

Hundreds of thousands of A-Level results downgraded by UK government

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Almost 40 percent of A-Level assessments in England have been bureaucratically downgraded by the government, leaving thousands of students' futures in jeopardy.

Of results, 35.6 percent were docked by a grade, 3.3 percent by two grades, and 0.2 percent by three grades; 2.2 percent were increased by one grade and a tiny fraction by two or three. In Northern Ireland, 37 percent of grades have been lowered and 5.3 percent raised.

A-Level examinations were cancelled this year due to the pandemic. Students were awarded grades based on the estimates of their teachers, which were then adjusted by the exam boards, overseen by the government's exam regulator Ofqual. There is no transparency in the methodology used to carry out this adjustment, but it is understood to be based largely on the results of schools' previous cohorts.

The consequences of this system were previewed in Scotland last week when the Scottish Qualifications Authority docked almost a quarter of grades. The news was greeted with an outpouring of protest by students and teachers, including protests of young people in Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Confronted with this opposition, the Scottish National Party government in Holyrood was forced into an apology and a U-turn. First Minister Nicola Sturgeon stated lamely, "Despite our best intentions, I do acknowledge we did not get this right and I'm sorry for that."

Scottish Education Secretary John Swinney told the Scottish National Assembly on Tuesday, "We did not get it right for young people. ... I want to apologise for that." He announced that the adjusted grades would be scrapped and results reverted back to the original estimates given by teachers.

These events sent the Conservative government in

Westminster into a crisis over fear of an even larger backlash in the rest of the UK. An 11th-hour fudge was devised to offer students a so-called "triple lock," allowing them to exchange their awarded grades for the results previously obtained in mock exams or to take exams organised for some time this autumn.

The new options add nothing other than confusion. The idea of holding hundreds of exams later this year sidesteps the fact that Britain is by then likely to be suffering a renewed surge of the COVID-19 disease.

For mock grades to be considered, students will have to appeal their assigned grades through their schools. The exam boards have all indicated that they will continue to charge fees for these appeals, rising to punitive levels when they are judged unsuccessful.

There is also no set standard for how mock exams are conducted—Ofqual says it will release guidance on "valid mock grades" in the coming days. Schools often mark mock exams more harshly, in any case, to challenge students to improve for the real thing. And many students make most of their academic progress in the period leading up to the final exam, after mocks have taken place. Many schools have not even run mock exams for all subjects.

Faced with a far more extensive downgrade than in Scotland, Education Secretary Gavin Williamson declared, "We're not going to be changing this system again." In an article in the *Daily Telegraph* yesterday morning, he stated with astounding cynicism that granting students their teacher-assigned grades "would harm Generation Covid for life."

Thousands of students have had their futures thrown into chaos by the administrative fiat of a crisis-ridden government. They have been deprived of any individual agency in their own achievement and had months of hard work spat on. But the government's callous

disregard is not simply a question of bureaucracy and incompetence. The A-Levels scandal has exposed the dirty secret of the British education system: that it is social class, not merit, that is really being graded.

Detailed figures have not yet emerged for England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, but the Scottish example is indicative. In the most deprived areas, the proportion of students getting A-C grades was reduced by 15.2 percent. In the richest areas, the figure was 6.9 percent. That a similar process has taken place with the latest results is suggested by the fact that the proportion of private school children achieving A*-A grades this year climbed 4.7 percent—more than double the 2 percent increase in non-grammar state schools.

Schools catering to high numbers of working-class students have experienced devastating downgrades. At Wales High School south east of Rotherham, in one of Yorkshire's poorer boroughs, 84 percent of the sixth form's more than 130 A-Level students have had results lowered. Further education colleges, attended by more disadvantaged pupils on average, are reporting their lowest grade profiles ever, especially in the A-C grades, with some institutions seeing more than 50 percent of their results adjusted downward.

The education system launders class privilege into academic achievement, granting the sons and daughters of the rich—with access to the best schools and educational resources, private tutors, and more secure home environments—high grades, used to access the rarefied elite of Britain's top universities. In 2018, the Sutton Trust found that 60 percent of private school pupils in higher education attend Russell Group universities, compared to less than a quarter of pupils in state comprehensives and sixth forms. Even this figure obscures the true scale of inequality, as the most successful state schools are found in areas monopolised by affluent households.

When this system was disrupted by the coronavirus crisis, the Scottish and UK governments swung into action to ensure the working class was kept in its proper place—at the bottom of the pile. The class logic behind their actions was nakedly espoused by Sturgeon before the SNP was forced to retreat. Speaking to *Channel 4 News*, she said it was “necessary to make sure we have a credible—and that's important for young people—system of results.

“Without that system of moderation, I would be

saying that 85 percent of young people in our most deprived areas had passed Highers [the Scottish qualification] this year, compared to around 65 percent last year and in previous years.”

Comments like these underline the ruling class's execrable hypocrisy in pushing for the unsafe reopening of schools with the claim that they are concerned for disadvantaged pupils' and students' wellbeing. The same people touting the importance of reopening schools for improving children's life chances are happy to write off those chances with the stroke of a pen.

Students and teachers are determined to resist this injustice. At protests in Scotland, young people carried homemade signs with the slogans, “Classism at its finest,” “Judge my work, not my postcode,” “My postcode should not define me,” and “Stop the postcode lottery.”

The hashtag “#WilliamsonResign” was trending on social media for much of yesterday. A petition started by schoolteacher Neil Brownhill, calling on the government to “Allow teachers to give honest predicted grades for their students,” and “Allow any students who feel they could have done better than their prediction to re-sit the exam in November” on a purely voluntary basis, has gained around 150,000 signatures.



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