

# The most able students

An update on progress since June 2013

---

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector commissioned an up-to-date assessment of the progress made by schools since Ofsted's report 'The most able students: are they doing as well as they should in our non-selective secondary schools?' (2013). That report made clear that too few schools set high enough expectations of what these students can achieve.

This report explores how well non-selective secondary schools are supporting their most able students in response to the recommendations made in the 2013 report. Our findings demonstrate that too little has been done by schools to address the concerns raised in the previous report. In other words, our most able students in non-selective schools are still not being challenged to achieve the highest levels of scholarship. However, this report also recognises examples of good practice that prove the barriers to high achievement, especially for the disadvantaged most able students, can be overcome.

**Age group:** 11-18

**Published:** March 2015

**Reference no:** 150034



Corporate member of  
Plain English Campaign  
Committed to clearer communication

**361**

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for looked after children, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk).

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence), write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: [psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk).

This publication is available at [www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted](http://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted).

Interested in our work? You can subscribe to our monthly newsletter for more information and updates: <http://eepurl.com/iTrDn>.

Piccadilly Gate  
Store Street  
Manchester  
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231  
Textphone: 0161 618 8524  
E: [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)  
W: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)

No. 150034

© Crown copyright 2015



# Contents

---

<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Key findings</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Findings from the schools inspected</b>	<b>10</b>
Lack of opportunity in secondary school	10
Disadvantaged most able students are much less likely to succeed	12
Links between secondary and primary schools are not effective enough	13
Lack of challenge at the start of Key Stage 3	14
Teaching that does not challenge the most able in Key Stage 3	15
Assessment and tracking at Key Stage 3 is not effective	17
Quality of guidance about courses, universities and jobs is still not good enough	18
<b>Notes</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Annex A: Achievement of our most able students</b>	<b>24</b>
The minority effect	26
The effect of disadvantage	30
Differences by gender	32
<b>Annex B: Providers visited for this survey</b>	<b>33</b>

## Executive summary

It is crucial that our most able students fulfil their potential. We need to harness the talents of these students so that they can become the next generation of business, intellectual and political leaders. If we succeed, it will benefit not only them as individuals but our country as a whole.

In June 2013, Ofsted published *The most able students: are they doing as well as they should in our non-selective secondary schools?*<sup>1</sup> The report made it clear that many of our most able students who attend non-selective secondary schools fail to achieve their potential compared with students who attend selective and independent schools.<sup>2</sup> More than a quarter of those who achieved Level 5 in English and mathematics at the end of Year 6 failed to attain at least a B grade at GCSE in those subjects.

We were particularly concerned that poor transition arrangements between some primary and secondary schools resulted in students not being sufficiently challenged by Key Stage 3 work.

In the 2013 report, we recommended that school leaders take urgent action to ensure that their most able students leave school with the right level of qualification and with the skills and confidence they need to succeed at the best universities.

School leaders were also urged to evaluate the effectiveness of mixed-ability teaching to ensure that the most able students are challenged and make the best possible progress. The report prompted schools to consider how well they work with families to nurture ambition and give practical help with university applications.

It was with these pressing needs in mind that Her Majesty's Inspectors conducted this latest survey to review the speed with which improvements are being made for the most able students.

Disappointingly, our findings show that most schools visited have been slow in taking forward Ofsted's previous recommendations, particularly at Key Stage 3, and some have been complacent.

For this survey, Her Majesty's Inspectors visited 40 non-selective secondary schools and 10 primary schools to assess the teaching, curriculum and guidance they provide for their most able students. As part of a further 130 routine inspections, inspectors asked schools how they support their most able students. The report also draws on

---

<sup>1</sup> *The most able students: are they doing as well as they should in our non-selective secondary schools?* (130118), Ofsted, June 2013; [www.gov.uk/government/publications/are-the-most-able-students-doing-as-well-as-they-should-in-our-secondary-schools](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/are-the-most-able-students-doing-as-well-as-they-should-in-our-secondary-schools).

<sup>2</sup> For this report, 'most able' refers to students starting secondary school in Year 7 having attained Level 5 or above in English (reading and writing) and/or mathematics at the end of Key Stage 2. There is currently no national definition for most able.

evidence from interviews with five university admissions tutors and over 600 online survey responses from Year 8 and Year 11 students in 17 schools.

The national performance data indicate that there are three key areas of underperformance for the most able students. These are the difference in outcomes between:

- schools where most able students make up a very small proportion of the school's population and those schools where proportions are higher
- the disadvantaged most able students and their better off peers
- the most able girls and the most able boys.

If the performance of the most able students is to be maximised, these differences need to be overcome.

Since the 2013 report was published, national policy has changed for how students' achievement at the end of Key Stage 4 is measured. Consequently, direct comparisons of performance data since that report are not possible. However, standards data from 2014 show that disadvantaged students continue to lag behind others.<sup>3</sup> Also, the most able girls continue to outperform the most able boys significantly and, where there is a reasonable proportion of most able students, they do far better than when they are in a very small minority. The data that demonstrate these differences in performance are set out in Annex A to this report.

Her Majesty's Inspectors identified too much complacency in many of the schools visited. In these schools, the leaders indicated that they were satisfied with their most able students making the 'expected progress', but all too often, aspirations of what these students could achieve were simply not high enough.<sup>4</sup> This chimes with recent comments made by organisations including the National Association for Able Children in Education (NACE) and Potential Plus UK.<sup>5</sup> The previous 'national expectations' seem to have set a glass ceiling that too few leaders have the ambition for their students to break through. We are hopeful, however, that national reforms such as Progress 8 will be helpful in focusing schools on raising their aspirations for all students.<sup>6</sup>

In almost half of the schools visited specifically for this survey, headteachers were not prioritising the needs of their most able students early enough. It was too often the case that poor transition arrangements between feeder and secondary schools resulted in these students treading water when they started Key Stage 3. Often,

---

<sup>3</sup> 'Disadvantaged' is used to refer to pupils who were classified as FSM (free school meals) if they had been in receipt of free school meals at any point in the previous six years.

<sup>4</sup> 'Expected progress' is the minimum of three levels of progress between Key Stages 2 and 4.

<sup>5</sup> 'Schools neglect their most able, campaigners claim', *TesConnect*, February 2015.

[www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storyCode=11006456#.VOgz6AzQjhY.twitter](http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storyCode=11006456#.VOgz6AzQjhY.twitter)

<sup>6</sup> Update on Progress 8 measure and reforms to secondary school accountability framework:

[www.gov.uk/government/collections/ofsted-inspections-of-maintained-schools](http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/ofsted-inspections-of-maintained-schools)

these students repeated work they had already mastered and so were not adequately challenged by the tasks set or the level of knowledge and understanding expected of them.

In most of the secondary schools visited, leaders were focusing their efforts on improving students' examination results. This has brought about some improvement in the tracking of the most able students in Key Stages 4 and 5. However, it has also caused many schools to lose focus on providing the high quality curriculum and effective teaching critically required right from the start of Key Stage 3. The lack of leadership accountability for the quality of curriculum, teaching and learning during transition into Key Stage 3 also appears to be a considerable influence on the stifled progress of some of the most able students at GCSE and beyond. By the time the most able students have reached Key Stage 4 when the 'serious tracking' begins, they have often been left to flounder for too long and are not able to maximise their potential.

Not only did many of the most able students spoken to during this survey say they felt unchallenged by the teaching they received, they often said that low-level disruptive behaviour from other pupils affected their learning. This resonates with the views of parents and teachers expressed in Ofsted's previous report 'Below the radar: low-level disruption in the country's classrooms'.<sup>7</sup>

The survey evidence shows that the most able students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, were not routinely getting the information, advice and guidance they needed to develop a self-assured approach to preparing for their future studies or their next steps into employment or training. This situation has not changed since our report in 2013.

It is worrying that in four of the schools that inspectors visited, most able students were not encouraged to apply to top universities, an issue picked up previously in research commissioned by the Sutton Trust.<sup>8 9</sup> University admissions tutors confirmed that they have worked with most able students who had not been encouraged by their schools to apply to prestigious universities. This is a particular problem for those students from disadvantaged backgrounds whose families do not have experience of higher education. It is imperative that these students are aware of the opportunities open to them and that schools give them the confidence to fulfil their potential.

Ultimately, because too many secondary schools are failing to get those students who are most able and disadvantaged off to a good start, fewer of these students

---

<sup>7</sup> *Below the radar – low level disruption in the country's classrooms* (140157), Ofsted, September 2014; [www.gov.uk/government/publications/below-the-radar-low-level-disruption-in-the-countrys-classrooms](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/below-the-radar-low-level-disruption-in-the-countrys-classrooms).

<sup>8</sup> 'Top' and 'most prestigious' describe the Russell Group of 24 leading United Kingdom universities.

