

Using entry qualifications in the benchmarks

Introduction

1. For the past six years, performance indicators have been produced for universities and colleges of higher education across the UK. For each indicator for an institution, a benchmark has been provided which is the sector average for that indicator adjusted to take account of various factors specific to the institution. One of the main factors used is the entry qualifications of the students. Recently, there have been various misleading statements made in the press about the use of entry qualifications in calculating the benchmarks. This guidance therefore explains how entry qualifications are grouped for the purpose of this exercise.
2. The information used in the calculations comes from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). HESA collects information from all publicly funded higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK, on behalf of the various funding bodies and government departments, on staff, students and resources within the HEI. In particular, it asks institutions to provide details about all their students individually, including their entry qualifications.
3. Entry qualification information is collected using two sets of variables. The first set consists of a single variable. It provides information about the type of the highest qualification which the student holds. This may be, for example, HND, BTEC, Baccalaureate or an Access qualification, or it may be one of the A-level equivalent qualifications (A-level and/or AS level, Scottish Highers, Vocational A-level/AS level).
4. The second set of variables contains more information for those students with an A-level equivalent qualification. Until 2001-02, this set consisted of five variables, containing the total points for the best three A-levels obtained, the total points for the best five Scottish Highers obtained, and summary information about the numbers/types of A-levels, Scottish Highers and vocational A-levels. Since 2002-03, the set comprises about 30 variables, which are mainly in pairs: the number of a particular qualification, and the total tariff score for that qualification. There is also an overall total tariff score.

What is the tariff score?

5. The tariff score is a way of numerically summarising various types of qualification, using agreed equivalences between the types. It is used to report achievement for entry to higher education.
6. The tariff score is calculated from all eligible qualifications, except that if any subjects are duplicated, either within or across qualifications, only the highest score is used. For example, suppose a student has four AS levels in French, Latin, English and Economics, with grades A, B, B and C respectively, and three A-levels in French, English and Economics with grades A, C and D respectively. This student's tariff score will be made up of points for each of the three A-levels plus points for the Latin AS level. The remaining AS levels are duplicated at A-level and so are discounted.

7. For entry up to 2003-04, the qualifications eligible for inclusion in the tariff score were:

- GCE qualifications, at AS and A-levels
- vocational (VCE) qualifications at AS and A-levels
- Scottish qualifications, at higher and advanced higher grades
- core skills – the five (Scottish) core skills, communication, information technology, numeracy, problem solving, & working with others
- key skills – the three key skills (in England and Wales), application of number, communication, and information technology.

8. From entry in 2004-05, there will additionally be points for the following:

- BTEC Nationals
- CACHE Diploma in Childcare
- Welsh Baccalaureate Core
- IFS certificate in Financial Studies
- music examinations.

9. From entry in 2005-06, there will also be points for:

- Advanced Extension Awards
- Diploma in Foundation Studies (art and design)
- Irish Leaving Certificate.

10. Results for each group of qualifications are reported separately, together with how many of the qualifications are included. UCAS also computes an overall total tariff score. This is not necessarily the sum of the component parts, because of the need to remove duplicate subjects. For example, a student with the results given in paragraph 6 would be shown as having 4 AS levels, with a tariff score of 200 (60 for the A grade, 50 for each of the B grades, and 40 for the C grade); 3 A-levels with a tariff score of 260 (120 for the A grade, 80 for the C grade, 60 for the D grade); and a total tariff score of 310 (260 for the A-levels, plus 50 for the Latin grade B).

11. The core skills and key skills groups (see paragraph 7) are not duplicated in any of the other groups. Also they account for relatively few tariff points – nearly all have no more than 60 points for these skills. The total tariff score has therefore been adjusted for use in the benchmarking by removing the points attributable to core skills and key skills.

12. The tariff was introduced by UCAS, to take account of the new Curriculum 2000. The equivalences are based on work done by the University of Oxford Department of Educational Studies. Further information about the tariff and these equivalences can be obtained on the UCAS web-site, www.ucas.ac.uk.

Defining the groups

13. The two sets of variables outlined in paragraphs 3 and 4 are used to define the entry qualification groups used for the benchmark calculations. Initially, the first set is used to define eight broad groups:

- A-level or equivalent
- Baccalaureate
- BTEC or equivalent
- access or foundation courses (not foundation degree)
- previous higher education (HE)
- other qualifications not given above
- no previous qualifications
- unknown qualifications.

Note that whatever qualifications are added to the tariff score, these groups are expected to remain unchanged as this first variable does not depend on the tariff.

14. The first group, A-level or equivalent, includes nearly 90 per cent of young entrants (those under 21 when they enter HE) to full-time first degree courses at HEIs, and about 30 per cent of mature entrants. Table A shows the breakdown of entrants in 2003-04, by these broad groupings.

Table A: Entrants to full-time first degree courses in 2003-04, by broad entry qualification

Entry qualification	Young entrants	Mature entrants
A-level or equivalent	211,757	21,896
Baccalaureate	848	227
BTEC or equivalent	6,490	2,764
Access or foundation courses (not foundation degree)	4,757	11,753
Previous HE	8,927	21,886
Other qualifications not given above	2,310	4,583
No previous qualifications	445	4,234
Unknown qualifications	5,911	4,830
Total	241,445	72,173

15. These groupings have not changed substantially since 1998. The main difference is that those entering with a Baccalaureate now form a separate group.

