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

Research Report

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Students in England who continue in education after age 16 can follow academic, vocational, or mixed qualification pathways. As post-16 qualifications continue to change through ongoing reforms, understanding the combinations of qualifications students take is relevant. This report examines the combinations of Level 3 academic and vocational qualifications completed by students in Key Stage 5 and explores how these combinations vary according to students' background characteristics. The analysis builds on previous work that examined overall uptake of Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications in post-16 education.

Data and methods

Data from the National Pupil Database (NPD) was used, focusing on students in the 2022/23 and 2023/24 Key Stage 5 cohorts who completed only Level 3 qualifications. Qualifications were classified into academic (A Levels and non-A Level academic qualifications) and vocational (BTECs, Cambridge OCR qualifications, other vocational qualifications, and T Levels). Descriptive statistics were used to examine qualification combinations and to compare uptake patterns across student characteristics including sex, ethnicity, language, special educational needs (SEN), prior attainment, deprivation, free school meal eligibility, and school type.

Results

The findings show that within the academic pathway, A Levels dominated qualification uptake. The most common combination was three A Levels, completed by around 60% of academic-pathway students. Academic non-A Level qualifications were rarely taken without A Levels. For vocational pathways, BTECs were the most common vocational qualification, and T Levels were generally taken as standalone qualifications. Across cohorts, there was a notable shift from students taking three vocational qualifications to taking two vocational qualifications. Students on mixed pathways most commonly combined two A Levels with one BTEC.

Important differences were observed by student backgrounds. Students completing three A Levels were more likely to be high prior attainers, come from less deprived backgrounds, be ineligible for free school meals, have no identified SEN, and attend comprehensive schools. In contrast, students completing vocational combinations such as two BTECs were more likely to have lower prior attainment, come from more deprived areas, have higher eligibility for free school meals, have higher rates of SEN, and attend further education colleges.

Conclusions

Qualification combinations in Key Stage 5 are strongly associated with students' background characteristics and, therefore, qualification choices are not evenly distributed across the student population.

As post-16 qualification reforms are implemented, changes in qualification combinations should continue to be closely monitored, particularly the increase in students in vocational pathways

completing fewer than three qualifications (e.g., one BTEC worth three A Levels). This could have implications for students' qualification uptake in the context of the introduction of V Levels, which will only be offered in a single size, with each qualification equivalent to one A Level.

1. Introduction

Post-16 education in England is the education phase when students aged 16 to 18 choose between continuing their full-time education, starting an apprenticeship, or combining part-time study and employment. Students who decide to remain in education can follow academic, vocational, or mixed pathways.

Most students in post-16 education in England take Level 3 qualifications. In 2024, 67.3% of students in Key Stage 5 completed only Level 3 qualifications, whereas 13.3% completed Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications, and 19.3% completed only Level 2 qualifications (Miranda, 2026).

Given the ongoing reforms to strengthen post-16 education, it is relevant to examine the combinations of Level 3 qualifications taken by students in Key Stage 5 and how these are associated with students' backgrounds. The report, an extension of the study from Miranda (2026) that looks at the uptake of Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications post-16 answers the following questions:

1. What are the combinations of Level 3 qualifications completed in Key Stage 5?
2. How do the different combinations of qualifications vary across student background characteristics?

2. Data and methods

2.1. Data

This report 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 report, we focused on the Key Stage 5 attainment data for the academic years of 2022/23 and 2023/24, which were linked to the School Census of 2020/21 and 2021/22, respectively. For more information about the data used, see Miranda (2026).

2.2. Qualification type

For this report, we looked at the combinations of Level 3 qualifications. Level 3 qualifications were grouped into:

- A Level: Academic qualifications that equip students with the knowledge, skills, and understanding needed to progress to undergraduate study at a higher education establishment.
- Academic non-A Level: Other academic standalone qualifications such as Advanced Subsidiary (AS), Extended Project, Core Maths, or International Baccalaureate. They are equivalent to between 0.4 to four A Levels, depending on the qualification.
- BTEC: Advanced vocational and technical qualifications that included Applied Generals and Tech Levels. They are equivalent to between one to three A Levels, depending on the qualification size.
- Cambridge OCR: Advanced vocational and technical qualifications that included Applied Generals and Tech Levels. They are equivalent to between one to three A Levels, depending on the qualification size.

