

# Education Policy Institute Position on Testing and Examinations in 2021

## Introduction and background

Following a period of school closures, formal exams were cancelled in 2020 and there was considerable debate about how an alternative system for awarding grades should operate. Following an outcry over an algorithm for determining results devised by Ofqual, the government changed its policy and allowed students to use the higher of either the grade determined by Ofqual or a grade based on teacher judgement. This led to an increase in grades compared to previous years, meaning that the results of the 2020 cohort are not comparable with previous years. Since colleges and universities had to expand their places in order to accommodate a larger number of students, the government lifted the numbers cap for 2020-21.

The government must now decide what to do for the cohort of young people taking exams in 2021. The Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson, has already announced that summer exams will be pushed back by 3 weeks in 2021, allowing extra time for lessons to take place. However, this assumes that schools remain open and can facilitate exams. Williamson has said that there will be further consultation to consider any further contingency measures and that details will be published later in the autumn. In the light of this current uncertainty, the Education Policy Institute has published this briefing paper to consider some of the priorities, challenges and options for the government before further decisions are made.

## Key points

### Priorities for the 2021 results

- The EPI has identified a set of key priorities on which decisions about the 2021 examinations should be based.
- The first priority is to provide pupils with a set of grades which will: enable them to progress to the next stage of education; give employers an indication of pupil achievement; and fulfil the role of formative assessment so that gaps in pupils' knowledge can be addressed.
- The system should avoid, as far as possible, penalising pupils who have lost learning time due to Covid-19. Specific consideration should be given to disadvantaged pupils who, even before the onset of the pandemic were over 18 months behind their peers by the end of secondary school and, as noted in the sections that follow, have had less access to online resources.
- Not use the 2021 results for accountability purposes. The focus needs to be on delivering the two priorities set out above, and policy-makers should not seek to judge the performance of schools at a time when they have dealt with an unprecedented crisis.
- Be deliverable: any arrangement must be delivered in full within the agreed timescales and with the confidence of the

public. Any delays to or distrust in the arrangements risk another summer of uncertainties and last-minute changes to policies.

### Evidence about the problem and effective solutions

- Not a lot is known about the impact of school closures, although some relevant research has been published.
- Research from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF published in June 2020) estimated that the attainment gap between advantaged and disadvantaged pupils could widen by 36 per cent (median estimate). The full range of estimates lay between 11 and 75 per cent. Even in a "best case" scenario, the study found that the gap is likely to widen.
- Survey data from the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and the Sutton Trust all indicate that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds have spent less time on home learning, have had less access to online classes and have also had less



access to their own technology and a place to study than their more affluent peers.

- A number of assessment options are being explored for 2021. The first is teacher assessment. However, relying solely on teacher assessed grades means that there is no standardisation across the cohort as a whole. In turn, there is also the potential for results to be unreliable and lead to unmanaged grade-inflation.
- Another potential problem is teacher bias. Existing research shows that teachers are not immune from societal stereotypes which inform their judgments. Such stereotypes may not be deliberate or conscious but may instead be shorthand mechanisms for assessing pupil ability, often based on prior attainment or experiences of past cohorts. Most research on teacher bias has been carried out with Key Stage 2 and A level pupils; there is a need for more research focussing on GCSE.
- The option of providing more questions in exam papers and allowing pupils to only answer questions on the subjects they have covered has been considered. Ofqual has decided not to extend optionality, stating that the approach would place greater pressure on exam boards and that it tended to benefit higher attaining or better prepared candidates because of the need to navigate between different questions and content. It should be noted that more optionality has been extended to GCSE English literature as well as history and ancient history following direction from the DfE.
- The use of mock exams has been discussed as an option for 2021. The issues with this are i) that mocks (as currently designed) are not standardised and ii) that they usually take place in December and therefore omit a term of learning time.

#### How should summer exams work?

- The government has already announced that exams will be pushed back by 3 weeks. However, this approach is not enough to mitigate against all lost learning time. It also lacks a Plan B, should a large proportion of pupils be unable to sit exams.
- The EPI supports greater optionality in exam papers. As pointed out in its consultation response, it considers that the risks to pupils in navigating exams with more questions could be mitigated by allowing schools to guide pupils to the relevant questions or only putting certain sections in front of them.
- The DfE must be willing to provide a short-term increase in funding to ensure that exam boards have the capacity to amend exam papers now and to mark more complex papers over the summer. This might mean providing optionality in some exams but not others.
- The government should consider what a credible "Plan B" should look like if summer exams cannot take place either in part or in full.
- Multiple papers covering a single subject should be spaced out as much as possible so that, if a student misses either the first or second exam in order to comply with Covid-19 guidance, he or she has an exam on which to fall back.
- There should be a new series of benchmarking assessments in the spring term which would provide pupils with grades if exams cannot go ahead at scale in 2021. The assessments would be set by exam boards, but

schools would have the flexibility to decide which components to give to their pupils so that they are only assessed against the content they have covered. In order to avoid any potential gaming, the assessments for each subject should take place on the same day. This approach, although not perfect, would be different to mock exams in that it is set by the exam boards with an accompanying marking scheme – thereby providing greater consistency than traditional mocks.

#### Measures to enable pupil and student progression

- In its evidence to the Education Select Committee, EPI recommended that the government should double the Pupil Premium for pupils currently in years 1, 7 and 11 and that it should double the disadvantage weighting for those in year 13. It also recommended that the Pupil Premium should be doubled for Looked After Children and extended permanently to those with a Child Protection Plan. The estimated cost of this would be £1.3 billion.
- Because of the use of teacher assessments, there was grade inflation in 2020. Since the 2021 cohort will also have experienced lost learning time and will be competing with the 2020 cohort for further and higher education places as well as in the labour market, the fairest approach would be to allow some grade inflation for this cohort. This should be pinned between the 2019 and 2020 cohorts with a particular focus around the grade 3 and 4 boundary.
- As exam results for 2021 are unlikely to be completely secure, further and higher education institutions should apply some discretion when deciding on admissions and should take into account the demographics of the pupil (including consideration of whether their local area has been impacted by local lockdowns) and particularly whether their results are only just below the required grade threshold. Since this approach is likely to result in an increase of admissions, the government should remove the cap on domestic admissions to universities as in 2020.
- EPI recommends providing catch up support for the 2021 cohort once they are in further or higher education. Additional funding should be made available in the next academic year to support any necessary catch up for students in their first year of college or university.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/testing-and-examinations-in-2021/>

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