

Education Policy Institute position on testing and examinations in 2021

November 2020

EDUCATION
POLICY
INSTITUTE

Research Area:
Curriculum and
Qualifications



About the Education Policy Institute

The Education Policy Institute is an independent, impartial and evidence-based research institute that promotes high quality education outcomes, regardless of social background. We achieve this through data-led analysis, innovative research and high-profile events.

Education can have a transformative effect on the life chances of young people, enabling them to fulfil their potential, have successful careers, and grasp opportunities. As well as having a positive impact on the individual, good quality education and child wellbeing also promotes economic productivity and a cohesive society.

Through our research, we provide insight, commentary, and a constructive critique of education policy in England – shedding light on what is working and where further progress needs to be made. Our research and analysis spans a young person's journey from the early years through to entry to the labour market.

Our core research areas include:

- Benchmarking English Education
- School Performance, Admissions, and Capacity
- Early Years Development
- Social Mobility and Vulnerable Learners
- Accountability, Assessment, and Inspection
- Curriculum and Qualifications
- Teacher Supply and Quality
- Education Funding
- Higher Education, Further Education, and Skills

Our experienced and dedicated team works closely with academics, think tanks, and other research foundations and charities to shape the policy agenda.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in widespread disruption to England's education system. Following a period of school closures for most pupils earlier this year, formal exams were cancelled in 2020 and there ensued a prolonged period of debate about how an alternative system for awarding grades should operate. The government's decision to award GCSE and A-Level (and equivalent) grades based largely on an algorithm developed by Ofqual led to widespread (but predicted) outcry leading up to and on results day. This culminated in the government changing its policy and allowing students to use the higher of either the grade determined by Ofqual or the grade submitted by their school (based on teacher judgements).

This, in turn, resulted in an increase in grades relative to previous years, meaning that the results of the 2020 cohort are not comparable with previous cohorts. It also meant that colleges and universities needed to expand their places in order to accommodate a larger number of pupils. To facilitate this, the government lifted its cap on university places for 2020/21.

The government is now faced with important decisions about what to do for the cohort of young people taking exams in 2021. As well as having lost learning time in the last academic year, many are also facing local school closures during this year. The precise scale of closures this year remains uncertain. But, as we observed with the 2020 cohort, decisions about exams and grading have far-reaching consequences – for colleges, universities, training providers and employers as well as for the motivations and wellbeing of young people themselves.

Earlier this month, the Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson, announced that summer exams would be pushed back by three weeks in 2021, allowing extra time for lessons to take place. However, this assumes that schools remain open and can facilitate exams. To date, there is no contingency plan if exams cannot take place in the summer. Williamson has said that he will consult with the sector to consider any further contingency measures and will publish details "later in the autumn".

In this briefing paper, we consider some of the priorities, challenges and options for government ahead of it making any further decisions.

1. What do we need the 2021 results to deliver?

The cancellation of 2020 exams and the uncertainties surrounding 2021 have reignited the debate about the necessity and purpose of exams. While this might be a valid debate to have, there is no time to have it now. Public policy affecting future generations should not be rushed nor should there be an attempt to take important decisions with long-reaching consequences while the government and service providers are simultaneously trying to deal with a global pandemic. Instead, discussion about arrangements for 2021 should be focused on a set of key priorities. Those priorities should be to:

a) Provide pupils with a set of grades that are as reliable as possible in order to:

- enable them to progress to the next stage of education;
- give employers an indication of pupil achievement, particularly in relation to GCSE English and maths; and
- act as a form of formative assessment so that pupils progressing into further or higher education are able to access any additional catch up support as needed.

b) Avoid, as far as possible, penalising pupils who have lost learning time due to Covid-19. Specific consideration should be given to disadvantaged pupils who, even before the onset of the pandemic were over 18 months behind their peers by the end of secondary school and, as noted in the sections that follow, have had less access to online resources.

c) Not use the 2021 results for accountability purposes. The focus needs to be on delivering the two priorities set out above, and policy-makers should not seek to judge the performance of schools at a time when they have dealt with an unprecedented crisis.

d) Be deliverable: any arrangement must be delivered in full within the agreed timescales and with the confidence of the public. Any delays to or distrust in the arrangements risk another summer of uncertainties and last-minute changes to policies.

These priorities, alongside the evidence we set out below, must guide decision making in the coming weeks.

