

A level Religious Studies 2026

ENGLAND

Participation, attainment, gender and the subject pipeline



A briefing to accompany the NATRE A level RS 2026 infographic

August 2026

Cover image: NATRE, "A Level Students", 13 August 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What the 2026 A level RS results show in England

13,832 entries	-3.1% on 2025	25.3% A*-A	81.2% A*-C
--------------------------	-------------------------	----------------------	----------------------

- Participation is the warning light. RS entries fell 3.1% in 2026 while all A level entries in England grew 2.6%. Since 2019, RS entries are down 14.7% while the total A level market has grown 13.4%.
- This is not an attainment failure. RS is below the all-subject rate at A* and A*-A, but ahead at A*-B, A*-C and A*-E. Its A*-A rate is close to History and English Literature and above several similar subjects.
- Participation is strongly gendered, but attainment is not. Women are 68.9% of entries, yet A*-A outcomes are almost identical for women and men: 25.2% and 25.4%.
- Access and specialist capacity matter. Only 42.2% of qualified teachers involved in RE held a relevant post-A-level qualification in 2025/26. Subject availability, staffing, option blocks and the GCSE-to-A-level pipeline all influence participation.

Scope and method

This briefing analyses A level Religious Studies in England using JCQ results-day data, Ofqual Analytics, FFT Education Datalab and NATRE analysis of the School Workforce Census. It keeps participation, attainment and workforce evidence distinct so that a falling entry count is not mistaken for weak outcomes.

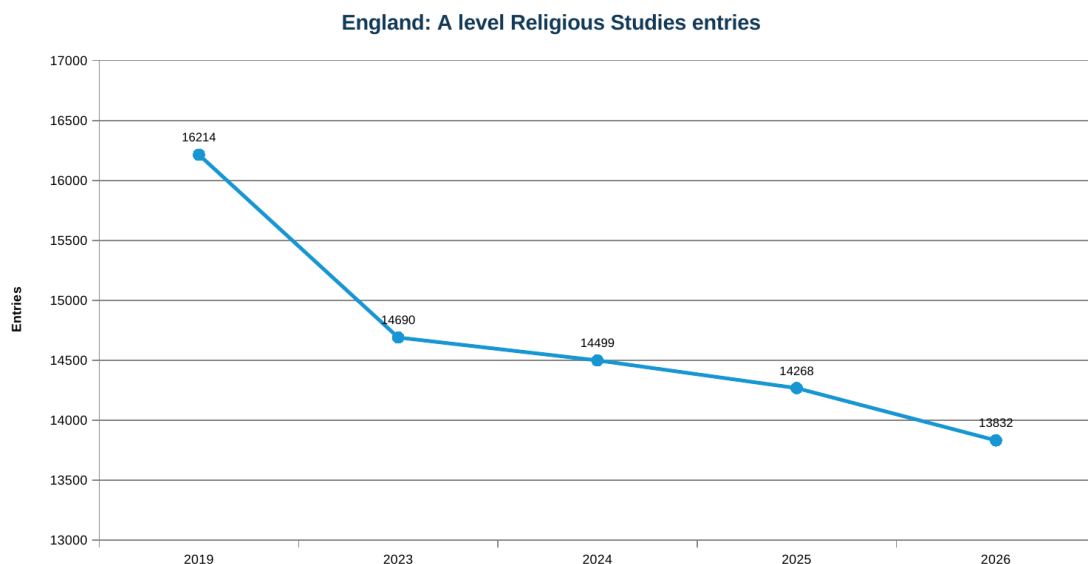
The infographic provides the headline summary; this longer briefing sets out the underlying patterns, caveats and questions for subject leaders and policy audiences.

Source: JCQ A level Table 1, 2026; JCQ historical results; Ofqual Analytics; FFT Education Datalab; NATRE School Workforce Census analysis.

ENGLAND

The central issue is participation

13,832 entries in 2026	-3.1% year on year	-14.7% since 2019	1.66% share of A level entries
----------------------------------	------------------------------	-----------------------------	--



Source: JCQ (2026), A level by subject, age, sex and country, Table 1, for 2025-2026; JCQ (2024), AS and A level results summer 2024, for 2019, 2023 and 2024 comparators.