- Other vocational qualifications: Advanced vocational and technical qualifications that included Applied Generals and Tech Levels (excluding BTEC and Cambridge OCR). They are equivalent to between one to three A Levels, depending on the qualification size.
- T Level: Advanced technical qualifications, equivalent to three A Levels. They are equivalent to three A Levels.

Students were classified into three pathways based on the type of qualifications they completed:

- Academic: Only academic qualifications completed, that is, either A Levels or academic non-A Level qualifications.
- Vocational: Only Level 3 vocational qualifications completed, that is, BTECs, Cambridge OCR qualifications, T Levels, or other vocational qualifications.
- Mixed: Both academic and Level 3 vocational qualifications completed, that is, at least one A Level or academic non-A Level, and at least one BTEC, Cambridge OCR, T Level, or other vocational qualification.

2.3. Methods

To answer the first (what are the combinations of Level 3 qualifications completed in Key Stage 5?) and second (how do the different combinations of qualifications vary across student background characteristics?) research questions, descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages were used.

To examine the combination of qualifications taken by student background characteristics the following variables were used:

- Sex: male or female.
- Ethnicity: Asian (not Chinese), Black, Chinese, Mixed, White, and any other ethnic group.
- Language: English and other than English.
- Special Educational Needs (SEN): no identified SEN, SEN without a statement or SEN support, and SEN with a statement or an Education, health and care plan.
- Prior attainment: students were divided into terciles based on their attainment score in Key Stage 4: low attainment, medium attainment, and high attainment.
- Income deprivation: the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI-2019) 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: schools were classified into seven groups[1]: comprehensive schools, further education (FE) colleges, independent schools, secondary modern schools, selective schools, sixth form schools, and other (Gill, 2017).

[1] 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.

For more detailed information about the definition of the student background characteristics, see Miranda (2026).

3. Results

3.1. Number of qualifications completed and pathway

In 2024, 67.3% of students in Key Stage 5 completed Level 3 qualifications only, whereas this was 69.5% in 2023 (Miranda, 2026). Among these students, nearly 64% took only academic qualifications, whereas 20% took both academic and vocational qualifications, and 17% took only vocational qualifications. These results were observed across both 2023 and 2024 cohorts (Table 1).

Table 1: 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 (mixed)	64,367	19.8	62,845	19.7

To answer the first research question (what are the combinations of Level 3 qualifications completed in Key Stage 5?), descriptive statistics for the combinations and number of qualifications taken were calculated for each pathway.

Related to the number of qualifications taken per student in Key Stage 5, students who completed Level 3 qualifications only took 3.1 qualifications on average, with a standard deviation (SD) of 1.2 across both 2023 and 2024 cohorts (Miranda, 2026). When broken down by pathway, Figure 1 shows that, in 2024, students who took only academic qualifications completed on average 3.4 qualifications (SD = 1.1), with 61.3% of students taking three qualifications and 25.8% taking four.

Furthermore, students who took only vocational qualifications completed on average 1.9 qualifications (SD = 0.9), with 47.2% of students taking two qualifications, 37.3% taking one, and 9.6% taking three qualifications. Students who took a mix of academic and vocational qualifications completed 3.5 qualifications (SD = 1.0), with 47.5% of students taking three qualifications, 28.3% taking four qualifications, and 11.6% taking two qualifications.