16. Once the broad groups have been defined, the second set of variables is used to divide the 'A-level or equivalent' group further. This is done in two stages.

17. First, a group is created for all those students who have tariff scores for vocational A- or AS levels (VCEs or GNVQs). This group is then split again into those who also have

tariff scores for A-levels or Scottish Highers, and those who do not. As these two groups are currently relatively small, no further split by total tariff score is applied.

18. The remaining students can then be assumed to have just A-levels, AS levels or Scottish Highers in some combination, and the adjusted total tariff scores (see paragraph 10) of these students are used to divide the group further. (Note that some students are recorded as having A-levels or equivalent using the first set of variables, but have no tariff score recorded by the second set.) Table B shows the groups used, and the numbers in each, for 2003-04 entrants.

Table B: Entrants to full-time first degree courses in 2003-04 who have A-level or equivalent entry qualifications

A-level or equivalent	Young entrants	Mature entrants
VCE or GNVQ plus A-levels or Highers	15,441	259
VCE or GNVQ only	5,546	464
A-levels or Highers, no tariff score	17,166	8,753
A-levels or Highers, tariff score 1-100	4,361	2,679
A-levels or Highers, tariff score 101-160	9,850	2,255
A-levels or Highers, tariff score 161-200	11,967	1,527
A-levels or Highers, tariff score 201-230	10,290	893
A-levels or Highers, tariff score 231-260	16,212	1,323
A-levels or Highers, tariff score 261-290	13,879	716
A-levels or Highers, tariff score 291-320	18,025	1,009
A-levels or Highers, tariff score 321-350	15,209	498
A-levels or Highers, tariff score 351-380	16,514	547
A-levels or Highers, tariff score 381-420	20,428	404
A-levels or Highers, tariff score 421-480	19,216	358
A-levels or Highers, tariff score over 480	17,653	211
Total	211,757	21,896

Changes between 2001-02 and 2002-03

19. The introduction of the tariff in 2002-03 changed the way A-level grades were translated into numerical measures. The main change affecting the benchmarking was removal of the cap on how many results could be included. Up to 2001-02, the total points included either the best three A-level results or the best five Scottish Highers results – for the relatively few students who had both A-levels and Highers, the maximum of these two scores was used in defining the entry qualification groups. From 2002-03, the results for all

GCE and VCE qualifications at AS or A-level and Scottish Highers at higher or advanced higher grades are counted towards the total tariff score, with the exception of duplicated subjects.

20. Under the old system, a maximum score of 30 points was attainable for those with three grade As. Under the current system, someone with three grade As would have a tariff score of 360 points. Many students have scores above this value, without necessarily obtaining any grade As. This is partly because the introduction of Curriculum 2000 has encouraged pupils to study more than three subjects, at least at AS level, and partly because more of their qualifications are now taken into account. In deciding on the categories to be used in splitting this group of students it was therefore agreed that those with at least 360 tariff points should be split into those with up to 380 points, those with between 381 and 420 points, those with between 421 and 480 points, and those with over 480 points.

21. Because we have only the summary results, not the results of individual subjects, it is not straightforward to say exactly how many students have at least three A grades, for example. However, about 60 per cent of students with over 480 points are thought to have at least three A grades, and smaller percentages of the other two categories.

Effect of removing the cap

22. This extension of the numbers with large (tariff) scores has led to these high scoring groups being rather more heterogeneous than the 30 A-level point group was under the old system. This can be seen in Table C, which shows the percentages of students from state schools and from low participation neighbourhoods (LPN) for selected benchmark groupings under the old and new systems. The values for most of the groups are similar, but for the 30 A-level points / over 480 tariff category (shaded) there is a relatively large difference for the percentage from state schools.

23. The effect of this difference on the state school benchmarks, in particular, only occurs if the institution is highly selective and takes most of its students from this 'Over 480 tariff points' category. For such institutions, the benchmarks have increased over their values in previous years, relative to the sector average. Most other institutions are unaffected by the change

24. The results in Table C are taken from tables B5 and B7 in Annex B of the 2003 PIs publication (HEFCE 1003/59) and from tables SP4 and SP6 of the 2005 publication (see HESA web-site).

Table C: Comparisons of old and new systems

Entry qualification (Old / New)	2001-02 % State school	2003-04 % State school	2001-02 % LPN	2003-04 % LPN
A-levels/Highers, no points	89.1	88.3	14.6	15.6
A-levels/Highers, 10 points / 161 to 200 tariff	92.7	93.8	16.4	18.5
A-levels/Highers, 16 points / 261 to 290 tariff	89.2	88.4	13.6	13.9
A-levels/Highers, 24 points / 351 to 380 tariff	82.3	81.4	10.0	10.3
A-levels/Highers, 30 points / over 480 tariff	68.1	76.3	7.1	8.8
GNVQ3 / VCE only	99.4	99.7	18.8	19.9
Foundation or Access course	99.0	98.4	12.0	12.9
All qualifications	86.0	86.8	13.1	13.9