

Written evidence submitted by Miss Niharika Paul

Cancelling formal exams & fairness of proposed grading

Summary

- An approximate two-week gap between the announcement of cancellation of exams and Ofqual's announcement led to confusion amongst the student population, causing stress and anxiety that could have been avoided.
- Students and schools should have been consulted in a more transparent manner.
- Crucially, details of the statistical process by which the final grades will be awarded by the exam board needs to be publicly declared.
- A clearer stream of communication between universities and their offer-holders ought to be in place – in comparison to the current.

My name is Niharika Paul. If this were like any other year, I would be in the middle of my A Levels, but I am instead sat at home, unsure whether I will be able to meet my offer that I have been diligently preparing for, for the last ten years. I feel that I am the right person to be writing this, to address the impact of the cancellation of formal board examinations, as I am the immediate and direct bearer of the consequences of this decision – so much so, that I experience a palpable sense of nervousness, every time “grades” and “university places” are mentioned amongst my peers. I believe it to be not only my right, but my duty to express to you the worries and fears commonly shared by my year group. At the same time, my chief aim here is to make a few suggestions, including better information-sharing, that is unfortunately missing even as I write. To this effect, I am going to begin by delineating the effect that this crisis in education has had amongst my peers.

I still remember the day when the announcement was made towards cancellation of public exams. I recall a palpable sense of desperation, confusion, and betrayal envelope me, as I stood witnessing the announcement live on television.

Desperation, because I felt that the hard work that I had invested into my studies over the last two years, had been futile, and that my own future was being taken away from under my nose, with all relevant parameters wrenched out of my control.

Confusion – nobody knew what the alternative was, and nobody knew how our respective grades were going to be allocated. Let us remember that this confusion persisted for two weeks, before Ofqual's initial announcement that broadly explained the process of grade assignment.

However, following that initial period of shock, the sense of anger and betrayal became more tangible. How could such a decision - that was to directly affect the rest of our lives;

which we were to be allowed to control ourselves - be made, sans consultation either with schools, (to pupils' knowledge at least), or more importantly, with us? Wherein lies the guarantee that our dreams will not be challenged by a freak error made within the statistical process, that incidentally appears available only to the exam board. How do we feel assured that extraneous, non-academic factors will remain exempt from the assignment of the grades suggested by a school for a pupil? Crucially, the worry is that students remain exempt from details of such a statistical process. We are young today but voiceless we ought not be assumed; it is only fair that the leaders of tomorrow be treated today with greater compassion and transparency.

The school system has been thrown into the eye of a hurricane since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. The process that is responsible for awarding school pupils, qualifications and grades at the GCSE and A Levels, stands battered and challenged, leaving a million like myself, in a quandary. The announcement that exams would not be sat in May and June of this year, initially caused worry and confusion, as it was not accompanied by an explanation of the alternative mechanism that would determine how grading will be undertaken instead. Due to such an initial lack of clarity in the guidelines, schools provided their pupils with conflicting information. Some were told to continue with the revision process for a longer period of time, anticipating exams in August or early September of the year. Other pupils stopped schoolwork altogether, as they believed that they had no reason to continue working. All this confusion triggered anxiety amongst some students who could not comprehend the unilateral nature of such an announcement that appeared to have materialised without a comprehensive weighing of consequences. Many students felt let down after having invested two or even three years in their courses. That being said, there is now a general appreciation that exams could not go forward and that no alternative process would be as fair as exams. However, I do believe that the myopic view undertaken in arriving at such an announcement, led to unnecessary speculation, and triggered tremendous anxiety within my age-group, during an already stressful time.

Since the announcement of the cancellation of exams, it has been advanced that grades based on pupils' progress hitherto, is the only viable method of grade assignment. However, in itself, it raised many questions and worries. For instance, when the process of grading was revealed, many pupils were worried – some in fact panicked - as they were planning to invest the Easter holidays towards their revision, aimed at boosting grades, as so many students do indeed resort to, every year. This course of action is underlined by a rather commonly placed worry that mock exams and class test results fail to reflect the grades that they would have achieved, if they were to have sat an exam in the Summer.

In addition, we now know that teachers' personal opinions about their students will come into play when ranking, and this typically pertains to cohorts of over a hundred pupils, especially at the GCSE level. Notwithstanding the dedicated efforts on the part of schools to try and guarantee that favouritism - and the opposite of it - will not influence departmental decisions, students are naturally struggling to be convinced of the same.

Furthermore, there is always the possibility of exam boards altering grades, once the school has dispatched its recommendations to the Board. The process of "fitting their statistical

distributions” to nationwide, or schoolwide grades has not been explained to the ultimate recipients of this exercise. A detailed explanation of this mechanism is sorely missing, even at the current time, and needs redressal. Absolutely no attempt has been made to describe this to any of us. This much Statistics we have been taught at the A Level, that informs us of the fallibility of a statistical approach to a subject that occurs with extreme values; in other words, students who fare very badly or very well, appear exposed by any intended fitting mechanism. I urgently invite suggestions that can clarify my – and my peers’ – appreciation of this fitting process.

It appears unclear as to how we can guarantee fairness of grade allocation, at either the school level, or especially once the grades are sent through to the exam board. The difficulty of this grading process is apparent, but I do believe that a higher level of transparency, would help ease some of the worries, common to most students. Indeed, taking the route to a better sharing of information from early on, would have helped ease our worries better. However, this trend of ignoring students continues. Even now, there is little information about how the exam boards will award grades, once teachers have submitted the rankings and the estimated grades for their students. It is only fair to share the details of the process with students, who are being directly affected by it. There is no other way of putting it than saying that our lives hang on this.

The guarantee that pupils will be able to sit exams, as soon as it is safe in 2020 (or in the summer of 2021), is essential, if the grades received do not match a student’s expectations, or even desire. Via such a process, pupils who are currently in Year 11 will be able to boost their GCSE grades, thus enabling them to apply for jobs and university places in the future. However, for those students who are currently in Year 13, who have university places and internships riding on their A Level grades, the possibility of taking the exams for their grades, after university terms start, is too late.

Most universities do not have, (or if even if they do, have not communicated) any arrangements regarding the addressing of possible difficulties or inaccuracies in assigning grades. In fact, some offer-holders have received emails clearly stating that the grades offered this year, will be treated in the very same way that one would treat grades received in any other year, and that they will not be accepting anybody who does not meet their offer. It is nerve-racking to have your future snatched away so recklessly from your hands, especially after so many students have travelled hard to secure university places. There has been little recognition of this fact, in my experience, from both universities and exam board authorities. I believe that there needs to be a clearer stream of communication between universities and their offer-holders, in this deeply stressful and confusing time. There is a high possibility that many pupils will not be able to meet their offers and not wish to enter Clearing. This will, in due course possibly lead to a lower number of home students in UK universities this year and much more competitive university applications next year. This will, of course, affect not only the class of 2020 but also those leaving school in 2021.

The process of awarding grades has been confusing, with fractured pieces of information emerging at different times, adding to an overall sense of anxiety amongst the student community. The worries in the minds of many pupils has not however, been mitigated by

the actions of either exam boards or universities. In these troubling times, when children's futures are at stake, we look to authorities to treat us with compassion and offer us the assurance that it is recognised that our lives will be directly affected by the actions of others. We need to be informed well enough to infer if we can clutch some assurance about how to resolve this issue that appears – as of now – to be completely outside our control.

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