



PQA: Reforming University Admissions



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KEY FINDINGS

- The United Kingdom is an international outlier in admissions, as the only major country to base its university admissions system on a system of predicted grades. However the vast majority (almost 85%) of students receive predicted grades that prove to be incorrect.
- A move to a post-qualification system, where young people and universities can make decisions based on actual exam results has been under discussion since at least the mid-nineties. The wake of this year's exam results controversy provides an important opportunity to take another look at reforming the system.
- Two thirds of this year's university entrants (66%) are in favour of removing predicted grades from university admissions and making decisions based on actual results (a system called Post-Qualification Applications), with only 13% saying such a change would be less fair than the status quo.
- Despite the difficulties and controversy surrounding their exam results this year, most students applying to university did receive a place at their first preference institution (69%). 16% gained a spot at one of their other preferences, and just 3% at a university they had not initially considered. However, working class students were less likely to gain a place at their first preference university when compared to their better-off peers (63% compared to 72%).
- Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the role of teacher assessments in Centre Assessed Grades (CAGs) this year, 38% reported achieving final grades the same as their predictions, significantly higher than other years.

Nonetheless, almost two-thirds were incorrect, with 32% gaining grades higher than their predictions, and 30% which were lower. Students from state schools were more likely to be underpredicted than those from private schools (32% vs 26% of private school students).

- Currently, students apply to university based on their predicted grades. While most of this year's applicants would have applied to the same universities knowing their final grades (73%), a considerable proportion, about 1 in 4, would have made different decisions, with 13% instead wanting to have applied to more selective universities, and 11% to less selective institutions.
- Of those who would have applied to a higher tariff university, over half (52%) had been underpredicted in their grades.
- A change to a post-qualification system would likely influence university applicants' choices in different ways. Just over 1 in 5 (21%) of those who achieved final grades higher than their predicted grades said they would have applied to higher tariff institutions if they knew their final grades before applying, while 29% who performed worse than their predictions reported they would have applied for institutions with lower entry requirements.
- Many applicants also thought the universities they applied to would have made different decisions on their application if they had known their final grades. 7% of applicants thought some universities who rejected them would have accepted them based on their final grades, however 18% felt they would instead have been rejected from some universities who accepted them.

INTRODUCTION

When students apply for university in the UK, they do so on the basis of 'predicted grades'. These grades, determined by their teachers, influence both students' decisions of where to apply, and the decisions made by the institutions they hope to attend. But, as previous Sutton Trust research with UCL has shown, predicted grades are often incorrect, with 9% of students underpredicted and 75% overpredicted. Underprediction particularly impacts

high achieving disadvantaged students: up to 1,000 such students are underpredicted each year.¹ These students may then not apply to selective universities on the basis that their predicted grades are lower than published entry requirements. And even if they do apply, they may not be accepted by institutions who think they will not get the grades needed to attend. These dynamics may be contributing to the problem of 'undermatch', where students from less well-off backgrounds are

in general more likely to attend less selective universities and courses than their exam results would qualify them for.²

This system not only potentially disadvantages many talented young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, but also makes the UK an outlier internationally. A large number of other countries (including 9 of the top 10 countries in the world for graduate performance) have some form of post-qualification system of admissions, in which students

apply and universities make their decisions on the basis of applicants' final grades.³ A change to the system, which would remove predicted grades, while not a silver bullet for university access, could help to level the playing field for students from less advantaged backgrounds and improve informed decision making, while bringing the UK in line with common practices used internationally. It is time for it to be looked at seriously once again.

Background

Discussions for a change to a post-qualification system in the UK began in earnest in 1997, when the 'Dearing Report' on higher education, commissioned by the UK government and authored by Lord Ronald Dearing, argued that such a system would provide students with more learning time and allow them to make a more informed decision about their next academic steps.⁴ In 2004, the approach was once again supported by a government-commissioned Schwartz Review into fair admissions,⁵ which deemed predicted grades to be unfair and could prevent students with lower self-confidence from applying for courses with higher entry requirements. The report argued that fair admissions are based on five key principles: transparency, considering grades in context, involve reliable (and valid) assessment methods, an accessible application process and be underpinned by both appropriate institutional structures and professional processes.⁶ A post-qualification system would help to meet these principles.

