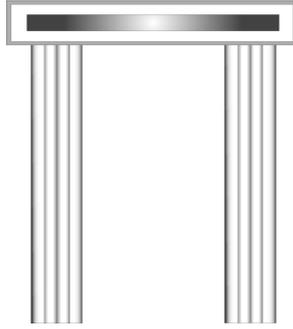


**John Marenbon  
Dominic Sullivan  
Louise Moelwyn-Hughes**

**Back to School!  
Preparation, Not Cancellation**

**POLITEIA**

**A FORUM FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC THINKING**



## POLITEIA

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**POLITEIA**

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# I

## Introduction – Too Important to Sacrifice

John Marenbon

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When we try to take stock of government choices that have made the Covid-19 epidemic so much more harmful than it need have been, it is hard to know what item will top the list. The failure, shared by leaders worldwide, to keep infected people from entering the country and spreading the disease, when the epidemic was still confined to the Far East? The carnage in the care homes? The wanton undermining of the economy through an unnecessarily protracted lockdown supported by unaffordable state aid?

Education, however, will probably figure, if at all, a long way down the list, because the effects of the failures in school and examination policy are almost invisible – no excess deaths, no direct redundancies or bankruptcies. Yet these unseen effects may well represent the greatest loss of all. The collateral damage alone is serious enough: millions of parents unable to carry on with their work, abused and vulnerable children left without support, all children without the social life, routine and need to accommodate others which would train them to be proper members of society. But it is the central damage which is gravest. From 5 to 18 all but the small percentage of pupils at the best independent schools will have lost, at the very best, three months, but in most cases almost a half-year of their schooling. To be deprived of education is incommensurably worse a loss than all these others.

Of all that our state offers its citizens, education is the most precious. Healthcare and economic support may enable humans to survive; education lets them live worthwhile human lives. The children and young people will indeed resume their classes eventually – though, we are told, perhaps not even in the autumn, but the loss is more than a mere percentage (about 5 per cent) of teaching foregone. Continuity, too, is important, and so is the habit of study. The education offered to most pupils in England is far from ideal, but for everyone at school this year it will be significantly worse.

Examinations are an important part of education policy, and here the choices made, apparently with the government's blessing, have been even poorer than with regard to the schools themselves. It was precipitately decided to abandon GCSEs and 'A'-levels, and rely on teacher assessments. The result, in the best case, is that two cohorts will, through no fault of their own, have examination grades that employers and universities should not take very seriously. In a worse case, there will be four such cohorts (GCSE and 'A'-level candidates for 2020, and for 2021), since it is easy to anticipate the calls for teacher assessment to be continued next year, because candidates' preparation will have been so disturbed. The worst case, however – and, alas, perhaps the most likely one – is that traditional, written externally set, marked and moderated public examinations will disappear for ever. They already seem anachronistic because they judge candidates' performances neutrally, irrespective of their sex, sexuality, ethnicity and economic circumstances, and allow, at least to some extent, those who are more intelligent and work harder to excel. Many would be happy if Covid-19 and its disruptions provide an excuse to do away with them.

The government might reply to such criticisms that it has closed schools and allowed examinations to be cancelled only because of the demands of public health. To do otherwise would be to risk tens of thousands more deaths. This would be a very weak, reply, however,

both, on the one hand, for practical and scientific reasons, and, on the other hand, on grounds of principle.

Scientists, who differ about almost everything else to do with Covid-19, are agreed that, a few identifiable special cases aside, people of 5 – 18 run a negligible risk of having the illness in a serious, let alone life-threatening form. There is also no clear evidence about whether, and to what extent, having schools open would increase transmission of the disease more generally, and some reason to think that younger children do not contribute much to spreading it. It is debatable whether all the precautions now being taken in primary schools are necessary, but practical steps could be taken to open schools to all pupils, even following these rigorous and extreme social distancing rules: it is just a matter of logistics and imagination – making use of vacant spaces, moving lessons outside, staggering timetables, teaching more in smaller groups. The same applies, more obviously, to examinations.

The point of principle is that, even were it to lead to a significant rise in Covid-19 deaths, it would be right to reopen schools, and it would have been right to plan and hold public examinations. We have, unfortunately, a government itself governed, not by statistics and scientific advice, bad though that might be, but by the particular interpretations put on them by officials who, in many cases, are most concerned to protect their positions and increase their power. Our rulers lack a compass, by which they could choose to act in the right way, under the circumstances, rather than setting certain narrow goals and then calculating the means to reach them and, when it has become obvious that their calculations have been wrong, looking for a way to pretend that they have, none the less, made the best decisions.

