

## Business and social studies subjects at A level

A good practice guide for business, economics, government and politics, law, psychology, and sociology AS and A level in school sixth forms and further education colleges

August 2020



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<b>Contents</b>	<b>Page</b>
<b>Foreword</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Background</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Main findings</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Standards</b>	<b>7</b>
Learners' standards and progress	7
Wellbeing and attitudes to learning	10
A level performance in business and social studies	11
Outcomes for groups of learners	13
Retention and progression	14
<b>Provision</b>	<b>15</b>
Curriculum	15
Teaching and assessment	17
Advice and guidance	19
Entry policies	21
<b>Leadership</b>	<b>23</b>
Leadership	23
Self-evaluation and improvement planning	24
Partnerships	25
Professional learning	26
Recruitment and staffing	27
Resources and funding	27
<b>Appendix 1: Evidence base</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Appendix 2: AS and A level results</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Appendix 3: Effective pedagogy in social sciences - graphic</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Glossary</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>40</b>

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## Foreword

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I am publishing this report now because I feel it is timely and can contribute to our thinking about how we can work towards a post-pandemic education system that builds on a strong focus on pedagogy and collaborative working. Features of effective practice in this report that are particularly relevant are:

- The extent to which learners enjoy A level study and show a keen interest in current affairs, especially now given the relevance of the current crisis to many topics within business, economics, government and politics, law, psychology and sociology
- The importance placed on learners managing their time efficiently and the need to emphasise the benefits of wider reading and independent research
- The need to give learners insight into the nature of individual subjects before finalising their subject choices
- The positive impact teachers have on learners and their learning when conveying a passion for their subject and using well-thought-out teaching strategies to engage all learners
- The value of working collaboratively with other schools and colleges to extend the range of subject choices and enhance professional development opportunities for subject teachers

Although the fieldwork for the report was carried out prior to the emergence of the pandemic, I hope that the key messages and case studies in the report will support schools and colleges to improve their AS and A level provision in business and social studies subjects and more generally.

**Meilyr Rowlands HMCI**

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## Introduction

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This report is in response to a request for advice in the Minister for Education's annual remit letter to Estyn for 2018-2019. It reports on standards, provision and leadership of business and social studies General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced Levels (A levels) in school sixth forms and further education colleges. The report provides an overview of the challenges and good practice for standards, provision and leadership in supporting learners studying particular subject areas at A level in school sixth forms and further education colleges.

The intended audience for this report is the Welsh Government, school headteachers, college chief executives and principals, teachers in secondary schools and colleges, and local authority and regional consortia officers. The report draws on evidence from secondary school and college inspections and from visits to 20 secondary schools and further education colleges. During the visits, inspectors observed lessons, scrutinised curriculum plans, held discussions with senior and middle leaders, and interviewed learners and discussed their work.

For the purpose of this report, the term business and social studies refers to Advanced Subsidiary (AS) and A level subjects in business, economics, government and politics, law, psychology and sociology.

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## Background

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### A level reform

A levels are subject-based level 3 qualifications studied at post-16 in Wales, England and Northern Ireland, as well as other parts of the world. Learners usually study between three and five A levels over two years and are able to study for A levels in school sixth forms or in further education colleges. Around 70% of publicly funded A level delivery in Wales is undertaken by school sixth forms and the remaining 30% by colleges (Estyn, 2018).

In August 2014, the Welsh Government published a paper setting out changes to A levels in Wales: '*GCE AS and A level qualification principles*' (2014). The paper sets out the overarching principles for all GCE AS and A levels developed for teaching in Wales from September 2015 onwards. The paper identifies key differences between A levels in Wales and those in England, principally retaining AS levels, which would now count for 40% (previously 50%) of the overall qualification, and allowing opportunities for resits.

Prior to September 2015, schools and colleges could choose A level specifications from a range of awarding bodies, as the same specifications were studied in Wales and England. However, the differences set out in the AS and A level qualification

principles and outlined above meant that awarding bodies would have to develop specifications for A levels in Wales that were different to those in England. All awarding bodies across Wales and England were invited to present specifications. Most of the awarding bodies declined to develop Wales only specifications, with the WJEC becoming the only awarding body in Wales for Wales-specific A and AS level qualifications. The content of A and AS level courses was also reformed. WJEC offers AS and A level qualifications in six business and social studies subjects. These include business, economics, government and politics, law, psychology and sociology.

In Wales, the first year of an A level counts for 40% of the overall qualification and results in an AS grade and learners complete another year to gain the full A level qualification. A levels in Wales, as in England, are graded on a letter grade scale from highest to lowest, A\*-E, while AS levels are graded A-E. Learners achieving less than a grade E receive a U (unclassified) grade.

### **A level examination data**

This report considers outcomes in business, economics, government and politics, law, psychology, and sociology at AS and A level over a period of five years. In the report, the term business and social studies will be used to refer to this group of six subjects. Due to the changes introduced in recent years, year-on-year comparisons of outcomes in Wales, as well as comparisons with those in England, are difficult and 'should be made with caution' (Joint Council for Qualifications, 2018, p.2).

Comparative analysis of A level performance between schools and colleges is complicated by the fact that outcomes have been reported differently in data published by the Welsh Government, until recently. Details regarding the differences in data collection and analysis between schools and colleges, and the Welsh Government's work on developing a common approach through post-16 consistent performance measures, are included in appendix 1.

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## Main findings

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### Standards

- 1 Many learners begin to study business and social studies subjects for the first time when they enter sixth form or college. Many make strong progress in their studies and a few make exceptional progress, compared with their starting points. A minority of learners do not progress from AS to complete A level studies or do not achieve as well as they could. A far greater proportion of girls than boys choose to study law, psychology or sociology while a much greater proportion of boys than girls choose to study business studies or economics. Girls outperform boys in business and social studies subjects across most high grade indicators at A and AS level (grades A\*-C and A-C respectively).
- 2 Most learners enjoy A level study and many show a keen interest in current affairs, especially in subjects such as economics and government and politics. A minority have aspirations to study business or social studies subjects at higher education level. Most learners show positive attitudes to learning and a strong sense of pride in their work. Many manage their time efficiently and organise their work files effectively. A minority of learners are over-reliant on support and materials provided by their teachers and do not undertake enough independent research. Most learners have a clear understanding of their own strengths and what they need to do to improve. In a few cases, learners do not build on teacher feedback to improve their work.
- 3 Many learners make strong progress in developing their writing skills, especially through essay and research work, although a few produce work that is insufficiently evaluative. Many learners demonstrate strong numeracy skills in business, economics and psychology, but a few are not confident in handling and analysing data. Many learners do not develop and use their information and communication technology skills well enough to enhance their work, such as by using statistical packages to analyse and present data in research projects. Many learners develop strong problem-solving skills and apply these confidently in new contexts.
- 4 Many learners develop specific skills in business and social studies courses. These include applying theoretical models and concepts to the real-world, and interpreting and evaluating information from complex sources, including the media and academic journals. They develop the ability to present an argument and discuss the merits of different perspectives. Learners recognise that, in business and social studies, there is often no single correct answer, and that they need to choose from a range of valid interpretations and justify their choice by putting forward a reasoned line of argument.

### Provision

- 5 A few schools and colleges offer the full range of business and social studies subjects, while many offer some but not all of these subjects. In general, the breadth of curriculum offer tends to relate directly to the number of learners. A few providers offer one or more subjects in partnership with other centres. Nearly all centres

ensure that subjects continue from AS to A level, although class sizes can vary widely.

- 6 Most schools and colleges enable learners to gain only a limited insight into the nature of social science subjects before they make their A level choices. A few learners also do not receive enough guidance on choosing subject combinations that are appropriate to their career and progression aspirations.
- 7 Most teachers establish good working relationships with learners and set clear expectations of them. Most teachers have strong subject knowledge and up-to-date understanding of external assessment requirements. They plan their teaching well to ensure that learners are prepared effectively for external examinations.
- 8 The most effective teachers convey a genuine passion for their subject and inspire their learners using well-thought-out teaching strategies. Many discuss topical issues to encourage learners to apply theories and concepts to real-world situations. They also emphasise the value and importance of wider reading in their subjects.

### Leadership

- 9 The arrangements for the leadership of business and social studies A levels vary greatly between individual schools and colleges. Management structures based around academic subject disciplines are most common in schools, while many colleges are organised around broad vocational areas. A few colleges with large numbers of A level learners have established dedicated sixth-form centres, usually with leadership arrangements more akin to those in secondary schools.
- 10 Many schools and colleges undertake course or subject cluster reviews. However, in a minority of providers, these processes are not robust enough at identifying key strengths and areas for improvement in specific subjects.
- 11 Many schools and colleges tend to focus primarily on A level pass rates or successful completion data and give insufficient consideration to grade attainment or distance travelled. A minority also do not take enough account of AS level performance when evaluating subject performance. Many centres stipulate minimum entry grades in GCSE English or mathematics for learners to study some subjects, such as economics or psychology. This practice can skew the attainment data and so it is important to consider value-added data when comparing results across providers.
- 12 A few schools and colleges work in partnership with other providers to extend the range of subject choices. But in many of these partnerships, arrangements for quality assurance are not robust enough to identify accurately areas for improvement.
- 13 Most teachers identify support available through the WJEC examination board, as the main source of professional learning for these teaching subjects, either through subject networks or linked to roles as A level examiners. Regional consortia provide little subject-based support relating to these subjects. The majority of teachers in business and social studies subjects are the only A level teacher of the subject in their school or college. As well as restricting opportunities for collaborative working



this can lead to difficulties in covering classes when a member of staff is absent, especially if this is for an extended period of time.

- 14 The recent reform of A and AS levels has led to a change in awarding organisation for business and social studies subjects. Delays in the availability of materials and resources for some subjects have added to the challenges faced by learners and teachers. The availability of Welsh-medium learning resources including textbooks remains a particular challenge.

