

13/08/2020

I am heartbroken for everybody in my year group. Today is A-Level results day. One of my friends, who did their first GCSE in year 9, got all 8s and 9s at GCSE and was constantly predicted A\*s was given D,D,C. They missed both of their university offers. Students are not defined by their postcodes. If my friend went to Eton, if they were rich and living in a 'good' area, you can absolutely guarantee they would be getting the grades they'd worked for. The handling of results today is indicative of the rampant classism in this country, and exposed the ideas of meritocracy and social mobility that education is supposed to champion for the facade that they are.

I'm so angry. I'm angry that privately educated students, those from high-income areas, were given the grades they worked for and deserved while people from my area, from low-income, low-performing schools have been left to suffer. I'm angry that people online are saying 'get over it' or 'I got \_ \_ \_ and I did xyz'. Older people need to understand that the world is not the same as it was twenty years ago. We can't get a good job out of uni and work our way up. Most graduates I know spend years trying to get a grad job. Even when they have it, there's a constant fear of being let go, especially as a new hire. How do you think this situation is going to look for my year group, going into one of the deepest recessions there has ever been?

Let's also look at 'get over it'. I don't think people that say this fully understand the education system as it is today. I don't think people understand that in 2016 I was thinking about applying to ██████████ for sixth form and then, the day after results day, saw that a girl's body had been found after not getting into her first choice university. I don't think people understand that this pressure isn't just present in high-achieving places like the Girls School but in my state comp. I remember having a panic attack when my parents told me they wanted to visit my grandparents over the Easter break before my GCSEs because I felt I needed to be revising constantly to get good grades, that if I didn't my life would be ruined. The education system today has taught us that our grades are our worth as human beings. Even at my state comp I've had constant assemblies telling me that getting under a C would be 'betraying myself and my school' and that we needed to 'give back to the school that our younger siblings would be going to'. We've been taught, and to a large extent it's true in the current economic situation, that our grades will make or break us. Now, thousands of students in areas like mine have been betrayed, and had their futures taken away from them. I am so angry.

People are kidding themselves, also, to think that universities will counter this disaster of a system by being 'sympathetic' to applicants. I can count five of my friends- all from low-income areas- who have missed the entry requirements by one grade and have essentially been told that unless their appeal comes back to amend this they will be denied their place. So 'sympathy', clearly, is a stretch. We must also keep in mind that the vast majority of people from low-income areas or low-performing schools have been downgraded more than one grade: 'sympathy' will never be extended this far.

I consider myself so lucky to go to the state comp that I do, because here we're encouraged to go to university. It's not completely outlandish. I spent a lot of time in y12 doing access and outreach university schemes to try and put my application on the same level as those applying from more privileged backgrounds than my own, and when I was doing this I met so many students who are one of the only students in their college applying to university. Colleges where expectations are low and where peer pressure is towards downward mobility. I don't think the government, or those commenting about this issue online, understand how hard it is to try and go to university from a place like this. These students have been downgraded beyond belief, had their hopes and dreams

shattered, and their hard work, their absolute hustle as the majority worked long hours alongside their revision, shoved back in their face. These students deserved so much better today. My friends are heartbroken. I'm worried that what happened at the Girls School will repeat itself tenfold this year. My year group, and my generation, have been betrayed by a system made to benefit people born into privilege. All I am grateful for today is that the idea of meritocracy, and fair access to success, has been exposed as absolute fraud. I'm ashamed that Gavin Williamson is MP in my county.

### **17/08/2020**

Today my friend led a protest in their own and Education Secretary Gavin Williamson's constituency of South Staffordshire and spoke on our local BBC station and the national Sky News site. It's so powerful to see people my age standing up to such destructive legislation and fighting for our futures. Watching footage of the London protest and seeing the planning of protests for next week has been so heart-warming and gives me hope for the future. What worries me, though, is when it comes to things like school and economic reform, and climate change, it will be too late to solve the problems when my generation are in power. Politicians and decision-making bodies have to stop pushing responsibility onto future generations and start taking direct action right now. Today at 4pm an announcement was made that England would match the rest of the UK and trust teacher predicted grades. This is very good news and proves to me that lobbying and protesting works. I'm still quite worried about GCSE results next week as more disadvantaged pupils will be sitting this qualification.

I'm also worried and angry for students who were rejected, who confirmed their insurance but could have gone to their first choice, who accepted a place through clearing could have gone to 1st/2nd choice. I'm angry for those who will be forced to take an unexpected gap year in a pandemic and a recession. That the government had months to figure this out but decided to wait until days before, or a week after, to decide the future of a generation. If we needed any more proof that the government couldn't care less about my generation, this is it.

