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The impact of COVID-19 on A Level exams in England: Students as consumers

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Abstract

The recent global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic created significant challenges for society, not least for education. England went into lockdown in March 2020; following this, A Level exams were cancelled and the Department for Education announced that results were to be determined by teacher-assessed grades. This paper draws upon research conducted during this time with A Level students. It is based on a total of 53 Skype interviews with students who had their A Level exams cancelled, most of whom had ambitions to start university in September 2020. A number of striking findings emerged from the study. Students were well-informed about the changes to the A Level exam assessment and the impact structural inequalities were likely to have on assessed grades. White students and those from independent fee-paying schools were consistently more satisfied with the measures put in place to assess their grades compared to students from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds. However, all students—regardless of their background—identified patterns of unfairness which were based on structural inequalities. We conclude that these findings point to students adopting some of the attributes of the ‘student as consumer’, not by concentrating on choices associated with free market economies such as ‘good value’, but rather by identifying more ethical ‘values’ within education.

KEYWORDS

A Levels, higher education, inequality, pandemic

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Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This paper addresses the impact of A Level exams being cancelled during the COVID-19 pandemic on students' understanding of the process and inequalities associated with this.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

The main findings suggest that students, regardless of their background, identified unfairness due to structural inequalities.

INTRODUCTION

The global outbreak of the COVID-19 virus created new and challenging circumstances for schools, colleges and universities. In England, on Friday 20 March 2020 the Department for Education (DfE) announced the closure of all schools and colleges with only a very restricted provision made for the children of 'key workers' unable to access childcare and vulnerable children (DfE, 2020a). This was immediately followed by a further announcement confirming the cancellation of the 2020 'summer exam series, including A Levels, GCSEs¹ and other qualifications, and all primary assessments' (DfE, 2020b, p. 1). The DfE, in conjunction with The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (OFQUAL),² which regulates qualifications, exams and assessments in England, decided that students who were due to sit their GCSE and A Level exams would be awarded a 'calculated grade' (DfE, 2020c, p. 1) based on teacher assessments. This was the first cohort of students in England to have grades awarded rather than being assessed through exams. The next week a more general 'lockdown' was announced, requiring the public to remain at home for all but essential activities. In this paper we examine the findings from a study conducted to explore the impact of lockdown on students' experiences, specifically in relation to the cancellation of A Level exams and the impact this had on students and their understanding of the process.

Unequal predictions

Previous research has found that A Level grade predictions for students in the UK are inaccurate (Everet & Papageorgiou, 2011; UCAS, 2016), with only 16% of grades predicted by teachers reflected in actual grades achieved (Murphy & Wyness, 2020). Inaccurate predictions of A Level grades are particularly problematic for students intending to progress to university. Students who are under-predicted are likely to apply for less prestigious institutions; whilst those who are over-predicted are more likely to apply for more prestigious institutions but not secure their preferred choice. Everett and Papageorgiou (2011) found that school predictions of Black students' A Level grades had the lowest accuracy compared to White students, whose grades were most accurately predicted. Anders et al. (2020) have found that high-achieving students in comprehensive schools are more likely to be under-predicted compared to those at grammar or independent schools. The Sutton Trust's analysis of students from less affluent families noted the greater impact inaccurate predictions of grades had on their university choices, often leading 'many disadvantaged students to make sub-optimal decisions when choosing their universities' (Wyness, 2017, p. 3). Grades

for students from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds are often over-predicted by teachers; the inaccuracy of such predictions also results in poorer outcomes when students do not achieve the grades required for their first choice of university (Murphy & Wyness, 2020).

When OFQUAL initially announced the adoption of calculated grades, the full details of that process were not published in order to avoid schools 'gaming' results; however, three key elements were outlined (OFQUAL, 2020a). Firstly, schools and colleges would submit 'Centre Assessed Grades' for individual pupils to OFQUAL. Secondly, teachers would submit a rank order of where students' results were expected to fall in relation to each other. Finally, OFQUAL would use the data submitted by schools and standardise the outcomes to ensure there was no significant element of grade inflation. This standardisation process became associated with OFQUAL's use of an 'algorithm' to calculate the grades announced to students on A Level results day, Thursday 13 August 2020.

