

Education update – Monday 20 June

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(Below is a summary of some of the main education news stories from the last week. They do not reflect the opinions of *The Exams Office*)

Reformed GCSEs ‘will widen the gap between private and state sector’

The government’s GCSE and A-level reforms will widen the attainment gap between state and private schools, headteachers in the independent sector believe.

Pupils in fee-paying schools already achieve significantly better average grades compared with the state sector, and now heads say that reformed qualifications will stretch this advantage.

Chris King, headmaster of Leicester Grammar School and chair of the Headmasters’ and Headmistresses’ Conference, which represents elite independent schools, said: “It’s quite likely that the best independent schools will pull ahead in their proportion of the top grades.”

The heads say this is because the coursework and modular assessment that they had argued favoured the state sector is being abolished or significantly scaled back.

Private schools also claim that greater resources will leave them better prepared than state schools to adapt to the reforms. And they believe their pupils will gain a disproportionately large share of the new grade 9s, the highest grades in new tougher GCSEs, which will be harder to achieve than the current A*.

“Because the [grade] scale itself is being stretched out, the performance of top independent schools at the high end will become more apparent,” Mr King said.

For more details see the [TES website](#)

New rules may lower pupils’ coursework grades

The “automatic protection” that safeguards pupils’ GCSE and A-level grades from going down when schools appeal against coursework results is being lost under controversial new measures from Ofqual, TES has revealed.

The exam watchdog’s overhaul of the appeals system will also allow the grades of scores of other pupils to drop after results day – even though they did not appeal – because of a challenge to coursework marks from another school.

Schools say there will now be a disincentive to challenge inaccurate and unfair results.

The changes come because of the way that Ofqual will treat appeals against the moderation of controlled assessment from this summer. The watchdog will, for the first time, allow grades to fall in these circumstances if the moderator was too lenient. That means schools face a significant new risk in appealing.

Mary Bousted, general secretary of the ATL teaching union, said: “Are we now saying that all grades are only a draft? It appears Ofqual is doing everything in its power to stop schools from appealing against their pupils’ results.”

A spokesman for Ofqual said: “Exam boards have always had the potential to change marks and therefore grades after GCSE, AS and A-level results have been issued if they consider it appropriate to do so for any reason other than as a direct result of a review of moderation. Removing automatic protection brings clarity and consistency to the review system.”

The regulator stresses that exam boards will not be forced to pass on grade reductions if it emerges after results day that grades were too high – but they will have to follow Ofqual guidance when deciding whether to do so.

Native speakers 'put rest at disadvantage' in A-level language exams

Native speakers of foreign languages could be putting others at a disadvantage when taking A-levels prompting the exams regulator to launch an investigation into the issue.

It is understood that a larger number of pupils who speak French, German, Spanish, Italian and Russian as their native language are taking A-levels in those subjects. Some claim this is leaving those who study them as a second language at a disadvantage. Ofqual have now requested details on the number of native speakers who are taking these subjects.

In a letter to schools, Ofqual said it would use the information to determine "whether any action needs to be taken".

Separately, Rachel Taylor, a research fellow for the watchdog, wrote in a blog post: "We're conducting the research because we know from anecdotal evidence that there are concerns about the potential impact of native speakers on A-level modern foreign language results. In particular, there are concerns that the number of native speakers is increasing and that, as a result, students for whom the [language] is a second language are being disadvantaged."

Students who take foreign language A-levels are not obliged to declare whether they are native speakers.

For more details see the [Telegraph website](#)

Bright students' potential being wasted in A* culture

Bright students who are not geared towards the nation's fast "exam culture" are having their potential wasted, a leading headteacher has warned.

Many students do not excel at writing concise GCSE exam answers and as such are seen as a "threat to results" by selective schools which focus on A* results in particular, said a senior educator.

Jonathan Taylor, headteacher of mixed-ability North Bridge House Senior School in London, said a heavily writing-based style of testing meant the abilities of able and creative students were going unaccounted for. He said "If you base an entire reputation on the number of A*s you get, by definition you're compromising those who in this system are getting B grades,"

For more details see the [Telegraph website](#)

Pupil premium 'used to offset cuts'

A small but rising number of schools in England are diverting money meant for disadvantaged pupils to offset budget cuts, says an education charity.

Of 1,600 teachers polled for Sutton Trust in March, 6% said pupil premium money was used to offset budget cuts, compared with 2% the previous year.

The charity's chairman, Sir Peter Lampl, described the trend as worrying. But the government said the poll showed the vast majority of schools were using the cash to support the poorest pupils.

The pupil premium grant was introduced by the coalition government in 2011 to boost the education of disadvantaged children. It is paid to schools for each pupil who is eligible for free school meals or who has been eligible at any point during the previous six years, or for pupils who have been in care for more than six months continuously.

This year it is £1,320 for primary pupils and £935 for secondary pupils. Schools are free to spend the money as they see fit but must be able to show how it is helping children from low income families.

For more details see the [BBC website](#)