

The Covid-19 pandemic, A Levels, and Transitions to UK Higher Education

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*Covid Policy Briefs: E-Briefing Papers from The Covid-19 and
Democracy Project*

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A Note on Method, Aims and Context

This e-briefing paper is an output of *The Covid-19 and Democracy Project*. Since Spring 2020, this project has explored the intersection between the Covid-19 pandemic and democratic politics and policy. Project outputs thus far include a comparative [report](#), a [briefing](#) paper on the 2020 US electoral cycle, comment [pieces](#), and a [podcast](#). The project is led by Principal Investigator Dr Peter Finn and Co-Investigator Associate Professor Radu Cinpoes.

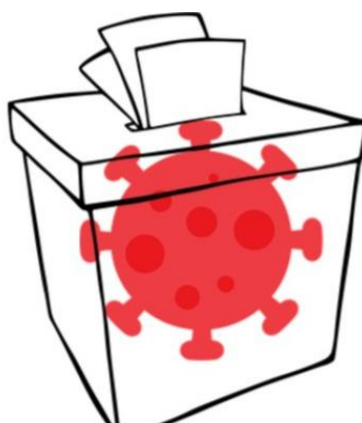
Rather than provide a comprehensive documentation of events pertaining to the Covid-19 pandemic, A Levels, and transitions to UK higher education, this e-briefing paper provides selective discussions to draw out key themes. In short, this e-brief aims to provide a first-cut analysis which acts as a bridge between the reflective writing that develops from the academic peer review process and the more immediate analysis and information found in (the undoubtedly essential) media coverage of the pandemic and education. As such, it is hoped it provides important food for thought for policy makers and educators involved in UK further and higher education.

For democracy to thrive, accountability is key. Core to this accountability is an understanding of how democratic states act to protect their citizens against a myriad of threats. Since Spring 2020, one of the largest of these threats has been the Covid-19 pandemic. Understanding how the pandemic has impacted policy areas such as education is key to ensuring such accountability is maintained.

An abridged audio version of this e-briefing can be found [here](#)

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Foreword

This briefing paper on The Covid-19 pandemic, A Levels, and transitions to UK higher education provides clarity on a complex phenomenon that continues to be the focus of all HE institutions in the UK, and many around the world. Transitioning to University is such a major step for all students, but more so for students from backgrounds that are consistently marginalised in UK higher education. We know that the performance of a student at the beginning of their university journey in so many ways has an impact and correlation to their success at the end of their qualification, should they get to that stage. This briefing paper provides a simple but crucial look at the past 3 years of A Level education, and documents the flux that has taken place from a policy perspective. However, the authors have also been able to interweave this with the real-life implications of policy decisions on students.

A comprehensive view is presented of the experiences of students who will be transitioning into University in September 2022. University executives, academics, and support staff should take heed to the recommendations to focus support on student mental health, addressing inequalities, and academic support. In the face of imposing regulatory

requirements to look at these issues, universities should take this history of all of our incoming students into consideration when designing support and projects to enhance the student experience. Universities should seek to address the real barriers to equitable access and success, understanding that the experience of all students is not the same, and that many of the systems and structures in place in education continue to perpetuate the marginalisation of some. This briefing paper speaks to the fact that institutions will have to put much more resources in place to ensure that this incoming group of students is supported effectively and equitably.



Dr Melanie-Marie Haywood

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1. Key Policy Learning Points:

- **Academic support:** The bulk of students finishing their A Levels in 2022 have had their education disrupted since the latter stages of their GCSEs. Institutions, teams, and individuals involved in the provision of university services and teaching should be mindful of the need to provide more in-depth support than normal for first-year and foundation students in the 2022-23 academic year. As well as maintaining an awareness of the differences in provision and support students may have received since March 2020.
- **Mental health:** Mental health impacts have been considerable across all groups during the Covid-19 pandemic. Young people reflect this broader picture. Those involved in pastoral care and mental health support services within higher education should reflect on how they can best support students. Whilst other higher education staff should maintain an awareness of relevant institutional support services they can direct students struggling with their mental well-being to.
- **Inequality:** Fostering equality, diversity and inclusion is a stated goal of universities across the UK higher education sector. Those working at all levels within the UK higher education sector should be aware of the exacerbation of inequality during the Covid-19 pandemic and the need to work towards policies aimed at fostering equality, diversity, and inclusion among those making the transition to higher education in the 2022-23 academic year and beyond. In particular, those with the ability to resource support to this end should think about how such resources can be best targeted.

