

2021 grade plans – a bigger disaster than last year?

By Sammy Wright, Social Mobility Commissioner for Schools and Higher Education

The government has published a broadly sensible proposal for exams in 2021, with one glaring error.

To look at how we calculate grades without looking at learning loss and catch up at the same time leaves young people at risk of catastrophic unfairness.

The cancellation of examinations this summer is not because the pandemic makes them impossible to sit – the BTECs that went ahead last week are proof of this – but rather because the unequal impact of the pandemic makes it impossible for them to be fair.

Not on a level playing field

This is for the simple fact that disadvantaged students have had less digital access and schooling, resulting in higher learning loss than their more advantaged peers. They will not be on a level playing field.

As such, qualifications for 2021 can never be an objective measure of performance in the way we are used to, no matter how much we might wish it.

And if, as the proposal suggests, we ask teachers to ignore lost learning and attempt 'objectivity' while simultaneously suggesting that the grades they award should match the inflated profile of 2020 results, we are heading for a worse disaster than last year.

The destinations gap between the disadvantaged students most impacted by COVID-19 and their peers will yawn wider than ever.

Correct bias and ensure parity

Once we accept that these judgements must inevitably include some measure of a student's potential, the government is right in saying we need to use assessment evidence – probably based on the cancelled exams – to inform teacher judgement, help correct bias and ensure parity.

But this evidence must only be a guide and a check. We also need to give teachers the opportunity to show how far a student currently is from their true potential.

For students who might have the ability to progress on to the next stage, but have high levels of lost learning, we must ensure that they are offered proper support and catch up at the start of the next phase of their

education.

One solution is a fully funded extra year of education, for example expanding and covering tuition fees for the Foundation year that many universities already offer and adding a year of free post-16 provision.

Alternatively, we could provide an extra term on all post-16 and higher education (HE) courses. This could be made possible by increasing the funding of post-16 providers to enable them to provide more hours of teaching per week, and by adjusting course completion dates for HE.

The government's proposals make several important and useful suggestions:

- Grades and assessments – The consultation is absolutely right to say that we must ensure that learning continues right to the end of the academic year. Grades are only an indicator. To progress, students must have, as far as possible, the education the grades represent. As such, we whole-heartedly welcome the proposal that grades should be linked to school-based assessments in the summer – without which many young people would disengage. But we caution that to simply make this a direct link, with students effectively given mock exam grades, would be the worst of both worlds and would open the door to systemic inequality.
- Ensuring clearing happens after appeals: It is also right to propose that we must have a robust system of appeals, designed in such a way that schools can submit their own evidence in good time to ensure everyone has a verified grade before the traditional results day. At all costs we must avoid the chaos of clearing in 2020 – and as such, we again call on UCAS and universities to ensure that clearing does not happen until all appeals have been responded to.
- Vocational education is important: The proposals for vocational and other qualifications are sensible in outline and rightly reflect the huge variety in these courses and the uses to which they are put, as well as the range of evidence already gathered and the skills of centres in assessing this. Getting the detail right will be essential, as will ensuring that students who elected not to sit BTECs in the confusion of the lockdown announcement are not penalised for this decision.
- Opportunity to sit exams: The consultation is right to make special provision for private entrants. Exam boards have already been planning an extra, one-off alternative exam in July for students who miss the main series. Given the proposed early release of grades to students, there seems little justification for not allowing any other student the option to sit this exam if they are not happy with the grade awarded by their institution and feel they have no grounds for appeal.

We cannot lose sight of the most important fact that lies at the heart of this. Ofqual must work closely with DfE to address policy, concurrently dealing with qualifications and learning loss.

No matter how grades are awarded, many students will be embarking on courses

in September 2021 at a lower level than they may have done in a normal year. We must have a bold and comprehensive plan to enable the most disadvantaged groups to catch up with their more advantaged peers. It needs to be part of a long-term strategy, fully funded, planned by educationalists with cross party consensus, that looks forward for the next five years to support those most impacted by COVID-19 over their educational lifetime.

Many of us have been calling for this since the start of the pandemic. Now it is time for action.