



A Levels and University Access 2022



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KEY FINDINGS

Ongoing disruption and catch-up support

- Disruption from the pandemic is still ongoing. Over a third (34%) of students who have applied for university this year have missed 11 or more days of school or college over the last academic year for Covid related reasons, with 21% missing more than 20 days.
- The majority (74%) of applicants in state schools were offered at least one type of catch up support over the last year, with over half (56%) taking at least one up.
- The most common support offered in state schools or colleges was additional in-person classes before or after school or at lunchtimes (53%), with 36% reporting similar classes were on offer during school holidays or weekends. 44% were offered additional classes online.
- Tutoring has been a core part of the government's catch up strategy, including tutoring for 16-19 year olds. 36% of applicants reported being offered some type of tutoring (either one to one or group tuition), and 19% reported they had taken part. Working class students were slightly more likely to have been offered any sort of catch up tutoring (39% vs 33%).
- 62% of this year's applicants felt they had fallen behind their studies compared to where they would have been without the disruption of the pandemic, only slightly lower than last year when 69% said the same. This figure was higher for students in state (64%) than in private schools (51%).
- Ethnic minority students were much more likely to think they had fallen behind their peers than white applicants, at 41% vs 23%.

Exam mitigations and preparations

- Almost half (45%) of teachers involved with exams this year do not think the mitigations in place have gone far enough to account for pandemic related disruption. This figure was higher for those working at state schools (46%) than in independent schools (38%).
- Most A level teachers (80%) were able to cover the vast majority, 90% or more, of the content released in advanced information topics for most subjects.

No teachers reported that they covered less than half of the content. A similar proportion (75%) had been able to cover 90% or more of the full syllabus.

- Most A level students applying to university felt the advanced information was helpful (76%). However, only 52% thought the arrangements for exams this year had fairly taken into account the impact of the pandemic on students' learning.
- This year's A level students had never sat formal exams before. The majority (81%) of teachers covering exams classes this year reported their students had sat a mock exam this year in an exam hall under exam conditions, with a further 13% doing so in the same conditions in the classroom.
- Most teachers (57%) agreed with Ofqual's approach to grade boundaries this year, but a sizeable minority (29%) felt the approach was too strict. This proportion was higher in state (30%) than in private schools (23%).
- 72% of teachers thought the attainment gap at their school would widen; almost a third (29%) thought the gap would increase modestly and just under 1 in 5 (19%) said it would increase substantially. Those working in deprived schools were 13 percentage points more likely to think this increase would be substantial, at 29%, compared to 16% of those working in more affluent schools.

Concerns for the future

- 64% of applicants said they were worried about their grades, 8 percentage points higher than said the same last year. Just over 1 in 4 (27%) said they were very worried this year.
- Students from working class backgrounds were 8 percentage points more likely to be concerned about their grades, at 70%, compared to 62% of those from middle class backgrounds.
- 60% of applicants were worried about getting a place at their first choice university, 13 percentage points higher than last year. 71% of working class applicants expressed concern about getting a place, 13 percentage points more than those from middle class backgrounds, at 58%.

INTRODUCTION

The past academic year has seen society return to some sense of normality, with remaining domestic Covid restrictions removed and schools open throughout. This year has also seen exams taking place again for the first time since 2019, a welcome move back towards the pre-pandemic norm for schools and colleges. However, whilst a welcome return, exams this year will not be the same as they were pre-crisis.

Students in year 11 and year 13 who have taken exams this summer have been through considerable disruption, going far beyond the periods when schools were closed. Indeed, 2022's GCSE pupils haven't had a full 'normal' school year since they were in year 8, while A level students last had the same when they were in year 10 (as shown in Figure 1). Also unusually, this summer's exams will be the first set of formal exams that those in year 13 have ever sat, as their GCSEs back in 2020 were determined by Centre Assessed Grades (CAGs).¹

During school closures, there were clear inequalities in access to remote learning, with those from poorer homes much less likely to have the technology, internet access or workspaces needed to learn remotely.²

And whilst all children faced a large amount of disruption, research has consistently shown that those from disadvantaged backgrounds suffered the worst impacts.³

Staff and pupil absences due to Covid-19 have also continued after schools re-opened. For instance, earlier this year the Trust found that state schools were much more likely to be affected by ongoing issues with teacher absences than private schools, with state schools in the most deprived areas the most impacted.⁴

