

# Letter to the Education Secretary

Dear Gavin

You were right to warn us that grade inflation can cause problems for universities allocating limited places to the best candidates. Grade inflation leads to demands for more discriminating higher grades, as with the introduction of the A\* to offer some distinction between a large number of students who all came to qualify for an A grade.

It is important that next year the Examining Boards and Ofqual re establish a sound process for awarding grades to students that commands general confidence in the qualifications and allows universities to select the best students for the courses they offer. I am glad to hear that we will be returning to an exam based system. Awarding grades determined by the pupil's own teachers places the teachers in a difficult position of having to defend the grade, and leaves open the worry that some teachers take a more generous approach to their own students than others. An exam is professionally marked by teachers marking the work of other people's students, removing the chance of judgement being influenced by personal knowledge and relationship with the pupil. The grade arrived at is recognised as independent of the pupil's own teacher and school.

Next year the Examiners and the Boards will need to ask themselves how to pitch the standards and the grade boundaries. Should they return to something like the level of 2019, or should they incorporate the grade inflation of 2020? It is an important issue because it will send out a message about how the Examiners see standards. If the best universities and courses stay with similar numbers of UK students between the two years it merely determines how high a grade any given pupil needs to achieve to get to the best institutions. If there are roughly the same total number of places grade inflation has an impact on grades needed to get a place at all.

There will also be questions to resolve over what to expect of A level candidates who lost some months of full time education in school this spring and summer. The Boards will also need to consider what impact if any complying with CV 19 guidance on social distancing will have on their education in the 2020-21 academic year. Will there be any adjustments to practicals, events in subjects like music and drama, foreign language conversations and other elements in some A level assessments? The Boards both need to be fair the class of 2021 and ensure that nonetheless they attain good standards that are comparable to other years.

One thing it should be possible to agree. Getting all exam year pupils back into school and offering them full teaching and good curriculum from here is essential for their education and for maintaining standards. I would appreciate details of your approach to the teaching and standards of exam for 2021.

Yours

## University places

I joined the on line meeting with Education Ministers yesterday evening to discuss the A level change of policy. The main talking point for MPs and Ministers was the knock on from the decision to University admissions. The University Minister said she would issue a letter today to the Universities urging them to offer places to all those with conditional offers who could now meet the requirements following A level upgrades. Any student who has accepted a place at their second choice can now contact their first choice institution if they can meet the conditions to see if they will honour their original offer. If they are happy with the place elsewhere there is no need. It would be prudent to sound out the first choice university about their conditional offer and whether they are still offering a firm place before cancelling the offer accepted elsewhere.

There may be shortages of places for qualified students following the upgrades for some subjects or at some institutions. Ministers were aware of particular pressures on places for medicine and promised to review capacity with the Health Secretary. MPs pressed for further communications about the availability of places in medical areas.

---

## Managing the public sector

There are a number of worries about the day to day management of public services by Departments and quangos. Ministers are responsible for policy decisions , for budget priorities and new legislation. They rely on the goodwill and abilities of many officials to supervise the day to day running of existing policies, to hire good people, to buy in necessary stocks, to distribute benefits, collect taxes and provide licences and approvals.

We have seen in recent months parts of the public sector struggling to carry out regular functions, It is true the lock downs were disruptive, but most of the things government needed to do could be carried out from home with suitable computer back up, and by a limited number of key workers continuing to go into offices and other government installations.

I have drawn attention in past blogs to the big shortfall in normal NHS work , and the shortage of work sent to the private hospitals which were contracted to undertake some of it. As the CV 19 hospital numbers came down

there was a slowness in creating isolating units for the remaining CV 19 patients and returning most NHS capacity to the other needs. It appears the NHS is still well below capacity on many specialities , and it is taking time to restore full GP services in some locations.

It appears that the Passport Office allowed a substantial backlog to build up for UK passports. This is something which allows on line applications and processing and should be compatible with more homeworking. I also learn from the media that there is a backlog in issuing provisional driving licences to new drivers. Again it is difficult to see why this could not be done remotely.

I have not had reports of failures to issue cash payments to furlough employers, to benefit seekers or to small businesses under the new scheme. It shows that some parts of government were able to deal with large new surges in demand and to implement new programmes rapidly. It makes the failures in established areas more surprising.

We saw the failure of Public Health England to buy enough protective clothing and to establish a strong enough test regime quickly. We are now witnessing Ofqual's inability to implement a policy which does uphold standards whilst being fair to young people when the ability to take examinations was removed.

I would be interested in your examples of where the public sector responded well to new circumstances, and where it failed even in areas where it was simply meant to be doing what it had always done, adapted to more homeworking and social distancing.

---

## How does a student appeal an A Level trade?

Ofqual issued guidance for appeals based on Mock exams on Saturday, only to withdraw it again late in the evening that day. It put out a terse statement saying "Earlier today we published information about mock exam results in appeals. This policy is being reviewed by the Ofqual Board and further information will be published in due course."

The news programmes I heard on Sunday morning said no Ofqual spokes person was available to clarify. This was surprising considering the importance of their late night announcement and the great interest and concern it aroused in many students, teachers, and their families. Ofqual according to its published Organogram employs a Director of Communications supported by 10 people. It is odd that none of these were available on such an important occasion. If the Board had decided to overrule the staff after they had published some work, then it is surprising the Board itself did not appoint someone to put its case. The Chairman for example could have offered himself

for interview.

Ofqual according to its website has 217 people in important posts on the Organogram to perform its role of regulating and supervising the Examining Boards with a view to maintaining the standards of qualifications. The inability on this occasion to agree a policy on appeals with the government and to implement it may have something to do with the different senior people and teams involved in policy. There is a Director of Policy and Strategic relations with six staff reporting. There is an Associate Director of Strategic Policy and Risk with seven staff, and a Director of Strategic Relations with eight staff, for example. The Board should set out the strategy on the advice of the Chief Regulator and senior management team. It is difficult to know what all these people do and how it contributes to maintaining the standards of qualifications. In the end standards come down to a mixture of judgement by the Board and Chief Regulator, and good data from the Examining Boards.

Ofqual owes it to students to move quickly to offer them a realistic appeals system to deal with injustices and mistakes thrown up by the current surrogate evaluations for the absence of exams. It is certainly not fair to keep students who feel they have been wrongly downgraded guessing about how and when they can appeal.

---

## The spread of the virus and herd immunity

According to global figures 0.3% of the world population or some 20 million people have now had CV 19. Of these sadly 750,000 have died, a death rate of 4% of known cases. Given the shortage of tests in large countries like India and Mexico these figures may be an underestimate. In some other countries using the formula on death certificates of death with rather than death caused by CV19 there may be some compensatory overcounting.

The numbers do imply however that we are a long way off having the herd immunity some scientists talked about in the early days of the pandemic. The virus has not found as many superspreaders as feared so far. There is also medical and scientific doubt about whether someone who has had it is likely then to resist having it again. If it turned out to be more like flu or colds you could get it or a variant of it again.

If this is the case cautious scientists will continue to argue in favour of social distancing to limit further spread. The scientific community remains wedded to the idea of a vaccine, whilst accepting it could take a long time find a safe and successful one. How many readers here would not wish to take up the offer of vaccination if one were available?

Meanwhile the better medical news is Blood clot busters, steroids and anti viral drugs are all now being tested and some Approved and mobilised to improve treatment and lower the death rate.