

Chapter Five: Saving General Applied

Applied general qualifications are important to sixth form colleges: colleges offer some 130 different applied general qualifications at level three in as many different subject areas as are offered at A level. They are also important to students. While many in the sector would be able to advance an impassioned argument in support of applied generals, evidence of the importance of the applied general route beyond student testimonials and anecdote is in somewhat shorter supply. In this chapter, we seek to provide the evidence that is currently missing from this discourse.

In focusing on performance in applied general qualifications, we examine performance on three different routes through level three study. Our routes are, frankly, the routes that the Department for Education should have used in developing its retention analysis for the performance tables. While the Department gets caught up in identifying ‘core learning aims’ and seeing whether people get to the end of the core learning aim, we do something much more obvious and much closer to the student experience: we separate those students who are on a pure A level programme, those on a pure applied general programme, and those on a blend of the two qualification types.

Our analysis focuses on three things: what students are studying, whether they get to the end of a two year programme of study, and whether they achieve a ‘full’ level three outcome: defined here as achieving all elements of a programme of equal width to three A level subjects. As ever, we use prior attainment as our starting point for analysis, as it is only when we compare like with like that we get a clear sense of what is important.

In developing a data-set, we have drawn on data from those institutions where we have a full set of data for both 2016-17 and 2017-18. We have also used the 2015-16 data to provide a means of excluding those students who were on level 3 programmes the previous year. In all, our data-set comprises 64,526 students starting a study programme on one of these three routes in September 2016. The analysis focuses on those students starting a programme of equivalent width to three A level subjects or more.

Figure 5.0 examines the prior attainment profile of the students:

Figure 5.0 Students starting level three programmes at sixth form colleges: Sept 2016

	Indicative profile of GCSE grades	Students	Percentage
0.0-<4.0	Averaging below a D grade at GCSE	1699	2.6
4.0-<4.7	From straight Grade Ds at GCSE up to a seven C / three D blend	6253	9.7
4.7-<5.2	Around a Grade C average	10117	15.7
5.2-<5.5	From an eight C grade / two grade B mix up to an equal grade B and C blend	7533	11.7
5.5-<5.8	From an equal blend of B and C grades up to an eight B / two C blend	7967	12.3
5.8-<6.1	Around a Grade B average	7343	11.4
6.1-<6.4	From just above a straight grade B profile up to six B / four A profile	6728	10.4
6.4-<6.7	Around an equal blend of A and B grades	5539	8.6
6.7-<7.0	Approaching a Grade A average	3862	6.0
7.0-<7.5	Straight A grades up to an equal blend of A and A* grades	5024	7.8
7.5-<8.0	An equal blend of A* and A grades or higher	2461	3.8

The prior attainment profile becomes more interesting when we separate these students out into three different curriculum routes. The pure A level route contains those students starting at least three AS or A level qualifications and no applied general qualifications.

Figure 5.1: Students starting level three programmes by curriculum route: Sept 2016

	Number of sixth form colleges	Number of students	Proportion of Provision	Average GCSE score
A level	82	41,031	63.6%	6.2
Mixed	76	11,999	18.6%	5.3
Applied General	75	11,496	17.8%	4.7

Figure 5.1 provides us with some useful summary information. Of the 82 sixth form colleges in our analysis, all do A level and 76 offer some applied general provision, and all that offer applied general qualifications have some students on mixed programmes. Around 82% of students follow a programme with some A level content. Note how the average GCSE score varies by course route. While the average GCSE score for all students is 5.7, for pure A level programmes it is 6.2, for applied general courses it is 4.7, and for mixed courses, it is 5.0.