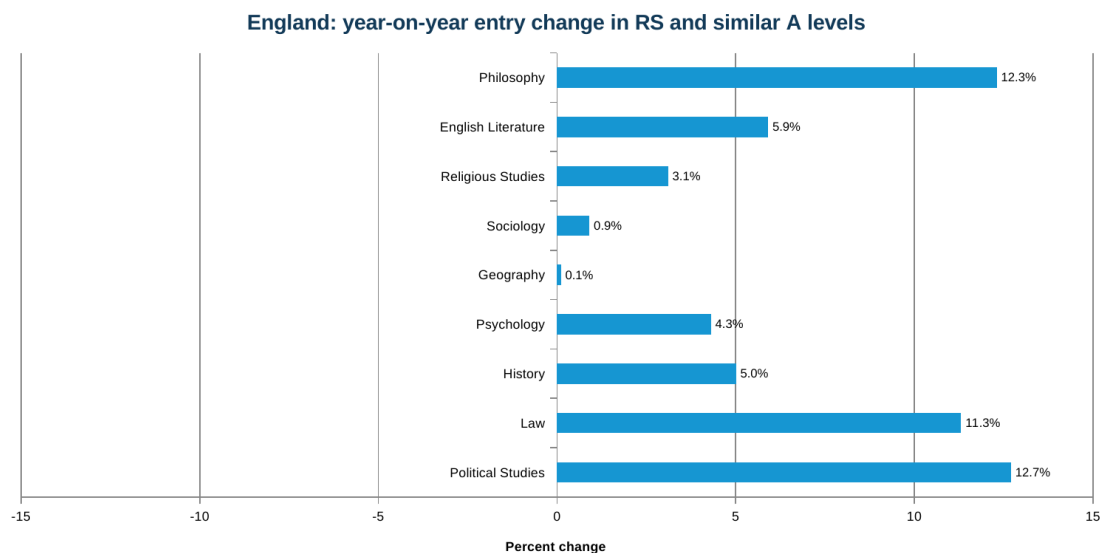
From 2019 to 2026, RS entries fell from 16,214 to 13,832. Over the same period, total A level entries in England rose from 736,746 to 835,606. RS therefore fell from 2.20% to 1.66% of all entries - a reduction of about one quarter in its share of the A level market.

The 2026 fall is not explained by a shrinking sixth-form cohort: RS entries fell 3.1% while all A level entries rose 2.6%. Ofqual provisional entries had already signalled the same direction.

Measure	2019	2026
RS entries	16,214	13,832
All England A level entries	736,746	835,606
RS share of entries	2.20%	1.66%

ENGLAND

RS is still a substantial A level - while several similar subjects grew



Source: JCQ (2026), A level by subject, age, sex and country, Table 1. Percentage changes calculated from 2025 and 2026 England, all ages, male and female combined.

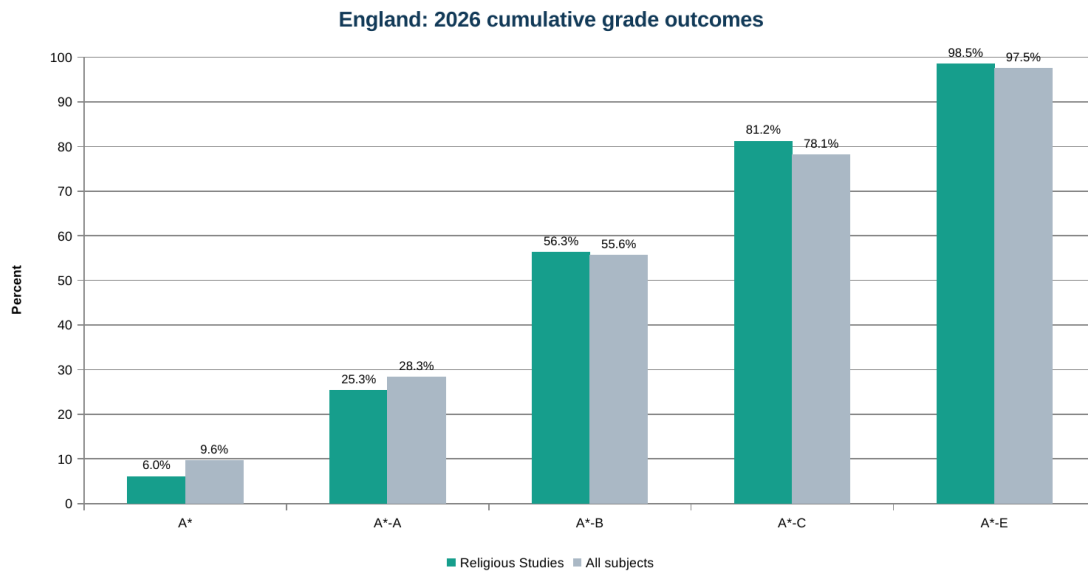
Religious Studies had 13,832 entries in England, making it 17th of the 51 individual JCQ subject categories. It sits between Law (15,853) and Media Studies (13,694), with English Language (12,857) and Physical Education (11,395) immediately below. RS is therefore not a niche A level, even though its share of the overall market is shrinking.

