

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

An analysis of grades awarded for a number of Level 3 and Level 4 VTQs in spring and summer 2020

Applied General qualifications, other Performance Table qualifications and Other General qualifications

ofqual

Authors

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Executive summary

Due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, many grades could not be awarded as normal this spring/summer. As a result, a number of mitigation measures had to instead be put in place. The purpose of this report is to explore the grades that were awarded in light of these circumstances for a number of Level 3 and Level 4 Vocational and Technical Qualification (VTQs).

Through our analyses, we evaluate the appropriateness and fairness of the set of grades issued this spring/summer, to understand the extent to which outcomes are similar to previous years, as well as to check that certain groups of learners have not been unfairly advantaged or disadvantaged over others. We specifically focus on a number of higher stakes qualifications: Applied General qualifications as well as other qualifications included in the Department for Education's 2020 performance tables, and 'Other General' qualifications.

Data was collected from awarding organisations on all learners in England awarded a grade this spring/summer for exams and other assessment (collectively referred to as 'assessments' in this report) taken between 20 March and 31 July (the period covered by the [Extraordinary Regulatory Framework which was put in place by Ofqual in response to Covid-19](#)). Data was also collected for the same period of time in 2018 and 2019, so that trends over time could be observed.

The main findings are summarised as follows:

1. there was an increase in the total number of grades awarded for Applied General qualifications in 2020 compared to 2019, continuing the trend from 2018. Overall entry size for other Performance Table qualifications decreased this year, while the overall entry size for Other General qualifications remained broadly the same this year, relative to 2019. A slight decrease in numbers of grades issued for Level 4 qualifications was also observed. It is difficult to know with certainty whether or not any of these observations are attributable to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic or some other explanation, but this may suggest some change in entry behaviour this year
2. overall, grade distributions this year appear generally similar to grade distributions observed for previous years. In other words, neither the shape nor the skew appeared to have changed substantially from previous years. This suggests overall that the awarding process in 2020 has not been majorly affected by the pandemic situation
3. while grade distributions appeared stable overall, some small increases in the proportions of top grades were observed for some groups of qualifications. Only in a small number of cases were there small decreases in the proportion of top grades being awarded. This appears to suggest that cohorts overall have not been disadvantaged this year compared to previous years, and some trends may appear to suggest that some cohorts may have actually been afforded a slight advantage this year over previous cohorts. However, these patterns might also be explained by centres in some cases not entering students for whom there was insufficient evidence to support a calculated grade or a pass
4. in most cases, attainment gaps have not increased over time between different demographic groups. There are some specific cases where

attainment gaps have changed (e.g. the gap between males and females in Other General qualifications, and between Asian and white ethnicity learners), although these apparent differences seem small in real terms and it is difficult to know what the exact cause of these may be without further exploration (for example, these findings could reflect a genuine change in ability of cohorts over time)

Overall, the findings suggest that there has not been a sudden slip of standards nor a sudden introduction of bias in 2020 due to the measures adopted in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. A small degree of change is expected in any given year, and the majority of changes reported here are in line with those expectations. We shall continue to monitor the system as response measures change in the months to come, endeavouring to ensure that outcomes remain as fair as they can be in light of these challenging circumstances.

1 Background and purpose

On 9 April 2020 the Secretary of State for Education issued a [direction, issued to Ofqual](#), stating that assessments for Vocational and Technical Qualifications (VTQs) could not proceed as planned in the spring and summer of 2020, due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. For GCSEs, AS and A levels, the government direction was that the majority of learners should receive calculated results based upon their centre's judgments of their ability. For VTQs, however, it was recognised that the diversity and complexity of the sector meant that the same approach would not be appropriate for all qualifications. A range of mitigation approaches were subsequently taken by awarding organisations, as detailed in Ofqual's [Extraordinary Regulatory Framework \(ERF\)](#), including calculated results, adapted assessments (eg moving a paper-based test online). Where neither approach was appropriate (for example with qualifications that signal occupational competence, in safety-critical industries), assessments were delayed.

As results were not issued in the same way as in previous years for these qualifications, it was important for us to explore any changes over time so as to ensure that no particular groups of learners were unfairly advantaged or disadvantaged by the approaches taken this year, relative to previous years. In doing so, we hoped to ensure that awarding processes have remained as fair as they can be this year, despite the challenges posed by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. In particular, this report sought to explore the following research questions:

1. were more or fewer grades in total awarded this year compared to previous years? If so, this could be evidence of a change in entry behaviour
2. were grade distributions substantially different this year compared to previous years? If so, this could be evidence of a change in standards
3. were certain groups of learners seemingly advantaged or disadvantaged relative to their peers to a greater degree this year compared to previous years? If so, this could be evidence of bias towards this year's cohort

The focus of this report is on Level 3 qualifications (broadly equivalent to an A level) that tend to be used for higher stakes purposes, such as those that are used for progression to further or higher education, or for progression straight into employment. Specifically, qualifications included in this report were Applied General qualifications or qualifications otherwise included in the Department for Education's 2020 performance tables¹, and/or those having a qualification type of 'Other General Qualification'. Qualifications were only included if they were in scope of the ERF.

We present some more information on the data collected for these analyses in the section give below, before exploring each of the above questions in turn.

¹ Listed separately on www.gov.uk for [Key stage 4 qualifications](#) and [16 to 18 qualifications](#).

1.1 Data source

Data was collected from 27 awarding organisations for 498 qualifications (not including any separate routes/pathways within those qualifications) that matched one of the aforementioned qualification types. Awarding organisations (AOs) were asked to provide to Ofqual the qualification-level grades awarded to all learners in centres in England who took or would have taken assessments for these qualifications between 20 March 2020 and 31 July 2020, the period of time covered by the ERF. Where grades had not been fully finalised yet, provisional grades were accepted for the purpose of these analyses.

To allow us to explore trends over time, data was also collected for all learners in England who took assessments for the same qualifications in 2018 or 2019, for the equivalent time period (20 March to 31 July).

In order for us to conduct equalities analyses (Research Question 3 mentioned above), we required more information on the demographic/socio-economic characteristics of learners than was present in the data collected from awarding organisations. We therefore used some additional fields from the [Individualised Learner Record](#) (ILR; maintained by the Education and Skills Funding Agency), in addition to the data provided by AOs to Ofqual.

To combine the two datasets, we developed a stepwise rules-based method that identified matching records of individual learners in both the datasets. The algorithm used a set of common fields to identify the matches including name, surname, date of birth, Unique Learner Number (ULN) and qualification number. The search for matching records using the set of common fields was performed in several stages. First the full set of common fields was used. At each subsequent stage, the set of common fields was progressively reduced according to predetermined rules and new matching records identified. This was required to accommodate incomplete or missing data as well as variations and errors present in the data. Name, surname and date of birth was the final combination of unique identifiers used to find new matching records in both datasets. Using this approach, we were able to match demographic information fields to 66% of the learners in the AO-provided data.

2 Numbers of grades over time

In this first analysis section, we address Research Questions 1 and 2, to see whether or not there appears to have been a change in entry behaviour or a change in standards this year compared to 2018 and 2019.

2.1 Total number of grades over time

We first show how the total number of grades issued over time has changed. This analysis gives an indication of entry behaviour this year in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic as well as context to the other analyses to follow.

2.1.1 Level 3 qualifications

As shown in Figure 1, there has been a slight increase in the total number of grades issued for Level 3 qualifications this year, up from 239,806 in 2019 to 246,345 in 2020. While the rate of change between 2019 and 2020 is smaller than the rate of change between 2018 and 2019, it is difficult to know whether or not this is attributable to the context of coronavirus (COVID-19) and various restrictions and/or some other factors.

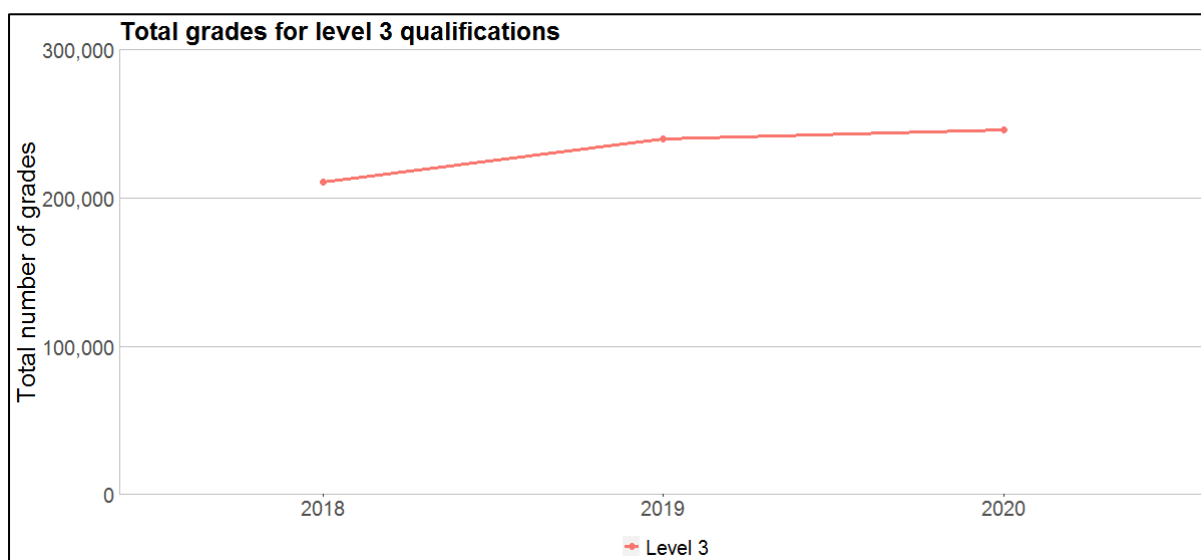


Figure 1. Total grades over time for Level 3 qualifications

2.1.1.1 Level 3 qualifications by group

When this information is broken down into different qualification groupings (shown in Figure 2), one can see that entry numbers for Applied General qualifications have increased this year to a greater extent than between 2018 and 2019. A decrease in entry size was seen for other PTQs (excluding Applied Generals). The entry size for

Other General qualifications has remained broadly the same as last year. As before, while any effects may be attributable to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, it difficult to conclude that with any certainty, as other factors might be at play (e.g. a change in funding arrangements).

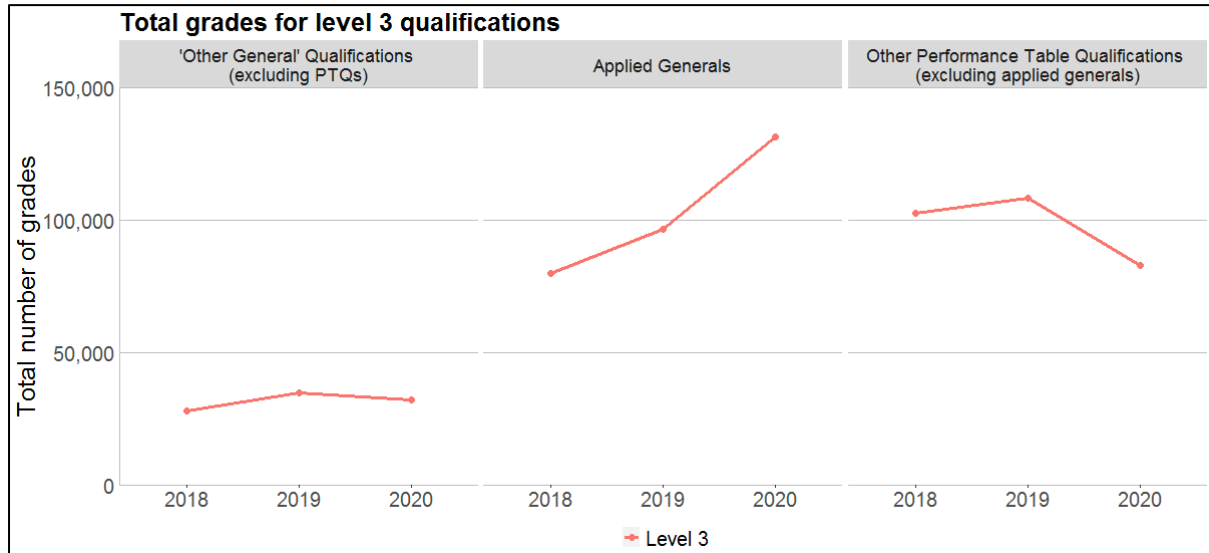


Figure 2. Total grades over time for Level 3 qualifications by qualification group

2.1.2 Level 4 Other General qualifications

A decrease in the total number of grades issued can be seen for Level 4 qualifications in Figure 3, continuing the trend seen in previous years. All Level 4 qualifications included in this dataset were Other General qualifications, negating the need for further breakdowns of this information.

