



# A Levels and University Access 2021



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## KEY FINDINGS

### Impact on learning

- More than a quarter (27%) of university applicants from a working class background struggled with insufficient study space at home this year, compared to 16% of those in middle class households. 7% reported lacking sufficient internet access.
- 15% of applicants studying in private schools received one to one tutoring this year, compared to 9% at state school.
- 69% feel they have fallen behind with their studies due to the disruption, with many also feeling that they have fallen behind even in comparison to their peers. 37% of state school applicants felt this, compared to 25% of private school students.

### Assessment

- There was significant variety in the intensity of A Level assessment undertaken by students. The most common number of mini-exams/in class assessments per subject reported by teachers was three or four (38%). However 18% reported two or fewer, and 18% more than six. There were few differences between the state and the private sector, or across different types of school.
- 96% of teachers report at least one assessment sat under exam conditions was used for calculating A Level grades. 63% reported using mock exams, 80% reported using past papers, and 35% reported assessments written by teachers themselves. Some schools used home (13%) or previous classroom work (17%).
- Independent schools were more likely than state schools to use a wider variety of assessments, including giving prior access to questions and 'open book' assessments. More affluent state schools and those with higher Ofsted ratings were more likely to use mock exams and assessments based on past papers. The opposite was true for homework and classroom work, which were more likely to be used by more deprived

state schools and those with lower Ofsted ratings.

- 52% of teachers working in the most deprived schools of the country thought the support they received to determine grades was insufficient compared to 44% of those working in schools in the most affluent areas.
- 23% of teachers at private schools report that parents had approached or pressured them about their child's grade this year, compared to 17% at more affluent state schools, and 11% at the least affluent.
- Students' views are more positive this year than in 2020, with fewer anticipating that their grades will be harmed, and more agreeing that the system is as fair or more fair than a typical year. Anxieties around fairness also eased between April and June this year.
- However, almost half (49%) of state school applicants said they didn't feel confident that they would have the right information and support if they needed to appeal their grades. Applicants from independent schools were less likely to not feel confident (43%).

### University applications and entry

- University applications this year are at record levels, including from under-represented groups. The number of offers made by selective universities have also risen from last year, but the offer rate (the ratio of applications to offers) has dropped by 5 percentage points, meaning entry is more competitive. In contrast, the offer rate has risen at less selective universities.
- Half of this year's applicants feel that the pandemic disruption will negatively impact their chance of getting into their first choice university, particularly those applying to Russell Group institutions (56%).
- However some anxieties have eased since the Spring, with 47% of applicants worried about getting into their first university in June, down from 62% in April. Nonetheless, many feel unprepared to start university this autumn. Those from a state school are more than twice as likely to feel unprepared– 36% compared to 17% of private school applicants.

## INTRODUCTION

In the wake of last summer's disruption to the Higher Education entry process, this year's cohort of young people finishing school and college have faced their second consecutive year of disruption to their education, impacting their schooling,

their exams and assessment, and the transition to their next steps in education.

Since the pandemic first hit in March 2020, schools and colleges have had two major periods of closure and enforced remote teaching. This had a significant impact on the learning

of pupils, particularly those without a laptop, internet connection or suitable space to study, or with lower levels of provision from their school.<sup>1</sup>

Even when schools and colleges have been able to open, many year groups and class 'bubbles' have been sent home to isolate for

days at a time after coming into contact with someone infected with Covid-19. Again, this has affected disadvantaged pupils the most,<sup>2</sup> and more closures have been seen in the North of England as well as London compared to elsewhere in the South.<sup>3</sup> Much emerging evidence has demonstrated the effect these disruptions have had on educational progress in school, with a particular impact on those from disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>4</sup>

And while the education of pupils of all ages has been affected, disadvantaged students in post-16 education are at a particularly crucial time in their lives. Those who entered post-16 education in 2019 have faced two years of disrupted education, and are now facing a crucial transition period, with very little time left to catch up before they move into further study or employment.

The government has announced several interventions over this time to help secondary school pupils, from the setup of the National Tutoring Programme (which has now enrolled over 240,000 pupils)<sup>5</sup> to the provision of laptops to students to allow them to participate in online lessons.<sup>6</sup> However, the support provided to students in post-16 education has been lacking. The 'recovery premium' (additional funding for disadvantaged pupils to help them 'catch up', announced in early 2021), the pupil premium and the National Tutoring Programme all end at age 16, excluding a generation of students coming to the end of their compulsory education, and proposals to date have fallen short of what is needed to fully support pupils.<sup>7</sup>

Examinations as well as learning have been affected. After so much class time was missed, it became clear from the beginning of this academic year that it would be hugely challenging for examinations (both at GCSE and A Level, as well as equivalent qualifications in the UK such as Scottish Highers) to resume in their pre-pandemic form. As the autumn wore on, it emerged that school closures were falling unevenly, threatening

the fairness of any national exam, creating dilemmas for Ofqual and the UK's other regulators.

In November 2020, Wales announced that GCSEs, AS and A Levels were to be cancelled, and in December, Scotland announced that Higher exams would no longer take place (National 5s had already been cancelled in October). In January, England followed suit by announcing that exams would be cancelled and replaced once again by teacher assessed grades.

Faced with another year of no exams, changes were clearly required to avoid the chaos of last year's grading system, when a combination of teacher ranking and an algorithm was initially used to calculate students' grades. While overall, socio-economic attainment gaps remained steady compared to previous years<sup>8</sup> the enforced maintenance of these gaps, as well as many cases of individual unfairness, led to public outrage. Particular issues arose for high performing disadvantaged pupils in deprived areas,<sup>9</sup> with the grades system seen as a cap on aspiration. This system also generated significant uncertainty amongst university applicants, with Sutton Trust research finding that 34% anticipated that they were more likely to require UCAS Clearing or Adjustment due to the pandemic and almost 1 in 3 expecting to miss out on their first-choice university as a consequence of the disruption.<sup>10</sup> After the backlash, the system then went back to using teacher assessed grades to determine final grades, and although the average socio-economic gaps still remained

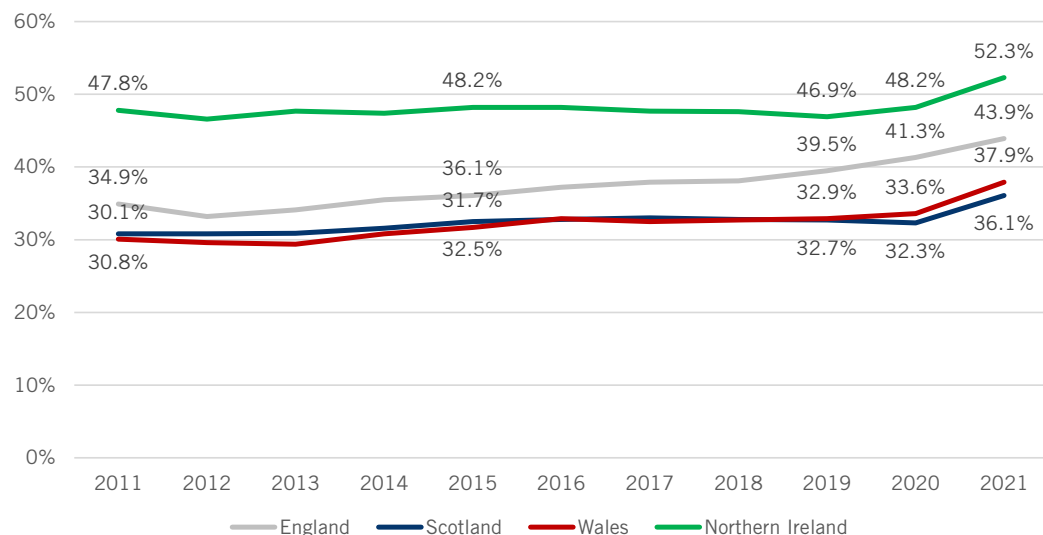
steady, overall averages can disguise patterns under the surface.<sup>11</sup> For example, the FSM attainment gap for C and over narrowed by 2 percentage points, but for A and over widened by 2 percentage points.