Denying education to millions should simply never have been countenanced.

## II

### **School Exams Matter Preparation, Not Cancellation**

Dominic Sullivan

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#### **A levels and the 2019 Public Examinations –A premature cancellation?**

On Wednesday 18 March Gavin Williamson, the Secretary of State for Education, announced that GCSE and A Level examinations would be cancelled and that schools were to close from the following Monday until further notice. By that point schools were beginning to find it difficult to function as usual: fear of contagion was keeping pupils and staff away from schools in seemingly increasing numbers. Some schools had already shut up shop.

In cancelling the examinations the Department for Education announced that it wanted ‘to give, pupils, parents and teachers certainty, and enable schools and colleges to focus on supporting vulnerable children and the children of critical workers.’ The announcement was arguably premature. At that point no-one knew how long the lockdown would last nor how gradual would be the return to normality. Examinations could have been postponed until the second half of June or July and lost teaching time made up by cancelling the usual study leave after the Easter holiday. Disruptive, to be sure, but more so than wholesale cancellation?

Rather than relief many pupils and parents felt frustration and disappointment. It was like changing the rules of a game halfway through. Pupils had lost the chance to prove themselves that they expected. They had worked for a particular form of assessment at a specified time and the most conscientious, at least, had planned their work and revision to enable them to peak opportunely. As any teacher knows, past performance is certainly not an entirely reliable guide to future achievement. There are always the clever but idle pupils - the despair of their teachers – who spurt late and manage to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. One cannot commend their game plan, but to change the rules without warning seems unjust.

The target pupils had been aiming at was suddenly taken away. They felt disoriented, with the work of the previous two years in danger of being rendered purposeless.

#### **Teacher Assessment – Process and problems**

It was only on 3 April that Ofqual (the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation), which regulates qualifications, examinations and assessments in England, revealed the outline of what would take the place of examinations. It proposed a combination of teacher assessment, class ranking and the past performance of their schools. Such a process relies on the professional judgment of teachers and heads of department making as informed a prediction as possible of how their pupils would realistically have fared if they had taken the exams this summer. Ideally this would not be an automatic extrapolation from trial examination results and other assessments, but a more subjective estimate of the pupil’s overall performance and potential. Once grades have been established, the subject department then ranks pupils within each grade. This ranking should counter any temptation to give one pupil the benefit of the doubt against any other. The predictions are then checked by the

senior management, particularly against an historic profile of results achieved by the school in each subject over the last few years. The predicted grades will then be passed to the examination board, which makes the final decision

The process introduced by Ofqual is probably the fairest approach given the circumstances, but we must not forget that it is intrinsically very much second best. The ranking at each grade counters the understandable tendency of teachers to want to see their pupils do as well as possible, while the more subjective teacher assessment takes into account individual quirks of character that may have led pupils to have performed below ability in recent tests. Nevertheless no-one should pretend that it matches the fairness and objectivity of externally assessed examinations. Teachers know from experience how uncertain is the business of predicting grades. There are too many contingent variables involved. In good schools, at least, heads of department are held to account for discrepancies between predicted grades and the ones actually awarded. There always are discrepancies and, although we try to reduce these as far as possible, everyone realizes that prediction is far from being an exact science. External data is available to help the crystal-ball gazing: the life of a head of department is increasingly bedevilled with data processing of ALIS and YELLIS scores, as well as predicted grades from the Fisher Family Trust, all of which use performance at earlier stages in the school career to peer into the future. A sense of determinism often lurks behind the use of this data, as though a pupil's examination grades were already set in stone. Teachers know that free will and individual quirks of character are also at play.

Any system of prediction used to replace externally assessed examinations presupposes that some badly performing schools and departments will not take advantage of the lockdown to try to improve their results. It is difficult to see how examination boards can entirely prevent this by using historic profiles. There are quite wide variations in results each year and, given the absence of external moderation of work actually done by pupils, it will be difficult to go against the judgment made by the school of its own pupils. It will be interesting to see the league tables this year, if they are published. One also wonders what stock universities will take of this year's GCSE results when they make offers for places in two years' time. Ofqual has announced that appeals can be made, but only on the basis of inconsistent or unfair procedures within schools, not against "the professional judgements of teachers and centres."

