

A-level results: Generation Covid faces university rejection

Tough A-level grades mean 40,000 could lose out

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Wednesday August 17 2022, 10.00pm, The Times

Tens of thousands of teenagers are expected to miss out on their first-choice university as the most disrupted school leavers since the Second World War receive their exam results today.

The first pupils to sit traditional exams since the start of the pandemic will be awarded about 80,000 fewer A and A* grades than last year's cohort.

Experts say 40,000 candidates could be rejected by their first choice if they miss a grade. This is partly because the population of school leavers has grown but universities also over-recruited last year owing to sharp grade inflation at A-level.

The majority of students are expected to get the results required for their firm offer, but those who miss their grades or have not yet secured an offer will face strong competition.

Leading Russell Group universities have been far more cautious with their offers this year. Last night they were advertising only a third of the number of courses through clearing than they were in 2019, a Times analysis found.

Clearing is the process by which empty spaces on university courses are matched to applicants who have not met the terms of their offer or who have exceeded their predicted grades and are seeking a better course.

Head teachers, however, said pupils with high predicted grades had had fewer offers from the most selective universities.

Grades will still be higher than when pupils last sat traditional exams with about a third of A-levels expected to receive A* or A. Ofqual, the exams regulator, has announced a two-step return to normality, with grade boundaries shifted to ensure that results are roughly halfway between those in 2019 and 2021, when 45 per cent of A-levels were for the top two grades.

Today's results are expected to reveal large discrepancies within that figure, regionally and between schools and subjects. Private schools had the biggest increase in A* and A grades during the pandemic so could see a similar fall.

The offer rate for the most competitive providers fell this year, with high-tariff providers — those which require the most UCAS points — only offering 55 per cent of applicants a place, compared with 60 per cent last year.

Last night The Times found there were only 1,519 clearing courses listed at 15 Russell Group universities, compared with 4,390 in 2019. The number of Russell Group courses advertised fell by 1,228 yesterday and what remains is expected to be taken quickly when clearing opens today at 2pm.

The total available to A-level students is likely to be lower, as several universities are only accepting graduates onto programmes such as nursing.

James Cleverly, the education secretary, said he was “not uncomfortable” with universities using the background of pupils to decide between applicants with similar grades.

“If universities are recognising that for some students in some circumstances, getting the top grade or whatever grade they’re making offers against are harder than students from other schools and other backgrounds, then I’m not uncomfortable with that,” he told The Daily Telegraph.

He said that if a student’s higher performance is against a tougher backdrop than in other circumstances, “I don’t think it’s wrong that that is recognised”.

UCAS displays live information about clearing places, and during the course of the day yesterday the number of Russell Group courses advertised fell by 1228. The overall available clearing places for England fell from 26,426 to 26,104.

Several Russell Group universities have already pulled out of clearing, while The University of Liverpool removed 526 courses which had been listed due to an “administrative blip”. Today, the university had no courses available.

A spokeswoman said it would be in clearing for “a small number of high-quality candidates” but it was too early to say which courses might have space.

The University of Manchester had just 11 courses listed, compared with 178 on Monday and 222 at the same time in 2019, while Leeds had only 4 compared with 248 in 2019.

Demand for the service could be high. Polling by UCAS earlier this year found 21 per cent of students planned to use clearing to shop around for good courses even if they make the terms of their offer.

These students “could be seen as the most likely group to decline a confirmed place” in favour of a better option available via clearing, a UCAS analysis earlier this year said.

Kieran McLaughlin, headmaster of Durham School, said: “We have certainly seen an increase in the number of rejections without interview for the more competitive courses and universities, particularly for medicine. It applies pretty much across the board of Russell Group universities.”

He said University College London, Imperial College and Edinburgh had all been extremely selective, mainly with science and maths applicants, but also economics and business.

Lucy Elphinstone, headmistress of Francis Holland School, Sloane Square, said universities had not asked for noticeably higher grades for her pupils, but added: “The difference has been fewer offers than usual from some places such as Edinburgh, UCL and the London School of Economics. The old regime of ‘offer high, accept low’ is over.”

David James, deputy head at Lady Eleanor Holles School in southwest London, said: “Universities are clearly managing their numbers very carefully this year. There is real evidence of offers being one or two grades higher.”

Geoff Barton, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, said: “This cohort has been more disrupted than any since the Second World War. They have spent the past two-and-a-half years under the shadow of the pandemic. The impact on results is likely to be uneven depending on how schools, colleges and communities have been affected.”

The head of Ofqual said teenagers had been desperate to prove themselves. Jo Saxton said: "I've visited dozens of schools. Students have been very clear that they wanted to sit their exams. They spoke about wanting that rite of passage. We have asked exam boards to be more lenient this year, to reflect the disruption."

Mike Nicholson, director of recruitment at Cambridge, said students should still feel optimistic about results.

"At the minute I think we're predicting possibly about 80 per cent of students getting into their first choice, which is high when you compare it to the times when we last had exams," he said. "So most students — the majority of students — will end up probably getting their first place."

Even though competition would be high, Nicholson urged students to take their time making a clearing decision.

Lella Violet Halloum, 18, a student at Harrogate Grammar School, is predicted A*A*A and already has an A* Extended Project Qualification, a popular A-level add-on where students plan and carry out a university-style research project.

She also works for IBM and received a Diana award for her volunteering in the pandemic.

Despite this, she received no offers from the five Russell Group universities she applied to for a politics degree.

Lella, who attended Harrogate Grammar School, a non-selective academy, said: "One after one, it was a rejection. I don't understand why, but I'm far from alone in it. So many of my peers, even those who did get offers, are taking a gap year because they know they'd be worth more in a normal year."

She and her year group, who had both their GCSEs and A-Levels disrupted by the pandemic including missing weeks of teaching, have been "completely let down" by the government, she added.

"I remember watching the announcement that our GCSEs had been cancelled and thinking, right, you've got two years to make sure my A-levels are okay," she said. "I think it could have totally been avoided. But instead, we're left with something where my generation will never recover."

James Cleverly, the education secretary, said: "I want to reassure anyone collecting their results that whatever your grades, there has never been a better range of opportunities available."