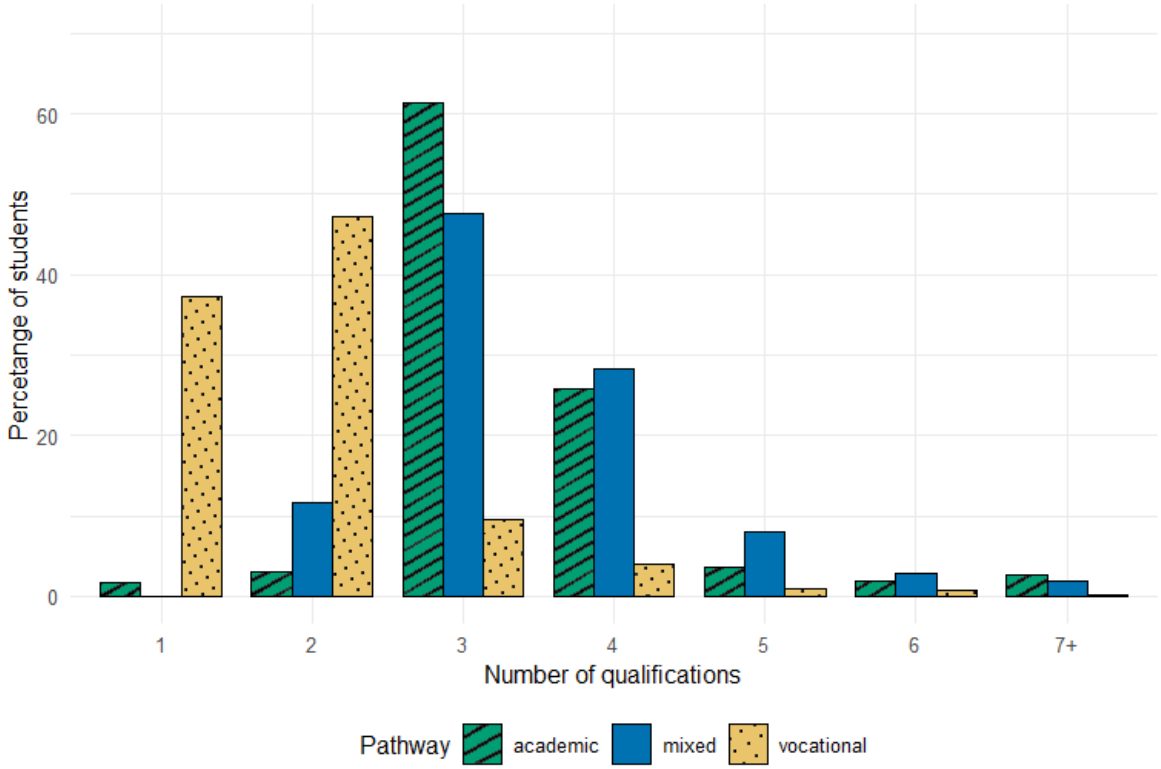


Figure 1: Number of qualifications completed in Key Stage 5 in 2024 by pathway.

A similar pattern was observed in the 2023 cohort (Figure 2). Students who took only academic qualifications completed 3.4 qualifications (SD = 1,1), with most students taking three (62.1%) or four qualifications (24.5%). Those who took only vocational qualifications completed 2.0 (SD = 1.1), with 39.5% of students taking one, 30.2% taking two, and 24.9% taking three vocational qualifications. Interestingly, the percentage of students taking three qualifications reduced from 2023 to 2024, whereas the percentage of students taking two qualifications increased.

Students who took a mix of academic and vocational qualifications completed on average 3.5 (SD = 1.1), with 46% taking three, 28.1% taking four, and 11.7% taking two qualifications.