The direction of travel is particularly important. Political Studies, Law, History and Psychology all grew in 2026. RS fell 3.1%, while English Literature and Philosophy fell more sharply.

Key policy question: do students have a genuine opportunity to progress into RS? Subject availability, specialist staffing, option blocks, entry requirements and continuity from GCSE all influence participation.

ENGLAND

The attainment profile is stronger than the A*-A headline suggests



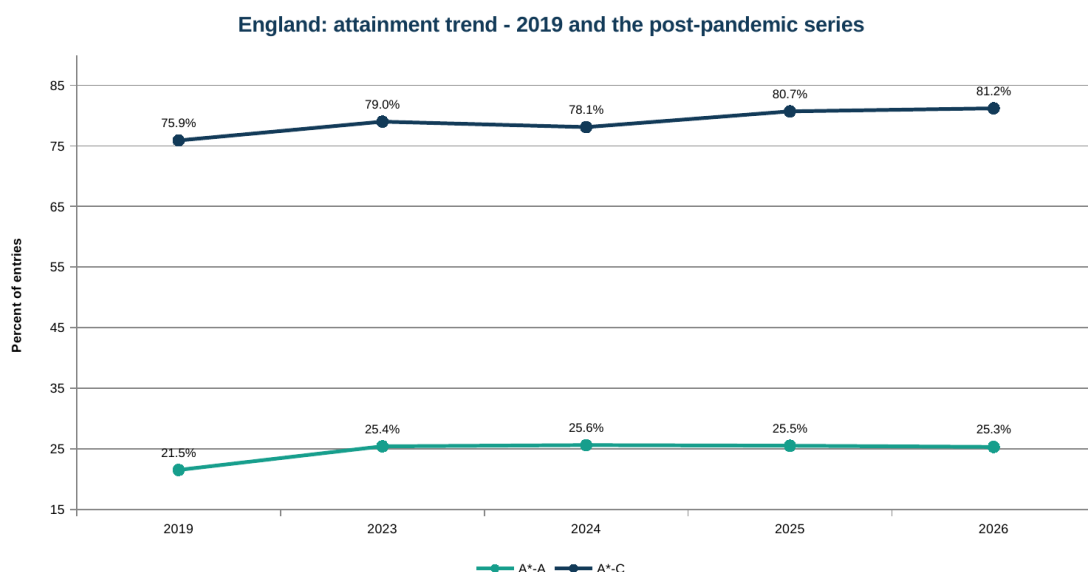
Source: JCQ (2026), A level by subject, age, sex and country, Table 1, England, all ages, male and female combined.

At A* and A*-A, RS is below the England all-subject average: 6.0% compared with 9.6% at A*, and 25.3% compared with 28.3% at A*-A. But the gap disappears by B. RS is slightly ahead at A*-B (56.3% versus 55.6%), clearly ahead at A*-C (81.2% versus 78.1%) and ahead at A*-E (98.5% versus 97.5%).

Across all 51 subjects, RS ranks 24th for A*, 22nd for A*-A, 20th for A*-B and 19th for A*-C. It is therefore misleading to describe RS simply as a lower-attaining A level. The distinctive feature is fewer grades at the very top, combined with a comparatively strong middle/high-middle distribution and a smaller lower tail.

