

Tracking the “June 2020 cohort”: did the cancellation of exams in England hinder progression to post-16 study?

Conference Abstract

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Abstract

Introduction

A growing body of evidence describes ways in which young people in England were affected by the initial disruption of the COVID pandemic. In terms of understanding the ongoing impact, however, major questions remain unanswered. In this research, we carried out the first detailed investigation of the progression of the 2020 Key Stage 4 (KS4) cohort, who were awarded Centre Assessment Grades by their teachers following the cancellation of their GCSEs.

Progression from GCSE to post-16 destinations is a critical transition in pupils' educational and career journeys (e.g., Gewirtz & Maguire, 2022; Thompson, 2017), and facilitating onward progression was cited as a top priority by decision-makers tasked with replacing the cancelled assessments (DfE, 2020; Ofqual, 2020, p. 9). Notwithstanding a solution to grading, researchers stressed that COVID would also disrupt all those "practical processes" in schools and communities that typically shape and support 16-year-olds' post-GCSE decisions (Lupton et al., 2020).

Therefore, as the actual progression to post-16 destinations of the 2020 cohort was a natural and urgent issue to raise, our primary research question was: How did the progression of the 2020 KS4 cohort compare to the progression of the 2019 cohort? Since there was already evidence that COVID affected some groups of learners more than others (Cullinare & Montacute, 2020; DfE, 2021; EEF, 2020) the research also investigated the progression of specific subgroups.

Method

If groups of students in the 2020 cohort were disadvantaged by the cancellation of exams in terms of their progression, it was important to discover this as soon as possible. Given this urgency, this research analysed the Post-16 Learning Aims (PLAMS) extract of the National Pupil Database (NPD), which captured the courses that pupils from the 2020 cohort embarked upon in Autumn 2020. By matching this to KS4 results data in the NPD, and pupil and school characteristics captured by the School Census, we were able to analyse progression of the 2020 KS4 cohort in 2021.

We produced descriptive statistics to quantify the overall changes in progression experienced by the 2020 cohort compared with the 2019 cohort, and for important subgroups of particular concern (including of differing ethnicities, level of socio-economic disadvantage, and level of general academic attainment).

Findings

In terms of overall progression to post-16 study, the results showed that pupils from the 2020 cohort were slightly more likely to start post-16 education than those who sat exams the previous year (+1.6 percentage points). While perhaps surprising, this could reflect the fact that the decision to cancel pupils' exams came in March 2020, when pupil's post-16 plans were already quite firm.

Other key findings of the research include:

- Pupils in the 2020 KS4 cohort were more likely to progress to qualifications at Level 3 (A levels or equivalents) than those in the previous year, and to start three or more A levels.
- While progression rates to post-16 study increased for all pupils, the increase was very slightly higher for those from the most deprived areas than those from the least deprived areas. There was also a slight increase in the numbers of pupils with lower results at GCSE continuing into post-16 education, while the proportion of those with higher results remained unchanged.
- Unexpectedly, pupils from the 2020 cohort were less likely than those from 2019 to have either dropped or changed courses within the first months of post-16 study.

Conclusions and significance

A primary motivation of this research was to inform ongoing efforts (e.g., provision of guidance and/or skills support in education and the workplace) to mitigate the disadvantages experienced by the 2020 cohort. We also sought to become aware of patterns that might affect subsequent Covid cohorts (while noting that disruptions to learning, the societal context, and assessment arrangements varied for each cohort), and inform future policy-making.

The findings so far suggest pupils were not disadvantaged by the cancellation of GCSE exams when it came to starting their A levels and other post-16 qualifications. However, there were some changes in the rates at which different groups of pupils progressed to different courses. In combination with the clear disruptions to learning (and life) experienced by young people, this may contribute differences in the ongoing needs of students enrolled on post-16 courses.

As part of our ongoing research, we will analyse the 2020 cohort's 2022 qualification results once this data becomes available to researchers in 2023. This will increase our understanding of the 2020 cohort's progression, and contribute evidence on the retention and performance of this cohort during their post-16 courses.

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Full paper

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