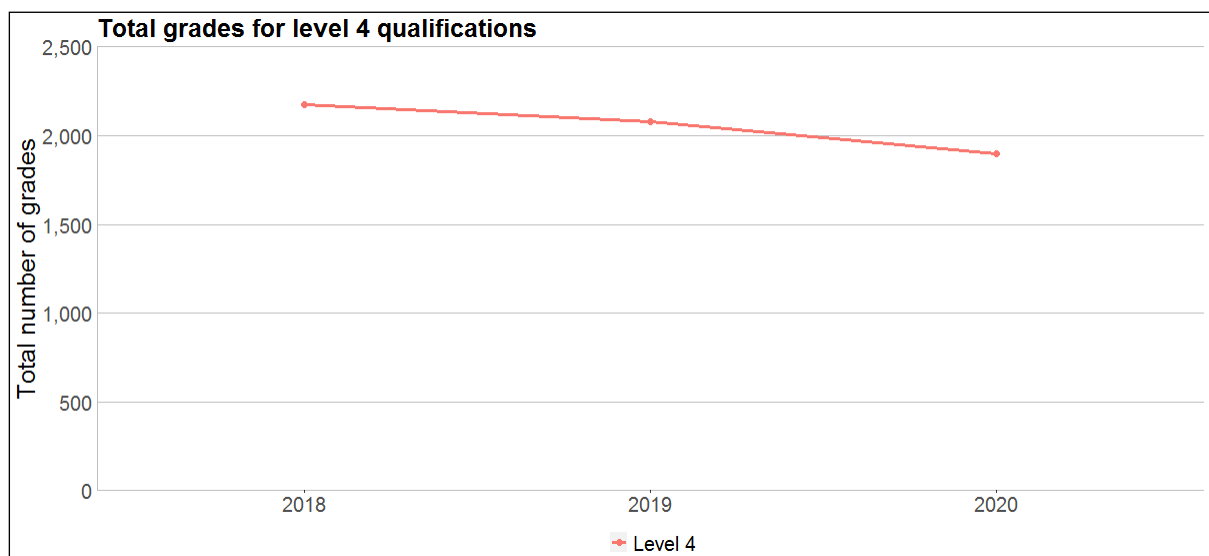


Figure 3. Total grades over time for Level 4 qualifications

2.2 Grade distributions over time

The following graphs show the distributions of grades awarded in 2018, 2019 and 2020. The main purpose here is to observe whether the shapes of the distributions look similar in 2020 to previous years. If distributions were skewed in a particular direction, for example, then this might be evidence of a change in standards.

Note that graphs in this section are only plotted for grading structures relating to 5 or more qualifications and 500 or more certifications in 2020. Below these thresholds, we would normally not expect stability in grade distributions over time. No Level 4 qualification structures met this threshold.

2.2.1 Level 3 qualifications

We focus first on the distributions for Level 3 qualifications at the aggregate level (Figure 4). Unlike in GCSEs, AS and A levels, where the top grade can either be a 9 (in reformed GCSEs) or an A* (in AS and A levels), a larger number of different grading structures are used in the VTQ sector. We have therefore produced separate plots for each of these different structures. For example, some VTQs are graded on an A* to E scale, others are graded Distinction* to Pass.

Fail grades have been reported where provided, but it should be noted that not all awarding organisations reported fail grades to us as part of this data collection.

These graphs show that while there have been some changes (mostly slight increases) in the proportion of top grades being issued over time for some types of qualifications, the grade distributions do not appear substantially different this year compared to previous years. Each distribution has its peak at a similar location in the graph, and has a similar degree of skew compared to previous years. This tends to give support to the notion that standards have in general been maintained this year relative to previous years. It should also be noted that a small degree of change is expected in any year and that many of these changes are in line with those expectations.

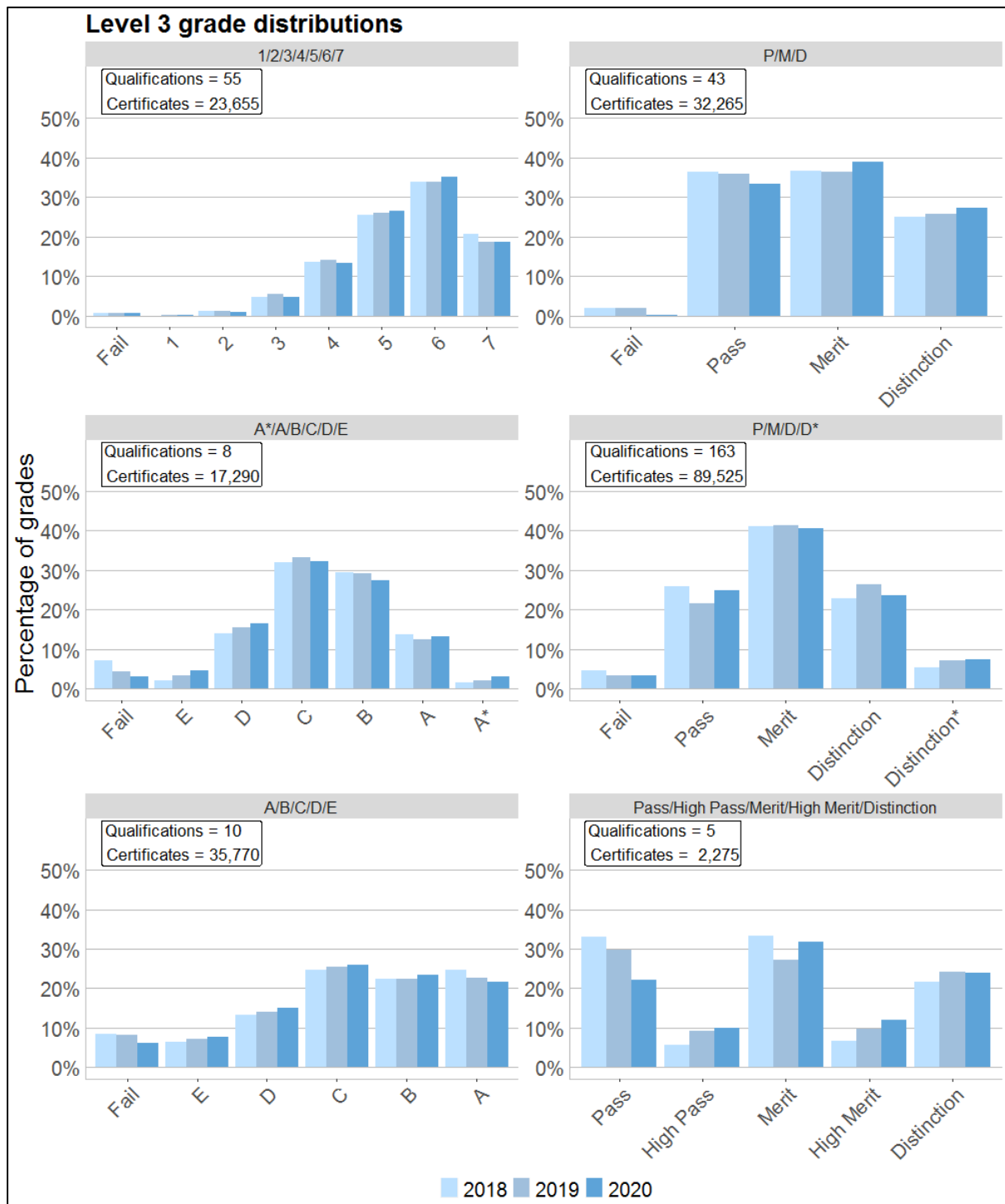


Figure 4. Grade distributions for Level 3 qualifications by grading structure

Note: The numbers of qualifications and certificates given in the text boxes relate to 2020 only. Numbers of certificates have been rounded to the nearest 5.

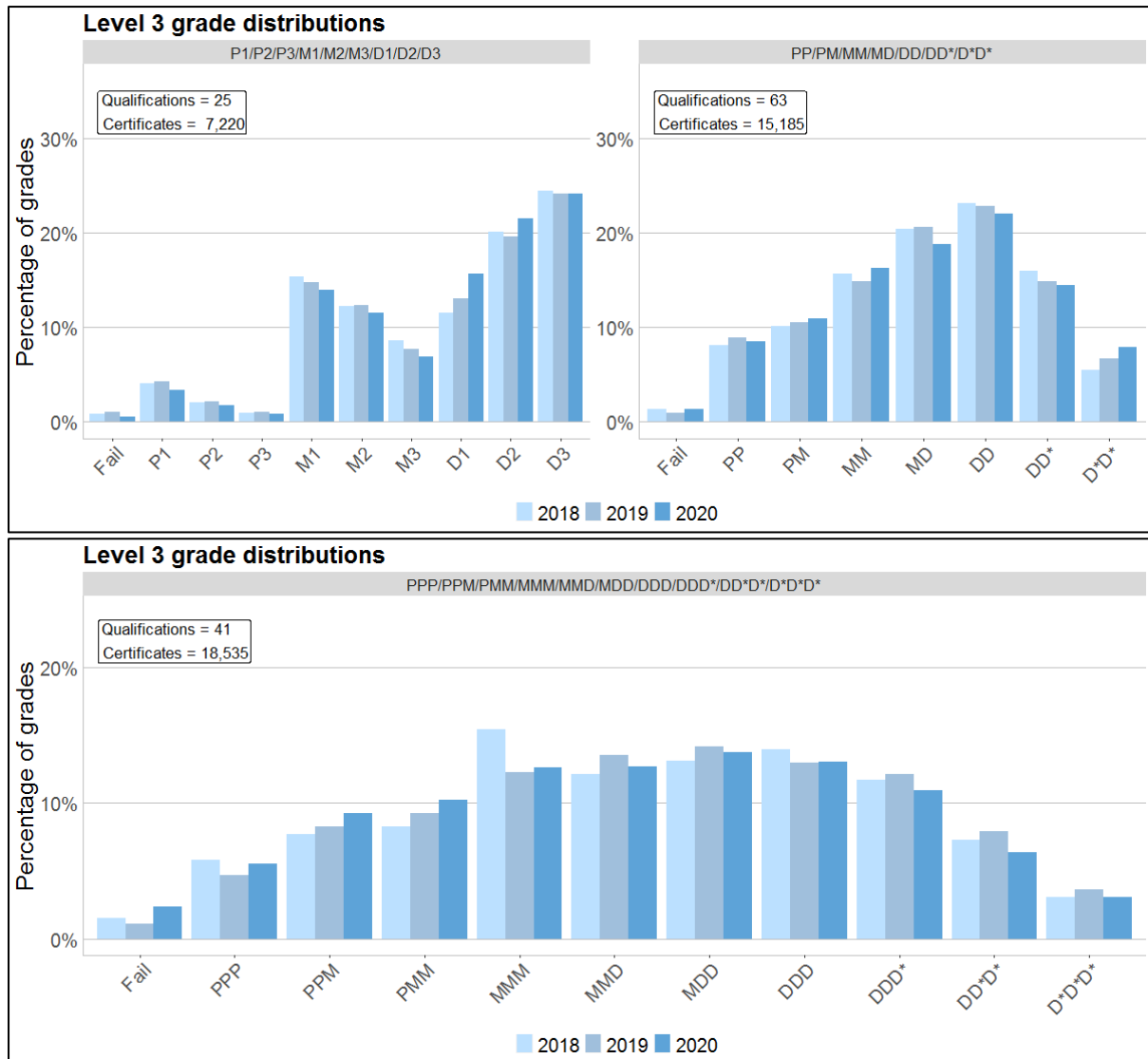


Figure 4 continued

2.2.1.1 Level 3 qualifications by group

The same basic conclusions can be drawn when focussing on different qualification types, shown in Figures 5 to 7.