In 2011, it was considered as an option for reform by UCAS, which consulted on a proposal for exams to be moved earlier and university term start dates to be moved later in the academic year in order to facilitate a post-qualification system.⁷ UCAS ultimately did not recommend such a move, due to the practical concerns set out by schools, colleges and universities to implementation, along with worries around the level of support and guidance for disadvantaged pupils when making life-changing decisions outside of school term-time. However, the increased popularity of the Clearing and Adjustment system, where applicants without offers can 'shop

around' for places (Clearing), and others can swap their place on one course for another (Adjustment), has increasingly introduced a de facto post-qualification element into the system.

Nonetheless, systemic change has become increasingly popular in recent years. While the focus of critics of the current system has traditionally been on reducing the impact of predicted grades, more recently reform has become more attractive because of the rise of unconditional offers. In 2019, 25% of applications received at least one unconditional offer (63,190 applicants, up from 2,570 in 2013, an increase of 2,350%).⁸ These offers, which are often conditional on a university being selected as a 'firm choice' before results are received, may put pressure on students to make poor and rushed decisions. This is a particular risk for disadvantaged students, who are less likely to have access to help and support when navigating the system.⁹ The rise of such offers have led to a wide backlash among politicians, regulators and organisations concerned with university access, including the Trust itself.

There are now indications of an emerging cross-party consensus on the issue. In 2019, education secretary Gavin Williamson backed a review into university admissions,

including specifically whether it is in students' interests to apply for university after A level results are known.¹⁰ Later that year the Labour Party committed to introducing post-qualification admissions in their election manifesto.¹¹ It has also been backed by the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU), who have published research on the impact of predicted grades on disadvantaged pupils, and reported that seven in ten staff working on admissions are in favour of reform.¹²

Earlier this year, the Office for Students (OfS) set out potential options for reform in their consultation on admissions to higher education.¹³ Universities UK have also undertaken a 'Fair Admissions Review', considering the 2004 Schwartz principles and possibilities for pre and post-qualification admissions reform.¹⁴ Although the Office for Students consultation has been paused due to the pandemic, debate over post-qualification admissions has continued, particularly in light of events since March.

As a result of this year's cancellation of exams, the university application process was turned upside down, with substantial uncertainty and stress for students, parents, teachers and university staff. The crisis has also served to highlight the unreliability

Table 1. Features of Post-Qualification Applications and Post-Qualification Offers

	Post-Qualification Applications	Post-Qualification Offers
Students apply after receiving final grades	Yes	No (they would still apply before exams)
Universities make offers after seeing students' final grades	Yes	Yes
Would eliminate use of predicted grades by universities	Yes	Possible, but this would depend on implementation
Would eliminate predicted grades' impact on choices by students	Likely (though schools may continue to share predictions)	No
Would eliminate unconditional offers	Yes	-Yes
Would eliminate need for clearing and adjustment period	Yes	No
Would improve transparency, particularly relating to contextual admissions	Yes	Yes
Would most likely require a new timeframe for exams, applications and admissions	Yes	No

of the predicted grades system. However, amongst these challenges, disruption to normal business has at least given the opportunity to consider seriously how the system could be improved in future years. And indeed, changing to a post-qualification system has been put forward by some as a potential part of larger plans for a post COVID-19 recovery.¹⁵

