

RSS STATEMENT ON 2021 A LEVEL RESULTS

10 August 2021

Looking back

The RSS starts by recognising that the effects of Covid on education in the UK were worse this year than last. Students graded this year have experienced much more learning loss – about half of their A-level schooling was disrupted, compared to about a quarter for those taking exams last year. The amount of learning loss will have varied more than usual between different types of schools and students (e.g., public vs private schools, advantaged vs disadvantaged households).

While headlines may focus on grade inflation, this is not really an accurate description of what has happened this year or last – the process for awarding grades has been too different from that used in the past. It has been a difficult year for students, and government and others should focus on helping them to progress appropriately and catch up on lost learning. It will be important to think about what needs to happen at universities to support students and, we hope, **to measure longer term outcomes of this enlarged cohort of students whose school-level attainment can't be directly compared to previous cohorts.**

While last year we saw the government abandon their poorly-considered plans to use an algorithm to award individual grades, this year's guidance – released only at the end of February – delegated these issues to teachers and exam boards. **Earlier guidance about assessment would have helped ensure more consistency in the evidence available for grading.** There would have been more 'data points' for teacher assessed grades, and there could have been much more consistency between schools. This underlines the need for a 'Plan B' for next year. The importance of consistency is highlighted by the fact that this year the [attainment gap has widened](#) for students on free school meals, from areas of high deprivation and Black candidates. Some of this will reflect real differences in learning loss, but in the absence of more consistency in assessment processes and evidence between schools, we cannot be sure.

Ofqual have provided [detailed and helpful analyses of the results](#), which we welcome.

Looking forward

The RSS believes there are two priorities for next steps.

First, **there should be a full and transparent account of what statistical evidence was used by exam boards to select which schools would be subject to further investigation.** Though there is some information in the Ofqual report, further details are promised for 'later this year'. We await with interest.

Second, **there needs to be open discussion about what this means for assessment next year.** The return to exams may help ensure consistency of grading, but not of learning loss. The steps government has announced to ensure exams take some account of learning loss are welcome. But exams are statistically 'norm referenced' – the cut-offs between different grades are partly set by prior decisions about what grading results should look like. Is the plan to revert in one fell swoop to 2019 grade profiles, or to adjust them more slowly? Public debate about this should start now.

The cohort of 18-year-olds is growing. That, combined with increasing (and rational) aspirations for a higher proportion of each cohort to attend university (particularly given the small number of degree-level apprenticeships currently available), means that decisions will need to be taken that are at the intersection of statistics and policy. The public needs to be part of this conversation.