<sup>9</sup> The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) surveyed a representative sample of 1,163 teachers in March 2014 in both primary and secondary schools as part of their Teacher Voice omnibus survey.

are achieving top grades at GCSE, then studying A levels and going to the most prestigious universities. Only 5% of disadvantaged students who completed Key Stage 5 in 2012 went on to the top universities. Although there has been some improvement this year, the proportion of most able disadvantaged students entering universities still compares poorly with their better-off peers.<sup>10</sup> In addition, there are regional differences with which most able students have to contend. For example, even within a high-achieving region like London, disadvantaged students in Brent are almost four times as likely to attend a prestigious university as those in Croydon.

Although improvements since our last report have been generally slow, inspectors found pockets of good and excellent practice. In the successful schools, most able students typically thrive because school leaders provide a challenging curriculum and are tenacious in making sure teaching is consistently good or better for all students throughout the key stages. Successful leaders use the information they have from primary schools to make sure that students are doing work that stretches them as soon as they join Year 7. This continues throughout the students' time at the school and culminates in their successful applications to the best universities, training providers and employment.

The approaches that schools take to support their most able students remain a concern, particularly for those that are disadvantaged. Urgent action is now required. Leaders must grasp the nettle and radically transform transition from primary school and the delivery of the Key Stage 3 curriculum. Schools must also revolutionise the quality of information, advice and guidance for their most able students. Only with swift and bold improvements can we ensure that our most able students fulfil their potential.

## Key findings

- **National data show that too many of the most able students are still being let down and are failing to reach their full potential.** Most able students' achievement appears to suffer even more when they are from disadvantaged backgrounds or when they attend a school where the proportion of previously high-attaining students is small.
- **Nationally, too many of our most able students fail to achieve the grades they need to get into top universities.** There are still schools where not a single most able student achieves the A-level grades commonly preferred by top universities.
- **Schools visited were rarely meeting the distinct needs of students who are most able and disadvantaged.** Not enough was being done to widen the experience of these students and develop their broader knowledge or social and cultural awareness early on in Key Stage 3. The gap at Key Stage 4 between the

---

<sup>10</sup> *Statistical first release: Destinations of key stage 4 and key stage 5 students, 2012/13*, Department for Education, 27 January 2015; [www.gov.uk/government/statistics/destinations-of-key-stage-4-and-key-stage-5-pupils-2012-to-2013](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/destinations-of-key-stage-4-and-key-stage-5-pupils-2012-to-2013).

progress made by the most able disadvantaged students and their better off peers is still too large and is not closing quickly enough.

- **Leaders had not embedded an ethos in which academic excellence was championed with sufficient urgency.** Students' learning in Key Stage 3 in the schools visited was too frequently disrupted by low-level disruption, particularly in mixed-ability classes. Teachers had not had enough effective training in using strategies to accelerate the progress of their most able students.
- **Inspectors found that the secondary schools visited were not using transition information from primary schools effectively to get the most able off to a flying start in Key Stage 3.** Leaders rarely put in place bespoke arrangements for the most able students. In just under half of the schools visited, transition arrangements were not good enough. Some leaders and teachers expressed doubt about the accuracy of Key Stage 2 results. The information that schools gathered was more sophisticated, but, in too many cases, teachers did not use it well enough to make sure students were doing work with the right level of difficulty.
- **Too often, the curriculum did not ensure that work was hard enough for the most able students in Key Stage 3.** Inspectors found that there were too many times when students repeated learning they had already mastered or did work that was too easy, particularly in foundation subjects.
- **In some schools, teaching for the most able lacked sufficient challenge in Key Stage 3.** Teachers did not have high enough expectations and so students made an indifferent start to their secondary education. The quality of students' work across different subjects was patchy, particularly in foundation subjects. The homework given to the most able was variable in how well it stretched them and school leaders did not routinely check its effectiveness.
- **Information, advice and guidance to students about accessing the most appropriate courses and universities were not good enough.** There were worrying occasions when schools did too little to encourage the most able students to apply to prestigious universities. The quality of support was too dependent on the skills of individual staff in the schools visited.
- **While leaders made stronger links with universities to provide disadvantaged students in Key Stages 4 and 5 with a wider range of experiences, they were not evaluating the impact sharply enough.** As a result, there was often no way to measure how effectively these links were supporting students in preparing successful applications to the most appropriate courses.
- **Assessment, performance tracking and target setting for the most able students in Key Stage 4 were generally good, but were not effective enough in Key Stage 3.** The schools visited routinely tracked the progress of their older most able students, but this remained weak for younger students. Often, targets set for the most able students were too low, which reflected the low ambitions for these students. Targets did not consistently reflect how quickly the most able students can make progress.



- **The Department for Education has developed useful data about students' destinations when they leave Key Stage 4.**<sup>11</sup> However, information about students' destinations when they leave Key Stage 5 is not as comprehensive and so is less useful.
- **Ofsted has sharpened its focus on the progress and quality of teaching of the most able students.** We routinely comment on the achievement of the most able students in our inspection reports. However, more needs to be done to develop a clearer picture of how well schools use pupil premium funding for their most able students who are disadvantaged and the quality of information, advice and guidance provided for them. Ofsted needs to sharpen its practice in this area.

## Recommendations

### School leaders should:

- develop a culture of high expectations for students and teachers in Key Stage 3 and rapidly improve the quality of curriculum delivery, teaching and assessment, especially in foundation subjects
- ensure that teachers and leaders in Key Stage 3 use information held by primary schools about students' learning and achievements in Key Stage 2 effectively, so that work for the most able students provides the right level of challenge
- identify designated staff and governors to champion the needs of disadvantaged most able students
- give Key Stage 3 equal priority with other key stages when allocating teaching staff to classes
- provide training for teachers of all key stages so that their teaching routinely challenges the most able students
- ensure evaluations of curriculum delivery, teaching and learning in Key Stage 3 are robust and lead to rapid improvements
- involve universities, other providers and employers in training school staff to provide expert advice and guidance to the most able students, especially those who are disadvantaged, about the opportunities open to them in higher education, apprenticeships and other work opportunities

---

<sup>11</sup> Collection: 'Statistics: destinations of Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5 pupils'; [www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-destinations](http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-destinations).

### **Ofsted should:**

- make sure that inspections continue to focus sharply on the progress made by students who are able and disadvantaged
- report more robustly about how well schools promote the needs of the most able through the quality of their curriculum and the information, advice and guidance they offer to the most able students
- ensure thematic surveys investigate, where appropriate, how well the most able are supported through, for example, schools' use of the pupil premium and the curriculum provided.

### **The Department for Education should:**

- ensure that its performance tables, which present key data on school outcomes, include measures of the achievement of the most able students.

## **Findings from the schools inspected**

### **Lack of opportunity in secondary school**

1. In over half of the schools visited for this survey, the most able students were making as much or better progress than other groups. However, approximately half the schools' leaders could not say whether their most able students made good progress in all their subjects. Of those who did track that information, the most able students made good progress in most of their subjects but this was not consistent across the curriculum. The lack of progress tended to be focused in foundation subjects.
2. Approximately half the schools reported the progress made by most able boys lagged behind that of girls. Schools also reported a similar gap between disadvantaged most able students and other most able students. This resonates with the national performance data set out in Annex A.
3. In 22 of the 40 secondary schools visited, leaders have not prioritised embedding an ethos in which the most able can flourish in Key Stage 3. Monitoring and evaluation of the quality of teaching and students' work tended to be focused on Key Stage 4 in these schools. Schools are, of course, in a transition period as they take on the new National Curriculum requirements. Nevertheless, the needs of most able students in Key Stage 3 were not being met effectively in the majority of our sample.
4. Only 44 of the 130 schools that responded to additional questions from recent section 5 inspections indicated that they had a designated member of the senior leadership team with the responsibility for the performance of the most

able students.<sup>12</sup> Of these schools, just 16 also reported having a named governor with this designation. This suggests that the performance of the most able students was not a high priority in these schools.