Post-Qualification options

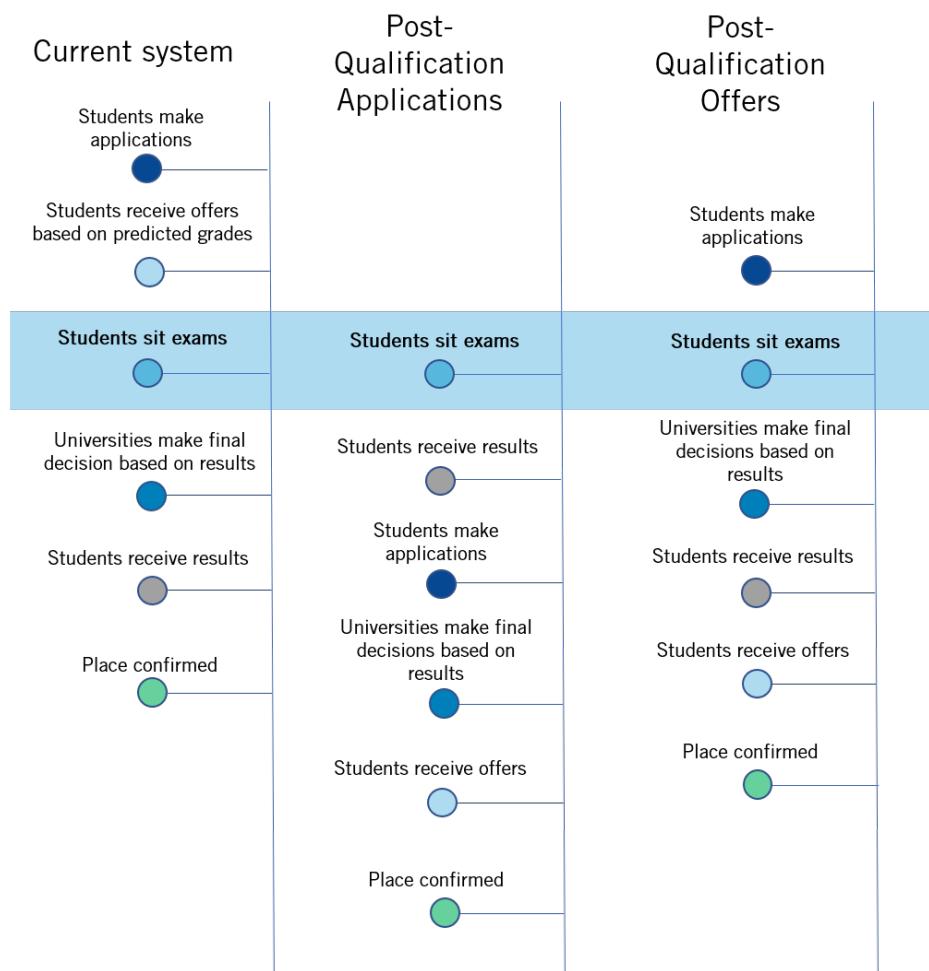
The most commonly made criticisms of the current system can be summarised as follows:

- a) Students currently make decisions on which universities to apply to, and which to accept offers from, on the basis of predicted grades, which are in most cases unreliable.
- b) Universities also currently make their decisions on to whom they make offers of a place on the basis of these predicted grades.
- c) The current system has facilitated the recent growth of unconditional offers, which remove final exam grades from the equation altogether and can have negative impacts on informed choice.
- d) The above issues do not impact on all students equally, and thus may be limiting fair access.

Post-qualification admissions is an umbrella term which actually covers a number of different variants. The Sutton Trust has long called for a system of Post-Qualification Applications, where all, or the majority, of the application and admissions procedure takes place in an accelerated time period after exam results are released in the summer. This is the form most commonly discussed in recent times. While some countries internationally have such a system (including the United States, Italy and South Korea), the majority of countries using a post-qualifications system allow students to apply before or after they take exams, but not after results are received.¹⁶

Such a system is referred to in the Office for Students consultation as 'Post Qualification Offers' (PQO). This is similar to PQA, in that offers are not given until a student receives their confirmed grades. However, in this approach, students would

Figure 1: Sequencing comparison between the current application system, PQA and PQO.



apply to their preferred universities before they receive the results of their examinations, either at the same time as currently, or slightly later. Universities would then offer places to students after results day, similar to the way in which offers are confirmed on results day currently. This approach would involve much less change to the exam and university term timetable. However, whilst this system would reap many of the benefits of a PQA approach, both predicted grades and the clearing process (as well as the issues around them) could remain.¹⁷ With PQO, students would still be choosing where to apply without access to their final grades, so the risk remains that less confident applicants may underestimate their ability to be accepted into a highly selective course or university. Furthermore, if universities were to continue to receive predicted grades (a variant referred to in Universities UK consultation as 'Post-Qualification Confirmation'¹⁸), rather than shifting the whole offer-making process until after results are known, this may have a limited positive impact, because

predicted grades would continue to be informing university decisions. While the nomenclature in this area can be inconsistent and confusing, Table 1 and Figure 1 give an overview of the features and sequencing of the two main variants, PQA and PQO.