2. Introduction

A Levels sit within the broader further education environment in the UK. Other further education routes include Scottish Highers, BTECs and apprenticeships, T-Levels, and the International Baccalaureate. This e-briefing focuses on the impact of the pandemic on the administration of A Levels and the experience of A Level students. It does so chronologically, with sections on 2019-20, 2020-21, and 2021-22. The final section considers three themes those due to teach and support students finishing their A Levels in summer 2022 in higher education (HE) settings in the forthcoming 2022-23 academic year may want to factor into their preparation. These factors are academic support, mental health, and inequality.

As shown by [government figures](#), the majority of A Level students are aged 16-18. In early September 2021 272,500, or [37.9%](#) of all 18 year olds in the UK, were due to begin a university course in the 2021-22 academic year. Across the UK HE sector then, upwards of 250,000 18 year olds, many of whom will have studied A Levels, are likely to begin university courses this September. They will do so having had the last three academic years of their education disrupted.

Pressures on A Level students over the last three academic years have included restrictions and lockdowns, [loss](#) of [learning time](#) and curtailments of academic support, [mental health](#) and wellbeing impacts, [tech-poverty](#) and [food-](#)

[poverty](#). In many cases these issues pre-dated the pandemic, but they have been exacerbated since March 2020. As we shall see, further educational and administrative pressures have included uncertainty around exams, grade controversies and a related inequality of grade inflation. The assessment arrangements for those finishing A Levels since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the point at which students were at in their educational journey when the pandemic began, are documented in *Table 1* below.

Table 1: Arrangement for A Levels since the onset of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Academic year	Assessment and grading arrangements for final year A Level Students	Year of students when schools closed in March 2020*
2019-20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exams cancelled Grades first decided via moderated algorithm Grades changed to whichever was higher between centre assessed grades or moderated algorithm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Year 13 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Final year of A Levels
2020-21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exams cancelled Centre assessed grades 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Year 12 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> First year of A Levels
2021-22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Marked via exams and coursework Support package announced in February 2022 Generous grading 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Year 11 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Final year of GCSEs (exams cancelled)
2022-23	Exact arrangements are unknown at present, but in March 2022 a government white paper noted that 'Ofqual seeks to return, in 2023, to GCSE and A level results that would be in line with those from pre-pandemic years.'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Year 10 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> First year of GCSEs GCSE exams in 2021 cancelled

*The school years used in this table assume a journey through the school system from finishing GCSEs in Year 11 and moving straight to A Levels in years 12 and 13. This accounts for the bulk of A Level students, though clearly not all.

3. 2019-20 Academic Year

For students due to finish A Levels in Summer 2020, the last few months studying for this qualification was beset with general pandemic related uncertainty, which was layered on top of vastly reduced face-to-face teaching and contact time for many, [cancellation of exams](#), and uncertainty about grades. Schools and colleges closed to many students for face-to-face teaching as part of the national lockdowns from March 20 2020 onwards. These closures were announced on March 18, the same day the cancellation of A Level exams [was announced](#). A phased reopening of schools in England did not occur [until June](#), after the time A Level students would normally have finished classes and begun sitting exams.

