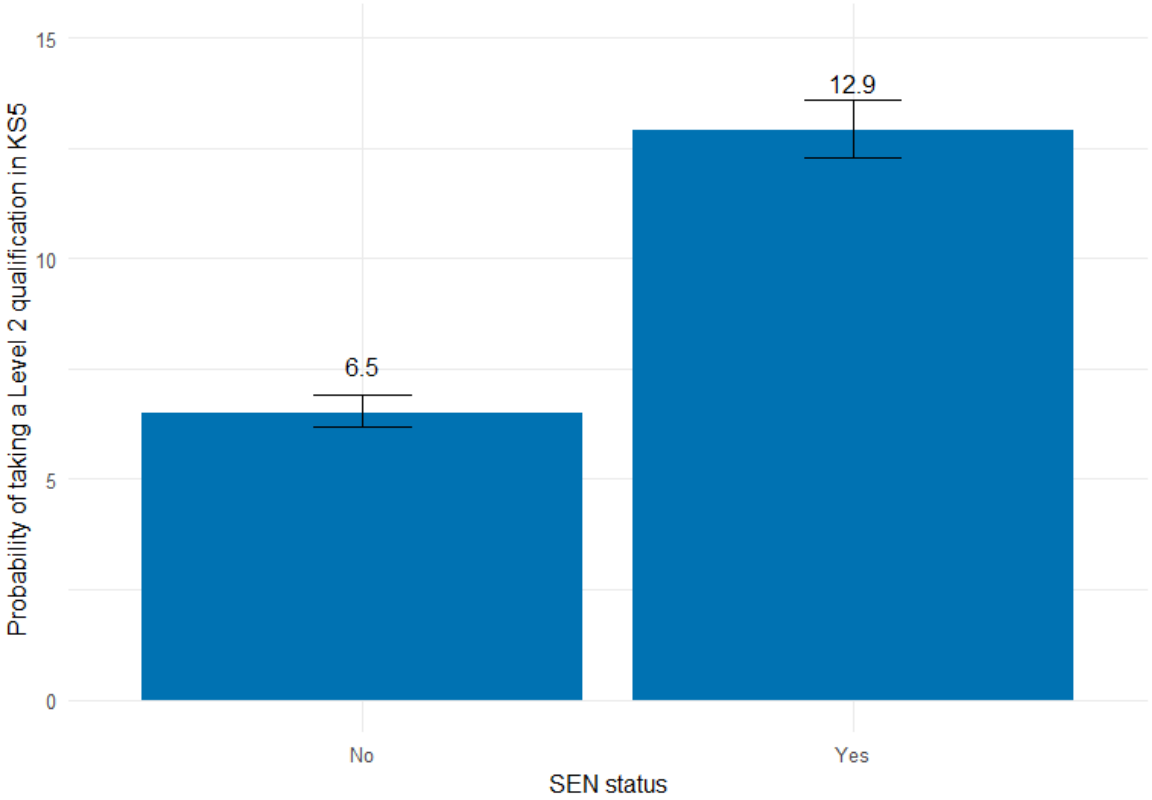


Figure 28: Probability of a student completing a Level 2 qualification in Key Stage 5 by SEN status – 2024 cohort[7].

In relation to the school type, Figure 29 shows that there were significant differences between students from comprehensive and other type of schools, as students attending comprehensive schools had a lower probability of taking a Level 2 qualification in Key Stage 5 relative to students attending other type of schools (6.5% versus 35.4%). Similarly, students from FE colleges were more likely to complete a Level 2 qualification than students in comprehensive schools (27.0% versus 6.5%). Students from comprehensive, independent, secondary modern, selective, and sixth forms had similar probabilities of completing a Level 2 qualification in Key Stage 5.

[7] Sex = female, IDACI = medium, attainment = medium, ethnicity = White, school type = comprehensive, language group = English, FSM= no.

