



BRIEFING PAPER

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A level results in England and the impact on university admissions in 2020-21

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Summary

The annual university admissions cycle for full-time undergraduates across the UK follows the same pattern every year - the **UCAS admission system** opens in the autumn and students apply for places, universities allocate places during the year and places are confirmed in the summer after the release of school examination results in August, students who achieve lower than expected grades may secure a place through the Clearing scheme which opens on results day.

In 2020 all schools and colleges in England were closed in March due to the coronavirus pandemic and **public examinations were cancelled. Ofqual the examinations regulator was tasked with devising a system for assessing and allocating students final grades** in the absence of examination marks – the method chosen was based on several factors including: **centre assessed grades (CAGs)**, **pupil rankings** and a computer model or **algorithm** which took into account the **past performance of individual schools**.

On 13 August students in England were informed of their final grades- **40% of students had been awarded grades lower than their CAGs**. The subsequent protests resulted in a Government U-turn on the method used to calculate grades and grades being awarded based on CAGs.

On results day around **two thirds of 18 year olds had been accepted on to their first choice of course**. However the move to CAGs has caused significant **grade inflation** and many more students have now become eligible for places at their first choice provider and on high tariff courses. Increased demand for places and movement of students has caused **turmoil in the admissions process** and higher education providers are facing unique challenges over **meeting offers and increasing capacity**.

This briefing paper outlines the causes of the situation and the ramifications for students and the higher education sector.

This is a fast moving issue and the information in this briefing is correct at the time of writing. The paper focuses on the situation that arose in England in August 2020.

Library briefing, [Coronavirus and schools: FAQs](#), 18 August 2020 gives further details of the A level assessment process and issues surrounding it.

1. A level assessment in England 2020

In 2020 all schools and colleges were closed in March due to the coronavirus pandemic and public examinations were cancelled. Ofqual the examinations regulator was tasked with devising a system for assessing and allocating students final grades in the absence of examination marks – the method chosen was based on several factors including: **centre assessed grades (CAGs)**, **pupil rankings** and a computer model or **algorithm which took into account the past performance of individual schools**.

1.1 How grades were calculated

The exams regulator, Ofqual, set the regulatory framework for issuing results in summer 2020 and the grading was done by the individual exam boards.

Schools and colleges in England were required to provide exam boards with a **centre assessment grade (CAG)** for each student in each subject studied. This was the grade a student would most likely have achieved if they had sat their exams and completed any non-exam assessments. They were also asked to supply awarding bodies with a list of candidates in **rank order**, within each grade, for each subject.

In April 2020 Ofqual conducted a [consultation](#)¹ on the exceptional arrangements that were proposed for awarding GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2020. The consultation acknowledged that in relying on CAGs “some centres will **inevitably be slightly more generous and others slightly more severe** than the average when they are determining centre assessment grades”.² Ofqual, therefore proposed that exam boards should **standardise grades**:

We are also consulting on the statistical methods we propose exam boards should use to achieve these aims, including:

- the degree of emphasis to be placed on historical evidence on students’ performance within each centre and on the trajectory of centres’ results
- whether the individual rank orders provided by the centres should be protected during the standardisation process or modified to account for potential bias

We are being advised by a group of assessment and statistical experts. The members of the panel and the terms of reference of the group are published in annex C.³

The statistical model used to standardise grades would take into account:

¹ Ofqual, [Exceptional arrangements for assessment and grading in 2020](#), April 2020, An [Equality Impact Assessment Literature Review](#) was published alongside the consultation

² Ibid p7

³ Ibid p8

- historical outcomes for each centre
- the prior attainment (Key Stage 2 or GCSE) of this year's students and those in previous years within each centre
- the expected national grade distribution for the subject given the prior attainment of the national entry⁴

In his initial direction [letter to Ofqual](#), in March the Secretary of State had also stated that to maintain standards the distribution of grades **should follow a similar profile to that in previous years.**⁵

The consultation received 12,623 completed responses.⁶ The analysis of responses showed that 89% of respondents agreed with the aim of the standardisation process and 62% agreed with the proposed model, however only 54% of respondents said that the use of historical evidence of centre performance was likely to be fair for all students.⁷