### **18/08/2020**

In order to get a picture of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected a full range of young people in the education system, I interviewed a student attending a 14-16s course at a college aimed at those who had struggled in the school system or had been home-schooled. The student left school halfway through their time in year 6 and was home-schooled for three years before attending the 14-16s course: they had planned to sit exams this year to spread the cost of being an external candidate, but this is now no longer possible. When I spoke to the student about what next year was going to look like for them, they told me that there was a real risk that schools may not accept external candidates at all due to the pandemic, and that they'd get less GCSEs than they had planned to. 'Having less GCSEs will make it more difficult to get a job and get into university', the student said, 'I feel like I had my chance at education back and now it's been taken away from me again'. To have had circumstances out of the student's control dictate their education and by default their future so many times before, to have this pandemic take away their 'hope' to achieve their dreams 'feels unfair, more than anything else'.

The student spoke about how their education already felt like an afterthought for the government: 'the system is already not built for us, it's obvious that they've completely neglected us'. They are 'locked into doing a course that is too basic', already not able to get the grades that they would have otherwise been able to achieve, and what they need to get into university or further education

courses. As with the rest of the education system, the pandemic seems to have exposed wider systemic problems and inequalities- that students that encountered issues in the education system are systematically excluded from achieving and aspiring to the same things as a student following a linear academic path doing GCSEs and A-Levels. The student described how poorly-funded their educational institution is, that there is limited additional funding and support for students who are struggling financially, and that this has only been exacerbated by lockdown. 'Much like the A-Level results, this is a classist issue', the student said, 'the people in my class whose families struggle financially, have been disproportionately affected'. The student also described how the pandemic has affected mental health support: 'a very large amount of the college and alternative schooling population are affected by mental health issues, so why aren't my learning support assistants and the mental health support staff at college being provided with the resources they need to support the young people in my class who are struggling with the current situation?'. Students 'have been left in the dark', and the lack of communication from staff has left students who are already struggling, who already have strong work anxiety, to cope by themselves. This lack of communication, though, is symptomatic of a complete lack of transparency and clarity in governmental advice, as well as a lack of funding to provide the support that is needed.

When it came to online working, the college, the student described, 'is not really set up for that'. Practical, vocational work has been ignored, and those already having financial struggles at home are suffering even more, because getting the resources they need to work has become so much more difficult. There is a clear disconnect between these students and those that government advice is catered towards- students that are physically unable to work full-time online have missed half a year of what was supposed to be their 'fresh start'. Students, like the one I spoke to, are being forced to delay or give up on their plans for the future, and sacrifice the qualifications that they will need to get jobs and further education placements. Thousands of students across the UK have been let down by the guidance, or lack thereof, put in place by the Education Secretary, and this will have a lasting impact on a generation of young people.

### **20/08/2020**

It's GCSE results day and a week since A-Level results were released. My friends are still stressed beyond belief, and many of them who already suffer with mental health conditions or have never suffered before are falling into depressive and self-destructive behaviours. One of my friends, who was given an unconditional to Royal Holloway at the last minute after been downgraded 2-3 grades per subject, still isn't sure if they will be able to sit exams in Autumn. OCR haven't published an Autumn exam timetable yet and their college isn't able to tell them if they can sit the exams because the government hasn't released enough information. My friend is planning to sit A-Level exams in her first term of university, missing the experience and the education, and they still don't know if this is able to happen. They physically can't afford to take a gap year, so this is their only option.

Another friend was predicted two A\*s and an A, and accepted an offer from Durham for A\*AB, with an A\* in English Literature, and missed this by having an A in English Literature instead. Durham denied them a place, and said if appeal grades met the entry criteria and came back as successful by 31st August then they might get a place for 2020/21 but it would probably be deferred, and if it came back after the 31st then it would definitely be deferred. Keeping in mind that appeals are supposed to take up to 42 days, and Results Day was on the 13th August, getting results by the 31st August was never going to be a possibility. Now that the government has made their U-Turn and based grades on Centre Assessed Grades, my friend has met the entry criteria before the 31st, but is still being told their place is uncertain and being offered money to defer entry until 2021/22. My friend is considering taking legal action against the university, on the basis that legally they cannot

be forcibly deferred, since by firming the university on UCAS they entered into a contract on the basis of starting university in 2020/21.

This friend also comes from a low-income background and physically cannot afford to defer during a recession and a pandemic. They were recently hospitalised for an eating disorder, and after Results Day went four days without eating because of the stress of the situation. I'm so angry that this is the situation our government has put us in. We have been failed. I will definitely be joining any protests or campaigns that I can for Gavin Williamson to step down as Education Secretary following this disaster.