

## Written evidence submitted by Dayaanan Muthukrishnan

### Introduction and executive summary

1. This submission is written by Dayaanan Muthukrishnan. Dayaanan is an undergraduate at the University of Exeter who has a vested interest in the impact of COVID-19 on education; not only because of his status as a current student, but also because of his roles as the Chair of Young Enterprise Devon, and as the Project Lead of a volunteering programme that sends university students into secondary schools to mentor disadvantaged students.
2. This submission addresses the implications of the cancellation of formal examinations, due to COVID-19. These implications include the fairness of qualifications awarded, the financial burden experienced by students, and students' progression to the next stage of education. This submission highlights that the actions of examination boards and the Government have grave consequences, if considerations for accuracy, personal circumstances and consistency are not made.

### Background

3. The Secretary of State for Education announced to the House on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 that Her Majesty's Government has taken the decision to cancel GCSE, AS and A-Level examinations<sup>i</sup>. The Secretary of State assured the House that students will receive the necessary qualifications in order to progress to the next stage of their education.
4. There are details surrounding the integrity and objectivity of the new forms of examination and the method in which grades will be awarded, that are yet to be fully communicated with students. Whilst students appreciate that time is required to deal with issues of such a complex nature, many students are understandably in a state of distress due to the uncertainty of the next stage of their education and lives.

### Alternative means of awarding GCSE, AS and A-Level grades

5. Recently, The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) wrote a letter to affected students to explain the method in which students will be awarded their GCSE, AS and A-Level grades<sup>ii</sup>. Grades will be awarded based on:
  - The schools' and colleges' ranking of students in each subject, based on performance.
  - The grade that schools and colleges believe students will likely attain if teaching, learning and exams were to continue to take place.
    1. Whilst the effort to provide students with accredited grades can be commended, the Government must realise that this solution will not produce a grade that is reflective of the grade that a student would achieve under normal circumstances. Research has shown that predicted grades, a teacher's perception of a student's grade potential, are often inaccurate.
    2. As revealed in a report by the UCL Institute of Education, only 16% of predicted A-Level grades are accurate<sup>iii</sup>. Furthermore, a recent poll conducted by the Higher Education Policy Institute shows that only 46% of students expect their predicted grade to reflect their final grade<sup>iv</sup>.

3. The evidence surrounding predicted grades should be a cause of concern for the Government, seeing as predicted grades, in essence, makes up for one of the two criteria that exam boards will use to award grades. In order to eradicate the possibility of bias in these judgements, and to improve the accuracy of awarded grades, it would be welcomed if the Government recommends that predicted grades or teacher assessments are not to be factored into the process of awarding grades.
6. Most UK universities have opted to provide online examinations of various forms to its students. This decision has been welcomed by university students; nearly 50% of students wish for their examinations to still be conducted, on an online platform<sup>v</sup>.
    1. Ofqual recently approved City & Guilds proposal to move Functional Skills examinations to an online format<sup>vi</sup>. Whilst Functional Skills examinations are not exactly the same as their GCSE counterparts, the Government should take note of this development and it should strive to facilitate a similar development for GCSE, AS and A-Level examinations.
    2. The main concern surrounding the delivery of online examinations is the maintenance of the fairness of the examinations. The setting of an exam hall cannot be replicated through an online medium; however, an online medium can uphold the integrity of the examination, through remote invigilation and the disabling of students' access to other websites during the examination, amongst other measures.
    3. Some students may be uncomfortable with the idea of online GCSE, AS and A-Level examinations, yet, some students would take the opportunity to sit the examinations online in order to ensure that they receive the grade they believe they are capable of achieving. With this in mind, the Government could work with examination providers to offer online examinations to students, on an optional basis.
    4. In circumstances where students wish to sit their examinations online but do not have the means to do so (due to the lack of an internet-enabled device), the Government should follow the lead of higher education institutions in providing these particular students with equipment loans, to ensure that students are not financially discriminated against for a lack of access to the internet.
    5. Higher education institutions have adapted swiftly to the onslaught of COVID-19 on its examination process. This is a testament to the higher education sector's commitment to investing in technology — UK higher education institutions spent over £1.3billion on technology infrastructure in 2017-2018<sup>vii</sup>. With this in mind, there is a role for Government to lead the overdue technological advancement of the secondary school public examination system, by engaging in talks examination providers to create the widespread provision of online examinations.
    6. Whilst it is important for the Government to solve this coordination problem, the funding itself should be sought to be delivered by examination providers, such as AQA (the UK's largest examination provider), who in the 2018-2019 financial year earned over £180million from educational services — with summer GCSE, AS and A-Level examinations accounting for the vast majority of this income<sup>viii</sup>. Expanding the offerings of educational services should be welcomed by these examination providers.

