

## INFORMATION

### EXAM RESULTS 2020: WHAT HAPPENED?

*Date:* 24 August 2020

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*Deadline:*

### SUMMARY AND INITIAL CONCLUSIONS

1. Producing exam results in summer 2020 without actual exams taking place was never going to be straightforward. However, what happened has damaged public confidence - particularly in DfE and Ofqual - with potential knock-on impacts on the return to school in September.
2. We have an initial timeline and key documents from the Department that sets out what happened. It is too early to draw firm conclusions. You will want to decide whether a lessons learned inquiry would be useful. Even if we don't instigate it, there is bound to be plenty of interrogating what happened and didn't happen, including by Parliament. It's often better to be on the front foot and have instigated a formal lessons learned exercise. Plus we should properly understand what failed and would get credit for asking the question. **Do you want to see options?**
3. Based on what we know so far these are my initial reflections on what went wrong:
  - The initial decision by the Department to prioritise **resisting grade inflation** (SoS letter to Ofqual of 31 March) set the ground for a difficult summer. Even at this point the Department knew that teacher-assessed grades were likely to be more generous, so moderating these to reflect previous years' performance would inevitably lead to students feeling they had been unfairly treated.
  - However, it was the combination of this perceived unfairness and the **other problems with the Ofqual model** - the treatment of "outliers", the benefits to the independent sector over state schools and some other technical issues - which completely undermined public confidence. On the technical issues, the Cambridge exam board has suggested to Munira that the algorithm was responsible for some bizarre and indefensible

results (e.g. a student achieving a D in Maths and an A in Further Maths). Although the Department clearly did probe Ofqual on outliers and equality issues they did not test the technical aspects of the algorithm; and it's not clear they understood it. This is a highly specialised area where they do not have the expertise, and the technical model and the complete data were shared by Ofqual late in the day, possibly because of concerns about their operational independence.

- There were lots of people raising questions in June and July but the opportunity to properly interrogate what was happening was missed; and even when there was a dress rehearsal of what was to come in the Scotland experience, appropriate action was not taken in response, including by the centre.
- On 31 July - in light of what was known about the problem with outliers - the wrong decision was made to solve this through the appeals process rather than fix in advance of awarding grades.

4. Here are some initial reflections on why things went wrong:

- It is striking that none of the bigger questions about **what the Department was trying to achieve (e.g. prioritising no grade inflation)** were tested at the early stage; and there is a significant contrast here with the more generous approach taken to other C-19 impacts, e.g. furlough.
- It took the department a long time to accept the scale of the challenge and the impact of the pandemic, and the potential problems it would cause for these students: from what we've seen the **concern from DfE was about the sector and the process and not the pupils and parents**.
- Many of the issues with the algorithm were known about and could have been corrected in advance of results day (which incidentally could have been a different day - the real results were known far in advance). The reasons why they were not are likely to include: **the Department not owning this problem enough; the relationship between the Department and Ofqual as independent regulator; the failure of the centre to hold the Department and Ofqual to account; and the lack of technical scrutiny of the Ofqual model until too late.**

## **BACKGROUND AND TIMELINE**

5. This section covers the key events in order they occurred. Cabinet met on 17 March, at which concerns were raised that schools would need to close before the Easter holidays. You then chaired a meeting of COBR on 18 March, which took the decision to close schools from 20 March until further notice.

grade (5 May) and arrangements for calculating the grade (22 May). In this response they addressed several of the issues that later became the target of criticism of their model. These included that “outliers” i.e. high-performing students in low-performing schools were unfairly penalised, as were schools on an improving trajectory. Ofqual concluded that these issues could not be corrected without creating unfairness elsewhere.

12. By June, other issues with the Ofqual approach were emerging. Sir Jon Coles (Chief Executive of United Learning Trust and former DfE Director General) wrote to DfE officials (24 June) saying that he had concerns that the model did not use the grades that teachers awarded - known as the “Centre Assessed Grades” or CAGs, but used only the relative ranking of teachers plus the statistical analysis (except in the case of very small cohorts). The SoS met Jon Coles on 15 July to discuss his concerns, and then met with Ofqual. At the latter meeting the SoS expressed concern about the downgrading of a large proportion of students’ results compared to CAGs. According to the Department, Ofqual said they were unable to introduce further flexibility to the model to address this and the discussion then focussed on the appeals process.
13. On 31 July, Tim Oates of Cambridge Assessment wrote to DfE officials saying that his team had identified 400-4000 students (high performing outliers), depending on model applied, who would be disadvantaged by Ofqual’s model and suggesting that the names were passed on to universities/UCAS so they could be treated more sensitively in the admissions process. DfE passed this on to Ofqual. In the event, it was decided to deal with the problem through appeals. Further discussions between the Department and Ofqual in the run up to the exams focussed on widening the appeals process. In particular, there were ongoing discussions about where to allow ‘valid mocks’ as a criteria for appeals process, to widen the grounds for appeal in anticipation of criticism of the results. This decision was eventually announced and then withdrawn, adding to the sense of confusion.
14. On 9 August, the Department received the first A level results, which were compared to the previous year and to the CAGs at aggregate level. The results were then provided to pupils on 13 August. At first criticism focussed on the benefits for independent schools (caused because for smaller exam cohorts the model used CAGs). Then criticism focused on outliers, and other seemingly random results generated by the algorithm. Ofqual had published a technical note on the algorithm for the first time on 13 August, and within a couple of days