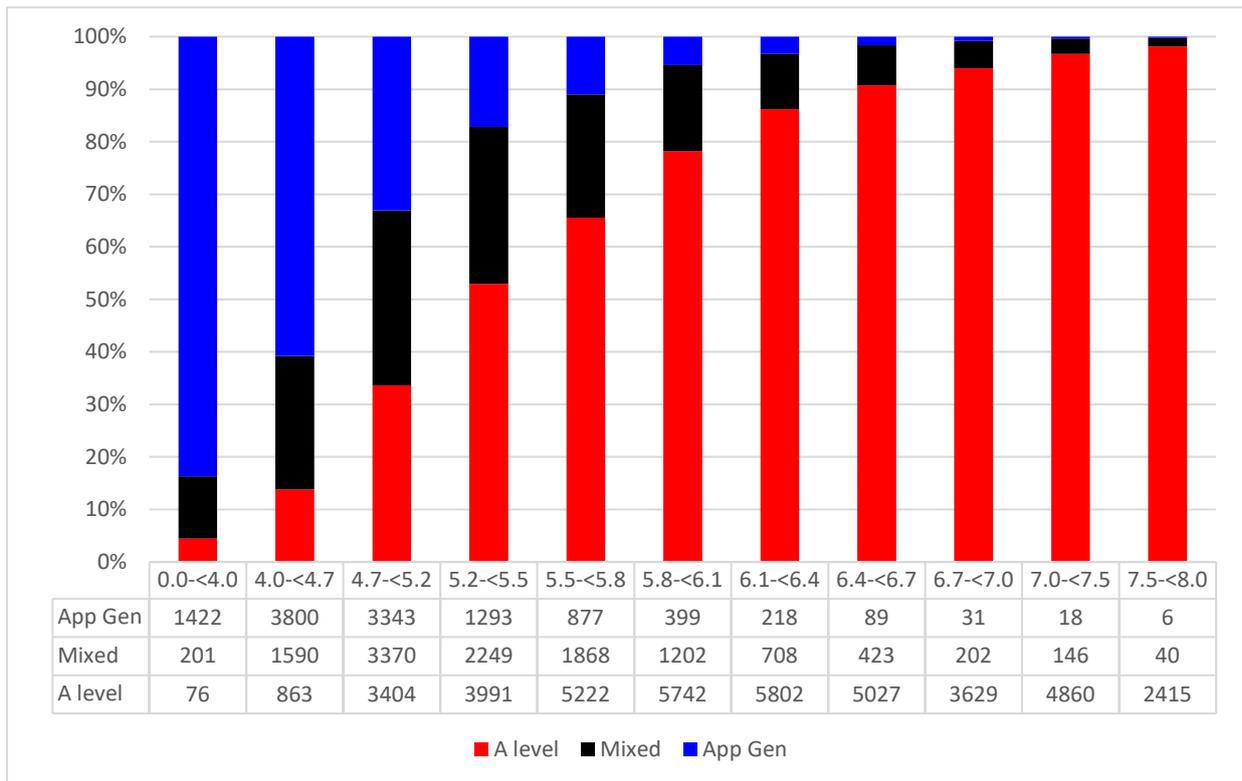
Figure 5.2 looks at the number of students on each curriculum pathway.

Figure 5.2: Curriculum pathways by prior attainment (2016-18 Cohort)

	0.0- <4.0	4.0- <4.7	4.7- <5.2	5.2- <5.5	5.5- <5.8	5.8- <6.1	6.1- <6.4	6.4- <6.7	6.7- <7.0	7.0- <7.5	7.5- <8.0
A level	77	871	3412	3993	5222	5742	5802	5027	3629	4860	2415
Mixed	217	1719	3583	2364	1940	1245	739	440	209	149	41
App Gen	1562	4270	4039	1608	1091	505	266	111	37	19	6
All	1856	6860	11034	7965	8253	7492	6807	5578	3875	5028	2462