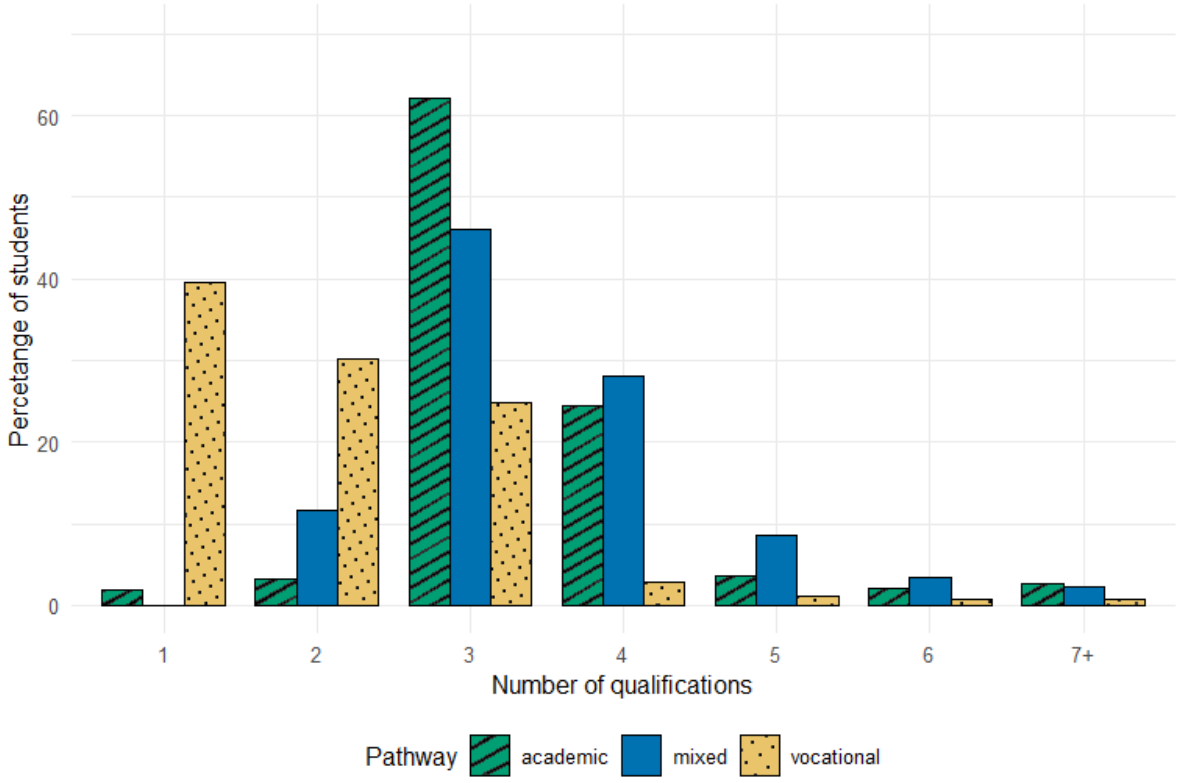


Figure 2: Number of qualifications completed in Key Stage 5 in 2023 by pathway.

To further explore qualifications uptake, we examined the combinations of qualifications taken by students on the different pathways: only academic qualifications, only vocational, and both.

3.2. Combinations of qualifications among students on an academic pathway

Table 2 shows the number of students who took a particular type of qualification and the percentage of students who took specific pairs of qualifications by cohort. The first column indicates the qualification of interest, and the other columns are the combined qualifications. The percentage should be interpreted relative to the qualification of interest.

For example, in the 2024 cohort, 198,741 students took at least an A Level, and 28.6% of those students also took an academic non-A Level qualification. In contrast, most students (91.4%) who took an academic non-A Level qualification also took an A Level. This indicates that most students taking an academic pathway in Key Stage 5 completed only A Levels, followed by students completing both A Levels and non-A Levels, and very rarely students completed only non-A Levels. This pattern was very similar in the 2023 cohort (Table 3).

Table 2: Percentage of students taking an academic qualification alongside the qualification of interest in 2024.

Qualification of interest		Combined qualification 2024	
Type	Number of students	A Level	Academic non-A Level
A Level	198,741	100.0	28.6
Academic non-A Level	62,148	91.4	100.0

Table 3: Percentage of students taking an academic qualification alongside the qualification of interest in 2023.

Qualification of interest	Combined qualification 2023		
Type	Number of students	A Level	Academic non-A Level
A Level	200,860	100.0	29.1
Academic non-A Level	64,158	91.2	100.0

Furthermore, the five most common combination of qualifications – taking into account the number of qualifications taken – are shown in Table 4. These combinations represent over 88.0% of students on the academic pathway. The most common combination in the 2024 cohort was taking three A Levels (59.7%), followed by 19.5% of students taking three A Levels and one academic non-A Level qualification, and 6% taking four A Levels. The same pattern was found in the 2023 cohort (Table 4).

Table 4: Most common qualification combinations among students on the academic pathway, by cohort

Combination of qualifications	2023 cohort		2024 cohort	
	N	%	N	%
Three A Levels	124,335	60.2	121,944	59.7
Three A Levels and one non-A Level	39,645	19.2	39,768	19.5
Four A Levels	9,916	4.8	12,165	6.0
Two A Levels	5,755	2.8	5,404	2.6
Four A Levels and one non-A Level	3,222	1.6	3,510	1.7

3.3. Combinations of qualifications among students on a vocational pathway

Among students who took vocational qualifications only in 2024, most students took at least one BTEC (Table 5). Nearly 13% of students who took a BTEC also took another type of vocational qualification, and 6.0% took a Cambridge OCR qualification alongside the BTEC.

Around 38% of students who took a Cambridge OCR qualification also took a BTEC, whereas 22.4% combined it with other vocational qualifications. Thirty-five percent of students who took another type of vocational qualification also completed a BTEC, whereas 9.6% of students also completed a Cambridge OCR qualification.

