

The 2021 A level results crisis has to be planned for n...

Published: January 13, 2026, 4:14 am

I make no apology for returning to the A level theme that I have noted for a couple of days. This blog is a stream of consciousness, as much as anything. It represents my reaction to world events, and in my world this has been a big deal for the last few days. My son and I are, we now know, amongst the lucky ones. We could celebrate last night, and not all could.

This year's results are not, however, my main concern this morning. Next year's are. And they are just as important to those who will be taking them as this years have been to people like my son. The prospect that those results will be severely impacted by the coronavirus crisis is very real. And that is an issue I have not seen anyone mention in the mainstream media as yet.

There is an assumption that this year's results will be aberrational: a disruption in an otherwise smooth flow of results that would otherwise exist from 2019 to 2021, but that is not true. In fact, it is likely to be very far from it. I can, in fact, make a fairly confident set of predictions right now, presuming that there are A level exams in 2021, and nothing should be taken for granted at present.

The first is that students from private schools will perform at way above average level. Their schooling has been relatively uninterrupted during the summer term of 2020, largely because it was reasonable for those schools to presume that every pupil could partake in online learning.

Second, and inversely, state school performance will be worse. They could not deliver a continuing curriculum during a crucial term, or provide the exam training that is, rightly or wrongly, a key part of that team's work for their pupils. Those pupils will not be as well prepared as is desirable as a result. That is the consequence of their inability to assume all pupils could access online learning.

And third, the impact noted in my second point will be exaggerated by income factors. The lower a pupil's parental income is likely to be the harder access to education during the last term was also likely to be, through lack of IT resource, uninterrupted space to

study, and so on.

As a result it is entirely possible to say now, and with absolute certainty, that next year's A level results will not see a return to normal.

It is equally certain that those results will be heavily biased in favour of those pupils with the best off parents, and most especially those who have attended private schools.

It follows that without allowing for this fact the 2021 A level results will fail next year's sixth formers, and most especially those from lower income households attending state schools. That means planning to correct for this has to start now, unless the government is indifferent to the injustice this will give rise to.

And nor will the problem end there. Those aged 15 who will be taking GCSEs next year are also impacted by this. The consequences will flow through to their post 16 choices and A levels. There is very likely impact in that case until the 2023 A level results, at least.

My question in that case is a simple one, and is what is to be done about this, unless we are to be indifferent to the resulting prejudice? This year's mess can be dismissed as a fiasco, even if an utterly arbitrarily unfair one. But next year's issue is wholly anticipatable, because I am doing that now. It cannot be avoided in that case. And I suggest that the injustice cannot be avoided either.

So what is to be done? I have no answers, at least as yet. I do not claim that I can formulate answers to every problem I can foresee arising. But unless this issue is addressed now the scale of the anger at the injustices that will result will be even greater than this year, where some degree of forgiveness for the mess is at least possible on the part of some. Next year there will be no such tolerance.

The key issue is that we are not going back to normal.

And that means that ministers need to prepare for that reality.

And so, too, does everyone else.

The post-Covid world is not going to be the same as the pre-Covid one. We need to embrace that reality. Few have. And ministers do not appear to be amongst those few. It's time they rose to the challenge, and prepared the ground. How society develops from here depends upon them doing so.