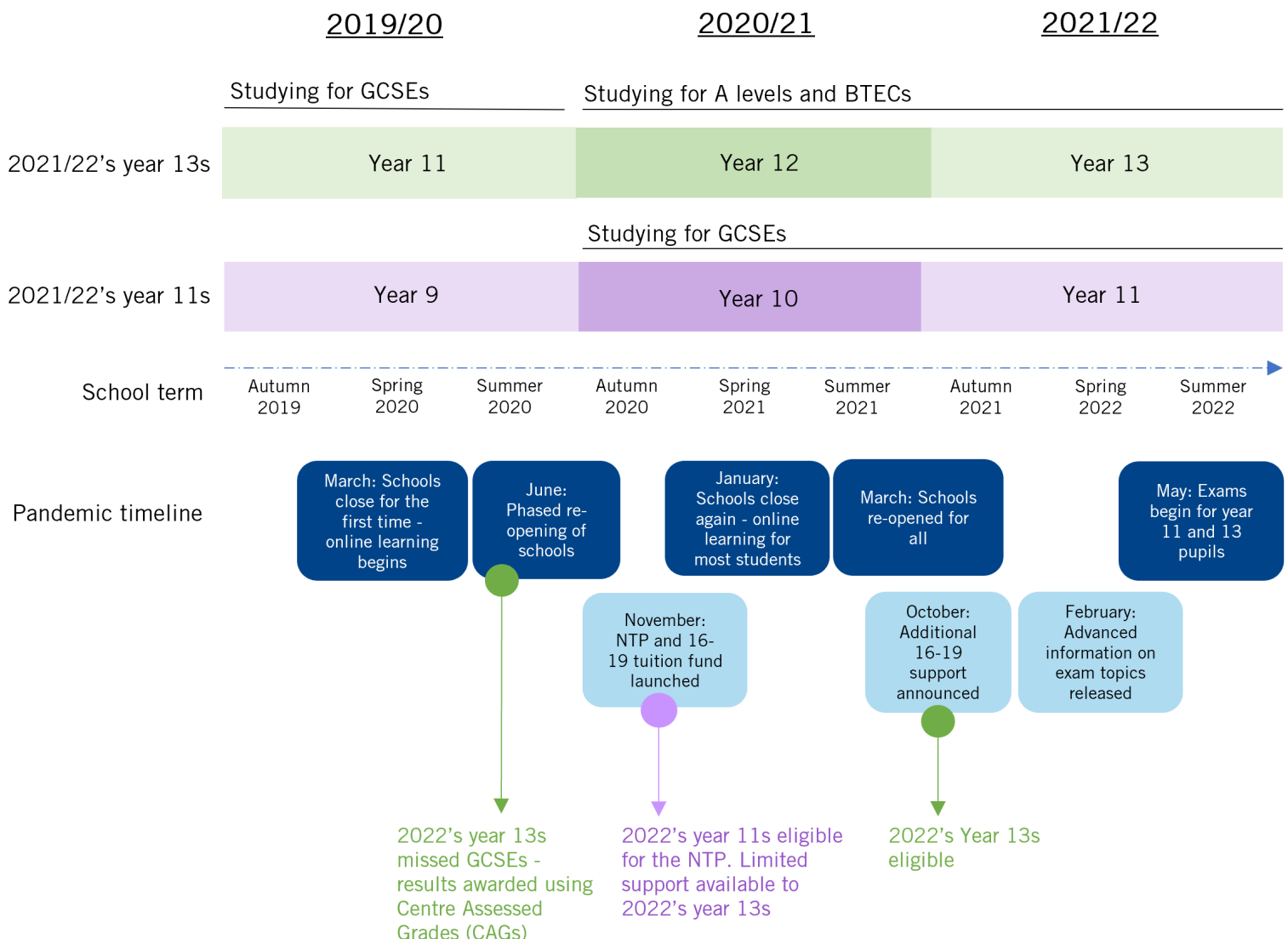
Furthermore, whilst there were no nationwide school closures over the past year, many have seen their class or bubble sent home for short periods. According to Education Datalab, over a quarter (28%) of students in year 11

eligible for free school meals (FSM) have missed the equivalent of at least a day a week over the course of the year, compared with 11% of their peers.⁵ These findings are particularly concerning given the established link between higher absence rates and lower levels of attainment.⁶

Whilst there has not been any research looking at learning loss for this year's year 11s and 13s specifically, from existing evidence on learning loss more generally, it looks likely they will have been considerably impacted by the pandemic. For instance, a review by the Education Endowment Foundation bringing together existing evidence on learning loss found that attainment gaps between the poorest and richest students have widened.⁷

Looking at evidence on learning differences for particular year groups earlier in the pandemic, many schools were prioritising learning for younger year groups, rather than those in exam year groups (which would apply to current year 13s, who were in year 11 at

Figure 1: Pandemic timeline for 2021/22 cohorts of GCSE and A level students.



the time),⁸ with far less remote learning materials being provided.⁹ Whilst these students didn't have exams to prepare for as they had been cancelled, the last few months of such a key year in education are important to consolidate learning and nail the basics that inform further study in a particular subject, which could potentially impact those students in this year's A level results.

There have been several measures announced by government to support students in the aftermath of the pandemic, including a recovery premium from school aged children of £1 billion running until 2024, and a National Tutoring Programme (NTP) to provide catch-up tutoring for students.¹⁰ Many organisations, including the Sutton Trust, have criticised the overall scale of support provided for catch up¹¹ – with the government's "catch-up Tsar" resigning after saying the government's catch-up plans were not of the scale needed.¹²

A 16 to 19 tuition fund was also announced by government as a part of catch-up efforts (as this age group were ineligible for the National Tutoring Programme). However, critics have argued that the eligibility criteria are too narrow, leaving thousands of students without support. In the 2021 spending review last October, an additional £800 million until 2024 was announced for 16- to 19-year-olds for catch-up activities, to fund an average of 40 additional learning hours for all students to allow for more time for catch-up. But even aside from these measures, exam students this year have not had long back in school to engage in catch-up support.

Exams this year

To try to account for the disruption experienced by this year's exam cohorts throughout the pandemic, several changes were made by the exam regulator Ofqual to exams this year. For example, advance information was made available in February on the topics due to be covered in exams for most subjects, to allow teachers and students to focus in during the revision period.¹³ However, there have been some issues with implementation, with several reports across the exam season that topics not on the pre-released list were tested on, although in most instances exam boards have said they will either not mark these question or give all students full marks.¹⁴ Where possible, exams were also spaced out to prevent someone who contracted

Covid-19 from missing all exams in a subject, with grades decided on one exam per subject if required.

For some subjects at GCSE level specifically, students had a choice of topics or content to answer questions on within exams, so that they could pick questions on topics they have had a chance to cover. Students also had additional formulae and equation sheets for maths and some sciences.

In terms of grading, the process will be harsher than last year, with grade boundaries set at a mid-point between 2021 and the last 'normal' year pre-pandemic, in 2019.¹⁵ There are however some potential issues as grade inflation is brought down, potentially worsened by the speed at which this process is taking place.

Any reduction in grade inflation risks some students missing out on the grades they need to go onto their next steps in education, training, or employment. And given the large impact of the pandemic on this year's cohort and the limited time they have had for catch-up, a considerable number of students may be impacted. The largest impacts are likely to be on students at key boundaries, for example those just missing out on 4s or 5s at GCSE, who may potentially be left unable to progress to their next steps in education or training.