In 2021 pupils' grades will be determined by teachers, without any adjustment by algorithm, using assessment of content relating to only topics their class had been taught.<sup>12</sup> While such an approach could help to account for schools having been able to cover varying amounts of the curriculum, The Trust has been concerned about individual-level differences in learning loss, most likely to impact disadvantaged pupils who were less likely to have fully accessed home learning. With schools free to use many different types of assessment to inform grades, with no external marking and only light touch moderation, there are also significant worries about consistency and fairness.<sup>13</sup> In such circumstances of uncertainty, particularly when stakes are high, it is often the schools and parents with the greatest resources and 'savvy' that are most adept at navigating these complex waters.

## ENTRY TO UNIVERSITY IN 2021

Uncertainty remains over university entry this year. Despite widespread anxiety, and the chaos of the grades controversy, last year saw record numbers of disadvantaged 18-year-olds accepted into university.<sup>14</sup> In the circumstances, many universities accepted significantly higher numbers of students than a

Figure 1: Higher Education application rate, UK domiciled 18 year olds, June deadline 2011-2021



normal year, particularly selective universities, which proved a boon for access. However, it is not clear that we will see similar patterns in access this year, with the whole admissions cycle taking place in a new context, whereas the pandemic only impacted the final stages of admissions in 2020. Indeed, patterns of applications and offers for UK students are markedly different in 2021, with a substantial increase in 18 year olds applying to university in all four nations (Figure 1). The overall application rate has leapt to 43.3% in 2021, from 40.5% in 2020 and 38.9% in 2019.

Whilst UCAS have seen increases in the number of offers from selective institutions, even higher than last year,<sup>15</sup> there are reports from headteachers that students set to achieve top grades have missed out on offers from all their choices.<sup>16</sup> Some universities have expressed concern about grade inflation (the 2020 A level grades, eventually based on teacher assessment, were the highest ever), with worries that more applicants will meet the conditions of their offers than some universities are able to accommodate.

With coronavirus still circulating in summer 2021, concerns among students also remain about what the university experience will be like in the next academic year, with social mixing restrictions (such as holding lectures online and delaying freshers week)<sup>17</sup> possibly in place.

This research brief considers how the pandemic has disrupted education for this year's cohort of university applicants, changed the nature of A level assessments and affected students' transition from school to

university. It looks at applicants' concerns about starting university in the autumn as well as the views of both teachers and university applicants on this year's grading system.

### LEARNING IN LOCKDOWN

Even more so than last year's cohort, students heading to university this year have had a substantially disrupted education due to nationwide lockdowns and school closures across two years of their education. Many have also spent time at home even when schools have been open, due to their school or bubble closing, or needing to self-isolate due to having Covid-19. Without a classroom environment to work in, access to the internet as well as a suitable space to work at home became a necessity to continue learning, revising, and applying to university.

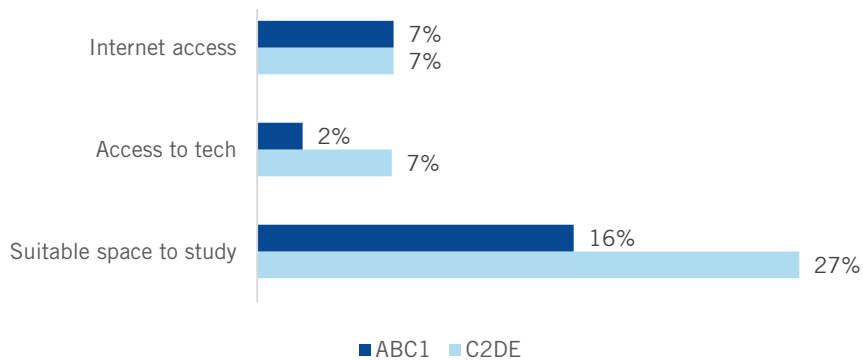
To investigate this year's university applicants' experience of learning and preparing for university at home; how applicants feel about this year's grading system; and concerns about starting university, we polled 497 UK

students in April 2021 and 463 in June 2021 through YouthSight.<sup>18</sup>

When thinking about the most recent period of lockdowns and school closures, 4% of the young people surveyed reported they had insufficient access to a sole computer, tablet, or laptop to work on (Figure 2). This figure has reduced since our previous polling in April 2020,<sup>19</sup> where 9% did not have sole access to an internet-enabled device, most likely due to the government's scheme (as part of strategies to improve internet access at home, as referenced above), as well as efforts from charities and businesses to provide free laptops for disadvantaged young people. 7% of applicants said they had insufficient access to the internet. This is the same figure as when we polled university applicants in April 2020, despite the government's scheme to provide internet dongles to those without a connection as part of education recovery plans.<sup>20</sup> Issues with internet coverage and bandwidth needs for an increase in online lessons during more recent lockdowns may explain this.

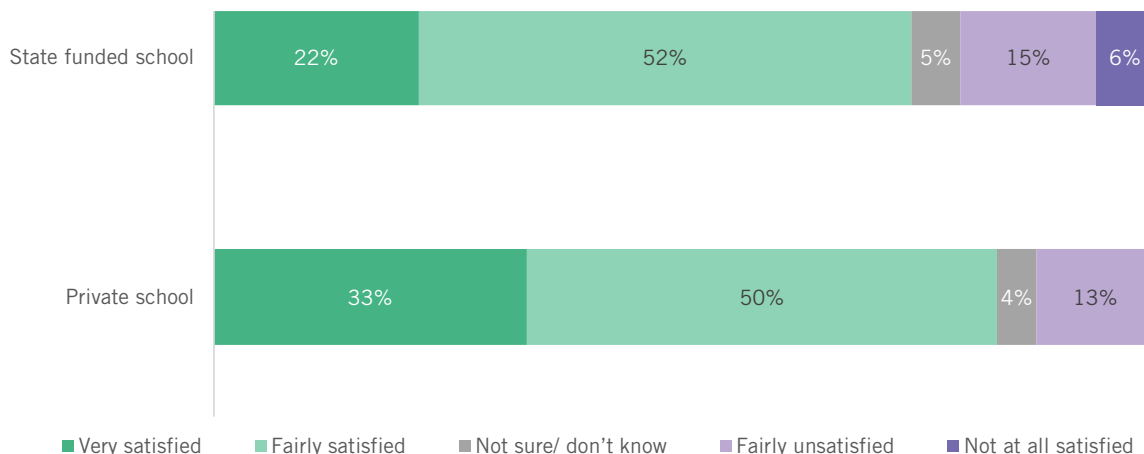
Access to a suitable space to study

Figure 2: Access to the internet, tech and a suitable study space by socio-economic group



Source: Youthsight student polling, April 2021

Figure 3: Satisfaction with support for learning by school type



at home has also remained an issue, with 19% of applicants saying they had insufficient study space (up from 17% in April 2020). As discussed in previous Sutton Trust research,<sup>21</sup> as school provision for online learning increased in 2021 compared to the previous year, so did expectations on pupils, whether in terms of internet strength for online lessons, or suitable space to engage with them. 27% of those from a working-class background said they had insufficient access to a study space - 11 percentage points more than those from a middle-class background (16%).

