



## BONUS CASE STUDY: THE 2020 EXAM FIASCO AND INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

### Events

The exam fiasco of 2020 saw thousands of A-Level and GCSE students face huge uncertainty after their grades were initially downgraded by a 'mutant algorithm'. After A Levels and GCSEs were cancelled, the Government, alongside Ofqual and the exam boards, came up with a process to award grades. Teachers would provide Centre Assessed Grades (CAGs) and Ofqual and the exam boards would come up with a process for aligning these results with previous school attainment; an algorithm. Ofqual advised mid-summer that CAGs would have resulted in grade inflation of approximately 7% across both sets of qualifications, justifying the need to apply an adjustment process.

The Education secretary, Gavin Williamson, insisted in the weeks and months preceding the publication of results that the process was fair and robust and that the Exam Board-awarded grades would stand, not CAGs. Using CAGs, he argued, would lead to unacceptable grade inflation; speaking on 15 August, in an interview with *The Times*, he was clear, 'This is it... No U-turn, no change... [In Scotland] you've got a system where there aren't any controls, you've got rampant grade inflation. There's been no checks and balances in that system; it degrades every single grade as a result and in-baked unfairness.'

### Significance

A-Level results day came, and Exam Board-adjusted results were published to huge uproar as around 40% of grades had been downgraded by the adjustment process. The algorithm seemed to adversely affect poorer communities and benefit small private schools. Many A-Level students lost out on university places they had been offered, as a result of these downgraded results. After days of uncertainty, the Education secretary, Gavin Williamson, announced a U-turn and that CAGs would stand in place of the awarded grade. A decision was also made to give GCSE students their CAGs just days before their results were released.

Less than a week later, Sally Collier, Ofqual's chief regulator, and Jonathan Slater, the Department for Education's permanent secretary, resigned; Mr Williamson remained in post. Collier's resignation came not long after the Education secretary, Gavin Williamson, insisted Ofqual had his 'full confidence'. After her resignation, a statement was released on behalf of the body saying, 'Ofqual was asked by the Secretary of State to develop a system for awarding calculated grades, which maintained standards and ensured that grades were awarded broadly in line with previous years. Our goal has always been to protect the trust that the public rightly has in educational

qualifications. But we... appreciate that it has also caused real anguish and damaged public confidence. ... For all of that, we are extremely sorry.'

While the media and opposition were baying for Williamson's blood, he responded that 'We worked with Ofqual to construct the fairest possible model, but it is clear that the process of allocating grades has resulted in more significant inconsistencies than can be resolved.'

However, a week later in a select committee interview, Roger Taylor, the Chair of Ofqual, said that the Government changed policy without notice and set an 'impossible task' on exams: 'It was the secretary of state who decided to take the decision unannounced, without further consultation with Ofqual, that exams were to be calculated and the system of calculated grades implemented.' This calls into question the issue of who should take responsibility as his account shifts some of the blame for the results fiasco to Williamson, and disputes the view that a 'mutant algorithm' was to blame.

Taylor further told the Education select committee that Ofqual advised the Government against cancelling exams in 2020. They suggested to Williamson that they could either be held in a 'socially distanced manner' or they could be delayed. 'The third option – if neither of these were acceptable – would be to have to try and look at some form of calculated grade,' he told the committee. He said the Government was warned that cancelling exams and opting for calculated grades would be the 'worst-case scenario'.

Taylor acknowledged that Ofqual was fully responsible for developing the algorithm and insisted the process was fairer than using teacher assessments and had been tested thoroughly. But he said the 'approach failed to win public confidence' even when it was operating as intended because candidates were 'not willing to accept' lower grades than they had expected based on an algorithm.

Geoff Barton of the Association of School and College Leaders, argued that 'Ofqual's evidence is that there was nothing wrong with the algorithm used in the standardisation process, but the fundamental mistake was believing a statistical approach to awarding grades would be acceptable to the public, and that the Government knew the risks all along.'

The Labour Party's spokesperson said the evidence raises 'serious questions' about the Education secretary's role in the exams furore. 'Gavin Williamson has repeatedly tried to blame Ofqual and officials for the crisis over exams. It is now clear he was responsible,' she said. 'Williamson must urgently come to the Commons to offer an explanation and to take responsibility for his own incompetence.'