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## Recommendations

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### **Schools and colleges should:**

- R1 Strengthen the opportunities for learners to find out more about new subject options such as A level business and social studies subjects before they finalise their subject choices
- R2 Work collaboratively with other schools and colleges to share learning resources, particularly Welsh-medium resources, and to increase professional learning opportunities for teachers of A level business and social studies subjects
- R3 Strengthen monitoring and evaluation processes for A level business and social studies subjects to ensure that teachers and leaders are able to identify strengths and areas for improvement in relation to teaching, learning and assessment

### **Local authorities and regional consortia should:**

- R4 Facilitate increased professional learning opportunities for teachers of A level business and social studies subjects
- R5 Support schools to evaluate the effectiveness of their A level provision and develop targeted improvement plans

### **The Welsh Government should:**

- R6 Address the limited availability of A level Welsh-medium learning resources, including textbooks, in these subjects

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## Standards

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### Learners' standards and progress

- 15 Many learners have not studied their chosen business or social studies subjects prior to starting their sixth form studies as few learners have the opportunity to study these subjects at key stage 4. As a result, they are often unsure of the nature and demands of these subjects.
- 16 Many A level business and social studies learners make strong progress in their knowledge and understanding, while a few make exceptional progress compared to their starting points based on GCSE grades. Most learners, especially those studying these subjects for the first time at A level, take time to adjust to the demands of learning a new subject and to the added complexities involved in advanced level work compared with their GCSE studies. Most learners develop resilience when facing difficulties in adjusting to these challenges and many make the transition to advanced level study successfully to become more mature and independent in their learning.
- 17 Most learners demonstrate secure recall of previous learning. Many apply prior knowledge and skills to new contexts and express their ideas confidently. A few learners, especially those who study an all A level programme with fewer than five GCSE passes at grade C or above, make insufficient progress in their first year of AS level studies. As a result, they either leave school or college during that year or do not progress to A level study in the second year of the sixth form or college.
- 18 Many learners display a strong command of subject-specific terminology and concepts, and use these appropriately and accurately in their work. For example, many business learners are able to express and present their ideas using appropriate business terminology and reporting formats.
- 19 A few learners demonstrate an excellent knowledge and understanding. They have a depth and breadth of subject material and apply skilfully across all areas of the subject. However, a few learners with weaker literacy skills struggle to grasp the meaning of technical terms, express complex ideas or see connections between topics well enough and this limits their progress and learning.
- 20 A minority of learners rely too heavily on support and materials provided by their teachers, such as worksheets, handouts and photocopies from textbooks, rather than researching topics themselves and solving problems independently. A few learners do not develop their note-taking skills well enough but copy large sections of text from books or rely too much on photocopied materials.
- 21 Many centres stipulate minimum grades in GCSE subjects such as English or mathematics before learners can choose some business and social studies options. This practice is most prevalent in subjects such as economics or psychology where a minority of centres stipulate that a GCSE grade of B or above is required in mathematics or, in a very few cases, in English. Where such requirements are specified, providers explain that the main reasons for these restrictions are the extent of numeracy work or extended essay writing at A level.

- 22 Most learners have sound literacy skills. They are able to select and synthesise information from an appropriate range of sources when undertaking their work. Many structure their written work well and express their ideas clearly and confidently when completing extended writing tasks. They develop these skills particularly well through undertaking individual research projects and answering examination-style questions.
- 23 A minority of learners produce particularly strong pieces of evaluative writing, especially when undertaking individual research projects and responding to examination-style questions. However, a few learners produce work that is insufficiently evaluative, relying too much on reproducing factual knowledge and the submission of largely descriptive text. A very few learners do not structure their work well enough and make too many spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors.
- 24 Many learners demonstrate strong numeracy skills in business, economics and psychology subjects. Many produce or interpret data in tabular and graphical information well. For example, learners evaluate relationships between cost and revenue in profit and loss analysis in business and economics or analyse population characteristics and use observation frequency tables in sociology and psychology. Many demonstrate sound numeracy and mental arithmetic skills, while a minority use statistical data sets well to calculate standard deviation and identify significance. However, a few learners are not confident in handling and analysing data.
- 25 Many learners tend to use only a limited range of information and communication technology (ICT) tools, such as word processing their work, constructing basic spreadsheets, graphs or tables, and preparing simple presentation slides. They rarely take the opportunity to use the full potential of these tools, and more advanced applications such as those for conducting statistical testing or simulation and modelling, despite these skills being particularly useful when progressing to higher education.
- 26 Many learners develop strong problem-solving skills, which they apply confidently in new contexts. A majority make useful and perceptive connections between different topics when solving problems or analysing topical events and materials, such as media and journal articles.
- 27 Many learners contribute enthusiastically and maturely in class discussions, debates and question and answer sessions. Most listen attentively to their teachers and peers and many provide thoughtful and insightful responses to others' viewpoints. Most express their ideas clearly and many articulate their opinions and justify their viewpoints effectively, using accurate vocabulary and subject-specific terminology and drawing on appropriate examples or supporting evidence. A minority offer extended and well-considered responses and use a wider, more sophisticated vocabulary.
- 28 A majority of learners ask useful questions and express themselves confidently when challenging information they receive or when providing alternative interpretations. For example, in an observed psychology class a few learners pose well-considered questions when considering the case for and against the use of live animals for scientific investigations. A few learners are too passive in class discussions and are

reluctant to ask questions or express their views unless asked individually to do so. As a result, these learners miss opportunities to consolidate or extend their knowledge and understanding and do not develop their ability to apply learning to new contexts.

- 29 A majority of learners, especially those in or approaching the second year of A level study, provide detailed verbal or written responses to challenging questions. They give careful consideration to the reliability and validity of available information, including issues of bias and the distinction between primary and secondary sources of evidence. A few provide detailed and exceptionally well written answers that demonstrate higher order thinking skills, such as critical evaluation, coupled with an impressive depth of analyses. When asked probing questions, a few learners provide only brief and superficial responses, which lack the necessary depth of knowledge and understanding, and do not see useful connections with other topic areas.
- 30 Many learners develop a range of specific skills they learn in business and social studies courses. These include the application of theoretical models and concepts to real world scenarios and the ability to interpret and evaluate critically information from complex texts and other sources, including the media and academic journals. They develop the ability to present an argument and discuss the merits of different perspectives. Learners recognise that, in business and social studies, there is often no single correct answer, and that they need to choose from a range of valid interpretations and justify their choice by putting forward a reasoned line of argument.
- 31 Many learners feel that studying business and social studies subjects gives them an important insight into the real world. In government and politics for example, learners develop a deeper understanding of current affairs and how events in the wider world can affect their own lives and communities. They develop a personal, political awareness. In sociology in particular, learners value that the range of perspectives from the various theories they study allows them to see the world from a different point of view.
- 32 Many learners use a well-developed range of reading strategies to meet the demands of their studies. This includes the ability to critically evaluate the suitability of different sources of written information and to extract key learning points from across a rich variety of highly detailed source materials. These materials often contain conflicting messages and viewpoints, and require learners to undertake detailed analyses of historical sources and statistical information.
- 33 Many learners show a strong understanding of the purpose of their writing and this helps them to structure and set out content effectively. Most learners who start the course with weaker writing skills improve the quality of their writing substantially as their course progresses and their understanding of the purpose and audience of their writing deepens. Many learners demonstrate strong reasoning skills in their written work and in class discussions. They evaluate and draw on a useful range of evidence, such as legal and theoretical principles, to formulate and support well-thought-out coherent lines of argument.

- 34 Most learners are clear about their current strengths and the progress they are making towards achieving their target grades. Most know what needs to be done to improve their work. Many have a strong and detailed understanding of examination assessment criteria and use this to guide their reading, plan their written work, and improve their examination techniques. Many learners are able to show examples of how they use teacher feedback to improve their work, such as by enhancing existing work ready for final assessment or building on development points when completing subsequent pieces of work. In a few cases, there is little evidence of learners responding to teacher feedback to improve the quality of their work.

### Wellbeing and attitudes to learning

- 35 Nearly all learners engage well in their learning and demonstrate positive attitudes to learning. In nearly all lessons, pupils' attendance and punctuality are strong and they settle quickly to their learning. Most show a genuine interest in their chosen subjects, are enthusiastic about their learning and are proud of their progress.
- 36 Most learners value the opportunity to specialise in a few chosen subjects at A level and value the greater sense of independence and responsibility afforded to sixth form learners. Many are eager to succeed and keen to engage in topical discussions on current affairs, especially in subjects such as economics and government and politics.
- 37 Most learners work diligently on tasks set in lessons and in their studies outside of lessons, such as when completing independent study work. They maintain concentration throughout lessons and show an exemplary focus on their work. However, a very few learners studying at AS level do not engage fully in their learning and are too easily distracted. In a few cases, this hinders the pace of lessons and the progress of other learners.
- 38 Most learners show positive attitudes to learning and a strong sense of pride in their work, which is presented carefully and organised well. Many learners work effectively independently and in groups or pairs to support each other's learning, such as when considering and evaluating different legal scenarios during an A level law lesson. A very few learners engage in off-task chatting during independent and group activity in lessons.
- 39 Many learners manage their time efficiently and organise their physical or online work files effectively. They produce useful and concise notes, which summarise key learning points to support their studies, and annotate handout materials where these are provided. Learners find that this helps them to structure their learning and is of particular benefit when undertaking revision for tests and examinations.
- 40 A minority of learners express an aspiration to progress to study business or social studies subjects in higher education but a few struggle to keep up with the demands of their workloads and lose motivation in one or more subjects. Frequently, this includes those with heavy timetable commitments where they choose, or are required, to undertake four or more AS subjects in the first year of sixth form.

- 41 In a very few cases, learners choose a business or social studies subject as a fourth option on the basis that it fits in with an option block or it is a subject that they have not studied before. These learners often do not view such choices with as high a priority as their other subject choices. A few learners also tend to choose social studies subjects as a result of facing a restricted choice of options due to not meeting subject-specific entry requirements for some alternative courses. In these circumstances, a few learners drop these subjects early in their studies or do not continue these beyond AS level.