Concerns about the award of grades within the extraordinary circumstances of school closures and cancellation of exams were widely identified before results day. Initial concerns were raised that students from Black and minority ethnic and working class backgrounds were likely to be disadvantaged by the process; whilst those from middle class, wealthy backgrounds and those attending independent fee-paying schools were likely to benefit (Weale & Batty, 2020). The House of Commons (HoC) Education Committee raised similar concerns and argued that OFQUAL should address emergent inequalities within the standardisation process and that 'Ofqual must be completely transparent about its standardisation model and publish the model immediately to allow time for scrutiny' (HoC, 2020, p. 4). Although OFQUAL identified the possibility for anomalies in grades, they made assurances that the standardisation process would be modelled on historic data available for schools' performance and that their equality analysis suggested 'the production of grades this year has not been compromised by bias in centres' judgements or by the standardisation model' (OFQUAL, 2020a, p. 9). Significant problems with A Levels were foreshadowed by the announcement of Scottish exam results on 4 August. Using a similar model of Centre Assessed Grades and standardisation by the Scottish Qualifications Association, many pupils felt their individual results were unfairly downgraded and within 1 week the Scottish Education Secretary, John Swinney, announced the reinstatement of all downgraded results (BBC, 2020). The announcement of A Level results in England saw a similar pattern of anomalies caused by the standardisation process, followed by an announcement from the then Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson, that teacher-assessed grades would be reinstated (DfE, 2020d).

The detailed technical account of the algorithm used by OFQUAL to standardise Centre Assessed Grades and the pupil rankings provided by schools was released on A Level results day (OFQUAL, 2020b). OFQUAL had trialled 11 approaches to standardisation before settling on the Direct Centre Performance (DCP) model, which '... works by predicting the distribution of grades for each individual school or college. That prediction is based on the historical performance of the school or college in that subject taking into account any changes in the prior attainment of candidates entering this year compared to previous years. This was fine-tuned to take account of known issues such as centres with small cohorts of students, small-entry subjects, and tiered subjects' (OFQUAL, 2020b, p. 7). OFQUAL stated that in order to 'understand the impact of potential advantage or disadvantage across different demographic and socio-economic groups we have also performed an equalities analysis of calculated grades. The analyses show no evidence that this year's process of awarding grades has introduced bias' (OFQUAL, 2020b, p. 8). However, mirroring the earlier Scottish experience, the publication of A Level results led to immediate accusations of unfairness as it became clear that 39% of Centre Assessed Grades were downgraded. Poorer pupils, pupils from marginalised backgrounds and pupils from state schools were most likely to have been downgraded; whilst more affluent pupils living in wealthier areas and pupils

attending independent fee-paying schools were less likely to have their grades downgraded (Adams & McIntyre, 2020).

The announcement that pupils' Centre Assessed Grades would be reinstated occurred on 17 August, 5 days after A Level results and the technical detail of the standardisation process were announced. This resulted in various knock-on effects, including the need for universities to revisit offers of places where grades changed and the lifting of a government cap on student numbers that was no longer tenable in the face of earlier confusion (Weale & Stewart, 2020). Despite apparently addressing the clear examples of unfairness in the 2020 A Level results, many anomalies remained unaddressed, including evidence that pupils from independent fee-paying schools still appeared to have benefitted significantly from higher awards of A and A* grades compared to pupils at state schools (Lee, 2020). A Level grades have a significant impact on outcomes for pupils leaving school, including for access to the employment market, apprenticeships and university places (Bhopal & Myers, 2022), with White middle class students and those from independent fee-paying schools more likely to gain places at Oxbridge and elite Russell Group universities (Bhopal, 2018; Boliver, 2017).

A Level grades consequently affect all aspects of future life chances, including access to the labour market and future social mobility (Bhopal et al., 2020).