The Trust has long raised concerns about individual-level lost learning during the pandemic, with disadvantaged students less likely to have full access to the facilities needed for home learning during periods of remote schooling. It remains to be seen to what extent the measures implemented by Ofqual have mitigated

POLICY IN THE DEVOLVED NATIONS

In Scotland, the same mitigations as last year were in place for examinations, whereby students were given revision resources to match topics covered in exams¹⁶. Adaptation booklets were published for all qualifications in Wales which indicated topics that would not be examined on,¹⁷ and for students in Northern Ireland, topics were given out in advance and fewer exams were sat per subject than usual.¹⁸

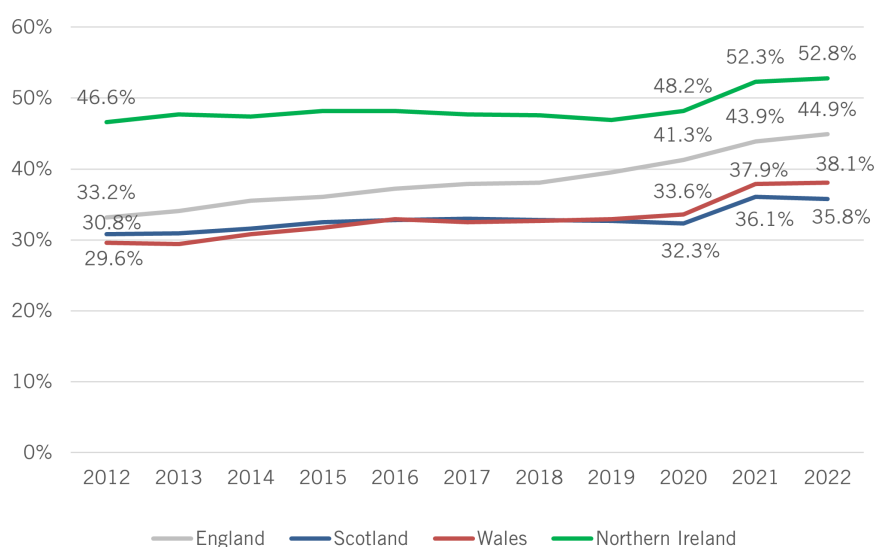
such problems, but they have not been specifically designed to control for the unequal impact of learning loss on young people from less advantaged backgrounds.

Entry to university in 2022

There are reports of high levels of competition for university places this summer,¹⁹ with warnings universities are reducing the number of places available on popular subjects, after taking on additional students in the last two years following pandemic grade inflation. For disadvantaged young people particularly, the pandemic and associated learning loss could have a considerable impact on their final grades, potentially putting those students in a difficult position in what looks to be a very competitive market.²⁰

Data already available from UCAS shows that applications to university rose by 5% in the UK this year, and there is also a larger cohort of 18 year olds going through the system this cycle.²¹ Changes in application rates over time are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Higher Education application rate, UK domiciled 18 year olds, June deadline 2012-2022



Source: UCAS

Combined with the increased number of students accepted to university over the past two academic years, it appears that many institutions have made fewer offers this year, with reports from some teachers that even students predicted to get A* grades had not received an offer from any of the institutions they applied to.²²

Indeed, according to recent data released by the university admissions service UCAS, this year's offer rate is just 66.4%, compared to 72% in 2019, with the trend more pronounced in subjects like medicine and dentistry (16% of applicants received an offer this year compared to 20.4% in 2021), as well as higher tariff institutions.²³

UCAS have also released information on the offer rate by POLAR, a measure which looks at the historic rate of progression to HE in an area, with some promising news that young people from areas with lower historic rates of progression to HE (those in POLAR groups Q1 and Q2) are seeing the smallest falls in their offer rate this year. But there is still a persistent gap when it comes to offer rates overall – this year an applicant from a disadvantaged area is 2.86 times less likely to hold a firm choice compared to applicants in the most advantaged areas.²⁴ And no such data is yet available for markers which more closely link to income inequality, for example by the free school meal (FSM) status of applicants.

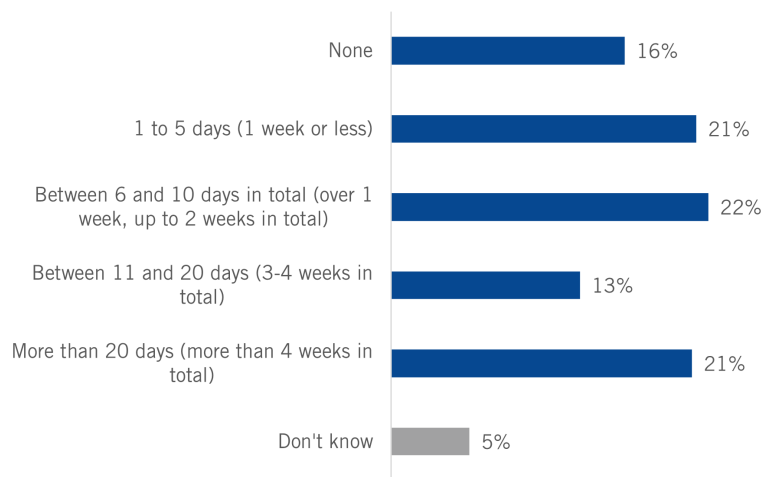
This research brief looks closely at this year's exam series, considering the views of teachers as well as students who have just completed their examinations. It looks at whether mitigations have fairly taken the effects of the pandemic into account, as well as the views of this year's university applicants on their own academic progress, and concerns they have over their grades and potential progression to university

MISSED SCHOOL

To understand more about the experiences of students taking exams this year, we polled 434 UK students who applied to university this year through Savanta in early July, just after the A level exams period had ended.²⁵ This included 400 students studying for A levels and equivalent qualifications.