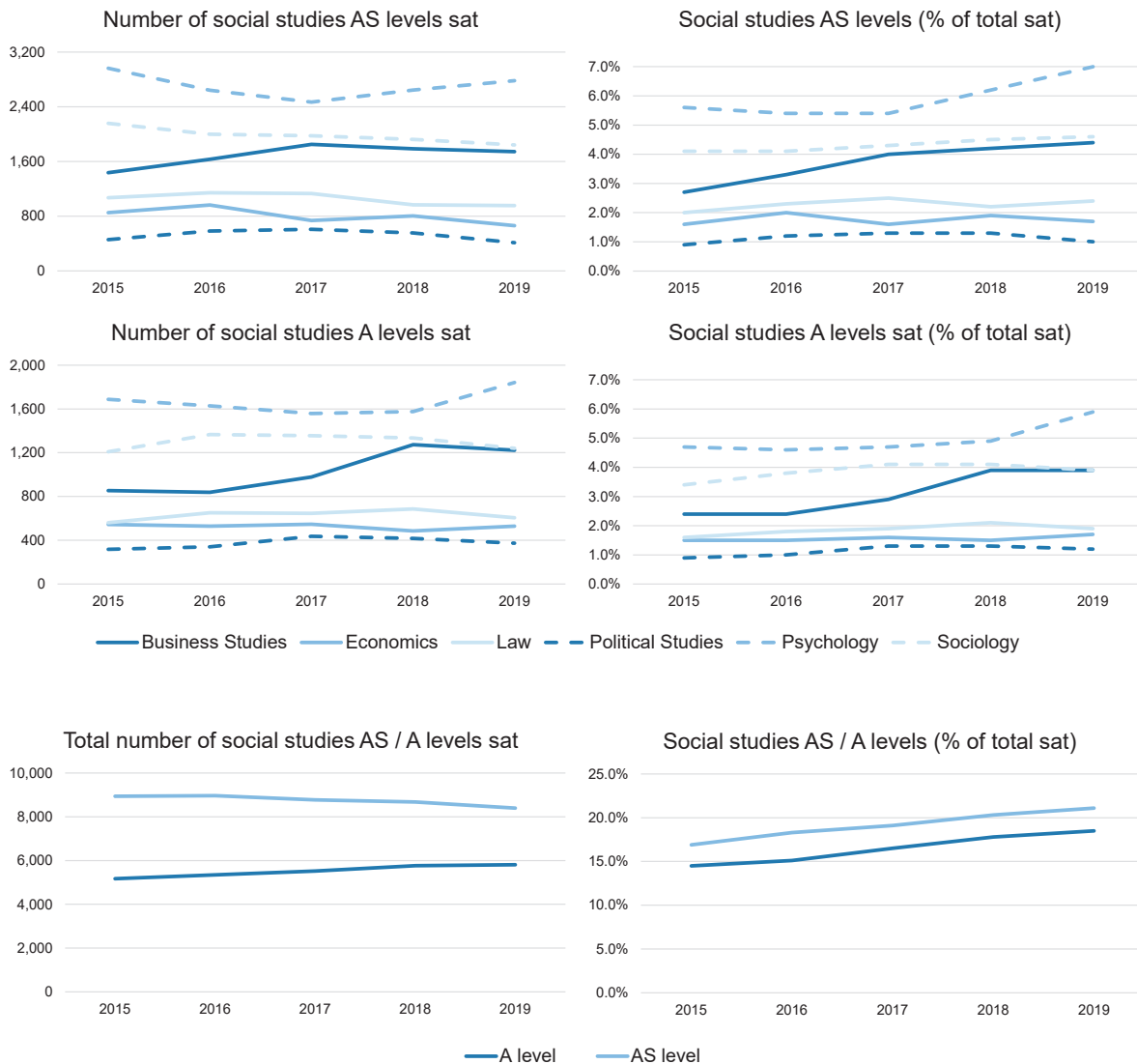
### A level performance in business and social studies

- 42 As outlined in our thematic report on A levels in sixth forms and further education colleges published in November 2018 (Estyn, 2018), the Welsh Government has recently introduced a set of post-16 consistent measures across schools and colleges. These new measures are designed to address and rectify the lack of consistency between the previously separate measures that have been used for learner outcomes in further education and school sixth forms. They also help identify where providers have large drop-out rates from courses, including between AS and A level.
- 43 The new measures show performance in terms of A level **learner achievement** over the two years of AS followed by A level. A second measure of **post-16 value-added** shows the progress made by learners based on their previous attainment. The final measure, **learner destinations**, shows progression into further learning or employment. Further detail is given in Appendix 1.
- 44 Provisional examination entries and results data for AS and A levels is published each year by the Joint Council for Qualifications (2020a)<sup>1</sup>. This data shows that the relative popularity of individual business and social studies subjects has remained consistent over the last five years. The relative popularity of individual subjects, as measured by subject entries, is ranked consistently at both AS and A level in each of the five years as shown below (1 = most popular, 6 = least popular):
1. Psychology
  2. Sociology
  3. Business
  4. Law
  5. Economics
  6. Government and politics

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<sup>1</sup> The provisional JCQ data is published soon after the A level results are released to candidates and includes information on entries and outcomes from all exam centres in Wales and will not include late information such as outcomes of appeals. Whilst not directly comparable with the Welsh Government consistent measure information it gives a good approximation of the volume of entries and outcomes in individual subjects.

**Figure 1: A and AS level entries (Joint Council for Qualifications, 2020a)**



- 45 In line with overall entries for AS levels, there has been a steady decline in the number of overall entries in business and social studies AS level subjects (Joint Council for Qualifications, 2020a). This reflects demographic factors affecting the number of learners seeking to progress into the sixth form and a reduction in the average number of subject entries per learner as many centres now guide learners towards studying three rather than four A level subjects.
- 46 Between 2015 and 2019, the combined proportion of total entries for all subjects accounted for by business and social studies subjects has increased at both AS and A level. Over the same period, the share of AS and A level entries in individual business and social studies subjects relative to other subjects has been maintained or increased in all six subjects. Relative growth is strongest in business and psychology. The relative proportions of entries in economics, government and politics, law, and sociology are relatively stable with all at least maintaining their share of entries or showing a slight increase.

- 47 Between 2017 and 2019, nearly all learners who sat their examinations achieved A level passes at grades A\*-E in business, economics, government and politics, law, psychology or sociology (Joint Council for Qualifications, 2020a). Detailed charts showing AS and A level examination entries and results are contained in Appendix 2.
- 48 In 2018 and 2019, the proportion of learners achieving A\* grades in individual A level subjects was higher in economics than for other business and social studies subjects. Around 13% of learners entered for A level economics achieved an A\* grade compared with between 4% and 9% in other business or social studies subjects. Over the same period the majority of learners entered for A level economics achieved a pass at grades A\*-B. Around half of learners entered for A levels in government and politics, law, psychology or sociology achieved grades A\*-B in these subjects. Almost half of learners entered for A level business achieved a similar grade (Joint Council for Qualifications, 2020a).
- 49 A level results in 2018 and 2019 show that many learners achieve grades A\*-C in their business, economics, government and politics, law, psychology and sociology examinations (Joint Council for Qualifications, 2020a). Charts showing a breakdown of A level grades for each subject are in Appendix 2.
- 50 In 2018 and 2019, the AS level pass rate (at grades A-E) is below the overall A level pass rate (at grades A\*-E) in all business and social studies subjects. There is substantially higher proportions of learners achieving unclassified (U) grades at AS level than in A level examinations, in line with similar trends across nearly all other subjects. Charts showing a breakdown of AS grades for each subject are included in Appendix 2. The most recent data in 2019 shows that most AS level learners in business and politics achieved an overall grade of A-E. Pass rates in AS economics, law, psychology and sociology were a little lower (Joint Council for Qualifications, 2020a).
- 51 Over the same period, a minority of AS level learners achieved a grade A in economics while a few did in business, government and politics, law, psychology and sociology. The proportion of AS level learners achieving grades A-B is higher in government and politics and economics than in other business and social studies subjects and the majority of learners achieve grades A-C in these two subjects. Although higher proportions of learners achieve A\*-B grades in A level economics this would appear, at least in part, to reflect the tendency for these learners to have higher average GCSE entry grades than those choosing other business and social studies subjects (FFT, 2020).

### Outcomes for groups of learners

- 52 There is a distinct pattern in the choice of AS and A level business and social science subjects when analysed by gender. Social studies subjects, including psychology, sociology and law, attract a higher number of girls than boys. Conversely, business and economics attract a higher number of boys than girls. Government and politics tends to attract boys and girls in fairly equal numbers (Joint Council for Qualifications, 2020a). These differences carry through to subsequent course choices of those learners who progress into higher education. These gender differences in subject choices reflect long-standing differences in the way these subjects are perceived



rather than resulting from factors such as aptitude or prior attainment. The differences are in line with similar disparities across both the UK and US and indicate that continued and concerted effort is needed to challenge gender stereotypes in education and the workplace.

- 53 Over the five year period 2015 to 2019, both girls and boys have chosen a steadily increasing proportion of business and social studies subjects at both AS and A level when compared to total subject entries. Between 2015 and 2019, the proportion of entries accounted for by these subjects rose steadily for girls from around 19% to 24% at AS level and from around 16% to 21% at A level. This trend was mirrored for boys by similar steady increases over this period from around 14% to 18% at AS level and from around 12% to 15% at A level (Joint Council for Qualifications, 2020a).
- 54 In Wales, girls generally outperform boys in business and social studies subjects at A and AS level. Over the five year period 2015 to 2019, girls performed consistently better than boys across all grades in both law and psychology at A level, and in economics, psychology and sociology at AS level. Over the same period, girls have also consistently outperformed boys at grades A\*-B in all other business and social studies subjects at A level, and at grades A-C in all other business and social studies subjects, other than government and politics at AS level (Joint Council for Qualifications, 2020a).
- 55 As reported in the previous thematic report on A levels (Estyn, 2018), there are difficulties in analysing the A and AS level performance of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds because free school meal status does not apply to learners after compulsory schooling. It is therefore not possible to draw statistically valid conclusions about comparative performance data in business and social studies subjects. Even so, visits to schools and colleges, along with other research, suggest that learners from economically disadvantaged backgrounds perform less well than those from more privileged backgrounds (Welsh Government, 2017, p.41) as at key stage four.

### Retention and progression

- 56 Learner outcomes data traditionally reports A and AS level data separately. This data indicates that learner successful completion is higher in business and social studies A levels than in AS levels in the same subjects. This is consistent with the overall picture for A and AS levels across all subjects (Welsh Government, 2020).
- 57 The new post-16 consistent measures data looks at learner outcomes at A level over the full two year duration of the A level programme, including both the AS and A level year. In general across all subjects, around 25% of learners who completed AS levels do not continue onto A level (Welsh Government, 2020).
- 58 Many learners progress to university, including a few who go on to study business or social studies subjects. A very few learners secure places at highly competitive universities such as Oxford or Cambridge to study these subjects and a few gain places at Russell Group universities.

