

DRAFT

Glass Ceilings: Access to A-Levels in England

New Schools Network data briefing
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A good school for every child



The Merseyside borough of Knowsley – one of the most deprived areas in England – is set to lose its last remaining A-Level provision, as [Halewood Academy decides to close its sixth form](#). This decision attracted [national attention](#) back in April, but Knowsley is just one of a number of deprived boroughs where students struggle to access high-quality further education. To investigate whether this is an isolated incident or part of a wider trend, New Schools Network analysed A-Level provision in state-funded schools across the country. We found similar areas of scant local provision. In these ‘glass ceiling’ towns and areas of England, the route to higher education and the high-skilled jobs market is blocked for too many 16 year-olds. Our findings also highlighted a startling lack of access to A-Levels in some of the most deprived communities.

Key findings

1. In addition to Knowsley, other areas are at risk of losing their A-Level provision. Low rates of A-Level participation are evident in urban, coastal and rural areas including Rutland, Portsmouth, Barnsley, Salford and Lambeth among them.
2. Access to local high-quality provision is also scarce, and in some places non-existent, with no provision rated Good or Outstanding by Ofsted.
3. Access to A-Levels is closely linked to deprivation. Poor patterns of provision tend to be found in the most deprived areas of the country. Initial research indicates that this follows a wider trend of low-quality schooling at the secondary and post-16 phases.
4. New, high quality provision is needed at 16-19, but also at secondary school level, especially in the most deprived areas.
5. Free schools are delivering new, specialist and high-quality provision – both academic and vocational – across the country, and particularly in the poorest areas. 16-19 free schools are outperforming all other types of state school in their results and free schools are more likely to be rated Outstanding than any other type of school.

1. Areas of scarce A-Level provision

- To identify areas of scarce A-Level provision in England, the number of children at the end of A-Level study in open state-funded schools in 2015 was taken as a proportion of the 18-year old population resident in each local authority. This allows a means of showing the amount of A-Level provision available to local eligible students.¹
- In 2015, across England there were 236,182 students in state-funded schools and colleges at the end of A-Level study, of a total of 655,753 18-year olds – a rate of 36%. This rises slightly to 41% when independent schools are counted but we have excluded these schools to focus on access to state-funded A-Level provision, free and open to all pupils.
- This rate of participation is not evenly distributed, and some areas have much scarcer A-Level provision than others. 27 of 152 local authorities (excluding the City of London and Isles of Scilly, which have extremely small pupil populations) see the A-Level provision available in their area fall below a quarter of the eligible pupil population.
- Nine areas fall below a rate of 20%, with Knowsley, Rutland and Portsmouth close to losing their provision altogether:

Table 1: local authorities with scarce A-Level provision in England (9 scarcest)

Local authority	Number of students at the end of A-Level study (2015)	Number of 18-year olds (eligible pupil population)	Proportion of the eligible pupil population studying A-Levels
Knowsley	48	1984	2%
Rutland	44	594	7%
Portsmouth	225	2565	9%
Barnsley	437	2939	15%
South Tyneside	283	1879	15%
Southwark	554	3017	18%
Lambeth	558	2982	19%
Salford	551	2854	19%
Southampton	614	3078	20%

- These places span rural, urban and coastal areas, and are spread across the country, from Barnsley in the North to the South Coast. Coastal towns fare particularly poorly, with Portsmouth, Southampton and South Tyneside among the scarcest local authorities. Despite its success at Key Stage 2 and GCSE, two areas of London also see low levels of local provision – Lambeth and Southwark.
- Knowsley is in particular trouble, with its last remaining A-Level offer at Halewood Academy [set to close](#), with no new schools or sixth forms currently in the pipeline. Rutland also has only one state school offering A-Levels, and it was recently rated Requires Improvement, [sparking concerns about the school](#).
- Furthermore, in the majority of these areas, their surrounding local authorities also had below average levels of provision, meaning that even if students do travel out of their local area there are not sufficient A-Levels on offer.²
- Some areas have A-Level provision significantly above average. Harrow, Darlington, and Redbridge, for example, have provision for more than 60% of their eligible pupils, suggesting

¹ The number of children at the end of A-Level study was taken from Department for Education, [Key Stage 5 Performance Tables](#) (2015). The number of 18 year olds was calculated from Office for National Statistics, [National Population Projections: 2014-based Statistical Bulletin](#) (2015). This is the best possible proxy to identify A-Level supply using publically available data

² Five of nine local authorities had a lower proportion of 18 year olds studying A-Levels locally than the national rate of 36%

that they take a higher rate of pupils from neighbouring authorities – and may be more pressured as a result.