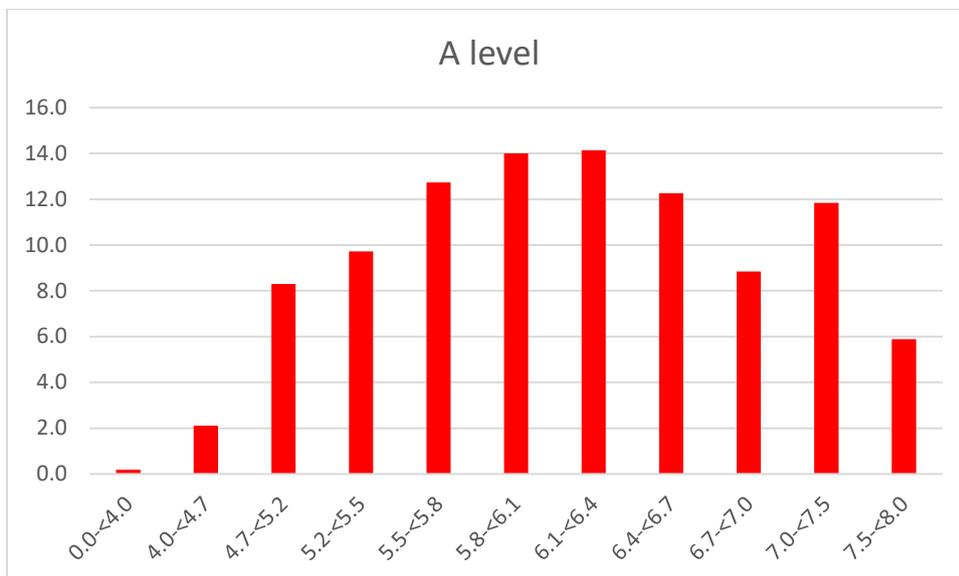
Figure 5.3 takes the data from Figure 5.2 and expresses it graphically. Note the contrasts in composition at different levels of prior attainment with the extremes being dominated by the pure A level and pure applied general route.

Figure 5.3: Curriculum pathways by prior attainment (2016-18 Cohort)



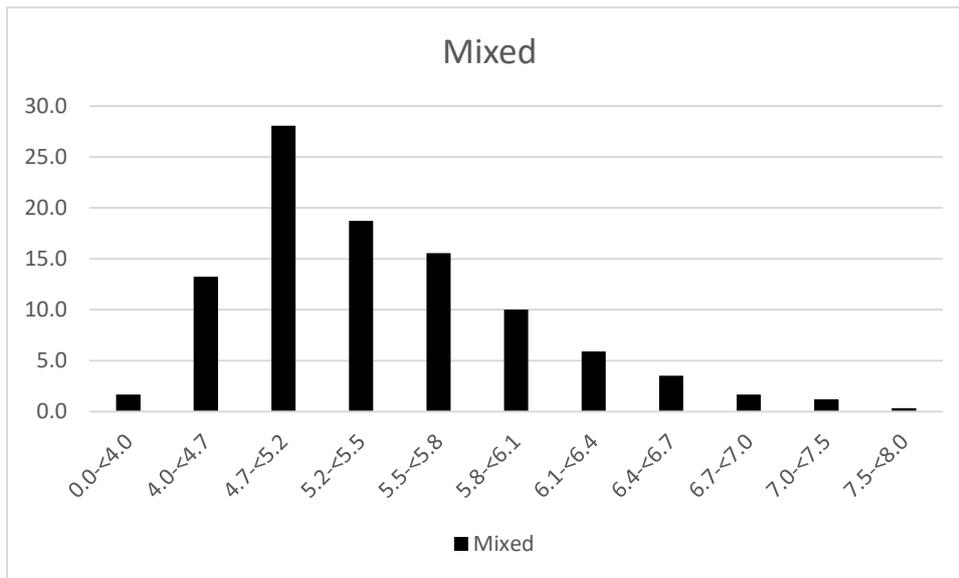
Figures 5.4 to 5.6 look at each of the curriculum pathways and examine the make-up of the cohort on each route.