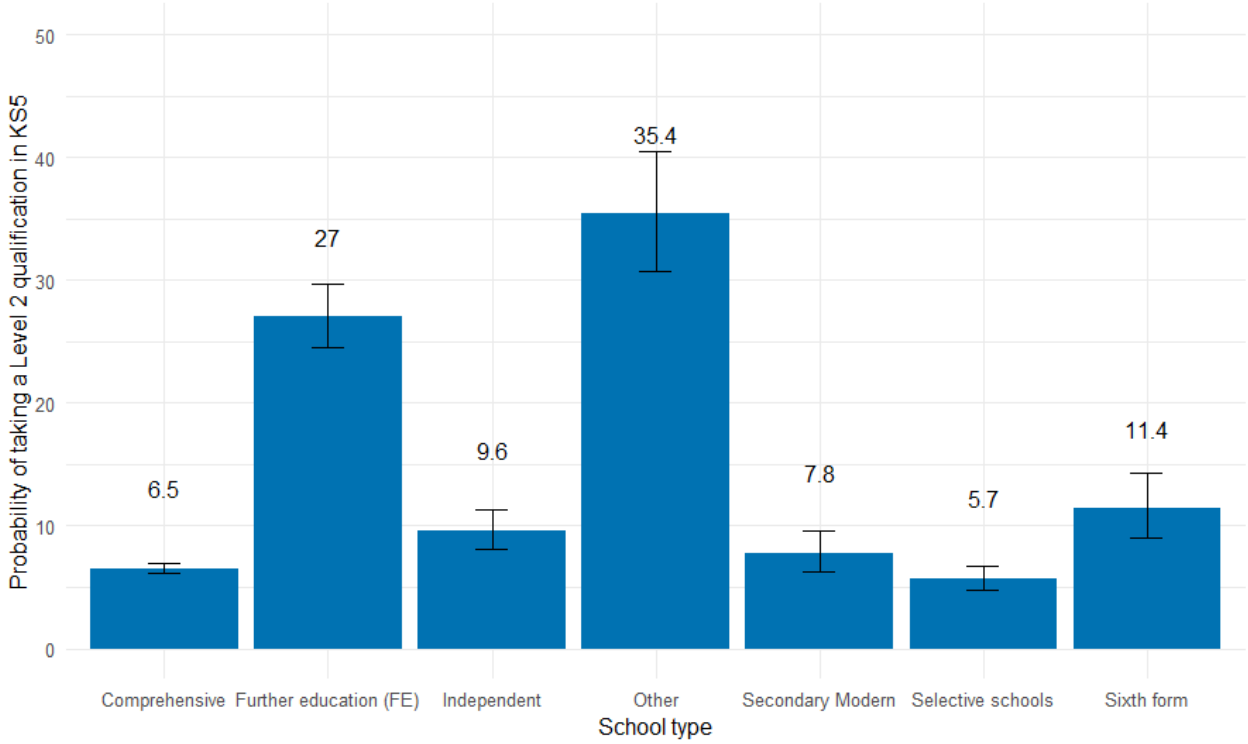


Figure 29: Probability of a student completing a Level 2 qualification in Key Stage 5 by school type – 2024 cohort[8].

5. Summary and conclusions

5.1 Summary

Key Stage 5 is an important transition period for students as they prepare to enter the workforce or continue to higher education. The goal of this study was to examine the uptake of Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications in Key Stage 5 and the extent to which qualification uptake was associated with students' background characteristics.

The study used information from the NPD to look at qualification uptake in Key Stage 5 among the 2022/23 and 2023/24 student cohorts. First, we examined overall qualification uptake and observed that over half of students completed at least one GCE A Level in Key Stage 5, whereas over one-fifth of students completed GCSEs. BTEC Applied Generals were the most popular vocational qualification in Key Stage 5.

Second, we found that nearly 70% of students in Key Stage 5 completed Level 3 qualifications only, whereas almost 20% completed Level 2 qualifications only. The rest of students completed a mixture of both Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications. On average, Key Stage 5 students completed three qualifications, increasing to 4.3 qualifications among students who completed both Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications.

Students who completed Level 2 qualifications only in Key Stage 5 mostly took GCSEs and Other Level 1 / Level 2 qualifications. Similarly, students who completed both Level 2 and Level 3

[8] Sex = female, IDACI = medium, attainment = medium, ethnicity = White, SEN = no, language group = English, FSM= no.

qualifications mainly took GCSEs and Other Level 1 / Level 2 qualifications, although over 25% of these students completed BTEC Applied Generals and over 25% GCE A Levels. Most students completing a GCSE in Key Stage 5 were resitting GCSE Mathematics or English.

Roughly 75% of students who completed Level 3 qualifications only in Key Stage 5 completed at least one A Level. Academic non-A Levels and BTEC Applied Generals were also common among students who took Level 3 qualifications only. These patterns were consistent across the 2023 and 2024 cohorts. The main difference was the increase in the T Level uptake between 2023 to 2024.

Third, we looked at subject uptake in Key Stage 5. We found that the most frequent subjects in Level 2 vocational qualifications (not including GCSE) across both cohorts were Health Studies, Electrical Installation, Business Studies, Basic Communication Skills, and Art & Design. In contrast, among students who took Level 3 qualifications only, we looked at the most frequent subjects in GCE A Levels (academic) and Applied Generals (vocational). The most common GCE A Level subjects were Mathematics, Psychology, Biology, Chemistry, and History. These patterns were consistent across both the 2023 and 2024 cohorts. The most common Applied General qualification subjects were Social Science, Business Studies, Health Studies, Applied Science, and Sports Studies. These were consistent across both cohorts too.

