

Whatever happened to tougher A-levels?

Proportion of A and A* grades is the highest for six years

By Eleanor Harding, Sarah Harris and Harry Howard

THE proportion of A-level entries graded A or A* hit its highest level in six years yesterday, triggering a row over standards.

More than one in four got these top grades this year, despite a government overhaul designed to make the qualifications tougher and more rigorous.

Hundreds of thousands of pupils travelled to their schools to pick up their results having been the first to sit new exams in most of the mainstream subjects.

The qualifications had been designed to better prepare youngsters for university, and much of the coursework – in which it is easier to gain marks – has been abolished.

But it emerged that grade boundaries have been set low in many of the new exams to stop a fall in results – leading critics to accuse regulators of ‘undermining’ the changes.

One geography paper set its C pass mark at 49 per cent, in comparison with 61 per cent in previous years, while the boundary for an A was 68 per cent, compared with 77 before. Meanwhile, a physics paper set the boundary for a C at 39 per cent, compared with 60

‘One wonders the point of the upheaval’

per cent in previous years, and set the A boundary at 58 per cent, compared with 80 per cent before. It also emerged that:

■ Boys continue to outperform girls at the highest A-level grades, with 8.5 per cent of male students achieving A*s, compared with 7.6 per cent of female entries;

■ Only 1.8 per cent of English language papers were graded A*, leading experts to warn it could indicate widespread literacy problems caused by their reliance on text-speak;

■ Russell Group universities were lowering their entry requirements in clearing in a scramble to fill places;

■ A record number of overseas students were accepted onto UK degree courses despite Brexit doom predictions.

The new A-levels were pioneered by the then education secretary Michael Gove as part of a drive to toughen up qualifications.

Universities had complained that students were not being prepared properly for how they will need to work during a degree.

Officials say the new content is not more difficult in itself, but the structure of the courses is more challenging because they are assessed via exams at the end of sixth form. Previously, courses were assessed in stages and through coursework, which students tended to find easier to deal with.

The new qualifications caused widespread panic in the education world. Teachers had warned that their pupils could lose out because schools were unfamiliar with the

Now for a Stormzy scholarship



Boost: Stormzy catches up with Harris City Academy chief Sir Daniel Moynihan and his old teachers yesterday

RAPPER Stormzy has announced he will pay for two black British students to attend the University of Cambridge.

The controversial musician will fund tuition fees and provide a maintenance grant for two successful applicants this year and two next year.

The 25-year-old launched the Stormzy Scholarship at his old school in south London on A-level results day and said he hoped it would inspire teenagers to apply to the prestigious university, which has been criticised for failing to admit enough black students.

Stormzy, real name Michael Ebenazer Kwadjo Omari Owuo Jr, has revealed he harboured ambitions of studying at Oxbridge when he was at Harris City Academy in Croydon, South London. He said: ‘There are so many young black

Controversial rapper to fund two black Cambridge students

kids all over the country who have the level of academic excellence to study at a university such as Cambridge – however, we are still under represented at leading universities.’

The double BRIT-award winner said he was on the verge of being expelled but got six A*s, three As and three Bs at GCSE. He did not go to university after he only achieved a ‘humbling’ ABCDE at A-Level. A music career followed – but his rise has been marked by controversy.

In March he faced backlash from fans

after he posted a video showing suspicious packages and drug paraphernalia in his flat. In November last year he was forced to apologise for sending homophobic tweets sent between 2011 and 2014. The lyrics to his ‘grime’ songs also regularly make reference to drugs.

In his hit Big For Your Boots, he said: ‘I’m too hot, drug money in my shoebox, I’m the man of the house and my shows sold out.’ During one performance he rapped: ‘MPs sniff coke, we just smoke a bit of cannabis...’

new course content. But on results day yesterday, data showed 26.4 per cent of UK entries were given one of the two top grades – up 0.1 percentage points on last year.

The last time the proportion was this high was in 2012, when 26.6 per cent got these grades.

However, there was also a decrease of 0.3 percentage points in the proportion – 8 per cent – getting A*. This is the lowest it has

been since 2013. And the proportion of A* to C grades also fell by 0.4 percentage points to 77 per cent.

A Daily Mail audit of grade boundaries found many had been set lower than in 2016 – the last year that all of the old qualifications were sat before the new ones began to be introduced.

Ofqual, the exams regulator, has instructed boards to make sure similar proportions of students get

good grades as in previous years, even if overall performance drops. The measures have been taken to stop students from being ‘disadvantaged’ by the new system, in comparison with their older peers.

But Alan Smithers, a professor of education at the University of Buckingham, said: ‘What’s the point of tougher A-levels if Ofqual is going to undermine them by keeping the grades the same?’

Ofqual’s intervention is not allowing the marks to speak for themselves. One wonders what the point of the upheaval has been.’

Ofqual said its strategy for setting grade boundaries would remain in place at least for the next year or so while the qualifications bed in.

A spokesman said: ‘Grade boundaries have been set using statistics to carry forward standards from previous qualifications.

‘Examiners have confirmed that the standard of work in each subject is appropriate for the grade.’

A Department for Education spokesman said: The high standards we expect in these exams have remained the same.’

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C GRADES CAN STILL GET YOU A PLACE AT TOP UNIVERSITIES

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