ENGLAND

Top grades are flat; C+ has strengthened



Source: JCQ (2024), AS and A level results summer 2024, for 2019, 2023 and 2024; JCQ (2026), Table 1, for 2025 and 2026.

Against 2019, A*-A has risen from 21.5% to 25.3% and A*-C from 75.9% to 81.2%. Since the return to normal grading in 2023, however, the top end has been almost flat: 25.4%, 25.6%, 25.5% and 25.3% at A*-A. The C+ measure has moved 79.0%, 78.1%, 80.7% and 81.2%.

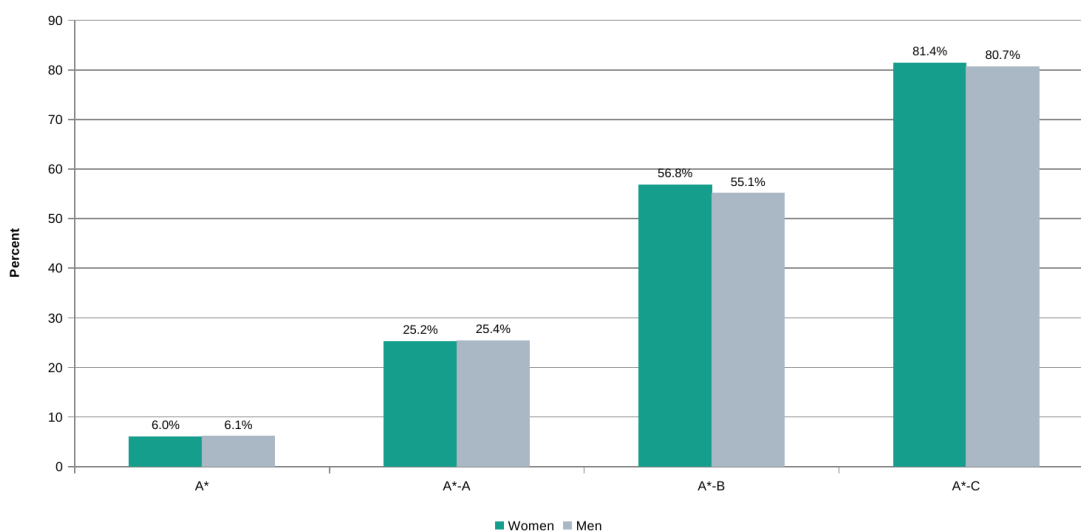
Why 2019 matters: 2020-2022 were exceptional grading years. The clean comparison is 2019, then 2023 onwards.

ENGLAND

A highly gendered entry pattern, but little attainment gap

Entry share	Women	Men
2026 entries	9,528 (68.9%)	4,304 (31.1%)

England: 2026 grade outcomes by sex



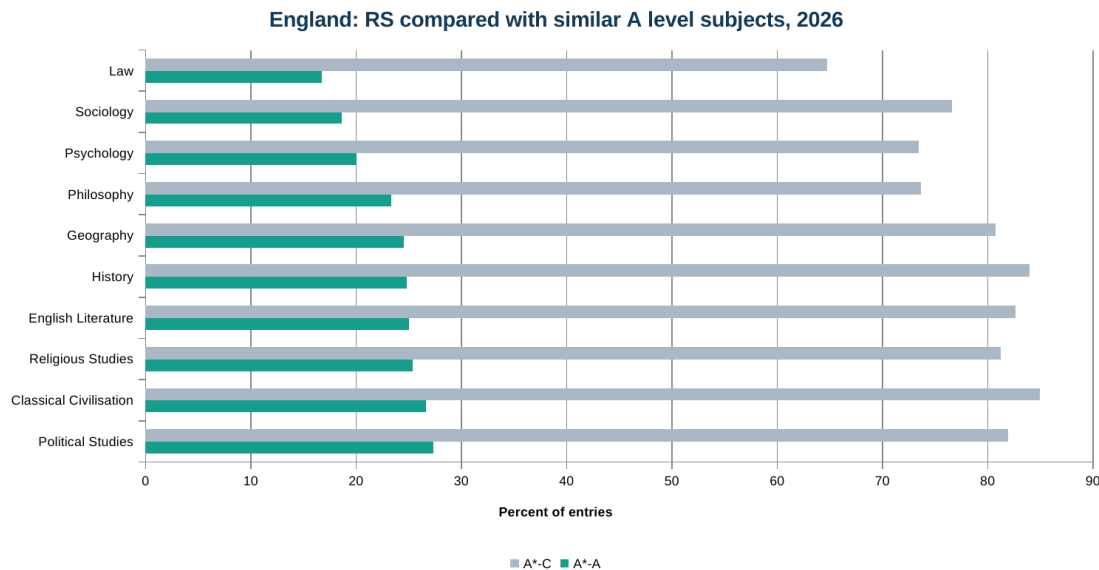
Source: JCQ (2026), A level by subject, age, sex and country, Table 1, England, all ages. Gender ranking calculated across subjects with at least 100 combined entries.