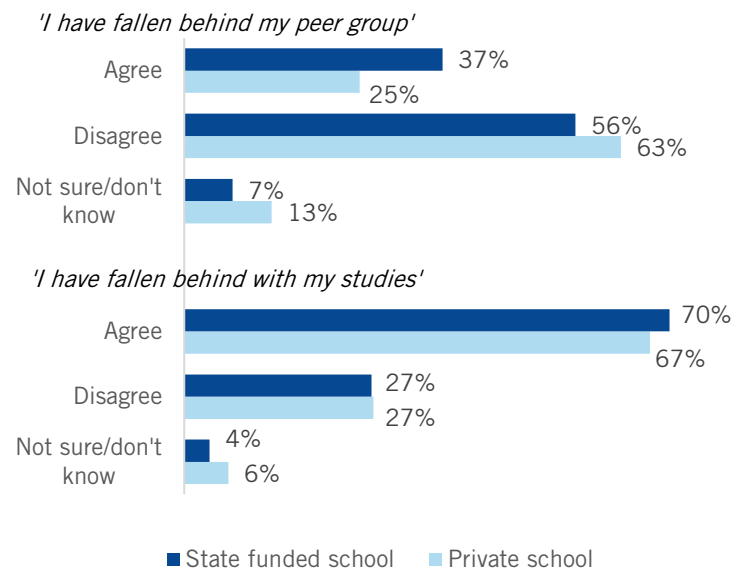
As shown in Figure 3, whilst out of the classroom, the vast majority of applicants (75%) thought that the support and resources for learning provided by their school was satisfactory. This is 7 percentage points up compared to the first lockdown in April 2020 when 68% of applicants said they were satisfied. Nonetheless, a sizeable proportion (20%) were not satisfied. Those at a state school were 8 percentage points more likely to be dissatisfied compared to those at a private school (21% compared to 13%).

To further support students missing out on class time, some students have started (or carried on) receiving private tutoring. 10% of applicants said they had received tutoring paid for either by their school or family. This is only slightly more than during the first lockdown in March 2020, where 8% of children were accessing private tuition (albeit based on a larger sample of pupils from all year groups),<sup>22</sup> despite additional funding for tuition for 16-19 year olds being announced in February of this year.<sup>23</sup> Those at a private school were 6 percentage points more likely to report receiving tutoring at 15% compared to 9% of those at a state school.

10% of those at a private school reported that this tutoring had been paid for by their school, compared to only 2% of those at state schools.

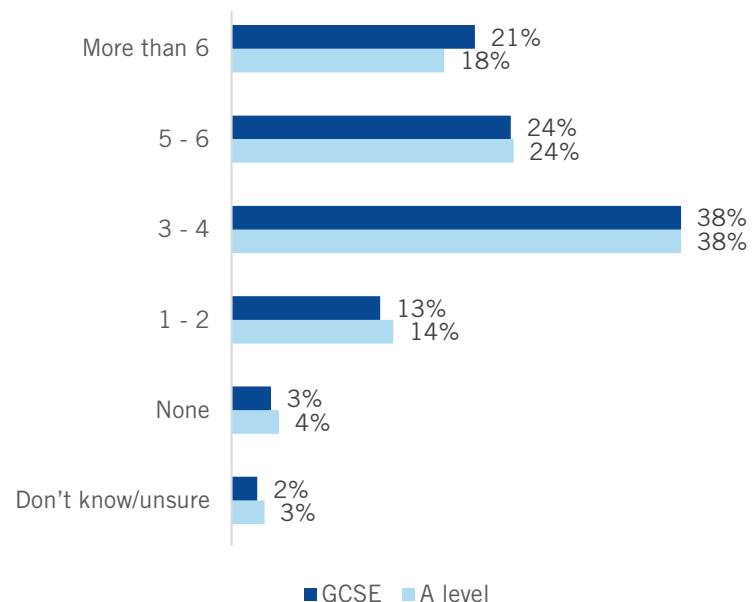
In June, 69% of applicants agreed with the statement 'I have fallen behind with my studies' compared to where I would have been without the disruption', with 30% saying that they strongly agree. Applicants from a state school were slightly more likely to agree with the statement

Figure 4: Views on falling behind by school type



Source: Youthsight student polling, June 2021

Figure 5: Average number of mini exams/in class assessments used by teachers to determine GCSE and A Level grades



Source: Teacher Tapp survey of teachers, June 2021 (Excludes those who said 'Not Relevant')

than those from a private school (70% compared to 67% respectively) (Figure 4).

Furthermore, 36% of applicants agreed with the statement 'I have fallen behind my peer group as a result of the pandemic'. 37% of applicants from a state school felt they had fallen behind compared to a 25% of private school applicants. Those from working class backgrounds were slightly more likely to feel they had fallen behind compared to those from middle class backgrounds (37% compared to 34% respectively). Applicants from an ethnic minority background were also more likely to report

feeling that they had fallen behind their peer group (42%) compared to 31% of white applicants. While measuring how far someone has 'fallen behind' is difficult, particularly for older pupils, young people's perception of their performance is an important factor in their wellbeing and in shaping their aspirations.

## ASSESSMENT AND GRADING

Following last year's grading controversy, where students were unable to sit examinations and grades were generated by an algorithm, it was decided that teachers would set the grades of their pupils using a

chosen set of assessment materials, and these would not be statistically adjusted.<sup>24</sup> To find out more about the materials being used to assess students this year and what teachers' views are on the new process, we polled 3,221 teachers in England through polling platform Teacher Tapp in June.<sup>25</sup>

As shown in Figure 5, the number of 'mini exams' and-or assessments teachers are using to determine A level Teacher Assessed Grades (TAGs) appears to be mixed. The most common number was 3-4 assessments per subject, with 38% of teachers reporting this. 18% of A level teachers said they set 6 or more assessments for their class this year, 24% said 5-6, and 14% said 1-2. A small proportion (4%) of teachers said they set no mini exams and-or assessments for their class. While broadly similar patterns were reported by university applicants sitting A Levels or equivalent qualifications, 33% reported in June that they had taken 6 or more mini exams or assessments per subject.

Patterns were

similar for GCSEs, with 3-4 assessments also being the most common number (reported by 38% of GCSE teachers). More data on the types of assessments being used to determine this year's GCSE grades can be found in Appendix A.

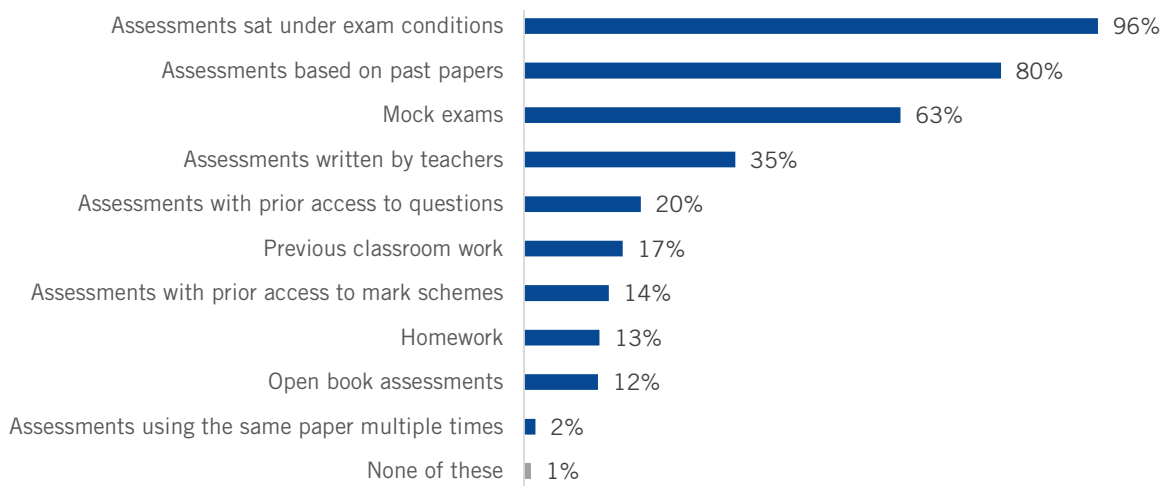
In terms of the type of assessments being taken, almost all A-Level teachers (96%) said that at least one assessment sat in exam conditions had been used to determine TAGs this year (shown in Figure 6). 80% used assessments based on past papers, 63% used mock examinations, and 35% used assessments written by teachers themselves. 17% reported including previous classroom work, and 13% used homework. 20% of teachers reported that their students

had prior access to the questions in their assessments, 14% said their students could see the mark schemes before completing their assessments and 12% said the assessments were 'open book' (where students have access to supporting materials like a textbook). A small number of teachers (2%) said the same papers were used multiple times to decide grades.