In Applied General qualifications, the distributions were generally similar in most cases, although the numbers of top grades being awarded seem to have risen over time for qualifications belonging to some grading structures. The number of top grades seems to have returned to levels similar to 2018 for qualifications using the PPP to D*D*D* structure.

The same general conclusions can be drawn for other PTQs and Other General qualifications. While some small changes can be seen for some grades across the three years, distributions have broadly similar shapes, peaks, and degrees of skew this year in general compared to previous years.

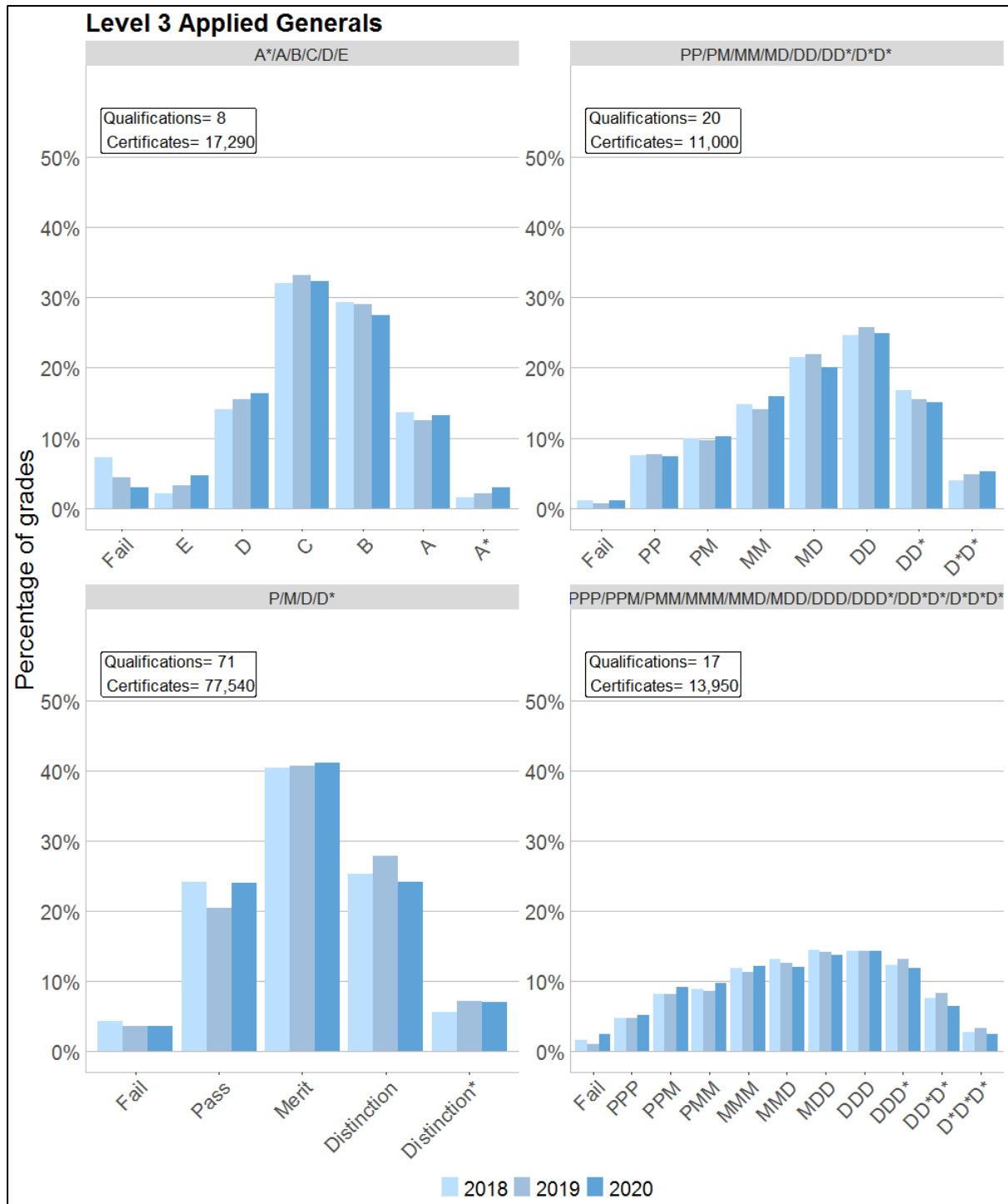


Figure 5. Grade distributions for Level 3 Applied General qualifications by grading structure

Note: The numbers of qualifications and certificates given in the text boxes relate to 2020 only. Numbers of certificates have been rounded to the nearest 5.

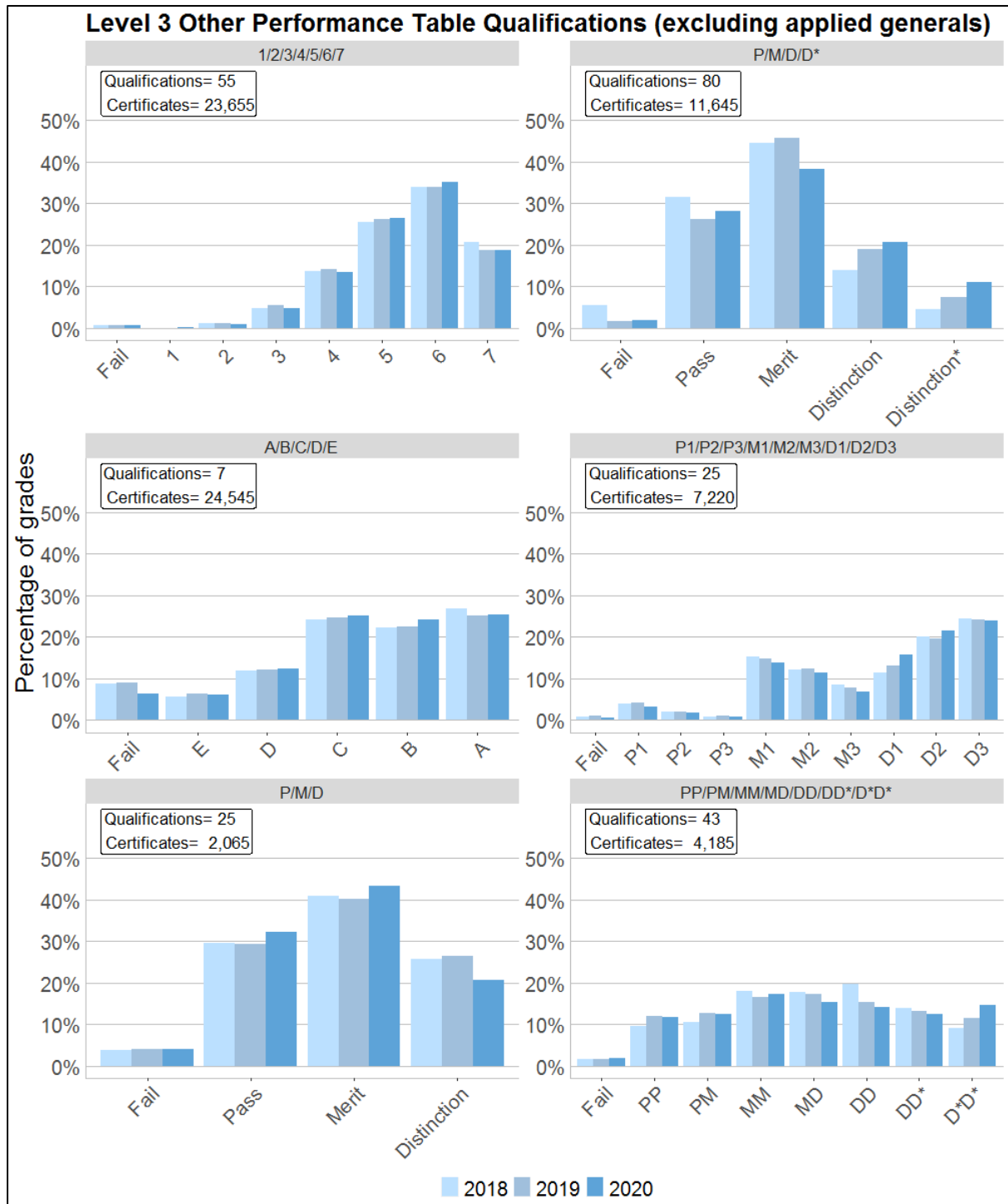


Figure 6. Grade distributions for other Level 3 PTQs by grading structure

Note: The numbers of qualifications and certificates given in the text boxes relate to 2020 only. Numbers of certificates have been rounded to the nearest 5.

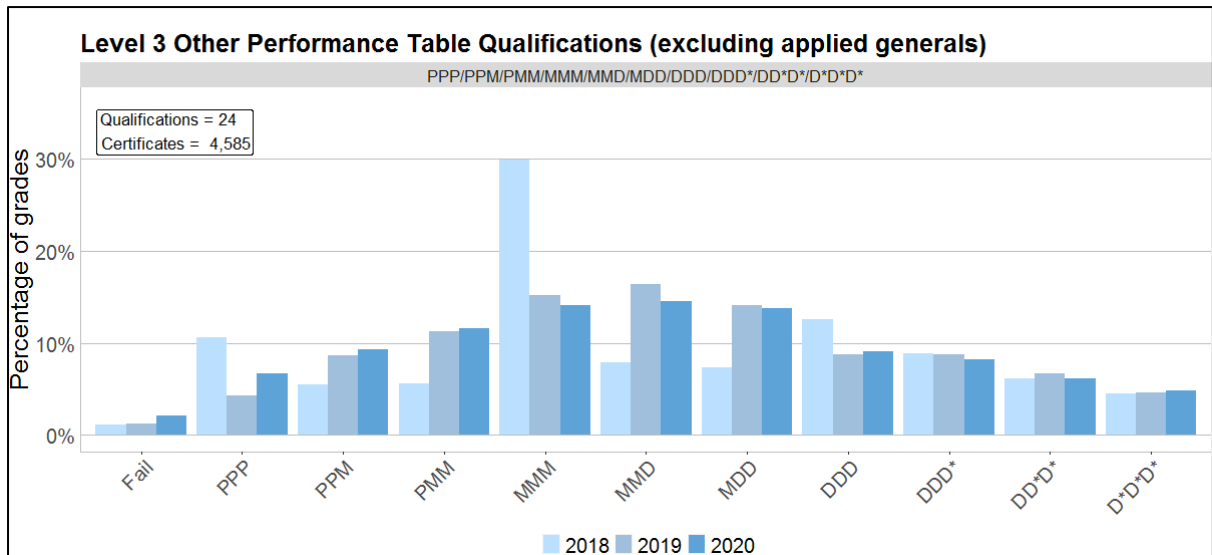


Figure 6 continued

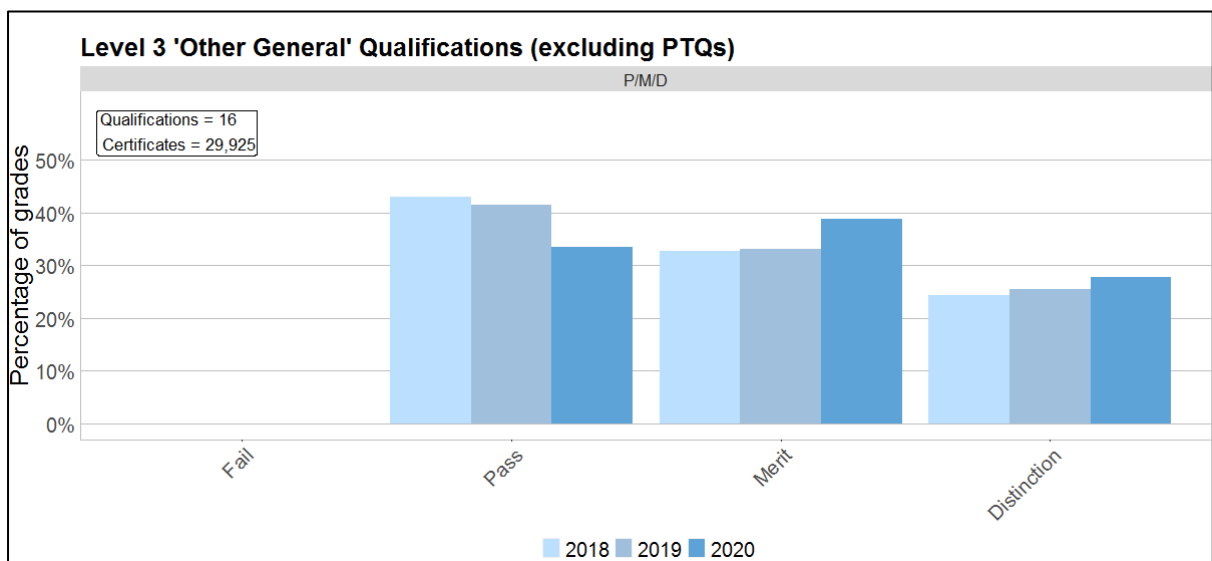


Figure 7. Grade distributions for Level 3 Other General qualifications by grading structure

Note: The numbers of qualifications and certificates given in the text boxes relate to 2020 only. Numbers of certificates have been rounded to the nearest 5.