Women account for 68.9% of England's RS entries and men 31.1%. Among subjects with at least 100 entries, RS is the 9th most female-dominated A level in England. The imbalance is substantial, but it should not be confused with an attainment gap.

At A*-A, women achieve 25.2% and men 25.4%; at A*, the figures are 6.0% and 6.1%. Women have only a modest advantage at A*-B and A*-C. The same message holds for 18-year-olds.

Female RS entries fell 5.3% year on year in 2026 while male entries rose 2.4%, reducing the female share from about 70.5% to 68.9%. One year is not enough to call this a structural shift, but it is worth monitoring.

RS compares strongly with similar subjects



Source: JCQ (2026), A level by subject, age, sex and country, Table 1, England, all ages, male and female combined. Subjects selected as common humanities and social-science comparators.

RS's 25.3% A*-A rate is almost identical to History (24.8%) and English Literature (25.0%), slightly above Geography (24.5%), and above Philosophy, Psychology, Sociology and Law. Political Studies and Classical Civilisation are higher.

At A*-C, RS (81.2%) also compares favourably with most of the group. The national data therefore do not support a simple claim that RS is a weak-attaining A level. The more specific issue is top-grade concentration, not overall success through B and C.

WORKFORCE + ACCESS

Specialist capacity is a second warning sign

42.2% of qualified teachers involved in RE held a relevant post-A-level qualification	KS3 specialist teaching was most thinly spread	Pipeline GCSE access and staffing shape A level viability
---	--	---

The participation trend should be read alongside the workforce evidence. In 2025/26, only 42.2% of qualified teachers involved in RE held a relevant post-A-level qualification. Specialist teaching was least secure at KS3 - the stage that helps build confidence, subject identity and the pipeline into GCSE and A level.

The national measures should not be used to infer that every teacher without a recorded relevant post-A-level qualification is ineffective. They do, however, show that subject expertise and specialist capacity remain a legitimate policy concern.

What to monitor	Why it matters
A level RS availability by centre and area	Falling entries may reflect the disappearance of provision as well as student demand.
Specialist staffing from KS3 onwards	A stable pipeline depends on sustained access to high-quality subject teaching.
Option blocks and entry requirements	Students may be willing to take RS but unable to fit it into a viable programme.
GCSE-to-A-level progression	Weak continuity between phases can shrink otherwise viable sixth-form cohorts.

Source: NATRE (2026), Religious education staffing by subject specialism: England, 2010/11 to 2025/26, analysis of School Workforce Census data.

What the wider analytical sources add

Ofqual Analytics is England-only. Its A level tools provide subject-selectable views of outcomes, centre type, geography, centre variability and subject combinations. These are useful for testing whether national patterns are concentrated in particular kinds of centres or areas.

Centre type and geography matter because national subject averages combine providers with very different intakes, curriculum policies and entry practices. A department or policy maker should therefore compare RS nationally and with appropriate contextual peers, rather than relying on one headline average.

FFT's value is different: it synthesises the whole Level 3 market. Its 2026 analysis shows that overall A level participation and top-grade patterns were relatively stable, while subject entry movements varied substantially. This reinforces the point that RS's falling participation cannot be explained simply by national demography.

Ofqual lens	Useful question
Centre type	Where is RS offered and how do outcomes vary between provider types?
Geography	Which regions and local areas have the weakest access or uptake?
Centre variability	Are apparent changes robust over several years, especially in small cohorts?
Subject combinations	Who chooses RS, and what else do they study?