5. Most of the schools visited placed students in ability sets for mathematics fairly early in Year 7; this was closely followed by science, but less frequently in English. In many cases, particularly in foundation subjects, students in Key Stages 4 and 5 were successfully taught in mixed ability classes by necessity because there were too few students to make sets viable. The fact that these schools were delivering mixed ability classes successfully suggests that the organisation of classes by ability is not the only factor affecting the quality of teaching. Other factors, such as teachers not teaching their main subject or sharing classes or leaders focusing the skills of their best teachers disproportionately on the upper key stages, are also influential.
6. In most of the schools visited, Key Stage 3 students said leaders asked for their views through questionnaires or through the school council. However, they could not always say what had happened as a result. There were only eight examples of the most able students' views being sought as a cohort. In these schools, students spoke enthusiastically of particular subject leaders who asked them about their learning and changed the way certain aspects were delivered in response. The students were confident and clear about their own responsibilities to work hard and achieve highly. In Key Stage 5, students were much more likely to contribute to discussions about the quality of teaching and learning.
7. The teachers and students spoken to reported that the most common techniques to stretch the most able were through extension work, challenge questions and differentiated tasks. However, in only eight of the 40 secondary schools did teachers frequently state that they had specific training in how to offer challenge and accelerate the learning of the most able students. The majority of those teachers questioned pointed to more generalised training on how to meet the needs of different groups of students.
8. When leadership was effective, leaders placed strong emphasis on creating the right ethos in which the most able are inspired and motivated. They paid close attention to nurturing and encouraging those with particular gifts and talents. For example, in one school, sixth form students told the inspector that 'it's cool to achieve'. Their view was that leaders and teachers took every opportunity to bolster their self-belief and encouraged them to aim high.

---

<sup>12</sup> Schools that have previously been judged as requires improvement and those where risk assessments have raised concerns feature more frequently in Section 5 inspection than schools previously judged good or outstanding.

### **East Barnet School**

In this school, science and design and technology students in Years 9 to 13 gained exceptional expertise in designing and building automated devices using industry standard software within and beyond the curriculum. Students regularly win national competitions and two teams, including a girls' team, represented UK schools in an international robotics competition in California.

The most able science students who demonstrate a particular interest are given opportunities for additional accreditation. Two students took GCSE astronomy and were provided with telescopes to support their studies. The school is now planning to build an observatory to encourage further interest in the subject.

In 2013, the proportion of A\*/A grades at GCSE was significantly above the national average in nine different science, mathematics and technology subjects. In the separate biology, chemistry and physics GCSEs, with a larger than average entry, approximately 75% gained A\*/A compared with less than half nationally.

## **Disadvantaged most able students are much less likely to succeed**

9. The national picture of performance for disadvantaged most able students is set out in Annex A. Our report in 2013 found few instances of the pupil premium being used effectively to support the disadvantaged most able pupils. In the schools visited for this survey, about a third were using the pupil premium funding effectively to target the needs of these pupils. Where this was applied successfully, schools were using the funding, for example, to make sure that students could attend university open days or cultural visits. This helped give the students opportunities such as visits to the theatre, experiencing life in other countries and going to public lectures, which they might not have done without financial support. Six of the schools visited used the money effectively to support the most able students who needed help with specific aspects of their work to achieve A or A\* at GCSE. Key Stage 5 students reported that access to the 'Brilliant Club' and Sutton Trust summer schools had been successful in motivating them to aspire to gaining places at top universities.
10. These were some of the ways that most able disadvantaged students benefited from an increasing range of widening participation schemes in these schools, particularly in Key Stage 5 and to some extent in Key Stage 4. However, such enrichment opportunities were much less common in Key Stage 3, where not enough was being done to broaden the experience and develop the social and cultural awareness of this group.
11. Where work was less successful, funding was not targeted with the most able students in mind nor its impact evaluated with precision. For example, eight of the 40 secondary schools visited provided students with laptops or other

equipment without identifying why this was specifically necessary or how they would know it had benefited the students. Hence, the justification for these schemes was not always clear.

12. In most of the secondary schools visited, the proportion of the most able students who were also disadvantaged was small. As a consequence, leaders did not always give this group enough consideration. In the few examples where this did happen, schools set out personalised plans for students that looked at their particular needs with pragmatic solutions. For example, one most able student who was eligible for pupil premium funding was involved with the school's robotics group. The school provided extensive support including a space to do homework at school. The student was also provided with resources and closely supported for university visits, the application and interview. The school's support and carefully tailored guidance made a strong contribution to the student winning a place at Oxford.
13. Since the 2013 report, Ofsted has sharpened its focus on the progress and quality of teaching of the most able students. Inspection reports routinely comment on the achievement of the most able students. However, there is more to be done to develop a clearer picture of how well pupil premium funding is used for the most able students who are disadvantaged and the quality of information, advice and guidance provided for them.

### **Links between secondary and primary schools are not effective enough**

14. In 16 of the secondary schools visited, the transfer arrangements with primary schools were not well developed. The information that the schools gathered in this sample was more sophisticated than for those visited in the 2013 report. However, while the schools were now more likely to find out about students' strengths and weaknesses, this information was rarely used well. The secondary schools in this survey sample also had more frequent and extended contact with primary schools through different subject specialist teachers to routinely identify which pupils were most able than in the previous study. However, these links between specialists and non-specialist teachers were not always used effectively, for example to spot gaps in students' learning. Only one had a specific curriculum pathway for these students. The reluctance to introduce specific support or enhancements to meet the needs of the most able in Key Stage 3 was captured by one headteacher's comment that it would be 'a bit elitist'. More commonly, leaders did not see the need to do anything differently for the most able as a specific group. Headteachers and assessment leaders considered tracking the progress of the most able to be sufficient. Using this information to improve the curriculum and teaching strategies for these students was rare.
15. In four of the 10 primary schools visited, leaders expressed doubts that secondary schools used transition information effectively. In 20 of the secondary schools, transition worked well. In these schools, leaders paid great

attention to detail when students were preparing for transfer. They visited feeder primary schools, discussed what pupils had learnt in Year 6 and, in six schools, planned the Year 7 curriculum jointly with teachers from the primary schools. The leaders of these schools also had the highest expectations of teachers and middle leaders to use the information carefully so that the most able students were working at the appropriate level of challenge.

16. Understandably, transition arrangements appeared more effective where secondary schools had only a small number of feeder primary schools. In these schools, leaders were able to gather detailed information about students and work closely with the primary schools. About a third of the secondary schools in the sample, however, had more than 30 feeder primary schools and this poses more practical difficulties. Nevertheless, four schools with a high number of feeder schools overcame this challenge and had effective arrangements.

#### **Drayton Manor High School**

A transition team that includes teachers and some of the most able students in Years 7, 8 and 9 develop an understanding of each of the Year 6 pupils due to transfer. Staff members visit over 40 feeder schools to establish the students' strengths, interests and needs. This is gleaned through discussions with staff, parents and pupils. Students complete demanding literacy, numeracy and science activities on 'taster days' and subject-based 'challenge booklets' during the summer break. Leaders then set individualised and highly demanding targets based on information about each student. This is supplemented by the results of baseline subject, cognitive, reading and spelling tests that are used to diagnose gaps in learning, potential and any previous underachievement. Close liaison with the primary schools ensures that the Year 7 curriculum builds on, rather than repeats, work completed at Key Stage 2. Homework tasks develop students' higher-order thinking and reasoning skills well and help facilitate substantial progress during Year 7.

### **Lack of challenge at the start of Key Stage 3**

17. Leaders have generally made positive changes to the curriculum for the most able at Key Stages 4 and 5. Similar to our previous report, however, challenges remain in Key Stage 3. The general consensus among the most able students spoken to in over half of the schools visited confirmed that work in Key Stage 3 is too easy. Students said that when work was harder, it was usually when they worked with other students of similar ability, but others pointed to mixed ability classes that really stretched them. Students identified English and mathematics as more challenging than other subjects in about a third of the schools.
18. Additional questions asked at 130 recent section 5 inspections confirmed that leaders were rarely prioritising the needs of the most able students at Key

Stage 3.<sup>13</sup> Only seven schools offered a curriculum that had been designed for different abilities for this age range. Commonly, leaders said they made sure most able students were challenged by placing them in similar ability classes or ensuring that teachers gave them challenging work.

19. In almost half of the schools visited, the curriculum was tailored in Key Stage 4 to challenge their most able students. In all the schools, enrichment and extra-curricular opportunities were used to offer an added dimension, such as experiencing different sports or going to the theatre. However, few of these programmes were effectively evaluated or the information used to make improvements.
20. In responding to the online survey, Year 8 students typically said their school could do more to develop their interests. One Year 8 student reflected on the lack of encouragement they had:

‘I took a musical interest in playing the piano, but my teacher in my music lesson did not encourage me to play the piano to the best of my abilities. At parents’ evening I went to my music teacher and she didn’t even know who I was.’

Another expressed frustration at the lack of variety open to Year 8 students:

‘I want to do music, psychology and art but there are no art or science clubs that I have been informed of, also there are music clubs, but none for just lower years’.

21. In the most effective schools inspectors visited, the curriculum at Key Stage 3 was carefully structured, taking into account the most able students’ knowledge and understanding. In these schools, leaders knew that, for the most able, knowledge and understanding of content was vitally important alongside the development of resilience and knowing how to conduct their own research.

