

Exam results

There may be a row in England, as there has been in Scotland, over this summer's GCSE and A level results.

The first thing to stress is the award of grades to students has nothing to do with Ministers and the government. Normally students take exams set by independent Examining bodies, advised and moderated by teachers, with all the work marked by teachers. The Exam body then awards grades based on the marks awarded, seeking to moderate standards between years. Ministers rightly do not get a say in any individual's papers or marks, or in the decision each year on where to set the grade boundaries.

This year the decision was taken to abandon exams but to award grades and passes based primarily on teacher assessment of the individual's course work and achievements at school in each subject. The Exam Boards will still moderate the results fed to them by each of the participating schools. There are issues over how this will be done.

If all worked well each school would come to a perfect judgement of each pupil it teaches, and across England this would produce a fair set of outcomes without moderation or adjustment. However, life is not that simple. The Examining Boards want the schools to ensure they have placed all their pupils in the right relative order to each other, reserving to themselves the ultimate right to decide how marks translate to grades awarded by the Examining Board. The Examining Boards are alert to the possibility that teachers will naturally see the best in their own pupils and might collectively mark up producing some grade inflation compared to previous years. They need, however, to be alert to other possibilities as well. For any individual pupil there is the danger of adverse marking if they planned to leave much of their study and revision to close to the exam and did not do so well in the early months of the course, or if their conduct and attitudes did not lead the teacher to see their academic strengths fully.

The toughest cases are for schools or subject teachers who are lifting standards year by year or lifting them for the first time this year who may encounter a general downgrade of their forecast results owing to the Exam Board wishing to moderate grades in relation to past experience at that school. There is also the unspoken danger that a school or subject area on the slide will secure more favourable outcomes than if their pupils had had to undertake the exam. The Independent Regulator is also involved in requiring Exam Boards to moderate standards.

Most people would agree it is better and fairer to let pupils sit exams and to have these marked by teachers at other schools to a prescribed marking scheme. In this CV 19 damaged year all involved will doubtless do the best they can to come to fair judgements, but there is likely to be more unhappiness both by some individuals and by some individual schools and teachers given the occasional rough justice which will be delivered. The good news is a student can appeal and can ask to sit a proper exam to improve

their grade.