Another benefit of such reform is that it could also improve transparency in the admissions process. With universities knowing students' exact grades at time of decision making, this could erase the often blurred lines between the entry requirements that are published and the ones universities eventually accept, which can be impacted by the grades that were predicted. It also may reduce the weighting on other materials like the personal statement, which often favours students from well-off backgrounds and those with greater support.¹⁹ Moreover, the OfS have stated that an increase in transparency on entry requirements could mean contextual offers could also become more transparent, with universities publishing more details on their contextual offers for students. Such changes would likely

require a transparency policy to be introduced alongside any introduction of a new admissions system, and would help ensure that reform had a positive impact on fair access.

There are clear options for reform, but the question may be asked, is now the time to do it? While previous polling of university staff has shown they are in favour, what do young people themselves think? This year's university applicants will, given the years' disruption, have thought about the application system much more than most. The remainder of this brief looks at their views on the fairness of the current admissions system, and a potential move to Post Qualification Applications. Data is based on polling of 502 of this years' university applicants, surveyed by YouthSight, with polling carried out in September 2020.

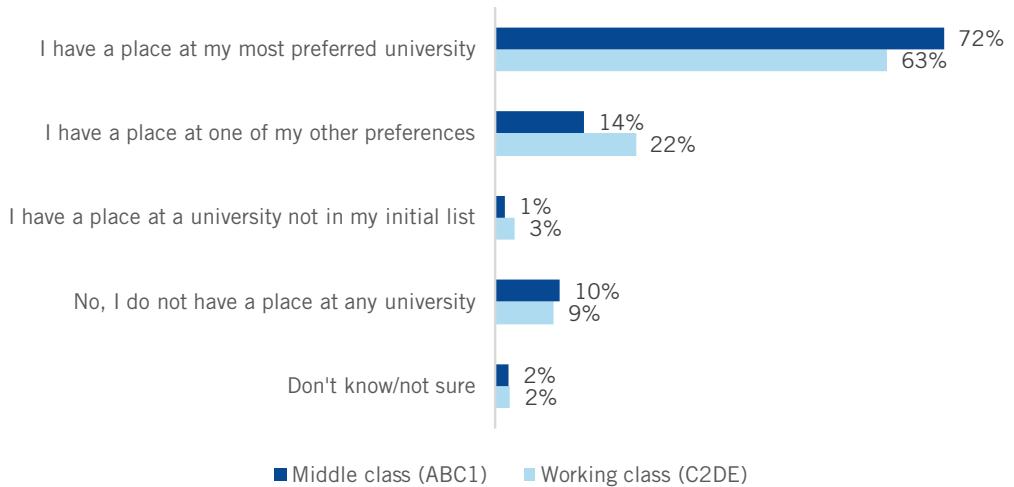
THE STUDENT VIEW

University outcomes

Early in the national lockdown imposed at the start of the pandemic, the decision was made to cancel this year's school examinations. During the following months, the assessment and admissions process became increasingly complicated, with plans across the four nations to use a combination of teacher assessment with an adjustment algorithm to determine final results. The fact that all four countries decided that algorithmic adjustment would be needed reflects the unreliability and inconsistency of the predicted grades process. However when the impact of the algorithms became clear on the publication of results in August, a wide public backlash ensued, with students eventually being awarded their Centre Assessed Grades (CAGs), or the results of the algorithm, whichever was higher. Discussions on how to award grades in the absence of exams highlighted some of the major failings of the current admissions system, including the limitations of teacher assessed grades.