The student as consumer

In 1997, the recommendations of the Dearing Report resulted in students taking greater direct responsibility for paying tuition fees with the introduction of student loans. Consequently, a shift towards the marketisation of higher education increasingly positioned students as 'consumers' of education (Bunce et al., 2017; Marginson, 2012; Tomlinson, 2014, 2016). The UK experience mirrored global trends in which the commodification of education eroded its traditional status as a public good (Naidoo & Williams, 2015). Following the Browne Review (2010), higher education institutions in England increased tuition fees from £3000 to £9000; and in 2016 fees rose to £9250. Government initiatives such as the National Student Survey (NSS)³ were introduced for students to provide feedback to their institutions to facilitate universities improving the student experience. The NSS is also an important instrument in the positioning of higher education institutions in league tables, often used by prospective parents and their children to assess the student experience—including value for money. The 'student as consumer' approach has also resulted in students and universities being included in the Consumer Rights Act (2015), which has significantly increased the position (and power) of students as consumers of higher education (Naidoo & Williams, 2015; Nixon et al., 2016; Tomlinson, 2014). Higher education institutions have noticeably adapted to survive (and often thrive) within these new economic conditions by adopting corporate strategies such as developing brands, selling themselves as 'service providers' for students and commercially orientated investment in property portfolios (Dearing, 1997; Mulhearn & Franco, 2018; Myers & Bhopal, 2021; Naidoo et al., 2011). It has been argued that within higher education, a shift of power towards students as consumers has resulted in academic standards being challenged (Furedi, 2009) as students are able to effectively 'buy' a degree (Molesworth et al., 2009; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005; Williams, 2013; Woodall et al., 2014). Some have argued that because students increasingly identify as consumers, this results in higher levels of complaints against lecturers and, consequently, higher education institutions placing new and greater demands on academics to satisfy consumer expectations (Dearing, 1997; Finney & Finney, 2010).

In this paper we explore the impact of lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic on students' experiences, specifically in relation to the cancellation of A Level exams and the impact this had on students and their understanding of the process. We argue that the 'student as consumer' has historically been seen as a neoliberal form of education policy-

making, which assumes students (and their parents) are able to identify 'choice' in a competitive market (Bhopal & Myers, 2023; Myers & Bhopal, 2020, 2021). However, we argue that our research suggests one impact of COVID-19 and lockdowns during the pandemic was the creation of unique conditions in which students acted as *ethical consumers* of education. In assessing the choices available within the educational economy, they often identified inequalities in the education system which they recognise as the perpetuation of wider structural inequality and bias towards certain groups (namely those from Black, working class and minority ethnic backgrounds). The following section will outline the methods, followed by our findings, discussion and conclusions.

METHODS

Following the official announcement of school closures and the cancellation of exams, we conducted a survey questionnaire with a total of 583 A Level students between April and August 2020 (Bhopal and Myers, 2020). Participants were recruited via social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and message boards such as Mumsnet and The Student Room. In addition, we contacted three independent fee-paying schools and special interest groups (such as Gypsy and Traveller groups) in order to ensure that students from diverse backgrounds would be represented in the study. We also conducted 53 Skype interviews with students who expressed an interest in being interviewed in the survey. Ethical clearance was obtained from the participating university and in line with the British Educational Research Association's ethical guidelines (BERA, 2018). This paper focuses on findings from the qualitative interviews. The main aims of the study were:

- To examine students' feelings about the cancellation of exams.
- To explore whether students were aware of the process of awarding grades.
- To analyse students' views on teacher objectivity in the process.

The sample

A total of 53 respondents participated in our study; of these 30 were female and 23 were male. Respondents were from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds; 15 identified as White British, 9 as British Indian, 6 as British Pakistani/Bangladeshi, 10 as Black British, 4 as Black African, 3 as mixed heritage (Black/White), 2 as mixed heritage (Asian/White) and 4 as Gypsy, Roma and Traveller. A total of 37 respondents were from state schools and 16 were from independent fee-paying schools. All of the respondents who participated in the interviews had also participated in the survey and responded to a question asking them if they would like to participate in an interview. They were subsequently contacted and asked to fill out a consent form and given a participant information sheet outlining the study aims. They were also told they could withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty. All of the interviews were conducted via Skype and all but 10 (at the request of the respondents) were digitally recorded and transcribed.

Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis can be seen as a process to identify 'thematizing meanings' (Holloway & Todres, 2003) or as a specific method rather than a tool that can be used across different types of qualitative analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). The data for this project were

analysed through a process of thematic analysis, ‘... a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). In addition, it can be used to interpret various aspects of the research project’s aims and objectives (Boyatzis, 1998). One of the advantages of thematic analysis is that it ‘... provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). In our process of data analysis, we used thematic analysis to identify patterns across the data set to generate codes based on our initial aims and objectives. These were further categorised and broken down into themes from which we were able to focus on the experiences of students (Roulston, 2001). Both researchers cross-checked the codes and themes in order to ensure the accuracy and robustness of the data analysis. The following section explores the findings. We are aware that our findings are based on a small sample size of 53 respondents. This paper presents those findings; we are not attempting to generalise to the wider population of *all* students in England.

FINDINGS

The cancellation of A Level exams

Respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the cancellation of A Level exams. The majority (50 out of 53) felt that they would be identified and labelled the ‘COVID-19 generation’; a cohort of students who did not sit their exams and were awarded *estimated* grades which were devalued because they were not legitimised by the exam process. They were disappointed that their hard work would not be recognised and many felt that despite the stress involved in sitting their exams, they would rather have done so, in order that their results would be based on their actual achievements rather than on how their teachers *thought* or *predicted* they would perform.

I was absolutely devastated when I found out that I wasn't taking my exams. It's what I've been working towards for two years and I was working hard the day before we were told. I think this has changed everything for me and I'm worried about what is going to happen in the future. (Henrietta, White, state school)

Caty (White, state school), who had applied to Cambridge, was worried that cancelling exams would jeopardise her future:

I feel as though my life has been ripped out from under me, this has had a very bad effect on my mental health. I felt happy at school and confident but now I do not know what this is going to do to me. I've been working so hard for this since I was in Year 6 [age 11]. I've always wanted to go to Cambridge but now I do not know what is going to happen. I have had to seek help for my mental state because this could change a lot of things for me.

Meena (British Indian, state school) mentioned how she felt the two previous years of hard work had been wasted:

I was getting along ok and was feeling quite confident that I would get my grades but then when I found out that the schools were going to close and we were not going to take our exams I just broke down and cried. I feel as though the rug has been pulled out from under me with everything totally destroyed—my future

mainly. It all depends on what the teachers think about my work and that's not fair. We all feel as though we have been robbed.

Many respondents discussed the effect of cancelling exams on their mental health and the unfairness and biases that would be introduced in the process. Jordan (Black British, state school) said:

I would definitely have rather taken all my exams because I have been working so hard for them for two years—and being told suddenly we cannot take them is a real shock to the system—I want to be judged by what I do and not what the teachers think I can do. I also do not want people to think I got something without working for it and not taking the exams. The whole system is so unfair. I think I cannot prove myself and how can we convince our teachers we could do better in a subject? It's all beyond our control and that's the thing that makes us all feel devastated and depressed about it. The last two years have come to this, and they mean nothing now. All that matters now is what the teachers think, and they will have their biases as they always do.

Other students were worried about how they would be judged if they did not take their exams. Emily (White, state school) said:

I do not want people to think, oh you just got your grade without working for it, you did not even have to take the exam so it's been easier for you. I want to get my grade based on the hard work that I have been doing for the two last years which comes to fruition when I actually have my exams and take them. I want to be judged on that, not on something my teachers thought I could do. The whole system makes it look as though we are undeserving and it's not fair on us. In the future, people will judge us because of that, and it's not because of what we have done.

A minority of students, however, were glad they were not sitting their exams because they felt they would be advantaged by teacher-assessed grades. Chris (White, independent school) said:

At first I was a bit annoyed about not having to sit exams because I thought I've been doing all this work and what for? It's all been a waste, then I thought hang on a moment this could work in my favour. I did not do so well in my mocks, but with other teacher assessments it would put me in a good position and I could actually be advantaged by the process. I could get better grades given to me by my teachers than if I sat the actual exam. So once I thought about it and let it sink in, it did not feel that bad, in fact my parents said I would do well out of it and be advantaged because I'm at private school.

