COVID-19 and disadvantage gaps in England 2020

Introduction and background

In 2020, summer exams were cancelled due to the disruption caused by COVID-19. Instead, the higher of students' grades predicted by an algorithm or assessed by their teachers determined final grades at GCSE, A level, and for other post-16 qualifications. Under this approach of 'centre assessed grades' (CAGs), students' grades were much higher than in previous years. In 2020, the average GCSE grade across English and maths was 4.9, an increase of 0.4 grades from the previous year. The DfE cautioned that "the increases seen in the headline statistics reflect the changed method for awarding grades rather than demonstrating a step change improvement in standard."
This report from the Education Policy Institute explores whether students with certain characteristics or in certain areas fared more favourably or lost out relative to their peers in 2020 under the CAG system. Calculations are based on the gap in grades awarded in GCSEs, A levels and other post-16 qualifications between different student groups and geographic areas in 2020 compared to 2019. Longer-term trends in the years before the pandemic are also examined to highlight where progress is being made in addressing educational inequalities.

Key findings

The Key Stage 4 disadvantage gap

- Despite the disruption to education with the onset of COVID-19, the measured GCSE disadvantage gap fell very slightly in 2020, with pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds scoring on average 1.24 grades below their non-disadvantaged peers, compared to 1.26 grades below in 2019.
- Whilst disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils benefited similarly from the GCSE grade increases in 2020. The share of disadvantaged pupils awarded at least a grade 4 or above across English and maths rose by 8.5 percentage points between 2019 and 2020, compared to a 6.5 percentage point increase among non-disadvantaged pupils. Disadvantaged pupils tended to shift into the middle of the grade distribution whilst non-disadvantaged pupils tended to shift into higher grades, i.e., grade 7 and above.
- Grades 4 and above – particularly in English and maths, often act as a passport to future study and are important to employers. This may mean disadvantaged students among the 2019-20 cohort stand a better chance of progressing to level 3 courses which require GCSE grades 4 and 5 as passport qualifications. However, it is also possible that institutions have increased their entry requirements in response to the 2020 grade increases, or that more popular courses are already oversubscribed. Furthermore, the grades awarded in the absence of exams may be a less reliable guide to some students' underlying knowledge and skills. These students may be at risk of not receiving the additional support they need in order to progress.
- Persistently disadvantaged pupils are those who are classed as disadvantaged for at least 80 per cent of their school lifetimes. In 2020, the measured grade gap for persistently disadvantaged pupils stood at 1.60 grades. This was a small decrease from 2019, when it stood at 1.62 grades. This indicates that persistently disadvantaged pupils did not lose out under centre assessments. However, in contrast to the headline disadvantage gap which narrowed until 2017, there has been no substantive progress in closing the gap for persistently disadvantaged pupils over the last decade.
- There has been a significant increase in persistent poverty among disadvantaged pupils in recent years. Among disadvantaged pupils, the share of pupils who have been eligible for free school meals for their entire time at school has increased from 18.8 per cent (or 26,000 pupils) in 2017, to 25.3 per cent (34,100 pupils) by 2020 – a rise of over 8,000 pupils in 3 years. Rising persistent poverty within the group of disadvantaged pupils is associated with stalling progress in closing the headline disadvantage gap since 2017.
- Despite the stability of the measured gap in 2020 – for both disadvantaged and persistently disadvantaged pupils – not all groups shared equally in the grade increases that occurred under centre assessments. Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) pupils with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) scored 3.62 grades below their peers in 2020 – the largest single gap of any subgroup of pupils that we considered and indicating a widening of the gap from 3.45 grades in 2019. SEND pupils without an EHCP were 1.65 grades behind, virtually unchanged from 2019. This follows a longer-term trend of slowing progress in closing the gap for the SEND group without an EHCP and progress stalling altogether for those with an EHCP.
- However, there was progress in closing the measured grade gap in 2020 for most minority ethnic groups, including Black Caribbean and other Black pupils who

had been losing ground relative to White British children prior to 2020.