2. What evidence do we have about the scale of the problem and effective solutions?

The reality is that we currently know relatively little about the impact of school closures on learning (in this context) or about the best way to issue pupils with reliable grades in a high stakes system. The most relevant evidence to consider in this process includes the following:

On lost learning

In June 2020, the Education Endowment Foundation published a Rapid Evidence Assessment on the impact of lost learning on the attainment gap (the gap between disadvantaged pupils and the rest).¹ Their report drew on existing studies about this issue and then quantified, within a range, the likely impact on the attainment gap in England. The EEF researchers were clear about the limitations of the report – none of the studies from which it drew related to England or to a pandemic of this scale.

Nevertheless, it gave us some indication of what we might be facing. The median estimate of the impact on the gap is that it could widen by 36 per cent. The full range is between 11 and 75 per cent. Even in a “best case” scenario, the study found that the gap is likely to widen.

While the EEF study could not account for different levels of provision of online learning, survey data from the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and the Sutton Trust all indicate that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds have spent less time on home learning, have had less access to online classes and have also had less access to their own technology and a place to study than their more affluent peers.^{2,3,4}

Over the course of this academic year, EPI will be working with Renaissance Learning, using their assessment data, to measure the true scale of lost learning including for the most disadvantaged pupils. This will help us to understand better the impact of school closures, but not in time to inform what action should be taken for 2021.

On different assessment options

There are potentially a number of ways in which pupils can be assessed, although many are hindered by constraints to timescales and infrastructure. The most common options being discussed for 2021 include:

¹ Education Endowment Foundation (2020) Best evidence on impact of school closures on the attainment gap. <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/covid-19-resources/best-evidence-on-impact-of-school-closures-on-the-attainment-gap/>

² Andrew, A., Cattan, S., Phimister, A. Krutikova, S., Kraftman, L., Costa Dias, M., and Sevilla, A. (2020) Primary school closures created substantial inequality in time spent learning between pupils from poorer and better-off families - and re-opening schools may be the only remedy. Institute for Fiscal Studies. <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14976>

³ Lucas, M., Nelson, J., and Sims, D. (2020) Schools' responses to Covid-19: pupil engagement in remote learning. National Foundation for Educational Research. <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/schools-responses-to-covid-19-pupil-engagement-in-remote-learning/>

⁴ Cullinane, C., and Montacute, R. (2020) Covid-19 impacts: school shutdown. The Sutton Trust. <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/covid-19-and-social-mobility-impact-brief/>

a) Using teacher assessments (or Centre Assessed Grades)

Relying solely on teacher assessed grades means that while there can be internal moderation within schools, there is no standardisation across the cohort as a whole. In turn, there is the potential for this set of results to be unreliable and lead to unmanaged grade-inflation.

There are also questions about teacher bias. Existing research shows that teachers are not immune from societal stereotypes which inform their judgments of potential and ability among children and young people.^{5,6,7,8} These stereotypes may not be deliberate or conscious but may instead be shorthand mechanisms for assessing pupil ability, often based on prior attainment or experiences of past cohorts.⁹

In its consultation on arrangements for exams in the summer of 2020, Ofqual downplayed this research but did acknowledge that teacher assessments “may slightly underestimate performance of students with Special Educational Needs”. Ofqual was, however, right to point out that context matters. The existing research on teacher bias has tended to focus on key stage 2 and A-levels.¹⁰ There is a large knowledge gap about teacher bias at key stage 4, largely due to the existence of formal GCSE examinations and the absence of a need to predict GCSE grades, unlike A-levels which are predicted for university admission.

It is clear that further research on the prevalence of teacher bias, particularly in relation to GCSE exams, is needed and the 2020 set of results gives us an opportunity to conduct such research.

b) Providing more questions in exam papers and allowing pupils to only answer questions on the subjects they have covered (without being penalised for those they have not)

This option was largely dismissed by Ofqual in their consultation on summer results for 2021. Ofqual cited evidence that such an approach tended to benefit higher attaining or better prepared candidates because of the need to navigate between different questions and content. Ofqual also indicated that such an approach would place greater pressure on exam boards, potentially leading to mistakes being made in developing exam papers. For these reasons, Ofqual proposed that exams in 2021 should not include more optional questions than usual (except in the specific case of GCSEs in history and ancient history).

Despite nearly half (47 per cent) of respondents to the consultation disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with this proposal (while 37 per cent agreed or strongly agreed), Ofqual held its position that more optionality should not be introduced – although it did extend more optionality to GCSE English literature as well as history and ancient history following direction from the DfE.

⁵ Campbell, T. (2015) Stereotyped at Seven? Biases in Teacher Judgement of Pupils’ Ability and Attainment. *Journal of Social Policy*, 44(3), 517-547.