Similarly Chloe (Black, state school) said:

I think it's better for me not to take the exams because I do not do so well. In this new system, my teachers know how hard I work and they can then assess me based on that which is fairer than exams. I think my teachers will give me a good grade, even a better grade than I would be able to get in the exams so I think it will be a good process for me because I do not do well at exams.

Our findings suggest mixed views on the cancellation of exams. Whilst the majority of students were clearly upset and devastated by the news, and felt the previous two years had been wasted, some students felt the cancellation of exams would work in their favour. Overall, there was a sense of the shock students felt when plans for their educational experiences were disrupted as a result of the pandemic. In many ways this was unsurprising and reflected similar emotional rollercoasters felt by society at large, as many expectations of what constituted normal life were curtailed by 'lockdowns'. More significantly for our respondents was how their discomfort with the unexpected consequences of the pandemic resulted in the development of new conceptions of inequalities within education. In the first place, they identified clear and specific concerns about the new Centre Assessed Grades process and second, they often became more aware of structural inequalities within educational economies, including universities. Both of these consequences are explored in more detail in the following subsections.

The process of awarding grades

Many students were very well informed about the new Centre Assessed Grades. Whilst in the past the school may have been the main source of information about A Levels, during the pandemic—and often as a consequence of their personal research into how A Level assessment was changing—many students appeared *as well informed about* Centre Assessed Grades as their teachers. They were accessing the same information from similar sources. In addition to taking advice from teachers and schools, many students independently sought out further information, often from media sites such as the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation). Consequently, in addition to understanding the specific processes for assessing A Level grades, they also became well informed about areas of concern and unfairness, including evidence of teacher bias around race and class and variations in school strategies for submitting student work and grades.

Respondents expressed varying views on the information they received about the process of awarding grades from schools. White students and those who attended independent fee-paying schools were consistently more satisfied with the measures put in place by their schools to address the cancellation of exams compared to those who were from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds who attended state schools. They said they were given little or no information. Robin (White, independent school) said:

I absolutely knew how I was going to be graded. Our school told us all about it, but I made sure I did my own homework—and so did my parents. I read all the newspaper reports, especially the BBC. I read the Ministers' reports. All the parents just called the school and the school was very quick off the mark, because they knew they would have all the parents on their backs if they did not know what was going on. So the school made sure they knew what was going on so that they could tell us. I could hear my dad saying, 'we're paying fees, I want my money's worth'.

Jane (mixed heritage (Black/White), state school) said she and her parents had found out about how grades were going to be awarded, as they were given little information by the school:

The school did not really tell us anything to be honest, but I do not know if that was because they did not know themselves or because they just did not want us to know. I found out about it all myself and my dad did lots of research on it. I

found out via the media and OFQUAL and other reports I had seen in the press. I think the school should have put out a clear message to the students to tell them how the grades were going to be awarded, because I think they probably knew before we did.

Similarly, Steven (Black, state school) felt the same:

I did understand the process, but the actual process stressed me. I found out about the process myself, but nobody bothered to tell us about it and ask us what we thought—it was about us and our exams but instead it was the same old thing, they did not think we should be told because we are not adults, even though it's about us. We were not told or asked about anything, it was like, no worries they have to do what we say. Grown-ups all sitting in a room making decisions about us.

Jane (White, state school) was very satisfied with the information she received:

I thought everything they told us was fine. I think because my parents just said they wanted to speak to the head teacher, he just contacted them and told them what was happening. But I do not think he would have called all of the parents. My parents are very forthright and would have contacted the school anyway.