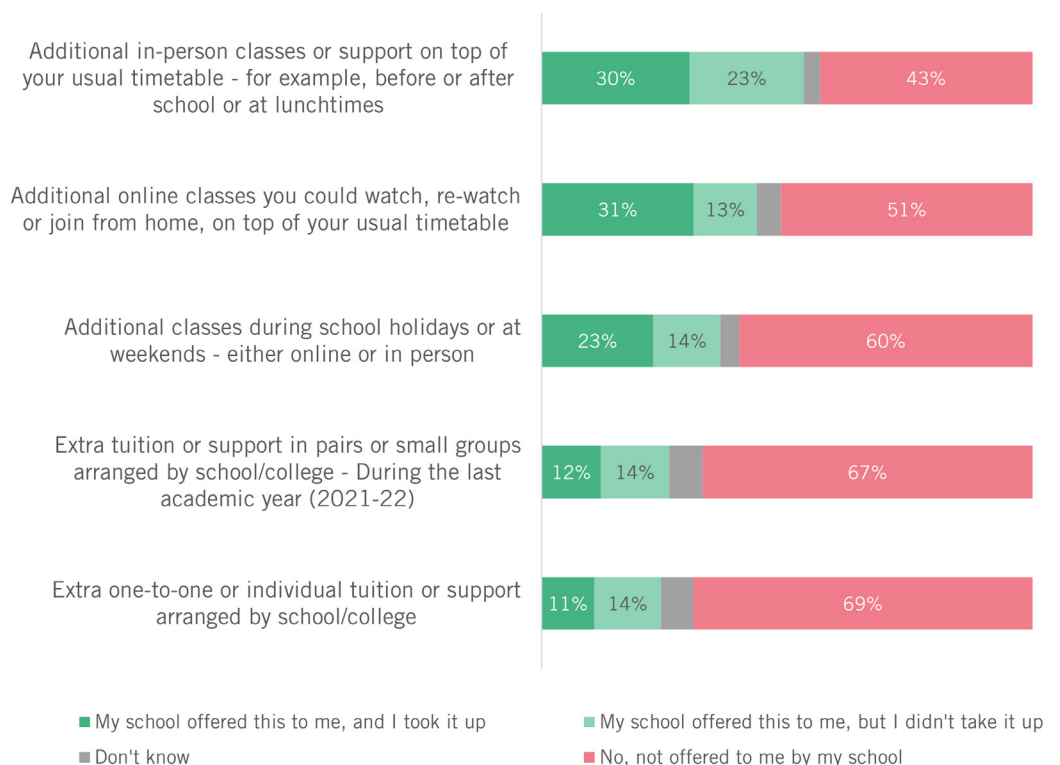
Students (looking at those taking any qualifications) still faced disruption, with over a third (34%) of the

Figure 3: Days of school or college missed due to Covid related disruption during the 2021-2022 academic year



Source: Savanta survey of university applicants for the Sutton Trust, 1st to 5th July

Figure 4: Catch up support offered to and taken up by applicants in state schools this year



Source: Savanta survey of university applicants for the Sutton Trust, 1st to 5th July

applicants surveyed missing 11 days or more over the course of the last academic year, including 21% missing more than 20 days (equivalent to four or more weeks of class time) (Figure 3).

CATCH UP SUPPORT

We asked students about the catch up support they had received in school or college over the last academic year (shown in Figure 4). The most common catch up support offered to applicants in state schools or colleges was additional in-person classes before or after school or at lunchtimes, with over half (53%) of students reporting this was offered to them, and 30% taking it up. Just over a third (36%)

reported similar classes during school holidays or on weekends, and 44% were offered additional classes online.

Only 24% of the applicants surveyed reported they had been offered one to one or individual group tuition, with just 11% saying they had taken it up. Similar proportions reported being offered pair or small group tuition, at 26%, with 12% saying they took this up. 36% reported being offered some type of tutoring (either one to one or group), and 19% reported they had taken part in one of these types of tutoring.

Overall, 74% of the state school applicants surveyed reported being

offered at least one of the catch up activities listed, and 56% had taken up at least one.

On the targeting of support, working class students were slightly more likely to have been offered any sort of catch up tutoring (39% vs 33%), although slightly higher proportions of better-off students reported being offered any catch up support (77% for ABC1 vs 71% C2DE). Ethnic minority students were much more likely to say they had been offered catch up (88% vs 70% of white students), to have been offered tutoring of any sort (49% vs 31%), and to have taken up any sort of tutoring (28% vs 14%).

When asked about how the pandemic has affected their studies, 62% of this year's applicants agreed with the statement 'I have fallen behind with my studies compared to where I would have been without the disruption of the pandemic' (Figure 5).

While lower than last year (when the figure was 69%), it is clear that many young people are still feeling the effects of the pandemic this year.

A higher proportion of young people attending state schools, 64%, were concerned they had fallen behind, compared to 51% in independent schools.

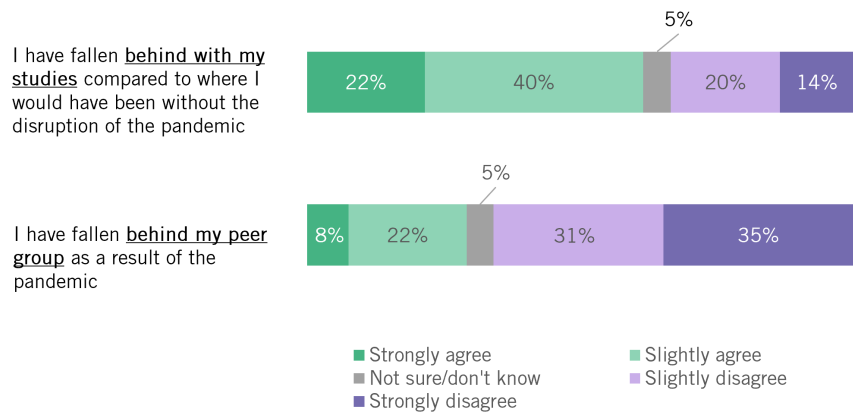
When comparing their own progress against that of their classmates, a small proportion of applicants, 29%, agreed with the statement 'I have fallen behind my peer group as a result of the pandemic'.

Students from independent schools were more likely to think they had fallen behind their peers, at 38%, compared to 28% of state school students. Ethnic minority students were much more likely to think they had fallen behind their peers than white applicants, at 41%, vs 23% of white applicants.

EXAM MITIGATIONS AND PREPARATIONS

As previously discussed, a number of measures have been put in place in an attempt to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on exams this year. To gain an insight into how these mitigations were received and delivered, we polled 4,089 teachers in England with knowledge of this year's exams through Teacher Tapp in May this year, just after students had left for study leave. This included teachers with classes in either year 11 (GCSE) or 13 (A levels) and teachers who are part of their school's senior leadership team (SLT).²⁶ Whilst 29% of

Figure 5: University applicants' views on the impact of the pandemic on their progress



Source: Savanta survey of university applicants for the Sutton Trust, 1st to 5th July

teachers polled agreed that measures put in place this year will fairly take into account pandemic-related disruption and learning loss, nearly half (45%) disagreed. Those working at state schools were more likely to say they disagreed, at 46%, compared to 38% of those working in private schools. Over half (53%) of teachers in the most deprived schools (those with the highest proportion of FSM eligible pupils) disagreed, compared to 43% of those in schools with more affluent intakes (Figure 6).