## Provision

### Curriculum

- 59 There are considerable differences in the choices available to learners in both English and Welsh-medium settings. These differences are usually related to the number of learners studying A levels in the sixth form, college or within any local partnership arrangement. A few schools and colleges offer the full range of A level business and social studies subjects while many offer a more limited range.
- 60 Although many schools or colleges offer a free choice of A level subjects, a minority organise their subject choices in option blocks. In a few cases, learners are also restricted in the number of subjects they are permitted to choose, usually two, in subjects they have not studied previously at GCSE level. This limits the number of business and social studies options chosen in centres where very few of these subjects are available at GCSE.
- 61 The extent of the subject choices available is influenced mainly by provider size, staff expertise and availability, language medium and whether or not there are partnerships with other schools or colleges. In general, providers with large overall A level provision tend to offer the broadest range of business and social studies options. A very few providers also offer vocational alternatives in subjects such as business or law rather than AS and A level options in these subjects.
- 62 In most schools and colleges opportunities to study A level business and social studies subjects through the medium of Welsh or bilingually are limited. In a few centres, partnership arrangements are used to increase opportunities for learners to study bilingually or through the medium of Welsh.

**Grwp Llandrillo Menai** provides Welsh-medium A level lessons in government and politics, law, psychology and sociology to sixth form learners in schools using a video link distance learning model. This arrangement is helping several schools to broaden the Welsh-medium and bilingual social studies provision that they offer.

Learners benefit from access to two and a half hours' of tuition a week by video link. In addition, tutors visit each school up to five times per year to provide additional face-to-face support to learners. This provision provides a cost-effective method of delivery and helps extend provision in minority subjects and is particularly beneficial for sixth form learners in schools in rural areas who would otherwise have to travel considerable distances to access these A level subjects.

- 63 A few providers report that they are unable to respond to substantial demand for some social studies subjects, due to staffing constraints. A few providers have reduced the number of business and social studies options due to a decline in the number of learners entering the sixth form, linked mainly to local population changes. A few providers opted to replace A level options such as business or law with alternative qualifications in these subjects at the same level, such as a subsidiary

diploma in business or level 3 diploma in law. These decisions are influenced by a range of factors, including course viability considerations, responding to learner preferences regarding assessment methods, and helping extend the range of vocational options.

- 64 Most learners are happy with the subject choices available, although a few are disappointed that some of the subjects are not available, especially when initial options choices are withdrawn before the course commences due to insufficient learner numbers. A few providers offer one or more business or social studies options, such as law, in partnership with other schools or colleges. Although this means that some learners are required to travel to other centres in order to study, most value the benefit of being able to study their chosen subject rather than having to choose an alternative.
- 65 A few post-16 learners studying business and social studies subjects value the opportunity to participate in the Seren programme and enjoy interacting with other learners with similar aspirations. However, the programme is often focused on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), with few activities geared towards business and social studies.
- 66 In a few schools and colleges, additional activities are made available to more able learners. For example, these activities may include masterclasses and specialist presentations by prominent people from business and other organisations. These sessions are particularly valued by learners, especially those who are considering studying related subjects in higher education or who aspire to similar careers.

**Gower College Swansea** involves external professionals in providing enrichment activities and expert support to learners looking to progress to higher education. Business and social studies learners are able to access workshops, talks and mock interviews, for example to help them with university applications.

Learners who wish to go directly into employment after completing their A levels receive specialist tutorials and support to help them progress onto their chosen career path. University and industry professionals, in fields such as accountancy, economics and law, help provide personal coaching, external visits and a broad range of subject-specialist masterclasses alongside college teachers.

- 67 Nearly all schools and colleges make sure that subject choices are maintained from AS to A level even if learner numbers progressing from AS to A level in a particular subject are very low, despite the financial implications. In exceptional circumstances a very few centres allow a learner to study AS and A level in a business or social studies subject in Year 13. This may, for example, be allowed if a learner does well in two AS subjects but fails their third subject and needs to study three subjects at A level to maintain their progression options.
- 68 Class sizes vary from as low as one to around 30 learners. Very small class sizes restrict the opportunity for learners to engage in productive discussions, debate alternative viewpoints and to learn from others. On the other hand, very large class sizes generate high teacher workload, especially in terms of assessing learners'

work, and make it difficult for teachers to provide sufficient individual attention and support to learners. Class sizes for Welsh-medium groups tend to be smaller relative to those taught in English.

### Teaching and assessment

- 69 Most teachers have clear and suitably high expectations of their learners and establish good working relationships with them. Most learners feel that they are treated more as adults in the sixth form when compared to key stage 4 and most lessons are characterised by strong mutual respect.
- 70 Most teachers have strong subject knowledge and an up-to-date understanding of AS and A level assessment requirements. They work hard to ensure that learners cover syllabus requirements and develop a secure appreciation of their subject and its broader context.

A useful synthesis of international research evidence relating to effective pedagogy in social sciences is contained in the booklet *Effective Pedagogy in Social Sciences* (Sinnema and Aitken, 2012). This research identifies twelve principles of effective pedagogy and provides a useful explanation of teaching as inquiry. A summary of the 12 principles of effective pedagogy and the teaching as inquiry model is shown in Appendix 3.

- 71 The most effective business and social studies teachers convey a genuine passion for their subject and strive to inspire their learners through the use of well-thought-out teaching strategies to engage all learners. Many invite discussion of current topical issues to enliven the subject matter and help learners apply theories and concepts to real-world examples. A minority of teachers miss valuable opportunities to relate subject content to real-world examples and events. This is particularly the case where teachers feel they have to adhere rigidly to a pre-determined scheme of work rather than adapting their approach to suit the class context where it makes sense to do so.
- 72 Most teachers plan well to ensure that they prepare learners for the requirements of external examinations at AS and A level. Most link learning activities in each topic to past examination questions and place a strong emphasis on assessment objectives and weightings. Many teachers emphasise the value and importance of wider reading in business and social studies subjects, especially given the requirements for independent research and importance of current issues and developments within these subjects.

#### Case study 1: Eirias High School, Conwy – a stimulating debate in a Year 13 A level economics lesson

In a Year 13 A level economics lesson, learners engaged in a lively and exceptionally well run formal debate on the motion that ‘it is essential for the UK government to reduce the public sector deficit’. The teacher facilitated the session by acting as the ‘speaker’ to make sure that learners followed protocols similar to those used in parliament.

All learners made useful contributions to the debate and most were confident and articulate. Many learners made effective use of specialist terminology to highlight links between taxation, public spending, aggregate demand, public sector borrowing, inflation, unemployment and economic growth. One pupil drew a comparison with economic difficulties experienced in Greece while another intervened to emphasise that the UK's credit rating had been reduced as a result of low growth and economic uncertainty. Other topical issues that learners included in their contributions included the potential impact of Brexit, the fall in the value of the pound, public sector job losses and the potential economic costs and benefits of the HS2 high speed train link.

Learners clearly enjoyed the opportunity to draw on previously acquired knowledge and understanding to put forward well-reasoned lines of argument and many used language powerfully to maximise the persuasive impact of their contributions.

At the end of the debate, all participants voted independently for or against the motion and learners then reflected on the impact the debate had on their pre-conceived views. As a follow-up task, learners were required to answer a past examination question that asked them to discuss whether it is essential for the government to cut public spending and raise taxes to reduce the public sector deficit.

- 73 Many business and social studies teachers have high expectations of their learners and plan engaging activities that stimulate, stretch and challenge all learners. They also place high importance on learners developing their independent learning and research skills. A few business and social studies teachers adopt approaches that do not encourage learners to take enough responsibility for their own learning and independent research.

In a particularly effective sociology A level lesson, the teacher used a carefully structured series of activities to enable learners to progress in their learning from recall of previous learning through to critical evaluation of a range of alternative viewpoints. Throughout the session, the teacher set high expectations of all learners who were clear about what was expected of them at all stages. Learners engaged in all activities with a lively but determined sense of purpose. The activities included open and directed questioning sessions, learner-led presentations, small-group work tasks and whole-class discussion.

Throughout the lesson the teacher provided clear explanations and useful developmental feedback to learners and learners responded exceptionally well to the teacher's mix of encouragement, praise, probing questions and constructive feedback.

- 74 Many teachers question and feedback skilfully to move the focus progressively from the acquisition of fundamental knowledge and understanding of key theories and concepts through to using higher-order thinking skills, such as problem-solving,

analysis, and evaluation. A few do not challenge learners sufficiently and provide too much input and direction, which often results in learners becoming too passive in their approach to learning.

In a particularly lively and productive government and politics lesson, learners discussed and evaluated how links between politicians and local communities have evolved in the face of changing social attitudes and the rapid growth of social media. Through a mix of individual and small group work, they provided insightful evaluations of the relative merits and drawbacks of various engagement strategies including constituent surgeries, canvassing, social media networks and other community and public relations activities. Through these learning activities, learners recognised the opportunities and challenges these different forms of communication channels present to current and future politicians and the impact they have on wider society.

- 75 In many cases, teachers use carefully thought out assessment strategies that link well with external examination requirements. Many replicate the approaches used in external examination assessment outcomes and marking schemes to provide precise feedback on strengths and priorities for improvement. They provide many opportunities for learners to practice their approaches to examination-style questions based around current issues and recent events rather than relying exclusively on previous examination questions. However, a few teachers do not provide enough worthwhile opportunities for learners to work independently and provide feedback that is not clear or precise enough to guide learners' progress.
- 76 In many schools and colleges, learners are clear about how well they are progressing in business and social studies subjects and know precisely what they are aiming to achieve in terms of target grades. Many centres use value-added data suitably to set targets and monitor progress for each learner. A few also process internal assessment outcomes using externally sourced reports to model value-added outcomes on a formative basis at several points during the year, including mock examinations.

### Advice and guidance

- 77 Many learners say that advice and guidance do not prepare them well enough for the demands of A level study and especially the extent of independent learning and extended writing required when studying these subjects. Many learners studying business and social studies subjects feel that they received only limited advice and guidance prior to commencing these courses. This is due mainly to many of these subjects only being available to learners from the sixth form onwards and limited consideration of possible transition activities or background reading as learners final choices depend on GCSE results. A few learners are attracted to business and social studies in particular because they have not studied them before and they welcome the opportunity and challenge of learning and exploring one or more new subjects. A very few learners who may be disappointed with their outcomes in some subjects at GCSE prefer to choose to study new courses where they can start afresh.

