

The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP
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Dear Gavin,

Issues Arising from A level Results

We trust you and your family are well. As Mayor and Deputy Mayor of Hackney, we wanted to write to you in order to raise our concerns relating to this year's A-level results and also the now emerging implications for the GCSE results due later this week.

On results day last week we visited a number of local schools and colleges, and witnessed first hand the impact downgrading has had on local students and these local institutions. Young people who worked so hard and were devastated to learn they would not be able to sit their exams were reassured that they would be assessed fairly, based on their work leading up to the end of their A-Level courses. However, they have been betrayed by a system, which nationally has seen some 40% of grades marked down and that seems designed to punish pupils according to which school or college they go to and that institution's recent history.

For example we met one young woman at a local college who was devastated to learn she would be unable to go to her first choice of LSE as a result of the downgrading from her teacher assessed and mock exam grades. Her story is just one of many shattered dreams across Hackney, and the country with many more young people emailing us and our local MPs all the time with their own experiences.

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On the data received so far, we think that disadvantaged students have been significantly disproportionately affected by the algorithm with students who were at the lower end of the compulsory rankings have been disproportionately downgraded.. The eleventh hour inclusion of mock grades as an additional criteria has been ill thought through, and is likely to be of very little benefit to this cohort, nor will they potentially benefit from the late offer from the Government to retake exams in the Autumn. AS grades have been included in the offer for students in Wales, but not England.

Schools and settings with lower entrance criteria for courses, which we know have been making great improvements over the past two years from a low base, have not been justly rewarded or recognised. These schools or colleges who do so much locally to improve outcomes and create opportunities often take young people with lower GCSE grades, but have been unfairly penalised because of the way the prior attainment factor has been used in the algorithm. The methodology chosen has lowered grades significantly and also operated unevenly within the same setting, potentially having the biggest impact on the most disadvantaged.

Schools and colleges with subjects taught in small groups of 5 or less have been awarded the teacher assessed grades, but Ofqual/DfE decided that teacher or centre assessed grades (CAGs) would be ignored for subject cohorts of more than 15. Young People in those larger cohorts were instead allocated grades by rank order in a grade distribution based on historical performance in that subject at that school or college. This is a blunt mechanism, impersonal, and risks embedding unfairness in the process. It is likely to penalise large groups in centres with students with lower GCSE scores and to what end other than to artificially preserve an overall spread of grades.

Schools and colleges with less consistent results, particularly where subject performance has been unsettled, and with lower entrance criteria for courses appear to have been disproportionately hit by downgrades. In some instances, high performing departments in schools with a strong track record, have also seen a lowering of grades. Schools and colleges (and subjects within those settings) with consistently good results and with middle to higher entrance criteria for courses appear to have done as expected or even better.

The picture is not consistent across the borough. In some settings, where grades are above last year's, particular students appear to have been unfairly marked down, including sixth formers who had received offers of places on prestigious university courses. Another example, students who were positioned at the lower end of ranking received grades that were two or more grades below predictions purely based on the algorithm rather than individual assessment or achievement.

We are extremely concerned by the equalities implications of the emerging situation and hope that you and the Department will take these concerns seriously. We were pleased to see that Rebecca Hilsenrath, chief executive of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), said Ofqual must "remove bias" and allow students to appeal directly if they feel their A-level grades have been unfairly reduced. Like the EHRC, we are concerned that Ofqual must mitigate against any "potential negative affect" of its process on ethnic minorities and disabled children, those with SEND as well as those from deprived backgrounds.

We support Hilsenrath's demand that, "To better understand any disparities for different protected groups, Ofqual must publish a full breakdown of the differences between teacher-assessed grades and the final grade. Students who have been downgraded must be able to appeal directly if they believe their grades are unfair."

The appeals process also needs to be fair, transparent and at no cost to schools, colleges or young people. It was deeply disappointing over the weekend to see that it is still unclear how this process might work with Ofqual first publishing and then removing details of the appeals process from their website with schools, colleges and families left in the dark.

Clearly, a number of students will wish to appeal and/or resit their A-levels on the basis of these results. We are pleased to see that if schools' autumn exam fees exceed any rebates they receive for the summer series, the Government will pay the difference, according to updated guidance from your Department. We also note that schools and colleges will also get access to fully-funded exam venues, if holding the tests on their own sites would cause "disruption to study," or that schools and colleges can book their own sites and submit claims to DfE along with supporting evidence," and claim back invigilator costs if their autumn fees exceed savings they made in the summer. However, as we have heard from some of our schools and colleges there are still likely to be more hidden costs, including the need for additional teaching and support time which will only increase at institutions hardest hit.

We are pleased that, following criticism, you have agreed to cover the costs of appeals. It was completely unacceptable for appeals costs to be levied at all, seeing as they derived entirely from the Government's own policy decisions, and are in no way the fault or responsibility of the schools concerned.

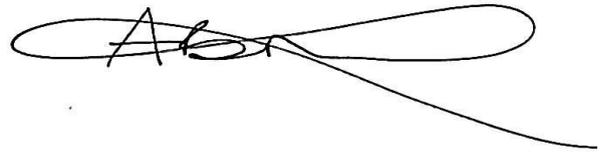
This Government failure is going to have a disproportionate impact on disadvantaged students across the country and will affect some of the most hard working Hackney young people. We have a high number of families living in poverty. This is in particularly stark contrast to the fact that A grades at private schools are up significantly more than at state schools or colleges who have been hit the hardest. This is clearly unfair. We call upon the Government to revert to centre assessed grades, working with those boroughs and institutions hardest hit. Young people already disadvantaged by social circumstances should have not been so unfairly downgraded, and we look forward to hearing from you in relation to these concerns and how the Government intends to remedy them.

We also want to urgently understand how you and the Government plan to put right what went wrong with the A-Levels process in time for the GCSE results being announced on Thursday. We owe it to this group of young people to do what is right, and give them a fair start in life.

Yours sincerely,



Philip Glanville
Mayor of Hackney



Cllr Anntoinette Bramble
**Deputy Mayor and Cabinet Member
for Education, Young People and
Children's Social Care**

CC: Diane Abbott MP, Member of Parliament for Hackney North & Stoke Newington
Meg Hillier MP, Member of Parliament for Hackney South & Shoreditch