The [consultation decisions](#)⁸ were published in May and Ofqual stated that "we have decided to implement the majority of the proposals we set out in the consultation document". The document confirmed that the standardisation process would be included and stated that the model should place **more weight on historical evidence of centre performance:**

We have decided therefore to adopt a modified form of our proposal. The statistical standardisation model should place more weight on historical evidence of centre performance (given the prior attainment of students) than the submitted centre assessment grades where that will increase the likelihood of students getting the grades that they would most likely have achieved had they been able to complete their assessments in summer 2020.⁹

Changes to the process

In Scotland the grades for National 5s, Highers, and Advanced Highers were announced on 4 August – these grades were awarded using a similar process to the one used in England. A large number of students received lower grades than they had expected and on 10 August the Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said that they had not got the process right. Following this statement Deputy First Minister, John Swinney announced on 11 August that downgraded results would be withdrawn and grades would be awarded based on teacher assessments.

On 12 August 2020, the day before students in England were due to receive their A Level results in England, Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson MP made [a statement](#) in which he announced a new **'triple lock' policy**, which would mean that students could either: **accept their calculated grade**, appeal to **receive a valid mock**

⁴ Ibid p28

⁵ [Secretary of State, Letter to Sally Collier Chief Regulator, Ofqual](#), 31 March 2020

⁶ Ofqual [Analysis of Consultation Responses](#), May 2020

⁷ Ofqual [Analysis of Consultation Responses](#), May 2020 p44

⁸ Ofqual, [Consultation Decisions](#), May 2020

⁹ Ibid p10

result, or sit autumn exams.¹⁰ Mr Williamson confirmed that students could keep the results from whichever of the three options resulted in the highest grade(s).

This approach would apply to A Levels and GCSEs; similar arrangements would also be applied to technical and vocational qualifications.

Library briefing, [Coronavirus and schools: FAQs](#), 18 August 2020 gives further details of the A level assessment process and issues surrounding it.

1.2 A level results on 13 August 2020

On 13 August Ofqual announced the (standardised) [A level results](#) for England. This showed an **increase in the proportion of entries awarded an A or A* from 25.2% in 2019 to 27.6% in 2020**. 96.4% of results were said to be the same or within one grade of the CAGs. However, further analysis showed that:¹¹

- 59% of awarded grades were the same as CAGs
- 36% were one grade *below* the CAG
- 3% were two or more grades *below* the CAG
- 2% were one grade *above* the CAG
- Less than 1% were two or more grades *above* the CAG

The interim technical report from Ofqual on the summer 2020 A levels said:¹²

Our initial analysis of the CAGs showed that they were, in general, optimistic (although not always) and the combined effect would be likely to lead to overall national results that were implausibly high.

...

This optimism was not surprising. It is what is suggested in the research literature and data published every year by UCAS – schools and colleges tend to be optimistic when estimating the grades that students are likely to achieve... the cumulative effect of this optimism, if reflected in the final results, would have undermined confidence in those results.

What was the problem with the results?

It could be argued that looking at the overall picture results in 2020 compared favourably to previous years' results and the result on aggregate were 'fair'. However, on an individual level, **39% of students had been awarded grades lower than their CAGs – 36% were one grade lower and 3% were two grades lower**. This led to a widespread perception of unfairness particularly in cases where awarded grades were lower than CAGs because of the school or

¹⁰ Ofqual had previously confirmed that students in England would have the option to sit actual exams in the autumn term, if they felt their calculated grades were not an accurate reflection of their attainment

¹¹ Ofqual, [A level results 2020 infographic](#)

¹² Ofqual, [Awarding GCSE, AS, A level, advanced extension awards and extended project qualifications in summer 2020: interim report](#)

colleges past performance and/or the individual's ranking within the school.

