

## Laidlaw end of Summer 1 Research Report - Phoebe Cook

**Topic:** What has been the impact on the Covid 19 pandemic on Widening Participation and the A levels of the last two years - 3 main focuses:

- 1) background of Widening Participation and what still needs to change, students belonging
- 2) impact of Covid on education, what was done to support each students in different school types
- 3) impact of Covid on A levels, the A level scandal of last year

### Key Findings:

(all statistics rounded to the closest whole number)

In this report it will highlight what the impact if COVID 19 has been on student experience within Widening Participation and A Levels. Widening participation is the attempt to increase the amount of disadvantaged students within higher education, this can be done through access to Higher Education programmes. These are programmes designed by universities to help disadvantaged prospective students get in to their university, there is usually certain criteria such as postcode and being a First Generation Scholar that they must fit into in order to be able to use them. In this report it will be highlighted what the pre existing disadvantages were of these programs in addition to the further disadvantage the covid pandemic brought to these students.

### Widening Participation Specific

- First Generation Scholars (FGS) students still highly underrepresented in private schools
- Still not enough understanding about what Widening Participation and Access to Higher Education Programmes are and what they do - 64% FGS students disagreed to understanding these programmes, 57% of students disagreed to understanding these programmes
- Often it's the case that students know what these programmes are but don't know how to look for them - 42% agreed that they knew how to go about looking for these programmes 58% disagreed. 73% of FGS disagreed that they knew how to look for these programmes
- Only 18% of students accessed one of these programmes
- None of the students who used an Access to Higher Education programme felt welcomed or a sense of belonging from their university after using these programmes

### Covid 19 impact on Education

- 93% of surveyed students thought Covid 19 had negatively impacted their school experience
- 79% agreed that because of the pandemic they have felt and feel less prepared for their first year of university

- 29% did not believe that their education institution supported them academically through the pandemic
- 63% of those students who stated they were not supported academically throughout the pandemic responded that their educational institution 'did not do anything' to support them once lockdown started (none of these respondents were privately educated)
- Only 14% of respondents fully agreed that their education institution supported them with their mental health throughout the pandemic
- 39% believed that because of the type of school they attended the pandemic affected them differently - 18% of these respondents were privately educated

### Covid 19 impact on A levels

- Only 18% fully agreed that the A level Results of last year were handled fairly
- 32% agreed that they fully understood the algorithm and appeals process for the 2020 A levels
- 32% of respondents disagreed that their results/ grades were affected last year because of the pandemic - 83% of privately educated students disagreed with this statement 46% of FGS students disagreed with the statement
- 64% of respondents agreed that their results were unfairly downgraded last year because of the pandemic - 83% of privately educated respondents disagreed with this statement
- 21% disagreed to the A level marking scheme changing the way they felt about the education system
- 11% of respondents were involved in a form of social action following the A level Results of 2020
- All those students who had participated in a form of social action said that it had changed the way they feel towards the education system.

## **Report**

### Introduction

Following the announcement from the government on the 23rd March 2020, all schools and education institutions were closed until further notice because of the Covid 19 pandemic<sup>1</sup>. Additionally, it was announced that all exams and assessments would be cancelled due to this unprecedented time and a new system would replace it so grades could still be awarded to students. However, the closure of schools has had more substantial implications on certain groups of students' education more than others. As the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic has

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<sup>1</sup> The Department of Education and The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP (2020) *Schools, colleges and early years settings to close* [press release] 18 August. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/schools-colleges-and-early-years-settings-to-close> (Accessed: September 2021)

only further widened the education attainment gap for those disadvantaged students. It is fair to say that there has been an unequal handling of education throughout the pandemic. With students being marginalised through the digital divide, when all teaching was moved online, disadvantage caused due to unfair algorithms and lack of support from education institutions to those students who need it most. This report will particularly focus on the crucial years for students who were in college/sixth form (either year 12 and 13) during the pandemic and students in their first year of university.