3 Equalities analyses

The aim of this section is to evaluate whether, within the cohort, different demographic/socio-economic groups appear to show different patterns of outcomes compared to previous years.

While there are certain patterns of demographic differences every year, this analysis focuses on whether in 2020 there was any change to these patterns, as it is important that any mitigation approaches adopted in spring/summer 2020 did not exacerbate any of these existing attainment gaps by introducing sudden bias. While the analyses in the previous section do not suggest standards have changed adversely for whole cohorts of learners, it is also important to assess the same for different groups of learners.

Therefore, to answer Research Question 3 we will:

1. evaluate the impact of demographic and socio-economic characteristics on learners' attainment this year, once other factors are controlled for
2. compare the impact of demographic and socio-economic characteristics on learners' attainment (once other factors are controlled for) across several consecutive years

The general idea is to explore the relationship between the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of learners and their attainment and how it evolved over time. In our analysis we will investigate how the attainment of 'top grades'² may differ according to candidate's demographic and socio-economic characteristics. These demographic and socio-economic characteristics include:

- gender: male, female
- Special Education Needs (SEN) status: candidate with/without Special Education Needs, or unknown
- Free School Meals (FSM) eligibility: candidate eligible/not eligible for Free School Meals
- a measure of deprivation known as the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) score: candidate belongs to one of the following three groups: low, medium or high level of deprivation
- major ethnicity group: white, Asian, black, mixed, Any Other Ethnic Group (AOEG), or unknown

Breakdowns of the frequencies of each of these categories can be found in the appendix.

² By 'top grades' we mean the highest/best grade that can be achieved in each qualification, which will depend upon the particular grading structure that has been adopted.

Analyses were based upon a logistic regression method. Through this, we are able to explore the effect of each demographic/socio-economic characteristic, when all the other factors are held fixed. The logistic regression specification takes the form:

$$\log \frac{P(Y_{ij} = 1)}{1 - P(Y_{ij} = 1)} = \alpha + \beta X_i + \gamma Z_i + c_j$$

where:

- $P(Y_{ij} = 1)$ is the dependant variable. It determines the probability of achieving a top grade for candidate i at centre j
- X_i is a set of independent variables summarising the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the candidate (see list of variables described above)
- Z_i is the highest level of prior attainment of candidate i . It is an additional variable that is controlled for in the logistic regression analysis
- c_j is a random effect determined by centre-level characteristics. It is also an additional variable that is controlled for in the logistic regression analysis
- α, β, γ are the regression coefficients

Within the above logistic regression specification, it is the estimate of the parameter β giving the relationship between each demographic/socio-economic characteristic and the dependant variable that is of most interest. A further breakdown of characteristics and multi-way interactions between the demographic and socio-economic variables listed above were not included in the analysis. This is because significantly smaller size groups would have led to unreliable findings.

3.1 Top grades over time for Level 3 qualifications

We focus only on Level 3 qualifications for these analyses as the entry size for Level 4 qualifications was too small for any meaningful analysis to be carried out.

The impact of demographic and socio-economic characteristics on achieving top grades is reported in the graph and table below (and also in the appendix). For each year separately, these show a measure of effect size of each variable on achieving top grades. This is expressed in the form of 'odds ratios', representing the ratio of the odds of achieving a top grade between two categories of a demographic / socio-economic characteristic.

Odds are defined as the probability that an event will happen (e.g., a learner achieving top grades) over the probably that it won't happen. For example, if 10 learners achieve top grades out of 100 (meaning 90 learners did not achieve top grades), the odds of getting top grades would be one to nine (10 / 90). An odds ratio, therefore, might be the odds of achieving a top grade for males over the odds of achieving a top grade for females. An odds ratio greater than 1 indicates greater odds relative to the reference category. An odds ratio less than 1 implies lower odds relative to the reference category. Through these measures, we can assess the difference in relative attainment between different demographic groups.

To give an example, an odds ratio of 0.58 would imply that the odds for males are 42% lower (using the formula: $(1 - 0.58) \times 100$) than are the odds for females. Note that this is not the same as saying that males are 42% less likely to achieve top grades than females. Instead, it implies that if 20 out of 120 female learners achieved the top grade, then approximately 12 (20×0.58) out of 120 male learners would achieve the top grade.

The different reference categories are as follows: males are compared to females, minority ethnicity learners are compared to white ethnicity learners, learners with SEN or FSM eligibility are compared against learners without SEN or FSM eligibility and medium and high IDACI score learners are compared against low IDACI score learners.³

In both the table and the graph, confidence intervals are also reported (inside brackets in the table and as horizontal lines around points in the graph), which show the degree of possible error around these estimates, giving a range of plausible values rather than a definitive value.

By comparing values between years one can observe how these differences have changed over time. If the values in 2020 appear to be substantially different from the values in 2018 and/or 2019, then this might indicate that the attainment differences between different demographic groups have changed this year compared to the previous 2 years. As mentioned above, attainment differences between demographic groups may be expected in any given year, but the purpose of these analyses is to assess whether or not those attainment differences appear to have been suddenly exacerbated this year as a result of coronavirus (COVID-19) mitigations.

Both the graph and the table below suggest that the attainment gap between males and females has become slightly larger this year relative to previous years. However, this change between years is relatively small in real terms. By comparing the coefficients, we can see that if 20 out of 120 females achieved top grades in both 2019 and 2020, 12 (20×0.58) out of 120 males would achieve top grades in 2020, compared to 14 (20×0.68) out of 120 males in 2019 – a difference of 2 learners out of 120 in such a scenario. It is difficult to know what the cause of these changes might be and there may be multiple possible explanations, including a change in the ability of cohorts of male and female learners between years, which may not be captured by the highest level of prior attainment variable⁴.

The analysis also suggests that Asian learners had lower odds this year of achieving top grades relative to white learners, compared to previous years, but this may possibly reflect an ongoing trend, meaning this may not necessarily be specific to the 2020 coronavirus (COVID-19) related mitigations around assessment. The changes may also again be relatively small in real terms. As above, if 20 out of 120 white learners achieved top grades in 2019 and 2020, figures suggest that 10 (20×0.51) out of 120 Asian learners would achieve top grades in 2020, compared to 13 (20×0.63) out of 120 Asian learners in 2019 – a difference of 3 learners out of 120 in such a scenario. Again, it is not possible to tell for certainty what the cause of these

³ Higher IDACI scores mean learners were living in areas with greater levels of deprivation. Lower scores indicate lower deprivation.

⁴ This variable only shows the highest qualification level achieved, which may not be an accurate measure of ability. In particular, we do not have information on the actual grades achieved in any prior learning.

changes might be, including whether this might reflect a genuine change in ability over time.

The odds for black, mixed and 'other' (AOEG) ethnicity learners seem broadly consistent over time, as indicated by the overlapping confidence intervals showing the range of plausible values. Aside from the 'unknown' special educational needs category, there does not appear to have been much change in the attainment gap over time with regards to special educational needs status or free school meal eligibility, or in relation to deprivation scores. Again, this lack of change is indicated by the overlapping confidence intervals.

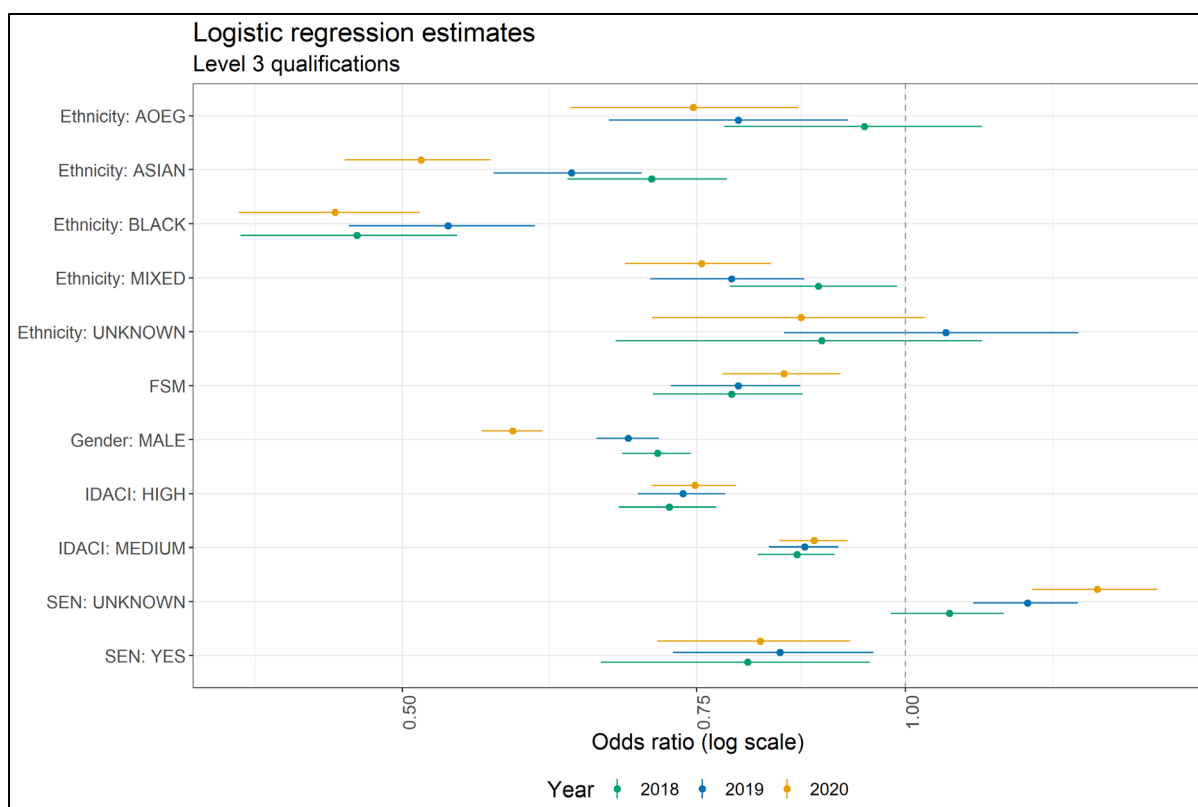


Figure 8. Equalities analysis for Level 3 qualifications

Note: The vertical dashed line shows the point at which one can say that there is no difference in the odds of achieving top grades between the category being observed and the reference category.

Table 1. Odds ratios for the impact of demographic and socio-economic characteristics on achieving the top grade - Level 3 qualifications

Factor	2018		2019		2020	
	Estimate	CI	Estimate	CI	Estimate	CI
Gender: Male	0.71	(0.68, 0.74)	0.68	(0.65, 0.71)	0.58	(0.56, 0.61)
Ethnicity: ASIAN	0.7	(0.63, 0.78)	0.63	(0.57, 0.7)	0.51	(0.46, 0.56)
Ethnicity: BLACK	0.47	(0.4, 0.54)	0.53	(0.46, 0.6)	0.46	(0.4, 0.51)
Ethnicity: MIXED	0.89	(0.79, 0.99)	0.79	(0.7, 0.87)	0.76	(0.68, 0.83)
Ethnicity: AOEG	0.95	(0.78, 1.11)	0.79	(0.66, 0.92)	0.75	(0.63, 0.86)
Ethnicity: Unknown	0.89	(0.67, 1.11)	1.06	(0.85, 1.27)	0.87	(0.71, 1.03)
SEN: YES	0.8	(0.66, 0.95)	0.84	(0.73, 0.96)	0.82	(0.71, 0.93)
SEN: Unknown	1.06	(0.98, 1.15)	1.18	(1.1, 1.27)	1.3	(1.19, 1.41)
FSM: YES	0.79	(0.71, 0.87)	0.79	(0.72, 0.87)	0.85	(0.78, 0.91)
IDACI: MEDIUM	0.86	(0.82, 0.91)	0.87	(0.83, 0.91)	0.88	(0.84, 0.92)
IDACI: HIGH	0.72	(0.67, 0.77)	0.74	(0.69, 0.78)	0.75	(0.7, 0.79)

3.1.1 Top grades over time by group

As in the previous sections, it would be useful to see if any effects appear to differ across different groups of qualifications.