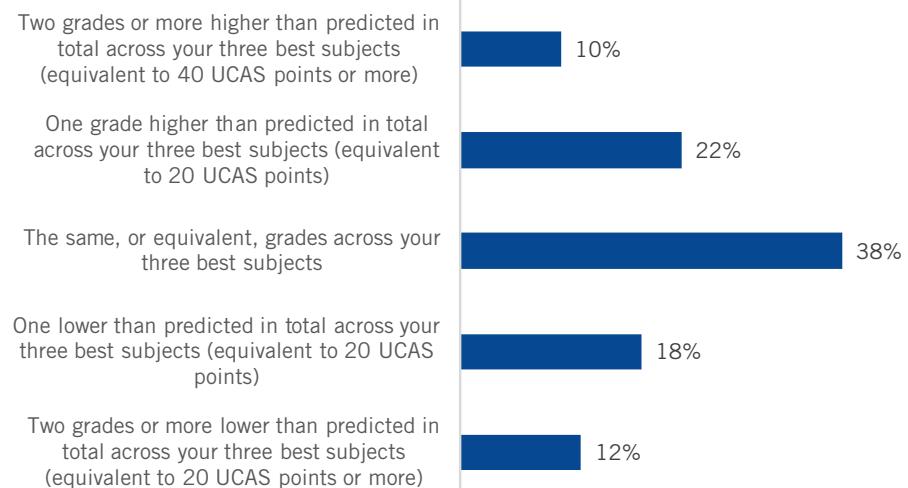
When we surveyed students before results day, it was clear that students were worried that changes to A-level grading this year would negatively impact their chances of getting into

Figure 2: University outcomes by socio-economic background of applicants



Source: Youthsight survey of UCAS applicants for the Sutton Trust, 11th-15th September

Figure 3: Self-reported difference between applicants' actual and predicted grades



Source: Youthsight survey of UCAS applicants for the Sutton Trust, 11th-15th September

university.²⁰ However, despite these concerns, results here find that the majority (69%) of applicants surveyed received a place at their preferred university, a further 16% gained a spot at one of their lower ranked options, and just 3% at a university they had not initially considered. Applicants from areas with high (POLAR Q5) or low (POLAR Q1) historic rates of participation in higher education were similarly likely to get into their first-choice university. However, as shown in Figure 2, middle class (ABC1) students were more likely than working-class applicants (C2DE) to have a place at their preferred institution (72% compared to 63%), whereas those from lower socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to instead have gone to one of their lower preferences.

Perhaps surprisingly, the opposite trend was seen when comparing private (64%) and state school (70%) students. One potential explanation for this disparity is that private school students are more likely to have an extremely selective university as their first choice (for example Oxford or Cambridge), and supported to apply there by their school. And indeed, when looking at those who gained a place at either their first or another preference combined, there was very little difference between the two school types (87% at private vs 85% in state schools).

Predictions

The UK's university application system relies on students applying with their predicted grades, rather than the actual grades they go on to gain. However, a large proportion of grades are predicted incorrectly each

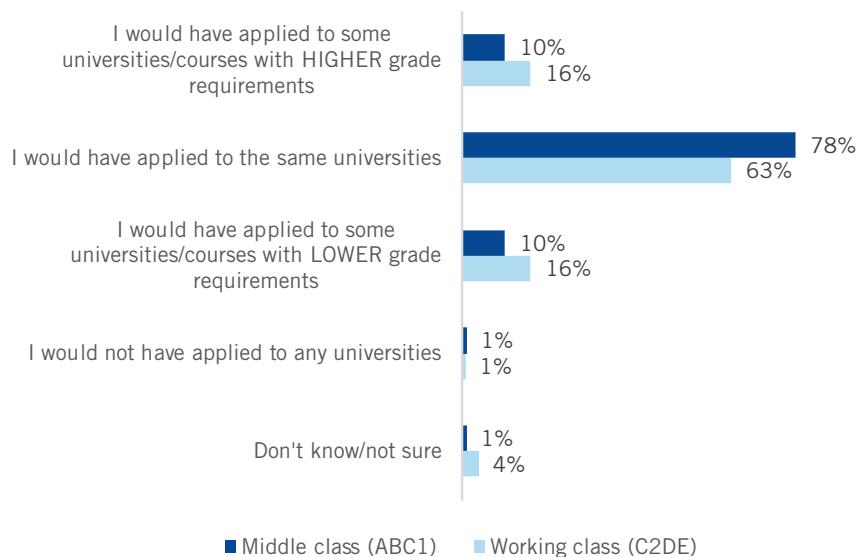
year, with just 16% of students getting the grades they were predicted.²¹

This year, rather than an exam, an applicant's centre assessed grade (CAG) or their grade as determined by algorithm (whichever was higher) gave them their final mark. Grades were overall much higher than in normal years, and perhaps unsurprisingly, given both predicted grades and centre assessed grades are based in part on teacher assessments, a relatively high proportion of applicants (38%) reported achieving the same as their predicted grades this year (Figure 3). Just under a third (32%) of applicants surveyed received final grades higher than they were predicted, and 30% lower than their predictions. Nonetheless, this means even with the cancellation of exams, around two thirds of applicants had different grades to what they were first predicted.

