# Northern Ireland GCSE and A level results fall as fewer pupils progress to university



The education landscape in Northern Ireland has experienced notable shifts, with new statistics indicating a decline in GCSE performance alongside a decrease in the proportion of students progressing to higher education. According to the latest figures released by the Department of Education, the percentage of pupils achieving at least five GCSEs at grades A\* to C fell sharply from 78% in 2022 to just 71.6% for those leaving school in summer 2024. This drop reflects broader challenges within the education system, particularly in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas.

The results reveal a persistent gender gap, wherein girls continue to outperform boys academically. In 2023, 76.3% of female students achieved top grades compared to 68.1% of their male counterparts. This disparity extends to A level performance, where 45.5% of female students attained at least three A-levels at grades A\* to C, versus 31.9% of males. Such differences underscore the ongoing need to address gender-related issues in academic success.

Further exacerbating the disparity, students from backgrounds qualifying for free school meals have consistently underperformed compared to their peers. This year, only 51.8% of students entitled to free meals achieved five GCSEs at grades A\*-C, starkly contrasted with 77% of all other pupils. The gap reflects not only social but also systemic issues, suggesting that initiatives aimed at mitigating educational inequality must be intensified.

The decline in top GCSE grades mirrors national trends, with only 34.5% of GCSE entries awarded A\* or A grades in Northern Ireland, down from 37% in 2022. This decline has raised concerns among educators and policy makers alike, particularly as many worry it signifies a broader issue with academic standards that could have lasting implications for the workforce. Nevertheless, entries in STEM subjects have seen a positive shift, growing to represent 41.5% of all GCSE entries, reflecting heightened interest in these critical fields.

While traditional grammar schools continue to produce superior results—with 94.5% of their leavers achieving five GCSEs at A\*-C—the performance gap between grammar and non-grammar schools has widened. Only 55.3% of pupils from other school types achieved the same level of success, reinforcing ongoing conversations about educational equity and access in Northern Ireland's schooling system.

Looking at A Level outcomes, the proportion of school leavers achieving three or more qualifications at grades A\* to C has dropped to 38.5%, marking a decrease from 42.1% the previous year. The overall progression rate to higher education is also concerning; just 40.3% of students moved on to university, a decline from 42% in 2018/19. This falls squarely within the context of lower A level achievements, which dictates university readiness.

Geographically, educational performance varies significantly across Northern Ireland. Lisburn and Castlereagh have emerged as leaders in academic success, with 60.6% of students attaining at least two A levels. In contrast, Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon reported the lowest rates in this category, explicitly highlighting the inequality that still prevails in educational outcomes across different regions.