- 78 In 2019, around 1.0% of total subject entries at GCSE were in business and only around 0.5% of entries were in economics or other social sciences (Joint Council for Qualifications, 2020b). As a result, nearly all learners who choose to study business or social studies subjects at A level are studying these subjects for the first time. This presents particular challenges for schools, colleges and learners themselves. In most other subjects, learners are already familiar with some aspects of the subject.
- 79 Nearly all schools and colleges run open evenings, or in a very few cases similar events at weekends, aimed at Year 11 learners and their parents or carers. These events usually provide a valuable opportunity for learners to meet subject teachers and to find out more about the options available to them at A level as well as alternative options. A very few learners feel that advice on subjects delivered in partnership with another school or college is more difficult to access where the teacher is not available at their school for events such as open evenings or guidance sessions on subject choices.
- 80 A minority of schools and colleges also provide taster sessions for learners considering studying A levels to help them find out more about the subjects they are considering and to experience a sample lesson in each of a few subjects (or subject clusters) on their shortlist. Many also provide a useful sixth form prospectus including subject option information sections or provide supplementary information on individual subjects on their school or college website. However, many schools and colleges do not do enough to make sure that potential learners gain enough understanding of the 'new' business and social studies options at A level to enable them to make a confident and informed choice regarding course suitability.
- 81 Nearly all providers publish A level pass rates in each subject in the sixth form prospectus or on their website. Very few centres also publish AS results, making it difficult for learners and parents to get a full picture of past performance in different subjects across the full two years of sixth form studies. Overall, the extent of information available is limited or difficult to find.
- 82 A minority of learners supplement the information provided by the school or college with information they find for themselves through independent research, mainly using internet sites. While much of this information may be useful, it can sometimes be misleading, especially in terms of issues such as preferred subject combinations or requirements for specific progression routes.
- 83 Most centres give careful guidance when learners are considering a combination of subjects which some universities may regard as being too similar, such as economics and business. However, a few learners feel that there is not enough discussion and guidance around the issue of subject combinations.

Initial advice and guidance for new A level learners considering enrolling on A level business and social studies subjects at **NPTC Group** are clear, comprehensive and impartial. Useful advice is available at several stages, including before and after sitting GCSE examinations. Guidance includes clearly stated subject entry requirements, careful consideration of suitable progression pathways and advice on appropriate subject combinations, which is tailored to the prior attainment and aspirations of individual learners.

Predicted and actual GCSE grades are used well to help with provisional and final subject choices. Teachers provide honest and direct information on the nature and challenges of specific subjects, especially where learners have not studied these in the school curriculum. As a result, learners are positive about the guidance they receive, and this helps maximise learner retention and enables strong progress.

- 84 A minority of learners consider a range of providers within their locality before choosing where to study their A levels. A few explain that their eventual choice of provider is at least partly determined by the availability of a wider range of subject options, including a wider choice of business and social studies subjects, on offer at their chosen provider.
- 85 Many schools and colleges recognise the challenge that sixth form learners face when finalising their A level subjects, especially where they have not studied one or more of their chosen subjects at GCSE level. A useful feature of many providers' approaches to sixth form study is that of allowing a 'settling in' period over the first few weeks of sixth form study. This settling in period allows learners to reflect on their subject choices and their progress to date, and to decide whether a change of subject options would be beneficial. In a few cases, providers structure this process into the curriculum by allowing learners to study four subjects for a short period, usually around four to six weeks, before deciding which three subjects to continue with as their final choices. Learners feel that this approach is particularly helpful when they have chosen subjects with which they are unfamiliar. In these providers, this often also allows a very few learners to continue with all four options where their progress across all subjects is particularly strong.
- 86 A minority of schools and colleges also allow learners to review and revise their subject options at other times during the first year of A level studies, especially where learners are studying four subjects at AS level. Most providers require learners to achieve at least a grade E at AS level in order to progress to A level.
- 87 A few learners from most providers progress to study business or social studies subjects at degree level. Across most providers, progression advice regarding university entry is generally good. However, guidance on alternative routes beyond A level, such as apprenticeships, is generally limited, especially in schools.

### Entry policies

- 88 Many providers offer an unrestricted choice of A level subjects to those learners who meet minimum entry criteria. However, a few restrict the number of subject choices which learners have not studied previously at GCSE, to either two or three. This



applies most frequently to social studies subjects as a result of these not being available as options at key stage 4 in most schools. Most learners feel that such restrictions are reasonable and are intended to act in their best interests by avoiding a scenario where they are required to learn a disproportionate amount of new concepts and terminology.

- 89 In a very few cases, learners are allowed to study business and social studies options even when they do not meet the general entry requirements for A levels, especially if the provider has very few learners in the sixth form. In such circumstances, learners often do not cope with the demands of these subjects and either drop out early in their programme or do not progress from AS to A level because of low attainment at AS level. In these very few cases, schools and colleges are placing institutional interests before those of their learners.
- 90 As a result of an increasing proportion of providers now encouraging learners to take three rather than four AS subjects in the first year of the sixth form, fewer learners are choosing business or social studies subjects as a 'fourth A level' choice. Many providers are choosing to include the skills challenge certificate alongside three A level options instead of requiring an initial choice of four AS levels. Many learners welcome this approach as it increases the number of independent study periods and reduces their overall workload, thereby helping alleviate some of the workload associated with sixth form study.

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## Leadership

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### Leadership

- 91 Most leaders have a clear vision for the inclusion of a range of business and social studies A levels within the curriculum in school sixth forms and colleges. They recognise the value and importance of providing a broad curriculum offer including subjects that are not delivered at key stage 4.
- 92 The arrangements for the leadership and management of business and social studies A levels vary substantially between schools and colleges. Most schools are structured around academic subject specialisms into a series of departments or faculties, each led by a middle leader. Many colleges base their curriculum management arrangements around broad vocational routes, such as business and management or science and technology. A minority of colleges have a specific department for A levels and a few have created separate sixth form centres, which are structured in a similar way to schools, based around subject disciplines rather than vocational areas.
- 93 Responsibility for specific A level subjects in schools usually mirrors the arrangements for those subjects in the rest of the school. In the majority of schools, business is also available as a GCSE subject. However, in many cases, other social studies subjects are not taught to GCSE and therefore leadership responsibility for these subjects tends to be added to the remit of existing middle leaders. In the few schools with large sixth forms, responsibility for social sciences is grouped together and a middle leader has responsibility for all aspects of this provision in the sixth form.
- 94 In further education colleges, especially those with relatively small numbers of A level learners, responsibility for business and social studies A level subjects is often subsumed within broader vocationally-focused departments or faculties. For example, A level business is often managed through the faculty or department responsible for a broad range of vocational business-related programmes at various levels. Where this is the case, additional team meetings often take place to bring A level teachers together from across other departments, as well as holding team meetings based on the line management structure. This encourages staff to feel part of a wider team of A level teachers and allows these teams to share information on individual learners' progress across all subjects.
- 95 A very few further education colleges with particularly high numbers of learners studying A levels have created dedicated sixth form centres with separate facilities and a dedicated line management structure. In these centres, leadership responsibilities are usually based around A level subjects or subject clusters. These are sometimes influenced by how data is clustered into sector subject areas (SSAs) in official qualification outcomes data. For example, psychology is often categorised within SSA1 (science and mathematics); economics, government and politics and sociology within SSA11 (social sciences) and business and law within SSA15 (business, administration and law).

## Self-evaluation and improvement planning

- 96 Most schools and colleges undertake evaluation activities at institutional level and at either at departmental level or based on subject clusters. Many also undertake course reviews. However, evaluation and improvement activities adopted by schools for subjects and departments at key stage 3 and key stage 4 are not always embedded well enough in post-16 provision. Similarly in colleges, evaluation activities that work well for vocational provision are not always adapted for A level provision where learners undertake a combination of individual subjects rather than a single integrated main course. As a result, in a minority of providers these activities are not sufficiently robust to identify key strengths and areas for improvement at course level, such as in individual AS and A level business and social studies subjects.

Self-evaluation and improvement planning processes for business and social studies A levels are particularly effective at **St Joseph's R.C. High School**. Progress tracking, at individual learner and group level, helps ensure that scrutiny and accountability is equally rigorous across all stages of the school curriculum.

Evaluation and improvement planning are informed by a wide range of secure first-hand evidence, and value-added data is used well with learners to track progress against challenging and realistic targets. Improvement planning focuses on clear, specific and achievable targets relating to teaching, feedback, assessment and effective planning for new specifications.

- 97 Many schools and colleges tend to focus primarily on A level pass rates and completion data to evaluate subject and overall performance. A minority do not take enough account of AS level performance in these subjects. In a few cases, providers also allow the overall performance of a cluster of subjects to mask underperformance in individual business and social studies subjects. Many providers do not take enough account of the number of learners who withdraw from business and social studies AS levels early in the course. They also do not reflect strongly enough on the numbers of learners who are awarded U grades at AS level and do not progress to the A level stage in these subjects.
- 98 A minority of providers are beginning to make effective use of additional data, such as value-added data. This takes into account learners' initial qualifications and compares these to AS and A level attainment grades, and in some cases also provides benchmarked comparisons across other providers. A very few providers are also beginning to make cautious use of the new post-16 consistent measures data that has been recently introduced by the Welsh Government, including careful reconciliation of this data with internal school and college data to identify any errors in the data and notify government officers where necessary.

Evaluation and improvement activities for business and social studies A level subjects at **Stanwell School** are particularly robust. They involve reflection on the key issues of standards, teaching and leadership to inform an accurate assessment of key strengths and precise identification of areas requiring improvement. Provision for business and social studies A level is a particular strength of the school.

Teachers and school leaders use data carefully to track and monitor individual learner and subject group progress. They make especially good use of value added information to inform target setting and review processes at learner and subject level.

- 99 Overall, school and college leaders place too much emphasis on examination outcome data rather than taking a holistic view of the standards achieved by learners. A minority do not have a detailed or accurate picture of standards in lessons or in learners' work. They also do not make enough use of learner feedback to help them evaluate the quality of provision or identify areas for improvement. In a minority of schools and colleges, improvement planning in individual business and social studies subjects needs improvement. In a few providers, this underperformance is not challenged in a timely or robust manner.
- 100 A majority of providers have one or more business and social studies subjects where they have only one subject specialist A level teacher. In these circumstances, a few providers work in partnership with other schools or colleges to overcome this difficulty and encourage sharing of resources. This approach is particularly beneficial for these lone subject specialist teachers who often feel isolated in smaller centres with a limited number of A level teachers. In addition to this approach, providers create helpful cross-subject arrangements to provide evaluation and feedback.

