COSMO COVID Social Mobility & Opportunities Study

Wave 1 Initial Findings – Briefing No. 7

Attainment and Assessment

May 2023

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Highlights

- Pupils from independent schools were much more likely to report that their teacher assessed grades were higher than they expected (43%) than those in state schools (34% for those in state grammars and 29% in state comprehensives). They were also much less likely to report that they were lower than they expected (at 7%, compared to 15% of those in state grammars and 23% in state comprehensives).
- A third of young people reported that they felt that teachers were biased against certain groups in their teacher assessment. This figure was higher among those from ethnic minority backgrounds and lower among those with more socio-economically advantaged backgrounds.
- Pupils who had particularly disrupted experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic received lower GCSE Teacher Assessed Grades (TAGs) than their peers whose disruption was more moderate.
- One-to-one or small group tutoring as catch-up provision was most likely to be offered to those from less advantaged backgrounds and those who had lower prior attainment. Boys were more likely to be offered tutoring but, as they were less likely to take it up, there was no gender difference in reported receipt of tutoring.
- Those who received one-to-one and small group tutoring appeared to perform slightly better in their GCSE TAGs than their peers who were offered this tutoring but did not take it up. However, only just over a quarter of the sample reported that they have received one-to-one or small group tutoring, meaning it is unlikely to have made a big difference to learning lost at the cohort level.

Average age 16 attainment adjusted for performance at age 11, by deprivation quintile groups of pupils' home area

Notes: N= 8,360. Analysis is weighted to account for survey design, young person non-response and young people's consent to link to National Pupil Database. GCSE Teacher Assessed Grades are average grade awarded across best eight subjects (which must include English and maths, which are double weighted, three EBacc subjects, and three other subjects) adjusted relative to expectations based on age 11 attainment scores.

Supported by UK Research and Innovation

Partners THE SUTTON TRUST, CENTRE FOR LONGITUDINAL STUDIES, UCL Centre for Education Policy & Equalising Opportunities

Conclusions and policy implications

In this briefing, we highlight a number of important findings about young people's experiences of assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly for our cohort who received teacher assessed GCSEs, rather than traditional examinations.

Almost half of pupils reported that they had performed as expected in their teacher assessed grade, but pupils from independent schools were much more likely to think they had done better than expected (and more less likely to think they had done worse than expected) than those in state schools. A quarter of young people reported that they planned to retake GCSEs, and were especially likely to report this if they felt they had done worse than expected in their teacher assessed grades. Around a third of pupils reported feeling that teachers were biased against certain groups in their teacher assessments, and this was most likely among those who felt they had done worse than expected (even after adjusting for the actual differences in their performance). Nevertheless, perhaps surprisingly, given the proportion of pupils agreeing with negative statements about the TAGs process, only a third said they would have preferred to have taken exams as usual.

Without further context, which may well come from A-level results this year, we are unable to provide direct evidence of whether teacher assessment relatively advantaged or disadvantaged groups compared to what they would have received from traditional exams. Inequalities between groups based on demographic characteristics and socio-economic status are evident, but further work will be needed to understand to what extent these represent pre-pandemic inequalities, differences attributable to variation in pandemic experiences, and directly to the teacher assessment.

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Those who received tutoring achieved slightly higher teacher assessed GCSE grades (after adjusting for attainment at age 11) than their peers who were offered this tutoring but did not take it up, providing encouraging evidence as to the effectiveness of this catch up provision to those who received it. However, this should be tempered by the fact that only just over a quarter of the sample reported receiving one-to-one or small group tutoring, making it unlikely that this will have made a big dent in addressing learning lost at the cohort level.

Our results highlight the substantial differences in experience between those from different backgrounds and the large implications for educational and wider opportunities.

As with many findings relating to the COVID-19 pandemic,[21] our results highlight the substantial differences in experience between those from different backgrounds and the large implications for educational and wider opportunities stemming from these. Educational providers and employers should be mindful of young people's experiences during the pandemic – and in their wider contexts more generally – when considering qualifications in the coming years, seeking to understand if relative differences in performance are explained by differences in these experiences rather than underlying potential when considering applications.

Efforts to support young people to catch up potential lost learning through one-to-one and small group tutoring do appear to be associated with better performance in GCSE TAGs, compared to the performance of similar individuals who were offered tutoring but did not take it up. This is encouraging for continued use of this method to support those placed at a disadvantage by their circumstances, whether or not this is related to the COVID-19 pandemic.