### **Progression to higher education**

7. Guidance issued by the Department for Education<sup>ix</sup> states that students who are not satisfied with the awarded grade will be able to sit their original examinations in the autumn term of 2020 so that they can still join university for the 2020-2021 academic year. Failing that, students can sit their examinations in the summer term of 2021.

1. The Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage) recently recommended that in order to keep the number of COVID-19-related critical care cases under control, social distancing measures of various forms should be in place for at least a year<sup>x</sup>. If the Government acts on this recommendation, it can be inferred that schools will remain closed and mass gatherings (public examinations) will not take place.
  2. As a consideration for prolonged social distancing, universities are making preparations to begin the 2020-2021 term 1 teaching in an online format<sup>xi</sup>. In this particular situation, students who wish to sit their examinations, but are not able to do so (due to continued social distancing measures), will in effect be forced to take a gap year.
  3. Not all students can afford to take a gap year; the National Union of Students (NUS) estimates that the average cost of a gap year for young people is between £3,000 and £4,000<sup>xii</sup>. “Gap year takers are more likely to come from families of higher socio-economic status”<sup>xiii</sup>; meaning that only the most advantaged students will be able to take a gap year in order to sit their examinations, to reflect their true capability.
  4. The Government should consider the provision of a maintenance loan for students in this situation, to ensure that students are rightfully able to sit their examinations without the financial strain associated with a gap year. It can be argued that there is precedent for such maintenance loans to students; current university students continue to receive their tuition and maintenance loan despite the shutdown of universities due to COVID-19.
8. Since the Government’s announcement that GCSE, AS and A-Level examinations have been cancelled, some universities have changed the terms of offers, and a number of universities have issued new unconditional offers. In light of this, Michelle Donelan MP, Universities Minister, has instructed universities to refrain from changing the terms of existing offers<sup>xiv</sup>.
1. The Government’s concern surrounding newly issued unconditional offers stems from the assumption that recipients of such offers will be under pressure to make a quick decision. This line of reasoning is ultimately flawed, as we know that the UCAS system offers students a chance to withdraw from their unconditional offers; once students receive their results, they are entitled to review their options and apply to other universities through clearance<sup>xv</sup>, should they feel that the unconditional offer no longer be suitable.
  2. Unconditional offers are a topic of contention, due to its evident ability to lead students to take their studies less seriously; “UCAS data shows that applicants with an unconditional offer are 11.5 percentage points more likely to miss their predicted grades”<sup>xvi</sup>. With the cancellation of all GCSE, AS and A-Level examinations, this concern no longer holds.
  3. With COVID-19 causing so much uncertainty, a case *for* unconditional offers can be made. These types of offers provide a sense of certainty in such times, for both students and universities. 25% of all university applicants received at least one unconditional offer in 2018-2019<sup>xvii</sup> — for the Government to prohibit universities from extending further unconditional offers at this time is simply unfair for the 75% of students that may have had the chance to guarantee their future education at this time of uncertainty. Data from UCAS suggests that “applicants from the most disadvantaged areas were 50% more likely to receive an unconditional offer than applicants from the most advantaged areas”<sup>xviii</sup>. The Government’s actions to prevent further unconditional offers is inadvertently affecting the chances of some of the UK’s most disadvantaged students to progress to higher education.
  4. Devolution in the UK means that the Government has no power to enforce such restraints on universities in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland<sup>xix</sup>. In the interest of maintaining consistency across all UK universities, the Government should end its moratorium on

unconditional offers, and instead, advise universities to exercise caution when extending offers or making changes to existing offers.

5. The Government should be aware of the financial challenges that universities are currently facing due to COVID-19; it is expected that UK universities will see their revenues shrink as a result of a substantial reduction in the number of international students that matriculate in 2020-2021. With international students forming 19.6% of the UK student population<sup>xx</sup> and contributing to over 25% of the total tuition fee pool<sup>xxi</sup>, universities are simply managing their risk by extending additional unconditional offers to UK students. In order to incentivise universities to exercise caution when extending such offers or making changes to existing offers, the Government may need to commit to assurances of funding for UK universities, for the potential loss of tuition fees from international students.

