

## PUPILS GET RECORD GCSE GRADES 2020

By Hannah Richardson & Katherine Sellgren

GCSE passes for England's pupils, in the most disrupted academic year in UK history, have risen dramatically.

Grades have been awarded by schools, after exams were cancelled, and data shows 78.8% of papers were rated grade 4 or above. It was 69.9% in 2019.

There was a rise of a quarter in the top grades - a 7 or above, which is equivalent to an A in the old system.

The exams season has been dogged by chaos, with policy changes leading to grades being altered at the 11th hour.

In the latest debacle BTec grades were pulled hours before pupils were to receive them although some schools are giving out grades, which were assessed by schools, anyway.

And universities are still waiting for pupils' adjusted A-level results, while they attempt to squeeze as many as possible into the courses they have qualified for.

Universities and the government have now agreed to honour all degree places - this year or

next - to students who have obtained the right grades, but there are concerns about the funding of these.

England's exams watchdog, Ofqual, says this year's results cannot be compared to last year's results and has confirmed that students who are unhappy with GCSE grades awarded by their school or college will not be able to appeal - other than for an administrative error.

The watchdog's efforts to maintain standards through a, now discredited, algorithm led to problems for the awarding of A-levels last week and stress for students.

In Wales, where grades are alphabetical, 26% of results were at grade A\* or A - up by eight percentage points from just over 18% in 2019.

Almost all pupils - 99.6% - received passes at A\*-G grades, compared to 97.2% last year.

In Northern Ireland, 37.1% of pupils achieving grade A\* to A - up by 5.7 percentage points on last year.

The numbers receiving A\*-G grades increased by 0.9 percentage points to 99.7%.

'The U-turn was for the best'



At Bolton's Canon Slade School, Sophie, 16, said she was "super happy" with a string of top grades which will allow her to start her A-level course in a few weeks time.

Her sister Hannah received her BTEC results last week and is "over the moon" with her distinction scores.

At Bexleyheath Academy in London, parent Heather Dockerill said the results system could have been managed better: "These kids have been through hell."

But her daughter Jess said that, in the end, she was relieved to have got the grades she needed for sixth form.

Evie, 15, agrees it's been a challenging year, but she's "over the moon" with the results.

"My hard work has paid off so there's a sense of relief."

Cory, 16, who did both GCSEs and BTecs said he was proud of his grades.

"2020 has been unfortunate, but I feel like I've made the best of the situation and I've stayed happy for the whole year."

Harriet, 16, relieved when her GCSE grades came through: "I honestly don't think I could have been happier with the results."

"The U-turn was for the best."

Graeme Napier, principal of Bexleyheath Academy, said it was great to see happy students.

"It's reassuring that the awarding bodies have agreed to look at the results again - the important thing is that students get the results they deserve."

'Unprecedented disruption'

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said young people should feel "incredibly proud of all they've achieved in the face of immense challenge and uncertainty".

"I also want to pay a special tribute to teachers and



school leaders this year who have shown dedication, resilience and ingenuity to support their students to get to this moment."

Geoff Barton, head of the head teachers' union ASCL, said students and teachers should be congratulated.

"These have been extraordinarily difficult circumstances, and this generation of young people has suffered a degree of uncertainty and disruption that is without precedent."

Chief executive of Association of Colleges, David Hughes said: "With an increase in top grades and passes, it is likely that more students than ever will progress to Level 3 vocational courses or A-levels.

"There is no need to panic for anyone unsure what to do, or for those awaiting grades - colleges will be able to meet their needs and there will be space for everyone."



On BTecs, exam board Pearson said it needed to look again at grades following the education secretary's reversion to centre-assessed grades, which pushed results higher.

However, the late decision is causing even further disruption to students seeking places in further and higher education.

Heads' leader Mr Barton he could not understand why it had taken Pearson until so late to realise the implications of grade changes for its BTec qualifications.

Nick Gibb says sorry for "the pain, the anxiety and the uncertainty" suffered by pupils over the "grading issues".

"It really does need to give an explanation of why this has happened. We feel desperately sorry for the students affected in a year when they have already undergone far too much disruption."

Pearson said in a statement: "BTec qualification results have been generally consistent with teacher and learner expectations, but we have become concerned about unfairness in relation to what are now significantly higher outcomes for GCSE and A-levels."

But Labour's Shadow Education Secretary Kate Green said the delay to BTec results was absolutely disgraceful.

She said demanded to know what had been going on since it became apparent that there was a problem with exam results, adding that the government was warned the algorithm might treat people unfairly.

The grades you leave school with, shape the next few years of your life, they're the calling card for your job hunt or getting into university.

The system is regulated with one overarching aim - to make sure that everyone trusts those grades are a fair reflection of the work and ability of young people.

So grades are meant to be just as fair and accurate from one year to the next.

Over the last three weeks across the UK that trust was fundamentally undermined as a statistical algorithm threw up results that were clearly deeply unfair to some students.

The price of putting that right, to avoid penalising a generation, is to live with a leap in pass rates overall and an increase top grades.

The cost in terms of stress to students has been incalculable. The inquest is far from over.

It's clear this can never be allowed to happen like this again. Next year exams are due to happen, but contingency plans that don't have unfairness for some baked into them will also be needed.