⁶ Burgess, S., & Greaves, E. (2013). Test scores, subjective assessment, and stereotyping of ethnic minorities. *Journal of Labour Economics*, 31(3), 535-576.

⁷ Maylor, Smart, Kuyok and Ross (2009). Black Children’s Achievement Programme Evaluation <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DCSFRR177.pdf>

⁸ Strand, Coulon, Meschi, Vorhouse, Frumkin, Ivins, Small, Sood, Gervais and Rehman (2010) Drivers and Challenges in Raising the Achievement of Pupils from Bangladeshi, Somali and Turkish Backgrounds <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DCSF-RR226.pdf>

⁹ Campbell (2015)

¹⁰ Campbell (2015); Burgess and Greaves (2013); Murphy, R. & Wyness, G. (2020). "[Minority Report: the impact of predicted grades on university admissions of disadvantaged groups](#)," [CEPEO Working Paper Series](#) 20-07, Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities, UCL Institute of Education, revised Mar 2020.

c) Using “mock” exams as the basis for final grades

A few days before the publication of 2020 A Level results, when it became apparent that public confidence in Ofqual’s algorithm was waning, the government announced that mock exams could be considered in appeals to grades. This was met with a great deal of concern from the sector because the announcement came very late in the process and there is no standardisation or consistent moderation of mocks. Indeed, schools use mock exams in very different ways – some as a formative assessment, some to motivate pupils to improve their performance before the real exam and some as the basis for post 16 and post entry choices and admissions. In the end, the decision to use Centre Assessed Grades meant that the use of mock exams in appeals became less important.

The use of mock exams has been discussed as an option for 2021. The issues with this are i) that mocks (as currently designed) are not standardised and ii) that they usually take place in December and therefore omit a term of learning time.

3. What are the relevant constraints within which we are operating?

The government has already announced that results day for A-Levels will be on 24th August 2021 and for GCSEs on 27th August 2021. This represents a delay of around a week and a half (for A-Levels) and a week (for GCSEs) compared with previous years. As the majority of exams will be taking place three weeks later than usual, the time available for marking will be shorter than usual in order to meet these new timescales.

While it is feasible for both exams and results to be pushed back further, there are practical constraints including: the need for universities and further education institutions to be able to offer places, and how far into the summer term (or indeed summer holidays) teachers can be expected to teach under existing contracts. In any case, any further delays could only realistically yield an extra 2-3 weeks.

Under any scenario pupils, teachers and exam boards need to know whether further changes will be made to assessments as early as possible. This is particularly the case if there are going to be significant changes to exam papers.

As well as working to a very narrow timeframe, it is also important to note that the capacity of exam boards to make changes is limited. While exam boards can, in theory, buy-in additional resource and expertise to redesign course content, exam papers and marking schemes and then mark exams, there is no guarantee that the system has the capacity to release additional resource. It is also likely that the government would be expected to meet the cost of increasing capacity in order to accommodate a last-minute change of policy.

The combination of short timescales, the need for urgent decision-making, the limited capacity and resource in the system all point to a solution which must be realistic to deliver. It must also avoid being overly complex; anything too complicated not only risks securing the confidence of the public but also being prone to greater errors, particularly when combined with an attempt to respond rapidly.

4. So how should the summer exam series work?

The government has already announced that exams will take place later than usual next summer. We consider this to be appropriate as it makes up for *some* of the lost learning time while still keeping to a reasonable timetable for admissions to further and higher education institutions.

However, on its own, this approach is not enough to mitigate against the majority of lost learning time nor does it provide a credible Plan B if a large proportion of pupils are unable to sit some or all of the summer exams.

The first step the government should take is to confirm how summer exams next year will help to lessen the impact of lost learning time.

The fairest way to do this is to introduce greater optionality in exam papers. While we accept that this approach carries risks, as Ofqual has set out, it is important to acknowledge that this is not a “normal” year and extra efforts must be made to pursue the best possible outcomes for pupils. As we set out in our response to Ofqual’s consultation on this issue, we consider that the risks to pupils in navigating exams with more questions can be mitigated by allowing schools to guide pupils to the relevant questions or only putting certain sections in front of pupils.

We also understand that the timescales for delivering greater optionality are challenging for exam boards. Ofqual and the government should have instructed exam boards to pursue this option much earlier in the summer of 2020. However, it is crucial that this option is not taken off the table during this period of discussion between the DfE, Ofqual and exam boards. The DfE must be willing to provide a short-term increase in funding to ensure that exam boards have the capacity to amend exam papers now and to mark more complex papers over the summer. This might mean providing optionality in some exams but not others.