Due to small numbers, minority ethnicities have been grouped under one heading within this sub-section: 'black and minority ethnicity' (BAME); and are still compared to white ethnicity learners.

When qualification groupings are taken into account, the conclusions change slightly from the above. For example, while the attainment gap between males and females has been increasing over time for Other General and other Performance Table qualifications, it has remained the same over time for Applied General qualifications.

All other differences relating to ethnicity and socio-economic factors do not appear to have changed significantly over time, as suggested by the overlapping confidence intervals giving the range of plausible values.

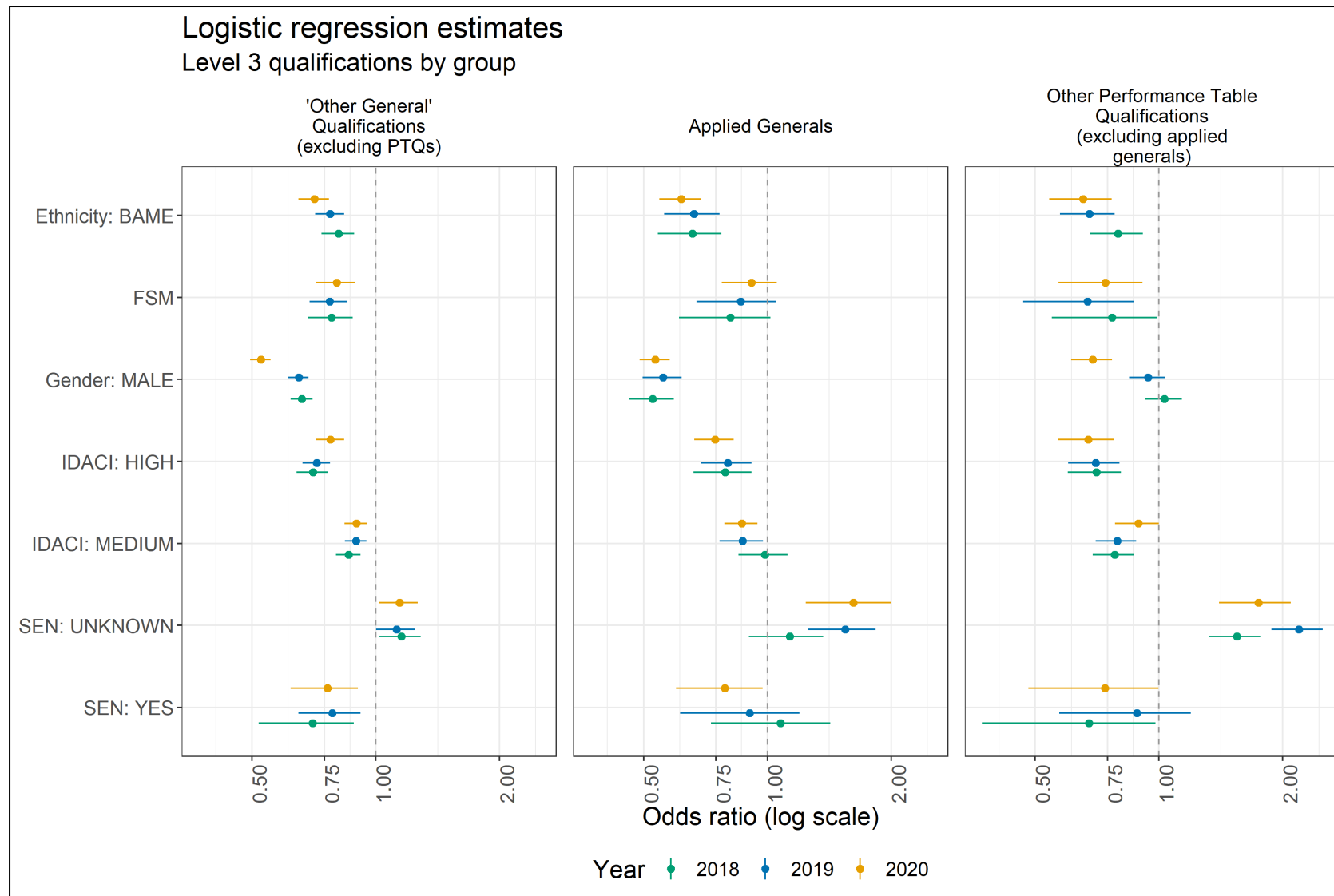


Figure 9. Equalities analysis for Level 3 qualifications by group

Table 2. Odds ratios for the impact of demographic and socio-economic characteristics on achieving the top grade - Level 3 qualifications by group

Qualification group	Factor	2018		2019		2020	
		Estimate	CI	Estimate	CI	Estimate	CI
'Other General' Qualifications (excluding PTQs)	Gender: Male	0.66	(0.62, 0.7)	0.65	(0.61, 0.69)	0.53	(0.5, 0.56)
	Ethnicity: BAME	0.81	(0.74, 0.89)	0.77	(0.71, 0.84)	0.71	(0.65, 0.77)
	SEN: YES	0.7	(0.52, 0.88)	0.78	(0.65, 0.92)	0.76	(0.62, 0.9)
	SEN: Unknown	1.15	(1.02, 1.29)	1.12	(1, 1.24)	1.14	(1.02, 1.27)
	FSM: YES	0.78	(0.68, 0.88)	0.77	(0.69, 0.85)	0.8	(0.72, 0.89)
	IDACI: MEDIUM	0.86	(0.8, 0.92)	0.9	(0.84, 0.95)	0.9	(0.84, 0.95)
	IDACI: HIGH	0.7	(0.64, 0.76)	0.72	(0.66, 0.77)	0.78	(0.72, 0.84)
Applied Generals	Gender: Male	0.53	(0.46, 0.59)	0.56	(0.5, 0.62)	0.53	(0.49, 0.58)
	Ethnicity: BAME	0.66	(0.54, 0.77)	0.66	(0.56, 0.77)	0.62	(0.55, 0.69)
	SEN: YES	1.08	(0.73, 1.42)	0.9	(0.61, 1.2)	0.79	(0.6, 0.98)
	SEN: Unknown	1.13	(0.9, 1.37)	1.55	(1.26, 1.83)	1.62	(1.24, 2)
	FSM: YES	0.81	(0.61, 1.02)	0.86	(0.67, 1.05)	0.91	(0.78, 1.05)
	IDACI: MEDIUM	0.99	(0.85, 1.12)	0.87	(0.76, 0.98)	0.87	(0.79, 0.95)
	IDACI: HIGH	0.79	(0.66, 0.92)	0.8	(0.69, 0.91)	0.75	(0.66, 0.83)
Other Performance Table Qualifications (excluding applied generals)	Gender: Male	1.03	(0.93, 1.14)	0.94	(0.85, 1.03)	0.69	(0.61, 0.77)
	Ethnicity: BAME	0.8	(0.68, 0.91)	0.68	(0.57, 0.78)	0.65	(0.54, 0.77)
	SEN: YES	0.68	(0.37, 0.98)	0.88	(0.57, 1.19)	0.74	(0.48, 1)
	SEN: Unknown	1.55	(1.33, 1.77)	2.19	(1.88, 2.5)	1.75	(1.4, 2.09)
	FSM: YES	0.77	(0.55, 0.99)	0.67	(0.47, 0.87)	0.74	(0.57, 0.91)
	IDACI: MEDIUM	0.78	(0.69, 0.87)	0.79	(0.7, 0.88)	0.89	(0.78, 1)
	IDACI: HIGH	0.7	(0.6, 0.81)	0.7	(0.6, 0.8)	0.67	(0.57, 0.78)

4 Summary

To conclude, while there are aspects of the Level 3 and Level 4 qualification level outcomes that may warrant further exploration, the awarding of these VTQs does not seem to have been majorly impacted in 2020 by the situation imposed by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Evidence in general does not point towards a sudden slip of standards or a sudden introduction of bias this year. However, there may have been some change in entry behaviour, and differences in attainment do seem to have increased between certain demographic characteristics in the context of certain qualifications.

Returning to our original research questions –

Firstly, there does seem to have been some changes in the total number of grades awarded this summer for these qualifications. For example, there has been an increase in entry for Level 3 Applied General qualifications. There has been a decrease in entry size, however, for other Level 3 Performance Table qualifications (excluding Applied Generals) and Level 4 Other General qualifications. Level 3 Other General qualifications, on the other hand, seem to have remained broadly the same in entry size this year compared to 2019. It is impossible to deduce the exact reasons behind these changes using this data, but this could be due to a change in the way learners who would have failed have not been entered or else have not been returned in the data. Additionally, the mitigations around coronavirus and the closure of centres could have impacted upon entry patterns. Alternatively, for example, some trends could reflect a change in funding arrangements, rather than being due to the 2020 pandemic.

Second, it does not appear that there has been a notable change in the profile of grade outcomes this year compared to previous years as grade distributions have remained relatively stable over time. The exceptions to this are a small number of cases where some outcomes have changed this year, although these appear to reflect an ongoing trend in outcomes over time for these qualifications, rather than being specific to 2020. Even ignoring that fact, the results suggest that some cohorts have faced a slight increase in outcomes, not suggesting that they have been disadvantaged by the 2020 situation.

Third, in most cases, it does not appear that mitigation measures adopted for awarding this summer have specifically disadvantaged certain groups of learners. In most comparisons, attainment gaps between different demographic groups have remained roughly the same over the past 3 years. However, there are some specific cases where attainment gaps have changed and may warrant further exploration. For example, some differences may be suggested between males and females taking Other General qualifications and Performance Table qualifications (excluding Applied General qualifications), and between Asian and white learners taking Level 3 qualifications. As mentioned above, it is not possible to say with certainty what the cause of these differences may be without further exploration, as there are a number of possible alternatives (including a genuine change in ability of cohorts between years).

A small degree of change is to be expected in any given year and many of these changes are in line with those expectations. These findings should therefore offer assurances to stakeholders that despite the very challenging circumstances imposed

on almost all aspects of the education and assessment system, standards for these qualifications have been maintained in line with normal expectations. We shall continue to monitor and engage with the system as we move through the remainder of the coronavirus (COVID-19) response measures, ensuring outcomes are as fair and valid as possible.

