

Letter to the Education Secretary

Dear Gavin

You were right to warn us that grade inflation can cause problems for universities allocating limited places to the best candidates. Grade inflation leads to demands for more discriminating higher grades, as with the introduction of the A* to offer some distinction between a large number of students who all came to qualify for an A grade.

It is important that next year the Examining Boards and Ofqual re establish a sound process for awarding grades to students that commands general confidence in the qualifications and allows universities to select the best students for the courses they offer. I am glad to hear that we will be returning to an exam based system. Awarding grades determined by the pupil's own teachers places the teachers in a difficult position of having to defend the grade, and leaves open the worry that some teachers take a more generous approach to their own students than others. An exam is professionally marked by teachers marking the work of other people's students, removing the chance of judgement being influenced by personal knowledge and relationship with the pupil. The grade arrived at is recognised as independent of the pupil's own teacher and school.

Next year the Examiners and the Boards will need to ask themselves how to pitch the standards and the grade boundaries. Should they return to something like the level of 2019, or should they incorporate the grade inflation of 2020? It is an important issue because it will send out a message about how the Examiners see standards. If the best universities and courses stay with similar numbers of UK students between the two years it merely determines how high a grade any given pupil needs to achieve to get to the best institutions. If there are roughly the same total number of places grade inflation has an impact on grades needed to get a place at all.

There will also be questions to resolve over what to expect of A level candidates who lost some months of full time education in school this spring and summer. The Boards will also need to consider what impact if any complying with CV 19 guidance on social distancing will have on their education in the 2020-21 academic year. Will there be any adjustments to practicals, events in subjects like music and drama, foreign language conversations and other elements in some A level assessments? The Boards both need to be fair the class of 2021 and ensure that nonetheless they attain good standards that are comparable to other years.

One thing it should be possible to agree. Getting all exam year pupils back into school and offering them full teaching and good curriculum from here is essential for their education and for maintaining standards. I would appreciate details of your approach to the teaching and standards of exam for 2021.

Yours

John