

SMC response to the government's plan for 2021 exams and catch-up

News story

The government needs to ensure teacher graded exams are fair and to think beyond summer schools in coronavirus education recovery plan, says SMC



Sammy Wright, Social Mobility Commissioner Lead for Schools and Higher Education, said:

“This week the government is taking the first tentative steps towards addressing the educational impact of coronavirus on schools and colleges, but there is a lot more that needs to be done. COVID-19 has exacerbated the existing inequalities, and disadvantaged students will continue to fall behind without more sustained support.”

Addressing unconscious bias when teachers grade exams

“We welcome the fact that students will receive grades that have been awarded and determined by their teachers, with pupils only assessed on what they have been taught in 2021. Nonetheless the detail is important: we must address potential unconscious bias to fairly mediate the impact on disadvantaged students.

“We hope that the range of evidence the Department for Education called upon, and the freedom given to teachers, indicates a willingness to think of grades as an indicator rather than a decider of ability and potential. This is vital in allowing fair progression to the next stage of education.

“The absence of an algorithm to standardise grades is understandable after last year’s debacle. It was badly designed. But algorithm is an important way to ensure fairness. In having nothing this year, we have no check on the overall distribution of grades, which could hurt disadvantaged students the most. This makes it even more important to mitigate potential negative impacts on progression by providing extra support for pupils aged 16-19.”

Summer schools are not the only solution to help catch-up

“The catch-up programme is a good start for supporting students and bridging inequalities. Summer schools could be valuable too. We call on the government to ensure that the summer schools create active, enriching, social experiences to re-engage young people with education and help them aspire to a brighter future.

“But we counsel against thinking that summer schools are the only solution and will continue to ask the government to:

- Initially prioritise those in 16-19 education, who are at critical transition moments in life
- Introduce a 16-19 Student Premium, which allows schools to invest in both whole-school and targeted interventions for disadvantaged learners
- Provide interventions for disadvantaged learners
- Increase funding for teaching time that can be delivered during the regular schedule
- Provide additional maintenance grants to those entering HR or higher technical qualifications, who need more time to complete their degree.”

Published 25 February 2021