Only 1.9% of students taking a T Level also took a BTEC, whereas 0.3% of students also took a Cambridge OCR qualification, indicating that most students who completed a T Level only worked on that. This is expected as a single T Level is equivalent to three A Levels. Similar patterns were found for the 2023 cohort (Table 6).

Table 5: Percentage of students taking a vocational qualification alongside the qualification of interest in 2024.

Qualification of interest		Combined qualification 2024			
Type	Number of students	BTEC	Cambridge OCR	Other type of vocational	T Level
BTEC	34,950	100.0	6.0	12.7	0.4
Cambridge OCR	5,432	38.4	100.0	22.4	0.3
Other vocational qual.	12,749	34.8	9.6	100.0	0.9
T Level	6,959	1.9	0.3	1.6	100.0

Table 6: Percentage of students taking a vocational qualification alongside the qualification of interest in 2023.

Qualification of interest		Combined qualification 2023			
Type	Number of students	BTEC	Cambridge OCR	Other type of vocational	T Level
BTEC	38,218	100.0	5.7	11.3	0.3
Cambridge OCR	6,110	35.7	100.0	20.2	0.3
Other vocational qual.	13,944	30.8	8.9	100.0	0.5
T Level	3,621	3.1	0.6	1.9	100.0

When considering the number of qualifications taken, the most common combinations of vocational qualifications in the 2024 cohort were two BTECs (27.8%) and one BTEC (24.3%). In addition, 7.5% of students completed one vocational qualification of another type, and 6.5% completed two T Levels (Table 7). These combinations represent roughly 80.0% of students on the vocational pathway.

For the 2023 cohort, the most common combinations were one BTEC (25.6%), three BTECs (18.1%), and two BTECs (14.3%). This indicates that the percentage of students taking three BTECs has significantly decreased from 2023 to 2024, and the number of students taking two BTECs has increased. This is consistent with the findings in Figure 2.

Table 7: Most common qualification combinations among students on the vocational pathway, by cohort

Combination of qualifications	2023 cohort		2024 cohort	
	N	%	N	%
One BTEC	13,929	25.6	12,792	24.3
Two BTECs	7,762	14.3	14,654	27.8
Three BTECs	9,839	18.1	1,143	2.2
Two T Levels	1,436	2.6	3,437	6.5
One other vocational qual.	4,970	9.1	3,958	7.5
Two other vocational quals.	3,752	6.9	3,442	6.5
One Cambridge OCR	1,653	3.0	1,370	2.6
Two Cambridge OCR	1,191	2.2	1,032	2.0

3.4. Combinations of qualifications among students on a mixed pathway

Table 8 shows the combination of qualifications for students who completed both academic and vocational qualifications in 2024. Among students who took A Levels, over half of them combined it with a BTEC (53.4%), whereas 40% combined it with another type of vocational qualification, 19.3% combined it with a Cambridge OCR qualification, and 18.2% combined it with another academic non-A Level qualification.

Most students who took an academic non-A Level qualification also took an A Level (70.4%), whereas 57.4% combined it with a BTEC. Among students who completed a BTEC, 91.2% also took an A Level. Similarly, most students who took a Cambridge OCR qualification or another type of vocational qualification also took an A Level (93.5% and 93.8%, respectively).

Only a small number of students combined a T Level with an academic qualification (163 in 2023 and 331 in 2024). Nearly all students who completed a T Level in this group also took an academic non-A Level qualification (96.1%). In particular, T Levels were mostly combined with at least one AS Level, a Core Maths qualification, or an extended project diploma. Results were similar for the 2023 cohort (Table 9).

Table 8: Percentage of students taking a vocational or academic qualification alongside the qualification of interest in 2024.

Qualification of interest		Combined qualification 2024					
Type	Number of students	A Level	Academic non-A Level	BTEC	Cambridge OCR	Other type of vocational	T Level
A Level	58,372	100.0	18.2	53.4	19.3	40.0	0.0
Academic non-A Level	15,109	70.4	100.0	57.4	18.7	37.4	2.1
BTEC	34,225	91.2	25.4	100.0	5.2	15.8	0.1
Cambridge OCR	12,069	93.5	23.4	14.8	100.0	12.5	-
Other vocational qual.	24,865	93.8	22.8	21.8	6.1	100.0	0.1
T Level	331	5.1	96.1	5.1	-	5.7	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 "-".