Prior to the pandemic there has always been issues with the attainment gap between more advantaged and disadvantaged students. Particularly for disadvantaged students access to more selective Russell group universities where the attainment gap seems to be getting wider and more stubborn despite Widening Participation and Access programmes being put in place to try and decrease it<sup>2</sup>. Past research has indicated suggestions of why this attainment gap is so wide and why access to higher education programmes are continuing to fail. These include but are most certainly not limited to: mistakes in government policy<sup>3</sup> and limited contextual indicators for those who would benefit from these programmes<sup>4</sup>. I would like to add another reason to this list of limitations, the lack of knowledge about what these programmes are and how to go about looking and applying for them. I found that this was particularly true for First Generation Scholars even though these would be the students who would benefit the most from these programmes.

This failure of the system only worsened during the Pandemic due to the underlying fact that Covid negatively impacted students' experience within education last year. The long term effects for the Covid cohort of students 2020 are still highly unknown<sup>5</sup>. However, one thing that has presented itself already is the division in support given to those students at private schools

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<sup>2</sup> Boliver, V., Crawford, C., Powell, M. & Craige, W. (2017) *Admissions in Context: The use of contextual information by leading universities*. London: Sutton Trust. Available at: [https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Admissions-in-Context-Final\\_V2.pdf](https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Admissions-in-Context-Final_V2.pdf) (Accessed July 2021)

<sup>3</sup> Rainford, J (2016) *Targeting of widening participation measures by elite institutions: widening access or simply aiding recruitment?* Available at: [https://srhe.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13603108.2016.1148645?casa\\_token=z1QOf7UXoIAAAA%3A3qaE3BPnaI4usdLvEHio3rMkJJoSCDSjsJwHs0EbkXZ4Kr0n5zsp2jvyBlphDve8f5RmQWdkdl0K6#.YLdAjC9Q3BI](https://srhe.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13603108.2016.1148645?casa_token=z1QOf7UXoIAAAA%3A3qaE3BPnaI4usdLvEHio3rMkJJoSCDSjsJwHs0EbkXZ4Kr0n5zsp2jvyBlphDve8f5RmQWdkdl0K6#.YLdAjC9Q3BI) (Accessed July 2021)

<sup>4</sup> Boliver, V., Crawford, C., Powell, M. & Craige, W. (2017) *Admissions in Context: The use of contextual information by leading universities*. London: Sutton Trust. Available at: [https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Admissions-in-Context-Final\\_V2.pdf](https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Admissions-in-Context-Final_V2.pdf) (Accessed July 2021)

<sup>5</sup> Bhopal, K. M., Martin (2020). *The impact of COVID-19 on A Level students in England. Birmingham and Nottingham: Universities of Birmingham and Nottingham*. Available at: <https://osf.io/j2nqb/download> (Accessed July 2021)

vs state schools throughout the pandemic.<sup>6</sup> With those attending non private school types like Sixth Form Colleges or comprehensive schools finding themselves unsupported academically therefore less prepared for university. One thing that should be highlighted is that it was unanimously agreed on by all students, despite their educational institution, was the lack of mental health support they received from their schools last year.

The lack of mental health support was not the only thing that was handled poorly during the pandemic. The A level results or 'A level scandal' of 2020 was one of the biggest failures during the pandemic due to the government's management and questionable algorithms for results. Due to the recentness of this topic there is limited literature on this issue. However, the main opinion is that the 3 part Direct Centre Performance (DCP) system, which was the system they finally agreed on for awarding A level results in 2020, was too institutionally biased towards those students from private schools. As the DCP model looked at 3 aspects when awarding grades: students past performance, their schools past performance and Centre Assessed Grades (CAG's), this is how it put certain students at a disadvantage. As a result it left many students with instability about their university places or questioning whether they wanted to be in the 2021 university cohort at all. Additionally, resulting from the A level result mess up students participated in a variety of Social Action activities to raise awareness of the situation.

### Methodology

Due to the recentness of my research focus, the main aim of my project was to develop a background of knowledge into Widening Participation and its impact on A level results prior to the Covid pandemic. Once this was established I began to explore the limited research there is on the Covid pandemic and education and developing this literature for my own research. Included within this aspect of my project was the creation of my own pilot survey to collect primary data on my research focus.