## Conclusion

9. The Government's swift response to tackle as many issues as possible with regards to COVID-19, in a short space of time, is admirable. Despite the accommodating nature of the Government-led changes in the education sector, it is clear that there will be many students that will either be left with a grade that is not reflective of their true potential, forced to undertake financial strain in order to take a gap year to attain their deserved grade, or left without the certainty of a university space for the next academic year.
10. As the evidence suggests, a lot of these students maybe some of the most disadvantaged in this country. For the sake of these students' futures, it will be beneficial for the Committee to review the evidence available and consider making recommendations to the Government to establish alternative means of assessment and progression for students. As highlighted in this submission, some of these suggestions may include:
  1. The eradication of teacher assessments and predicted grades, to remove inaccuracy and subjectivity from the process of awarding grades.
  2. The technological advancement in the secondary education examination space, to deliver online examinations for students that wish to sit their examinations.
  3. The issuance of a maintenance loan, to support students that are unable to afford to take a gap year to improve their awarded grades.
  4. The end of the moratorium on unconditional offers, to provide certainty to both students and higher education institutions alike in these uncertain times.

---

<sup>i</sup> The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson) (23 March 2020) *Covid-19: Summer Exams*, Available at: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-03-23/debates/2003236000005/Covid-19SummerExams>.

<sup>ii</sup> Sally Collier (Chief Regulator, Ofqual) (3 April 2020) *A message for all GCSE, AS and A level students this summer*, Available at:

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/877830/Letter\\_to\\_students\\_-\\_Summer\\_2020\\_grading.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/877830/Letter_to_students_-_Summer_2020_grading.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> Dr Gill Wyness (2016) *Predicted grades: accuracy and impact*: UCL Institute of Education.

<sup>iv</sup> Higher Education Policy Institute (7 April 2020) *New poll finds almost one-third of applicants feel less confident they will get into their chosen university since the Coronavirus pandemic*, Available at:

<https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/04/07/new-poll-finds-almost-one-third-of-applicants-feel-less-confident-they-will-get-into-their-chosen-university-since-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>.

<sup>v</sup> Higher Education Policy Institute (7 April 2020) *New poll finds almost one-third of applicants feel less confident they will get into their chosen university since the Coronavirus pandemic*, Available at:

<https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/04/07/new-poll-finds-almost-one-third-of-applicants-feel-less-confident-they-will-get-into-their-chosen-university-since-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>.

<sup>vi</sup> FE Week (2 April 2020) *Students to sit English and maths exams at home during Covid-19 lockdown*, Available at: <https://feweek.co.uk/2020/04/02/students-to-sit-english-and-maths-exams-at-home-during-covid-19-lockdown/>.

- 
- vii Ucisa (2018) *Corporate Information Systems Survey 2018*, Available at: <https://www.ucisa.ac.uk/Groups/Corporate-Information-Systems-Group/CIS-surveys>.
- viii AQA Education (2019) *Annual Report And Consolidated Financial Statements For The Year Ended 31 March 2019*, Available at: <https://filestore.aqa.org.uk/content/annual-reports-and-accounts/AQA-ACCOUNTS-2019.PDF>.
- ix Department for Education (3 April 2020) *Coronavirus (COVID-19): cancellation of GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2020*, Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-cancellation-of-gcse-as-and-a-levels-in-2020/coronavirus-covid-19-cancellation-of-gcse-as-and-a-levels-in-2020>.
- x Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (16 March 2020) *Consensus view on behavioural and social interventions*, Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/873729/06-spi-m-o-consensus-view-on-behavioural-and-social-interventions.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/873729/06-spi-m-o-consensus-view-on-behavioural-and-social-interventions.pdf).
- xi Simon Marginson (Director, Centre for Global Higher Education, University of Oxford) (25 March 2020) *The Future of International Education: Universities UK International Higher Education Forum (Online)*.
- xii National Union for Students (June 2008) *Planning a gap year*, Available at: <https://www.nus.org.uk/en/lifestyle/planning-a-gap-year/>.
- xiii Centre for Analysis of Youth Transitions (CAYT) (2012) *Gap year takers: uptake, trends and long term outcomes*: Department for Education.
- xiv Department for Education (23 March 2020) *Universities told not to alter applicants' offers*, Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/universities-told-not-to-alter-applicants-offers>.
- xv UCAS (2020) *UCAS Undergraduate: types of offer*, Available at: <https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate/after-you-apply/ucas-undergraduate-types-offer>.
- xvi Nicola Dandridge (CEO, Office for Students) (2020) *Unconditional Offers*, Available at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/unconditional-offers/>.
- xvii UCAS (2019) *Unconditional Offers - An Update For 2019*, Available at: <https://www.ucas.com/file/250931/download?token=R8Nn7uol>.
- xviii UCAS (2019) *Unconditional Offers - An Update For 2019*, Available at: <https://www.ucas.com/file/250931/download?token=R8Nn7uol>.
- xix Civil Service (2019) *Devolution: Factsheet*, Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/770709/DevolutionFactsheet.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/770709/DevolutionFactsheet.pdf).
- xx Universities UK (2019) *International Facts And Figures 2019*, Available at: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/International/Documents/2019/International%20facts%20and%20figures%20slides.pdf>.
- xxi Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) (2019) *What is the income of HE providers?*, Available at: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/finances/income>.