One also wonders how many pupils will take the option to sit the external examinations being offered in September. These seem to be intended as a form of additional appeal against the grades based on prediction, or, at least, to give pupils the chance to prove themselves in a real examination, but by the time these are marked GCSE pupils will already be well into their sixth form courses and most A Level pupils will be well past their virtual Freshers' Week. In any event the examinations boards have not yet announced any details to schools and Ofqual is not insisting that examinations be provided in every subject.

### **Next Year's Exams?**

Examinations in 2021 also seem threatened. The extremely cautious approach of the Government to the easing of social distancing measures and the still prevalent fear amongst many parents make it unlikely that the academic year will start as usual in September. There could be a staggered return with only some year groups in at any one time. The school day could be shortened and timetables rearranged. Continued staff absences may increase the number of cover lessons provided by teachers not qualified in the subject. There are even

rumours of Government plans to close schools again once the influenza season starts in late autumn. Even if things are not as bad as this, Year 10 and 12 pupils will have had at least three months away from school. Some schools have been very assiduous at ensuring that teaching continues as fruitfully as possible, but these seem to be a minority. Some unconfirmed reports suggest that only 5 per cent of state and 30 per cent of independent schools have provided online lessons. Teaching unions have discouraged these and indeed anything but the most general setting of work. There will inevitably be calls to scrap examinations.

Given the unevenness of the provision of online teaching and the disparity in dates when Year 10 and 12 pupils return to school, as well as the other disruptions to normal education even in the new academic year, there may be pressure against examinations taking place in 2021 in the usual way. Although pupils can be examined externally on a reduced content, if necessary, that will not stop the calls from some quarters to continue for another year the system of internal prediction adopted as an emergency measure because of teaching time lost during the lockdown and its aftermath.

The danger is that this will set a precedent for the future and that sections of the educational establishment will push for the permanent abolition of examinations in favour of internal school assessment. This pressure must be resisted. Our examination system is certainly not perfect. A syllabus can be restrictive to a good teacher and encourage overly narrow teaching. Pupils can often be more concerned about examination techniques than about the intrinsic value of the subject. A depressingly utilitarian approach to education is increasingly common among school managers, parents, pupils and teachers. Teaching to the examination certainly exists. There is an almost superstitious veneration for grades written on a piece of paper, while we forget that a grade is merely an external measure of intrinsic worth. What perfects a human being is inside. Education really consists of a real change within a person undergoing a growth in character, knowledge and wisdom.

### **Why Examinations Matter**

Nevertheless examinations give pupils a clear target and the incentive to work hard. Teachers commonly see pupils' work improve in leaps and bounds as examinations focus pupils' minds. It is difficult to see how internal assessment alone could provide this focus and motivation. Coursework and assignments done at home will always incur the suspicion that some pupils may receive undue help. What pupils value about examinations is the chance to prove themselves in an objectively verifiable and fair way.

Competitive examinations were introduced into the Civil Service in the light of the Northcote-Trevelyan Report of 1854 to ensure recruitment based on merit rather than preferment, patronage or purchase. Standardized written assessments eventually made their way into schools. Whatever the danger of examinations becoming the tail that wags the dog, no other form of assessment can ensure the objective and just evaluation of merit. As long as universities and employers need grades for selection of recruits, some form of assessment standardized across schools, meeting objective criteria, is a demand of justice. Assessment within schools based on the judgment of teachers will always contain a subjective element which can never provide the confidence that all pupils get what is due to them: *sum cuique*.

**Next Steps - What should government policy be?**

To avoid a slide into internal assessment the Government needs to confirm that external examinations will be held next year. This has to be done as soon as possible to give examination boards time to reduce syllabus content, if necessary, and to give schools time to adapt to any changes. It is unfair to keep pupils and teachers in a state of uncertainty.

The Government also must commit to ensuring it will adopt any means necessary to deal with obstacles or difficulties that may arise in the year ahead, including the provision of additional teaching and the extension of the examination period, in the very unlikely event that social distancing is still in force. In these extraordinary times it is the responsibility of the Department for Education to find solutions to problems rather than abandon the fairest system of assessment we have.

