Reform the system: A minority of students achieve predicted A-level marks

August 14 2019, by Iain Garner

Credit: Ketut Subiyanto from Pexels

With A-level results day come the countless pictures of jubilant students leaping in the air. But despite those jumping for joy, results day can also be a nerve-wracking time for those waiting to see if they got the grades

needed to get into their first choice university.

It's generally accepted that going to university plays a significant part in shaping lives, and the skills gained there help to sustain a thriving society. So it seems odd that at the heart of this process is guesswork—with the bulk of university offers based on predicted grades.

Indeed, Labour has announced plans to replace offers based on predicted grades with a new "fairer" system of post-qualification admissions. Under Labour's plans, students would apply for their higher education place after receiving their results instead of the current system of predicted grades—which the party says penalizes disadvantaged students and those from minority backgrounds.

The plans also look to curb the rise in unconditional offers and bring an end to the clearing process—which the party says can be an "incredibly stressful and worrying time for students."

The problem with predicted grades

Care has to be taken to not create a crisis where there isn't one. After all, most university applicants find a place to study and UCAS provides for "adjustment" allowing students who have "overachieved" to reconsider where to study.

But, according to a 2016 report from University College London's (UCL) Institute of Education, only 16% of predicted grades are accurate. And less than one in five students gains the grades their university offers are based upon. Of the others, 75% are over-predicted and 9% of students are under-predicted. These figures show that this is not a marginal issue. The process of predicted grades is inaccurate for most applicants.

It would seem at first glance that the 75% of students with over-predicted grades have just been "lucky," but it's not that simple. The [admissions process](#) is designed to match academic potential and courses to maximise the chance of applicants thriving while studying. Over-predicting may place students "out of their depth." So rather than benefiting from this "advantage" it may put students under academic stress that limits their potential.

Credit: Ketut Subiyanto from Pexels

Even if these students thrive, they act as place blockers for other students who may have been better suited to the course. Although there

are no longer student number controls and universities can, in theory, take as many students as they wish, real estate, student accommodation, and staffing mean that practically places are limited. So every extra student on a course who technically didn't get the grades to be there, is taking up a spot.

Massive disadvantage

For the 9% of students whose projected grades were lower than their actual grades, this disparity tempers aspirations. These students' true abilities would place them at higher ranking universities, but they may not be made offers—even if they do apply—because of their inaccurate projected grades. Going through Clearing could be a way out of this, but emotionally these students may not want to make a late change to their place of study—and places at their ideal universities may already be filled by students whose grades were inflated.

UCL's report also noted that the students most likely to be under-predicted on grades are those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Over the course of the study, 3,000 high performing students—those getting AABs or better—from disadvantaged backgrounds were under-predicted. This meant they applied to universities they were overqualified for.

[According to analysis](#) carried out by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills, black students were the most likely to have their grades under-predicted. [The Sutton Trust](#) has also warned that poorer students are more likely to have their [grades](#) under-predicted—making them less likely to apply to the most selective institutions.

All of which makes Labour's most recent suggestions of reforming the system a step in the right direction. Indeed, a [2019 report from The University and College Union](#) revealed that post-qualification admissions

were the global norm, and that countries the UK often benchmarks against—such as Germany, Singapore, Australia and the US—all use this system.

[The OECD's top five countries](link) with the highest performing graduates also use post-qualification admissions—so it's possible that students in those countries are being better matched to institutions and thriving accordingly.

The UK's approach was designed in the 1980s and is becoming less fit for purpose. The system allows disadvantage to be compounded and the merits of a notable group of students to not be fully recognised. To move to a new system will not be easy but international examples show this is possible. And if we are to have a system of education that values, recognizes and rewards merit it is an essential step.

A system where qualifications are assessed on what has been achieved and not what has been unreliably predicted would also help to move higher education access nearer to a transparent merit-based approach and at the very least would remove the clairvoyance that compounds disadvantage.

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