Figure 5.4: Prior attainment distribution (A level) (2016-18 Cohort)



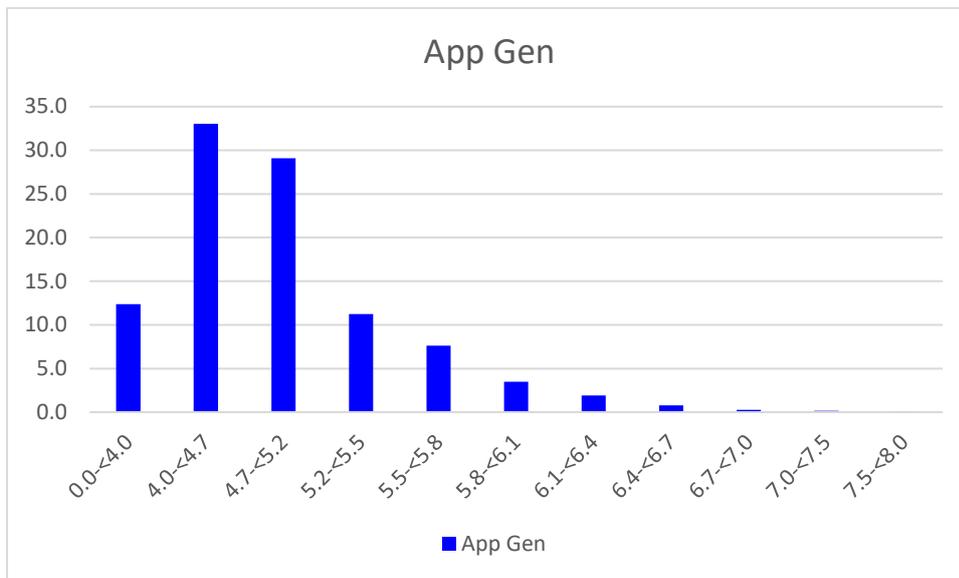
With the A level cohort we find that only 10% or learners have an average GCSE score below 5.2.

Figure 5.5: Prior attainment distribution (Mixed programmes) (2016-18 Cohort)



While the A level analysis saw relatively few learners with average GCSE scores below 5.2, on mixed programmes, some 43% of learners are found in these bottom three bands. Only 12% of the students on mixed programmes have an average GCSE score of 6.4 or higher.

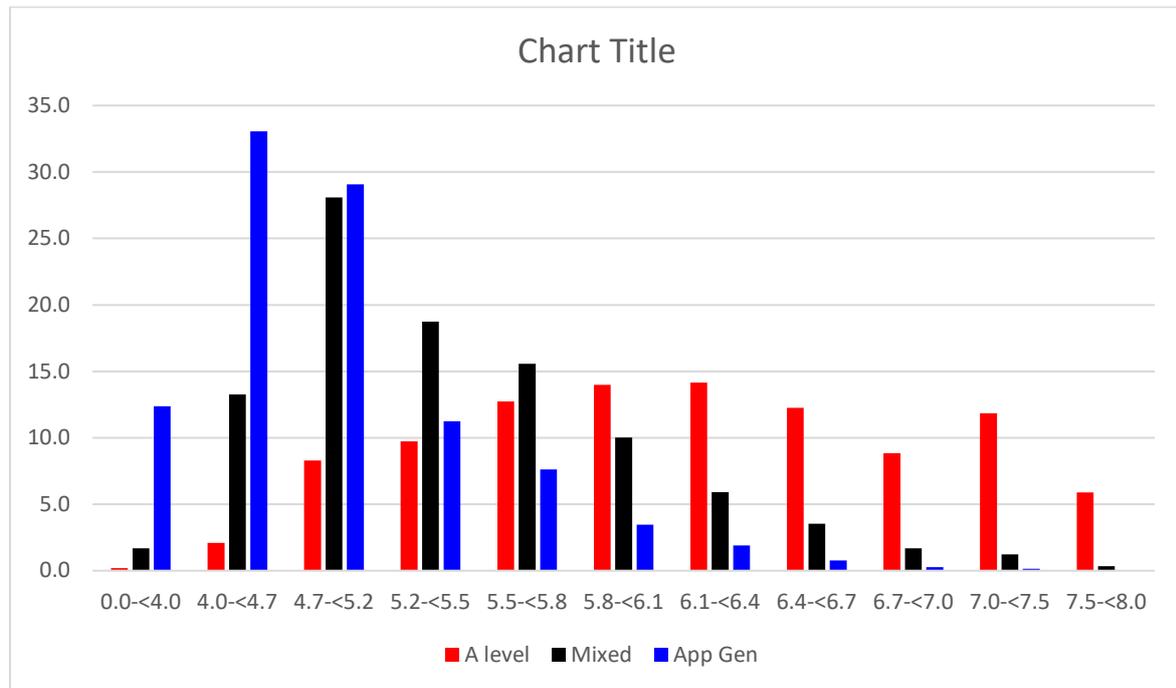
Figure 5.6: Prior attainment distribution (Applied general programmes) (2016-18 Cohort)



