BRIEFING NOTE: HIGHER EDUCATION APPLICATIONS AND ADMISSIONS

Summary and Implications:

As a result of Covid-19, 2020 is a highly unusual year for UK higher education, with A level grades 'calculated' based on teachers predictions, the end of certain types of offer making, and the return of student number caps. These issues may have a disproportionate effect on individuals from disadvantaged groups.

Calculated grades:

- A level grades were 'calculated' based on teachers' predictions of pupil grades and rankings, in 2020. Predicted grades have been shown to be inaccurate, and typically over-optimistic. Research has also shown that certain types of students, e.g. high attaining students in comprehensive schools, may be harder to predict accurately.
- The standardisation procedure adopted by Ofqual was needed to correct for the prevalence of overprediction. But, may have penalised students "untypical" for their school, e.g. high achievers at historically low performing schools.

Unconditional offers:

- Conditional unconditional offers, where the university offers the student a place regardless of their eventual A level grades, but conditional on them listing the university as their top choice, have been banned.
- This is a welcome move, given that young people may face undue pressure to accept a place without full information.

Numbers caps:

- Student numbers caps are back on. Grade inflation, particularly for private school pupils and Scottish pupils following the calculated grades process, in conjunction with the forthcoming recession, could result in very strong demand for university places this year. Restricting supply of places is likely to 'squeeze out' students from poorer backgrounds.
- There is already speculation that the caps might stay on for future years.[1] The trend in increasing university applications may continue into the coming years, given the likely poor labour market conditions for young people. There is therefore a risk that low SES students could disproportionately miss out on places as a result of the caps.

CEPEO Recommendations

- Government should consider relaxing the numbers caps this year, and allowing some flexibility in student recruitment by institution, especially for those students who may have been penalised by the calculated grades process.
- This would, in turn, allow institutions to be more flexible about which students they accept this year, potentially allowing them to increase the intake of disadvantaged students.
- The predicted grades system should be abolished, and students should be allowed to apply to university after they have received the results from their age 18 exams.

The Issue:

As a result of Covid-19, the UK 2020 is a highly unusual year for UK higher education, and in particular, university admissions. The cancellation of A level exams has thrust the issue of predicted grades once more into the spotlight. Concerns about falling student numbers, particularly among international students, led to aggressive recruitment policies by universities, culminating in government intervention in the form of restricting "conditional unconditional" offer making, and the return of controversial student numbers caps. This briefing note summarises the research evidence on these policies, and their potential impact on social mobility.

Predicted grades: This year, A levels were calculated on the basis of teacher predicted grades, which have been shown to be inaccurate. The standardisation procedure could also be damaging to 'atypical' students.

In a situation that is unique to the UK, students apply to university courses *before* they sit the entry exams (A levels) needed to get in, applying instead on the basis of teachers predictions of their grades.

In 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, predicted grades were thrust into the spotlight. A level exams were cancelled and instead replaced with "calculated" A level grades. These are based on teachers; predicted grades and teachers' estimate of the within-school rank order of students in each subject. Grades were standardised according to the school's historical performance and the prior attainment of the entry cohort. But the student rank order within schools was preserved.

There is limited research on predicted grades, though studies typically reveal a low probability of exact accuracy, and a tendency toward overprediction. Delap (1994) and Everett and Papageourgiou (2011) analyse prediction accuracy by individual grade, both showing around half of all predictions were accurate, while 42-44% were over-predicted by at least one grade, and only 7-11% of all predicted grades were under-predicted. Studies by Gill and Benton (2015), UCAS (2016) and Murphy and Wyness (2020) examine prediction accuracy according to the best 3 A levels. All three studies show overprediction is more

[1] https://www.researchprofessionalnews.com/rr-he-agencies-other-2020-7-universities-scored-own-goal-on-numbers-cap-says-jo-johnson/

prevalent than underprediction. For example, Murphy and Wyness find that only 16% of students received accurate predictions, with 75% overpredicted and just 8% underpredicted.

All studies find that students with higher grades are more accurately predicted than those lower grades. This is likely an artefact of the combination of teachers' tendency to overpredict coupled with ceiling effects; overprediction is impossible for students with top grades so accuracy is the likely consequence.