### Partnerships

- 101 A few schools and colleges work in partnership with one or more A level providers to provide a broader range of business and social studies subject choices. Such arrangements are particularly helpful when multiple centres have insufficient numbers to run financially viable classes in some of these subjects or they do not have the appropriate expertise. They also play an important part in increasing opportunities for bilingual and Welsh-medium provision. A few providers have withdrawn from previous partnerships, mainly due to funding pressures associated with transport or, in a very few cases, issues relating to quality of provision.
- 102 Partnership delivery is most successful when timetables are aligned carefully to minimise travel times between centres and to ensure parity in teaching time. However, in many partnerships there is a need to strengthen quality assurance arrangements, including ensuring transparency of learner outcomes data and agreeing shared lesson observation arrangements in relation to partnership provision.

The **LINC Conwy** partnership was established in September 2011 to provide partnership courses for post-16 learners in Conwy. It includes every high school in Conwy and Coleg Llandrillo working together to maximise sixth form subject choices for post-16 learners. All partnership courses are available to all learners and run on a Wednesday from 9.30am to 2.30pm with free transport provided from and to the learners' home school or college. These arrangements minimise the number of journeys for learners and allow staff to arrange trips or invite visitors without learners' other studies being affected.

LINC Conwy curriculum options for 2020-2021 include A levels in economics (taught at Ysgol Eirias) and psychology (taught at Coleg Llandrillo). Although law is not included as an A level option, learners are able to study the BTEC Extended Certificate in law (taught at Ysgol Emrys ap Iwan) as an alternative option. Many other non-business and social studies options are also available through the partnership. Similar partnerships operate in other local authority areas.

### Professional learning

- 103 Most business and social studies teachers identify WJEC as the main source of professional learning in relation to their A level teaching. The awarding body publishes a range of resources for each qualification on its website, including detailed subject specifications, sample assessment materials, examiners' reports on each question paper, free access to past examination question papers and mark schemes, and a teachers' guide. Other useful ways that WJEC offers support include face-to-face professional learning events, direct access to a subject officer, free online resources, and examination results analysis on an online examination review facility.
- 104 The teachers' guide published by WJEC for each subject provides useful support for teachers and is intended to help them develop stimulating courses to meet their learners' needs and abilities. These materials differ in style between subjects. For example, a majority of the guides contain examples of possible classroom activities and links to a variety of freely available digital resources (including both WJEC and external sources) for teachers to tailor and use when planning lessons to engage and stimulate learners' interests. A minority of the guides concentrate on those areas that are new to WJEC subject specifications as well as those subject areas where additional guidance has been requested by teachers. They are not intended as comprehensive reference documents. Official WJEC endorsed textbooks are available in the majority of business and social studies A level subjects. However, delays in external resources and materials becoming available in a minority of business and social studies subjects are often cited as a frustration by teachers and learners.
- 105 WJEC has set up an official online social network group in a minority of subject areas to facilitate sharing of information and resources between teachers. This is particularly useful for those teachers who are the only person in a centre teaching a particular subject. In other subject areas, teachers rely on informal or similar 'unofficial' communication network groups.

Psychology teachers benefit from strong formal and informal networks set up by the awarding organisation and by the teachers themselves. Through these networks, teachers create and share many teaching resources, share news updates and help each other by responding to a range of queries, including any concerns they may have about assessment related issues. These networks provide particularly valuable support and encouragement to teachers who work as the only psychology teacher in their centre.

- 106 A minority of schools and colleges have one or more teaching staff who are A level examiners or chief examiners in business and social studies subjects. These roles provide valuable professional learning experience for teachers and support improvements in their practice well.
- 107 There are limited professional learning opportunities for teachers of A level business and social studies subjects. Regional consortia support is usually generic rather than providing specific support for these subjects. Regional consortia are able to identify effective practice and facilitate links between teachers and departments. Most collaboration tends to be informal and established through personal contacts. These informal links are valuable in providing mutual support between teachers, but often do not involve all teachers of the subjects or provide advice that has been endorsed by the awarding organisation.

### Recruitment and staffing

- 108 In a majority of schools and a minority of colleges, there is only a single A level subject specialist teacher in one or more business and social studies subjects. As well as restricting opportunities for collaborative working, this can lead to problems when a member of staff is absent, especially if this is for an extended period of time.
- 109 A few providers report difficulties in recruiting suitably qualified A level subject teachers, especially in social studies subjects, both on a permanent and supply cover basis. In a very few cases this leads to classes remaining uncovered for several days or weeks with learners having to rely on self-study or completing set work without teacher input or supervision.

### Resources and funding

- 110 The nature and pace of A level reform have meant that the availability of materials and resources for learners and teachers has varied substantially between individual business and social studies subjects. The availability of Welsh-medium resources is particularly limited in many of these subjects. The availability of resources from the WJEC is improving over time although the realities of commercial markets means that publishers have been reluctant to commission resources specifically for qualifications in Wales particularly in subjects with low numbers of subject entries at AS and A level. As a result, centres in Wales rely on materials developed by WJEC or the Welsh Government or they adapt resources developed for teaching in England.

- 111 In most centres, the number of teaching hours for business and social studies subject at A and AS level is between four and five hours a week and is in line with other subjects. On a very few occasions, teaching time available on partnership provided courses is less than is provided for other options due to different timetabling models across providers or time lost for travel between sites. Many learners feel that this is unfair.
- 112 Class sizes vary substantially between centres and between subjects within individual centres. Most centres maintain parity in teaching hours across all subjects regardless of class sizes. In a very few cases, teaching hours are reduced slightly when numbers in a class are very small. Nearly all providers maintain subject teaching groups at A level where a subject has been taught at AS level, even if numbers are very low in the second year.

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## Appendix 1: Evidence base

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### School sixth form data

In schools, sixth form outcomes for the years up to 2019 are reported in terms of:

- how many learners achieve the level 3 threshold (2 A levels or equivalent at grades A\*-E)
- how many achieve 3 A levels or equivalent at grades A\*-A
- how many achieve 3 A levels or equivalent at grades A\*-C
- the average points score

There are limitations to these performance measures and they are in the process of being phased out and replaced with the new consistent performance measures. The level 3 indicator includes two A levels or equivalent grades at A\*-E and the three A\*-A measure is also a narrow measure. The three or more A levels or equivalent at A\*-C indicator has been calculated differently from year to year. This has been problematic for school leaders to understand the methodology behind the calculations. Guidelines about how the performance measures are calculated has been relatively limited.

Sixth form data was added to the Welsh Government's All Wales Core Data Sets (AWCDS) for schools in 2012. The sixth form performance measures include A levels and other qualifications which have equivalent value, such as the Welsh Baccalaureate and vocational qualifications including BTEC. In 2007, the Welsh Baccalaureate was introduced as a sixth form qualification. At advanced level, this was considered to be the equivalent to one A level at grade A. The qualification was reformed following recommendations from the 2012 Review of Qualifications (Welsh Government, 2012) and the new Welsh Baccalaureate has been taught since September 2015. The Advanced Skills Challenge Certificate element of the new baccalaureate is graded A\*-E and has an equivalent value to the same grades at A level. BTECs and other vocational qualifications also have equivalent values. The fact that a range of qualifications that are very different from one another in content and assessment contributes to performance measures makes it difficult to gain a clear picture of A level only performance. In addition, AS level performance is not reported at all.

The Welsh Government publishes average national figures for the sixth form performance measures. These provide a benchmark of sorts for schools, but data sets that take account of a range of contextual factors, which would provide a more meaningful point of comparison for schools, are not currently available. The WJEC publishes national average grade attainment figures for separate subjects.

The Welsh Government's All Wales Core Data Set compares each school's performance against a group of nine or ten other schools with broadly similar contexts, known as the 'family of schools'. All schools with a sixth form are in a family where four or five of the other schools in the family also have a sixth form,



although the size of each sixth form can vary greatly and the number of schools with which they can compare themselves is small.

### Further education data

In the further education sector until 2019, providers have been using Learner Outcomes Reports based on the LLWR (Lifelong Learning Wales Record) data collection system. In colleges, performance measures are based on learners who start, and complete, courses. Outcomes in colleges are reported in terms of:

- ‘completion rates’ (how many learners who start AS and A level courses stay until the end of the academic year)
- ‘success rates’ (how many learners who start an A level course complete them successfully and achieve grades A\*-E)

College data sets differ from schools’ data by taking account of those who start and complete courses. However, overall college data sets for A levels are more limited in scope than those for schools.

National comparators for these performance measures, based upon average performance across Wales, are available for colleges to use to compare their performance with the sector in Wales. Each college is able to view their success rate ranking among the other ten colleges in Wales that offer A level provision. However, these established performance measures reflect only whether learners attain, fail or withdraw from their courses. They do not reflect the strength of grade attainment or combined attainment in more than one A level. They also do not reflect the proportion of learners that continues from AS to A level. Neither do they capture the proportion of learners withdrawing within the first eight weeks of their studies.

As a result of the performance measures, historically, there has been less of a focus in colleges on grades and more emphasis on completion. Conversely, schools have focused on grades and have not placed much emphasis on completion.

The way data is collected and analysed differs between the LLWR and AWCDs reports. This has meant that comparing outcomes for A levels across schools and colleges has not been possible. The LLWR-based benchmarking data reports have now been discontinued as have the Learner Outcomes Reports (LORs), which reported on success rates for each provider by qualification type and sector subject area (SSA).

### Developing a joint approach to data in schools and colleges

In 2016, following a flat-lining in A level results at A\*-A, A\*-C and A\*-E over three years, the Welsh Government’s two directorates, the Directorate of Education and that of Skills, Higher Education, and Lifelong Learning, focused their work more closely on A level outcomes. Their work has also involved working with regional consortia and colleges, reviewing performance measures and holding two A level summit meetings.