With applied general, we find an even stronger concentration of students at relatively low levels of prior attainment, with almost 70% percent of learners found in the lowest three bands. **Figure 5.7** draws these together and enables us to get a sense of the constituency for each qualification route. For students with relatively low levels of prior attainment, a pure applied general programme is the most common curriculum route. At the top end of the prior attainment range we find an almost exclusively pure A level offer. Mixed programmes occupy a place in the middle, used by colleges as a way of building resilience into student programmes of those students averaging between a B and a C at GCSE.

In this context the sheer ambition of any attempt to replace applied general qualification with T levels become clear. The scale of the use of applied general qualifications perhaps suggests that we might mean foolishness rather than ambition. If we took just the three bottom prior attainment bands, and decreed that all students above this level of prior attainment should be on pure A level programmes, and all those below it should be on T levels, we would be looking at finding 19,750 substantial work experience placements in sixth form colleges alone.

Figure 5.7: Curriculum pathways by prior attainment (2016-18 Cohort)



We have thus far established that applied general provision makes up a substantial part of the work of sixth form colleges, and that these students seem to be clustered in relatively low prior attainment bands. What we really need to establish is how effective these applied general and mixed routes are.

Our first analysis of performance focuses on retention. In this instance we have counted retention as completing any course in the summer of the upper sixth year. In other words, staying two full academic years at a particular college.

Figure 5.8 Retention measured by completing at least one course in the summer of the upper sixth year (2016-18 cohort) by curriculum route