Table 9: Percentage of students taking a vocational or academic qualification alongside the qualification of interest in 2023.

Qualification of interest		Combined qualification 2023					
Type	Number of students	A Level	Academic non-A Level	BTEC	Cambridge OCR	Other type of vocational	T Level
A Level	59,487	100.0	18.6	54.5	19.7	38.2	-
Academic non-A Level	15,935	69.4	100.0	57.9	19.5	36.9	1.0
BTEC	35,780	90.6	25.8	100.0	5.2	14.4	-
Cambridge OCR	12,634	92.9	24.5	14.8	100.0	12.8	-
Other vocational qual.	24,356	93.2	24.1	21.2	6.6	100.0	-
T Level	163	-	96.3	-	-	-	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 "-".

The most common combinations of vocational and academic qualifications in the 2024 cohort were two A Levels alongside one BTEC (18.0%), as shown in Table 10. Close to 9% completed two A Levels and two vocational qualifications of other types, followed by two A Levels and one vocational qualification of other type (8.0%), one A Level and one BTEC (6.9%), and two A Levels and one Cambridge OCR (6.1%). We can see that the percentage of students was more spread out across combinations, representing 55% of the students on a mixed pathway. The 2023 cohort followed a similar pattern.

Table 10: Most common qualification combinations among students on a mixed pathway, by cohort

Combination of qualifications	2023 cohort		2024 cohort	
	N	%	N	%
Two A Levels and one BTEC	11,755	18.3	11,329	18.0
Two A Levels and two other voc. quals.	5,620	8.7	5,594	8.9
Two A Levels and one other voc. qual.	4,659	7.2	4,997	8.0
One A Level and one BTEC	4,462	6.9	4,336	6.9
Two A Levels and one Cambridge OCR	3,658	5.7	3,806	6.1
One A Level and two BTECs	3,058	4.8	3,030	4.8
Two A Levels, one non-A Level, and one BTEC	1,940	3.0	1,960	3.1
One A Level, one BTEC, and one other type	1,410	2.2	1,614	2.6

3.5. Students' characteristics and combination of qualifications

To answer the second research question (how do the different combinations of qualifications vary across student background characteristics?) descriptive statistics were calculated. The most common combination in each pathway was further examined. Table 11 shows the characteristics of students who completed three A Levels within the academic path, two BTECs within the vocational path, and two A Levels and a BTEC in the mixed academic and vocational path.

Some differences were noticeable across the combination of qualifications. For the 2024 cohort, there were more female than male students completing three A Levels or two A Levels and a BTEC. In contrast, the percentage of male students completing two BTECs was higher than for females. In addition, students taking three A Levels were mostly White (65.3%). There were 17.3% Asians, 7.5% Black, 6.5% Mixed, 0.7% Chinese, and 2.7% from any other ethnic group. The ethnic composition was somewhat similar for students who completed two A Levels and two BTECs and those who completed only two BTECs.

There were no noticeable differences between language groups across the three combinations of qualifications. In relation to SEN status, 95.2% of students who took three A Levels did not have SEN, whereas this was 90.8% for the group of students who took two BTECs. This indicates that the percentage of students with SEN was higher among students taking two BTECs in their vocational path, compared to students taking three A Levels in their academic path.

The percentage of low attainers was significantly higher in the group who completed two BTECs (33.5%), compared to the group who completed three A Levels (2.5%). Likewise, 64.3% of students who took three A Levels were students with high attainment in Key Stage 4, whereas only 8.3% of students who took two BTECs were high attainers.

Regarding student socio-economic background, 12.7% of students who completed three A Levels were eligible for free school meals. This percentage was somewhat similar for students who took two A Levels and a BTEC. However, it was higher for students who completed two BTECs (21.4%). Furthermore, students from the most deprived areas (those in the top tertile of the IDACI score) represented 25.5% of the students taking three A Levels, whereas these students represented 36.2% in the group who completed two BTECs.

In relation to the uptake by type of school, among students who took three A Levels, 58.9% attended a comprehensive school, 11.9% a sixth form, and 10.6% an independent school. In contrast, among students taking two A Levels and a BTEC, 74.7% attended a comprehensive school and 1.9% attended a sixth form. Lastly, among students taking two BTECs, they mostly attended FE colleges (76.1%), 16.3% attended a comprehensive school, and 6.3% a sixth form.