2. Areas of scarce quality provision

- We can gain a more detailed picture when also taking into account the level of high-quality provision available. To do this, the number and proportion of pupils in provision rated ‘Good’ or ‘Outstanding’ by Ofsted was calculated in each local authority.³
- Overall, of 236,182 students that were at the end of A-Level study, 198,982 were in provision rated Good or Outstanding – a rate of 84.2%.
- Again, the distribution of quality provision is uneven across the country, and some local authorities see an absolute and relative dearth of high-quality A-Level provision. 57 authorities fall below the national level, and eight authorities see less than 60% of their A-Level provision rated well.

Table 2: local authorities with scarce high-quality A-Level provision in England (poorest performing 10)

Local authority	Number of students at the end of A-Level study in Good or Outstanding provision	Number of students at the end of A-Level study	Proportion of students at the end of A-Level study in Good or Outstanding provision
Knowsley	0	48	0%
Rutland	0	44	0%
Richmond upon Thames	0	528	0%
Redcar and Cleveland	70	600	12%
Leicester	260	1600	16%
Thurrock	157	672	23%
Isle of Wight	150	413	36%
Nottingham	607	1344	45%
Coventry	591	1173	50%
Doncaster	589	1098	54%

- Knowsley and Rutland – local authorities that have scarce overall levels of provision – have no A-Level provision that is rated Good or Outstanding. Students in Richmond upon Thames experience the same, with none of its 528 A-Level pupils in provision deemed Good or Outstanding.
- Fewer than half of A-Level pupils in Nottingham and Leicester are in ‘Good’ or ‘Outstanding’ provision. Seaside and coastal towns have scarce amounts of high-quality A-Level provision, with Redcar and Cleveland, the Isle of Wight and Thurrock sitting among the poorest performing ten local authorities.
- Furthermore, in the majority of these areas, their surrounding local authorities also had below average proportion of students in Good or Outstanding provision, meaning that even if students do travel out of their local area there is not sufficient high-quality provision of A-Levels.⁴

3. Economic deprivation and access to A-Levels

- In order to ascertain whether there is a link between scarcity of A-Level provision and economic deprivation, and therefore an A-Level access problem for the poorest, local authorities and local

³ Using Ofsted, [Monthly management information: Ofsted's further education and skills inspections outcomes from December 2015](#) (May 2016), and Ofsted, [Monthly management information: Ofsted's school inspections outcomes](#) (May 2016)

⁴ Six of ten local authorities had a lower proportion of 18 year-olds studying A-Levels in Good or Outstanding schools than the national rate of 84%

authority districts were linked to their corresponding decile in the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2015, which ranks parts of the country from the most deprived (Decile 1) to the least (Decile 10).⁵