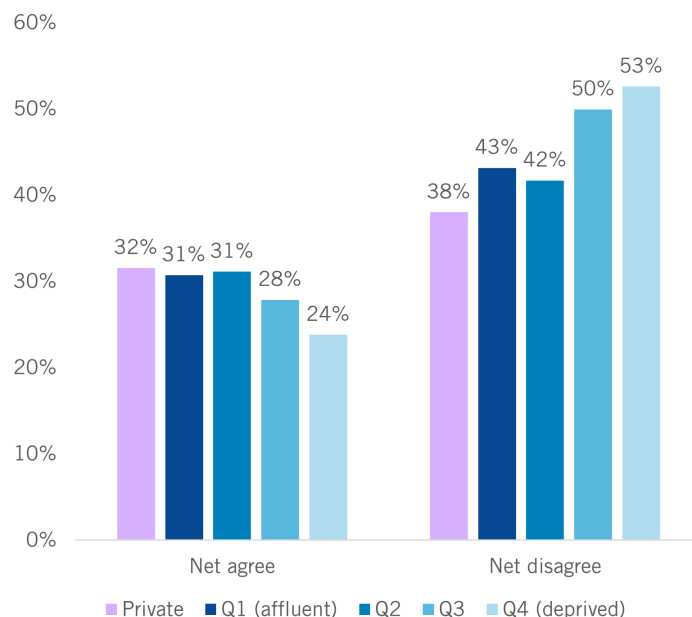
Looking at teachers of A level students only, the clear majority (80%) said that they were able to cover over 90% of the content included in the advanced information released on topics for most subjects. Less than 1% of teachers reported that they covered less than half of the content.

However, those working at deprived schools were 22 percentage points less likely to report covering over 90% of content, compared to those working at affluent schools (67% vs 88% for schools with the least affluent intakes).

Year 13 teachers were also asked about how much of the overall subject syllabus, rather than just the advanced information topics, they were able to cover in lessons. 75% said they covered over 90% of the syllabus, with a further 17% saying 76%-90% was covered.

But again, there were differences when looking at levels of deprivation (Figure 7, overleaf). Whilst 83% of A level teachers in schools with the most affluent intakes said at least 90% of the syllabus was covered (with 12% saying 76%-90% was covered), only 61% of those working in the most deprived schools said the same (with 21% saying 76%-90% was covered).

Figure 6: Teachers on whether measures in place for exams this year would fairly reflect the pandemic's disruption, by level of deprivation in the school



Source: Teacher Tapp survey of teachers for the Sutton Trust, 23rd to 24th May

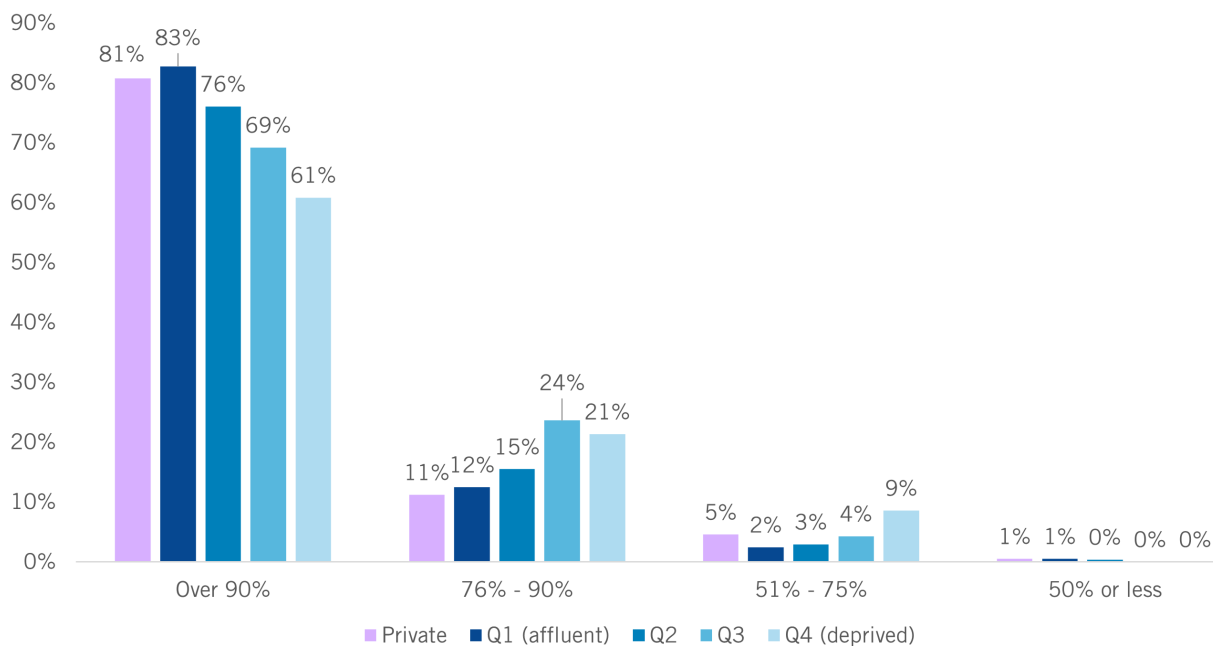
This is notable as it is likely most subjects have core topics that might not necessarily have been set out in pre-released topics ahead of this year's exams. Having an understanding of these would have likely been useful for wider understanding and contextualisation, which may have helped in exams, and will help to build foundations for further study at university.

Applicants were also asked for their views on the mitigations put in place to recognise the pandemic's disruption to learning over the past 2 years.

The vast majority (96%) of students said they were given advanced information about the subjects that would be covered in exams papers. Around three quarters (76%) said it was useful to have this information when preparing for exams, with 21% saying that the information they received was not useful.

Considering only those who said they received early information on topics ahead of their exams, working class applicants were 7 percentage points more likely to say that the early information was not useful, at 30%

Figure 7: Proportion of standard subject syllabus covered in lessons, by level of deprivation in the school



Source: Teacher Tapp survey of teachers for the Sutton Trust, 23rd to 24th May

compared to 23% of applicants from a middle-class background (Figure 8). Just over half (52%) of students thought the arrangements for exams this year had fairly taken into account the impact of the pandemic on students' learning, with 39% saying that the arrangements had been unfair. There were no notable differences by socioeconomic characteristics.