In June 2014, Welsh Government announced that it would be introducing a set of consistent measures across all post-16 providers, and made the following statement in February 2016 (Welsh Government, 2016, p.1):

*The current measures for learner outcomes in FE and sixth forms are entirely separate:*

- *In FE, the main measure is 'learning activity success' which is based on all terminated learning activities, and therefore combines learner completion and attainment but without taking any account of grades or qualification points scores.*
- *In sixth forms, measures are based only on pupils who are entered for examinations; they therefore do not include retention/completion, but do take account of grades and points scores.*

*This lack of consistency means that colleges and schools cannot be held accountable for outcomes in the same way, or compared on a 'level playing field', even where learners are doing the same qualifications in different settings. It also means that learners cannot make an informed choice about studying at school or college.*

In order to address these issues, the Welsh Government has introduced a set of post-16 consistent measures across schools and colleges (Welsh Government, 2018a). The new measures consist of the following:

- learner achievement – which shows whether learners stayed until the end of their courses and achieved their qualification aim
- post-16 value-added – which shows the progress learners made based on their previous attainment
- learner destinations – which shows whether, after leaving learning, learners progressed successfully into further learning or employment

This suite of measures is in the final stages of development and the first statistical release of experimental data for the three new measures (which does not include all providers) was published in September 2018 (Welsh Government, 2018a).

Unpublished achievement data has been issued to schools and colleges, though there have been initial issues with the accuracy and reliability of the data provided by schools and colleges. The new post-16 value-added data set will provide information on how well learners achieve in relation to their prior attainment. This information has not been available previously through the All Wales Core Data Set or LLWR. Following a procurement exercise, Welsh Government contracted Fischer Family Trust Education Ltd to develop, pilot and implement a Welsh post-16 value added model, as part of the new consistent performance measures. This model was piloted in 2016-2017 and a first full set of value added reports was issued to schools and colleges in autumn 2017. Providers received the latest value added reports in February 2020. The methodology for learner destinations data is now finalised, after the first release of experimental data for learner destinations published in September 2018 (Welsh Government, 2018b).

## Evidence base

The findings and recommendations in this report draw on:

- visits to 20 secondary schools and further education colleges
- evidence gathered from focused activities during core secondary school and further education college inspections in Spring 2019
- examination outcomes at A and AS level
- a review of relevant literature including Welsh Government policies and updates, research papers, evaluations of government programmes.

Analysis of data from the following sources:

- The Welsh Government's All Wales Core Data Sets (AWCDS) for sixth forms
- Lifelong Learning Wales Record (LLWR) data
- Joint Council for Qualifications data
- Wales Examinations Database (WED)
- Pupil Level Annual Schools Census (PLASC)

Schools and colleges were selected following an analysis of data, consideration of inspection findings and feedback from HMI. The sample is as diverse as possible, including a range of English-medium and Welsh-medium schools, geographical location and socio economic factors.

The visits involved:

- interviews with senior leaders and sixth form/A level leaders
- lesson observations to evaluate the quality of teaching and learning in business and social studies subjects
- meetings with learners to discuss their work and to gather their views on the quality of business and social studies provision in their school or college
- scrutiny of learners' work
- scrutiny of school or college documents, including the most recent business and social studies subject reviews and improvement plans

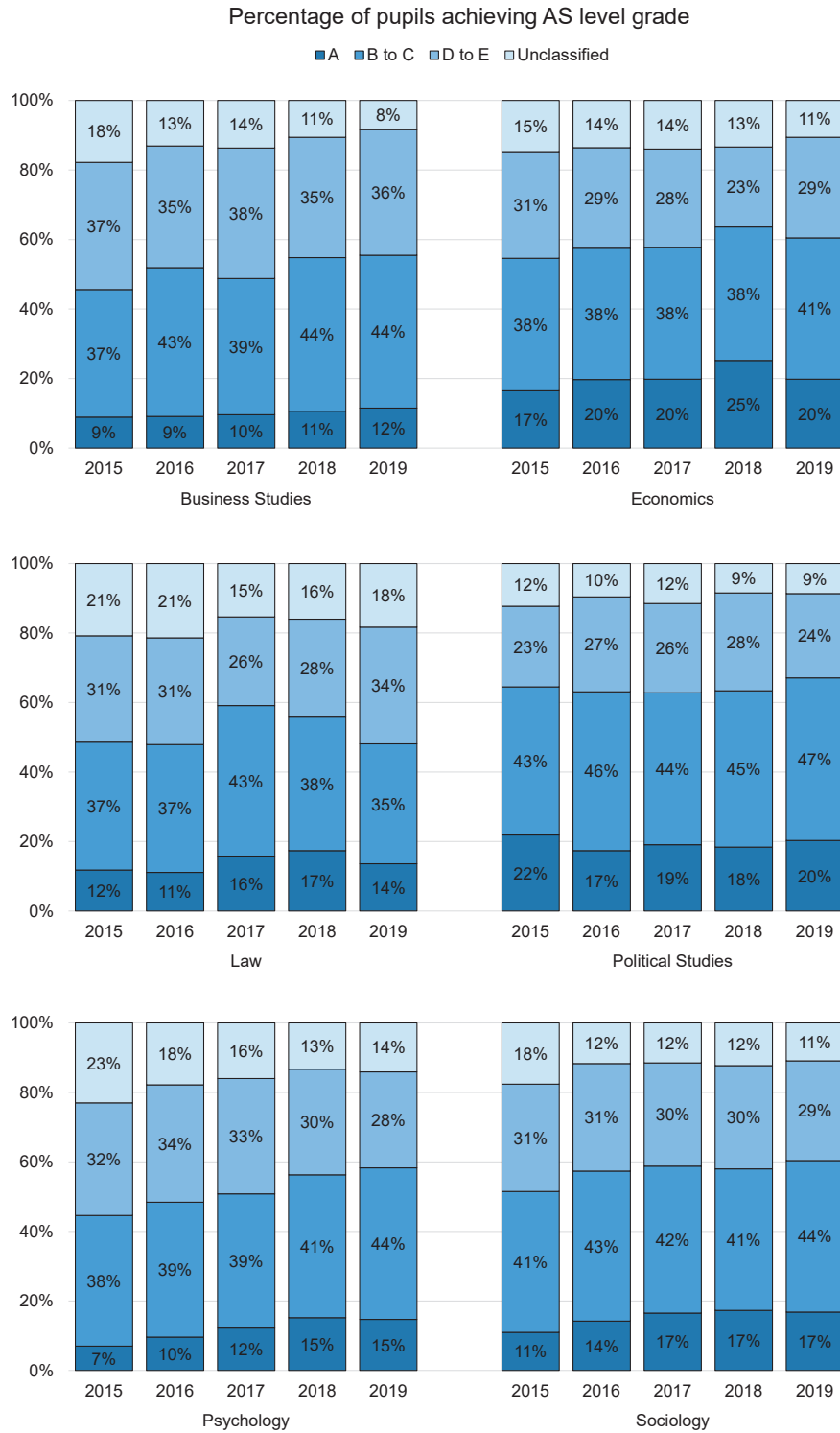
Estyn would like to thank the following schools and colleges that supported this thematic review:

- Alun School, Flintshire
- Bishop of Llandaff, Cardiff
- Brynteg School, Bridgend
- Caerleon School, Monmouthshire
- Castell Alun School, Flintshire
- Coleg Cambria, Wrexham and Flintshire
- Cowbridge School, Vale of Glamorgan
- Fitzalan School, Cardiff
- Gower College Swansea, Swansea
- Grwp Llandrillo Menai, Conwy
- Hawarden School, Flintshire

- Monmouth Comprehensive School, Monmouthshire
- NPTC Group, Neath Port Talbot and Powys
- Olchfa School, Swansea
- Stanwell School, Vale of Glamorgan
- St David's Sixth Form College, Cardiff
- St Joseph's RC High School, Newport
- The College Merthyr Tydfil, Merthyr Tydfil
- Whitchurch High School, Cardiff
- Ysgol Gyfun Gwyr, Swansea

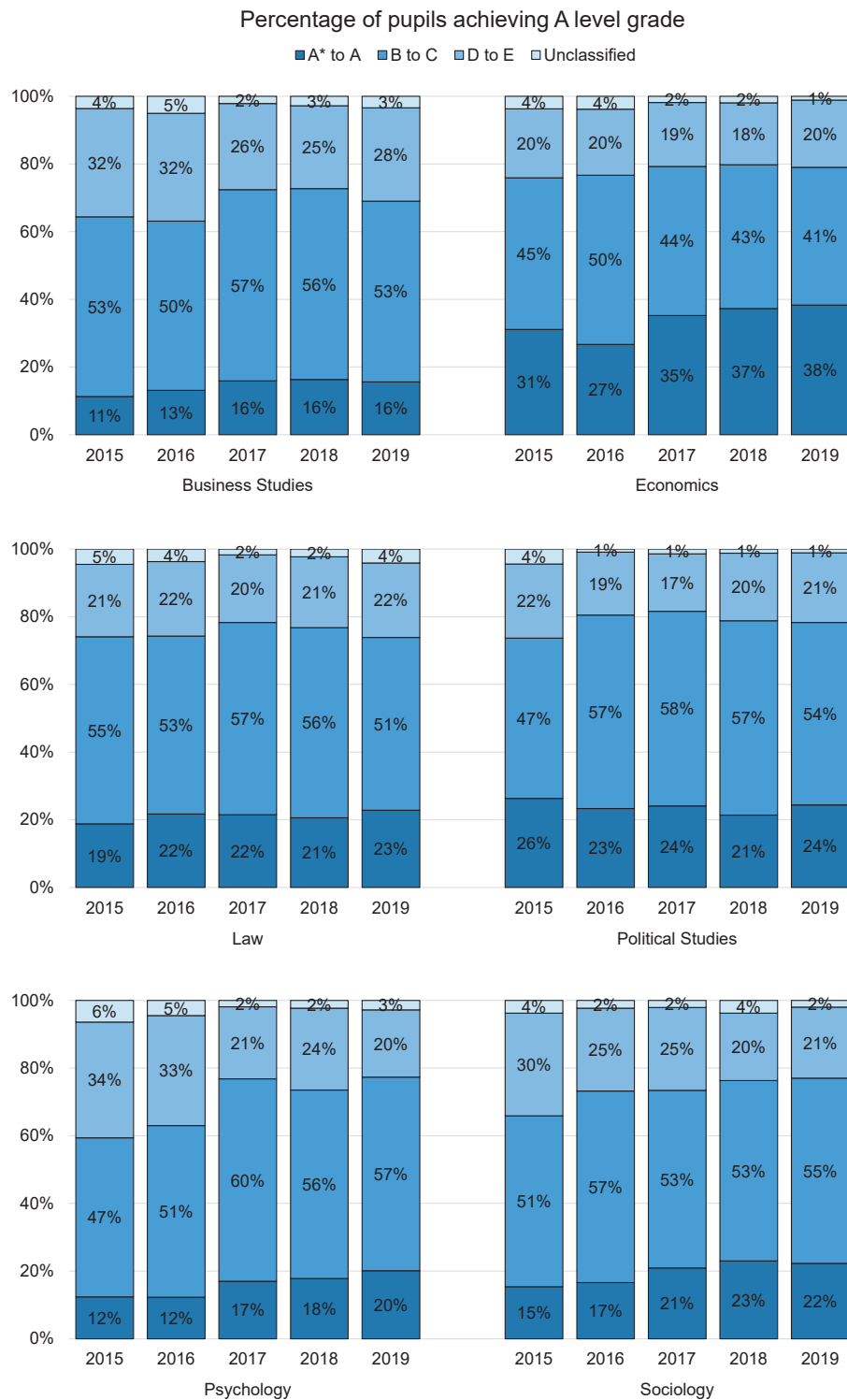
## Appendix 2

**Figure 2: AS level results**



(Joint Council for Qualifications, 2020a)

