

Aug 25, 2016 10:46 BST

## EXPERT COMMENT: The north-south divide in A-levels explained

[Michael Jopling](#), Professor in Education in the [Department of Education and Lifelong Learning](#) at Northumbria, writes about A Levels for The Conversation.

And with research out earlier this year showing that 30% of university applicants wished they had [chosen different A-level subjects](#), it is clear that what students choose to study at A-level can have a big impact on their university experience and future life choices.

But there's one thing students don't get to choose when it comes to A-level options, and that's where they live. Year after year, there are reports of a [north-south divide in A-level results](#), and this year was no different. Using a fairly crude regional distinction, the latest [Joint Council of Qualifications statistics](#) indicate that in 2016 almost half (47%) of A-levels overall were taken by students in the south of England, 29% in the midlands and almost a quarter (24%) in the north.

Of those A-levels, the southern regions saw 26-29% of students gaining the highest A-level grades, while in the midlands and the north the figures were lower at 22-24%.

These figures seem to suggest that if you happen to grow up in the south of England, you are more likely to end up with better A-level results than if you go to school further north. And if the headlines are to be believed, there also seems to be a north-south divide to contend with when it comes to subject choice. Apparently, [southerners study classics while northerners do PE](#).

### North vs. South

While it is true that 56% of students taking A-levels in classical subjects – which covers classical civilisation as well as Latin and Greek – were based in the south, students in the midlands – where 24% took the subject – and the north (20%) were not significantly under-represented in [statistical terms](#) compared to other subjects.

The situation was even less clear-cut in PE where southern students were only slightly under-represented at 40%. So it is simply not fair to suggest that an academic practical split exists between the south and the north. Especially given the relatively small numbers of students studying classical subjects – just over 6,000 in 2015. Compare this with the Maths A-level, which was taken by 92,163 students this year.

Looking at other subject splits, communication studies was predominately taken by southerners – 64% of students were based in the south, compared with only 8% in the north. Again, this subject was taken by a relatively small number of students – fewer than 2,000 across England.

Similarly, 39% of the 11,272 students who took law were located in the north, with only 33% of students in the south. But it would seem “southerners study communications while northerners study law” doesn’t quite have the same ring to it as classics vs. P.E.

These low numbers make the regional variations at subject level essentially meaningless. And combined with the uncertainty caused by the [policy changes](#) affecting what students can study at A-level – which are still working their way through the education system – it accounts for a lot of the so-called “regional disparity” in results.

## **Bigger disparities**

However, the focus on regional differences in subject choices obscures bigger issues, as the data also reveals that longstanding gender differences in subject choices still persist.

Sociology and psychology are overwhelmingly studied by female students and computing and physics remain predominantly male subjects – which is not the case in [other parts of the world](#). And there are also worrying signs of further decline in the numbers of students taking some modern foreign languages – with just [13,500 students](#) taking French and German this year, down from 18,400 in 2011.

Most importantly of all perhaps, the geographical disparities in results suggest that secondary schools in the north and the midlands are still struggling to capitalise on the [high levels](#) of excellent primary provision in these regions. Viewed alongside the enduring effects of regional inequality in terms of [both disadvantage and school funding](#) this is the real cause for concern.

So instead of focusing too closely on marginal differences between subject choices at A-level, we need to start examining what happens during children's transition between primary school and secondary school – and even before they begin formal education. Because it is clear that for both northern and midland regions something is going awry during this period.

*This article was originally published in The Conversation. Read the [original article](#).*

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