

CEO REFLECTIONS ON EXAM RESULTS 2020

The challenge for schools, colleges and universities over the coming years is to respond to the concern over *grade inflation* in ways that do not penalise those at times presented as undeserving beneficiaries of the situation in which we find ourselves: the students. Our response must be based on a realistic and pragmatic view of why we are seeing this grade inflation, and what it does and does not represent.

Firstly, I want to challenge the idea that grade inflation is the result of over-prediction on the part of teachers and schools. Of course, I cannot assert that every school has acted with the rigour and integrity we have applied in *The Collegiate Trust*, but we need to recognise that there is no real external driver for schools to overstate a student's ability. Teachers knew, when they were producing grades that schools then moderated into CAGs to submit to exam boards, that they were making a clear statement both on the **ability** of a student **and** potential for further study – in sixth form, at college or in higher education. Schools know the dangers of students beginning next level courses which are inappropriate for them. School and college leaders recognise that external accountability in the coming year(s) will look very different and will quickly pick up poor assessment practice. Therefore, I think we should be confident that CAGs come from a considered in-school process and generally represent a fair reflection of a student's ability in each subject.

But of course, these CAGs have now mainly become the exam results. My second key point is that exam results in 2020 are therefore different to what has gone before but equally valid. Exam results traditionally do not just reflect ability but are a combination of factors: *ability + performance under exam hall pressure*. Whilst teachers often have a good idea of which students are “good at exams”, they do not have an idea of which students, under that exam hall pressure, will:

- Make a wholly out of character mistake
- Misread or misinterpret a crucial question
- Accidentally omit a page of questions and not realise until too late to rectify
- Crumble under the pressure
- Find the inspiration – or pure luck – to perform a level way beyond anything they have done previously.

One of traditional tasks of exam results days is to console those students who have performed unexpectedly poorly, and to celebrate with those who have done surprisingly well; and we can usually track back the reasons for this to my brief list above.

Of course, in 2020 we have taken away the second part of the equation – the exam hall pressure – and have results that purely reflect ability. It should be no surprise that these results are significantly higher than in previous years, nor should this be a cause for undue alarm; these higher results do not represent poor practice or artificial grade inflation on the part of schools and colleges, but are the result of a different way of providing examination results.

The challenge now is how we respond to these results. Our young people will join Year 12, begin an apprenticeship, enrol at college or start a degree in the coming weeks. They will bring with them a clear statement of their ability in their exam results, but also a clear detachment from the rigours of learning and no recent experience of the exam hall pressure that we might yet expect them to endure in the future. My third and probably most important point, therefore, is that we must respond to this situation with highly effective support and guidance and a pedagogy where teachers walk alongside our students in their resumed learning, scaffolding and structuring their work to make sure that the knowledge and skills required in next level courses are built systematically and quickly.

Gordon Smith, CEO