

Written evidence submitted by Walters

I am writing with reference to the effect of cancelling formal exams on external candidates. My home educated son was due to take GCSEs this Summer.

In normal times, finding an exam centre as an external candidate is difficult. One has to contact individual schools personally and ask the exams officer if they are willing to help. The schools are under no obligation to do so and it creates more work for them, so they mostly (understandably) refuse. It is often not possible to sit the GCSEs that the school offers its own pupils because they require oversight of practical activities or fieldwork, so external candidates have to sit IGCSEs, which are entirely exam-based. This means that the school has to deal with a different exam time and set of papers for the external candidate. It is almost impossible to organise Access Arrangements for external candidates with Special Educational Needs (SEN) because the process is dependent on the school SEN Co-ordinator.

This is the position for all home educators who want to provide their children with the opportunity to take formal exams. If they can find a willing exam centre, they also have to pay exam fees and administration costs.

Despite these challenges, many home educators spend a great deal of time and money organising formal exam sittings, for which they then prepare independently. This year, with the cancellation of the Summer exam series, and the decision to allow schools to award assessed grades for their students, all these candidates have found themselves unable to prove what grade they might have got in the exams. On a very piecemeal basis, some exam centres have kindly agreed to consider evidence provided by the external candidates themselves, but a system to do this is by no means clear. The schools are already overwhelmed with work for their own students and so are inclined simply to apologise to their external candidates and tell them they will have to take the exams at a future date. Thereby students who have prepared conscientiously for exams have been stopped in their tracks, their plans entirely disrupted and their future learning thrown into confusion by the need to carry on with a syllabus which they were expecting to have completed and been tested on this Summer.

In my view, this event has highlighted the absurdity of our national assessment system. The GCSEs are made ridiculously complicated by the existence of numerous exam boards, all of which offer largely similar syllabuses, but require exams officers to plough through enormous amounts of registrations and exam entries. If we had one set of exams, compiled nationally and sat by all students, there would have been the option this year for those who were able to carry on with their studies to do so and sit the exams (abiding by social distancing regulations) as anticipated. Those students who weren't able to carry on with their studies could have been awarded an assessed grade.

With a much simpler exam system, it would be very easy for external candidates to find an exam centre, as they would be sitting the same exam as the schooled students. This would also provide the opportunity for greater flexibility for those who are currently failed by the education system as exams could be taken later in life if necessary.

I will stop there, because once I get started on educational policy I can go on forever! However, I would also like to note how concerned I am for those schooled students in Years 10 and 12 who will be taking their GCSE and A levels next year having missed weeks of teaching. I have friends with children in independent schools who have moved seamlessly to distance learning and who will be less affected, but this will not be the case for everyone. We must ensure that the different experiences that children have of this extraordinary time do not have an adverse affect on their lives for years to come.

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