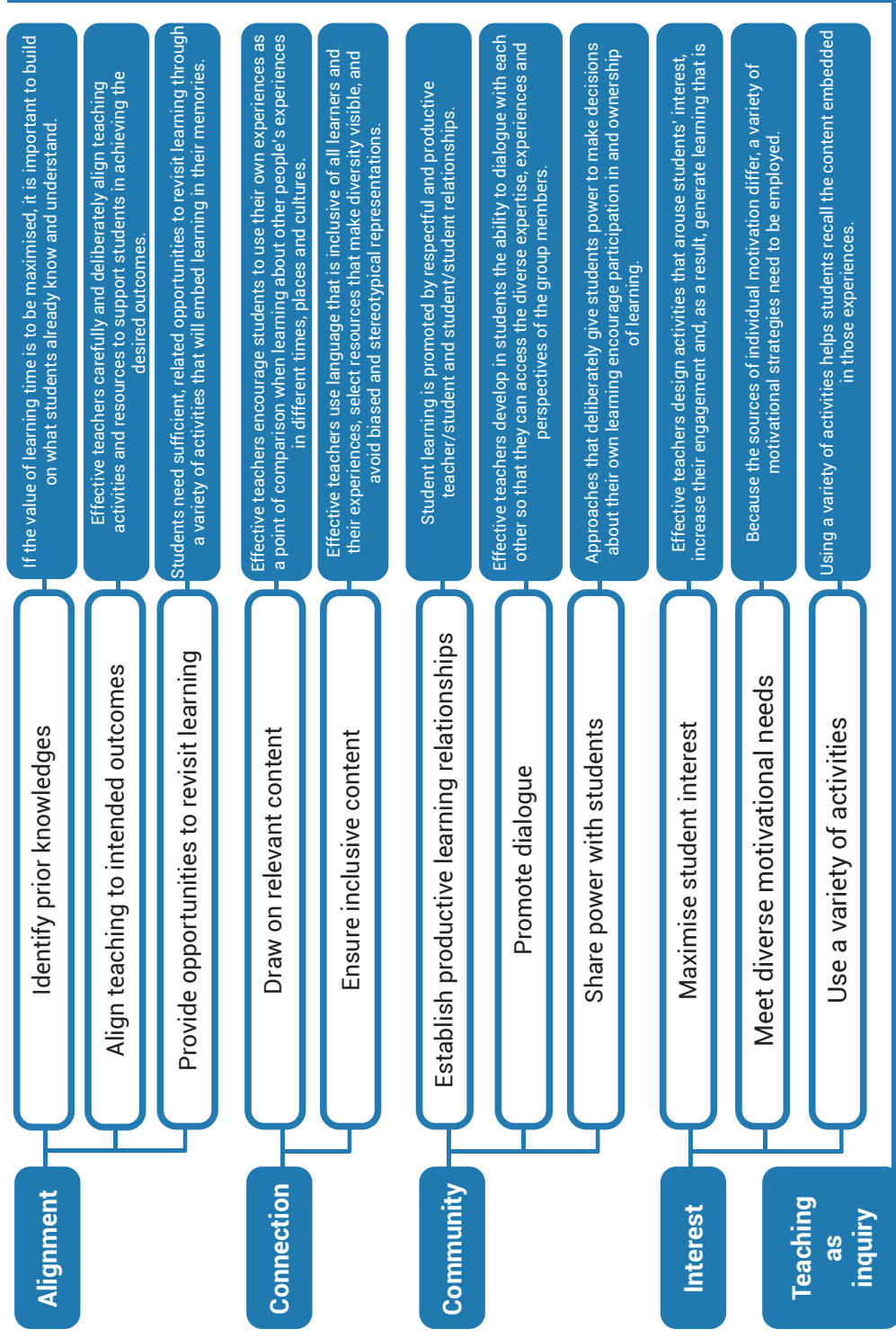
**Figure 3: A level results**



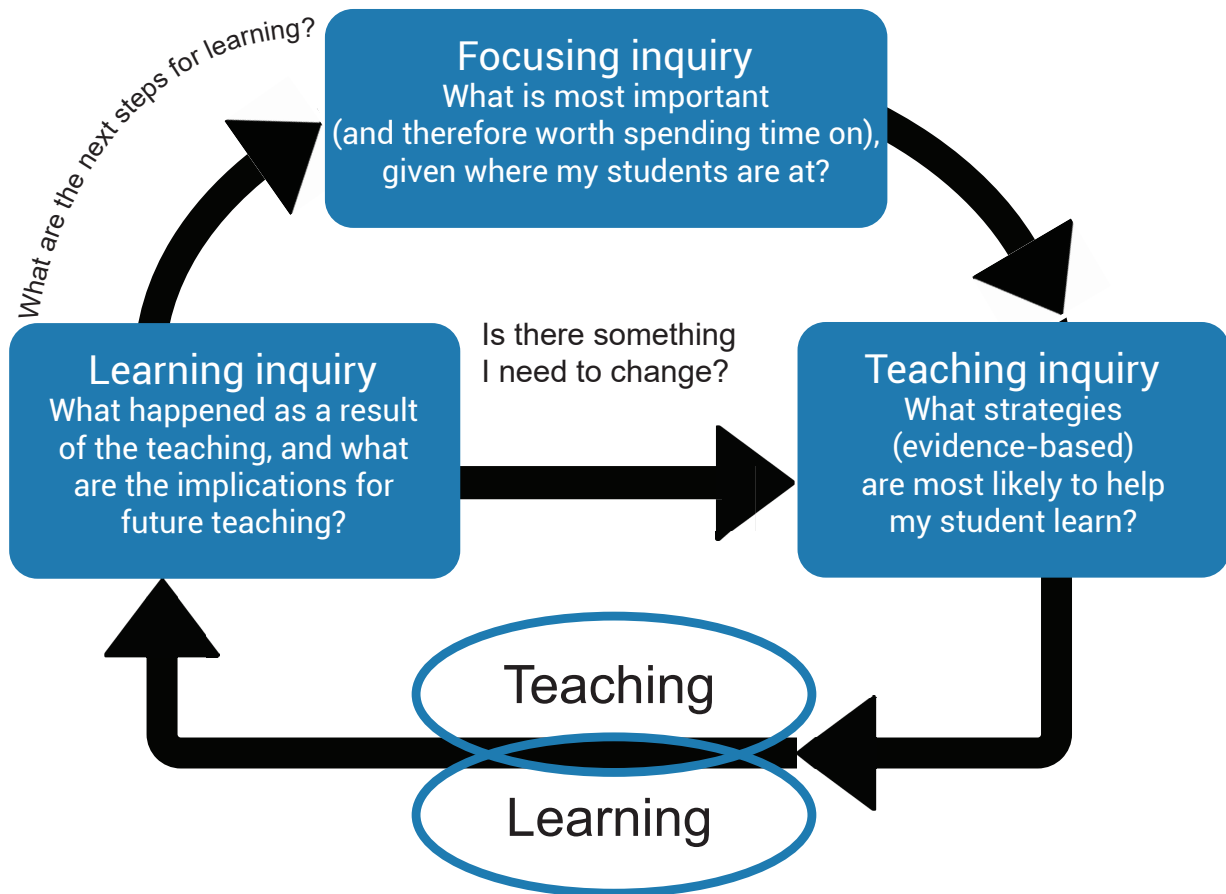
(Joint Council for Qualifications, 2020a)

## Appendix 3

# Effective pedagogy in social sciences



# Teaching as inquiry



Diagrams adapted from Sinnema and Aitken (2012)



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## Glossary

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<b>Average points score</b>	Each AS, A level and Welsh Bacallaureate grade is equivalent to a specific number of points. The total number of points for each learner in a centre is added up and divided by the number of learners to give the average points score.
<b>AWCDS</b>	The All Wales Core Data Sets
<b>BTEC</b>	BTECs are vocational qualifications offered at a range of levels. BTEC Nationals are available from level 3 and have a similar 'points value' to A levels.
<b>Completion rates</b>	How many learners who start AS and A level courses stay until the end of the academic year
<b>GCE A levels</b>	General Certificate of Education Advanced Levels
<b>GCE AS levels</b>	General Certificate of Education Advanced Subsidiary Levels
<b>LLWR</b>	Lifelong Learning Wales Record
<b>Level 3 threshold</b>	Two A levels or equivalent qualifications at grades A*-E
<b>Sector subject area (SSA)</b>	All qualifications are assigned to one of fifteen numbered sector subject areas as part of a classification system operated by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) and Qualifications Wales.
<b>Seren</b>	The Seren Network is an initiative funded by the Welsh Government to support the most successful learners to achieve their full academic potential and access the UK's most prestigious and selective universities.
<b>Subsidiary diploma</b>	BTEC Subsidiary Diplomas are advanced level programmes each equivalent to one A level and usually taken over two years.
<b>Success rates</b>	The proportion of A level learning activities that were successfully completed and attained at grades A*-E

**Value-added data** Value-added data is used to estimate how much of a positive (or negative) effect teaching and provision has had on individual learners by showing how much progress they have made from their starting points, based on prior attainment and other contextual factors. For example, if a learner is predicted to achieve a C grade at GCSE but achieves an A grade then the value-added for that learner is 2 grades.

**WJEC** Formerly known to as the Welsh Joint Education Council

### Numbers – quantities and proportions

nearly all =	with very few exceptions
most =	90% or more
many =	70% or more
a majority =	over 60%
half =	50%
around half =	close to 50%
a minority =	below 40%
few =	below 20%
very few =	less than 10%

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