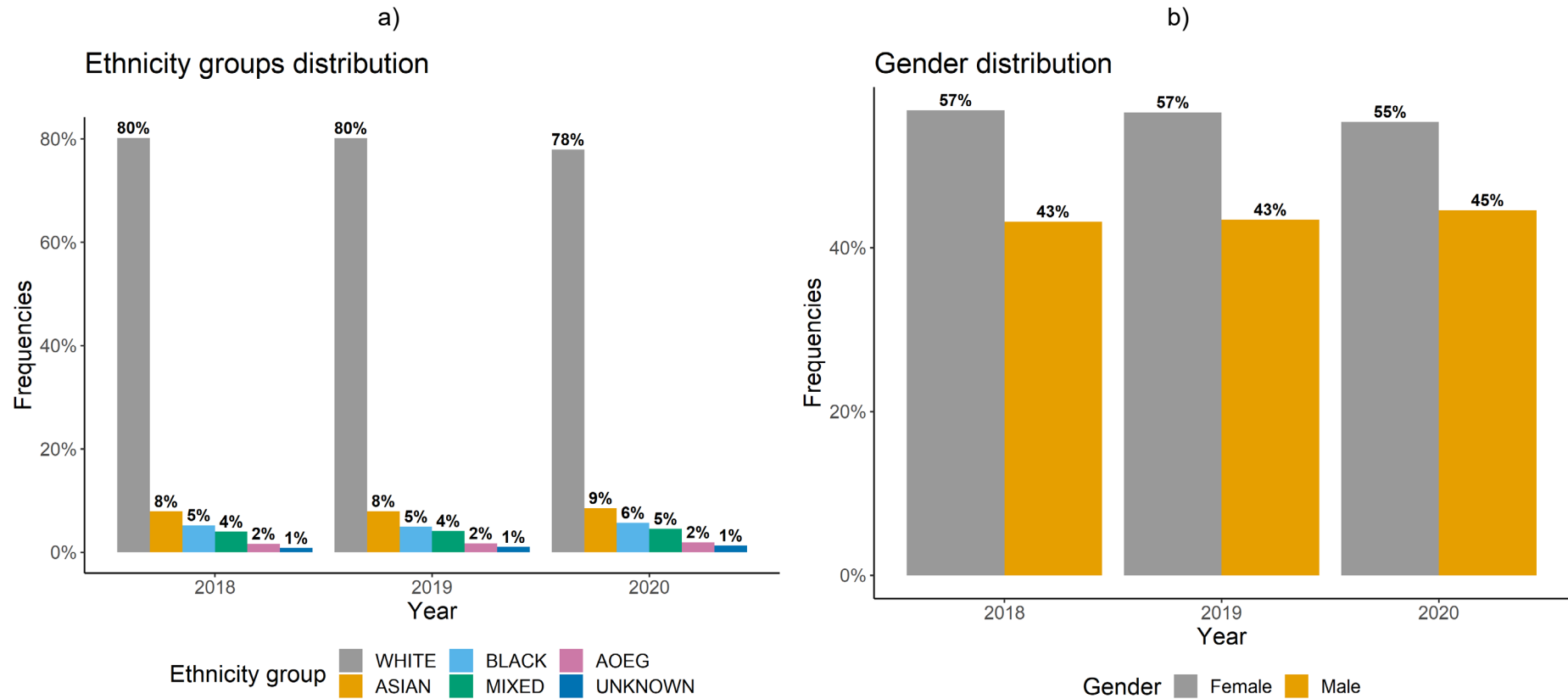
Technical appendices for the equalities analysis

Table 1. Counts of learners included in the equalities analysis per qualification group

Qualification group	2018	2019	2020
'Other General' Qualifications (excluding PTQs)	25,845	31,085	27,915
Applied Generals	31,120	32,430	54,335
Other Performance Table Qualifications (excluding applied generals)	19,575	20,870	19,510
Total	76,545	84,385	101,760

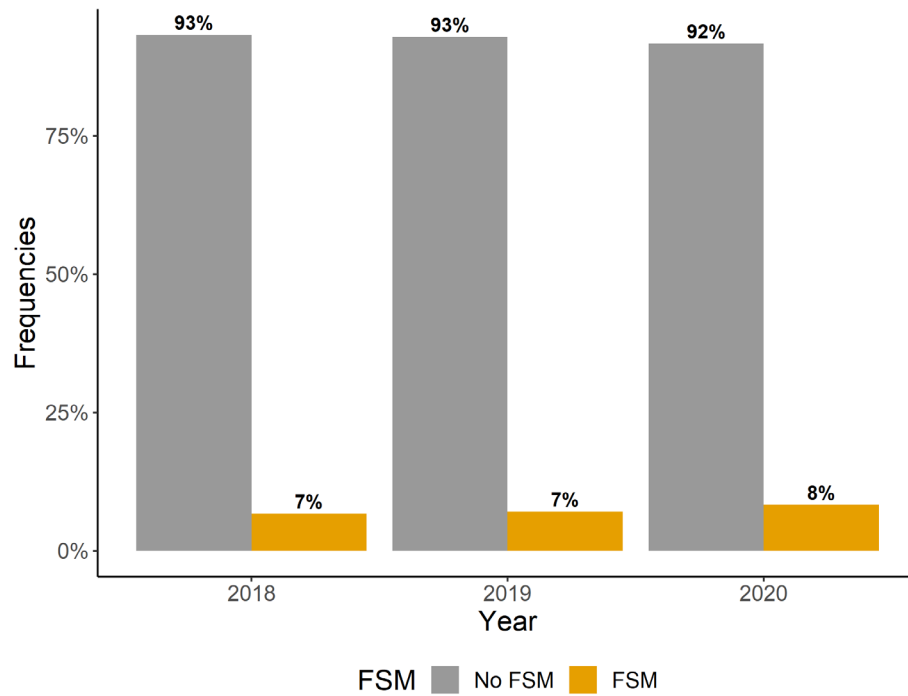
Note. Values are rounded to the nearest 5

Figure 1. Frequency distributions of key variables



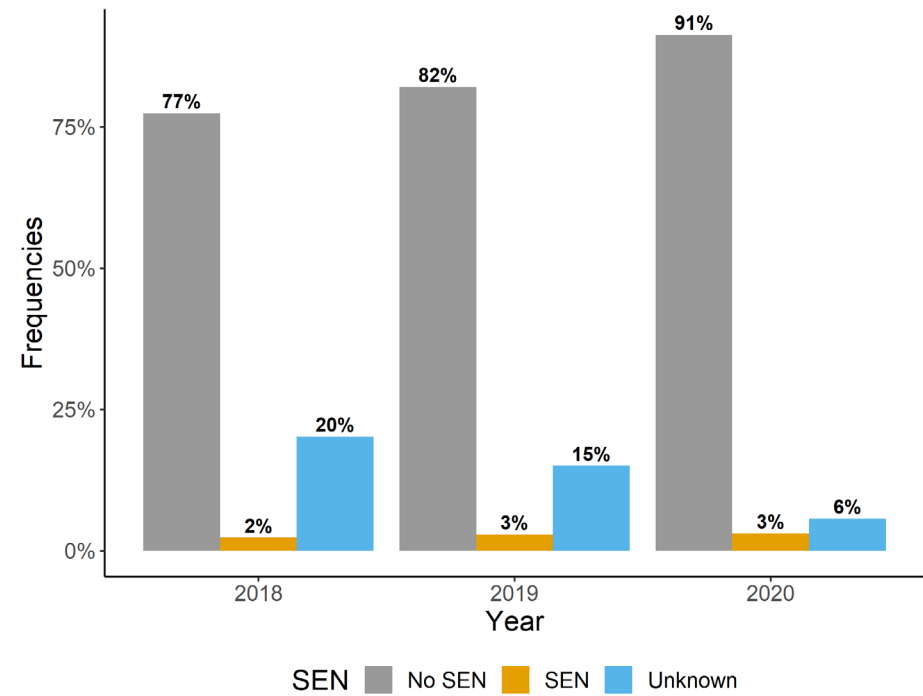
c)

FSM groups distribution



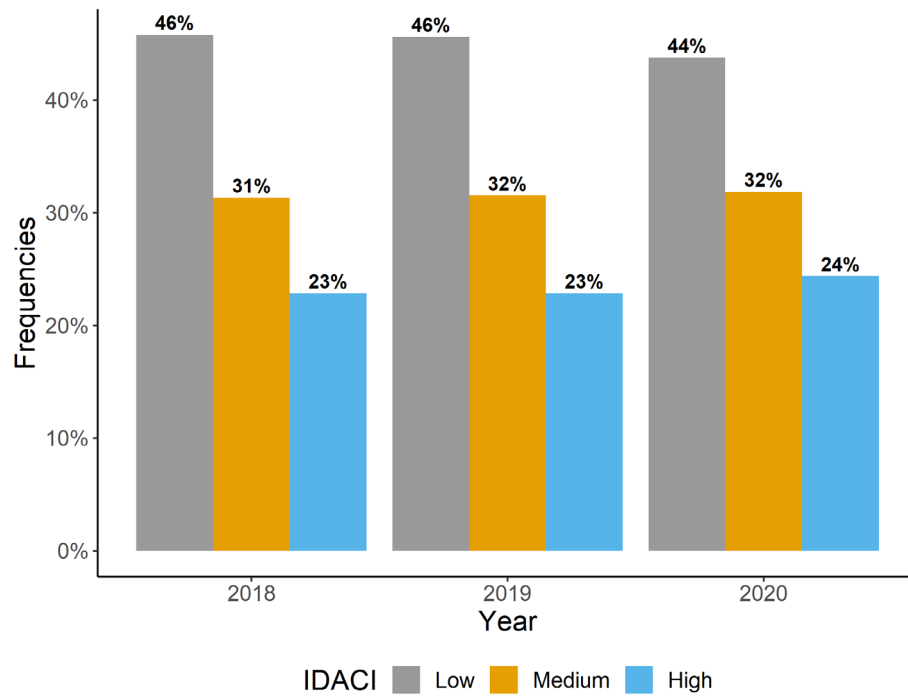
d)

SEN groups distribution



e)

IDACI groups distribution



f)

Top grade distribution

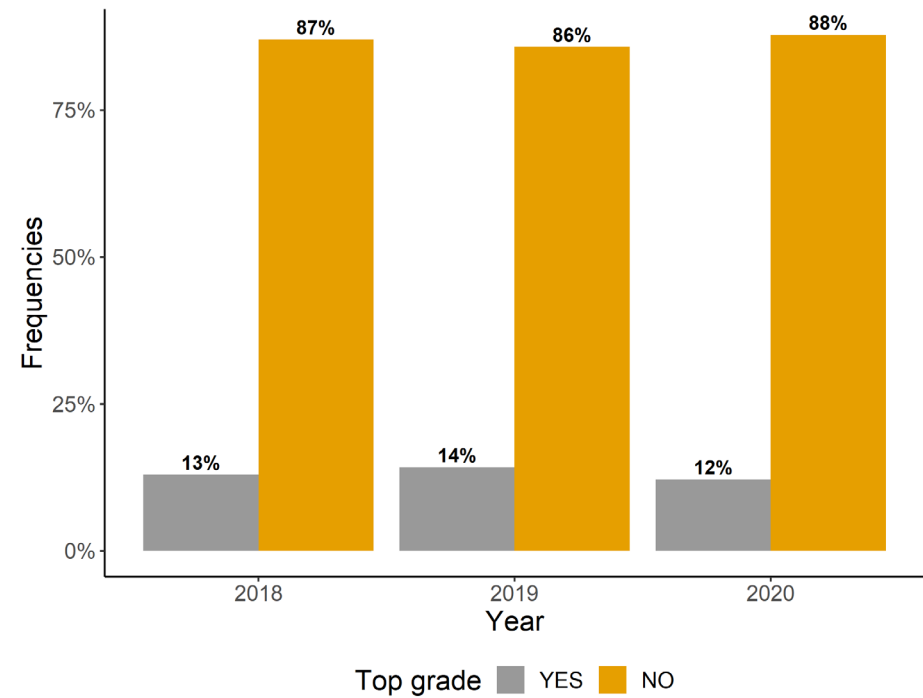
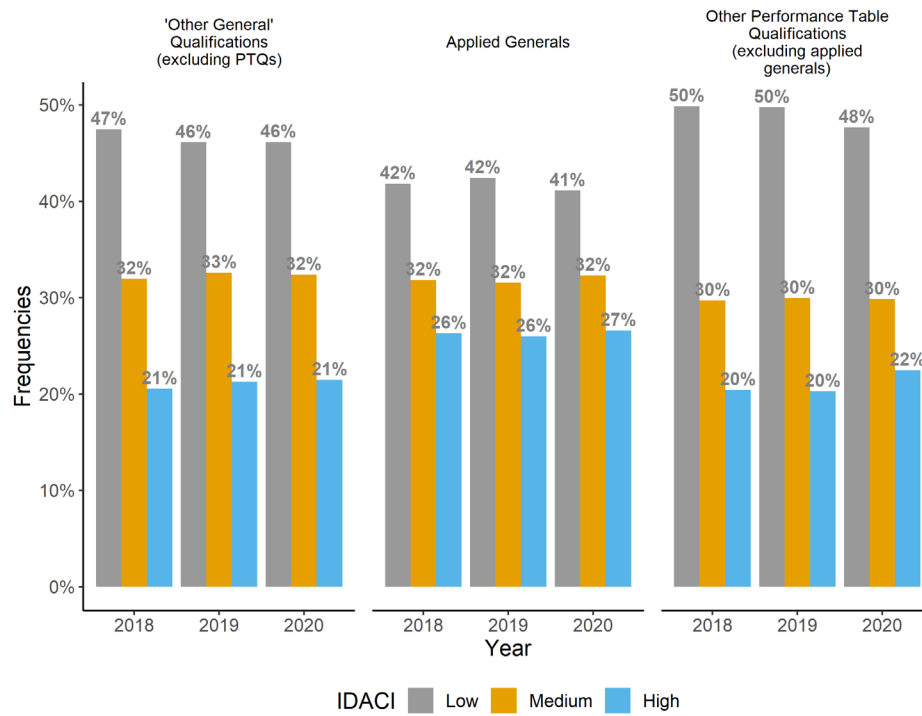