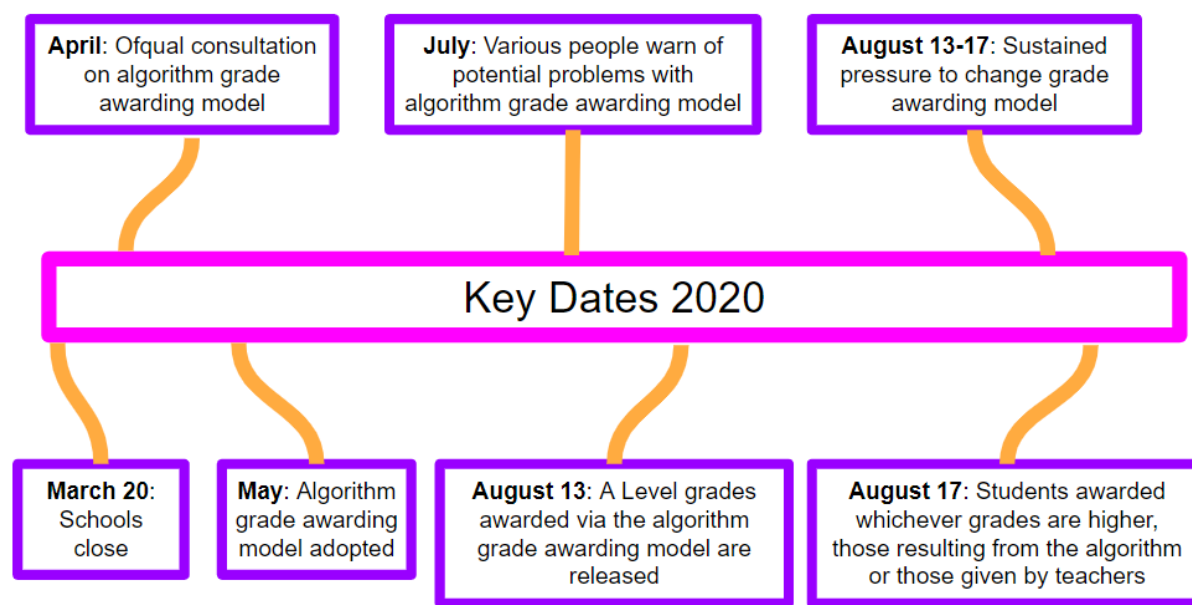
With exams cancelled and teaching halted, in April 2020 The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) held a [consultation](#) on proposed guidelines for awarding grades via the use of an algorithm that would moderate grades awarded by teachers, known as teacher assessed grades (TAGs). This [algorithm](#) was designed to quell teacher bias and grade inflation resulting from TAGs, with historic school level data used to help determine individual grades. These proposals were formally adopted in May 2020 following agreement between the Department for Education (DFE) and Ofqual. Put simply, TAGs were 'put through a process of [standardisation](#), using a model developed with Ofqual, to arrive at the final calculated grade'. However, this system caused controversy when A Level results were released on [August 13](#) 2020.

This controversy arose as the algorithm grade awarding model appeared to disadvantage students studying in more deprived areas, resulting in high-achieving students from historically low-achieving institutions being downgraded and lower-achieving students from high-achieving institutions having grades inflated. Summing up the situation, [The Guardian reported](#) that Ofqual's own analysis showed 'disadvantaged pupils were most affected by its statistical model' as students from 'lower socioeconomic backgrounds in England were most likely to have the grades proposed by their teachers overruled, while those in wealthier areas were less likely to be downgraded'. Under considerable public pressure, on [August 17](#) the then Education Secretary Gavin Williams MP (now CBE) announced a U-turn and pupils were awarded whichever was the higher: the TAG or the moderated grade.

Yet, issues with the algorithm grade awarding model were predicted. According to [media reports](#), Williams was warned about potential negative impacts on individual grades six weeks prior to their release by Sir Jon Coles, previously Director-General for Standards for the Board of the Department for Education. Schools Minister Nick Gibb MP confirmed that he had also met with Coles, whilst 'Ofqual's own analysis acknowledged the algorithm grade awarding model only 'had predictive accuracy of around 60%'. Finally, the [House of Commons Education Committee](#) warned in July that '[g]iven the potential risks of bias in calculated grades, it is clear that standardisation will be a crucial part of ensuring fairness'. The committee continued,

'[w]e are extremely concerned that Ofqual's standardisation model does not appear to include any mechanism to identify whether groups such as BAME [black, Asian and minority ethnic] pupils, FSM [free school meal] eligible pupils, children looked after, and pupils with SEND [special educational needs] have been systematically disadvantaged by calculated grades.'