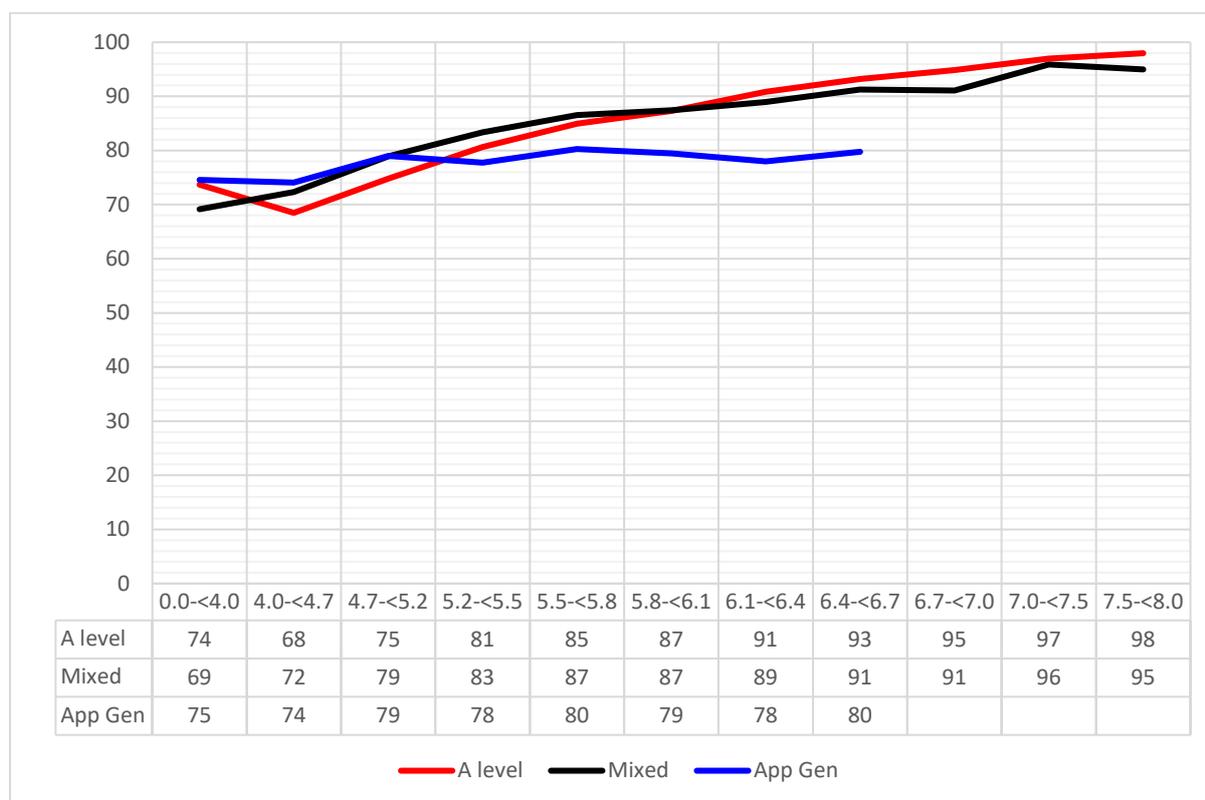


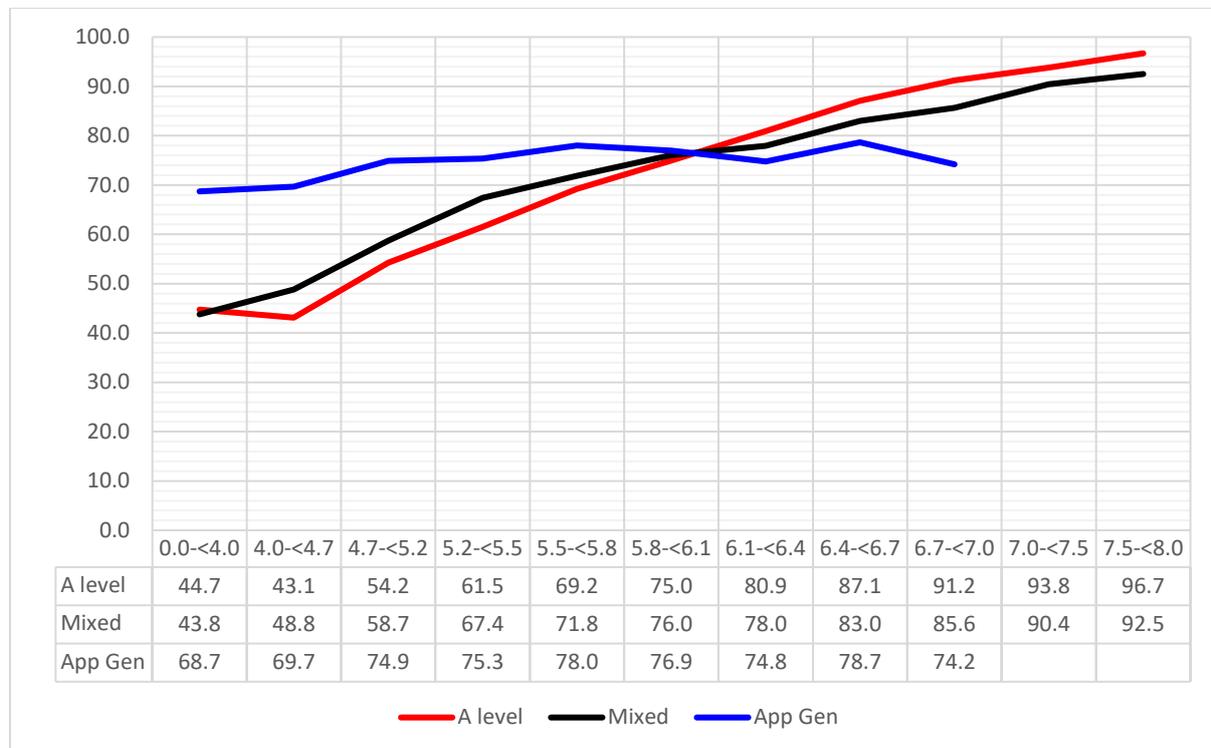
Figure 5.8 compares retention by the three curriculum routes. If we start with A level, we find a clear relationship between prior attainment and retention. As prior attainment rises, so too does retention: from 75% in the 4.7-5.2 band, up to 98% in the 7.5-8.0 band. Mixed programmes follow a relatively similar trajectory, but note how retention is actually stronger on mixed programme below 5.8, whereas A level is the slightly stronger route above this point. Retention on pure applied general routes is the highest in the bottom three bands, but hovers just south of 80% at average GCSE scores of 5.2 or above. This is interesting as it suggests that lasting the course on applied general qualifications is not particularly linked to prior attainment. Our evidence so far is that the best route for students in the bottom three bands is a pure applied general programme, but that students benefit from having some applied general in their programme of study up to around a 5.8 GCSE average.