To explore student experiences of Covid 19 and their perceptions of widening participation and inequality in education during this period, I undertook a small pilot study. For this I developed a mainly closed questionnaire, allowing participants to choose an already predetermined response ('agree' to 'disagree' to 'don't know'.) Although the qualitative data was fairly closed and did not allow the respondents to give their own unique responses, the data collected was still useful for me. Given the limited scope and timescale of this small research project, the responses which I received were useful to provide an initial overview of the research predictions. In order to analyse the data collected I converted the participants answers into percentages as I found this to be easier when it came to looking at my results

The survey created was very much a convenience sample. It was an electronic, online questionnaire that was advertised on social media and student led websites such as 'The student room'. I am greatly aware of the limitations that an all online survey can bring as often

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<sup>6</sup> Cullinane, C. & Montacute, R. (2020). *COVID-19 and Social Mobility Impact Brief# 1: School Shutdown*. London: Sutton Trust. Available at <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/covid-19-and-social-mobility-impact-brief/> (Accessed July 2021)

you find convenience sampling may not be the most representative, however it was advertised to all the relevant audiences of respondents that I needed. Subsequently I did receive responses from students who received their A level results in 2019, 2020 and 2021, which was what I needed to support my research focus. Furthermore, given the extra barrier of Covid 19 to my research, it simply was not plausible nor safe to conduct in person research. Therefore, I do believe I chose the best approach to research I could in order to make sure the survey was safe, accessible and straightforward for all participants. However, I would like to point out that if I or another researcher was to progress further into this research topic, I would highly encourage them to put together a focus group / unstructured interviews of participants. As it would allow the participants to delve deeper into their thoughts and understanding on this subject area.

### Sample Study Statistics

The respondents to my survey did have various backgrounds there what I found:

- 46% working class, 54% were middle / upper class
- 61% female, 32% male / trans male, 7% non binary
- 57% white British, 11% white, 7% British, 7% white Irish, 4% British Asian, 4% Asian, 4% Afgan, 4% Black-African
- Where they grew up - 29% North East England, 21% North West England, 11% The Midland (England), 11% South East England, 7% London (England), 4% Yorkshire and the Humber (England), 4% South West England, 4% Scotland, 4% Hong Kong, 4% China, 4% Afghanistan
- 32% considered themselves as having a disability
- Type of sixth form/college attended prior to starting university - 29% Sixth Form , 25% Non selective state school, 21% Private school, 11% Selective state school, 7% FE college, 7% other
- 39% identified themselves as a First Generation Scholar
- 50% received their A level results in 2020, 29% received them in 2019, 14% received them in 2021, 7% received them in other year

### Results

As already mentioned due to the recentness of my research topic there are not that many academic pieces already written and researched that I could have potentially have compared and built off of for my own research. Therefore, this is why I made the decision to split my research project into three main focus areas: widening participation specifically, Covid 19's impact on education and Covid 19's effect on the A levels for the past two years. Additionally, this further benefited my research as it demonstrated just how much effect the Covid pandemic has had, as it highlighted the difference between pre Covid education, during Covid education and post Covid education, which is a really important observation to make.

Prior to the Covid pandemic there was already research into Widening Participation and the understanding of contextual indicators and how they are effective and are not effective, plus the

limitations to them. There are already executive suggestions being made regarding what needs to happen next to ensure that they are accessible to all that need to use them. These include clarification into what can be classed as being a contextual indicator, and more support for those who use contextual indicators when they arrive at university<sup>7</sup>. In my research I found the main limitation of Widening Participation to be not enough understanding about what it is and how to use and look at Access to Higher Education programmes. 57% of participants in my survey disagreed with the statement they understood what access to Widening Participation programmes are and what they do. Even more problematic was the fact that 73% of all First Generation Scholars who participated in the survey disagreed with the statement. These would be the target audience of those who would benefit the most from these programmes yet the fact that it is not reaching them is something that seriously needs to be addressed. Out of all those who completed my survey only 18% used an access programme to aid their application into university. This was concerning considering 39% of respondents were First Generation Scholars, meaning they fit the majority of all UK universities, who use these programmes, criteria to gain access to these programmes which help underrepresented and disadvantaged groups get into university. Therefore, if this research was to develop one aspect I would like to look at is universities advertisement strategies for Widening Participation programmes, as I believe the lack of advertisement for these programmes is one of the major factors to why only a fraction of those students who would benefit from these programmes are using them. For now though I highly encourage universities to evaluate their advertisement strategies to ensure their message is being reached by the target audience.