Subject uptake between academic A Levels and vocational Applied Generals differed substantially; however, some subjects overlapped between Level 2 vocational qualifications and Level 3 Applied Generals, particularly in subjects such as Health Studies and Business Studies.

Based on the students' background characteristics analyses, we found in the descriptive results that students who took Level 3 qualifications only in Key Stage 5 were more likely to be female, without SEN, non-FSM eligible, with high prior attainment, from less income deprived backgrounds, and from comprehensive schools. In contrast, students taking Level 2 qualifications only in Key Stage 5 were more likely to be male, have SEN, have low prior attainment, be FSM eligible, come from income-deprived backgrounds, and attend FE colleges. A higher proportion of Asian (non-Chinese) and Chinese students were found among those who took Level 3 qualifications only, compared to those students who took only Level 2 qualifications.

However, the regression results showed that after controlling for all the students' background characteristics, there were no practical differences in Level 2 qualification uptake by ethnicity and sex. The largest differences in uptake were associated with SEN status, prior attainment, and school type, especially between comprehensive schools and FE colleges.

Most students with SEN in Key Stage 5 completed GCSEs or other Level 1 / Level 2 qualifications, whereas most students without SEN completed GCE A Levels. Similarly, most students with low prior attainment completed GCSEs, and less than 10% completed an A Level. In contrast, most students with high prior attainment completed GCE A Levels and other Level 3 academic qualifications. A similar pattern was found between students in Comprehensive schools and FE colleges. Most students in Comprehensive schools completed GCE A Levels, and most students in FE colleges completed GCSEs.

The study had some limitations. First, the findings showed associations between student background characteristics and Level 2 qualification uptake, but we cannot claim causality. Second, the NPD data included missing information, as shown in Table 1, because background characteristics come from the annual school census, which is completed mainly by state-funded schools.

5.2 Final conclusions

Several conclusions can be drawn from the study. At Key Stage 5, nearly 70% of students took Level 3 qualifications only, with more than half of students in Key Stage 5 taking at least one GCE A Level qualification. Among students taking Level 3 qualification only, the majority (64%) followed an academic pathway, whereas 17% followed a fully vocational pathway, and 20% combined both academic and vocational qualifications.

In addition, three in ten students completed at least one Level 2 qualification. Most of these students were resitting their GCSE Mathematics or English. This highlights that a significant proportion of students enter Key Stage 5 without achieving foundational qualifications in Mathematics or English.

In relation to vocational qualifications, Applied Generals continue to have the highest uptake among vocational and technical qualifications in Key Stage 5 compared to Tech levels, T Levels, and Technical Level 2 qualifications. This is consistent with the results of Vidal Rodeiro and Vitello (2020), who found that Applied Generals contributed most to vocational uptake at Key Stage 5.

Academic and vocational qualifications were popular in different subject areas. Mathematics, Psychology, and Biology were more common in A Levels, whereas Business Studies and Health Studies were more common within Applied Generals and Level 2 vocational qualifications. These findings suggest limited overlap between academic and vocational pathways and highlight the wide range of subjects available to meet the diverse needs of students.

Overall, similar patterns were observed across the 2023 and 2024 cohorts. There was an increase in the uptake of T levels in 2024, which is expected to continue as T levels were introduced in 2020.

There were substantial inequalities in post-16 education pathways as students taking Level 2 qualifications in Key Stage 5 had a different profile compared to those taking Level 3 qualifications only. The former group was predominantly students with special needs, eligible for FSM, from income-deprived backgrounds, low attainers in Key Stage 4, and attended FE colleges.

Therefore, additional support for these students is also relevant, as they may face barriers to progression into higher-level study. Also, it is important to ensure adequate funding and support for FE colleges which cater for high numbers of students taking GCSEs and other Level 1/2 qualifications in Key Stage 5.

The DfE needs to consider how the expansion of T Levels and the new V Levels can support progression and provide more integrated pathways across academic and technical routes.

The results of the study provide evidence of the need for continued investment in post-16 education, particularly for students with SEN, low attainment in Key Stage 4, and disadvantaged backgrounds in order to promote equitable access for progression for all students.

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Appendix A: Students' background characteristics by uptake group

Table A1: Students' background characteristics in Key Stage 5 by uptake group – 2023 cohort.