The overall relationship with prior attainment is interesting, as it once again reveals the paucity of any approach which tries to compare performance to a simple national average. Our colleges do not deal with ‘average’ students. They deal with a range of students from different backgrounds and endeavour to develop curriculum routes to suit their learners. Measures such as the performance tables retention measures, and the ESFA’s QAR analysis, can never provide an adequate picture of performance to inform the public or Ofsted’s risk assessment process.

Figure 5.9 continues this analysis looking at the proportion of students in each band on each route who successfully achieve three or more A levels worth of qualification. The securing three A levels or equivalent, is a deliberately tough, but particularly meaningful measure. It is uncompromising in that a chunk of students will leave having achieved two A levels or equivalent and have an entirely positive destination, but will not gain credit by this measure. However, if we are to measure the effectiveness of a route, we ought to start by examining the extent to which students achieve the

standard width of level 3 outcome. It requires students to pass all of their three A levels, or to assemble positive outcomes across all elements of an applied general or mixed programme. It is perhaps too easy to allow students to drop to a two A level or equivalent programme. This measure rewards those that do not.

Figure 5.9 Attaining three A level passes or passes of equivalent width



In **Figure 5.9** we find that for average GCSE scores below 5.8, the strongest route is applied general in term of acquiring a breadth of achievement equal to three A levels. Far from calling in to question the future of the applied general route, the Department for Education should perhaps be insisting on it, as part of any comprehensive offer for 16-18 year olds. Above 5.8, the A level route is strongest. Mixed programmes are similarly successful to pure A level programme, but at average GCSE scores below 5.8, they are a stronger route than A level by around five percentage points. Indeed, outcomes pivot at around 5.8, and the A level route outperforms the mixed route by (again) around five percentage points. In the bottom two bands students starting an A level programme have a less than 50:50 chance of success. In an applied general route, a student’s chance of success by this measure is 70%. Note how outcomes on applied general qualifications are similar across the ability range, suggesting that there is little relationship between the ability to secure grades at GCSE and the likelihood of passing an applied general qualification. If we conducted the analysis here though we would find a clear relationship between attainment at GCSE and the likelihood of securing a Distinction or Distinction* grade.

We can also at this point return to some data we presented in our chapter on destinations, and remind ourselves of the relative success of the various routes in securing university destinations.

Figure 5.10 does just that.

Figure 5.10: university progression by curriculum pathway completers only (see Figure 4.3 above)