We also need a commitment that if schools have to be closed in the future for any reason the continuation of pupils' education and external examinations will be a priority. The Secretary of State for Education should direct all schools to prepare an efficient system of online teaching that pupils and teachers can use if classroom teaching is disrupted again. Governing bodies and head teachers would have the responsibility of ensuring that their schools are prepared, with practical and technological support from the Department for Education. Never again should schools be closed without contingency arrangements in place to ensure that teaching continues as a legal obligation on schools and teachers. We owe that to our pupils.

### III

## Back to School Countering the Covid-19 Obstacles

Louise Moelwyn-Hughes

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### **The Academic School Year – Punctuation and purpose**

The academic school year provides that which the human senses enjoy: structure and balance. Term dates are evenly spread, working days and weeks are carefully mapped to afford a balance of delivery across subjects with, where possible, an equally balanced co-curricular offering. Wherever you look there are clear beginnings and endings, there is a commonly understood direction and, possibly more importantly, a determined fixed end point – that perfect cadence in music; a strong, confident ending.

And so, when it became clear in March 2020 that Covid-19 had beset the population of the UK, the need for reassurance in our schools began. I distinctly remember addressing Year 11 and Year 13 pupils in assemblies urging them to remain calm: if the unthinkable happened and the country went into lockdown, schools would, of course, close temporarily but, together, we would stay true to our path and strengthen our resolve to counter this obstacle and forge ahead

### **Retaining the Exam - The options**

At that stage I reminded pupils that Ofqual was committed to fairness to all; that examinations would happen, although perhaps in a different form. Their years of work (or perhaps in some cases their decision to postpone their revision to the final months; a decision made with the confidence in a different time) would all be made sense of and a reasonable, acceptable solution would surely be arrived at.

Heads across the country quickly moved to lobby for the retention of examinations in some form and, latterly, in any form. Our assumption was that schools would be back in session by the summer. Abridged papers, online assessment and/or the delay of examinations to later in the year might, however imperfectly, allow a generation of Year 13 pupils in particular to draw a line, to win and collect their grades, and to progress to the next stage of their lives feeling that there had been an unusual, perhaps unsatisfactory, but certainly marked closure to their school careers.

Of course, the inequality of provision of and access to education in this country was quickly stripped back. We will never truly know the percentage of pupils who accessed nothing of their education during this period but that number is shockingly significant and it can certainly be argued that every child and every family will have its own story to tell of how the lockdown affected them and their education. Where many Heads had hoped that continued online assessment in respect of work that continued after the lockdown might be possible, it was clear that this would work for only a proportion of the population and that the outcomes would certainly be far from fair or indeed acceptable.

**Ofqual's Proposal - Teacher assessment and the implications**

Ofqual's solution, in an effort to award grades and allow two examination year groups to move forward, was to introduce Centre Assessed Grades where teachers would use their professional judgement of the most likely grade a pupil would have achieved if exams had gone ahead. Schools would be required to present to the Board 1) the grades they believed a pupil would have achieved had they continued with their preparation and sat their exams this year as expected, taking into account any existing access arrangements and 2) a rank order of pupils for each grade category in each subject. Generating grades and ranking pupils would require teachers to take a holistic approach and consider each pupil's performance over the course of their studies, aiming to make a realistic judgement of the grade each pupil would have been most likely to achieve if they had taken their exams in a subject and completed any non-exam assessment this summer. An unenviable task which, although with decisions making close reference to the information provided by acquired data, also called upon and indeed encouraged the application of professional judgement which, by its nature, must be subjective and therefore volatile.

It is something of an understatement to say that the evidence required for establishing reliable grade decisions about pupil rankings is considerable and water-tight processes have had to be created, given that these decisions may be, quite rightly, challenged by pupils and their parents post results. Some schools moved to test online post 20<sup>th</sup> March in a bid to gather as much contemporaneous academic data as possible in order to best serve those who had left their work to the weeks before they were due to sit exams but Ofqual latterly announced that such evidence post 20<sup>th</sup> March would be considered unstable.

**Assessment v Examinations?**

Heads moved to reassure pupils and parents that their schools would work tirelessly to ensure that all pupils would be treated fairly and that nobody would be unjustly disadvantaged or advantaged by these exceptional circumstances; that we know our pupils exceptionally well and that we would ensure that fair and just recommendations were given.

Decisions would be made using the full range of information held by individual schools, including Mock examination results, non-examination assessment such as coursework, topic test results, tracked performance in class assignments and in homework/prep; project work and field work; previously achieved grades for those retaking; historic data for each subject's performance; application of any existing access arrangements; performance of this year's pupils compared with those in previous years; and projections on likely performance outcome given previous performance, for example, at (I)GCSE. Schools each established their own protocols for this process to ensure that their pupils would be treated equally and fairly within a common framework.