SITTING EXAMS

As previously discussed, this year's A level students will never have sat a formal exam before, having missed their GCSEs in 2020. Given that, mock exams, especially under exam

conditions, will have been a particularly important part of their preparations for the official examinations series this year.

The majority of A Level teachers (81%) said that their students had sat a mock, and this was in an exam hall under exam conditions. A further 13% said mock exams were held in the classroom under exam conditions. However, it appears students in the most deprived schools are less likely to have experienced a formal exam – with 68% of teachers in these schools reporting they had done so in an exam hall under exam conditions, compared to 87% of teachers in more affluent schools.

Figure 8: Usefulness of advance information for university applicants taking exams, by socio-economic background



Source: Savanta survey of university applicants for the Sutton Trust, 1st to 5th July

Students who have not sat a formal exam before may have found their exams this summer more daunting, which could potentially impact their performance and thus their final grades.

When asked whether they felt prepared to take exams this year, 73% of students agreed with the statement, with just over a quarter (26%) disagreeing. Over a third (37%) of university applicants from working class backgrounds disagreed compared to a quarter (25%) from middle class backgrounds (Figure 9). 32% of ethnic minority university applicants said they did not feel prepared for exams this year, compared to 24% of white applicants.

Reassuringly, the vast majority of university applicants (93%) said they were able to sit all of their exams this year. For the small proportion who missed some examinations, reasons for missing them included having Covid-19, having close contact with someone with Covid-19 and other non-Covid related reasons.

GRADING AND ATTAINMENT

All teachers polled were also asked about Ofqual's approach to grade boundaries. The majority (57%) thought the approach, whereby boundaries will be set at a mid-point between last year's results and results before the pandemic, is about right. However, over a quarter (29%) thought the approach is too strict. 6% thought the approach is too generous. This figure thinking the

Figure 9: Whether student agreed they felt prepared to take exams, by socio-economic group



Source: Savanta survey of university applicants for the Sutton Trust, 1st to 5th July

approach was too strict was higher, at over a third (35%), for teachers in the most deprived schools, 8 percentage points higher than the proportion in more affluent schools (27%). 30% of state school teachers thought the approach was too strict, compared to 23% of those working in private schools.

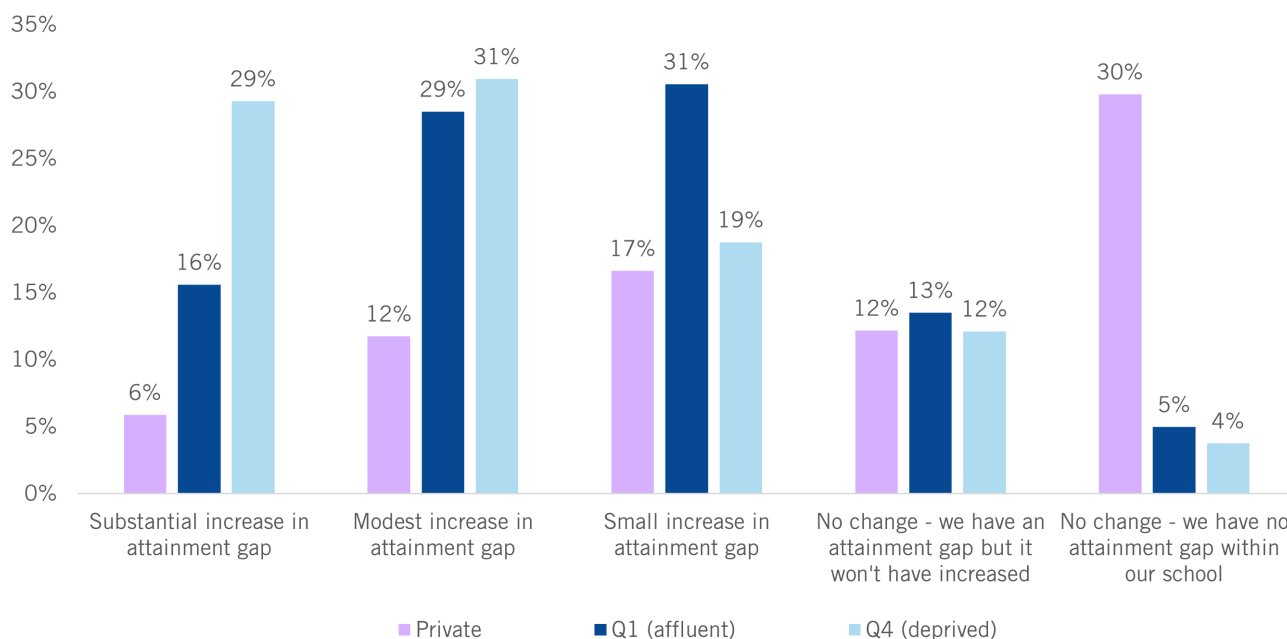
Teachers were also asked what they thought would happen to the attainment gap at their school with the return of national exams. 72% of teachers thought the attainment gap at their school would widen; almost a third (29%) thought the gap would increase modestly and just under 1 in 5 (19%) said it would increase substantially.

As shown in Figure 10, although the proportions of teachers at deprived schools and affluent schools who thought the attainment gap would rise were similar, at 79% vs 75% respectively, those working in deprived schools were 13 percentage points more likely to think this increase would be substantial, at 29%, compared to 16% of those working in more affluent schools.

CONCERNS FOR THE FUTURE

There is understandably a stressful period ahead for many students, with results day and starting university both just weeks away. We asked university applicants, including both those

Figure 10: Views on the attainment gap after this year's exams, by level of deprivation in the school



Source: Teacher Tapp survey of teachers for the Sutton Trust, 23rd to 24th May

studying for A levels or equivalents, and those taking other qualifications, about the extent to which they are concerned about the key milestones that are approaching.