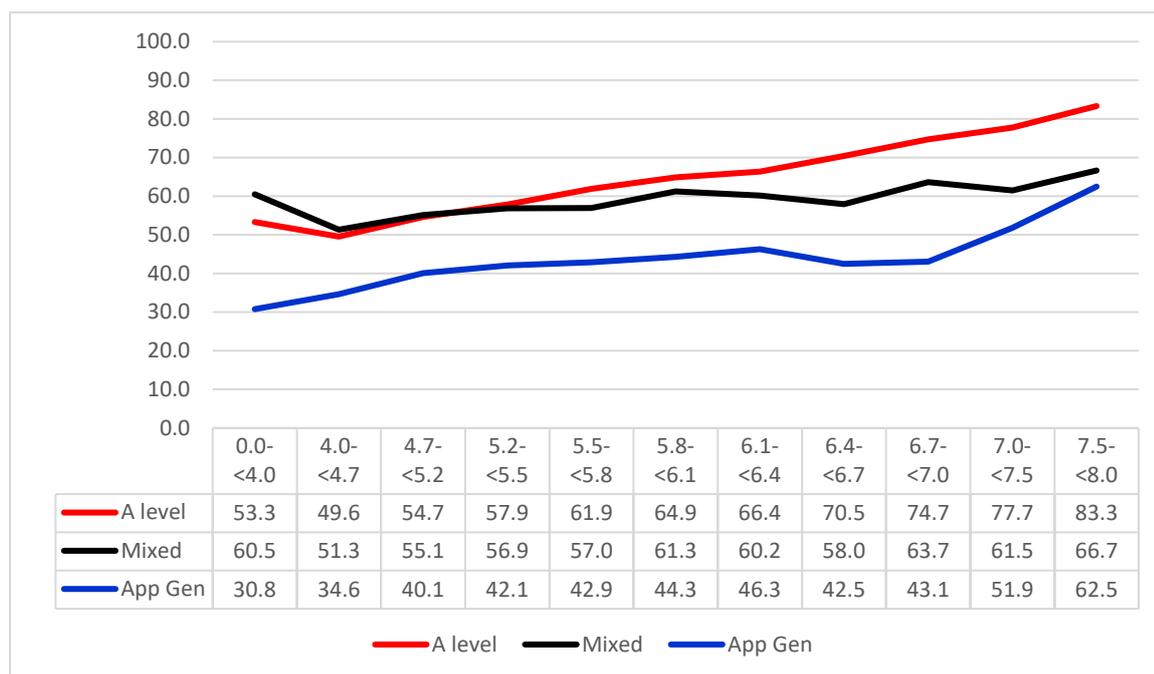


Figure 5.10 is based on a different data-set to the rest of the analysis in this chapter as it is not part of the 2016-18 cohort analysis: it simply looks at those students who completed the various routes in the summer of 2018 and examines whether they secured university places.

We see that applied general is the least positive route when it comes to university progression, but we really should not be surprised or indeed concerned about this. These are students who have deliberately chosen a vocational route, and students who have reached the end of the course. We have seen that retention is far superior on an applied general route at lower levels of prior attainment. Mixed programme are actually the strongest route for students below 5.5 (an equal blend of B and C grades or lower). For students with an average GCSE score above 5.5, A level provides the strongest route for university progression.

One way of reading this data, and I would suggest a powerful one, is to argue that what we are seeing here is pretty clear roles for applied general and mixed programmes of study. For students with relatively low GCSE scores, applied general qualifications strengthen programmes that mainly consist of A levels. Mixed economy programmes allow more to progress to university, where assessment will embrace both coursework and examined models, just like a mixed programme does. Pure Applied general qualifications have a clear role for students averaging around a C at GCSE or lower. Perhaps what is interesting here is that these are the routes that colleges have developed, without any grand government initiative telling them to.

There is a question that we are unable to address here, and that is what happens to these students once they get to university. Consider the 4.0 to 4.7 band for applied general students. Most of these students have more D grades than C grades at GCSE: indeed many of them have fewer than five GCSE passes, but more than a third of the students in each band are gaining places at university. They have gained these through performance on courses rooted in continuous assessment: understanding tasks, working to a brief and then refining work according to feedback. It would be intriguing to know how well they fare in a university context in the absence of the structures that have enabled them to be so successful in at level 3.

This is not of course to suggest that the applied general route is not without its problems. The rampant grade inflation over the last decade has reduced credibility and currency, and fuelled the calls for a review into this area. A sensibly managed migration to the new qualifications has a lot to recommend it.