Figure 1: Key Dates 2019-20



4. 2020-21 Academic Year

Rather than a hoped-for return to normal, the 2020-21 academic year saw continued uncertainty. Though face-to-face teaching returned in September, students had to wear masks in class, and there was broader uncertainty arising from a lockdown in November 2020 (though schools and colleges stayed open), and the last minute closure of schools and colleges for face-to-face teaching for many students following the Christmas break on [January 4](#) 2021. This closure, announced at the same time that Prime Minister Boris [Johnson said](#) 'it's not possible or fair for all exams to go ahead this summer as normal', lasted for just over two months, with schools reopening in England on [March 8 2021](#).

Summing up the last minute nature of the announcements of closures and exam cancellations, the [Financial Times](#) reported that school 'leaders and parents in England were left scrambling on the first day of the new school term after a last-minute announcement that schools would remain closed and secondary school exams would not go ahead as planned.'

After the issues with moderated algorithm grades in 2020, and the cancellation of exams, it was announced on [February 25 2021](#) that, following a [consultation](#) between the DFE and Ofqual, final A Level grades for 2020-21 would be [awarded via TAGs](#). According to Williams, '[Schools, colleges and other educational settings](#) will conduct multiple checks – such as checking consistency of judgements across teachers and that the correct processes were followed - to ensure as much fairness as possible.' On [March 24](#), twelve weeks before grades had to be submitted to exam boards on June 18, guidance on the awarding of grades was released.

Summarising what this meant logistically the [TES](#) reported that 'school leaders coped with a number of weighty decisions that would usually be dealt with by exam boards.' In short order, they 'had to decide: the number of new assessments to enter into each pupil's portfolio, the agreed amount of preparation in terms of lesson time all pupils should have before they sit these assessments, how to weight assessments based on when they were completed and the security of conditions and when to hold assessment weeks to meet the deadline for submitting grades to exam boards on June 18.'

Much discussed in Spring and Summer 2021 was grade inflation, with attainment gaps also a concern. [Ian Bauckham](#) of Ofqual, for instance, noted concern that the approach adopted could feed into grade inflation and the [TES](#) reported just prior to the release of A Level results that it had been 'told by sources close to the government that there are concerns about a widening gap in teacher assessed grades in state and private schools' grades at A level'.

In July 2021, meanwhile, the charity [Mind](#) published a survey of [13-24 year olds](#) highlighting the significant impact of the pandemic on the mental health of young people. Mind documented, for instance, that 34% of young people felt 'their mental health has got much worse during the pandemic', while 59% would 'enjoy school, college or university more once restrictions ease'. However, 21% did 'not think they will enjoy school, college or university' once restrictions end. Crucially, Mind also found that '[y]oung people want more information and education about mental health in school, college, university or work'.

Results from the 2020-21 academic year, published August 10, continued a trend of grade inflation. With [44.8% of students](#) getting an A* or A grades in 2021, compared with 38.5% in 2020. This [compares](#) with 25.2% in 2019 and 26.2% in 2018. Yet, the trend of grade inflation played out in a more nuanced manner than grades rising evenly across the board; with private schools showing the biggest jumps in grades, and the largest jump in state schools being likewise weighted towards grammar and selective schools.

