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NSEAD concerns regarding the awarding of GCSE, AS & A levels, and vocational qualifications in summer 2020

On behalf of our members NSEAD wishes to express deep concern about the results announced yesterday and the impact of the standardisation model. We would also like to register our objections to proposals by the DFE to allow appeals based on student performance in mock examinations.

NSEAD has supported the stated aim of Ofqual to make sure as many students as possible could achieve their expected grades so they could move on to the next stage of their lives and to do that in as fair a way as possible. We recognise that in this extraordinary year compromise was necessary. However, the model has not worked, and indeed that it has caused harm. We have been inundated by members as well as students and their families telling us that they have lost confidence in the system. As a subject that is well used to a process of moderation, we have many members who act as moderators for our exam boards, many of them in a senior capacity.

To quote one:

'As a Principal Examiner with a huge amount of expertise and experience in marking both internal and external candidates over many years, I was confident that my Centre Assessed Grades were accurate. I am horrified to see that 61 percent of these original marks have been downgraded with candidates given new grades that are utterly inaccurate and inappropriate.'

This loss of confidence in the system of standardisation should be a matter of grave concern, and we believe that is more damaging than grades being inflated in this extraordinary year.

In your equalities analysis you state: 'The analyses conducted shows no evidence that this year's process of awarding grades has introduced any systemic bias.' However, your interim report (*Awarding GCSE, AS & A levels in summer 2020: interim report*) reveals that for the top grades of A* and A, independent schools in England saw the greatest improvement on last year – up 4.7 percentage points. This compares with a 1.7, 2 and 0.3 percentage points improvement for top grades for England's academies, comprehensives, and colleges, respectively.

These findings appear to be in conflict. For example, you write: 'The extent of the increase varies by centre type though. This reflects differences in a typical year. Indeed, in 2019, the grade A outcomes for some centre types increased relative to the previous year, while others decreased.' How is it we ask that the independent sector increase (2019-20) is more than double that of Secondary comprehensive, Secondary selective, Sixth form/FE/tertiary and Academy settings?

Where cohorts are large – in sixth-form colleges for example, members are reporting blanket downgrades one to two grades for no apparent reason. In schools with small art and design classes, by contrast teacher predicted grades have been accepted and therefore students' grades have stayed the same. How can this be explained?

It is this inconsistency and volatility that is undermining professional confidence in the fairness of these results.

It is clear that the 2020 standardisation model has created an assessment bias favouring, in terms of attainment, very specific socio-economic groups. The system has privileged students in independent schools who have achieved more A and A*s and has disadvantaged students in state education. As students enter higher education and apprenticeships, where grades decide places, having experienced a torrid end to their formal education, we must put student interests first. Our priority, more than anything else must surely be find a way to recognise their potential.

In addition to this, our members do not support the proposal by Gavin Williamson MP, the Secretary of State for Education, to allow appeals based on 'valid mock exam' results held by centres. The proposal is entirely flawed, and will only compound the injustice, distress, and anger felt by students and their dedicated teachers.

For our subject in particular, we believe the Government's proposal could also discriminate between centres that hold and do not hold mock art and design exams – members have contacted NSEAD and shared that due to time constraints their centres do not even undertake mock exams.

In addition, many centres confirm that mocks are held at very start of year 11. As students' skills and experience mature, so also do their grades – an art and design mock, taken in November 2019, is likely not to reflect the final grade arrived at through a combination of course work and Externally set task. The Government must also remember that mocks are not standardised let alone moderated.

Reluctantly, given the loss of confidence amongst teachers, students, and parents, we urge you to move to accepting the teacher grades submitted in place of the standardised grades. We believe that this is the only way to limit the damage to these students.

With GCSE results published next week, a decision must be made as a matter of urgency to avoid a complete collapse in confidence at this critical time.

Michele Gregson
General Secretary, NSEAD

14th August 2020