Geoff Barton, leader of the ASCL head teachers' union said: "while there had been an overall increase in top grades, there was a "great deal of volatility among the results at school and student level" he also added "this results day must have been an absolute nightmare for many schools, colleges, and young people - it is a shambles."¹³

The Prime Minister, Boris Johnson said that "looking at the big picture, I think overall we've got a very robust set of grades."¹⁴

Inequality in results

Ofqual analysis of the grades initially awarded found that:¹⁵

The analyses conducted show no evidence that this year's process of awarding grades has introduced bias. Changes in outcomes for students with different protected characteristics and from different socio-economic backgrounds are similar to those seen between 2018 and 2019.

However the **downgrading of results affected state schools more than the private sector**.¹⁶

Paul Johnson director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies said that the grading system was "**manifestly unfair**" and **favoured private schools** with small numbers of students sitting individual A Levels. He also said that it was "**almost impossible for students at historically poor-performing sixth forms to get top grades**".¹⁷

Labour's deputy leader Angela Rayner criticised the system for "baking in inequality".¹⁸

1.3 Monday 17 August U-turn

On Monday 17 August, after a weekend of protests by students, Ofqual issued a [statement](#)¹⁹ **withdrawing the previous system**, and stating that student's grades for A-levels, AS levels and GCSEs would be based on **the centre assessed grade (CAG) or moderated grade whichever was the higher**.

This has resulted in many students having their grades changed (raised). The Government also announced that the **temporary cap on student numbers in 2020/21 would be lifted** to give universities more flexibility over higher education places.

This change means that many students who missed their university offers on 13 August, will now meet their offer if their CAG grade is

¹³ "[A-levels: Anger over 'unfair' results this year](#)", *BBC News*, 13 August 2020

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ *ibid*.

¹⁶ "A-levels and GCSEs: How did the exam algorithm work?" *BBC News*, 21 August 2020

¹⁷ "[Institute for Fiscal Studies. "The A Level grades were manifestly unfair and here's two reasons why"](#)", 17 August 2020

¹⁸ "[A-level results 2020: Cautious Keir Starmer calling for a Scottish-style exams U-turn shows it is possible](#)", *I News*, 14 August 2020

¹⁹ Ofqual, [Statement from Roger Taylor, Chair, Ofqual](#), 17 August 2020

higher. Students in this position have been advised to contact their first choice provider to discuss the possibility of reinstating their offers.

Revised results based on CAGs

On 20 August Ofqual released data tables showing the revised results, [Results tables for GCSE, AS and A level results in England, 2020](#).

The tables showed that the overall percentage of **A* grades has risen from 7.7% in 2019, to 14.3% in 2020** and the percentage of **A/A* grades has risen from 25.2% in 2019 to 38.1% in 2020**. This is an **unprecedented increase** and compares to initial results under the standardised model of 8.9% at A* and 27.6% at A/A*.

There were increases (compared to 2019) in A*/A grades in all major subjects of at least 9%. Some of the largest increases in awards of A*/A grades were in modern languages, music, computing and further maths. There were below average increases in sociology, maths and English language.

The original Ofqual assessment process was partly designed to avoid this type of **'grade inflation'**. This means that more students than ever before have achieved top grades.

Schools in Wales, and Northern Ireland have also announced that students will get the higher of the grade predicted by teachers or the one generated by the algorithm.

2. UK university admissions

Universities are independent, autonomous bodies and each institution has discretion to form its own admission policies and procedures – the Government does not get involved in university admission practices.

However this year universities and schools are in uncharted waters due to the cancellation of examinations and the new procedures used to allocate exam grades.

On 10 August, before A level results were announced, Michelle Donelan, the Minister of State for Universities, sent a [letter to universities](#) urging them to use **some flexibility** in admissions this year and asking that where possible institutions should **hold places open** for students until they got an appeal result:

I am writing to you to ask that you play your part in helping the young people affected by the events of this summer. I ask that you extend some flexibility in your admissions decisions this year, wherever you can, to assist young people in moving on to their next steps. Where you are aware that a student's grade may change as the result of an appeal, I would encourage you, where possible, to hold their place until they receive the result of that appeal.

[...]