- The extent of grade increases differed significantly between subjects. For example, in music the increase in grades awarded at the 4 or above threshold was 14 percentage points and in PE, drama, media, film and television studies, and French it was 13 percentage points. This compares to much lower grade increases for physics and maths (5 percentage points), as well as for chemistry and English literature (6 percentage points).
- EPI considered how subject-level disadvantage gaps in 2020 changed since 2019 when pupils last sat exams. Focusing on the most popular subjects, the biggest measured gap increases under centre assessments occurred in German, Spanish, English literature, and religious studies. That is, disadvantaged pupils who took these subjects in 2020 lost out – not only relative to their non-disadvantaged peers but relative to the previous year's cohort when grades were awarded under exam conditions. By contrast, the biggest measured gap reductions between 2019 and 2020 were seen in music, physics, chemistry, and biological sciences.
- Overall, the above findings suggest that concerns around widespread bias in teacher assessments in relation to disadvantage and ethnicity were mostly unfounded.
- It is, however, important to note that the impact of the pandemic was fairly limited for the 2020 cohort, with their education disrupted from March to June that year. Wider evidence, including assessment results throughout the 2020-21 academic year, shows that learning loss during the pandemic has disproportionately affected disadvantaged pupils – so while this may be masked in the grades awarded to date, policy must still focus on support and interventions for those groups affected.

16-19 education

- Using students' free school meal status during their last 6 years of school as an indicator of disadvantage, and a 16-19 attainment measure based on the qualifications and grades achieved between the age of 16 and 19, the analysis considers how disadvantage gaps changed in 2020, and how students taking non-academic (vocational or applied) qualifications fared in 2020. In 2020, assessment for academic qualifications was more disrupted than assessment for non-academic qualifications. This is because, in addition to final exams, non-academic qualifications are likely to include more project work and continuous assessment, much of which would have gone ahead as usual. The different structure of qualifications and EPI's approach to constructing metrics means that the measured grade gaps presented are not comparable between key stage 4 and the 16-19 phase.
- The measured 16-19 disadvantage grade gap widened in 2020, with students from a disadvantaged background on average 3.1 grades behind their non-disadvantaged peers over their best three qualifications, compared to 2.9 grades in 2019.
- The measured gap for students identified as persistently disadvantaged has been consistently wider than the gap for all disadvantaged students, and the widening in 2020 was more pronounced. The 16-19 persistent disadvantage gap over students' best three qualifications stood at 4 grades in 2020 compared to 3.7 in 2019.
- In 2020, average grades for female students increased by a quarter of a grade more than for male students over their best 3 qualifications. Over the same period, those with identified special educational needs saw a third of a grade less increase than those that did not, and students in general FE colleges saw almost no change compared to an increase of over a grade for those in state school sixth forms.
- Following the changes to assessments in 2020, A level grades were around half a grade higher per qualification in 2020 than in 2019. Conversely, applied general grades only increased by the equivalent of one quarter of an A level grade per qualification, and for other non-academic level 3 qualifications there was little increase at all.
- Across their best 3 qualifications, students completing applied general qualifications fell one grade behind their otherwise similar peers taking A levels. This could have put these students at a relative disadvantage when competing for higher education places because 35 per cent of UCAS (University and College Admissions Service) applications included at least one non-academic qualification in 2020.
- The increase in the disadvantage gap in 2020 therefore appears to have been largely driven by the fact that disadvantaged students were less likely to take the qualifications which saw the biggest increases in grades in 2020.
- The findings show that although most student groups saw higher measured grades in 2020 than in previous years on average, the different approaches to grading between qualification types disproportionately benefitted A level students. Disadvantaged students, who are more likely to take applied alternatives to A levels, lost out as a result.
- Although this research is based on 2020 results, A level results appear to have increased further in 2021. The government has committed to a gradual return back to 2019 grade distributions by 2023. However, given this may still leave students taking alternatives to A levels at a disadvantage in the 2022 grading process, the government should work with the higher education sector to ensure that these students do not disproportionately lose out when competing for university places.

The full document can be downloaded from:

https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/EPI-Disadvantage_Gaps_in_England_2022.pdf