As already suggested there have been problems within the education system prior to the pandemic, however the pandemic only made these issues even more prominent. Other academic researchers found their main concluding remark to be how can schools, universities and the government lessen the impact of the crisis on these students<sup>8</sup>. As previous research proposes the idea that the pandemic only further exposed the divide between those who attend private schools v those who attend public school.<sup>9</sup> I found that only 7% of respondents to my survey completely disagreed with the statement that Covid 19 negatively affected their school career. This can be supported by other academic researchers who all agree that the pandemic

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<sup>7</sup> Boliver, V., Crawford, C., Powell, M. & Craige, W. (2017) *Admissions in Context: The use of contextual information by leading universities*. London: Sutton Trust. Available at: [https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Admissions-in-Context-Final\\_V2.pdf](https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Admissions-in-Context-Final_V2.pdf) (Accessed July 2021)

<sup>8</sup> Montacute, R. & Holt-White, E. 2020. COVID-19 and Social Mobility Impact Brief# 2: University Access & Student Finance. London: Sutton Trust. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/covid-19-impacts-university-access/>.(Accessed July 2021)

<sup>9</sup> Montacute, R. & Holt-White, E. 2020. COVID-19 and Social Mobility Impact Brief# 2: University Access & Student Finance. London: Sutton Trust. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/covid-19-impacts-university-access/>.(Accessed July 2021)

has placed stress on students' school careers. However, additionally the Sutton Trust research noted that those students from a more disadvantaged background have had to face more hardship than their peers during the pandemic. These students were more likely to have faced financial insecurity, uncertainty about higher education progression and lack of support from their educational institution<sup>10</sup>. I also found this when 63% of students who reported not having received support from their education institution responded that their school 'didn't do anything' to further their education during the pandemic. Other researchers have looked into this as it is not clear what the impact of gaps in knowledge will be nor what the impact of being known as the Covid Cohort of 2020 will have on future aspirations.<sup>11</sup> A final concerning factor that was highlighted in my survey was that only 14% of respondents fully agreed that their education institution supported them with their mental health throughout the pandemic. Considering the unprecedented and stressful time the pandemic placed on students this was very alarming. Therefore, I urge education institutions to start putting in place support for students, focusing on what the long term impacts of the pandemic will be.

More specifically, the effects of the Covid 19 pandemic on the A level 's of the last two years have also been a dramatic one. Although current research on this is limited due to the recent nature of the topic, one thing that is clear to see throughout was there was a broad consensus amongst a range of stakeholders that the algorithm was unfair in its effects on disadvantaged students. Education boards such as the National Education Union and the Sutton Trust have spoken about how students have been "let down" through bad decision making and last minute policy changes.<sup>12</sup> When schools shut down on the 23rd March 2020 until further notice all exams of that year were also cancelled. Therefore the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (OFQUAL) set to work in creating a new system for awarding exam grades. OFQUAL trialled 11 approaches to standardization before settling of the Direct Centre Performances (DCP) model<sup>13</sup>. When I asked the participants in my survey if they understood the algorithm or the appeals process only 32% fully agreed to this statement. Moreover, despite

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<sup>10</sup> Montacute, R. & Holt-White, E. 2020. COVID-19 and Social Mobility Impact Brief# 2: University Access & Student Finance. London: Sutton Trust. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/covid-19-impacts-university-access/>. (Accessed July 2021)

<sup>11</sup> Bhopal, K. M., Martin (2020). *The impact of COVID-19 on A Level students in England. Birmingham and Nottingham: Universities of Birmingham and Nottingham*. Available at: <https://osf.io/j2nqb/download> (Accessed July 2021)

<sup>12</sup> National Education Union (2020) *A level Results* [Press Release] 13 August. Available at: <https://neu.org.uk/press-releases/A-level-results-2020> (Accessed July 2021)