If the DfE is convinced that optionality is not feasible for 2021, it must give clear reasons for its decision. This includes publishing a statement setting out the options considered alongside the extra resource that could be made available and the mitigation actions that could be put in place.

The next issue the government should consider is what a credible “Plan B” should look like if summer exams cannot take place either in part or in full.

We are unconvinced that teacher assessment would provide a more reliable or consistent set of grades than the exams themselves. Further research is urgently needed to measure the robustness of teacher assessments, particularly in relation to Key Stage 4.

The government should instead consider the following two options, both of which would act as contingency measures if the summer exam series cannot take place:

a) Ensure that multiple papers covering a single subject are as spaced out as possible during the exam period

This means that if a student misses either the first or second exam in order to comply with Covid-19 guidance, he or she potentially has an exam on which to fall back. The exam boards already have Special Consideration processes in place for adjusting grades in similar circumstances.

b) Introduce a new series of benchmarking assessments

The aim of these assessments would be to provide pupils with grades if exams cannot go ahead at scale during the summer of 2021 due to Covid-19 restrictions. These would take place in the spring term, and would replace mock exams so that pupils are not required to sit any additional exams this academic year.

These assessments would be set by exam boards, but schools would have the flexibility to decide which components to give to their pupils so that they are only assessed against the content they have covered. Exam boards would also provide schools with a marking scheme for teachers to mark papers within schools. Heads of Departments would be required to provide moderation.

In order to avoid any potential gaming, the assessments for each subject should take place on the same day. Importantly, the exam boards should only release the grade boundaries if national exams cannot go ahead in the summer for all or a significant proportion of pupils. In this case, the grades generated from this benchmarking assessment would provide the national set of back up grades. Where there is only a small minority of pupils who cannot sit national exams, we recommend that existing “Special Consideration” arrangements should apply. The government, in consultation with exam boards, should decide the precise threshold that would determine when to move from Special Consideration to the use of benchmarking grades.

This approach would be different to mock exams in that it is set by the exam boards with an accompanying marking scheme – thereby providing greater consistency than traditional mocks.

As with all policy options, this is not a perfect solution. It would not, for example, compensate for individuals in a school who have needed to self-isolate for longer periods of time. Neither would it provide a set of standardised results across the country. We also know that moderation of centre level marking comes with some uncertainty. But it is important to recognise that the system will need to live with some level of variability in results given the exceptional circumstances of this year.

It does, however, provide an acceptable “Plan B” if national exams are cancelled and it can do so within the constraints and capacity of the existing system.

5. How else can the system deliver our aims?

It is clear that we cannot rely solely on the exams system to fix the problem of lost learning time. There are other steps the government and sector can take to achieve the aims we set out at the beginning of this paper, particularly in relation to enabling pupils to progress to their next phase of education, employment or training.

These measures include:

a) Provide additional and urgent catch up funding for disadvantaged pupils in years 11 and 13 before the end of this calendar year

In our evidence to the Education Select Committee on how the government should respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, we recommended that the government should double the Pupil Premium for pupils currently in years 1, 7 and 11 and that it should double the disadvantage weighting for those in year 13. We also recommended that the Pupil Premium should be doubled for Looked After Children and extended permanently to those with a Child Protection Plan. We costed this at around £1.3bn.

The government did announce additional catch up funding for this academic year, but most of it was not targeted to disadvantaged pupils nor to specific year groups. Instead £650m has been allocated to schools on a per-pupil basis for all pupils, equating to around £80 per pupil in mainstream schools and £240 per pupil in Alternative Provision, specials schools and hospital schools. A further £350m has been earmarked for the National Tutoring Programme (delivered through the Education Endowment Foundation). The National Tutoring Programme includes tutoring and academic mentors for pupils aged 5-16, a 16-19 catch up fund and an early language programme for children in Reception. These programmes are intended to be targeted to disadvantaged pupils, but schools can determine which pupils will benefit.