But, of course, grade projections can never perfectly reflect what a pupil might have achieved on the day and few, if any, schools will have established identical protocols. Given professional judgement and our ability to predict in line with existing data, the vast majority of grades should be accurately predicted this summer but there will always be outliers; those who perform better or worse on the day; those who planned to use the Easter break to forge

ahead with their revision. And what of the school which has a stronger or weaker year group this year than in previous years? When Ofqual takes into consideration the results by school and by subject of previous years, will it be that an exceptional year group will be penalised and a weaker year group advantaged? But we are in uncharted waters and most pupils will be served satisfactorily by this approach; although it must be noted that these Year 11 and 13 cohorts will always feel the need, if asked in the future about their grades, to have to explain that the grades were not fully won in the way that they would have wished for and expected.

And so our fear is that the Covid-19 situation might continue to impact upon our children's education into September 2020 and beyond.

### **How Schools Can Counter Covid-19?**

With increasing scientific evidence that the transmission of the virus in schools may not be as strong as previously feared and with heightened hope that a vaccine might be found, preparations should be made for pupils to restart their education. The Government's recent announcement that, although primary schools will not open for a month before the summer break begins, there will be a real effort made to reopen schools for all in September, gives real hope that efforts hitherto rightly invested in the NHS and in the kick starting of the economy might, in turn, extend to schools. Not only is there an urgent social and mental health imperative to reopen schools for all.

But there is an overwhelming educational one.

From a narrower examination perspective, the 2021 exams take place. We must find a way allowing our 2021 examination year groups back on site as soon as possible, whether that be in August, virus permitting, to begin to make up for what for most pupils will be lost months, or by paring back syllabus content (shortened courses are never ideal but these are extraordinary circumstances), or by offering a wider range of exam questions for pupils to answer thus limiting the chance of material they haven't covered. It has become clearer than ever during this period that our pupils must be allowed a sense of agency, purpose and control; particularly in these difficult times. Our curriculum has been designed to have an end point and our pupils expect and deserve that.

For many families the lockdown has been a time of loss. Year 11 and 13 cohorts will, when asked about their grades, have to explain that these were not won in the way that they would have wished for and expected. There has also been social loss and for many, economic loss as well as the anxiety of an uncertain future. Perhaps the gravest loss of all for pupils is that of their education. While some pupils have had access to online learning and teaching, and many parents have worked heroically to ensure some schooling continues, these can never make up for time in the classroom, with one to one interaction interspersed through classroom teaching, structured lessons and marked homework.

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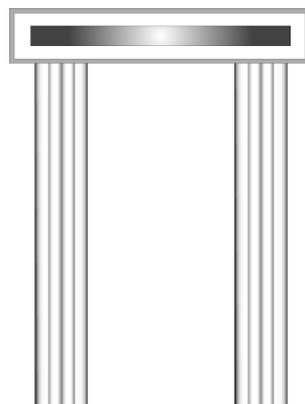
*David Burghes, John Marenbon, Bob Moon, Alan Smithers & Chris Woodhead*

Comparing Standards: Academic and Vocational, 16-19 Year Olds

*David Burghes, Herbet Lutz, John Marenbon, Shyam Patiar Sig Prais, Alan Smithers, Robert Tombs & Chris Woodhead*

The refusal to open English schools to most pupils until September has prompted questions about how committed the government is to education. Now a fresh concern has emerged about exams. This year's GCSE and A level, will be replaced by teacher assessment. In *Back to School! Preparation, Not Cancellation*, two of the country's most senior teachers, Louise Moelwyn-Hughes, Master of Marlborough College and Dominic Sullivan, Head of Classics at the London Oratory School, explain why teacher assessment is no substitute for exams. John Marenbon, a Cambridge philosopher, reinforces their arguments, explaining why pupils will suffer a lifelong loss from the missed schooling and cancelled exams.

The message from these essays is clear. There must be no further interruption to schooling. The government must make an immediate commitment that the 2021 external exams, GCSE and A levels will take place in the normal way and that all preparations will be put in hand to make that happen. It should also commit as a matter of immediate policy to ensuring that whatever the future brings, it will take whatever steps are needed to ensure that schools continue teaching, and pupils learning.



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