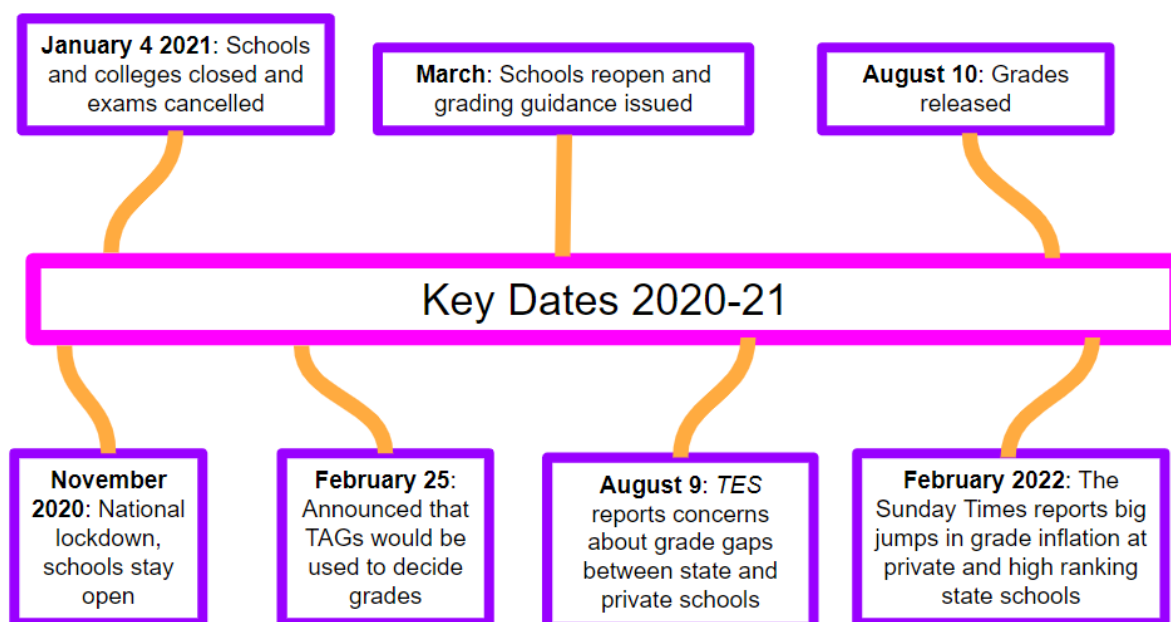
Reporting by [The Sunday Times](#) demonstrated, for instance, that whereas in 2019 16.1% of A Levels were graded A* at private schools, in 2021 this was 39.5%. At North London Collegiate School in London, there was a 56.4% increase from 33.8% in 2019 to 90.2%, or just over 9 out of 10, in 2021 of A Levels being awarded at A*. Similarly, Derby High School saw a 47.4% jump from 6.5% in 2019 to 53.4% in 2021.

Interestingly, there was a 21.3% difference between the biggest jump in private schools and the biggest two-year increase between 2019 and 2021 in state schools.

The largest state school increase was at Tiffin School in Kingston Upon Thames, which saw a 35.1% increase in the awarding of A* grades from 32% in 2019 to 67.1% in 2021. Similarly, The King David High School in Manchester saw a 32.5% jump in the awarding of A* from 18.2% in 2019 to 50.6% in 2021.

These increases compared with a 11.3% jump overall in the increase of the awarding of A* grades from 7.8% in 2019 to 19.1% in 2021. As such, though the awarding of the highest grades rose overall, this rise was heavily skewed in favour of private, grammar, and selective schools. Essentially, a short-term inequality of grade inflation occurring during the Covid-19 pandemic has tracked longer-term societal stratification and inequality. Summarising his reaction to the results, [Alistair McCall](#), Editor of *The Sunday Times* Parent Power unit, said the 'results cannot simply represent "benefit of the doubt" judgements on pupils sitting on grade boundaries - they must clearly include crude attempts to preserve the advantages that children at our leading independent and state schools have always enjoyed.'