State school pupils surveyed were more likely to report having been underpredicted, compared to those who went to a private school (32% compared to 26%). However, differences between socio-economic groups were not substantial in this regard. Nonetheless, those from working class backgrounds were, in general, more likely to be overpredicted: 34% compared to 29% of those from middle-class backgrounds. While previous data has shown this pattern to differ between disadvantaged pupils at the low and high ends of the attainment spectrum, the sample size available in this survey was not sufficient for such analysis.

Over and underprediction, however, appeared to show little impact on whether a student was more or less likely to secure a place on their first-choice course. A consistent 71-72% of applicants who overperformed predictions, who matched their predictions, or who underperformed by one grade all got a place at their first-choice university. This may have been due to the extra leniency shown this year by universities in light of the problems with grading. It was those who underperformed by 2 grades or more who were much less likely to get a place at their preferred choice, at 52%.

Figure 4: How applicants' decisions would have changed if applying with their final grades, by socio-economic background



Source: Youthsight survey of UCAS applicants for the Sutton Trust, 11th-15th September

Impact of predicted grades on applicant decisions

In the current university application system, predicted grades are included in the application for universities to base their offer decisions on. However, as previous Sutton trust research has shown, high-achieving disadvantaged students particularly are likely to have their grades underpredicted.²² This means that some may not even apply for higher-tariff institutions in the first place as their predictions suggest to them that a place is out of their reach.

This section looks at how a PQA system might change decisions made by applicants. While most surveyed here would have applied to the same universities (73%) if they had known their results when they applied, about 1 in 4 would have made different decisions, with 13% saying they would have applied to more selective universities, and a further 11% to less selective institutions (Figure 4).

Working class applicants were less likely to say they would have applied to the same universities if they knew their final grades at application (63% vs 78%). However, their decisions would have changed in both directions, with some more likely to have applied to universities with higher requirements (16% of working class applicants and 10% of middle-class applicants), and others with lower requirements (again, 16% working class compared to 10%). Given that many such students are overpredicted, this is to be expected.

Overall, the decisions of those from working class backgrounds were most likely to be affected by their predicted grades: 33% compared to 21% of those from middle class backgrounds. In either case, given the indications here that a sizeable group of students would have made different decisions if applying with their final grades, adopting a system like PQA could give students a better chance to apply for universities best suited to their ability and ambitions, with all the information needed to make better informed decisions available to them. In fact, given that the number of incorrect predicted grades this year appears to be lower than a normal year, the impact seen here may be an underestimate.

Predicted grades contributed significantly to those who said they would have made different choices, as one might expect. Over half (52%) of those who reported they would have applied to higher tariff universities had been underpredicted. 21% of those who achieved final grades higher than their predicted grades said they would have applied to higher tariff institutions if they knew their final grades before applying, compared to 11% of those who got the same as their predictions and just 6% of those who got lower grades than predicted. However, a significant proportion (29%) of those who performed worse than their predictions reported they would have applied for institutions with lower entry requirements if they had known their actual grades before applying.

Impact of predicted grades on university decisions

By adopting a full PQA system, universities would be able to see students' actual grades before they make a decision on offering them a place. Additionally, students would be better informed in terms of choosing institutions that are within their reach, rather than having their aspirations influenced by incorrect predicted grades.

Applicants were asked whether they felt that the universities they applied to would have made the same decisions on their applications if they had their final grades when they applied. Concerningly, as shown in Figure 5, a sizeable proportion of applicants (just under a fifth at 18%) said some universities they were accepted for would not have done so if they had known their final grades. Most (67%) said the result would have been the same, and a small proportion (7%) said they would in fact have been accepted by some universities who rejected them.