Figure 2. Frequency distributions of key variables by qualification group



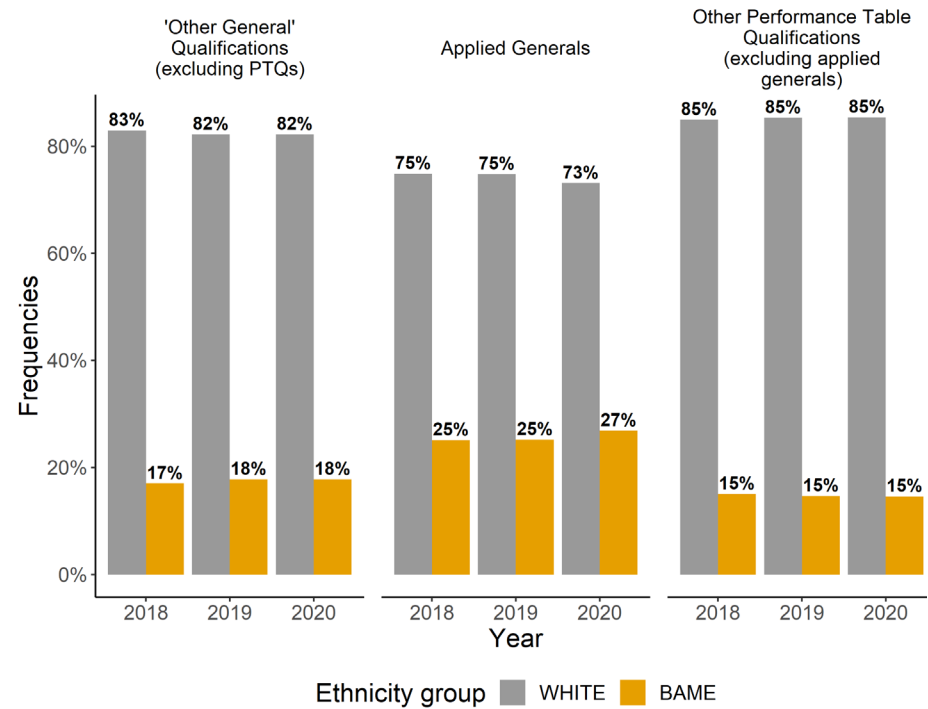
c)

Qualification level: Level 3
IDACI groups distribution



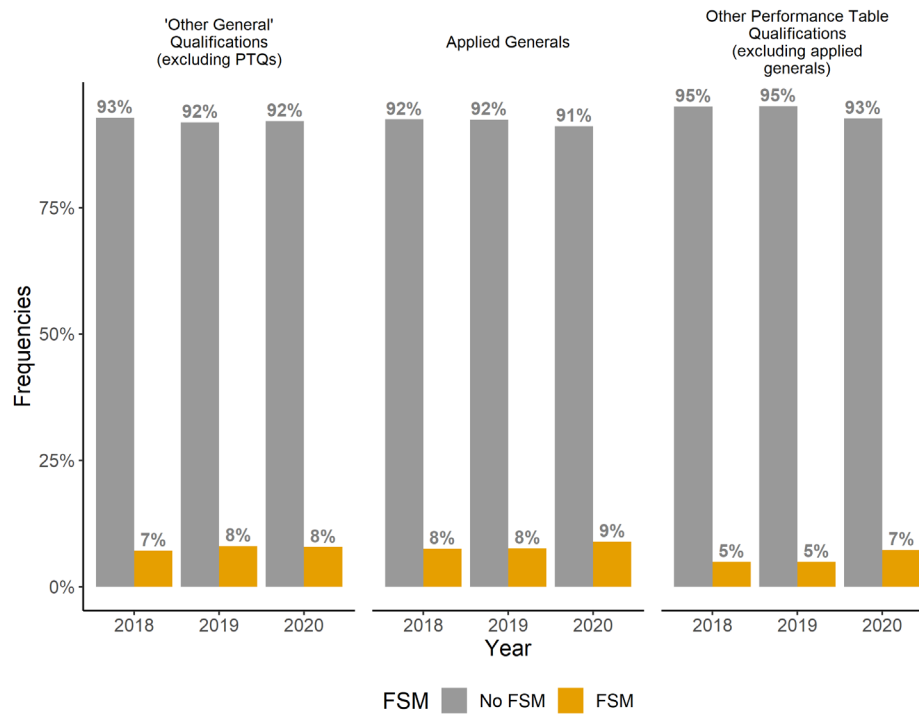
d)

Qualification level: Level 3
Ethnicity groups distribution



e)

Qualification level: Level 3
FSM groups distribution



f)

Qualification level: Level 3
SEN groups distribution

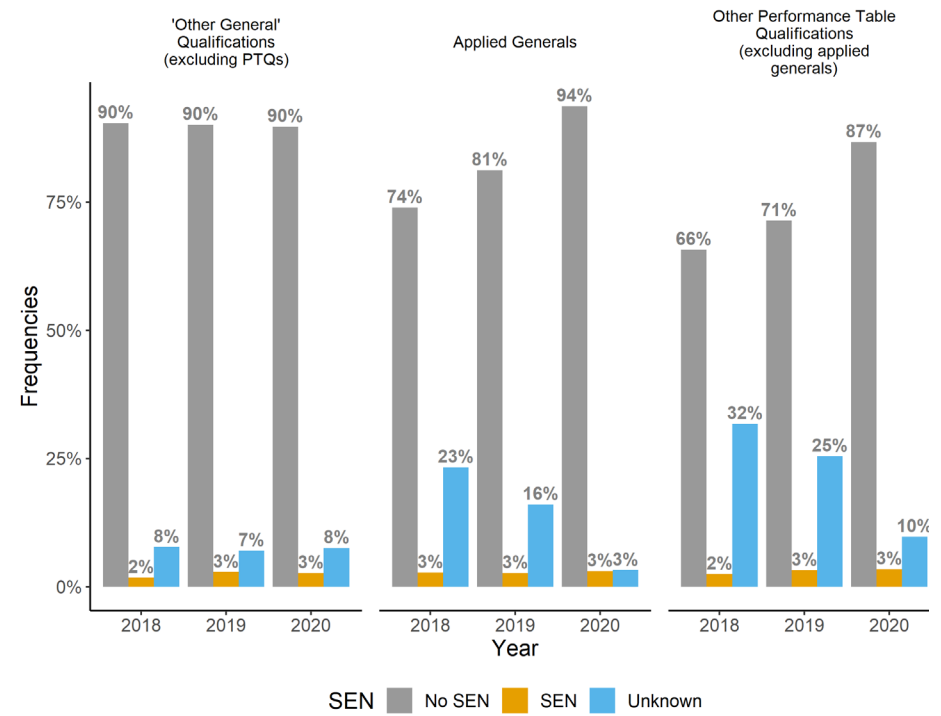
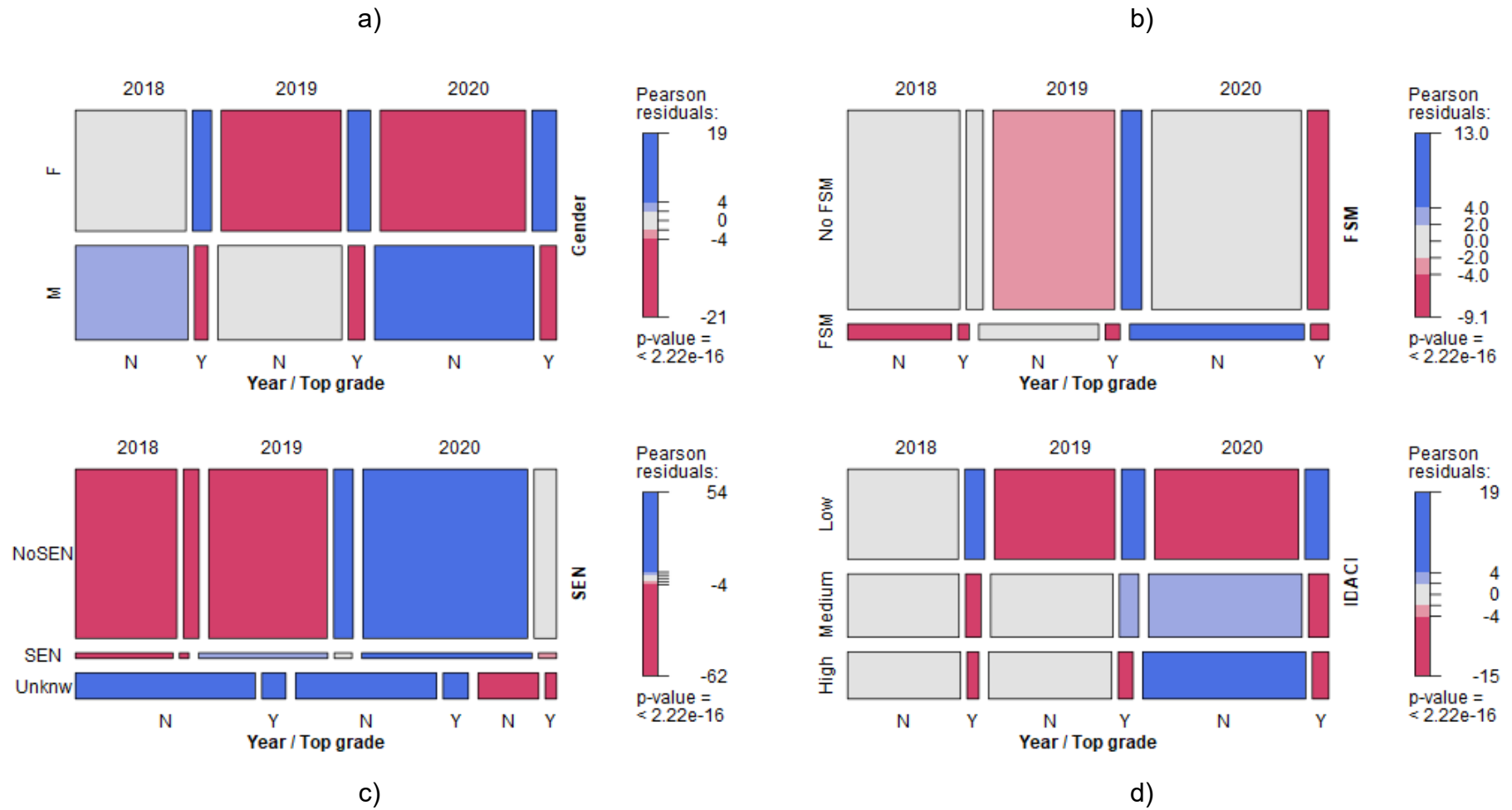
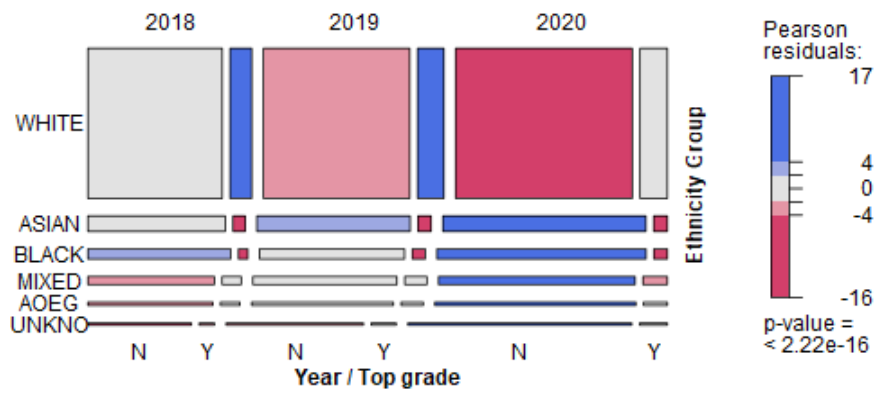
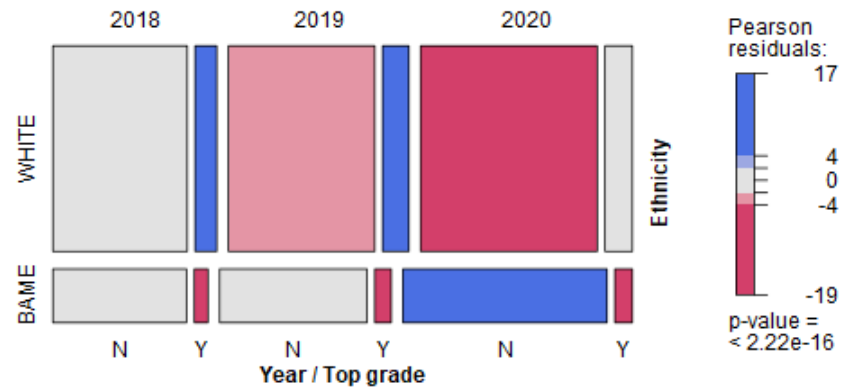


