# London’s A‑level lead driven by policy and practice, not innate advantage



The Evening Standard columnist’s complaint that “no one asks for your A‑level results” captures a wider frustration: while individual intelligence is evenly distributed across the country, educational outcomes are not. The piece argues that London’s apparent advantage is less about innate smarts than about policy choices and institutional advantages — notably the targeted funding and selective provision that have bolstered London pupils in recent decades — and that the mechanics of A‑level assessment themselves reward formulaic, box‑ticking answers in ways that favour certain types of schooling. The suggestion is blunt: if candidates can be taught the precise language and structure examiners expect, they do significantly better. (Evening Standard; AQA; Ofqual.)

A careful body of research supports the claim that London’s rise was policy‑driven rather than purely demographic. The Institute for Fiscal Studies documents a pronounced “London effect” in which attainment for disadvantaged pupils improved markedly from the early 2000s, with much of the gain originating in primary education and then being sustained through secondary phases. The IFS points to a mix of early‑years improvements, strengthened school leadership, targeted support and system‑level reforms — interventions that combined to narrow gaps that persist elsewhere. The Centre for London reaches similar conclusions, emphasising that inner London, despite high levels of deprivation, saw some of the largest gains where concentrated investment, local accountability and teacher‑recruitment initiatives were put in place. (Institute for Fiscal Studies; Centre for London.)

At the same time, national statistics underline a persistent advantage for independent schools at post‑16 level. The Department for Education’s 2023/24 results show that independent institutions tend to report higher average point scores and stronger value‑added at A‑level than many state sectors, and accompanying analysis published in the press highlighted that pupils in fee‑paying schools remain substantially more likely to receive the top A\* and A grades than their state educated peers. That gap has renewed political debate about the role of private provision and its public benefits — and about whether tax reliefs and other indirect subsidies to the independent sector should be reconsidered. (Department for Education; The Guardian.)

How do these strands fit together? Part of the answer is structural: independent schools can be selective, better resourced, and able to offer smaller classes, extensive exam preparation and targeted subject specialists — all practical levers that lift high‑grade rates. Another part is technical: the design of examinations and mark schemes can incentivise particular styles of response. AQA’s assessment commentary explains that mark schemes are often drafted to make what is required clear to examiners, while Ofqual’s literature review warns that overly detailed analytic criteria can produce “criteria compliance,” encouraging teaching and answers that line up with rubrics rather than deep, discursive understanding. The result is a twofold advantage for well‑resourced schools that prepare pupils to meet the rubric precisely. (Department for Education; The Guardian; AQA; Ofqual.)

That insight also helps explain why London’s reforms — which emphasised early intervention, leadership and concentrated support for disadvantaged areas — produced such large gains. Targeted funding and programmes like the London Challenge and teacher recruitment initiatives changed the conditions in which teaching and learning take place, raising baseline attainment so that more pupils arrive at A‑level with the skills to succeed. Policymakers point to these systemic levers as lessons for national policy: better early years provision, strategic resourcing and stronger leadership in struggling schools can produce measurable improvements in social mobility. (Institute for Fiscal Studies; Centre for London.)

There is, however, legitimate debate about the balance of causes. Some critics point to demographic shifts and parental choice as contributors to London’s improving figures; others insist private provision and selection remain potent forces entrenching advantage. Political commentators have used recent A‑level data to press for redistribution of resources or reform of tax breaks that benefit private schools; defenders of the independent sector argue that parental choice and philanthropic investment also play a role in raising standards. The truth is contested, and the different explanations are not mutually exclusive — reforms, funding and the structure of provision have likely combined with local demographic dynamics to produce the patterns we now see. (Institute for Fiscal Studies; Centre for London; The Guardian.)

Whatever view one takes, the policy implications are clear. If society values genuine social mobility, the lesson of London is that system‑level action — early support, targeted funding and leadership development — has real effect. At the same time, assessment designers and exam regulators need to guard against unintentionally rewarding formulaic responses: revising mark‑scheme practices and moving where possible toward assessments that reward depth and originality would reduce the advantage that comes from coaching to the rubric. And for those who point to the indignity of being forever judged by a single set of exam papers, the columnist’s rueful observation that “no one asks for your A‑level results” remains true in many walks of adult life — but it is small consolation to the young people whose futures are still determined by those results today. (Evening Standard; Ofqual; AQA; Institute for Fiscal Studies.)

