

## Written evidence submitted by the Oxford University

### **University of Oxford submission to the Education Select Committee inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services**

1. This submission is being made on behalf of the University of Oxford. The University is committed<sup>1</sup> to increasing access to our courses from under-represented groups, including students from disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as playing our part in helping to raise attainment in schools, and we are extremely concerned about the impact the COVID-19 pandemic is having on the education of school students, in particular those from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

#### *The effect of cancelling formal exams, including the fairness of qualifications awarded and pupils' progression to the next stage of education or employment*

2. We recognise the difficulties faced by Ofqual and awarding organisations this year in ensuring that qualifications can be awarded in as fair a way as possible, and that the arrangements put in place, using centre-assessed grades and rank orders, are the most pragmatic in the circumstances. However, we do have concerns that the methodology being used by awarding organisations in England to calculate A-Level grades is very likely to produce lower grades for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, especially those who are outliers in poorly-performing centres. And whatever grades are awarded in the summer, or achieved in later sessions, these will be the grades that the students of 2020 will take with them into their working lives, beyond their initial next destination, so it behoves all those involved in the awarding of qualifications to ensure that the grades awarded are as fair as possible.
3. While statistical models tend to predict group results well, the results for individuals are often poor. The statistical model being used by awarding organisations this summer will be heavily based on the past performance of the school, which means that it will be very difficult for highly-performing students in schools that have had low historical performance to be awarded appropriate grades, as this will not be within the parameters predicted by the model. And since almost all students change school setting between KS2 and KS3, and there is also movement at KS4 with students moving between schools, or to FE colleges or sixth forms, the extent to which historical data can predict future cohort performance at centres with such changeable populations is limited.
4. It is also our experience that students from disadvantaged backgrounds who apply to and are offered places at Oxford are more likely to have lower attainment prior to A-Levels (i.e. GCSEs) than their more advantaged peers. We also observe that these students are more likely to make significant progress from one key stage to the next compared to their more advantaged peers. There are thus structural reasons why students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely than other students to receive grades this summer that do not reflect the attainment they would have expected to demonstrate in their examinations.

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<sup>1</sup> Further information about our access targets and activities can be found in our Access and Participation Plan agreed with the Office for Students: [https://www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/UniversityOfOxford\\_APP\\_2020-21.pdf](https://www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/UniversityOfOxford_APP_2020-21.pdf)

5. Ofqual has explicitly rejected measures to enable the statistical standardisation to reflect the trajectory of a school's performance, and there will be no mechanism for individual grades to be adjusted, either during the standardisation or via an appeal once results have been issued. While the recent clarification<sup>2</sup> on the options for centres to challenge their students' final grades is welcome, it still leaves individual students with few opportunities to improve their grades if they believe they do not reflect the attainment they could have reached if they had been able to take examinations.
6. For students from socio-economic and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds who are more likely to be in this position of disadvantage and hold offers to study on a course at Oxford, we will consider any failed grades carefully and, based on the range of information we hold on the candidate (including interview and admissions test scores) may forgive any drop in required A-Level (or equivalent qualification) where we judge the candidate will be able to flourish on the course. This clemency will be applied after A-Level results are known. However, this mechanism to correct the potential flaws in the issuing of A-Level grades will only be possible if there are sufficient places available under the Department for Education's (DfE) nationally imposed 5% student number controls (SNC). We would have supported the policy that students under-represented in higher education should have been exempted from the SNC but sadly this opportunity was missed by the DfE.
7. We recognise that students will have the opportunity to take examinations in the autumn term; however, it is also important to acknowledge that not all students will have the same access to, and support in preparing for, these examinations. While awarding organisations will be required to provide examinations in all subjects that would have been available in the summer, schools will be under no such obligation to provide the opportunity for their former students to return in order to sit them.
8. Students will also have had very varied amounts of support since schools were closed in March, so many would be likely to struggle to prepare effectively for examinations in the autumn. If they are planning to continue to higher education and are taking examinations to improve their grades, they may also have to take an unplanned gap year if they are not able to start a university course in January once the results for the autumn exam series have been published. These issues are very likely to have a greater impact on students from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

*The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on disadvantaged groups*

9. Research is already indicating that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is having a disproportionate impact on the education and attainment of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, in particular those at more deprived schools with a high proportion of their intake eligible for Free School Meals. The Education Endowment Foundation's recent review of existing literature on learning loss and the impact of school closure<sup>3</sup> estimates that the attainment gap between disadvantaged students and others could widen by 36% by September 2020, reversing gains made since 2011.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ofqual-publishes-more-details-on-appeals-and-confirms-autumn-exam-arrangements>

<sup>3</sup> <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/covid-19-resources/best-evidence-on-impact-of-school-closures-on-the-attainment-gap/>