While the use of exam condition assessments was consistent across all school types, independent schools were more likely than state schools to offer students prior access to questions (24% v 19% in the state sector), marking schemes (19% v 13%) and 'open book' assessments (18% v 11%).

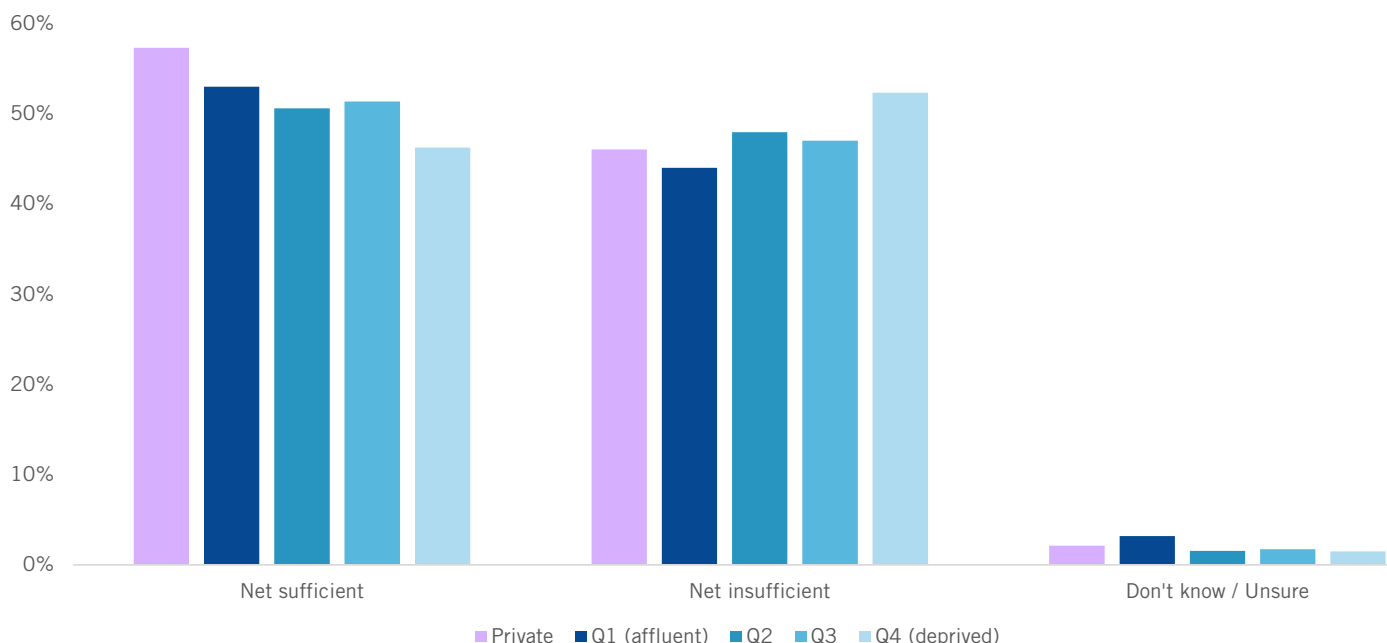
Schools with more affluent intakes,

Figure 6: Type of assessments used by A-level teachers to determine grades



Source: Teacher Tapp survey of teachers, June 2021 (Excludes those who said 'Not Relevant')

Figure 7: Teacher views on support and guidance to determine grades by level of deprivation in school



Source: Teacher Tapp survey of teachers, June 2021 (Excludes those who said 'Not Relevant')

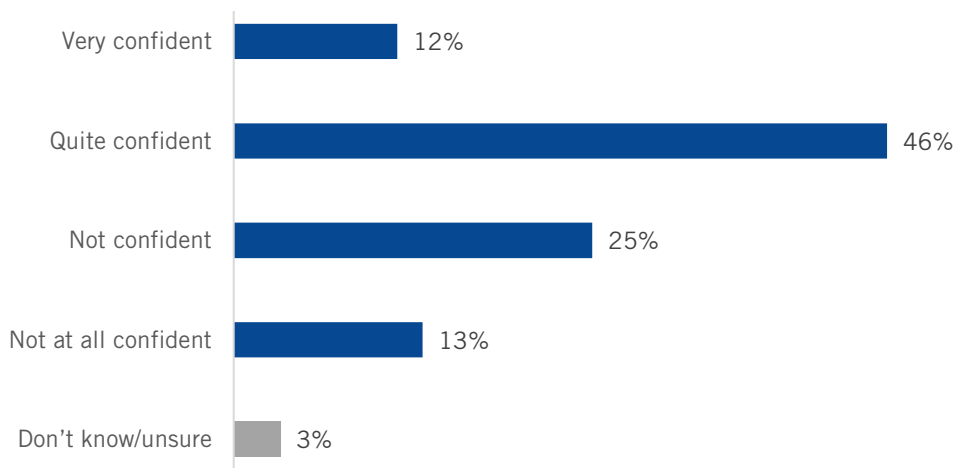
and those with higher Ofsted ratings, were more likely to use mock exams (64% in the most affluent compared to 55% in the most deprived) and assessments based on past papers (80% compared to 74%). The opposite was true for previous classroom work (14% v 18%).

Whilst just over half (52%) of teachers, at both GCSE and A Level, said they had received sufficient support and guidance to determine grades this year, 46% found the support insufficient (Figure 7). Teachers working in the most deprived schools of the country were 8 percentage points more likely to report the support they received as insufficient compared to those working in schools in the most affluent areas (52% compared to 44% respectively). Those working in state schools were also more likely to say the support they received was insufficient - 47% reported this compared to 41% of teachers working in private schools.

As shown in Figure 8, the majority (58%) of teachers are 'very' or 'quite' confident about the system in place to determine grades this year. However, 39% are not confident about the system, with 13% saying they are 'not at all' confident. Views appear to be consistent in state schools across levels of deprivation, with 40% of teachers in the most deprived schools 'not' or 'not at all' confident in the system and 38% of those working in the most affluent schools saying the same. However, 47% of private school teachers were not confident about the system compared to 37% of state school teachers.

With grades in the hands of teachers rather than exam boards this year, there are concerns that teachers may feel pressurised by parents to change their child's grades.<sup>26</sup> 15% of teachers said that a parent had approached and/or pressured them about their child's grades this year – 8% reported that multiple parents had done so. 23% of teachers at private schools said than one or more parents have approached and/or pressured them, which was 9 percentage

Figure 8: Teacher confidence in this year's grading system



Source: Teacher Tapp survey of teachers, June 2021 (Excludes those who said 'Not Relevant')

Figure 9: Whether a parent/s had pressured teachers over their child's grades by level of deprivation in school