Separate to the formal appeals process, you will also be in the best position to take a holistic view, using a wider range of evidence, of an individual's capability - working with their school or college. If as a result of this, you have reason to believe that they will be able to benefit from moving on to your institution, I would encourage you to allow them to do so.

2.1 The university application process

In the UK prospective students apply for university places through the [Universities and Colleges Admissions Service](#) (UCAS).

The annual university admissions cycle follows the same pattern every year - the UCAS admission system opens in the autumn and students apply for places, universities allocate places during the year and places are confirmed in the summer after the release of school examination results in August, students who achieve lower than expected grades may be able to secure a place through the Clearing scheme which opens on results day.

Students applying for university places through UCAS may apply for up to five different courses. Applicants must submit various types of information including: details of qualifications and courses being taken, the grades that their school predicts they will achieve in their exams, a personal statement and a reference. This information must be received sometime in January the year before a course starts if applications are to receive equal consideration. Applicants for Oxford and Cambridge Universities and for courses in medicine, dentistry and veterinary science must apply before October.

This information is passed to universities which assess the information provided and offer students places based on a holistic assessment of all the data provided. Some universities such as Oxford and Cambridge and high demand courses such as medicine and law, may require candidates to take extra tests and to attend interviews.

Details of the university admissions cycle and process is set out on the UCAS website at [Applying to university](#).

Box 1: Proposals for reform of the university admissions system

Various aspects of the university admissions system such as the use of predicted grades have been questioned for a number of years and reforms to the system, such as moving to a post qualification application (PQA) scheme, have been suggested. The Labour party currently endorses a move to PQA.

Currently two reviews of university admissions are being conducted. On 5 April 2019 the Education Secretary, Damian Hinds announced that the Department for Education would conduct a review of university admissions practices with a focus on unconditional offers and widening participation. The Office for Student (OfS) launched this review on 27 February 2020. On 22 July 2019 Universities UK (UUK) launched its own separate review of admissions. Library briefing, [The Review of University Admissions](#), 16 March 2020 discusses the ongoing debate around university admissions.

2.2 University offers

Each university has different entry requirements – these are set out on university websites. University admissions teams decide whether to offer places based on meeting their requirements and on an assessment of whether they consider the applicant could succeed on the course they have applied for. The number of places available on a course is also taken into account.

Offers of places are sent at any time during the application cycle but there is a deadline by which time all offers must be received. In 2020 due to the coronavirus this deadline was moved back two weeks to 20 May for applicants who applied by the January deadline.²⁰

Offers may be made conditional on meeting certain requirements (usually achieving specified exam grades) or unconditional. Students who accept a conditional offer may also accept a second offer as an insurance place – this is not an option for students who accept an unconditional offer.

Competitions and Market Authority [guidance](#) states that “when an offer is accepted, the HE provider and prospective student enter into a

²⁰ UCAS, [UCAS Undergraduate: types of offer](#)

contract”²¹An [article](#) on the Wonkhe website discusses the nature of the contract between institutions and students.²²

The Clearing and Adjustment process

Students without offers may enter [Clearing](#). Students with offers who wish to find an alternative place must turn down their offer if they want to enter Clearing. The Clearing process is open until October and aims to fill all remaining university places. This year a new personalised service called Clearing Plus was introduced to match students to places.

Students who have achieved better than expected results may be able swap their course through a process called [Adjustment](#) – this process allows students to seek a more suitable place whilst holding on their offer.

2.3 Applicant statistics 2020

Readers should look at The briefing paper [A level results in England and the impact on university admissions in 2020-21](#) for a more detailed analysis and the most up-to-date figures.

Analysis of applications by the pre-clearing deadline of 30 June was [published on 9 July 2020](#).