### **Teaching that does not challenge the most able in Key Stage 3**

22. Our report in 2013 found that teaching was insufficiently focused on the most able at Key Stage 3. This was also found to be the case within this latest study. The quality of the work and tasks that teachers set for students across different subjects was patchy, particularly outside the core subjects. The work given to individual students varied, for example, from challenging algebraic equations in mathematics to undemanding comprehension tasks in citizenship, which one student described as ‘ridiculously easy’. In just under half of the schools, work in English and mathematics was not challenging enough in Key Stage 3 and this increased to two thirds in other subjects.

---

<sup>13</sup> Schools that have previously been judged as requires improvement and those where risk assessments have raised concerns feature more frequently in Section 5 inspection than schools previously judged good or outstanding.

23. Assessment and tracking of the most able students' performance generally lacked urgency and rigour in Key Stage 3. This, combined with teachers' lack of effective use of assessments from Key Stage 2 to take account of students' starting points, has led to an indifferent start to secondary school for many of the most able students in these schools.
24. In 25 of the secondary schools visited, most able students in Key Stage 3 reported that their learning was affected by low-level disruption. This took the form of chatting, fidgeting or asking 'silly' questions intended to distract the teacher. Teachers, however, had a more positive view of behaviour. In three quarters of the schools, teachers maintained that low-level disruption of most able students' learning was rare. The optimism of this view dropped a little when senior leaders were asked, but nevertheless they had a rosier view of behaviour than the most able students.
25. In 16 of the schools, students in Key Stage 3 thought behaviour was not as good in mixed ability classes. Leaders and teachers tended to agree with them. They agreed that this was generally in classes where teachers did not rigorously apply the school's behaviour policy. One student summed this up in a response to the online survey:

'The school focuses far too much on pupils who are either disruptive or out of control in lessons and therefore do not give every other pupil an equal amount of focus and help.'

26. Key Stage 3 students in the sample experienced a whole range of quality in teaching, even within the same school. Most students said there were lessons that did not challenge them; the work was repetitive and covered what they had already learnt in Key Stage 2. A few gave examples of where their learning had been slowed by teachers pitching the work to the lowest ability or insisting that all students listened to explanations the most able did not need. For example, one student said that in IT the teacher regularly freezes the computer screen to explain the solution to a problem experienced by only one or two students. In the more effective schools, students said, 'there is always a question we can't answer or a really interesting challenge.' Older students were more content that they are stretched by the work they are given.
27. One Year 8 student who responded to the online survey commented:
- 'Most of the stuff I know already and you have to complete the simple stuff first to get to the more advanced things.'

Another Year 8 student reflected on the difference between work in primary school and the work he did currently:

'Most lessons aren't as interesting now..... They are now boring'.

28. Homework was adapted to the needs of the most able students in only about a fifth of the schools visited. Extension tasks were increasingly common for the



most able in addition to homework. One student described this as having to 'work through the normal stuff to get to the interesting stuff.'

29. The evidence from the additional questions on inspection further supports this poor state of affairs regarding homework.<sup>14</sup> Half of the 130 schools responding reported that homework was not adapted to be more challenging for the most able or that it varied across different subjects or teachers relied solely on students of similar ability being taught together. Only 14 schools in this sample had a distinct policy of setting more challenging homework for the most able students. In only nine schools did the leaders know whether homework was challenging for the most able.
30. Where teaching of most able students was more successful, teachers were highly aware of what students already knew and could do. They planned with high expectations and had a precise understanding of what they wanted students to learn.

### **John Spence Community High School**

In this school, English teachers plan together and produce high quality stimulus and challenging activities for lessons. They adapt the materials by pitching their lessons at the most able and offering scaffolding for different abilities. This includes regular review of model answers for the most able so that they know exactly what to aim for.

The English team invites all the families of Year 7 and 8 students to visit each term. At this popular event, families see different examples of work and get advice on how to support students. Parents of the most able see the work of other most able students and learn about the standards expected of class work and homework. They are given booklists to encourage wider reading and discussion.

Progress by the most able students in English language has improved markedly over the last three years, resulting in a very high proportion gaining A\*/A in GCSE.

### **Assessment and tracking at Key Stage 3 is not effective**

31. The schools visited were much better at tracking the progress of the most able students in Key Stage 4 – tracking both individuals and as a cohort – compared with the previous study, but tracking at Key Stage 3 remains weak.
32. Differences in target setting between the two studies are not as clear cut. Key Stage 2 test results were almost always used to set targets for the most able

---

<sup>14</sup> Schools that have previously been judged as requires improvement and those that risk assessments have raised concerns feature more frequently in Section 5 inspection than schools previously judged good or outstanding.

students in the sample schools, but there remained distrust of these results in five of the schools visited. Teachers typically used baseline testing widely, but only about a quarter of the schools used it effectively to spot gaps in pupils' learning or underachievement. In four schools, this type of testing had been used to support a case for Key Stage 2 assessments being inaccurate, rather than a means to raising expectations.

33. Of the 40 secondary schools visited, 26 set targets for their most able students at just above national expectations. However, they did not always recalibrate them to reflect all the information the school has about the students. For many students, this meant that expectations were not high enough to ensure that they reach their full potential. In five schools, inspectors were told that if a student met their target, teachers could set a more challenging one but this was not systematic and failed to provide effective challenge or encourage ambition. This was particularly weak at Key Stage 3, leaving too much to catch up on in Key Stages 4 and 5.
34. Where schools' target setting was robust, leaders had a clear strategy of not being constrained by merely 'national expectations' of levels of progress. In these schools, leaders looked critically at national expectations and made shrewd adjustments so that the most able were aiming for the gold standard of A and A\* at GCSE and A levels rather than grade B. They ensured that teachers were clear about expectations and students knew exactly what was expected of them. Leaders in these schools tracked the progress of their most able students closely. Teachers were quickly aware of any dips in performance and alert to opportunities to stretch them. Leaders have regular points to check with teachers on how students are doing and discuss how things could be improved.

### **Quality of guidance about courses, universities and jobs is still not good enough**

35. Support and guidance for students about university applications is still fragile. Only a third of the schools visited employed dedicated staff to support students in preparing for university applications. In these more successful schools, staff with responsibility for university applications were helping sixth form tutors to build their understanding of the process, so the level of expertise in these schools was more secure. This was helping students gain a better understanding of the wider attributes that contribute to successful university applications. However, much of the existing good practice observed was heavily reliant on the skills of a few individuals. In 13 of the 40 schools visited, students had a limited understanding of the range of options, including apprenticeships and jobs, available to them at the end of Key Stage 5.
36. National data show that only 11% of students from state-funded schools go on to top universities. This continues to compare badly with the proportion of students from independent schools when the figure rises to 37%. It is even more concerning for disadvantaged students, with only 5% going on to attend our most prestigious universities.

37. Regional differences result in some disadvantaged students being even more badly served. For example, of the 500 or so disadvantaged students in Kent, only 2% go on to attend a top university. In Manchester, this rises to 9%. Disadvantaged students in Barnet are almost four times as likely as their peers in Kent to attend a prestigious university.
38. Around a fifth of the schools visited operated group support for like-minded students. For example, groups of students who were interested in medical, dentistry or veterinary careers would meet to get specialist advice. However, this was not the norm and advice and guidance remains particularly weak.
39. Year 11 students who responded to the online survey commented on what kind of advice they thought would be useful in planning the next stages of their education. The following are the responses typically received:

‘more one-to-one meetings about possible careers, opportunities and sixth forms’

‘more life skills learning mainly how to apply for university or colleges and more skills on how to improve the types of jobs we could go into. As a student I do not feel like I get as much support as I and many other pupils need to help us in later life to improve the decisions we make.’

‘explain how to apply and why each college/university could be a big benefit to you.’

40. The remnants of misplaced ideas about elitism appear to be stubbornly resistant to change in a very small number of schools. One admissions tutor commented:

‘There is confusion (in schools) between excellence and elitism’.

In general, the admission tutors spoken to suggested that arrangements with schools were fragile because they are largely dependent on the skills and willingness of a few school staff.

41. Recent research released by the Sutton Trust has found that there is still a minority of teachers who would not encourage their students to apply for top universities.<sup>15 16</sup> This was borne out, for example, in one of the schools visited, when an able student reported being actively discouraged from applying to the most prestigious universities.

---

<sup>15</sup> The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) surveyed a representative sample of 1,163 teachers in March 2014 in both primary and secondary schools as part of their Teacher Voice omnibus survey.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Top’ and ‘most prestigious’ are used to describe the Russell Group of 24 leading United Kingdom universities.