In summary, while the educational statistics from Northern Ireland present a complex landscape of achievement—with clear disparities along gender and socioeconomic lines—the overall decline in performance raises critical questions. Addressing these gaps will be essential to ensure that all students, regardless of background or locality, are afforded the opportunity to succeed in an increasingly competitive world.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://m.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/education/gcse-and-a-level-performance-in-ni-down-as-figures-reveal-falling-grades-and-fewer-heading-to-university/a861613254.html), [[4]](https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/education/2023/08/24/gcse-grades-fall-in-northern-ireland-but-remain-above-pre-pandemic-levels/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://m.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/education/gcse-and-a-level-performance-in-ni-down-as-figures-reveal-falling-grades-and-fewer-heading-to-university/a861613254.html), [[2]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-66586126), [[5]](https://www.itv.com/news/utv/2023-08-24/girls-in-ni-out-perform-boys-in-gcse-results)
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* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://m.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/education/gcse-and-a-level-performance-in-ni-down-as-figures-reveal-falling-grades-and-fewer-heading-to-university/a861613254.html), [[6]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2023/08/24/news/gcse_top_grades_fall_in_ni_but_remain_above_pre-pandemic_levels-3555454/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://m.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/education/gcse-and-a-level-performance-in-ni-down-as-figures-reveal-falling-grades-and-fewer-heading-to-university/a861613254.html), [[3]](https://www.itv.com/news/utv/2024-08-22/top-gcse-grades-fall-as-nearly-one-third-of-pupil-receive-aa-grades)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://m.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/education/gcse-and-a-level-performance-in-ni-down-as-figures-reveal-falling-grades-and-fewer-heading-to-university/a861613254.html), [[2]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-66586126), [[6]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2023/08/24/news/gcse_top_grades_fall_in_ni_but_remain_above_pre-pandemic_levels-3555454/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://m.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/education/gcse-and-a-level-performance-in-ni-down-as-figures-reveal-falling-grades-and-fewer-heading-to-university/a861613254.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-66586126> - This article reports a decline in the number of top GCSE grades awarded in Northern Ireland in 2023 compared to 2022. It highlights that 34.5% of GCSE entries received A *or A grades, a decrease from 37% in 2022. The article also notes that girls outperformed boys, with nearly 40% of female entries achieving A* or A grades compared to under 30% of male entries. Additionally, the article mentions an increase in students studying STEM subjects, with 41.5% of GCSE entries in these areas.
3. <https://www.itv.com/news/utv/2024-08-22/top-gcse-grades-fall-as-nearly-one-third-of-pupil-receive-aa-grades> - This report discusses the GCSE results in Northern Ireland for 2024, noting that 31% of students achieved grade A or above, a slight decrease from 34.5% in 2023 but an increase from 30.5% in 2019. It also highlights that 82.7% of students received grade C or above, similar to the 82.2% awarded in 2019. The article mentions a rise in entries for STEM subjects, which now account for 41.5% of all GCSE entries, reflecting a 2.5% increase from the previous year.
4. <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/education/2023/08/24/gcse-grades-fall-in-northern-ireland-but-remain-above-pre-pandemic-levels/> - This article reports that the percentage of GCSE entries awarded top grades in Northern Ireland has fallen since last year but remains higher than pre-pandemic levels. It states that 34.5% of students received grade A/7 and above, compared to 37% in 2022 and 30.5% in 2019. The article also notes that 86.8% of students achieved grade C/4 and above, up from 82.2% in 2019. Additionally, it mentions that girls outperformed boys, with 10% more girls achieving grade A/7 and above.
5. <https://www.itv.com/news/utv/2023-08-24/girls-in-ni-out-perform-boys-in-gcse-results> - This report highlights that girls in Northern Ireland continue to outperform boys in GCSE results. It notes that 34.5% of students achieved grade A/7 and above, with girls achieving 10% more than boys in this category. The article also mentions that 86.8% of students received grade C/4 and above, with girls outperforming boys by 3.7% in this category. Additionally, it reports that 41.6% of all GCSE entries were in STEM subjects, reflecting a 2.5% increase from the previous year.
6. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2023/08/24/news/gcse_top_grades_fall_in_ni_but_remain_above_pre-pandemic_levels-3555454/> - This article reports that the percentage of top GCSE grades in Northern Ireland has fallen for the second year but remains higher than before the Covid-19 pandemic. It states that 34.5% of students received grade A/7 and above, compared to 37% in 2022 and 30.5% in 2019. The article also notes that 86.8% of students received grade C/4 and above, up from 82.2% in 2019. Additionally, it mentions that 41.6% of all GCSE entries were in STEM subjects, reflecting a 2.5% increase from the previous year.
7. <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/publications/year-12-and-year-14-examination-performance-post-primary-schools-northern-ireland-202324> - This official publication provides an analysis of the examination performance of Year 12 and Year 14 pupils in Northern Ireland for the 2023/24 academic year. It includes detailed statistics on GCSE and A-Level results, highlighting trends in achievement across different subjects and demographics. The report offers insights into the educational outcomes of students in Northern Ireland, including comparisons with previous years and discussions on factors influencing performance.