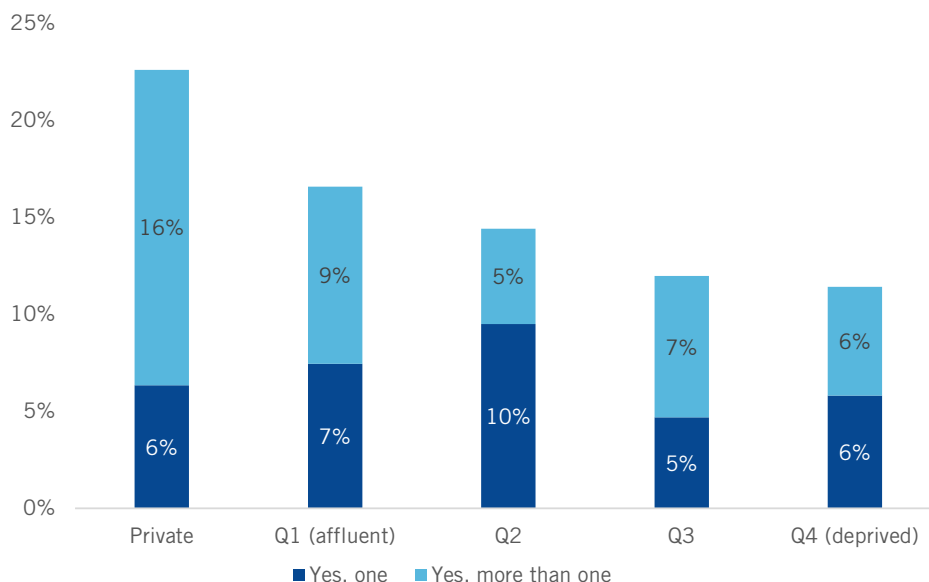
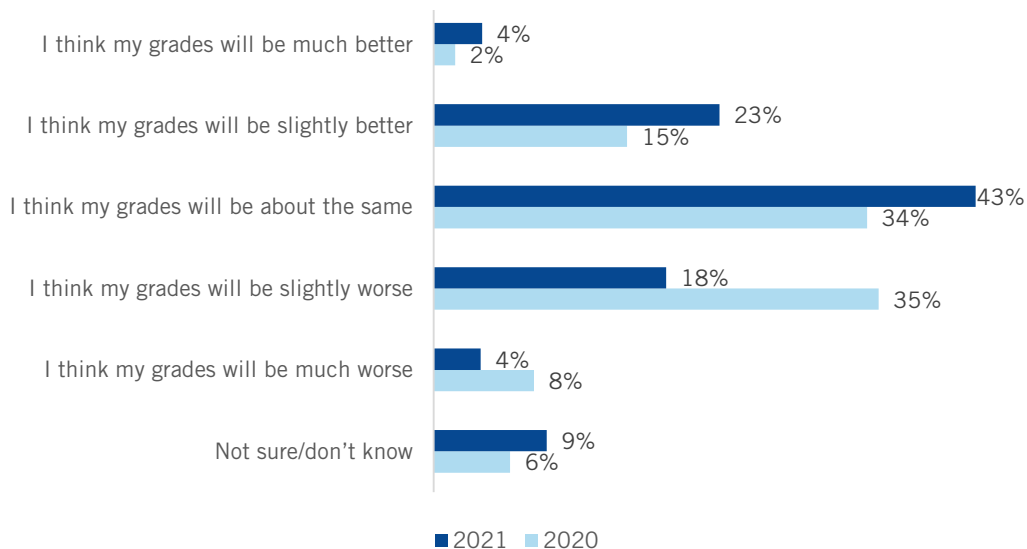


Figure 10: Impacts applicants think this year's grading system will have on their own grades comparing 2021 to 2020



Source: Youthsight student polling, April 2021 and 2020

points more than those working in a state school (14%), and were more than twice as likely than state school teachers to say they had been approached by more than one parent (16% compared to 7% respectively) (shown in Figure 9). 17% of teachers working in schools with the most affluent intakes said they had been approached and/or pressured by at least one parent; 6 percentage points more than those working in schools in the most deprived areas (11%).

### Applicant views

Young people are generally more positive about the outcomes of this year's exam system than last year. In April, 43% of students thought that their grades would be about the same as they would have been in a typical year (Figure 10). This is higher than in April 2020, when only 34% of applicants thought this. 26% of applicants thought that their grades would be better than those they would get in a typical year (up from 17% in April 2020), whilst 22% thought they would be worse (significantly down from 2020 when 43% thought this). Those at a state school were slightly more likely to think their grades would be worse at 22%, compared to 19% of those at private schools.

When asked two months later in June after the assessment period was complete, applicants' thoughts on this year's grading system appeared to be more mixed, with 42% of students believing the system would be fairer than in a typical year and 45% believing it will be less fair. This is far less than the 72% of applicants who in April 2020 believed last year's system would be less fair than normal (Figure 11). 8% thought there would be no change. These opinions were stable before and after the assessment period in 2021. 45% of applicants from a state school thought that their grades would be less fair, compared

to a smaller 40% of private school students. Interestingly, this year, 49% of middle-class applicants thought the system would be less fair compared to 35% of those from working class backgrounds.

Whether grades could be appealed was a controversial element of the approach to assessment last year, as appeals could only be made if a pupil's school or college thought that unreliable data was used to standardise grades.<sup>27</sup> This year, students are able to appeal if they feel that their TAG is wrong, firstly by asking for a review by their centre and then logging the appeal with the awarding body. However, there have been warnings that if there are a high number of appeals, this could cause problems for the university admissions process.<sup>28</sup>

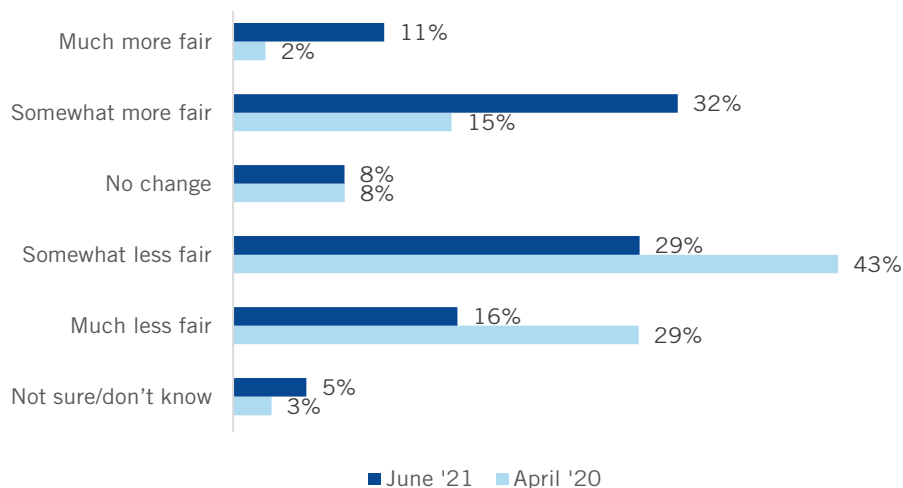
Taking these changes into account,

49% of applicants said they felt unconfident that they would have the correct information and support needed to appeal their grades if they are unhappy, whilst 39% said they felt confident. 18% said they were 'not at all confident' about the process. As shown in Figure 12, those from a state school were 6 percentage points more likely to feel unconfident compared to private school applicants, with 49% compared to 43% reporting that they felt 'not confident' or 'not at all confident'. Furthermore, 55% of applicants from an ethnic minority background felt unconfident about making an appeal, compared to 46% of white applicants.

### GETTING INTO UNIVERSITY

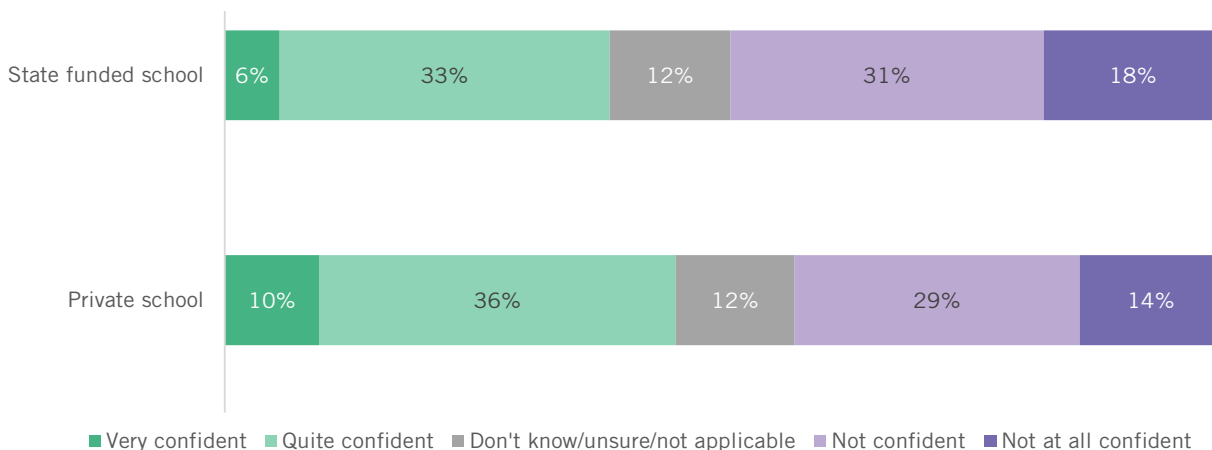
As well as the impacts on learning, pandemic disruption has also meant