A study by Anders et al. (2020) highlighted the difficulty in predicting grades accurately. The study attempted to predict students' A level grades on the basis of detailed information about their GCSEs, using advanced statistical techniques and machine learning. The study was only able to make modest improvements on teacher predictions, with only 1 in 4 grades accurately predicted, versus 1 in 5 found by Murphy and Wyness.

The study also showed that some students' grades are harder to predict than others. For example, high achieving students at comprehensive schools were more likely to be underpredicted by the models. These differences in prediction accuracy by student were also found by Murphy and Wyness, who showed that among high achievers, state school students and low SES students received slightly less generous predictions from teachers than independent school students and high SES students.

2. Conditional unconditional offers have been abolished, restricting the ability of universities to recruit more widely

The fact that students apply before sitting their exams also means that courses can offer students unconditional offers (i.e. offers in which universities will accept the students regardless of their achieved grade). There are various types of unconditional offers (including "direct unconditionals", where the offer is made irrespective of whether the applicant subsequently selects the HE institution as their first choice and, more controversially, "conditional unconditional" offers where the student has to list the university as their top-choice offer – meaning that they are effectively committed to that course regardless of other offers). This practice has been growing at a pace. According to UCAS, in 2013 only 1% of students received an offer with some kind of conditional component, but the prevalence has steadily risen, and reached 38% of students in 2019. More worryingly, UCAS reports zero students received unconditional conditionals in 2013, but in 2019 over a quarter of applicants received such an offer.

In 2020, in an attempt to "stop universities destabilising the English higher education sector by trying to lure applicants away from other providers",[2] conditional unconditional offers were banned until 2021.

Such practices are perhaps unique to the UK, given its predicted grades system, and the relatively recent increase in these offers means there is very little research into who is affected by unconditional offers, with mixed findings.[3]

3. Numbers caps are back on, at a time when record numbers of domestic students are applying to university. This could result in low SES students being "squeezed out" of university.

Between 1994 and 2012, the UK government limited the number of UK and EU undergraduate ("home domiciled") students that each university could admit. This was because of the high costs to the government of subsidising students to go to higher education. In 2012, UK tuition fees were increased to £9,000 per year, as part of a step-change designed to shift the cost of HE away from government towards graduates. Alongside the fee increase, government reduced the money it pays to universities to teach students: the "teaching grant". It began the removal of number controls at the same time, with caps completely removed in 2015.

The government has re-instated number controls for 2020/21 academic year. The rationale is that overseas student numbers may decrease substantially as a result of Covid-19, prompting aggressive competition among providers for domestic students, which could, in turn, destabilise the admissions system and place some providers at risk of significant risk (Drayton and Waltmann, 2020).

However, student numbers reached record levels in 2019, and UCAS report that a record 40.5% of all 18-year-olds in the UK have applied to go to university by 30th June this year, while applications from EU students are only slightly down.[4] Eventual demand is uncertain; on the one hand, many students could change their minds on whether to take their places or not, creating surplus. On the other hand, recessions have been shown to increase demand for university (Barr and Turner, 2013). Moreover, it is likely that behaviour changes by certain groups of students (e.g. mature students reducing their demand) could result in some universities losing students and others facing excess demand (Corver, 2020). Grade inflation, particularly for private school pupils and Scottish pupils following the calculated grades process, in conjunction with the forthcoming recession, could result in very strong demand for university places this year.

Restricting supply on places could disproportionately affect low SES students negatively. Murphy et al. (2019) examined the situation when numbers controls were relaxed in 2012. This relaxation was accompanied by a fall in the average entry tariff scores of Russell Group students. Since disadvantaged students are typically more marginal, in terms of their prior attainment scores, any reduction in entry requirements would be likely to benefit such students. Likewise, when supply is restricted, as with number caps, it is likely to be those from lower income backgrounds that are "squeezed out" as those from more advantaged backgrounds are better able to access information about university and to navigate the HE system (McNally, 2016; McGuigan et al., 2016). Thus, re-introducing numbers caps, as is the case this year, seems likely to have a negative effect on widening participation.

Prepared by: Gill Wyness

Contact for further information: Centre for Education Policy & Equalising Opportunities (CEPEO)

cepeo@ucl.ac.uk www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/cepeo

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[2] https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/england-bans-conditional-unconditional-offers-during-pandemic
[3] https://wonkhe.com/blogs/are-clearing-and-unconditional-offers-equally-bad-for-student-non-continuation/
[4] https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/jul/09/uk-universities-record-number-applications-lockdown

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