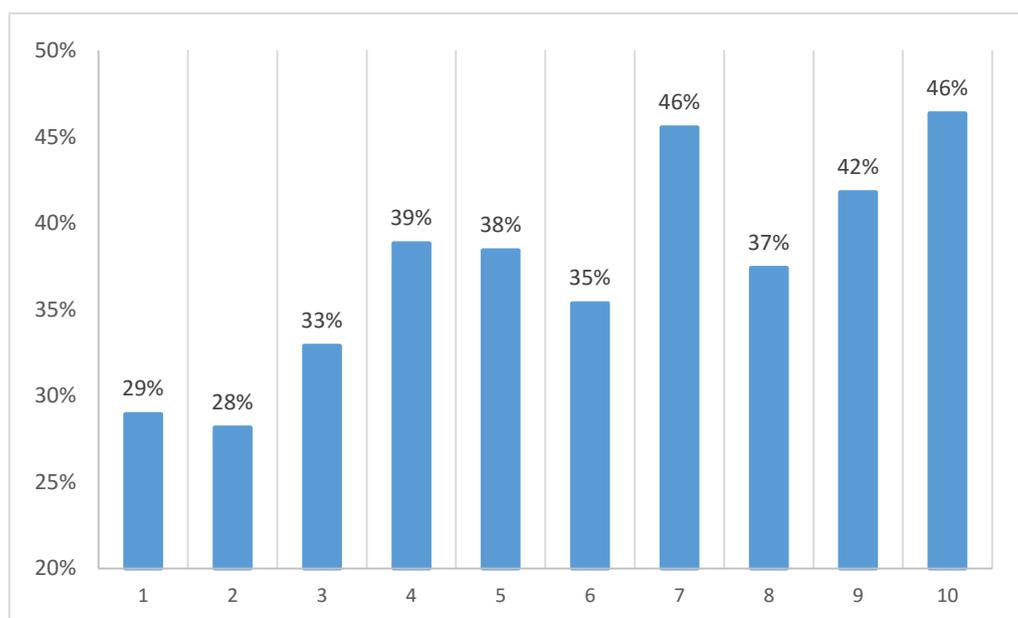
- Almost invariably, local authorities with areas of scarce provision are the most deprived in the country. 16 of 20 local authorities with the scarcest A-Level provision are in the most deprived 30% in England, as are all but one of the local authorities that have A-Level provision available for less than 20% of their eligible pupils:

Table 3: local authorities with scarce A-Level provision from Table 1 mapped to IMD deciles

Local authority	Proportion of the eligible pupil population studying A-Levels	Index of Multiple Deprivation decile
Knowsley	2%	1
Rutland	7%	10
Portsmouth	9%	2
Barnsley	15%	2
South Tyneside	15%	1
Southwark	18%	1
Lambeth	19%	1
Salford	19%	1
Southampton	20%	3

- This is by no means inevitable. Islington, St. Helens and Lewisham, for example, are local authorities in the most deprived 30% in England which buck the trend and have good access to A-Levels, with more than 45% of the eligible pupil population studying them.
- However, across the country the more deprived an area is, the less A-Level provision there is available for the eligible pupils that live there. This is a national trend:

Graph 1: proportion of eligible pupil population studying A-Levels by decile of Index of Multiple Deprivation (mapped using local authority district)



- The more prosperous an area of the country is, the better the access to A-Level provision. The most deprived parts of the country only have provision available for 29% – less than a third – of

⁵ Department for Communities and Local Government, [English indices of deprivation 2015](#) (2015)

their eligible pupil population, compared to 46% – almost half and significantly above the national level of 36% – in the least deprived parts of England.

- More pupils are missing out in the poorest areas than pupils gaining in the most prosperous. The 18-year old population in the most deprived decile (Decile 1) is twice the size of the same age population in the least deprived decile (Decile 10) – 109,808 to 44,904.
- This analysis was repeated at local authority and lower super output area level to ascertain the pattern held across larger and smaller areas. Extremely similar trends were found, with levels of A-Level access linked closely to deprivation.
- National statistics already show us that significantly fewer poor pupils go onto study at a school or sixth form, and pupils eligible for free school meals are half as likely to go to Russell Group universities than pupils who are not disadvantaged.⁶ Recent NSN research also found that only 50 students on free school meals went to Oxbridge from state-funded schools and colleges last year.⁷ In addition to these findings, it seems clear there is a problem with A-Level access – so essential to study at the best universities - for the poorest pupils in England.
- This is having a clear impact on take-up of Higher Education in these areas, both for the poorest but also students of all backgrounds. All of the local authorities bar one have a lower proportion of students going onto a Russell Group university than nationally. This worsens when looking just at pupils on free school meals, with almost all of the local authorities with scarce A-Level provision sending next to no students onto the best universities.⁸

Table 4: local authorities with scarce A-Level provision from Table 1 mapped to destinations of pupils from state-funded schools after Key Stage 5

Local authority	Percentage of students from state-funded mainstream schools and colleges going to a Russell Group University	Percentage of free school meal students from state-funded mainstream schools and colleges going to a Russell Group University
Knowsley	3%	0%
Rutland	8%	0%
Portsmouth	2%	0%
Barnsley	3%	0%
South Tyneside	12%	0%
Southwark	10%	9%
Lambeth	8%	5%
Salford	6%	0%
Southampton	6%	0%
National	11%	5%