## References

AQA Education (2019) *Annual Report And Consolidated Financial Statements For The Year Ended 31 March 2019*, Available at: <https://filestore.aqa.org.uk/content/annual-reports-and-accounts/AQA-ACCOUNTS-2019.PDF>.

Centre for Analysis of Youth Transitions (CAYT) (2012) *Gap year takers: uptake, trends and long term outcomes*: Department for Education.

Civil Service (2019) *Devolution: Factsheet*, Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/770709/DevolutionFactsheet.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/770709/DevolutionFactsheet.pdf).

Department for Education (23 March 2020) *Universities told not to alter applicants' offers*, Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/universities-told-not-to-alter-applicants-offers>.

Department for Education (3 April 2020) *Coronavirus (COVID-19): cancellation of GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2020*, Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-cancellation-of-gcse-as-and-a-levels-in-2020/coronavirus-covid-19-cancellation-of-gcse-as-and-a-levels-in-2020>.

Dr Gill Wyness (2016) *Predicted grades: accuracy and impact*: UCL Institute of Education.

FE Week (2 April 2020) *Students to sit English and maths exams at home during Covid-19 lockdown*, Available at: <https://feweek.co.uk/2020/04/02/students-to-sit-english-and-maths-exams-at-home-during-covid-19-lockdown/>.

Higher Education Policy Institute (7 April 2020) *New poll finds almost one-third of applicants feel less confident they will get into their chosen university since the Coronavirus pandemic*, Available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/04/07/new-poll-finds-almost-one-third-of-applicants-feel-less-confident-they-will-get-into-their-chosen-university-since-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>.

Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) (2019) *What is the income of HE providers?*, Available at: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/finances/income>.

National Union for Students (June 2008) *Planning a gap year*, Available at: <https://www.nus.org.uk/en/lifestyle/planning-a-gap-year/>.

Nicola Dandridge (CEO, Office for Students) (2020) *Unconditional Offers*, Available at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/unconditional-offers/>.

Sally Collier (Chief Regulator, Ofqual) (3 April 2020) *A message for all GCSE, AS and A level students this summer*, Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/877830/Letter\\_to\\_students\\_-\\_Summer\\_2020\\_grading.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/877830/Letter_to_students_-_Summer_2020_grading.pdf).

Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (16 March 2020) *Consensus view on behavioural and social interventions*, Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/873729/06-spi-m-o-consensus-view-on-behavioural-and-social-interventions.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/873729/06-spi-m-o-consensus-view-on-behavioural-and-social-interventions.pdf).

Simon Marginson (Director, Centre for Global Higher Education, University of Oxford) (25 March 2020) *The Future of International Education*, Available at: [Universities UK International Higher Education Forum \(Online\)](#).

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson) (23 March 2020) *Covid-19: Summer Exams*, Available at: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-03-23/debates/2003236000005/Covid-19SummerExams>.

UCAS (2019) *Unconditional Offers - An Update For 2019*, Available at: <https://www.ucas.com/file/250931/download?token=R8Nn7uoI>.

UCAS (2020) *UCAS Undergraduate: types of offer*, Available at: <https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate/after-you-apply/ucas-undergraduate-types-offer>.

Ucisa (2018) *Corporate Information Systems Survey 2018*, Available at: <https://www.ucisa.ac.uk/Groups/Corporate-Information-Systems-Group/CIS-surveys>.

Universities UK (2019) *International Facts And Figures 2019*, Available at: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/International/Documents/2019/International%20facts%20and%20figures%20slides.pdf>.

April 2020