Students often appeared to be acting the role of a concerned consumer, exploring their options and potential outcomes. Ironically, by doing so they were both falling into step with the marketised logic of the 'student as consumer' (Naidoo & Williams, 2015; Nixon et al., 2016; Tomlinson, 2016), but doing so in a more ethical fashion than simply making choices based around deriving 'good value' within a free market. Instead, they adopted forms of consumer behaviours and sought out knowledge that might be associated with issues of social justice (e.g. identifying likely patterns of discrimination within schools). Whilst the 'student as consumer' model anticipates students gaining knowledge that allows them to act effectively within the expectations of the market, the students in our research gained knowledge that challenged the market itself. In this sense, different forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) were being acquired because the economy in which A Level grades were being allocated was massively destabilised by the pandemic. Whilst in some respects the potency of such knowledge production and its relation to reproduction of educational inequalities was still readily apparent (e.g. in the role played by independent fee-paying schools), there was also evidence that the disruption of the pandemic resulted in some unexpected challenges to the authority of schools. In addition, some students began researching their university options within a similarly inquisitive and research-orientated set of practices, including identifying research that identified potentially discriminatory outcomes when they transitioned to university.

Students were able to foresee the inherent unfairness and problematic way in which grades would be awarded. Many of them were acutely aware of inequalities related to race and type of school. These issues were widely understood by all students, despite the fact that many (e.g. those who were White and attending independent fee-paying schools) were well aware of the inequalities in the 'system' which would advantage them and their peers over those attending state schools or those from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds. The following subsection explores this in greater detail.

Teacher bias and structural inequality

The majority of respondents (45 out of 53) were aware of the potential bias of the process of awarding teacher-assessed grades. When describing their experience or knowledge of teacher bias, they were often mirroring patterns of behaviour that are well documented, including bias towards or against students based on race, class and gender (Wyness, 2017). Respondents discussed the ways in which subjective teacher bias would significantly affect the way students would be graded. Vijay (Indian, state school), who was predicted three A grades, felt he could do better and achieve three A*s if he were able to sit the exams. He felt he would be disadvantaged in the process of awarding grades compared to his peers:

I know that if I sit the exam I can get the three A*s, but the teachers keep marking me down and think I cannot do that. For me, doing the exam was the thing that was going to prove it for me, now I know that I will just get the three As and not have the opportunity to try and get the three A*s which I know I can get. My fear is that I will not get what I deserve and [the] teachers will downgrade me. I think they might treat the students differently based on if they like them or if they think the student is a good student who deserves the grades.

Whilst Vijay's account of a 'good student'—who teachers believe deserved better grades was—stated in ambiguous terms, other students identified specific traits and characteristics such as their ethnicity as central to those judgements about who should be awarded better grades. Nisah (Pakistani, state school) felt that her teachers had also predicted her lower than her actual achievements compared to how her White classmates were predicted:

I did not do that well in my mocks, but throughout the year I was doing really well and getting As and Bs and I did all my coursework on time and handed it in and got good grades. The teachers do not see that and have predicted me low. But there are other White students who have not been getting straight As and Bs and did not even hand their coursework in who have been predicted higher than me—how does that work?

Similarly, Julia (Black, state school) was very worried about her grades; even though she was predicted three Bs, she did not feel she trusted that the teachers would be fair in their assessment of her work:

I am concerned because I'm not sure that I do trust the teachers. There is some prejudice against certain groups, teachers do have stereotypes about certain groups and what they expect of them. I do not think my Biology teacher likes me at all, so I think she will mark me down. There are other students that she really likes who are not that clever who will be marked higher. I think that bias in the system will not be captured because everyone will say, we trust the teachers. The system does not account for the fact that some teachers have favourites and they will mark those students higher.

Geeta (British Indian, state school) was very disappointed in the way in which grades were going to be awarded:

It is a system designed to make sure some groups do better than others. I know there will be outliers but I think that those of us who are not White will lose out

from this system. The teachers think they [White students] are worthy of the grades. It's an unfair system. We are never given the same rewards as White girls. It is actually a form of racism. It just pretends to be fair and equal.