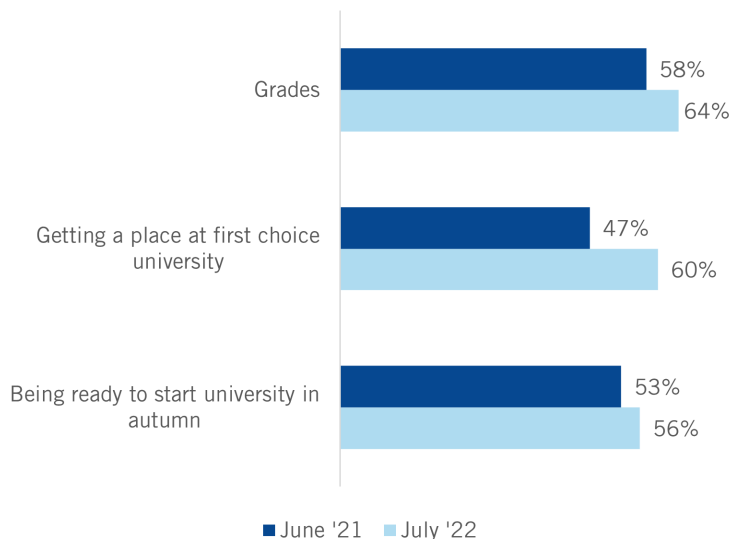
64% of applicants said they were worried about their grades, with just over 1 in 4 (27%) saying they are very worried. This proportion is 8 percentage points higher than the 58% of students who said the same last year (Figure 11), perhaps unsurprising given last year's results were based on teacher assessments with more lenient grading, compared to this year's cohort sitting their first formal exams alongside a reduction in grade inflation. Concern for grades was greater than for the other issues covered; getting into their first choice university (60%) and starting university in the autumn (56%).

Those from working class backgrounds were 8 percentage points more likely to be concerned about their grades, at 70% compared to 62% of those from middle class backgrounds (as shown in Figure 12), with these students also more likely to be 'very worried' (37% vs 24%). Nearly three quarters (74%) of ethnic minority students said they were concerned about being ready to start university, compared to only 60% of white students.

60% of applicants were worried about getting a place at their first-choice university, again with around 1 in 4 (27%) saying they are very worried. This figure is 13 percentage points higher than last year, when 47% said they were worried about this. 71% of working-class applicants expressed concern about getting a place, 13 percentage points more than those from middle class backgrounds (58%). Working class students were also almost twice as likely to say they were very worried, at 41%, compared to 23% of those from middle class backgrounds.

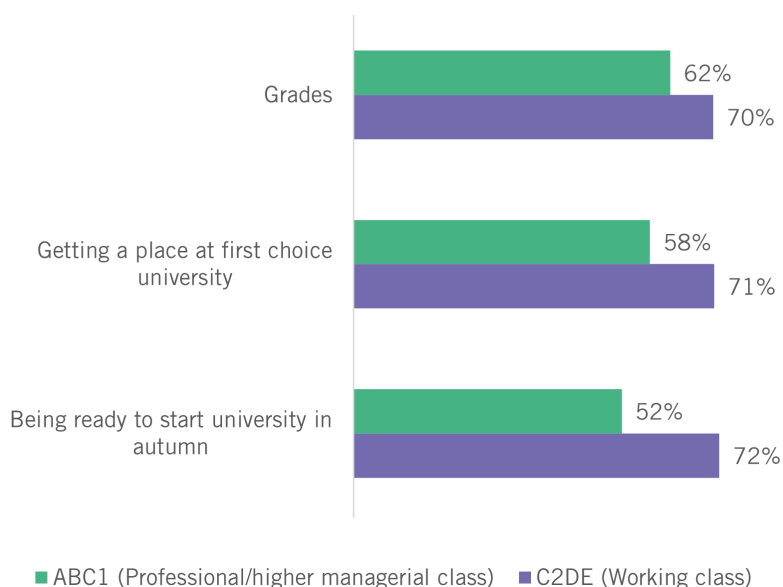
Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the reported increase in competition this year, students who applied to a Russell Group university as their first choice were more likely to be concerned about getting a place, at 67%, compared to 56% of those applying to a Pre-1992 institution and 50% to a Post-1992 institution. 73% of ethnic minority students were concerned about getting a place at their first choice institution compared to 53% of applicants who are white. Just over half of applicants (56%) said they were worried about being ready to start university in the

Figure 11: Applicant concerns, 2021 and 2022



Source: Savanta (previously known as Youthsight) survey of university applicants for the Sutton Trust, 1st to 5th July 2022 and 19th to 25th June 2021

Figure 12: Whether applicants were concerned over particular issues, by socio-economic group



Source: Savanta survey of university applicants for the Sutton Trust, 1st to 5th

Autumn, compared to 53% who said the same last year, with 19% saying they were 'very worried'. A large proportion of those from a working class background said they were concerned, at 72%, compared to a smaller (but still sizable) 52% of middle class applicants. A third (33%) of applicants from a working class background were 'very worried' about starting university – just over double the figure that said the same from middle class backgrounds (15% reported this). As with the other issues included here, ethnic minority students were more likely to say they were concerned than white students, at 62 vs 52%.

DISCUSSION

This brief has highlighted the long lasting effects of the pandemic, with students sitting exams this summer continuing to feel its impacts. For young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds especially, there is a danger the pandemic will cast a long shadow.

After the challenges for assessment over the last two years, it was a welcome return to see examinations back as usual this summer. But this did not signify that the pandemic's effect on learning was over. And indeed, as this briefing has demonstrated, disruption to learning has continued even in recent months,²⁷ with many students worried that they have fallen

behind where they should be.

Exam results and next steps

As highlighted in this briefing and elsewhere, there are warning signs that come results day, more students than usual may be left disappointed with their grades and perhaps without a place at their preferred university or in further training. This is a particular concern for disadvantaged young people, who suffered some of the worst disruption during the pandemic. And indeed, in schools with the most deprived intakes, results here have shown that teachers do not think mitigations to exams have fairly taken the effects of the pandemic into account, with teachers in these schools less likely both to have covered all topics from pre-released materials during lessons and have their students sit a formal mock examination.