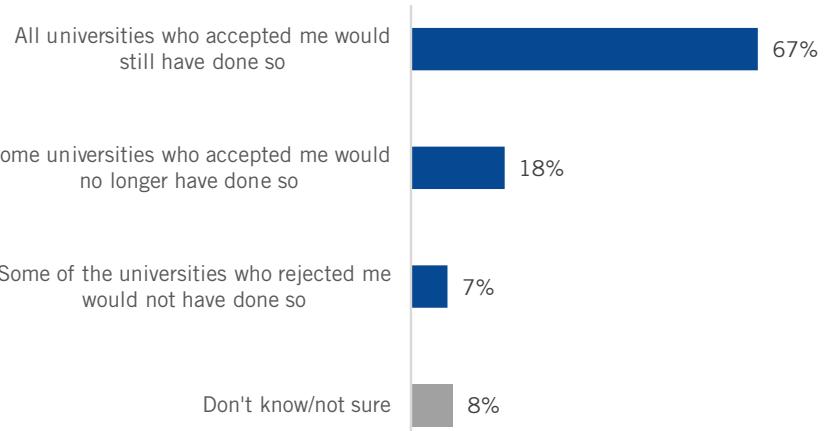
Working class students were more likely to say some universities who accepted them would have actually rejected them (21% vs 14%), reflecting their higher level of overprediction overall.

Unsurprisingly, students who achieved higher grades than their predictions were more likely to believe the universities who accepted them still would have, compared to those who got lower than their predictions (76% compared to 46%), although they were similar to those who gained the same grades as predicted (77%). Those with higher grades than their predictions were also slightly more likely to think that universities who rejected their applications would have in fact offered them a place (10% compared to 6% of those who had the same grades as predicted).

Views on changing to PQA

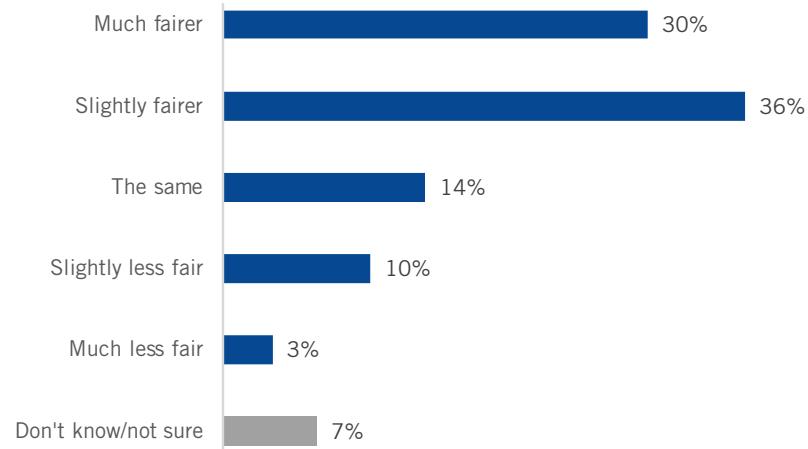
This year's university applicants were also asked whether a system in which students apply to university after their A level results are known would have been fairer than the current system. The majority, two thirds (66%) of university applicants said such a system would be fairer, with only 13% saying it would be less fair (see Figure 6). There weren't substantial

Figure 5: How applicants felt universities' decisions would have differed if they had known their final grades



Source: Youthsight survey of UCAS applicants for the Sutton Trust, 11th-15th September

Figure 6: Applicant views on whether applying after receiving final grades would be fairer than the current system



Source: Youthsight survey of UCAS applicants for the Sutton Trust, 11th-15th September

differences by socio-economic background, with working class applicants marginally less likely (66% vs 63%) to favour a change to PQA.

DISCUSSION

This year's exam grade controversy caused considerable stress for those involved, especially for the young people whose futures were on the line. As Sutton Trust research earlier this year highlighted, before results were released, almost half of applicants (48%) thought the crisis would have a negative impact on their chances of going to their first choice university, with working class students more likely to be worried about a negative impact.²³ As results here show, while those worries do not appear to have come to fruition, partly as a consequence of the government's decision to revert to Centre Assessed Grades for most

students and relax the temporary numbers cap that had been imposed, the stress that those students experienced over the course of many months was still considerable.

