

Impact of COVID-19 has created stark discrepancies in students' experiences of taking A Levels, says new study

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Research from the University of Birmingham and University of Nottingham has indicated some stark discrepancies in students' experiences of taking A-levels this year.

The researchers, Professor Kalwant Bhopal at the University of Birmingham and Dr. Martin Myers at the University of Nottingham, conducted over 500 survey questionnaires (to date) over a four month period, between April and July with students whose A levels were canceled due to the pandemic. This has been followed by a total of 53 interviews with students (to date).

Ahead of A-level results which will be announced on 13th August, this timely survey has highlighted how the COVID-19 pandemic has brought up concerns about the fairness of exams this year and various discrepancies in how their schools has managed their final, and arguably most important, year in school.

The survey reported how just 21% of students who took the survey suggested they were happy exams were canceled, while more than twice this number (46%) would have preferred to sit their exams and 33% of students were undecided.

Dr. Martin Myers, Assistant Professor in Education at the University of Nottingham said: "At the heart of our research are the voices of A-level pupils faced with extraordinary challenges at one of the most stressful moments in their education. None of these pupils imagined or prepared for the closure of schools, cancelation of exams and lockdown in the wake of COVID-19. The most striking finding to emerge in our research was of pupils desperate to demonstrate their best work and be rewarded fairly for their efforts. Unfortunately many pupils felt their A-Level results would not be a fair reflection of their ability."

Other key findings from the survey data show how satisfied pupils were with how their school managed the crisis which suggests a stark range of pre-existing inequalities have been mirrored since lockdown began and are likely to affect final A-level grades:

- 82% of White pupils were satisfied with how their school managed the crisis compared to 67% of Black pupils and only 42% of Asian pupils feeling similarly satisfied.
- 71% of girls were satisfied compared to 63% of boys
- Whilst 81% of pupils from fee-paying independent schools were satisfied with how their [school](#) managed the crisis only 67% of pupils in state comprehensive schools were satisfied.

In addition to satisfaction levels, the survey also found out from students where they felt they could have been better supported by schools including:

- Mental Health issues, such as regular support for isolation during lockdown. These concerns were not necessarily to do with academic work.
- Resources available, particularly in relation to continuing to prepare work which would be taken into account for their final grades.
- Direct information from teachers on how their grades would be awarded.

Professor Kalwant Bhopal, Director, Center for Research in Race & Education (CRRE) at the University of Birmingham said: "Our study highlights a range of inequalities in the experiences of A-level students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many students felt the pandemic would exacerbate inequalities within schools including those of race and ethnicity and those related to different types of schools. They felt that sitting exams was one way of proving their ability despite such inequalities and that this opportunity had been taken away from them. They also often highlighted their fears that the pandemic would not only adversely affect their education but have long term impacts on their mental health and well-being."

In addition many students also raised the following issues:

- The majority recognized the unfairness of the current situation and felt they would be identified and labeled the "COVID-19 generation"; a cohort of students who did not sit their exams and were awarded estimated grades.
- The majority of students had not changed their plans, all who had applied for university were still keen to go.
- Many students were concerned about the long-term impact on their mental health.

The researchers will be conducting a second survey and interviews following the release of A-level results to students.

Provided by University of Birmingham

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