

Generation Covid faces university rejection

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

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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.

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 that they did in 2019, a *Times* analysis found.

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

However, 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 at 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 majority of pupils are expected to achieve the results required for their firm university offer, but those who miss their grades or have not secured an offer will face strong competition.

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.

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, in Chelsea, 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

Continued on page 2, col 5

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Pupils face university rejection

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."

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." He added that he was "not uncomfortable" with universities using the background of pupils to decide between applicants with similar grades.

A-level reports and analysis, pages 12-13