

Written evidence submitted by Professor George Constantinides

Dear Sir / Madam,

Re: The Impact of COVID-19 on Education and Children's Services – GCSEs and A-Levels. Written evidence submitted by Prof George A. Constantinides

I am writing to submit evidence to this inquiry. My submission covers the specific topic of *the effect of cancelling formal exams, including the fairness of the qualifications awarded and pupils' progression to the next stage of education or employment*. I am submitting evidence to the inquiry because I am particularly concerned over the potential for unfairness in the award of GCSEs and A-Levels in Summer 2020, and I would like to help the committee to explore ways of safeguarding the fairness of our qualifications system.

I am a professor at Imperial College London, where I lead the Circuits and Systems Research group. I am also a long-standing school governor: I was chair of governors of a primary school for several years and I am now a governor at a standalone secondary academy.

I have the following specific points to make:

1. Fairness seems predicated on the existence of the ability to re-sit examinations in the Autumn. This was present in the written statement by the Secretary of State¹, where he used the phrase "earliest reasonable opportunity", and is discussed in Ofqual consultation on the topic, and then in a later written statement by the Minister for School Standards where he used the term "autumn term"². Since then, there have been press reports that Autumn exams may not be offered by all exam boards and centres³. It is important, in my view, for Ofqual to mandate the option of Autumn term re-sits.
2. In the proposals Ofqual has put out to consultation, there is a heavy reliance on a signed declaration from the Head of Centre as the only safeguard that the rank-order lists of candidates has been calculated in an appropriate manner, and there is a proposal for no appeals on this matter. From the perspective of natural justice, it seems reasonable to require that – should centres judgement be queried by a sufficient number of candidates – that they are *at least required to explain* their procedures to an independent panel. There also appears to be no plan for a mechanism by which exam boards can query statistically anomalous rank orders taking into account correlations between candidates' rank orders in different subjects.

¹ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-03-23/debates/2003236000005/Covid-19SummerExams>

² <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-04-27/debates/2004271000012/QualificationsSummer2020>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/apr/22/schools-and-exam-boards-undermine-promise-to-pupils-of-september-tests>

3. In the standardisation process consulted over by Ofqual, there is a lack of clarity over whether standardisation is to occur on an exam-board basis or across exam boards. Schools / centres will often change exam boards, and it is critically important for fairness to ensure that students whose centres have changed boards in the time window used to judge prior attainment at the centre are not disadvantaged.
4. Since the Ofqual consultation has closed, they have made it clear in a blog post that standardisation will be on a per-subject as well as a per-centre basis⁴. This means that there may be some very small cohorts being used for standardisation. For example, there may be only a handful of students each year taking Spanish A-Level at a certain centre. This makes judgement of prior attainment profiles, even over two or three years of accumulated data, statistically questionable, and it is not clear what process – if any – is being considered to address this concern.
5. Given the considerable uncertainty around such calculated normalised grades, I am unclear why Ofqual is not consulting over the possibility of awarding grade ranges, rather than single grades, to students. This would allow explicit quantification of uncertainty, and allow sixth-forms, universities, and employers to decide their own approach to such uncertainty.

Thank you for the opportunity to raise these points.

Yours faithfully,

Prof George A. Constantinides

May 2020

⁴ <https://ofqual.blog.gov.uk/2020/05/15/making-grades-as-fair-as-they-can-be-advice-for-schools-and-colleges/>