Table 11: Students' background characteristics by most common qualification combinations for the 2024 cohort.

Characteristics		Three A Levels		Two A Levels and a BTEC		Two BTECs	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Sex	Female	65,280	53.5	5,891	52.0	6,795	46.4
	Male	56,649	46.5	5,438	48.0	7,859	53.6
Ethnicity	Any Other Ethnic Group	2,830	2.7	205	1.9	308	2.2
	Asian	18,264	17.3	1,328	12.5	2,081	14.8
	Black	7,878	7.5	792	7.5	1,010	7.2
	Chinese	743	0.7	46	0.4	31	0.2
	Mixed	6,853	6.5	618	5.8	797	5.7
	White	68,827	65.3	7,631	71.9	9,836	69.9
Language group	English	84,507	79.2	8,832	82.2	11,260	79.1
	Other than English	22,231	20.8	1,914	17.8	2,975	20.9
SEN	No	101,929	95.2	10,127	93.9	12,960	90.8
	Yes, without statement	4,678	4.4	587	5.4	1,138	8.0
	Yes, with statement	470	0.4	70	0.6	176	1.2
Prior attainment	Low	3,027	2.5	1,001	8.8	4,909	33.5
	Medium	40,476	33.2	7,108	62.7	8,528	58.2
	High	78,441	64.3	3,220	28.4	1,217	8.3
IDACI	Low	44,344	41.5	4,092	38.0	4,141	29.0
	Medium	35,371	33.1	3,515	32.6	4,964	34.8
	High (most deprived)	27,256	25.5	3,164	29.4	5,160	36.2
FSM eligible	No	93,430	87.3	9,150	84.8	11,213	78.6
	Yes	13,647	12.7	1,634	15.2	3,061	21.4
School type	Comprehensive	69,560	58.9	8,275	74.7	2,368	16.3
	Further education (FE)	8,832	7.5	525	4.7	11,054	76.1
	Independent	12,515	10.6	343	3.1	49	0.3
	Secondary Modern	1,264	1.1	348	3.1	83	0.6
	Selective schools	10,342	8.8	103	0.9	-	-
	Sixth form	14,079	11.9	1,425	12.9	920	6.3
	Other type of school	1,542	1.3	52	0.5	46	0.3

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 "-".

For the 2023 cohort, the most common combinations were completing three A Levels, two A Levels and a BTEC, and one BTEC. Table 12 shows the characteristics of students by each combination. Similar patterns were observed in the 2023 cohort. The most notable differences were found between high and low attainers in Key Stage 4, with higher representation of high attainers in the group who took three A Levels, compared to the group who took one BTEC.

Students who took three A Levels were mostly White, female, without SEN, high attainers, non-eligible to free school meals, from less deprived backgrounds, and from comprehensive schools. In contrast, students who took both academic and vocational qualifications, specifically, two A Levels and a BTEC, were mainly White, female, without SEN, middle attainers, non-eligible to free school meals, from less deprived backgrounds, and from comprehensive schools. Lastly, students who took only vocational qualifications, specifically, one BTEC, were mostly White, male, without SEN, middle attainers, non-eligible to free school meals, from the most deprived background, and from FE colleges.

Table 12: Students' background characteristics by most common qualification combinations for the 2023 cohort.