The Trust has long called for contextual admissions, whereby the context in which a young person has achieved their grades is taken into account, to be used when institutions make decisions about university places. Given the disruption faced by this cohort, and their lack of experience with formal exams, looking at this context will be once again vital this year.²⁸ While universities have already made decisions on offers, their final decisions on admissions are still to come over the next few weeks. All institutions should look to give additional leniency to students who faced the most challenging circumstances. For students from lower income backgrounds especially, using this leniency to allow students to progress onto higher education, even if they have just missed out on their offer grades. A similar approach should also be taken by training providers and employers wherever possible, and also by colleges and sixth forms looking to admit students following their GCSE results this summer.

Last year, the Trust suggested using GCSE grades as an aid when contextualising A level results.²⁹ However, this year those results should be treated with caution, as this year's applicants were not able to sit a formal series of GCSE exams.³⁰

As highlighted in this briefing, many students are concerned about what will happen on results day. UCAS have encouraged students that there will still be places available in clearing,³¹ but concerns have been raised that there will be fewer spaces available on competitive courses.³² Schools and universities should prepare to support students to navigate the admissions

and clearing process, with potentially larger numbers of students requiring assistance compared to previous years. This is important for disadvantaged students particularly, who are more likely to require support and are less likely to be able to get it from home or wider networks.

Further support

Regardless of what happens on results day, our findings suggest that many students feel they have fallen behind academically because of the pandemic. For disadvantaged students particularly who experienced the most disruption, content they have missed may be vital for their chosen university subject, and missing out on it could hinder their progress through their course. Universities should bear this in mind when students arrive in the autumn and should offer academic support which helps to identify gaps in knowledge that could hinder understanding of key concepts for their subject.

Feeling behind may also make the transition to university harder for students, with potential impacts for their wider wellbeing and subsequent continuation. This comes alongside the social impact of the pandemic and being isolated from large groups for much of the past two years preceding the 2021/22 academic year.³³ Indeed, this briefing has found a significant number of students are worried about starting university. Wellbeing support is vital for students settling into a new environment, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds whose mental health has been more negatively impacted by the pandemic.³⁴ Support with settling in at university is particularly important for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are more likely to be the first in their family to attend, and to have fewer family or friends who have been to university to share their experiences and advice.

With extracurricular and social activities taking place on campus again after the end of restrictions, universities should encourage students to take part, helping them to socialise and interact outside of their university course. Last year, the Trust highlighted barriers for disadvantaged students to extra-curricular activities, which included affordability and other commitments like part-time work.³⁵ Where possible, universities should tackle these barriers to ensure first years can become a part of the student community as soon as they arrive.

Future exam cohorts

Our findings also show that a large proportion of teachers, particularly in schools with the most deprived intakes, are concerned that the attainment gap will rise after this year's exams. While next year's students will have had more time back in the classroom, they will still have faced a considerable amount of disruption at a crucial point of their education.

For those in younger year groups, it is vital that catch up activities continue to be offered to students whose learning has been disrupted by the pandemic. Several commentators, including the Sutton Trust, have criticised funding allocated to catch-up activities.³⁶ Further investment in catch-up should be substantial and sustained, with targeted funding for those from disadvantaged backgrounds who have suffered the most (most likely delivered through pupil premium funding). This should include access to tutoring both through the National Tutoring Programme and the 16-19 tuition fund.

Furthermore, Ofqual should look carefully at whether to keep some of the mitigations in place this year for next year's cohort, after assessing the impact on disadvantaged students in particular, as well as taking into account the experiences of young people and their teachers who have been through the system this year. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have all already announced that the changes they have in place will be used again next year,³⁷ which has not yet happened in England.

Moving forward

Whilst a return to relative normality has allowed students to sit exams again this year, the effects of the pandemic on their education have remained, with mitigations not fully reflecting individual-level lost learning. Those making decisions on students' next steps, from universities to employers, colleges and other training providers, should take this context into account when making final decisions on the basis of students' grades this year. The impact of the pandemic on education is going to be felt for years to come. It is vital we continue to look at the support young people need in response, especially those from the poorest backgrounds, who suffered the most disruption throughout the crisis. We must ensure that no young person is locked out of their next steps because of the unequal impacts of the pandemic, and give them every chance to fulfil their potential.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds who have narrowly missed their offer grades should be given additional consideration in admissions and hiring decisions.** Universities, employers, colleges and other training providers should consider that young people taking exams this year, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have faced considerable disruption over the last few years, and that the exam system has not taken into account individual learning loss within the pandemic. It is more vital than ever to take such factors into account and recognise that grades may not reflect a young person's full potential. Widening participation should be a key factor when universities are giving discretionary acceptances to those who have missed their offers this year.
- 2. Schools, colleges, training providers and universities should put adequate support in place for results day.** Results day this year is likely to be particularly challenging, with many young people potentially needing to adjust plans if they have not met their offers. Schools, colleges, training providers and universities should work together to ensure adequate support is in place for young people having to make quick decisions on their next steps.
- 3. Universities should identify key gaps in learning at an early stage in the first term, and provide support if necessary.** The impact of the pandemic and associated disruption is still ongoing, and students going onto higher education this year will still require additional help and support. The importance of learning gaps will differ by subject studied, but plans should be put in place to support students develop in key areas necessary to succeed in their course.
- 4. Universities should provide additional wellbeing support for the incoming cohort.** Many students are worried about starting university this year, and have only been back in the classroom and able to socialise with their peers for a relatively short period after the considerable disruption of the pandemic. We are still learning the extent of the impacts on young people, and they are likely to have additional need of support for their wellbeing and mental health as they transition to life in higher education.
- 5. Government should fund additional catch-up support for school and college students.** Current funding put into catch up support is not sufficient to meet the scale of the challenge posed by the pandemic and associated disruption to young people's educations. A renewed catch-up plan, with a scale of funding at a level to meet the need caused by the crisis should be put in place by government for future year groups, and should cover young people in 16-19 education. This should include extending the pupil premium to students in post-16 education.
- 6. Ofqual should review the mitigations put in place this year and consider adapting them for 2023, taking into account the views of teachers and young people who have been through the system this year.** Next year's exam students will have had longer back in school and college, but will still have faced considerable disruption due to the pandemic which should be taken into account in the exam process next year. Ofqual should carefully review this year's approach and use learnings to inform any mitigations in place next year, including re-examining current plans to reduce grade inflation to pre-pandemic levels next year.

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