Figure 11: Views of applicants on the fairness of the new grading system comparing 2021 to 2020



Source: Youthsight student polling, June 2021 and April 2020

Figure 12: Applicants' confidence in making appeals by school type



Source: Youthsight student polling, June 2021

a significant amount of classroom time has been missed when students could ask teachers about their next steps following school and gain advice on and support with putting together a personal statement, visiting universities and applying through UCAS. Gaining this support from teachers is particularly vital for disadvantaged students who typically have less support from family and friends at home.

When asked about how satisfied they were with their school's support and advice on the university application process, 67% of students were either very or fairly satisfied (up from 57% in April 2020, but lower than the equivalent figure for satisfaction with school support; as shown in Figure 13). However, 28% were unsatisfied with the support they received – those at a state school were more than twice as likely to be unsatisfied, with 29% of applicants reporting this compared to 13% of those at a private school.

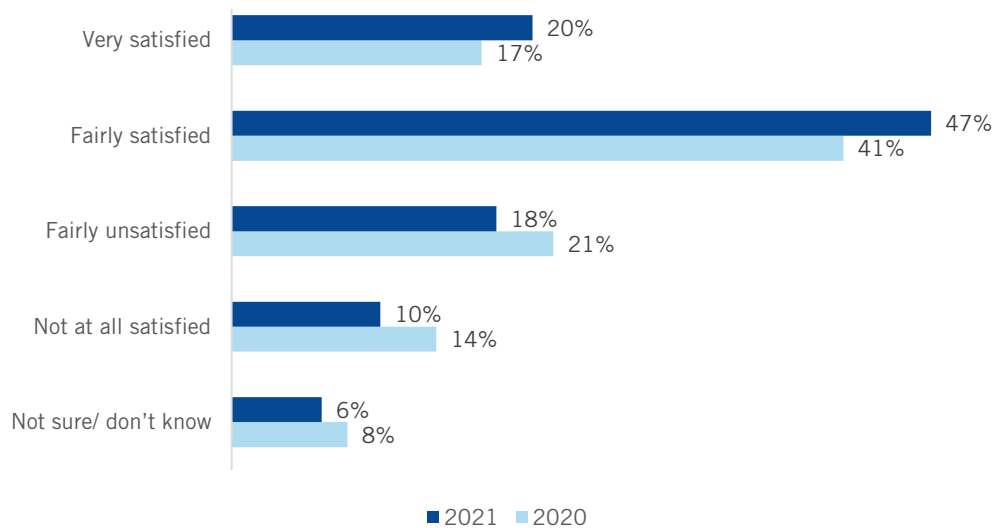
Not only have lockdowns impacted support with university applications when at school, they have also meant that visiting campuses and attending outreach programmes has become more difficult (albeit many programmes, such as Sutton Trust Summer Schools, have moved online).<sup>29</sup> When considering how pandemic-related restrictions have impacted the university application process this year, a significant majority (80%) thought they have had a

negative impact. 32% thought the impact was 'large' (Figure 14). This did not differ by social background.

### Starting university

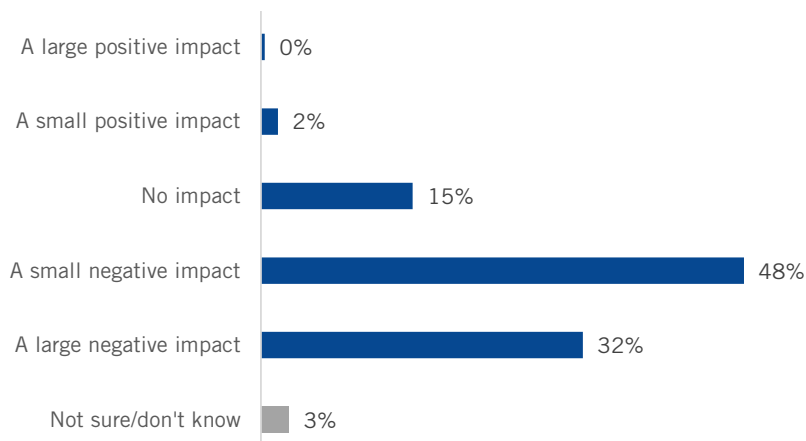
The uncertainty around grades this year as well as what the university

Figure 13: Satisfaction with support and advice on university application process comparing 2021 to 2020



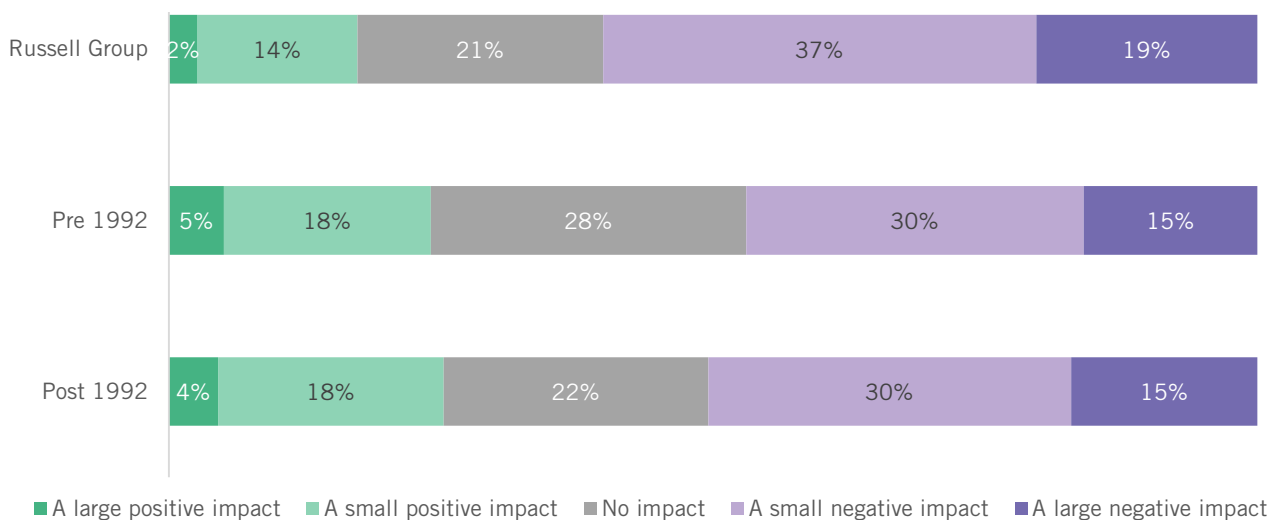
Source: Youthsight student polling, April 2021 and 2020

Figure 14: Impact of pandemic on university application experience



Source: Youthsight student polling, April 2021

Figure 15: Impact of the pandemic on getting into first-choice by institution type



Source: Youthsight student polling, April 2021



experience will be like next year (with some universities already planning to keep lectures online)<sup>30</sup> have led to significant concern among students about the months ahead.

Taking lost learning, class time and support into account, half (50%) of this year's university applicants feel that the impact of the pandemic on schools and universities will negatively affect their chance of getting into their first-choice university. This is broadly similar to April 2020, when 48% felt the pandemic would negatively affect their chances. As shown in Figure 15, those applying to a Russell Group university as a first choice were most likely to think the pandemic will negatively impact their chance of getting in, at 56% compared to 45% applying to a pre 1992 or post 1992 institution.

