



Colleges and 2020 summer qualifications

1. The Association of Colleges represents the 240 colleges in England who, between them, educate hundreds of thousands of students for academic, technical and vocational qualifications.
2. The problems with A-levels, GCSEs, BTEC and other qualifications affected all of these students.
3. This note explains the key issues from a college perspective. We recommend:
 - That there is an independent systematic review of what went wrong this summer to learn lessons for the future and to develop a more resilient qualifications system;
 - There needs to be careful planning now for the autumn 2020 resit exams and the summer 2021 exams to rebuild confidence in the system;
 - Contingency arrangements (a Plan B) of in-year standardised assessment opportunities to mitigate against possible future disruption, local lockdowns or second infections spikes;
 - DfE needs to give colleges flexibility in the use of the tuition fund to apply to all learners who need support;
 - A clear and consistent framework for awarding of vocational and technical qualifications in 2021 backed up with a centralized communications process.
 - More transparency from Ofqual of any moderation process needed in the future, and early sharing of impact assessments prior to release of results to students.
 - Assessment should be adapted this year in response to student need and public health risk but on balance we don't think that 2021 scheduled exams should be delayed

What happened?

4. The pandemic and the closure of schools and colleges is an event without precedent since the second world war. Replacing hundreds of thousands of exams and tests with an assessment of grades was an enormous challenge for which there was no rule book. It was a unique and almost impossible

undertaking to retain confidence in the reliability and rigour of the results whilst being fair to very single student.

5. DfE and Ofqual acted quickly to consult everyone involved in awarding and teaching. They floated the option of running or delaying the summer exams but did not deem either to be feasible. Some people now say it would have been better to delay the exams or run them with social distancing. There would have been very little time to organise this and it is worth noting that many colleges have several hundreds of candidates taking a single A-level or GCSE subject at the same time. Inequalities in access to learning during lockdown would have made exam outcomes this summer extremely unfair.
6. AoC supported DfE and Ofqual's broad approach of replacing external assessment with moderated centre assessment for academic/general qualifications and the mixed model for technical qualifications but we did ask questions about the process, such as:
 - How would any bias be avoided?
 - Would the awarding organisations reflect the value-added by centres?
 - How would the ranking of candidates work for very large cohorts?
 - How would proper assessments work for vocational and technical qualifications?

A-levels and GCSEs

7. Colleges approached the need for centre assessed grades and rankings in a professional and rigorous way. There are several members of teaching staff for each subject who followed guidance in spending time assessing the capability of their students and in ensuring that the assigned grades reflected recent trends, value-added measures and prior achievement of their students. Colleges did not anticipate the high level of downward adjustment to the grades they awarded.
8. Over the summer, Ofqual staff provided verbal assurance that the approach being taken would be fair and without bias. However, without data, analysis or impact assessments, teachers and college leaders had to take this on trust. AoC first became aware of the unfair outcomes only when colleges were given their results the day before students (12 August). At that stage, it became clear to us that something had gone wrong and we shared our concerns with Ofqual and DfE. The Ofqual publication on the day of the A Level results confirmed our fears.
9. Our summary of the problems for college students with the initial set of A-level grades is:

- The calculated grades for college students were far lower than expected when both compared with historical achievements and with centre assessed grades;
 - Many colleges had far more 'downgrading' of Centre Assessment Grades than overall. 39% of grades overall were downgraded; for some colleges more than 50% were downgraded;
 - There was no obvious logic to the adjustments, Many colleges with large and stable student profiles and consistently high value added were reporting very large reductions, including students being downgraded by 2 or more grades;
 - Ofqual's analysis showed that average college results in high grades (C and above) had barely shifted from last year (up 0.2%) compared to a big rise for private school students (4.9%) but there was very little further analysis on this point. Ofqual's equalities impact assessment was insufficient and used incomplete data from DfE's National Pupil Database¹
 - Ofqual's report confirmed that centres with small cohorts were partly or wholly exempt from moderation. Using centre-assessed grades for these students allowed for grade inflation compared with students in larger cohorts which tend to be found in colleges and larger school sixth forms.
10. Given the flaws in the initial grades and the lack of time available, Ofqual's decision on Monday 17th to award the Centre Assessment Grades (or calculated grades – whichever was higher) for A-levels and for GCSEs (issued on 20 August) was the least worst option available. However there have been significant knock-on effects. The public now has less confidence in qualifications.
11. It is now clear that the drive to avoid grade inflation over-rode other considerations and resulted in a moderation approach which suppressed the results of some students more than others. AoC supported the original plan in principle but we did not expect the moderation to override centre assessed grades to the extent that it did. There was insufficient planning for the volatility in results. The analysis of the results was not shared before results were issued to students. More transparency in advance could have helped to avert the worst problems and could have ensured better briefing of students, parents, journalists, MPs and everyone else with a stake in this