The total number of applicants at this point in the 2020 cycle was 652,790, up by around 14,800 or 2.3% on the same point in the 2019 cycle. This include all home and overseas students. The increase in 2020 followed a smaller one in 2019, but the total was still below equivalent numbers from 2014, 2015 and 2016. There was an increase in home applicants of 1.6% and a fall of 1.9% in those from the EU. Overseas applicants from outside the EU increased by 7,800, or 9.6%, to their highest ever level at this stage in the process.²³

A total of **243,170** 18 year olds from England applied by the 30 June deadline; a 3% increase in 2019 and a new record high. This was despite a fall in the 18 year old population of 1.5%. The **application rate for 18 year olds also increased to a new record of 40.5%**.²⁴

2.4 Acceptances

UCAS started publishing daily analysis of how many applicants have been placed on results day, 13 August. On the first day **158,500** 18 year olds from England had been accepted on to their first choice of course, up from just under 150,000 in 2019. This was **65% of applicants** compared to 64% on results day in 2019. A further **20,700** had been accepted on results day 2020 on a course that was their insurance choice or through clearing. The latest data shows that as of 27 August a total of **215,600 had a place on a course**, a further 5,500 were

²¹ Competitions and Market Authority, [Higher education: consumer law advice for providers](#), March 2015 p5

²² Wonkhe, [“They met the terms of their offer. Aren’t we required to admit them?”](#), 18 August 2020

²³ [University applications rise during lockdown](#), UCAS 9 July 2020

²⁴ [2020 applicant figures – 30 June deadline](#), UCAS

holding an offer²⁵ and 23,000 were still free to be placed in clearing. **The total number placed was 4.6% higher than at the same point in 2019.** The number of English 18 year old applicants with a place which is **deferred until a later year was 15,060 in 2020, down slightly from 15,170 at this stage in the cycle in 2019.**²⁶

2.5 'Turmoil' in admissions

As a result of the switch to CAGs, students' grades have generally risen and many more students are now be eligible to apply for higher education courses and increased numbers of students are eligible for high tariff courses and providers. This situation has **caused demand for places to soar and increased movement by students has caused challenges for both universities and students.**

About 15,000 students who were originally turned down by their first-choice university met their offer with teacher-assessed grades²⁷ and many of these students may now want to take up their first choice places. On 20 August it was announced that students who have accepted alternative offers can **'self-release'** through UCAS from their existing offer and accept a new offer at their preferred university.

However many students may find that places on their preferred course have been allocated and that alternative courses are full.

An article in The [Guardian](#)²⁸ 17 August reported vice chancellors as saying that "not all universities will be able to honour all their original offers" and the Russell Group, issued a [statement](#) which said that their universities were "working hard to be as flexible and compassionate as possible" but that there were limits to what could be done by the university sector alone.

Some students who have met their offer conditions may have been offered a deferred place next year if their courses was full this year.

The new grades will be passed on to universities on Friday 21 August and some universities have suspended their admissions until then.

20 August: Agreed action to support students into preferred university

On 18 August the Universities Minister, Michelle Donelan convened a [Higher Education Taskforce](#) with higher education sector groups including: UCAS, the Office for Students (OfS), Universities UK, GuildHE, the Russell Group, University Alliance, and MillionPlus.

On 20 August the Taskforce [announced](#) that the Government and the higher education sector had together agreed action to support students

'We understand that this move brings challenges for universities and colleges, but they should do all they can to make sure that students with the grades and potential to succeed do not miss out on their first choice course

[Office for Students,](#)
18 August 2020

²⁵ They have received an offer, but the outcome has not yet been resolved. For instance, a conditional offer for which results have yet to be verified against conditions of the offer.

²⁶ UCAS, [Daily clearing analysis](#) (27 August)

²⁷ UCAS, "[UCAS receives upgraded centre assessed grades and provides analysis on number of upgraded students able to meet conditions of original first choice](#)", 19 August 2020

²⁸ "Not all UK students will get first-choice place, universities warn", *The Guardian*, 17 August 2020

into preferred universities and that **all students who achieved the required grades will be offered a place at their first choice university:**

Yesterday's (19 August) daily meeting of the Government's Higher Education Taskforce agreed to honouring all offers across courses to students who meet their conditions this coming year wherever possible, or if maximum capacity is reached to offer an alternative course or a deferred place.²⁹

²⁹ Department for Education, "[Action agreed to support students into preferred universities](#)", 20 August 2020

3. Issues

The policy U-turn on A-levels has created significant challenges for universities caused by movement of students between institutions and increased demand for places. A number of factors will affect how many students can be accepted onto courses such as the need to provide, staffing, accommodation and facilities and it should be noted that during the current pandemic universities may also be constrained in the number of students they can take by the need to provide a Covid-19 safe environment.