42. Responses from admissions tutors suggest that this picture is improving, but they have also found cases where schools have not encouraged their most able students to apply to top universities. However, tutors are positive about schools which are engaging with 'Future Scholar Awards', the 'Brilliant Club' and other schemes set up to widen participation in, for example, higher education. They also told inspectors that, while the biggest barrier for disadvantaged students to gain a place at top universities remains their attainment, the information, advice and guidance they get from schools is also crucial.
43. The schools visited had a sound understanding of the subjects most commonly required or preferred by universities to get on to a range of degree courses and steer those with potential towards this route.<sup>17</sup> National data show there has been an increase in the number of students taking A level examinations in these subjects.<sup>18</sup>
44. Only a quarter of the schools visited engaged early with the families of most able students about universities. These schools gave parents information about such things as finances and help with navigating the UCAS website.<sup>19</sup> However, of the 40 secondary schools visited, 10 did not give specific support to students who were the first generation to attend university or those eligible for the pupil premium. Without this valuable information, misunderstanding about financial support acts as a barrier to disadvantaged most able students making applications to university.
45. Forty nine schools responding to the additional questions on section 5 inspections did not prioritise the needs of the most able disadvantaged students or those who would be the first in their family to attend university.<sup>20</sup> In these schools, such students did not get any specific help to prepare or motivate them to apply for top universities. Work to engage families and overcome social barriers was minimal. In the better schools visited, more was done to promote widening participation schemes run by the Sutton Trust or universities. However, leaders reported detailed and personalised mentoring and support in 16 schools.
46. The more effective schools spotted potential and tailored support to ensure that students were motivated to seek top university places and were very well prepared to make successful applications. Contact with parents happened early on. This helped schools to engage with parents and made sure that they had

---

<sup>17</sup> English literature, history, modern languages, classical languages, mathematics and further mathematics, physics, biology, chemistry and geography.

<sup>18</sup> Statistical first release: A level and other level 3 results (revised): 2013/14;

[www.gov.uk/government/statistics/a-level-and-other-level-3-results-2013-to-2014-revised](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/a-level-and-other-level-3-results-2013-to-2014-revised).

<sup>19</sup> Undergraduate Courses at University and College (UCAS); [www.ucas.com/](http://www.ucas.com/).

<sup>20</sup> Schools that have previously been judged as requiring improvement and those where risk assessments have raised concerns feature more frequently in Section 5 inspection than schools previously judged good or outstanding.

accurate and up-to-date information about university and practical details about student finances.

### **Prince Henry's High School**

This large high school (13-18) is excellent at raising students' awareness of higher education and preparing them for the next phase of their education.

Students receive strong careers support from Year 9, with a clear emphasis on top universities for the most able students. Parents are involved in careers guidance, especially in Year 11, where the most able students are encouraged to study four facilitating subjects. The school makes effective use of its links with universities in providing seminars and signposting students to lectures, open days and other events.

Year 13 students focus on UCAS applications and practice interviews in the autumn term. The varied range of activities continues and they benefit from visiting speakers who give them valuable information. Any students who demonstrate potential not previously identified are encouraged to reconsider their plans with tailored support. Over a quarter of students in each of the last two years gained places at Russell Group universities.

## Notes

This survey explored the progress made in how schools support the most able students in our non-selective secondary schools to achieve their full potential since the last report in June 2013.

The survey reviewed the recommendations made in the last report. The six key questions considered were:

- Has the provision for most able students improved in the last year? Is work for the most able in Key Stage 3 challenging and demanding? Is the quality of homework set for the most able sufficiently demanding?
- Are the most able students in Years 7 and 8 making a good start to secondary school? Has the quality of transition arrangements improved? Do teachers know which students achieved highly in Year 6 and build effectively on these students' prior knowledge and skills?
- Has the achievement of the most able boys and those students eligible for the pupil premium improved? Are more students making good progress between Key Stages 2 and 4, and between Key Stages 4 and 5?
- Has the culture and ethos in schools improved so that the needs of the most able are championed by school leaders?
- Are school leaders providing the right support to the most able students to help them overcome financial and cultural obstacles to university applications, including applications to the Russell Group of universities? Has the quality of information, advice and guidance for students and their families, particularly first generation university applicants and those eligible for the pupil premium, improved?
- How well has Ofsted reported on the achievement of, and provision for, the most able students in the past year through its section 5 inspections, especially those eligible for pupil premium?

We visited schools of different size and type in both urban and rural locations across the country. In the 40 non-selective secondary schools, at least 15% of pupils were considered to be high attaining at the end of Key Stage 2. In addition, approximately 10% or more pupils were considered to be low attaining at the end of Key Stage 2. This was done in order to ensure that there was a balance of differing abilities within the schools visited.

During the visits, inspectors held discussions with senior leaders, staff responsible for transition and those with responsibility for careers information, advice and guidance. This included preparation for university applications. Inspectors spoke with groups of students from Key Stages 3 and 5. They also scrutinised samples of students' work across different subject areas.

Fifteen of these secondary schools were previously visited for our previous report 'The most able students: are they doing as well as they should in our non-selective

secondary schools?’ published in June 2013. We also visited 10 primary schools, including nearby feeder schools for nine of the secondary schools in the sample, to gauge senior leaders’ views about the quality of the transfer and transition of the most able pupils to secondary school.

We asked additional questions during 130 section 5 inspections of maintained secondary schools. Inspectors asked two broad questions:

- How is the school ensuring that its most able students in Years 7 to 9 maintain their progress after transferring from primary school?
- How is the school ensuring that its most able students in Year 11 are challenged to excel, and are given appropriate guidance about future education and careers?

We also considered the responses of over 600 students from 17 secondary schools to an online survey.

Inspectors held telephone interviews with five admissions tutors from five different Russell Group universities to gain their views on how well schools were helping most able students prepare for university.

## Annex A: Achievement of our most able students

The achievement of our most able students remains a concern. Of those students who gained a Level 5 in English at the end of Year 6 in 2009, 61% did not gain an A or A\* grade in English GCSE in 2014 at non-selective secondary schools.<sup>21</sup> This is almost identical to the 2012 figures reported in our previous report.<sup>22</sup>

As can be expected, there is a larger proportion of students attending selective schools who achieved Level 5A in English and mathematics at the end of Year 6. At this sublevel, the numbers of students in non-selective schools making expected progress is positive. However, there are still marked differences in the numbers of students making more than expected progress.<sup>23</sup> For example, in schools where the lowest proportions of most able students had previously gained Level 5A in mathematics, 63% made more than expected progress.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, in schools where the highest proportion of most able students who had previously attained Level 5A in mathematics, 86% made more than expected progress.

The proportion of students who had achieved Level 5 in English at the end of Year 6 going on to achieve at least grade B at English GCSE was 77% in 2014. This means that 32,000 (23%) most able students attained a grade C or lower and so failed to make the progress they should in this important subject. The difference for most able students attending selective schools is noticeable, with 92% achieving at least a grade B at GCSE. Only 8% of the most able students (1,357) in selective schools did not make the progress they should.

The national picture is similar for mathematics. Almost a quarter of students attending non-selective schools who achieved a Level 5 in mathematics at the end of primary school failed to gain at least a grade B in the same subject at GCSE. This is again in sharp contrast to the performance of students in selective schools, where the corresponding figure is only 5%.

When looking at the two subjects together, the situation is no better for most able students in non-selective schools. This is clearly illustrated in Figure 1.

---

<sup>21</sup> Source: Unvalidated RAISEOnline data: <https://www.raiseonline.org/login.aspx?ReturnUrl=%2f>

<sup>22</sup> In 2014, two policy changes had a significant impact on school performance measures. Firstly, the pupil's first entry to a GCSE qualification is now used in school performance measures. Previously, the pupil's best entry had been used.