¹ 16% of records in key tables on socio economic status, ethnic origin etc of pupils are not known. Ofqual's Deputy Chief Regulator told the Education Select Committee on 2 September that the National Pupil Database data used in parts of the impact assessment does not include students educated wholly in the private sector. The equivalent equalities analysis in Scotland had comprehensive data (with fewer than 1% not known)

system. The consequences of the hasty return to unmoderated Centre Assessed Grades include:

- Unhelpful disruption to higher education and sixth form recruitment at a time when institutions are focusing on Covid-safety and when student anxiety is higher because of rising unemployment,
- There is a risk that some students will embark on a higher level course this autumn lacking certain skills and confidence. There may be more students taking A-levels and other Level 3 qualifications than usual. Some students awarded grade 4 and above in English and maths may need to improve these key skills.
- The possibility that there may be more systematic bias in the now unmoderated grades than in those initially issued². It is worth noting that state-funded schools and colleges are inspected by Ofsted and are bound by the public sector equality duty in a way that other exam centres are not.

BTECs, technical and vocational qualifications

12. Ofqual and awarding organisations took a different approach to vocational and technical qualifications because assessment arrangements are different with many requiring in-person testing of skills which sometimes confer licences to practice in safety-critical occupations. The approach in 2020 allowed some qualifications to be centre-assessed with moderation like academic qualifications, required the awarding of other qualifications to be delayed until buildings were re-opened and involved a mixed approach for a third group. There are hundreds of awarding organisations awarding several million qualifications each year so this has been a complex process and there has been some delay in resolving issues for students. DfE did not allow colleges to re-open at all for adult learners until mid-July.
13. BTEC qualifications issued by Pearson were in the centre-assessed with moderation group but with a different algorithm than the one used for A-levels and GCSEs. This year was always going to be complicated for BTEC qualifications because of a shift to new specifications. Late in the day – on 19 August 2020 – Pearson decided to withdraw the grades that it had calculated using its own algorithm and to reissue all grades, awarding candidates either the centre assessed mark or the one calculated in the moderation. This process took almost a week, adding to student anxiety,

² Ofqual witnesses told the Education select committee on 2 September that there were biases in centre assessments but their analysis has not been published.

but Pearson prioritised students whose grades were needed for UCAS applications. If action had been taken a few days earlier, there would have been fewer problems.

What next

14. DfE should commission an independent systematic review of what went wrong this summer to learn lessons for the future and to develop a more resilient qualifications system. The events of summer 2020 show that the system could not cope with the pandemic but have also exposed deep-seated problems related to how assessment works, whether students are assessed on the right things, whether it is right to leave everything in some qualifications to a single set of exams, whether technology could be used better, whether the oversight of exam centres is adequate and whether the relationship between DfE, Ofqual and awarding organisations needs reform.
15. DfE should also act to assist colleges and schools with some of the fall-out of the summer 2020 problems by:
 - giving colleges more flexibility in how they used the recently allocated post-16 tuition fund so allow them to support students who have been awarded higher GCSE grades but whose English and maths skills need improvement.
 - adjusting funding to cope with changes in patterns of enrolment. With more students starting higher level courses, there is a risk that colleges will have to cut courses at lower levels in the next 6-9 months to stay within budget.
 - Ensuring there is sufficient support and planning of the autumn 2020 and summer 2021 series.
16. We also need a fresh approach to planning the summer 2021 exams to rebuild confidence in the system. There should be contingency arrangements (a Plan B) of in-year standardised assessment opportunities to mitigate against possible future disruption and local lockdowns. There also needs to be a clear and consistent framework for awarding of vocational and technical qualifications in 2021 backed up with a centralized communications process. Ofqual and awarding organisations need to be more transparent about their moderation processes and should share their overall results and impact assessments prior to release of results to students.