While the disruption caused by COVID-19 has been harmful in many ways, the pandemic has given us a rare opportunity to look more critically at the status quo. The conversation on changes to the country's university application system has been ongoing for decades, but despite the potential benefits of a move to a post-qualification system, which is the norm in most other countries, the system has remained static. But this year, discussions on how to award grades in the absence of exams has highlighted some of the major failings of the current system, including its dependence on unreliable teacher predicted grades. These assessments are often inconsistent, differing across

schools and pupils, underpredicting some, including high achieving disadvantaged pupils, while often overestimating those at the lower end of the attainment spectrum. This paper has shown that predicted grades are not only inaccurate when compared to actual exam results, but also when compared to this year's Centre Assessed Grades (based on teacher assessment but with further validation at a school level), further underlining their unreliability.

Findings in this report also demonstrate that overall, recent applicants support a change to a post-qualification application system. Similarly, polling carried out by UCU has previously found that staff involved in admissions also favour a move to PQA, with 7 in 10 of this group supporting such a change.²⁴ However, while there is a clear case for change, and support from both applicants and university staff, there are undoubtedly challenges to implementing a full system of Post-Qualification Applications. The current school and university term timetable is a particular challenge, with the necessity of exams being moved earlier, or the beginning of university pushed later, or a combination of both. While the use of post-qualification systems is common globally, approaches to assessment as well as timings of examinations and term start dates differ substantially outside the UK. In some countries, there is only a short window between results and applications, which can be stressful for pupils and staff alike.²⁵ In others the gap between ending school and starting university is longer, which can lead to some students experiencing financial difficulties if they have no job or if their family are unable to support them - issues which are most likely to impact students from less well-off backgrounds.

Another potential issue, raised particularly in the 2011 UCAS consultation, is the support given

to students when applying in a PQA system over the summer period. The admissions review highlighted the concerns of teachers and school staff, who were worried about having sufficient resource to offer the support students would need.²⁶ Students from disadvantaged backgrounds especially, who are less likely to have support with applications from home, often rely heavily on the help provided by their schools. However, under a pure PQA system, students would likely be making decisions on where to apply to university during the summer holidays, outside of normal school term time. In order to ensure such a system did not inadvertently negatively impact on access, additional resource would be needed to ensure applicants, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds who may lack the support structure and networks around them with the right 'knowhow', can still receive the right support for their decision making. For example this could include resourcing schools to run a careers week in the summer holiday, which could combine university application support with help for students entering the workplace.

Exactly how PQA is implemented would need to be carefully considered, to mitigate against these issues and ensure all students can benefit fully from the system. As discussed above, while a Post-Qualification Offers (PQO) system would avoid the pitfalls of a lack of summer support, with students making their initial application at a similar time to currently, this would still mean young people making initial choices on the basis of their predicted grades.

PQA is not a silver bullet either, and as data in this report shows, would lead to some young people raising their sights, while others lower theirs. Nonetheless, changing the admissions timetable has the

potential to lead to more informed choice, and potentially impact disadvantaged students. However the gap in the participation rate at highly selective universities particularly is large and persistent,²⁷ and would not be fixed by PQA on its own. To give an idea of the scale of the gap, just 8,410 students from POLAR Q1 areas (those with low rates of participation in HE historically) gained a place at a high tariff university in 2019, compared to 50,180 students from POLAR Q5 (high participation) areas.²⁸ To really change the dial on access, a move to PQA would need to be one of several changes to level the playing field for students from poorer backgrounds, for example greater use of contextual admissions, in which institutions put the achievements of students in the context in which they were achieved, to better reflect the true potential of applicants.²⁹ Even if A level results are known, they are not a perfect proxy for potential, in particular for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who have not had the same access to the resources needed to display their full potential in the school system, such as highly quality teaching, or private tuition.³⁰ The uneven playing field at 18 will remain even with a PQA system, and other steps will be needed alongside it to redress the balance.

While a move to PQA may not be the only solution needed to improve access, it does have the potential to make a real difference for young people. It is time to look afresh at the system, and for government to look seriously at how it could be implemented, including how to mitigate against the challenges outlined in this report. As we seek to build back better from the pandemic, it is vital that we learn lessons from the last few months and take the opportunity to think again about a system that isn't working for many.

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