Secondly, the recommendations from Professor Alison Wolf's 'Review of vocational education' resulted in changes to the qualifications that could be included in school performance tables. This prevented qualifications from counting as more than one GCSE and restricted the number of non-GCSE qualifications. Readers should refer to the Department for Education's *Provisional GCSE and equivalent results in England, 2013 to 2014* for more information at:

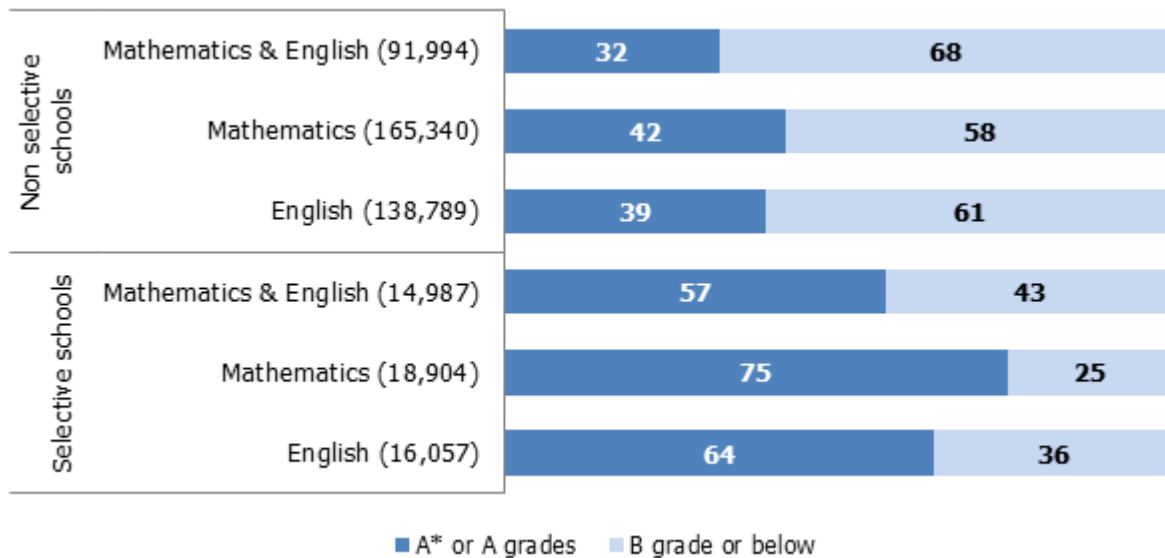
[www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/366556/SFR41\\_2014\\_provisional\\_GCSE\\_and\\_equivalents.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/366556/SFR41_2014_provisional_GCSE_and_equivalents.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> The Department for Education is currently holding a consultation on a new disadvantaged pupil attainment gap index.

<sup>24</sup> The lowest group is the schools with the lowest 10% of pupils who had previously attained a Level 5 and the highest group are those schools with the highest 10% who had previously attained a Level 5.



**Figure 1: Percentage of most able students who previously attained Level 5 at Key Stage 2 gaining A\* or A grade at GCSE in 2014**



Source: Ofsted

Data are based on 2014 unvalidated data.

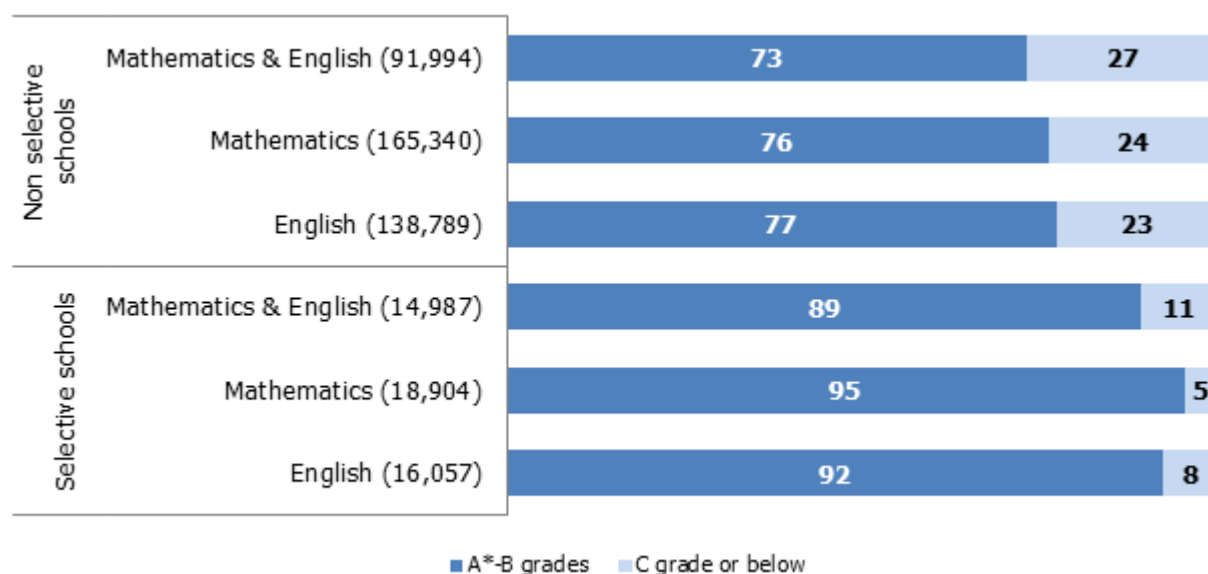
Numbers in parenthesis represent the number of most able pupils included.

Pupils are included in the analysis if they had attained a Level 5 in the given subject(s) at the end of Key Stage 2.

For the combined English and mathematics results, pupils were only counted as achieving A\* or A grade if they did so in both subjects.

Figures have been rounded and may not add to 100.

**Figure 2: Percentage of most able students who previously attained Level 5 at Key Stage 2 gaining A\* to B grades at GCSE in 2014**



Source: Ofsted

Data are based on 2014 unvalidated data.

Numbers in parenthesis represent the number of most able pupils included.

Pupils are included in the analysis if they had attained a Level 5 in the given subject(s) at the end of Key Stage 2.

For the combined English and mathematics results, pupils were only counted as achieving A\* -B grade if they did so in both subjects.

Figures have been rounded and may not add to 100

The 2013 report made clear that the failure of schools to help our most able students to reach their potential at GCSE has a detrimental impact on their subsequent achievement at A level and entry to university. There are too many instances where students are not achieving the grades they need to go to our most prestigious universities.<sup>25</sup> One half of students achieving Level 5 in English and mathematics at Key Stage 2 failed to achieve any A or A\* grades at A level in non-selective schools.<sup>26</sup>

## The minority effect

The most able students appear to do best when there are more of them in a school. In schools where there are few most able students, they perform considerably less well. For instance, in schools where the proportion of most able students in English

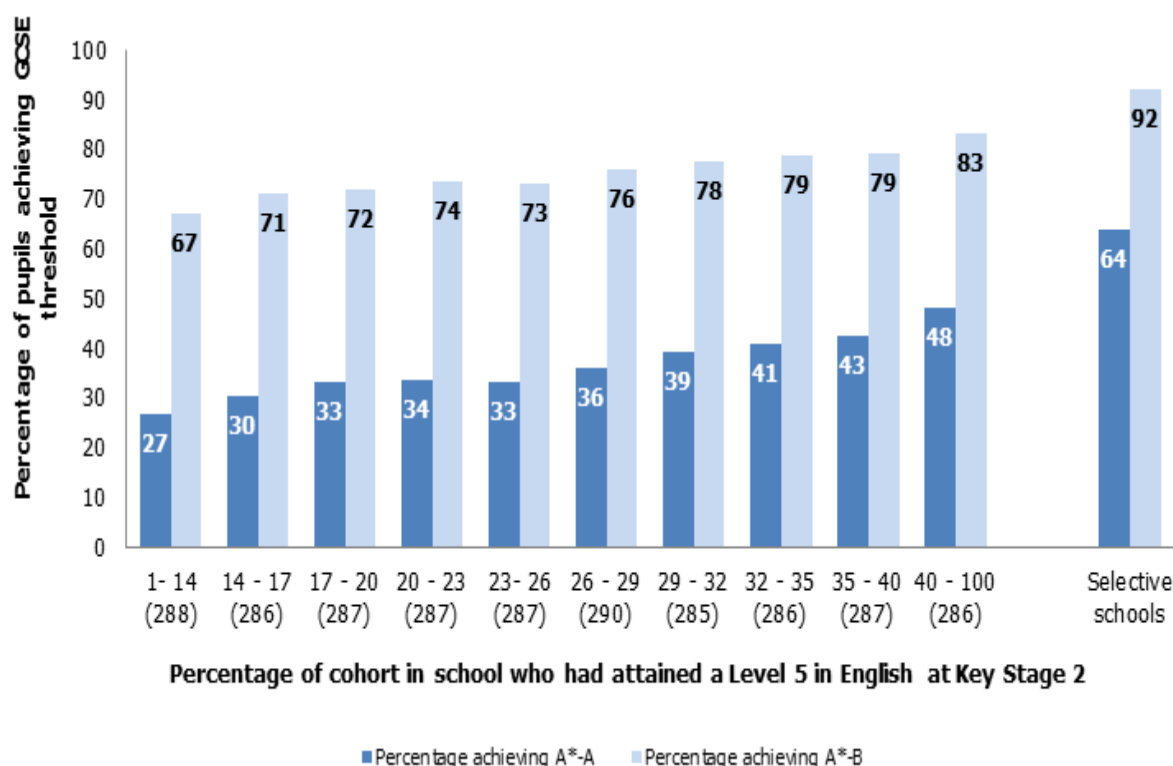
<sup>25</sup> In 19% of the 1,667 non-selective schools offering sixth form provision and with at least one pupil having previously attained Level 5 in both English and mathematics, not one student in 2013 achieved the minimum of two A grades and one B grade in at least two of the A level subjects most commonly required or preferred by many universities. Source: KS5 data at [www.education.gov.uk/schools/performance/2013/download\\_data.html](http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/performance/2013/download_data.html).