3.1 Removal of the student numbers cap: impact on lower tariff institutions

In May it was announced that a **temporary cap** would be placed on student numbers. This was in response to concerns that applications for higher education would fall (particularly from international students) and that this could result in high tariff providers “hoovering up” available students leaving other providers low on numbers and in financial difficulty.

In response to the higher potential demand for higher education places caused by the turmoil in this year’s exam cycle the **cap on student places has been removed. This will allow universities to expand their intakes and provide for the increased demand.**

However, it is possible that removing the cap **will benefit some providers more than others** and this might cause difficulties for some institutions that may already be struggling financially. Universities UK commented on the instability that could be caused in some universities:

These are very good universities with fine reputations and currently secure financial positions. They produce excellent graduates, but have slightly lower entry requirements. Usually they would expect to welcome large number of students through clearing but the late movement of students between institutions as a result of this policy change risks making their financial positions far less secure.³⁰

The [Institute for Fiscal Studies](#) has made a similar point about the potentially **difficult position of lower tariff universities:**

While the top universities could be awash with students who have now met their offers, many lower-ranked universities may have the opposite problem. While these institutions can usually count on a steady stream of students who have missed their offers elsewhere, this could be reduced to a trickle this year. In addition, many students may try to get out of their newly-confirmed places as they realise they could get in somewhere better (although capacity constraints at top universities may limit the opportunities for this).

To counteract this effect, lower-ranked universities could dip into the pool of potential students who got no offers or have not yet

Government must intervene to protect the vital role of these institutions. Financial support will also be needed to ensure those losing students can maintain capacity for next year – particularly important as we see an uplift in the 18-19 year-old population and in light of increased deferrals.

Universities UK, 25 August 2020

³⁰ Universities UK blog, “[The grades u-turn caused a ripple effect throughout education – it could be catastrophic for unis](#)”, 25 August 2020

applied. These students will have much better grades than usual this year, and many might be interested in going to university given the exceptionally tough labour market. Attracting these students could help the lowest-ranked universities avoid large losses.

[...]

However, there does remain a risk that some lower-ranked universities might lose a substantial share of their intake, which could be financially crippling – especially for those whose pre-COVID financial situation was already weak³¹

Removal of numbers cap on specific subjects

The number of students studying on certain courses such as: **medicine, dentistry, veterinary science and undergraduate teacher training** is regulated – in the case of medical/dentistry students this is because of the high cost of their training, and the need to support future NHS workforce planning. In 2020-21 there were to be around 7,000 domestic medical student places.

With high numbers of students now achieving top grades many more students have been successful in meeting the required grades to study medicine, dentistry, veterinary science and this has caused extreme pressure on places on these courses.

On 20 August the HE Taskforce announced the specific **cap on places for domestic medicine, dentistry and veterinary science places would be lifted for the coming academic year:**

For medicine and dentistry, we are lifting the specific cap set on places for these subjects and providers should offer places to students who meet the terms of their offer this year, where clinical placements are available. I will provide additional funding through the Teaching Grant in line with existing per student rates to support the delivery of these courses.

Providers have also raised concerns about offering additional places to students in other high cost subjects, such as veterinary sciences, nursing and STEM subjects. We will provide additional funding through the Teaching Grant to help providers meet additional costs.³²

3.2 Provider capacity

Newcastle University and others have referred to 'crazy demand' for places since the change in results on Monday 17 August.³³ Universities which are working hard to accommodate students' choices may potentially end up with **very large intakes of students in 2020-21**. A [report](#) by the Institute for Fiscal Studies has suggested amongst UK students holding offers at Oxford or Cambridge, around 10% more

³¹ Institute for Fiscal Studies, "[The government's A Level failure leaves universities in the lurch](#)", 19 August 2020