10. Surveys conducted since schools were closed in March corroborate these findings, showing that schools with fewer resources, drawing from more deprived catchment areas, are struggling to maintain the level of teaching and learning they would normally expect to achieve. A research brief from the Sutton Trust on COVID-19 and social mobility, published in April 2020<sup>4</sup>, highlights the fact that existing inequalities between state schools in affluent and deprived areas<sup>5</sup>, and more significantly between those attending state and private schools, are being compounded by the different levels of preparedness and support schools are able to provide during lockdown. Not only are schools in more affluent areas better resourced themselves, a higher proportion of their students have access to the IT needed to participate fully in online learning: 42% of teachers in private schools were confident all of their students would have appropriate access, a view shared by only 9% of those at the most affluent state schools, and only 2% of the most deprived state schools. This is, perhaps inevitably, having an impact on the amount and quality of work that students were able to complete: those in private schools were twice as likely to be spending five or more hours studying than those in state schools.
11. The Nuffield Foundation is also undertaking a major piece of research on the impact of COVID-19 on mainstream schools in England<sup>6</sup>. The first of two surveys was conducted in May, with findings published in June; the second will take place in July. The first survey focused on the impact of closure and early plans for re-opening, and many of the findings echoed those of the Sutton Trust survey: access to IT was identified as the most significant form of educational disadvantage, with 81% of teachers saying it was leading to disadvantaged students being less engaged in school work, a bigger factor than, for example, students being eligible for Pupil Premium funding, which was identified by 52% of teachers as the biggest cause of disengagement. However, the overall level of deprivation of the school<sup>7</sup> was found to have more influence on student engagement than the level of deprivation of individual students, with students from disadvantaged backgrounds in more affluent schools being more likely to be more engaged in their learning.
12. The more deprived schools were also more likely to be relying on less sophisticated technology for teaching and communication, and to have a higher proportion of their students unable to access adequate IT at home. These schools were also struggling to cover the full curriculum, which was also having a negative influence on student engagement, and their teachers were more likely to report lower levels of support from senior leaders, which also compounded the negative impact on student engagement. These students are also likely to struggle more with the transition to higher education than their peers from more advantaged backgrounds.
13. All three of the research reports highlighted here make recommendations about how to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on those from the most deprived backgrounds. Access to IT resources is crucial, for both students from disadvantaged backgrounds and their schools, and levelling up access to equipment and appropriate platforms could make a significant difference to the level of student engagement. Such students may also benefit

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/covid-19-and-social-mobility-impact-brief/>

<sup>5</sup> Based on eligibility for free school meals, measured in quintiles, with Q1 being the most affluent and Q5 being the most deprived. The surveys also included private schools, who are counted separately.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/impact-of-covid-19-mainstream-schools-england>

<sup>7</sup> Measured by the proportion of students eligible for Free School Meals (FSM).

from targeted tutoring and support, to help them recover at least some of the learning they may have missed, so they can start the new school year ready to learn alongside their peers.

14. At the University of Oxford, we are very aware that the students we admit this October will be coming to us having had very different experiences of education since schools were closed in March. We are already planning to take account of these difficult circumstances when results are issued, and our teaching will be adapted to ensure that our students are able to make a successful transition to university, and feel safe and supported as they settle into college life. Some of our students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are on the Opportunity Oxford<sup>8</sup> programme (a bridging programme) and will receive academic support through online materials, as well as a two week academic residential programme in September before they start term in October. Our future Oxford foundation programme<sup>9</sup> will support forthcoming generations of students affected by the pandemic and the loss of teaching and learning.
15. We are also aware that the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to have an impact on school education for a number of years. When they do reopen, schools will be facing the prospect of trying to recover many months' worth of teaching, with students who have had varying levels of engagement and support in the previous six months. Ofqual is already consulting on options for examinations in 2021, but in the meantime we are considering the potential implications for those who may apply to us in the future, and how we can most fairly assess their suitability for our courses. We know that there will be students who may not have covered as much of the curriculum as they would have in previous years, and whose schools do not have the resources to provide additional support in preparing for our admissions tests and interviews, so we will be taking this into account, as well as making greater use of contextualising information, to ensure that we recruit the most talented students, whatever their background.
16. To help us better assess the context from which a student is applying to Oxford we strongly encourage the DfE to provide data from the National Pupil Database at an individual level on disadvantage (for example eligibility for free school meals) via UCAS at the point of applying to higher education. Access to this information at this point in the admissions cycle would vastly improve access to higher education and would remove the need to use proxy metrics for disadvantage such as those based on home postcodes.
17. We have also supported schools, students, parents, teachers and the third sector by producing digital resources to help complement teaching and learning in schools and at home:
  - a. Digital resource hub<sup>10</sup>: digital resources to support learning and exploration. These can help parents and teachers to feed the curiosity of growing minds and inspire them to think more broadly.
  - b. Oxplore<sup>11</sup>: a series of thought-provoking Big Questions which take students on a guided journey to encourage their powers of debate and critical thinking. Each question has a series of learning resources (articles, quizzes, podcasts, videos, and

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/increasing-access/opportunity-oxford>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/increasing-access/foundation-oxford>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/increasing-access/ug-digital-resources>

<sup>11</sup> <https://explore.org/>

image galleries) which draw upon some of the cutting-edge research being carried out at Oxford.

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