Figure 2: Key Dates 2020-21



5. 2021-22 Academic Year

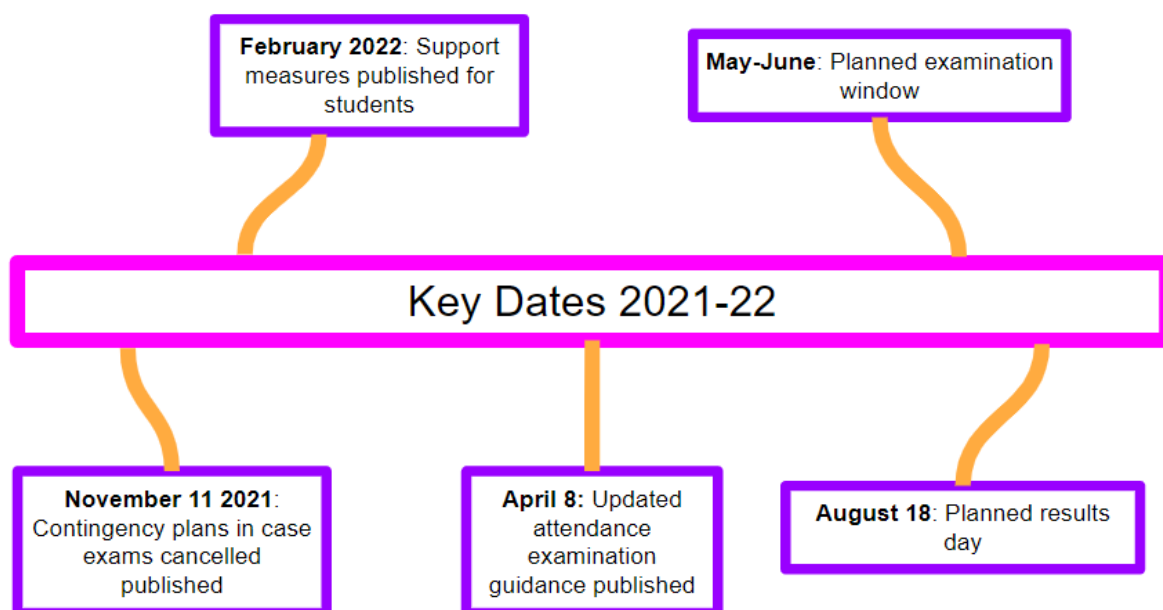
The bulk of students finishing A Levels this year have had their whole time studying A Levels and the final year of their GCSEs impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. As with A Levels in 2020, GCSE exams were cancelled following school closures in March, whilst teaching was disrupted again in the 2020-21

academic year when schools were closed from January to March. On top of this, there have been, among other pandemic related protocols, off and on mask wearing policies and testing requirements.

Exams have occurred in Spring-Summer 2022, though [contingency plans](#) were announced in November 2021 in case it was not possible for them to occur. On [7 February 2022](#) Ofqual announced a range of support measures for GCSE and A Level students in England. These measures oscillate around five themes; changes to coursework, optional content, support materials, advance information, and generous grading. These measures reflect similar support on offer in [Scotland](#), [Wales](#), and [Northern Ireland](#). According to Ofqual these measures, with detail also provided at the subject level, represent an '[unprecedented package](#) of support for students taking exams this year'. [Grading](#) will be at a '[mid-point](#) between 2021 and pre-pandemic grading'.

In April, updated attendance guidance for exams was provided by the [Joint Council for Qualifications](#) which stated that those 'who are unwell and have a high temperature should stay at home and avoid contact with other people', meaning they will miss exams. The guidance further stated that 'It is not recommended that children and young people are tested for COVID-19 unless directed to by a health professional.' '[S]pecial consideration' procedures were to be available for those unable to sit an exam who meet a threshold of work completed, though [arrangements differ](#) between subjects. A [ten day gap](#) between exams in the same subject was applied to reduce the likelihood of the students missing multiple exams in a single subject. [A Level results for 2021-22 are due](#) August 18.

Figure 3: Key Dates 2021-22



6. UK Higher Education in 2022-23

Having mapped the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on A Levels across the last 3 academic years, this section highlights three themes higher education (HE) institutions, professional services support teams, and education practitioners teaching students receiving A Levels in August 2022 should reflect on over the summer whilst preparing and planning to teach those making the transition to HE in the 2022-23 academic year.

Academic support:

The bulk of students finishing their A Levels in 2022 have had their education disrupted since the latter stages of their GCSEs. Though they are sitting exams this summer, their GCSE exams were cancelled in 2020, whilst many have missed months of face-to-face teaching due to school closures in 2020 and 2021. Moreover, significant staff and student absences have continued to disrupt learning into [Spring 2022](#), with the grading applied this year more generous than pre-pandemic levels. As such, students making the transition to a HE environment in the 2022-23 academic year who are coming straight from their A Levels have had significant impacts on the logistics of their teaching and assessment across the previous three academic years. Moreover, official [figures show that](#) support arising from extra pandemic related provision has been provided unevenly. Meaning some students have had greater access to resources to lessen the impact of lockdown and other pandemic related restrictions and procedures than others. Institutions, teams, and individuals involved in the provision of university services and teaching should be mindful of the need to provide more in-depth support than normal for first-year and foundation students in the 2022-23 academic year. As well as maintaining an awareness of the differences in provision and support students may have received since March 2020.