³² Minister of State for Universities, [Letter to Vice Chancellors](#), 20 August 2020

³³ "[A-levels U-turn: Universities facing 'crazy demand' from students](#)", BBC News, 19 August 2020

than expected (or around 500 extra students) may now have achieved their offers.³⁴

Universities UK has said that accommodation, the availability of teaching rooms and lab benches, work placements, and mental health support, facilities will be **under immense pressure**³⁵ due to increased student numbers and universities have said that they will need **Government help to provide extra capacity.**

On 18 August the Universities Minister, Michelle Donelan convened a [Higher Education Taskforce](#) and said that she would seek to support the sector and resolve issues:

“We are working closely with the higher education sector to understand the challenges facing universities and provide as much support as we can. Today, I led the first meeting of our new taskforce and I will hold meetings every day with the sector to resolve these issues.

“We are supporting universities, including by announcing our intention to remove temporary student number controls and working with them to help them prioritise students and uphold their first choice either this coming year, or as a last resort the following year.

“We announced a package of support for the sector during the pandemic, including bringing forward tuition fee and research funding, and a scheme to assess any restructuring support higher education providers may need.”³⁶

An [article](#) on the Wonkhe website discussed other issues around provider capacity and regulatory requirements:

But institutional student numbers caps are (hopefully) not the only thing stopping universities from declaring a course is full – there are obvious other capacity issues, especially in light of Covid-secure opening.

If nothing else, the Office for Students [reportable events guidance](#) reminds us that a substantial increase in the number of new students registering at a provider could affect that provider’s ability to satisfy condition E2 (management and governance) in the short term, and conditions B2 and B3 (quality and standards) in the longer term.

It argues that a substantial sudden increase could raise concerns about whether such growth was effectively planned and managed, or whether the quality of student support or student outcomes will be maintained for larger numbers of students. It seems hard to believe that an increase in student numbers of more than projection +5% could be regarded as anything other than substantial and by definition unplanned.³⁷

³⁴ Institute for Fiscal Studies, [“The government’s A Level failure leaves universities in the lurch”](#), 19 August 2020

³⁵ Universities UK blog, [“The grades u-turn caused a ripple effect throughout education – it could be catastrophic for unis”](#), 25 August 2020

³⁶ [“HE Taskforce: Understanding the challenges facing universities to provide as much support as possible”](#), *FE News*, 18 August 2020

³⁷ Wonkhe, [“They met the terms of their offer. Aren’t we required to admit them?”](#), 18 August 2020

3.3 Deferring a place – the 2021 intake

It has been suggested that many students will be unable to secure their first choice place this year and so increased numbers of student may choose to defer their place until 2021. This could cause **pressure on admissions next year** as students holding deferred places could result in less places being available for new applicants.

So far the number of deferrals, across all ages, among all home applicants was **100 lower than at the same point in the 2019 cycle**. Deferrals from overseas applicants are up by almost 800.³⁸ This is thought to be connected to the coronavirus pandemic.

Furthermore some 2020 students may choose to re-apply in 2021 and students who have achieved high grades this summer could potentially put other students taking exams in 2021 at a disadvantage if the grading system returns to normal and previous grades patterns resume.

However, there are lower numbers of 18 year olds next year and other factors may have an impact such as a potential drop in EU students after their funding changes come into play. Universities will also have more time to plan their intakes so this may also alleviate some of the potential difficulties.

On 2 September the Universities Minister, Michelle Donelan said that both universities and herself "**want to keep the number of students deferring to a minimum**".³⁹ She also said that she was working to "make available a range of opportunities for development" for those who end up having to take a gap year:

"I want these students to know that I have been working across government and with the higher education sector to make available a range of opportunities for development that will provide young people with an additional string to their bow."

Ms Donelan said information on the available options would be shared "shortly".

³⁸ UCAS, [Daily clearing analysis](#) (27 August)

³⁹ "[A-levels news: Government-backed gap years for students who missed university places this year](#)", *The Independent*, 2 September 2020

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