'Top' and 'most prestigious' are used to describe the Russell Group of 24 leading United Kingdom universities.

<sup>26</sup> 'Final' Key Stage 5 Candidate/Indicator data for the 2012/13 academic year matched to prior attainment at Key Stage 4 and Spring Census data 2013'

was in the lowest 10% nationally, just over a quarter of those who achieved Level 5 in English at the end of Key Stage 2 went on to achieve A or A\* at English GCSE. This compares starkly with the progress made by most able students in non-selective schools where the proportion of the most able students in English was in the highest 10% nationally. When they are part of this larger cohort, just under half the students who achieved a Level 5 in English at the end of Key Stage 2 went on to achieve A or A\* in English GCSE.

**Figure 3: Attainment of most able pupils in GCSE English by the proportion of the most able pupils in English, 2014**



Source: Ofsted

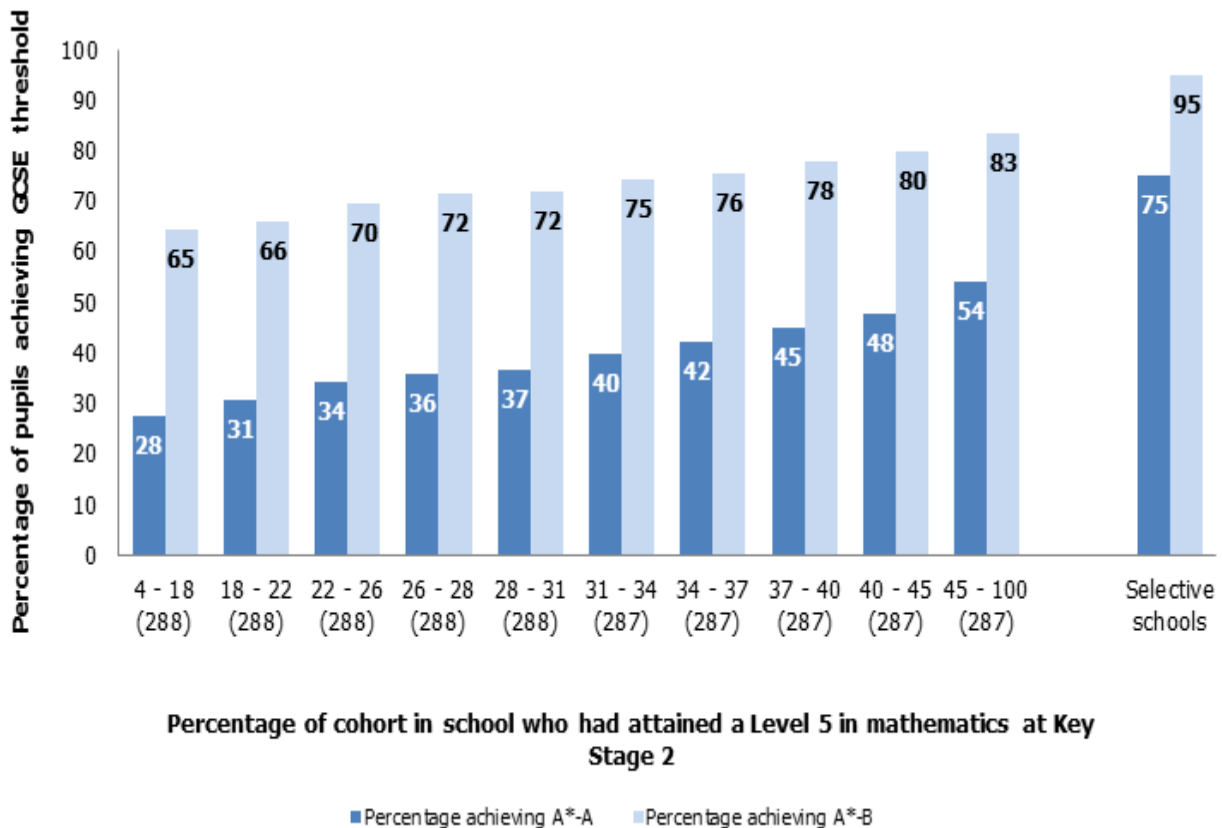
Schools have been divided into 10 approximately equal groups based on the proportion of pupils who attained Level 5 in English at the end of Key Stage 2. 2869 non-selective schools have been included where at least 1 pupil previously attained a Level 5 in English.

Figures are based on 2014 unvalidated data.

Non-selective mainstream schools and academies have been included in the main analysis. Special schools have been excluded. Selective schools have been added as an additional bar for comparison. The boundaries for each group have been rounded but have been calculated to greater precision. The number of schools in each group is shown in brackets.

There is a similar picture in mathematics. In schools where the proportion of the most able mathematicians is in the lowest 10% nationally, under a third of those who achieved Level 5 at the end of Key Stage 2 went on to achieve A or A\* in mathematics GCSE. This again compares poorly with schools where the proportion of most able mathematicians is in the top 10% nationally. In these schools, just under half of the students who achieved Level 5 in mathematics at Key Stage 2 went on to achieve A or A\* at GCSE.

**Figure 4: Attainment of most able pupils in GCSE mathematics and the proportion of the most able pupils in mathematics, 2014**



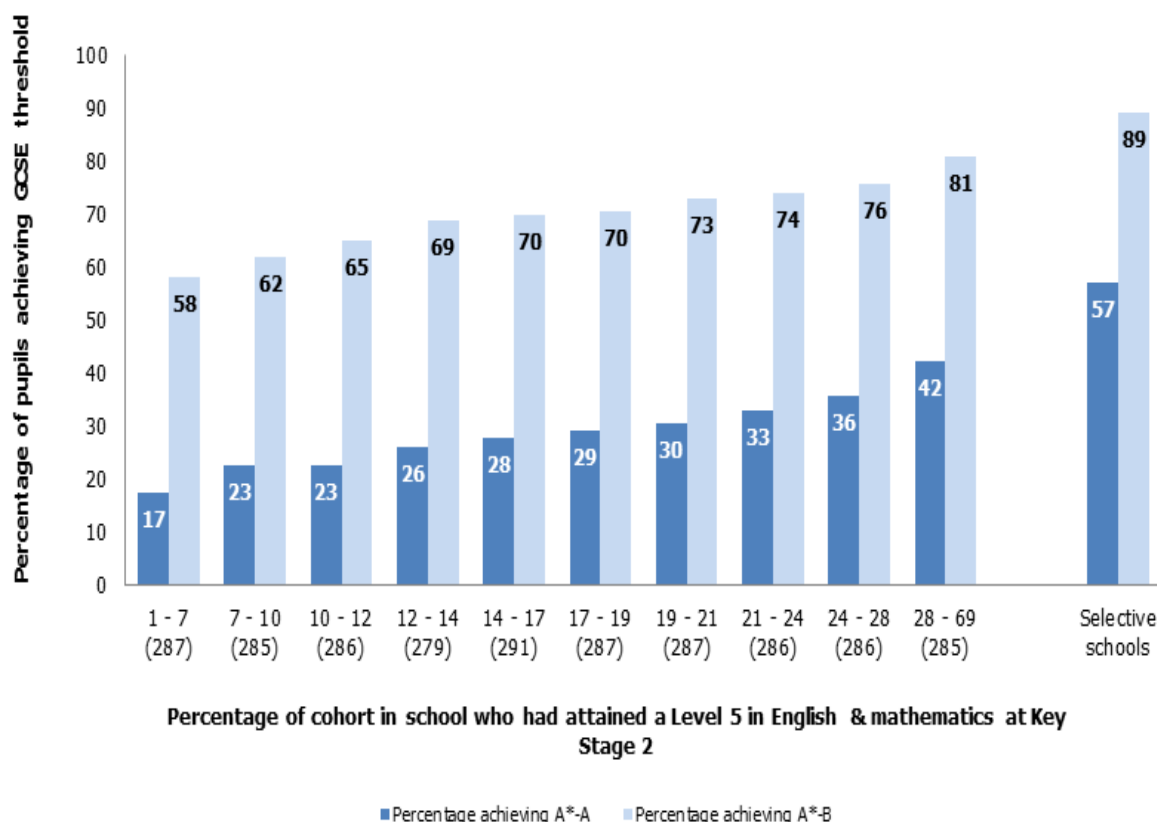
Source: Ofsted

Schools have been divided into 10 approximately equal groups based on the proportion of pupils who attained Level 5 in mathematics at the end of Key Stage 2. 2875 non-selective schools have been included where at least 1 pupil previously attained a Level 5 in mathematics.

Figures are based on 2014 unvalidated data.

Non-selective mainstream schools and academies have been included in the main analysis. Special schools have been excluded. Selective schools have been added as an additional bar for comparison. The boundaries for each group have been rounded but have been calculated to greater precision. The number of schools in each group is shown in brackets.