Mental health:

Mental health impacts have been considerable across all groups during the Covid-19 pandemic. As documented by the charity Mind, young people reflect this broader picture, with a desire for information related to mental health present. Providing adequate support for the sizable chunk of young people who will enter HE institutions for the 2022-23 academic year is going to be resource-intensive for HE institutions, with many students also dealing with the pressures of living away from home for the first time after more than two years of disrupted education and pandemic related challenges to life in general. Those involved in pastoral care and mental health support services within HE should reflect on how they can best support students. Whilst other HE staff should maintain an awareness of relevant institutional support services they can direct students struggling with their mental well-being to.

Inequality:

Fostering equality, diversity and inclusion is a stated goal of universities across the UK HE sector. As seen above, there has been an inequality of A Level grade inflation during the Covid-19 pandemic, seen particularly starkly in the 2020-21 academic year. It is too early to know if this will continue this summer. Yet, given that inequality, and its impact on educational attainment, are long-term national trends rather than pandemic related aberrations, even if some ground is clawed back from previous years in 2021-22 it is all but inconceivable that there will be a level playing field for those taking A Levels this summer. Those working at all levels within the UK HE sector should be aware of the exacerbation of inequality during the Covid-19 pandemic and the need to work towards policies aimed at fostering equality, diversity, and inclusion among those making the transition to HE in the 2022-23 academic year and beyond. In particular, those with the ability to resource support to this end should think about how such resources can be best targeted. There is no one-size-fits-all model, with each institution having a slightly different intake. However, if institutions do not reflect on how best to help mitigate the impacts of inequality exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, attainment gaps may widen further.

7. Concluding remarks

The success of the measures put in place for A Level students this year remains to be seen. However, speaking to the broader education picture as it has evolved since March 2020 [David Laws](#), Executive Chairman of the Education Policy Institute, noted in December 2021 that '[w]hat we see is that the north and the Midlands are doing worse than the south and disadvantaged pupils are doing worse than non-disadvantaged pupils, but very notably all pupils in more disadvantaged areas have a high likelihood of suffering severe learning loss. It is not only poor children; it is [also] non-poor children in disadvantaged areas.'

Likewise, the [House of Commons Education Committee](#) highlighted in March 2022 that 'it is clear that school closures have had a disastrous impact on children's academic progress, with disadvantaged children and those living in disadvantaged areas the worse hit.' Finally, official figures show that between 2017 and July 2020 there was a rise in the number of children '[having a probable mental \[health\] disorder](#)' from one in nine to one in six.

It is the stated aim of current Education Secretary [Nadhim Zahawi](#) and [Ofqual](#) to return to normal in terms of examinations and marking during the forthcoming 2022-23 academic year. Yet, as shown in Table 1, students due to finish A-levels next year had their GCSE exams cancelled in 2021 and have now suffered more than two years of disruption spread across the last three academic years. Moreover, when one factors in the issues raised by Laws and the House of Commons Education Committee, the impact of a rise in mental health of children, and long-standing inequalities, it is likely that whilst 2022-23 may, logistically at least, look more like pre-pandemic years, the

current balance of evidence suggests that educators and policy makers will be dealing with issues related to inequality in A Levels and other further education qualifications moving forward.

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<https://pixabay.com/vectors/coronavirus-icon-red-corona-virus-5107804/> (2020)

Table 1 & timelines by authors

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Further Reading

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Further project outputs

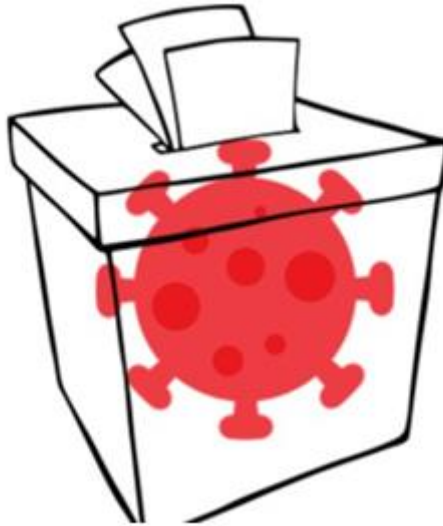
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