

Contributing to a robust and fair system for 2021 examinations

The Social Mobility Commission is pleased to be contributing to the planning process being led by the Department for Education and the exam regulators, Ofqual, as we work together to plan next year's examinations in the light of the ongoing pandemic.

The right measures implemented in a timely way could ensure an equitable and rigorously planned system is in place for more than one million students in the UK who will be taking GCSEs, A levels and BTECs next summer.

Most recognise that there is a widening achievement gap in the nation's schools and that the impact of coronavirus has disproportionately hit pupils in areas of deprivation.

To support students from lower socio-economic groups, the Social Mobility Commission has made the following recommendations:

- Suspend school performance tables for 2021, as they fail to take account of the disproportionate learning loss experienced by students in areas of deprivation.
- Work with schools and colleges to develop a clear and consistent system for collecting centre assessed grades that can be used as a contingency measure if individual students are unable to take exams.
- Offer students the opportunity to take exams in Autumn 2021, without this being considered a 'resit'. The results would need to be made available in time for UCAS applications for 2022 entry.
- Support schools with extra resources, such as additional staff and venues, so that they can provide Covid-secure examination environments.

Responding to Covid-19 challenges

Sasha Morgan, director of the Social Mobility Commission, says: "We are delighted to make an effective contribution to the debate and be part of the solution. Incorporation of our recommendations will ensure that disadvantaged students have the best possible experience next summer."

Sammy Wright, a Social Mobility commissioner and Lead for Schools and Higher Education, has prepared a detailed statement setting out our advice.

He said: "2020 has revealed much of what is problematic about our examinations and qualifications system, so we are pleased to get involved in planning practical solutions for 2021.

"We will continue to work closely with the Department for Education, Ofqual, schools, colleges, and social mobility charities to refine these concepts

over the next few months.”

The statement in full:

“We recognise the hard work that teachers, school leaders and the Department for Education have done in keeping schools open in the most difficult of circumstances. We believe that public examinations should go ahead next summer as the best way of allowing students to gain recognition for their work, and to allow them to move on to the next stage of their lives. However, it is hard to overstate the extent to which Covid has widened existing gaps in achievement and educational entitlement, and as such, there need to be significant short and long-term actions to guard against the worst inequalities in the exam system.

Schools must not be ambushed at the last minute on this – they need time to adjust their teaching and their focus in ways that allow them to provide an effective education for the most vulnerable. Teachers are experienced and capable, but are under huge strain even during a normal exam season – during the pandemic every effort must be made to support them. We must also not fall into the trap of thinking that solutions that benefit all students will address the widening achievement gap. In a competitive exam system like ours, the key worry is that disadvantaged students will be outperformed by their peers whose experience of lockdown has been far smoother and more productive.

The key question the commission has considered in setting out our advice is ‘What constitutes a good outcome for the students who have been most disadvantaged this year? Are they better with weaker grades in more subjects, or better grades in the subjects they need?’ We firmly believe that if we can free up schools by taking away some of the pressure of performance tables that we think are unlikely to tell us anything useful about the system this year, then we can allow deprived students who have often suffered the most to be given tailored solutions.

In light of this, we recommend the following for schools:

- School performance tables should be suspended in 2021 because they cannot perform their proper function this academic year. They are poorly equipped to reflect or take into account variegated levels of learning loss. We also believe the performance tables create perverse incentives in the school system. Without the threat of league tables in 2021, schools can be freed to allow the students who have been most heavily impacted to focus on the key qualifications they need for progression.
- The Department for Education, and the regulatory board Ofqual, should produce a clear, simple system for collecting centre assessed grades that can be used as a contingency. The system must be rigorous, moderated, and issued in good time for staff to gather any information needed. These should then be used for students unable to sit exams, or for whom their schools have decided to focus on other key qualifications.
- In those instances, students would take formal exams in only critical subjects for their personal progression and receive a certificate of

completion where a centre assessed grade was used. This blended approach would ensure that students had covered the content, but free them up in the last stretch to focus their revision where they needed.

- Students should be allowed the option of an exam series in the autumn, as they were in 2020, without this being labelled as a 'resit', and the results should be released in time for the UCAS deadline for 2022 entry.
- Additional places for full resit years should be funded at the same rate as current 16-18 funding.
- The use of a back up exam is a sensible option, but it should be after the main series, not before.
- Mitigations in content and structure of exams benefit all candidates, and so do not address gaps between those who have struggled with remote learning due to home circumstance and those who have not. As such, while some adjustment (like the reduction in content of English Literature) may be practically necessary and useful, it should not be regarded as a solution.
- Generosity in grading for 2021 should aim for a midpoint between 2019 and 2020, but following a normal mathematical distribution, rather than replicating the anomalies of 2020.
- Schools must have access to extra venues and extra staff to invigilate those venues to enable them provide Covid-secure environments during examinations.
- Arrangements for students isolating at the time of exams have to take into account the vast difference in personal and socio-economic circumstances. Home invigilation should be avoided.

For the students progressing to university:

- Arrangements providing grants and opportunities for gap years for those with fewer familial resources should be retained.
- At the moment, some courses prejudice those who have done an extra year, and some institutions struggle to accommodate retakes of years because of funding reductions for older students – this could easily be addressed.