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## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.standard.co.uk/comment/as-an-adult-no-one-asks-for-your-a-level-results-b1243026.html), [[6]](https://www.aqi.org.uk/blogs/what-comes-first-the-question-or-the-mark-scheme/), [[7]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/standardisation-methods-mark-schemes-marking-reliability)
* Paragraph 2 – [[2]](https://ifs.org.uk/publications/lessons-london-schools-attainment-gaps-and-social-mobility), [[3]](https://centreforlondon.org/publication/lessons-from-london-schools/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[4]](https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/a-level-and-other-16-to-18-results%C2%A0/2023-24), [[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/aug/20/private-school-england-twice-as-likely-top-a-level-grades)
* Paragraph 4 – [[4]](https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/a-level-and-other-16-to-18-results%C2%A0/2023-24), [[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/aug/20/private-school-england-twice-as-likely-top-a-level-grades), [[6]](https://www.aqi.org.uk/blogs/what-comes-first-the-question-or-the-mark-scheme/), [[7]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/standardisation-methods-mark-schemes-marking-reliability)
* Paragraph 5 – [[2]](https://ifs.org.uk/publications/lessons-london-schools-attainment-gaps-and-social-mobility), [[3]](https://centreforlondon.org/publication/lessons-from-london-schools/)
* Paragraph 6 – [[2]](https://ifs.org.uk/publications/lessons-london-schools-attainment-gaps-and-social-mobility), [[3]](https://centreforlondon.org/publication/lessons-from-london-schools/), [[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/aug/20/private-school-england-twice-as-likely-top-a-level-grades)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.standard.co.uk/comment/as-an-adult-no-one-asks-for-your-a-level-results-b1243026.html), [[7]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/standardisation-methods-mark-schemes-marking-reliability), [[6]](https://www.aqi.org.uk/blogs/what-comes-first-the-question-or-the-mark-scheme/), [[2]](https://ifs.org.uk/publications/lessons-london-schools-attainment-gaps-and-social-mobility)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.standard.co.uk/comment/as-an-adult-no-one-asks-for-your-a-level-results-b1243026.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/lessons-london-schools-attainment-gaps-and-social-mobility> - This Institute for Fiscal Studies report examines the so‑called ‘London effect’, documenting how attainment for disadvantaged pupils in London improved markedly since 2000. The authors analyse when and why London’s schools outperformed other English regions, finding that much of the improvement began in primary education and was sustained through secondary phases. The report evaluates policy interventions such as the London Challenge, Teach First and targeted funding, and argues that a mix of early‑years improvements, leadership, targeted support and system‑level reforms combined to lift outcomes. It stresses lessons for national policy on narrowing attainment gaps and improving social mobility.
3. <https://centreforlondon.org/publication/lessons-from-london-schools/> - Centre for London’s research reviews evidence that London’s schools improved dramatically from the early 2000s and considers the causes. The publication attributes progress not simply to demographic advantages but to a set of enabling factors and deliberate interventions: the London Challenge, strengthened leadership, teacher recruitment initiatives, and targeted resourcing. It highlights that inner London, despite higher deprivation, saw some of the largest gains. The report explores which policies were most instrumental and what aspects might be replicated elsewhere, emphasising the interaction of systemic support, local accountability and concentrated investment in raising attainment for disadvantaged pupils.
4. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/a-level-and-other-16-to-18-results%C2%A0/2023-24> - This Department for Education statistical release presents the 2023/24 A‑level and other 16–18 results for England, with breakdowns by institution type and pupil characteristics. It shows independent schools having higher value‑added scores and stronger average point scores at A‑level compared with many other institution types, and provides detailed tables on attainment by state, academy and independent sectors. The release also documents regional variation in top grades, gender and disadvantage gaps, and explains methodology for inclusion in performance measures. The data underpin commentary about private/state attainment gaps and regional disparities such as London’s relatively strong results.
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/aug/20/private-school-england-twice-as-likely-top-a-level-grades> - This Guardian report summarises official analysis of A‑level outcomes showing pupils in private schools in England were substantially more likely to achieve top A\* and A grades than state pupils. Using regulator and official statistics, the article highlights widening attainment gaps in recent years and contrasts private school top‑grade rates with those in comprehensives, academies and further education institutions. It covers political debate over tax breaks for fee‑paying schools and proposals to redirect revenue to the state sector, and situates the figures within broader concerns about social mobility and regional variation in high‑grade attainment.
6. <https://www.aqi.org.uk/blogs/what-comes-first-the-question-or-the-mark-scheme/> - An assessment blog by AQA’s insight arm explains how mark schemes are designed and why examiners use them, noting that mark schemes are often drafted before questions to clarify the evidence required from candidates. The piece explains ‘levels of response’ and illustrative content, and why detailed indicative guidance is necessary to ensure fair, consistent marking across many scripts. It also acknowledges risk areas – redundant marks, unintended incentives to focus on key phrases, and the tension between rewarding quality of analysis and applying analytic criteria – thereby illuminating how marking can encourage formulaic responses if not carefully designed.
7. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/standardisation-methods-mark-schemes-marking-reliability> - This Ofqual publication (a literature review commissioned to examine marking quality) explores how standardisation methods and mark‑scheme design influence marking reliability for GCSEs and A levels. It finds that overly detailed or complex mark schemes can obscure the assessment’s core principles, encouraging markers and candidates to focus on discrete criteria rather than holistic understanding. The review discusses analytic versus holistic schemes, the trade‑offs in online standardisation, and evidence of ‘criteria compliance’ where teaching and responses become aligned to the rubric. The document offers recommendations to improve clarity, validity and fairness in high‑stakes marking.