

Written evidence submitted by Mr Daniel Dipper

I am a Year 13 student who is an offer holder to study History and Politics at Oxford University. I have attended disadvantaged state schools for all of my education, and worked extremely hard to move beyond this background, for example achieving 7 x 9, 2 x 8, 2 x A* and 1 x 7 at GCSE. I am on a number of access programs including the Social Mobility Foundation's APP Reach Program, Sutton Trust's Summer School Program, UNIQ, and Access Oxbridge (now renamed as Zero Gravity). I have recently been appointed a Trustee of Potential Plus UK (an organization I have been a member of for 10 years), and am passionate about social mobility. This passion has led to me working with Year 12 students to support them with their personal statements this year due to the disruption to their education caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. I am submitting evidence because I am extremely worried about the impact of this emergency examinations process, both on myself and other people like me, and would like this to be urgently reviewed to hopefully prevent the issues raised below.

Executive Summary

- I am seriously concerned about the emergency grading system, particularly its impact on high-ability disadvantaged students like myself, and feel this could jeopardize my university place as a result as well as demoralizing me.
- My main concern is the standardization model, which I fear, due to studying at a disadvantaged school, will downgrade my results because my grades are much higher than the average from my school, when in actual fact my work clearly indicates I should get this higher grade.
- I find the lack of a robust appeals very worrying, suggesting an almost above reproach attitude in this examination series. The Autumn exam series is no substitute for a proper appeals process on the grades outputted by the standardization model.
- The Autumn exam series is severely flawed due to the lack of education I have received since lockdown began and is financially unaffordable, so therefore is not offering something which can be accessed on a level playing field.
- I feel this will have a long-term impact not just on myself but thousands of people like me, affecting our life chances overall and likely leading to us earning university degrees from institutions with less of a strong reputation so leading to lower paying jobs in the long-term, widening inequality in society.
- The standardization model and utilization of past school performance is a challenge to social mobility and will brutally stop any progress on this front in its tracks.

Main Body: My Concerns In Full

1. I hold serious concerns about the emergency grading system which has been put in place for this summer. A system based off of teachers' professional opinions on what grades we should get to me, in itself, is not a problem, and understandably this system has had to be implemented with speed to deliver results for A Level students on August 13th, and for GCSE students on August 20th, so it cannot be perfect. However, my fear is that bright pupils in disadvantaged areas are likely to be hardest hit by this system due to the standardization model, and this is something that I feel seriously needs addressing. As a Year 13 student from a disadvantaged school who worked extremely hard for my A Levels and now anxiously awaits my results this year, the outlook could not be bleaker. Below I have outlined my concerns and how it has impacted me:
2. The standardization model - the concept of a standardization model is not something I refute, in fact it is necessary that there are some controls as there are likely to be differences in the harshness of grading across schools; we can't just have everybody walking out with A*s as it undermines confidence in the exam system. Unfortunately though, the only indicator that seems to be included within this model (though it is important to acknowledge we don't know exactly what the model looks like as there is not absolute transparency on this point) is using the previous grades of the centre that entered you for the examination. This poses a serious problem to candidates like myself who are at disadvantaged schools and were on track to achieve grades rarely, if at all, seen at my institution. I do not doubt that there is enough evidence to support me fulfilling my offer conditions to study History and Politics at Oxford University, and this would make me one of three people in my year to go to Oxford, the first time my school has had any students get an offer from Oxford, and also I am in the first in my immediate family to go to university. For example I was on track to achieve an A* in my History A Level, and this conclusion is well-supported, in my opinion, due to the fact that my coursework achieved full marks, due to my mocks where I was comfortably into the A* boundary and in my classwork where I was consistently achieving this grade, and had been for most of my studies. Yet my school barely ever achieves A*s or large numbers of As in any subject, so I fear the standardization model may unfairly penalize me on this basis as it does not take any of my academic record into account.
3. Lack of appeals and issues with the Autumn exam series - the current system to me strongly lacks transparency, and suggests an almost above reproach attitude to the workings of this system. I am extremely frustrated at the fact that you cannot appeal the output of the standardization model and that the only appeal mechanism as such is the Autumn exam series - I already have put in all the work and certainly have the evidence I feel to support any appeal yet it is so infuriating this option is not on offer and instead we will have the disruption of having to defer or even lose university places to have to reapply