4. Reasons and Recommendations

- An academic study is required to begin to understand the full reasons behind the worrying lack of access to A-Levels for poorer students.
- However, the patterns identified here suggest that a lack of good A-Level provision could be one of the reasons for this poor access. New, high quality provision is required for 16-19 pupils. Free schools are delivering new, specialist and quality provision – both academic and vocational – across the country. 16-19 free schools are outperforming all other types of state schools in A-Level results. Despite being open for no more than three years, students at 16-19 free schools

⁶ Department for Education, [Destinations of key stage 4 and key stage 5 pupils: 2014](#) (2016)

⁷ New Schools Network, [Poor pupil numbers frozen in time: Oxbridge takes on just five more poor pupils than in 2007](#) (2016)

⁸ Using Department for Education, [Destinations of key stage 4 and key stage 5 pupils: 2014](#) (2016). Figures were suppressed where numbers were too low. These have been shown as “0%” here.

performed exceptionally well in last year’s examinations, with over 20% achieving AAB or better and 14% achieving three A-A* grades or better.⁹

- They are also improving access to high academic standards, with 70% of all free school A-Level entries in the facilitating subjects – those deemed by Russell Group universities as subjects that best prepare students for university - compared to under half across all state schools.¹⁰
- Better provision at 16-19, however, only solves part of the problem. For sixth forms and 16-19 provision to be viable, secondary schools must perform well and successfully cultivate children for academic study. Supply requires uptake. This is a particular problem in Knowsley, where there is not one Good or Outstanding secondary school in the borough. And for most of the local authorities with the worst access to A-Levels, there is a clear trend of underperformance as judged by Ofsted and attainment at secondary school:

Table 5: local authorities with scarce A-Level provision from Table 1 mapped to performance at secondary school

Local authority	% RI and Inadequate Secondary Schools in LA	5+ A*-C including English & Mathematics GCSEs
Knowsley	100%	37.4%
Rutland	33%	67.2%
Portsmouth	43%	50.7%
Barnsley	43%	49.4%
South Tyneside	11%	57.7%
Southwark	6%	64.3%
Lambeth	0%	56.5%
Salford	28%	48.0%
Southampton	25%	50.6%
National	24%	53.8%

- New, high-quality academic secondary schools in these areas will help to provide a pipeline for academic study offering all children access to qualifications that remain an important predictor of social mobility.
- Free schools are more likely to be rated Outstanding than any other type of school and are well-placed to enhance access to A-Levels for the poorest pupils. They are three times more likely to be located in the most deprived areas than the least, and – with teachers and community figures in the driving seat – are able to provide tailored and wrap-around support for the most disadvantaged.
- A number of free schools are already making a real impact in improving access to A-Levels:
 - **London Academy of Excellence** is a 16-19 free school, which opened in 2012. It was established to improve A-Level provision and university entries in Newham, one of the most deprived boroughs in London. It is partnered with eight successful independent schools including Eton College. It is now hugely popular with local students, with as many as ten applications for each place. This year it received more Oxbridge offers than many independent schools.
 - **New College Doncaster**, which will open in September 2017, offers a great model to start reversing this trend. Set up by New College Pontefract – an outstanding sixth form college – they chose to open in Doncaster because fragmented provision means limited A-Level choice for students who currently have very few options if they want a good local school.
 - **Dixons Trinity Academy** is a secondary free school in Bradford which opened in 2012. Through university visits, as well as a focus on hard work, the school aims to lift the

⁹ Department for Education, [A level and other level 3 results: 2014 to 2015 \(revised\)](#) (2016)

¹⁰ New Schools Network, [‘Top’ schools sidestep tougher A-Level subjects in favour of ‘General Studies’ and ‘Critical Thinking’](#) (2015)

aspirations of pupils of secondary age. It is in one of the most deprived areas of the country, and was the first secondary free school to be rated 'Outstanding' by Ofsted.

- As access to A-Levels faces wipe-out in Knowsley, and other areas of the country have scarce academic provision, particularly for the poorest students, NSN believes that by creating new, targeted and high-quality secondary and 16-19 provision, the most disadvantaged in our society will be able to better access the education and opportunities they deserve.

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