		Level 2 qual. only		Level 2 and 3 qual.		Level 3 qual. only	
Characteristics		N	%	N	%	N	%
Sex	Female	36,698	39.4	32,629	52.5	188,858	53.4
	Male	56,333	60.6	29,493	47.5	164,860	46.6
Ethnicity	Any Other Ethnic Group	1,639	1.9	1,640	2.8	6,361	2.1
	Asian	7,546	8.6	7,906	13.6	41,567	13.4
	Black	4,915	5.6	5,968	10.3	19,754	6.4
	Chinese	70	0.1	176	0.3	1,751	0.6
	Mixed	4,839	5.5	3,493	6.0	17,677	5.7
	White	68,774	78.3	38,826	66.9	222,834	71.9
Language group	English	75,194	84.5	44,989	76.5	256,899	81.9
	Other than English	13,810	15.5	13,828	23.5	56,827	18.1
SEN	No	62,062	69.7	48,667	82.5	294,332	93.6
	Yes, without support	20,959	23.5	8,782	14.9	17,778	5.7
	Yes, with support	6,025	6.8	1,536	2.6	2,281	0.7
Prior attainment	Low	84,333	90.6	40,882	65.8	44,412	12.6
	Medium	7,895	8.5	15,195	24.5	146,536	41.4
	High	807	0.9	6,046	9.7	162,773	46.0
IDACI	Low	18,449	20.7	15,096	25.6	120,399	38.3
	Medium	29,343	33.0	19,807	33.6	104,794	33.4
	High	41,122	46.2	24,008	40.8	88,814	28.3
FSM eligible	No	54,311	61.0	42,739	72.5	265,556	84.5
	Yes	34,719	39.0	16,243	27.5	48,835	15.5
School type	Comprehensive	7,367	8.1	16,927	27.6	168,073	48.4
	Further education (FE)	77,835	85.5	34,724	56.6	78,392	22.6
	Independent	348	0.4	1,620	2.6	32,503	9.4
	Secondary modern	374	0.4	755	1.2	4,634	1.3
	Selective	31	0.0	829	1.4	22,669	6.5
	Sixth form	3,634	4.0	6,175	10.1	36,461	10.5
	Other	1,427	1.6	373	0.6	4,628	1.3

Appendix B: Results of the regression analyses

Table B1: Regression analyses results of completing a Level 2 qualification in Key Stage 5 among 2023 cohort students.

Variable	Category	Estimate	Standard Error	p-value	Prob.	95% conf. interval. for the probabilities
Intercept	Intercept	-3.54	0.03	0.000		
Sex	Female	0.00	0.01	0.857	5.20	[5.0, 5.5]
	[Male]				5.20	[5.0, 5.5]
Ethnicity	Any Other Ethnic Group	0.12	0.03	0.001	5.80	[5.4, 6.3]
	Asian	-0.05	0.02	0.008	5.00	[4.7, 5.3]
	Black	-0.01	0.02	0.501	5.20	[4.9, 5.5]
	Chinese	-0.13	0.10	0.174	4.60	[3.8, 5.6]
	Mixed	-0.01	0.02	0.487	5.20	[4.9, 5.5]
	[White]				5.20	[5.0, 5.5]
Language group	English	-0.22	0.02	0.000	5.20	[5.0, 5.5]
	[Other than English]				6.40	[6.1, 6.8]
SEN	Yes	0.71	0.01	0.000	10.10	[9.6, 10.6]
	[No]				5.20	[5.0, 5.5]
Prior attainment	Low	3.44	0.02	0.000	40.00	[38.7, 4.12]
	Medium	0.95	0.02	0.000	5.20	[50, 5.5]
	[High]				2.10	[2.0, 2.2]
IDACI	Low	-0.23	0.01	0.000	4.50	[4.3, 4.8]
	Medium	-0.08	0.01	0.000	5.20	[5.0, 5.5]
	[High]				5.70	[5.4, 5.9]
FSM eligible	Yes	0.29	0.01	0.000	6.80	[6.5, 7.2]
	[No]				5.20	[5.0, 5.5]
School type	Further education (FE)	1.72	0.07	0.000	2.35	[21.3, 25.9]
	Independent	0.46	0.10	0.000	8.10	[6.8, 9.6]
	Secondary modern	0.26	0.11	0.022	6.70	[5.4, 8.2]
	Selective	-0.14	0.09	0.108	4.60	[3.9, 5.4]
	Sixth form	0.66	0.13	0.000	9.70	[7.7, 12.1]
	Other	2.20	0.11	0.000	33.10	[28.7, 37.9]
	[Comprehensive]				5.20	[5.0, 5.5]