next year after the Autumn exam results arrive which no doubt will have a knock-on effect in the higher education sector as well. Also the offer of an Autumn exam series, whilst sounding idyllic in theory, is severely flawed in practice. Not only do exam boards not actually have to offer a particular subject, or for that matter any subjects at all, but actually this will do nothing to resolve the problems already raised here; the very same students who are likely to be penalised in their results due to going to a disadvantaged state school are then going to be penalised again because they can't access this examination series. This is because these disadvantaged state schools are most likely to be the ones offering very little or no support at all since schools closed towards the end of March – my school for example set a few small pieces of work on an online platform, until after Easter we weren't allowed to communicate with our teachers in any way at all, and since then the support provided is incredibly minimal. In one of my subjects we still had an estimated eighth of the content left to cover on the syllabus, so these exams aren't accessible to the very people who I feel may require them as we've had no teaching time. These exams should also be the absolute last resort – to me a sign of success with this examination series is if not many people apply to take the exams but that should be because people are content with their grades overall, not because they can't access the exams or are so demoralized they see no point in proceeding. It's also important to consider access for the exams from more than just through the academic lens; many of these disadvantaged schools are cash-strapped and have been struggling to make ends meet for years, so adding in a bunch of students who want to re-sit could break the bank. This therefore means I feel there is a real-risk that there are going to be students who don't sit these exams because they, or their school, simply can't afford to sit them – the likelihood of schools passing these costs on (which could be several hundred up to nearly one thousand pounds) is real. This leaves students like myself from disadvantaged schools in a dead-end almost, unable to see any way to truly get the grades we deserve if injustice is served with the examination process, and puts thousands of students across the country in a helpless situation with no way out.

4. Impact on disadvantaged High Learning Potential students if the grades awarded are below what they were on track to achieve – if the system works as has been suggested, we are extremely likely to demoralize thousands of High Learning Potential children in disadvantaged areas across the UK, not just at A Level but also at GCSE level as well through no fault of their own, myself included. Why should we grade the achievements of the individual on what the school achieves instead of actually on what they achieved, what hard work they put in, what talent they have, and what ability they have shown over the last two years of study? To me, this is entirely contradictory to the vision of social mobility that we should hold, which is that regardless of where you are born, regardless of how wealthy your family is, regardless of your ethnicity or any other factor, that we live in a meritocratic society where we

judge children (and everybody else) by their own achievements. If this system operates in the way that has been suggested, what we are actually doing is punishing high-ability students simply for where they live and where they were educated. How is that justifiable? The impacts of these grades will not just be felt this year but will be felt for the rest of our lives – in the short-term I have already seen the serious consequences of the uncertainty and fears created by this system, leading to extreme stress, causing lack of sleep, loss of concentration, migraines and constant anxiety, with some even signing off of social media or refusing to engage with their potential future peers who they could be going to university with over worries they won't end up going there. In the long-term, these students were likely to end up at top institutions across the UK, yet in some cases they may no longer get this opportunity, so meaning they'll end up at an institution which does not have as good a reputation, does not deliver as good an educational experience, and more importantly does not have the same level of careers service, so meaning that these very students may have hundreds of doors closed to them and their life chances cut down severely due to factors beyond their control. They could end up with a lower skilled or lower paying jobs as a direct result of this, so it is so crucial this system works correctly and delivers for thousands of people in a situation similar to myself. This simply should not be happening; whilst high-achieving individuals from these backgrounds may not be a significant proportion of the population, they are in terms of what they can offer to our nation and are particularly important to the communities they come from as trailblazers who will hopefully lead more in a similar direction. Let's show commitment to social mobility and tackle this head on.

5. To me, these examination arrangements are significant, both on a personal level in terms of where I end up next and on a symbolic level in terms of social mobility, and it's incredibly important that we get it right the first time around. For years social mobility has been stagnant so it is so important that this examination arrangements system makes this country's commitment to social mobility loud and clear. Every student should be judged on their merits, and theirs alone, not what students a few years ago achieved or what a computer model thinks they deserve. The relationship between schools and what grades students achieve should be uncoupled – it is very likely that people who are in positions similar to mine got there through their own hard work and determination. Schools do recognize this, but it is very unlikely that the standardization model will, from the information we have. A serious reconsideration regarding appeals must take place as well, and let's see the Autumn exam series as a last-resort option for students. If Ofqual are insistent the Autumn exam series is to run then there is much work to be done on this as well to make sure students can actually access it; I fear the boat on this has already sailed with so much school time already having been missed by thousands of disadvantaged students across the country. This problem cannot wait, and let's ensure there isn't a lost generation of high-ability students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Let's show we mean it when we say it's not about where you come from but what you achieve.

My Recommendations

- Ofqual should immediately give more transparency about the standardization model to ease concerns from people like myself and so that it can clearly be judged the process is fair for every student, including disadvantaged high-ability students, before results are issued rather than after them when it is difficult to actually resolve these issues.
- Review the standardization model to make sure disadvantaged high-ability students are not penalized due to this system, and take into account the fact there will be outliers like myself who should get the grades they deserve first time around.
- Introduce a robust appeals process on the grades outputted from the standardization model. This process should be evidence based, for example in humanities the submission of essays from throughout your studies, from coursework (if completed) and from mocks, to allow students to get grades changed when it was clear they did deserve them, and to minimise disruption to their future life plans in as short a time span as possible.
- Tackle the problems raised by the Autumn exam series, including a funding pot for students from disadvantaged areas to allow them to access these exams, more logistical planning to make sure there is enough room to conduct these examinations and have every year group back in school, with possible catch-up tuition for Year 13 pupils who like myself have had no education for three months to prepare them for these exams or instead special consideration in grades outputted.

June 2020