<sup>13</sup> Bhopal, K. M., Martin (2020). *The impact of COVID-19 on A Level students in England. Birmingham and Nottingham: Universities of Birmingham and Nottingham*. Available at: <https://osf.io/j2nqb/download> (Accessed July 2021)

OFQUAL's aim being to create an approach that was "as fair as possible"<sup>14</sup>, only 18% of participants fully agreed to the A levels being handled fairly. The Direct Centre Performance model consisted of 3 stages: students past performance, their schools past performance and Centre Assessed Grades (CAG's), which were teacher predictions of what they believed the student would have gotten if they had sat the exams. However, even with this 3 part system which tried to prevent unfairness and grade inflation, only 32% of respondents disagreed with the statement that their results were unfairly downgraded last year because of the algorithm. What's more 83% of those who disagreed were privately educated, thus further highlighting the division between those privately educated v those publicly educated. The inequality in education has caused chaos for students in the last 2 years. When asked how their experience in education and receiving their A level results in Covid times has changed the way they feel about the education system, 100% of participants responded in a negative way. Most expressed feelings of "anger", frustration and "dissolution" as a consequence of the "systematic inequality" within education. Others had "reduced faith" in the education system as they believe the pandemic should have been a wake up call for the education system where it could start to address the issues of private v public students. Plus the failures of exams which place too much pressure and stress on a students mental health and wellbeing. A further notable fact was that most respondents already had these negative opinions of the education system prior to Covid 19, they said the pandemic just further "confirmed" them more. If I or other researchers got the opportunity to progress further with this particular research focus I would suggest holding unstructured interviews or forming a small focus group as it will allow those affected by the 'A level scandal' to really start to unpick their feelings on this issue.

One final thought I looked at in my research was the social action brought about due to the 'A level scandal' of last year. There was practically no other research done into this subject area meaning I had no way to compare my own findings. These were that 11% of participants in my survey had participated in some form of social action due to the unfairness of the results. These were mainly signing petitions online and sharing articles on social media. I would like to look at this further and encourage others too as all those who participated in social action noted that because of the social action they were involved in, it changed the way they thought about the education system.

## Conclusion

In this report I have looked at what the impact the Covid 19 Pandemic has had Widening Participation, education and A levels. I have broadly followed my three themes of the

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<sup>14</sup> Ofqual Research and Analysis (2020) *Awarding GCSE, AS, A levels and EPQ in summer 2020: interim report*. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/909368/6656-1\\_Awarding\\_GCSE\\_AS\\_A\\_level\\_advanced\\_extension\\_awards\\_and\\_extended\\_project\\_qualifications\\_in\\_summer\\_2020\\_-\\_interim\\_report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/909368/6656-1_Awarding_GCSE_AS_A_level_advanced_extension_awards_and_extended_project_qualifications_in_summer_2020_-_interim_report.pdf) (Accessed July 2021)

background of widening participation , what the impact of Covid has been on education and what has the impact of Covid been on the A levels. I have discussed pre pandemic Widening Participation and how this compares to it during the pandemic. It became apparent through both a literature review of previous research and my own pilot study reconfirmed this, that there have always been issues to do with Widening Participation for students who may be eligible. This is due to the lack of support received by students who use them leading to negative effects, as often it can lead to students feeling isolated or suffering from imposter syndrome. In my study I found an additional limitation of these programmes to the lack of advertisement that they receive, meaning they were not able to reach their target audience and consequently it is often the case that those who could benefit from them were missing out. Linking this to the world during Covid 19 times, it was agreed that the pandemic negatively affected peoples student experience within education at this time. Additionally, I found that the pandemic only further intensified the divide between those who were privately educated and those who are publicly educated. Looking at this a little more specifically, the impact Covid 19 had on A levels was also concerning as due to the last minute policy mistakes which caused the 'A level scandal' many students were left uncertain about their futures, downgraded due to inequalities. It also sparked social action where students took to protests, social media, petitions to try and make this injustice right. These themes have been central to my research process but due to limitations on time, I haven't had enough time to unpick them as much as I would have liked. Therefore, if I am to resume this research I would like to start by specifically focusing on each one individually as there is some much that could be considered and looked at in this area of research.

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