When asked in April about their concerns over the coming months, 78% were worried about their exams and the assessment process, with 33% very worried. Applicants at a state school were more likely to be worried than those at a private school (79% compared to 70% respectively). 81% of applicants from an ethnic minority background were worried – 4 percentage points higher than white applicants (77%).

We asked applicants about their concerns again in June, once most applicants had completed all their assessments (Figure 16).<sup>31</sup> 58% said were worried about their grades, with 19% very worried. 73% of applicants from an ethnic minority background were concerned – 23

percentage points higher than White applicants (50%). Applicants from a state school were also more likely to be concerned than those from a private school (58% compared to 51% respectively).

47% were concerned about getting a place at their first choice university, down from 62% in April, with 15% very worried. Those from an ethnic minority background were again more likely to report this, at 62% compared to 41% of White applicants. 51% of applicants with a Russell Group institution as their preference were worried about getting their first choice, which was the same as those applying to pre-1992 institutions (51%) but 14 percentage points higher (37%) than post-1992 institution applicants.

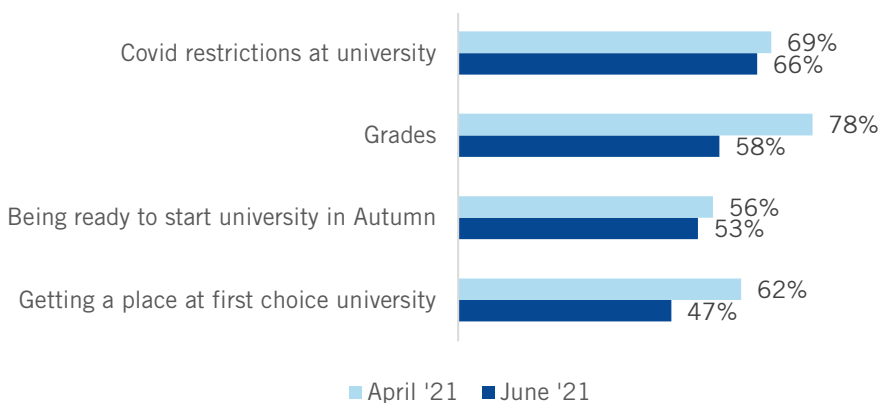
53% were concerned about being ready to start university in the autumn (down slightly from 56% when asked in April).

A large proportion of applicants (66%, albeit down slightly from 69% in April) also reported feeling worried about the Covid restrictions that may be in place at university, with 19% saying they were very worried.

There appears to be mixed feelings amongst students regarding readiness for university this autumn. Whilst 58% of applicants feel ready to start university (up from 55% in April), 34% feel unprepared (down from 40% in April). Strikingly, those from a state school are more than twice as likely to feel unprepared for starting university – 36% reported this compared to 17% of private school applicants (Figure 17). Those from an ethnic minority background were more likely to say they do not feel ready, with 37% feeling unprepared compared to 32% of applicants who are white.

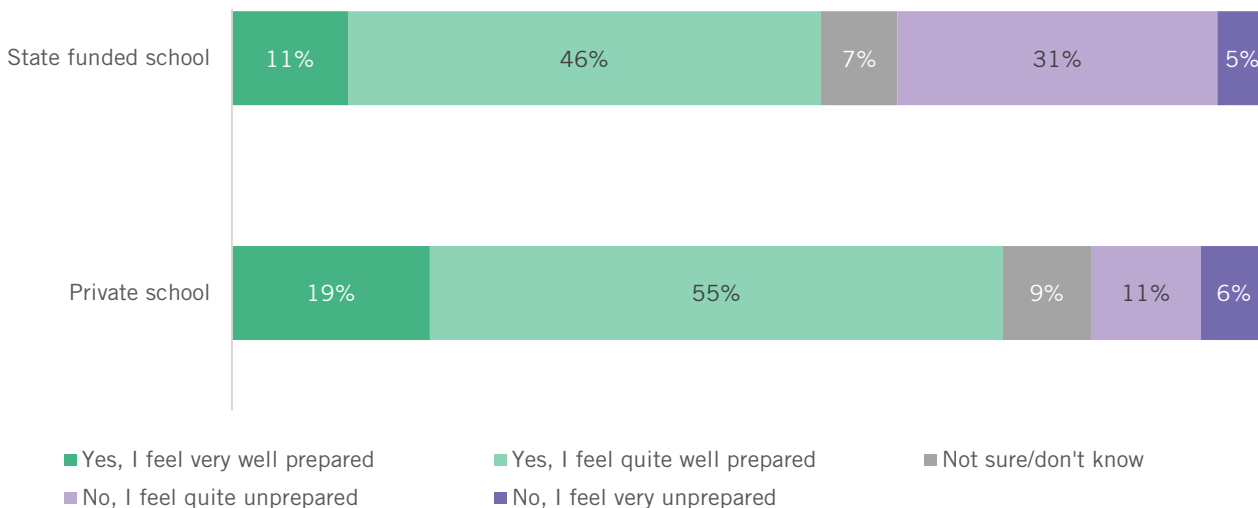
## 2021 Applications and Offers

Figure 16: Applicants' concerns over coming months comparing June 2021 to April 2020



Source: Youthsight student polling, June 2021 and April 2020

Figure 17: Readiness for university by school type



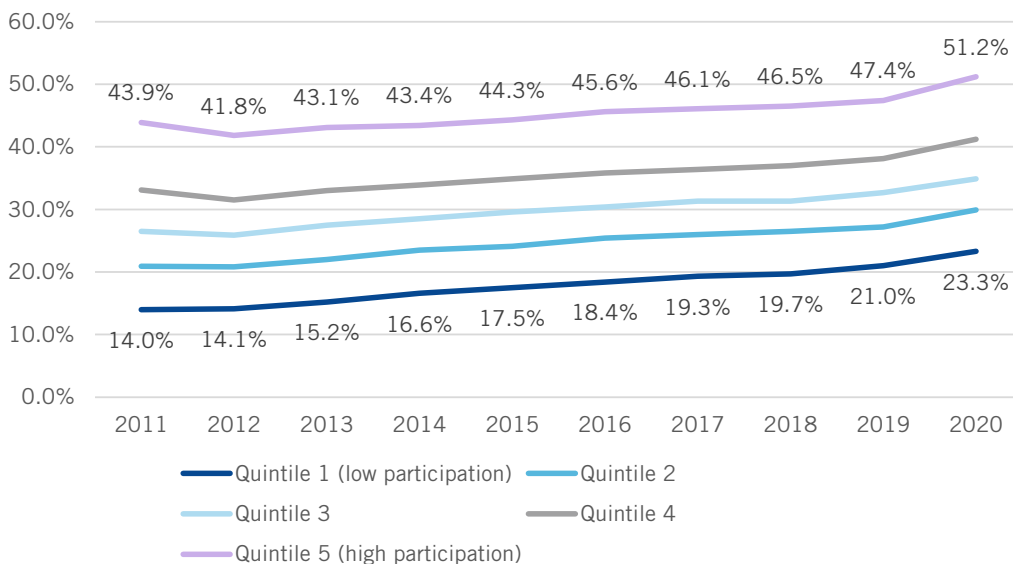
Source: Youthsight student polling, June 2021

As highlighted in the introduction, the last two years have seen increases in applications to university, accelerating the long-term trend. Figure 18 shows that acceptances have also surged, and that the growth is seen both in areas of high participation and low participation. Record numbers of young people entered higher education in 2020 from areas of the lowest participation, rising to 23.3% from 21%. However, this growth was outstripped by areas of the country which typically send high numbers to university, (51.2%, up from 47.4%), meaning the gap in absolute terms between more affluent and more disadvantaged areas grew once again. As Figure 18 shows, applications in 2021 have surged again, however the impacts on access, particularly to the most selective universities, remains to be seen.