One of the more striking findings was the number of students at independent fee-paying schools who also described inequalities and bias in the system of awarding grades, despite identifying that they personally would benefit from the new processes. Stewart (White) explicitly said:

This is not a fair reflection of awarding grades because every teacher will want their students to do well, but they will be biased. In this kind of school—where everything is controlled—we know teachers favour certain students who they have good relationships with. So the independent school system is rife with abuse, independent schools can simply sway the system. They want all the students to get in to the best universities because it's good for their reputation, so they will give the students much higher grades than they can achieve. The way the grades will be awarded is not a fair reflection, there will be teacher bias no matter what and independent schools will use that as much as they can. It happens all the time, you see it with teachers actually helping students with their exams so that they get the grades.

Ruth (White) also attended an independent fee-paying school and said:

Private schools have their own exam boards and they do not have to follow the same guidelines as state schools, they have wiggle room so that their students get higher grades. There are students who are getting predicted A*s when they are only B or C students. So this system will mean that these students will end up going to good universities but those students from state schools will not. Some of my friends are already saying their parents have arranged to speak to the head teacher and head of Sixth Form to ensure that their kid gets a good grade—because they have been paying the fees. It's the way the system works, some of them feel you are paying so you are entitled to get good results. But it's an unfair system.

The majority of students, whilst they were aware of the potential bias of the system of awarding grades, were also aware of how this would disadvantage minority groups. Sophie (Black, state school) also recognised the unfair system:

The system is unfair and unjust and it's not acceptable that if you have been getting good grades all year and then you get marked down. This is about people's futures, it's not a game and it's going to affect our mental health in the long term. It's obvious that people who go to state schools are going to be disadvantaged compared to private schools. The system is flawed and just not fair. And there are groups of students who will be more disadvantaged than others.

All respondents felt the system for awarding grades was unfair and had the potential to be biased in favour of certain groups. Whilst some did not think they would be disadvantaged themselves, they were aware of the unfairness of the system and how it would affect certain disadvantaged groups—namely Black and minority ethnic groups, and those attending state schools. Respondents identified the potential for bias against specific groups in the system

for awarding grades, and these feelings were based on structural inequalities which went beyond their individual, personal interests.

DISCUSSION

The narratives provided by respondents in our research suggested that during the pandemic, schools not only allowed pre-existing inequalities to continue to be perpetuated but, in some cases, were actively exacerbating these inequalities. In large part the issues identified by our respondents were quickly shown to be demonstrably true; when the English A Level results were announced it became apparent that systemic structural inequalities of the type anticipated by students were exacerbated by Centre Assessed Grades. The extent of the failure of Centre Assessed Grades and the moderating algorithm became most apparent with the near immediate reversal of this policy following the initial release of grades. However, this left at least two significant unanswered questions. Firstly, if it was so obvious to our respondents that the new grading processes were so flawed, why did it appear to be an unexpected revelation on the part of British educational policymakers? Secondly, the respondents in our research identified clear experiences of teacher bias which would not have been addressed by the later reversal of the algorithm-derived results; if our respondents were as accurate in their observations, can we assume that many students were still substantially disadvantaged in the final allocation of grades *because they were teacher-assessed grades*?

One consequence of the pandemic and subsequent lockdown has been that students appear to have emerged with greater knowledge of structural inequalities within education. Whilst in the first instance this appears related to becoming better informed within the context of the pandemic and the impact of this on A Levels, students also described accounts of becoming aware of similar inequalities in higher education. It was striking that evidence of teacher bias (particularly in relation to race and class) was widely recognised by all students; their accounts from the coal face largely mirroring research that links bias to achievement (Henry & Feuerstein, 2021; Peterson et al., 2016). We argue that our study shows students appear to be adopting the instincts of the 'student as consumer', but their understanding of 'good value' in educational economies diverges from that envisioned as simple economic choice. Instead, they identify 'good values' that might be more readily understood as commitments to fairness and social justice. The overwhelming finding from our research was that most students, even those with a strong aversion to the stresses of exams, still tended to identify the biases implicit in educational settings and allowed free reign in the context of the A Level grading processes as an entirely unacceptable context in which to have their work assessed.