Source: Ofqual Analytics (2026), A level outcomes, centre type, administrative-area maps, centre variability and subject combinations; FFT Education Datalab, 13 August 2026.

POLICY AND CAMPAIGN USE

A strong subject with a shrinking pipeline

England's A level RS participation has fallen 14.7% since 2019 while the overall A level market has grown 13.4%. Attainment does not explain the decline: RS is close to History and English Literature at A*-A and ahead of the all-subject rate from A*-B onwards. The policy case is therefore principally about access, specialist capacity and the strength of the subject pipeline.

NATRE's policy asks to the Department for Education

Policy ask	Why
Restore the RE ITT bursary and funded Subject Knowledge Enhancement	RE trainees received a £10,000 bursary in 2025/26, but RE is not among bursary subjects for 2026/27. A sustained plan is needed to rebuild specialist capacity.
Make access to A level RS visible	Publish and monitor subject availability and uptake by centre type and geography, not entries alone.
Investigate top-grade comparability	Use matched prior-attainment analysis across RS and similar A levels, with guidance on stretching high-attaining RS students.
Strengthen the GCSE-to-A-level pipeline	Support specialist workforce planning and viable provision, including collaborative delivery where small cohorts threaten access.

The Government's June 2026 explanation for withdrawing the bursary was that RE postgraduate ITT recruitment had risen by 71% between 2023/24 and 2025/26 and that the need for new postgraduate RE trainees had reduced. NATRE's concern is that a short-term recruitment improvement does not resolve the wider evidence on specialist capacity or the continuing decline in A level participation.

Central 2026 message: A level RS remains a substantial and successful subject. The urgent question is whether enough students still have a realistic opportunity to study it and whether the specialist workforce is strong enough to sustain that opportunity.

A practical 2026 benchmarking framework for England

- Separate participation from attainment. Track entries as a proportion of the eligible post-16 cohort as well as raw entry numbers.
- Use the full grade profile. A*-A alone understates RS performance in 2026; also compare A*-B and A*-C.
- Analyse women and men separately. The large participation imbalance is not mirrored by a large within-subject attainment gap.
- Benchmark against similar subjects in your own centre as well as national RS. History, English Literature, Geography, Sociology and Psychology are useful comparators.
- Use a clean time series. Keep 2019 as the pre-pandemic anchor, then compare 2023-2026; do not treat 2020-22 as ordinary examination years.
- Investigate access, not just results. Check whether RS is actually available, where it sits in option blocks, entry requirements and whether specialist staffing is secure.
- Use Ofqual's centre-type, geography and subject-combination tools before drawing conclusions from all-age national figures.

Central 2026 message: England's A level RS remains academically strong, but participation is falling within a growing market. Access and specialist capacity are the key policy concerns.

SOURCES

Primary datasets and analytical references

Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) (2026). A level interactive results dashboard, published 13 August 2026. <https://www.jcq.org.uk/a-level-interactive-results-dashboard/>

JCQ (2026). A level by subject, age, sex and country, 2026 (Table 1). https://www.jcq.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2026/08/Table-1-A-level-by-subject_age_sex_country-2026.xlsx

JCQ (2024). AS and A level results summer 2024, used for 2019, 2023 and 2024 comparators.

Ofqual Analytics (2026). A level outcomes in England; centre type; administrative-area maps; centre variability; subject combinations. <https://analytics.ofqual.gov.uk/>

Ofqual (2026). Provisional entries for GCSE, AS and A level: summer 2026 exam series, 9 June 2026.

FFT Education Datalab (2026). A-Level, T-Level and other Level 3 results 2026: The main trends in grades and entries, 13 August 2026.

Department for Education (2026). Every child achieving and thriving: Schools White Paper.

UK Parliament (2026). Written question 11046, Religion: Teachers, answered 26 June 2026.

Department for Education (2026). Initial teacher training bursary funding manual: 2026 to 2027 academic year; and 2025/26 manual (£10,000 RE bursary).

NATRE (2026). Religious education staffing by subject specialism: England, 2010/11 to 2025/26. Analysis of School Workforce Census data, August 2026.