**Figure 5: Attainment of most able pupils in GCSE mathematics and English and the proportion of the most able pupils in mathematics and English in 2014**



Schools have been divided into 10 approximately equal groups based on the proportion of pupils who attained Level 5 in English & mathematics at the end of Key Stage 2. The lowest grade attained by pupils in English or mathematics is used for the above. 2859 non-selective schools have been included where at least 1 pupil previously attained a Level 5 in both English & mathematics. Figures are based on 2014 unvalidated data. Non-selective mainstream schools and academies have been included in the main analysis. Special schools have been excluded. Selective schools have been added as an additional bar for comparison. The boundaries for each group have been rounded but have been calculated to greater precision. The number of schools in each group is shown in brackets.

Source: Ofsted

This disparity suggests that schools do less well in meeting the needs of the most able students when there is a small proportion of them on roll. For these schools, it is likely that tailoring the curriculum and ensuring that the quality of teaching challenges and supports their most able students is more difficult to achieve. This group of students, therefore, may not have been given the priority they need to flourish and achieve well.

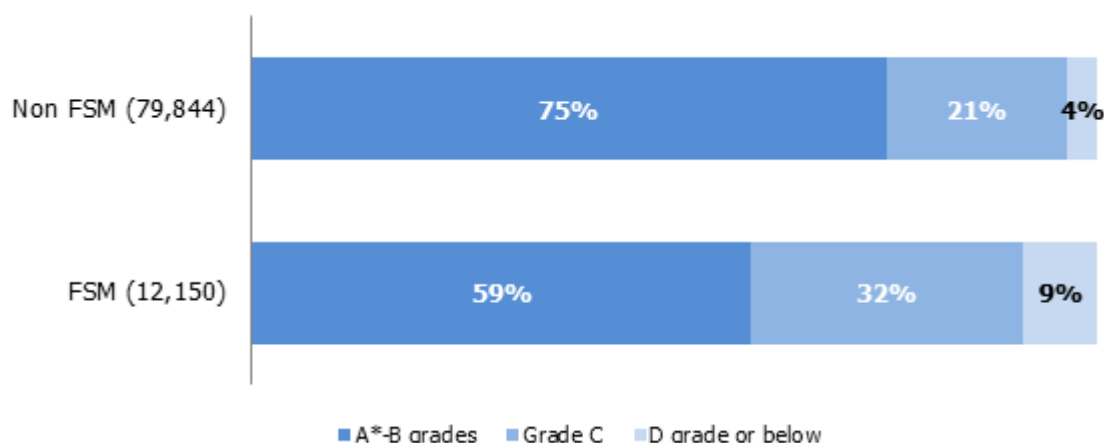
## The effect of disadvantage

Our 2013 report highlighted the stark differences in the achievement of most able disadvantaged students compared with their more affluent peers in non-selective schools. Their English grades at GCSE in 2014 tell us that the gap is not closing quickly enough. The proportion of the most able students eligible for free school

meals who achieved a grade B or better in English at GCSE was 66%. The comparable figure for more advantaged pupils was 79%, a gap of some 13 percentage points. There was an even bigger gap for mathematics: the proportion of most able students eligible for free school meals who achieved a grade B or better at GCSE was 61% compared with 78% of their better off peers.

The situation is no better when considering the highest GCSE grades of A and A\*. The proportion of students not eligible for free school meals who achieved Level 5 in both English and mathematics at the end of Key Stage 2 and went on to achieve an A or A\* in both those subjects at GCSE was 34%. However, the proportion of most able students eligible for free school meals achieving the same measure was only 20%.<sup>27</sup>

**Figure 6: GCSE attainment of pupils who attained a Level 5 in both English & mathematics. (Lowest grade from either subject shown)**



Source: Ofsted

These results are based on 2014 unvalidated data.  
 The numbers in brackets represent the number of pupils included.  
 Pupils were classified as FSM if they had been in receipt of free school meals at any point in the previous six years.  
 Data have been rounded and may not add to 100.  
 The above graph records the lowest grade attained by pupils in either English or mathematics  
 Includes pupils who attended non-selective maintained schools and special schools.

It is also worth looking at students who previously attained Level 5A in English and in mathematics at the end of Key Stage 2 and went on to achieve A or A\* at GCSE in these subjects. The table below shows that even when considering the highest attaining students there are still gaps between students eligible for free school meals and their more affluent peers.

<sup>27</sup> Pupils were classified as FSM if they had been in receipt of free school meals at any point in the previous six years.

**Figure 7: Performance of all most able pupils in 2014 by FSM status and sublevel starting point<sup>28</sup>**

	GCSE English						GCSE mathematics					
	5c		5b		5a		5c		5b		5a	
	FSM	Non FSM	FSM	Non FSM	FSM	Non FSM	FSM	Non FSM	FSM	Non FSM	FSM	Non FSM
Percentage A* to A	24	34	51	66	73	88	15	27	36	54	61	79
Percentage A* to B	63	75	84	93	89	97	49	67	72	86	88	96

Data based on 2014 unvalidated data.

Data presented as a percentage of pupils who previously attained the given sublevel at Key Stage 2.

Includes pupil who attended non-selective maintained schools and special schools.

Pupils were classified as FSM if they had been in receipt of free school meals at any point in the previous six years.

Source: Ofsted

## Differences by gender

The gaps in achievement between the most able boys and girls remain in our non-selective schools. The most able girls' achievement is better than that of boys in both English and mathematics. For example, 81% of girls who had attained a Level 5 in English at the end of primary gained at least a B at GCSE English in 2014 compared with 71% of boys. While 43% of girls who had attained a Level 5 in English at the end of primary school gained at least a Grade A in GCSE English, only 32% of boys did so.

In mathematics, girls are outperforming boys by five percentage points.<sup>29</sup> In 2014, 78% of the highest-attaining girls at the end of primary gained at least a Grade B at GCSE mathematics and 45% gained a grade A. The comparable figures for the most able boys were 73% and 40%.

<sup>28</sup> The numbers of students who had previously attained Level 5a in English and were eligible for free school meals were small (136)

<sup>29</sup> In 2014, 78% of girls who had attained a Level 5 in mathematics at the end of primary gained at least a grade B at GCSE mathematics compared to 73% of boys.



## Annex B: Providers visited for this survey

<b>Secondary/all-through schools</b>	<b>Local authority</b>
Blessed Hugh Faringdon Catholic School	Reading
Caldew School	Cumbria
Chapel-en-le-Frith High School	Derbyshire
Drayton Manor High School	Ealing
East Barnet School	Barnet
Farlingaye High School	Suffolk
Fred Longworth High School	Wigan
Hampton College	Peterborough
Heathfield Community School	Somerset
Helston Community College	Cornwall
Highdown School and Sixth Form Centre	Reading
Highgate Wood Secondary School	Haringey
John Kyrle High School and Sixth Form Centre Academy	Herefordshire
John Spence Community High School	North Tyneside
Joseph Whitaker School	Nottinghamshire
Langtree School	Oxfordshire
Melbourn Village College	Cambridgeshire
Old Buckenham High School	Norfolk
Our Lady's Convent Roman Catholic High School	Hackney
Penketh High School	Warrington
Preston Manor School	Brent
Preston Muslim Girls High School	Lancashire
Priesthorpe School	Leeds
Prince Henry's High School	Worcestershire
Richard Lander School	Cornwall
Selby High School Specialist School for the Arts and Science	North Yorkshire
Southfield School for Girls	Northamptonshire
St Benet Biscop Catholic Voluntary Aided High School	Northumberland
St Bernard's Catholic High School, Specialist School for the Arts and Applied Learning	Rotherham
St Peter's Catholic High School and Sixth Form Centre	Gloucestershire
St Thomas More Catholic High School, A Specialist School for	Cheshire East

Maths & ICT	
Swanshurst School	Birmingham
The Highfield School	Hertfordshire
The King's Church of England School	Wolverhampton
The King's School Specialising in Mathematics and Computing	Wakefield
The Steiner Academy Hereford	Herefordshire
Torpoint Community College	Cornwall
Walton Girls' High School & Sixth Form	Lincolnshire
Westhoughton High School	Bolton
William Ellis School	Camden

<b>Primary schools</b>	<b>Local authority</b>
Bosvigo School	Cornwall
Garden Suburb Junior School	Barnet
Meadowside Primary School	Northampton
Old Buckenham Community Primary School	Norfolk
Parc Eglos School	Cornwall
Selby Community Primary School	North Yorkshire
South Stoke Primary School	Oxfordshire
St Michael's CofE Primary School	Cumbria
Stilton CofE VC Primary School	Cambridge
Wheelers Lane Primary School	Birmingham