Many of the students in our research were keen to attend university, and one potential positive outcome of the pandemic may be that they enter university increasingly well informed and aware of structural inequalities. As ethical consumers of higher education, they may think more closely about the good values they can derive through the investment of their economic capital within institutions they identify as more or less engaged in socially just higher education. One cautionary note that needs to be made is that, just as students adapt their consumer behaviours, producers can also adapt around their interests. There is clear evidence that UK universities promote a public image of social justice to generate student recruitment that is not reflected in their practice (Bhopal et al., 2020; Myers, 2022). At the school level, if teachers hold greater power in assigning grades, this potentially introduces producer sovereignty; in effect privileging the supply side of educational economies to influence demand (consumption) (Galbraith, 1985). By doing so, schools could exercise greater influence over pupils' knowledge and decision-making upon leaving school, by creating the demand for their forms of cultural capital.

From a much less equitable perspective, it was clear that the marketisation of education was a means by which some parents could ensure their children were *deserving* of the highest grades because they had invested and paid for their education. The clear accounts of respondents at independent fee-paying schools were particularly enlightening because of the willingness to state the overt processes by which independent schools were able to benefit from the pandemic to ensure their students achieved highly inflated grades. Strikingly, many of the students at these schools identified these outcomes as flawed, unjust and unfair.

CONCLUSIONS

Our study shows that firstly, students from different backgrounds and different types of schools demonstrated high levels of awareness of the processes by which their exam results would be awarded and also of inequalities built into that process. They highlighted very explicit concerns about how A Level results would be skewed in favour of independent fee-paying schools and how students from Black and minority backgrounds and state schools were likely to be disadvantaged in the process. In this respect, many students appeared better able to predict the likely problems of the OFQUAL standardisation process than either the DfE or OFQUAL itself. Secondly, and allied to the previous finding, students identified the significance of unfairness within their individual experience of taking exams. Whilst the standardisation process was designed to produce results that collectively mirrored schools' past performance and could therefore be described as being collectively fair; the process clearly placed little or no value on *individual* student experiences. To reiterate, students from all types of school and from all backgrounds consistently identified how exam results would be awarded on an unfair basis, reflecting broader structural inequalities within education.

Despite the longstanding identification of racial inequalities in schools and universities (Bhopal, 2018; Gillborn, 2008; Warmington, 2020), and despite the recognition that attending an independent fee-paying school makes it more likely a student will secure a place at Oxbridge or an elite Russell Group institution (Bhopal, 2018; Sutton Trust, 2019), policy initiatives to address such inequalities have had little or no impact (Bhopal et al., 2020). Such policy has in practice simply reproduced existing patterns of disadvantage (Gillborn, 2005). These inequalities are readily identified in the accounts given by respondents in this research; and, whilst not all students benefit or are disadvantaged by these inequalities, all students are *aware* of them. Students were conscious that schools (and in turn universities) would benefit from the reproduction of race and class inequalities (particularly in relation to type of school attended). Students' greater awareness suggests that they are key players in this process, equipped with the knowledge to confront such inequalities. Increasingly defined as 'consumers' able to avail themselves of 'consumer choices', our respondents appeared less influenced by the economic attractions of marketisation, and more influenced by a significant identification that structural inequalities offer the 'worst value' in the higher education marketplace. Rather than identifying 'value' in a pure economic sense of 'good' or 'bad' market value, students identified good and bad 'values' within a system that was as morally corrupt and unequal as it was economically free.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical approval has been obtained from the University of Birmingham.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ A Level (Advanced Level) examinations are generally taken by students in England aged 18, at the end of their secondary education. GCSEs (General Certificates of Secondary Education) are exams generally taken at age 16.
- ² The Office for Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (OFQUAL) is a non-ministerial government department which regulates qualifications, exams and tests in England. It is often referred to as the exams 'watchdog'.
- ³ The National Student Survey (NSS) is an annual survey which was launched in 2005 of all final-year undergraduate students in England, Scotland and Wales. It enables students to provide feedback on their university experience and is often used as a benchmark for parents and students to assess universities. The universities use the NSS to make changes to the university experience (<https://www.thestudentsurvey.com/>).

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