Figure 3. Associations between demographic/socio-economic factors and top grade

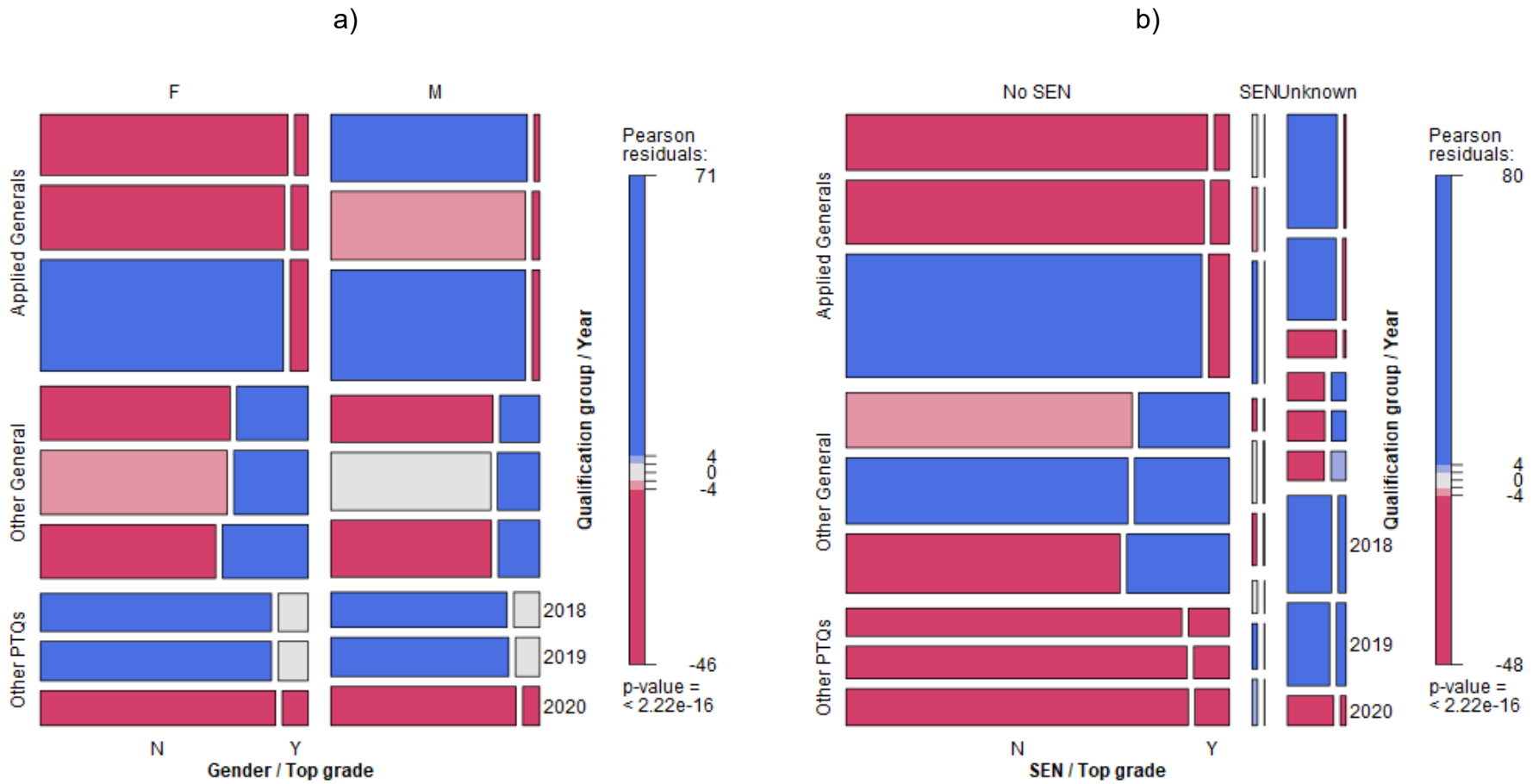


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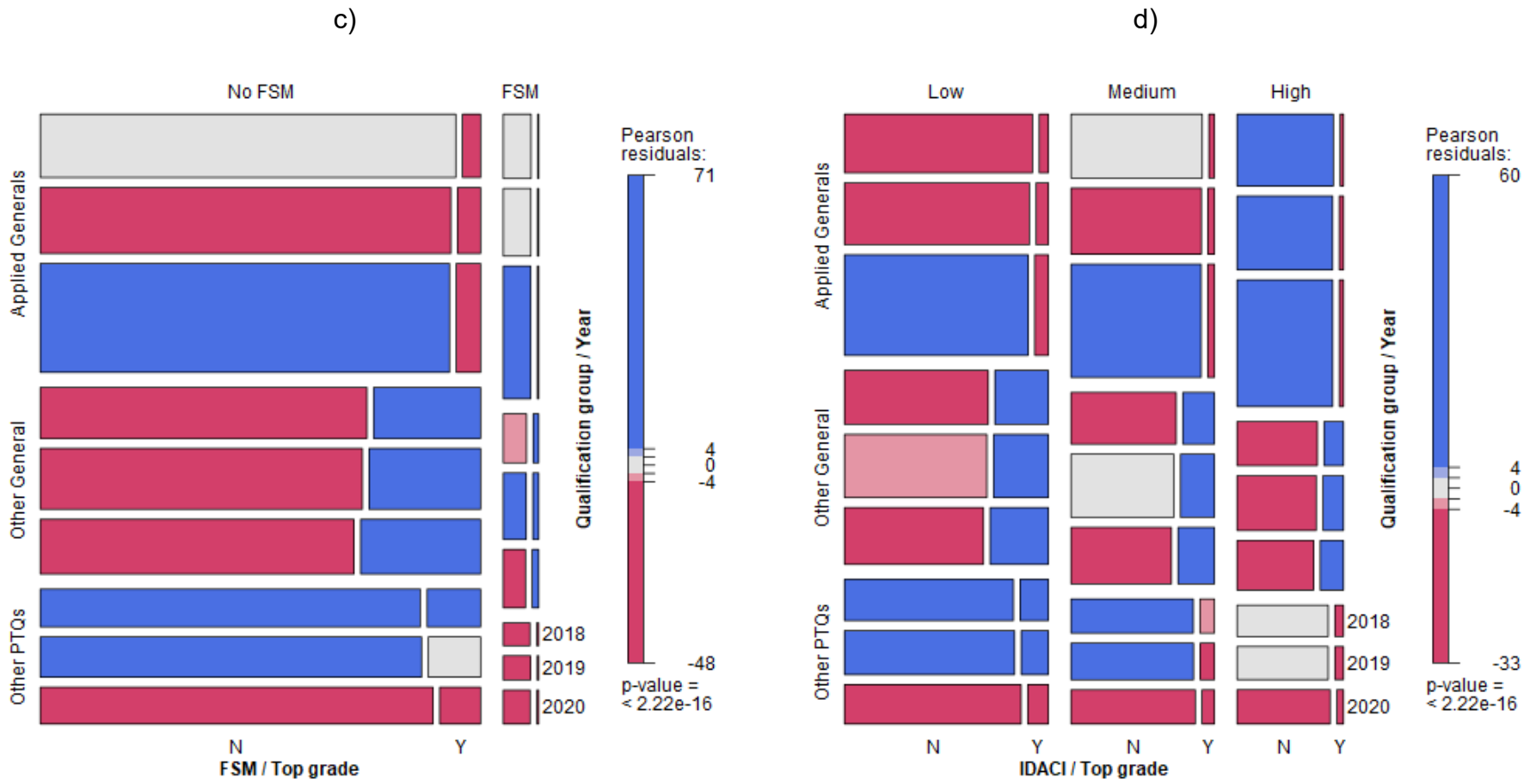


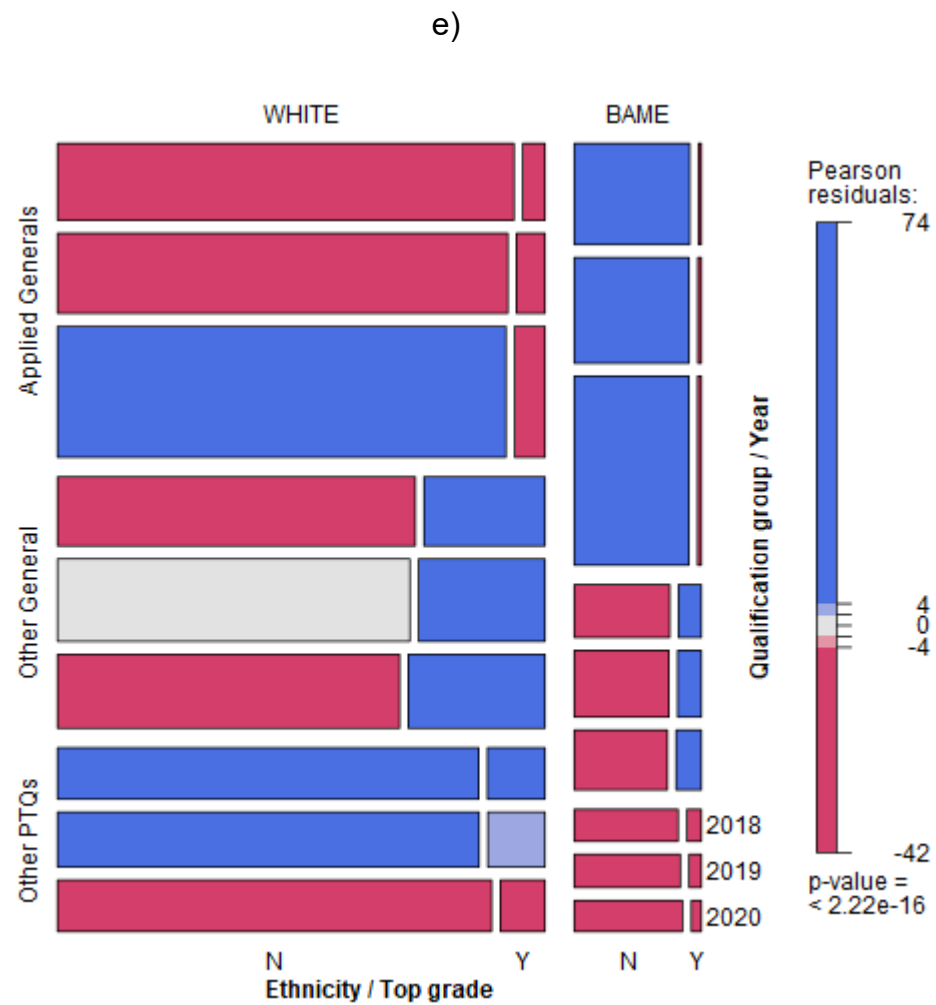
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Figure 4. Associations between demographic/socio-economic factors and top grade by qualification group



An analysis of grades awarded for a number of Level 3 and Level 4 VTQs in spring and summer 2020







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