COVID19: FUTURE PROOFING QUALIFICATIONS

Exam results are a topic of fierce debate due to a controversial formula for predicted grades and a year of academic disruption. Now businesses must look beyond qualifications when assessing people leaving the education system.

Introduction

As the immediate threat of the COVID-19 pandemic affects the health of the economy, the futures of young people who are leaving the education system remains uncertain. As well as experiencing significant disruption to their education, young people face the prospect of entering a labour market that has constricted beyond anything seen in recent memory[i].

It is well documented that young people are feeling the harshest effects of the COVID-19 crisis[ii]. It is projected that three years after leaving full-time education, the employment rate of today's graduates will be 13% lower than they would have been without the crisis[iii]. This is made worse by the fact that non-graduate leavers tend to start their careers in sectors – such as hospitality and retail – that are currently shut down and are likely to continue to suffer[iv]. As of August 2020, there has been a 122% increase in the number of 16-to-24-year olds claiming unemployment-related benefits since March 2020[v].

Businesses must recognise the extra disadvantage suffered by young black and minority ethnic (BAME) people. Research has shown that BAME graduates are three times less likely to enter employment after graduation than their white counterparts[vi].

This factsheet aims to make businesses aware of the crisis affecting education and how they can be proactive to ensure it does not impact on social mobility.

What happened to exam results?

After summer exams were cancelled in 2020, exam regulators in the four regions of the UK asked schools to estimate what grades pupils would have achieved, had exams taken place. However, there are significant problems with using predicted grades as a replacement for exam results: research has shown only 16% of predicted grades are correct, with over and under-prediction more likely to happen than not[vii].

There are also questions raised on unconscious bias in grade predictions and how this has a disproportionate effect on those from BAME or lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Analysis of graded predictions has shown that higher-education applicants from lower-income backgrounds are significantly more likely to have their grades underpredicted than those from high-income backgrounds[viii].

There is also a significant racial element to predicted grade errors. Research has shown that white applicants had the highest-grade prediction accuracy at 53%, while black applicants had the lowest at 39%. Black applicants also had the highest under-prediction rate of all groups (although, across the board, all groups were more likely to be over-predicted than under).

A new assessment system

Concerns over the fairness and accuracy of predicted grades led to the creation of a new system. This involved teachers being asked not

only to provide a pupil's predicted grade, but also to rank each pupil, from highest to lowest, within each grade. These two values were combined to produce what was called "centre-assessed grades".These grades were sent to exam regulators in all UK regions to go through a process of standardisation to account for major errors in the prediction process. Despite the recent outcry around results in Scotland, concerns around the fairness of the new system were being raised by the Education Select Committee back in July.

The committee called into question the fairness of the appeals process, which was said to be easier to navigate for wealthier families, and stated that "not enough has been done to ensure students from poorer backgrounds are not disadvantaged by this year's process"[ix].

In Scotland, controversy has stemmed from the fact that high-achieving students from low performing schools have had their predicted grades lowered. This raises significant issues for social mobility. The policy was then reversed in Scotland where pupils will be able to use their "centre-assessed grades".

In England, the policy reversal has resulted in the announcement of the "triple lock", whereby pupils could:

• accept their calculated grade.

• appeal to use results from their mock exams.

• resit exams in the autumn.

This announcement prompted even more controversy as there is no standardisation of how mock exams are taken in any of the UK regions[x]. Some are taken with questions in advance, while others are done under exam conditions. At the time of writing, the UK Government and all devolved assemblies have reversed the policy of grade standardisation and will instead be using "centre-assessed grades"[xi].

What does this mean for responsible businesses?

While recognising that the controversy around the assessment system, and its reversal, is a flawed solution to a challenging situation, we know that responsible businesses can be a part of the solution by looking beyond qualifications to assess young people.

As part of our Future Proof campaign with City & Guilds Group, Business in the Community (BITC) worked with more than 200 businesses to assess how to make recruitment processes more accessible to young people, by moving beyond fixed attitudes towards qualifications and experience. It is now time for more businesses to do the same in response to this crisis. Making these changes will also help drive forward the social mobility agenda.

CALLS TO ACTION

Our requests for business in the face of the current situation with qualifications are:

• **Reassess the need for academic qualifications that do not directly relate to the needs of the role:** such as 'five GCSEs' or '200 UCAS points'.

• **Do not ask for previous experience for entry-level roles:** assess young people on their behaviour and essential skills instead.

• **Use clear language:** use clear job descriptions written in Plain English and outline all the stages of your process.

• **Offer feedback to all interviewed candidates:** you can support a young job applicant even if you cannot hire them.

• **Recognise that some young people will feel the effects more than others and target diverse groups accordingly:** your workforce should reflect your community and your customers.

ACCESSIBLE RECRUITMENT CHECKLIST

As part of BITC's Future Proof campaign with City & Guilds Group, we conducted research with more than 150 young people aged between 16-24 on the most useful features of a recruitment process. The checklist below can be used as a quick tool to make your process more accessible for the class of 2020.

Overall design, format, and navigation	
Have a clear, simple layout – do not add too much text or too many sub-pages	
Add an 'entry-level' option in the search criteria	
Use positive language that shows why your business is a great place to work for a young person	
Include photos of a diverse range of employees – including young people	
Job description and entry requirements	
Do not ask for previous experience and use clear, specific entry criteria	
Provide a clear outline of the purpose of the role and day-to-day tasks	
Do not use jargon or acronyms and include an explanation of any technical language	
Include day-in-life profiles featuring existing employees	
Provide clear details on location, salary, hours, and contract type	
Outline what makes it a great place to work for a young person	
Outline of progression pathways	
Outline of training available, including content of apprenticeship if applicable	
The recruitment process	
Outline of the stages of the recruitment process, timeframe, and estimated start date	
Use a clear, simple first application stage with relevant questions	
Include tips for applying	
Outline your feedback process	

For further guidance on behaviour-based recruitment, writing job descriptions to attract young people, and making your hiring process fairer and more accessible, read BITC's Future Proof resources. Guidance on essential skills can also be found on our website.

REFERENCES

i FT (2020); Bank of England warns UK set to enter worst recession for 300 years [online]; available at ft.com

ii Resolution Foundation (2020); Class of 2020: Education leavers in the current crisis, available at resolutionfoundation.org.

iii Resolution Foundation (2020); Class of 2020: Education leavers in the current crisis, available at resolutionfoundation.org.

iv Resolution Foundation (2020); Class of 2020: Education leavers in the current crisis, available at resolutionfoundation.org.

v House of Commons Library (2020); Youth unemployment statistics briefing paper, Number 5871 August 2020; available at commonslibrary.parliament.uk.

vi Business in the Community (2015); Race into Work Revisited: The status of BAME leavers; available on request.

vii UCL Institute for Education (2016); Predicted grades: accuracy and impact; available at ucu.org.uk.

viii Business for Energy, Innovation & Skills (2015); Investigating the accuracy of predicted A Level grades as part of the 2009 UCAS admission process; available at gov.uk.

ix Education Select Committee (2020); Getting the grades they've earned: Covid-19, the cancellation of exams and 'calculated' grades; available at publications.parliament.uk.

x Manchester Evening News (2020); Controversy over students being allowed to use mock exams as A Level 'safety net' with 24 hours notice [online]; available at manchestereveningnews.co.uk

xi BBC News (2020) Exam results: where did it go wrong and what happens next? [online] accessed here: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-53811391