As well not being targeted to disadvantaged pupils, the £1bn catch up funding has been undermined by the following issues:

i) Delays in allocating money directly to schools

The DfE has stated that the £650m will be allocated in three different tranches: the autumn term 2020, the beginning of 2021 and the summer term of 2021. It seems that this decision is driven by the need to base funding on as close to actual per pupil numbers as possible. But phasing payments in this way, particularly for relatively small amounts, does not provide schools with sufficient certainty or spending power. For example, the first tranche of money was not allocated to local authorities until 30th September or to academies until 8th October.

ii) Delays in implementing the tutoring programme and academic mentors

The list of approved Tuition Partners was not announced until the 2nd November 2020 meaning that schools could not book Tuition Partners until that date. Schools will also need to pay a 25 per cent contribution towards the cost. The EEF has recognised that overall capacity could be an issue if demand is too high and said they will monitor whether a cap should be placed on the overall amount of tutoring that a school can access.

Academic Mentors is being run by Teach First and will provide trained graduates in disadvantaged schools to offer intensive support and catch up. Although the programme is intended to provide

1000 mentors, it is likely that only 150 will be in place from November 2020, with the remainder following in the spring term.

iii) An under-allocation of over a third of the budget for the National Tutoring Programme

Although £350m has been allocated under the umbrella of the National Tutoring Programme, it has emerged that £143m of this has not been assigned. According to a recent report, the DfE has said it will release further details about what will happen to the £143m following the government's forthcoming spending review. One option might be to increase the subsidy for schools so that they only have to meet 10 per cent of the cost of tuition, rather than 25 per cent in this first year.

While there is strong evidence about the impact of regular tutoring, and both the EEF and Teach First have strong reputations for delivering on large-scale programmes, we are not convinced that the government has approached this effectively. Given the challenging timescales and the need for resources to be targeted urgently on the most disadvantaged pupils, money should have been given directly to schools based on their levels of disadvantage and with the autonomy to use the entirety of the funding on interventions that best meet their needs.

Because the £650m given directly to schools is allocated based on all pupils, and not targeted in any way, we still consider there is a strong case for providing further, targeted catch-up funding for disadvantaged pupils. We recommend that the government implements our recommendation from earlier this year, targeting a further £1.3bn to the most disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils this year.

b) Allow some grade inflation for the 2021 cohort

In setting out arrangements for 2020, Ofqual were clear that they favoured an approach which retained statistical standardisation and generated results which were fair to and comparable with previous cohorts.

Because the government U-turned and allowed teacher assessed grades to be used for final results, there was grade inflation in 2020. Given that the 2021 cohort will also have experienced lost learning time and will be competing with the 2020 cohort for further and higher education places as well as in the labour market, we think the fairest approach for individual students would be to allow some grade inflation for this cohort. This should be pinned between the 2019 and 2020 cohorts with a particular focus around the grade 3 and 4 boundary.

c) Encourage contextualised admissions to further and higher education courses

It is clear that, whatever arrangements are put in place, the results for 2021 are unlikely to be completely secure. This will particularly be the case for disadvantaged students who have had less access to remote learning. As such, further and higher education institutions should apply some discretion when deciding on admissions and should take into account the demographics of the pupil (this could include consideration of whether their local area has been impacted by local lockdowns) and particularly whether their results are only just below the required grade threshold.

This approach is likely to result in an increase to admissions and so we recommend that, as with 2020, the government should remove the cap on domestic admissions to universities.

d) Provide catch up support for the 2021 cohort once they are in further or higher education

While all of our recommendations so far require the system to be more generous to the 2021 cohort in acknowledgement of their lost learning time, it is still likely that pupils will have gaps in their knowledge that may inhibit their success at the next level of education or in the workplace.

To address this, we recommend that additional funding is made available in the next academic year to support any necessary catch up for students in their first year of college or university.

6. Summary of EPI recommendations

To ensure that exam arrangements for summer 2021 are as fair as possible:

- Continue to explore whether there can be greater optionality in exam papers so that pupils have a better chance of answering questions on the content they have covered.
- Ensure that multiple papers covering a single subject are as spaced out as possible during the exam period.
- Introduce a new series of benchmarking assessments to provide “contingency grades” if summer exams cannot take place for the majority of pupils. This would replace existing mock exams.
- Pursue further research about the impact of teacher assessed grades on pupil outcomes and the disadvantage gap.

To mitigate against the impact of lost learning time

- Provide additional and urgent catch up funding for disadvantaged pupils this year. This should total around £1.3bn as EPI recommended earlier this year.
- Consider using the £143m under-allocation from the National Tutoring Programme to further subsidise tuition this year so that schools only contribute 10 per cent rather than 25 per cent.
- Allow some grade inflation for the 2021 cohort to ensure that individual pupils are not disadvantaged by different approaches to grading in different years.
- Encourage contextualised admissions to further and higher education courses.
- Provide catch up support for the 2021 cohort once they are in further or higher education.