Characteristics		Three A Levels		Two A Levels and a BTEC		One BTEC	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Sex	Female	66,930	53.8	6,206	52.8	6,397	45.9
	Male	57,405	46.2	5,548	47.2	7,532	54.1
Ethnicity	Any Other Ethnic Group	2,677	2.5	210	1.9	362	2.7
	Asian	17,423	16.3	1,304	11.8	2,001	15.1
	Black	7,413	6.9	775	7.0	1,163	8.8
	Chinese	748	0.7	47	0.4	20	0.2
	Mixed	6,601	6.2	566	5.1	759	5.7
	White	72,230	67.4	8,188	73.8	8,965	67.6
Language group	English	86,541	79.8	9,279	82.8	10,546	78.5
	Other than English	21,918	20.2	1,928	17.2	2,883	21.5
SEN	No	104,075	95.7	10,494	93.5	12,151	90.2
	Yes, without statement	4,193	3.9	644	5.7	1,171	8.7
	Yes, with statement	461	0.4	84	0.7	142	1.1
Prior attainment	Low	2,942	2.4	1,153	9.8	5,124	36.8
	Medium	42,864	34.5	7,387	62.8	7,551	54.2
	High	78,529	63.2	3,215	27.4	1,254	9.0
IDACI	Low	45,549	41.9	4,218	37.7	3,667	27.3
	Medium	35,986	33.1	3,767	33.6	4,361	32.4
	High (most deprived)	27,066	24.9	3,217	28.7	5,425	40.3
FSM eligible	No	95,195	87.6	9,518	84.8	10,175	75.6
	Yes	13,534	12.4	1,704	15.2	3,289	24.4
School type	Comprehensive	70,792	58.2	8,811	76.0	4,765	34.5
	Further education (FE)	9,100	7.5	439	3.8	7,054	51.1
	Independent	13,105	10.8	331	2.9	120	0.9
	Secondary Modern	1,290	1.1	411	3.5	155	1.1
	Selective schools	11,506	9.5	133	1.1	-	-
	Sixth form	14,162	11.6	1,420	12.2	1,670	12.1
	Other type of school	1,618	1.3	48	0.4	47	0.3

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. Summary

Students in England who continue into post-16 education can choose between academic, vocational, or a mixed pathway, each including different combinations of qualifications. This report examined the combinations of Level 3 qualifications completed by students in Key Stage 5, and explored how some of these combinations varied by students' background characteristics.

Information from the NPD was used to look at the uptake of combinations of qualifications by different pathways that students chose among the 2022/23 and 2023/24 student cohorts. The findings show that around 64% of students who completed only Level 3 qualifications followed an academic pathway, 20% combined academic and vocational qualifications, and approximately 17% completed only vocational qualifications.

Within the academic pathway, A Levels were by far the dominant qualification. Nearly all students who completed an academic non-A Level qualification also took an A Level, indicating that students rarely completed academic non-A Level qualifications on their own. Furthermore, the most common combinations by academic only students were three A Levels (60%), and three A Levels with an additional academic non-A Level qualification (20%). The findings also showed that qualification pathways remained highly stable across the two cohorts.

Among students following vocational pathways, T Levels were rarely combined with other vocational qualifications, indicating that they were generally taken as a standalone pathway. Likewise, BTECs remained the most common qualification, although the qualification combinations changed between cohorts. Specifically, the percentage of students who completed three BTECs declined substantially between 2023 and 2024, whereas the percentage who completed two BTECs increased. This finding suggests that students in vocational pathways could have shifted towards taking vocational qualifications that are equivalent in size to more than one A Level.

Students following mixed pathways most commonly combined two A Levels with one BTEC. Across both cohorts, A Levels were the core academic qualification, whereas BTECs represented the most common vocational qualification taken alongside them.

Differences in qualification combinations were also associated with students' background characteristics. Students completing three A Levels were more likely to have high prior attainment, come from less deprived backgrounds, be ineligible for free school meals, have no SEN, and attend comprehensive schools. In contrast, students completing two or one BTECs were more likely to have lower prior attainment, live in more deprived areas, and attend further education colleges. Students following mixed pathways who completed two A Levels and a BTEC generally showed characteristics that lay between those observed for academic only and vocational only pathways, particularly with respect to prior attainment and socio-economic background.

Overall, the results demonstrate that qualification combinations in Key Stage 5 are closely associated student characteristics. The observed differences, especially by prior attainment, socio-economic background, and school type, suggest that students' qualification choices are not evenly distributed across pathways.

Changes in vocational qualification combinations between the 2023 and 2024 cohorts should continue to be examined, particularly the reduction in students completing three BTECs alongside the increase in students completing two BTECs and T Levels. Lastly, the introduction of the new V Levels should be monitored, as students following vocational pathways will no longer be able to

complete only one or two vocational qualifications that are each worth more than one A Level. Unlike other vocational qualifications, V Levels will be offered in a single size, with each qualification equivalent to one A Level. Further research is therefore needed to examine how the introduction of V Levels may affect post-16 students' qualification uptake.

5. References

Gill, T. (2017). *Uptake of GCSE subjects in 2015, by alternative school type classifications. Statistics Report no. 113*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Assessment.

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