UCAS data published by WonkHE has shown that applications to high tariff universities have increased by 12% this year.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, low tariff institutions saw 13% growth in applications. For context, growth in 2020 was around 3% in both categories. However, as Figure 19 shows, growth in offers has not kept up at selective institutions. While offers from high tariff universities have indeed increased this year, from 396,810 to 412,670, proportionally, this is just a 4% increase. In contrast, the number of offers at low tariff universities has grown by 15%.

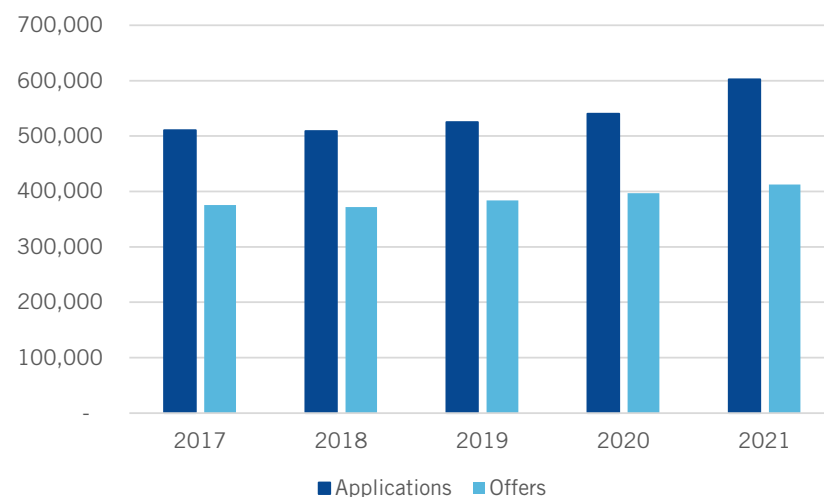
The result is that the offer rate at high tariff universities (the proportion of applications that convert to offers for places) has dropped by 5 percentage points from 73.4% to 68.5%, while it has increased at low tariff universities from 84.4% to 86.2% (Figure 20). This behaviour is likely to be driven by a combination of capacity constraints, when many selective universities took on much larger cohorts in 2020; along with a reaction to the grade inflation of last year. Anticipating similar or even higher grades in 2021, the most selective universities appear to be lowering their offer rate to compensate. The impacts of the

Figure 18: Higher education entry rate 2011-2020, by POLAR quintile



Source: UCAS

Figure 19: Applications and offers to high tariff universities, 2017-2021



Source: WonkHE/UCAS

pandemic are having very different effects on different parts of the sector, with high demand for high tariff universities, boosted by higher grades, and increased competition for students amongst low tariff universities, many of which face significant financial challenges.

The impacts on equity and access are less clear. Substantial gains to access to selective universities in 2020 may not be matched in 2021. Data published by DataHE has shown that, while offer rates for all POLAR quintiles at such universities are down, those in Quintile 1 have fallen less, indicating that high tariff institutions are trying to 'protect' under-represented groups from these lower offer rates.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, these groups do best in an environment of

growth, so with the possibility of some retrenchment this autumn, last year's gains may not be replicated.

## DISCUSSION

### Awarding grades

This brief has highlighted how the Covid-19 pandemic has continued to affect those taking school leaving exams and applying to university this summer, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. These impacts have been across three broad areas: 1) impacts on learning, 2) impacts on exams and assessment, and 3) impacts on the university application and entry process itself. In all three areas, while young people from all backgrounds have been affected, there are additional threats

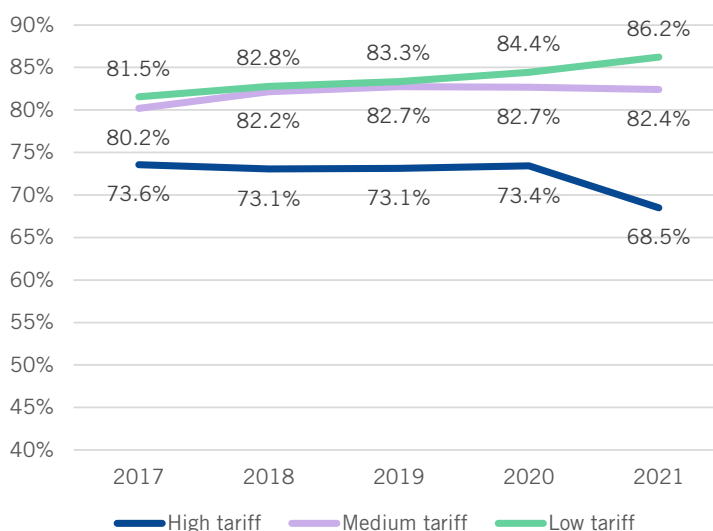
to equity and fairness as the poorest have been hardest hit.

Urgent action is required from schools, colleges, universities and policymakers to ensure that all students have fair chance of getting into and thriving during their time at their preferred institution. Furthermore, as the effects of the pandemic are unlikely to end after this year, action will also likely be necessary in future years to prevent further barriers to access and participation in higher education for other year groups earlier in their educational journey.

The importance of ensuring fairness and consistency in the approaches between schools has been a significant challenge this year. Schools have taken a wide range of different approaches to assessing their pupils,<sup>34</sup> and while some degree of flexibility has been necessary, there are questions around how to ensure that standards will be consistent across the country with such variation in assessments. The decision not to have externally set and externally marked in-class tests will inevitably impact on the consistency and integrity of this year's grades.<sup>35</sup> With teachers now having the final say, this places much more responsibility on them, and we see the consequences of this in the pressure some have come under from parents. This is potentially unfair both on the teachers themselves as well as students. This comes on top of the additional workload of developing and marking assessments this year (without the extra pay that would usually accompany exam marking), along with schools expecting to receive a significant number of appeals to process this summer.<sup>36</sup> As pressures on teachers surrounding education recovery continue over the coming years, it is key that teachers are given sufficient support.

It was also concerning to find that a large proportion of teachers found the support and guidance given to them to determine grades this year<sup>37</sup> was insufficient, as there is a risk that unintentional and unconscious biases may impact teachers' grading. Research has shown that teacher assessments can underestimate the abilities of disadvantaged students,<sup>38</sup> and that predicted grades determined by teacher assessments

Figure 20: Offer rates by university tariff, 2017-2021



Source: WonkHE/UCAS

underpredict disadvantaged high-achieving students in particular.<sup>39</sup> While maintaining there was no bias evident in the 2020 results, Ofqual's own literature review warned of the evidence for bias in teacher assessment.<sup>40</sup>

Grade inflation is another threat to the value of grades, both at A Level and GCSE. After last year's significant inflation, it seems inevitable we will see something similar this summer. In fact, a return to pre-pandemic grade distributions would be manifestly unfair to this cohort of students, particularly if they are competing for jobs or university places with last year's cohort. However, this stores up problems for the future. Next year we will face a similar dilemma: should there be a return to a 'normal' grade profile, or should accommodations be made once again for students whose schooling has been disrupted. Grades should be fair both within and across cohorts (particularly adjacent year groups who are likely to be competing in the future), and so there are few good answers. Any return to lower grades should be gradual, in order to avoid any individual cohorts being punished unduly. It will be particularly important to ensure that any grading data is made publicly available as soon as possible so that researchers and policymakers have enough time to analyse before confirming the approach for next year and beyond; the delay in publishing the 2020 data has made assessments of the impact of last year's system harder to discern.

## Admissions

Contextualising university admissions has been a long term ask of the Trust,<sup>41</sup> and is particularly vital this year to ensure that poorer students who have faced more adverse impacts of the pandemic on their education do not miss out on a place at their desired university. Such impacts include the circumstances students faced when learning at home during lockdowns, as well as the style of assessments used to decide their grades – this report has found wide variation in the number and type of assessments being used, which could impact on grades achieved. The uncertainties in this year's grading system, combined with the challenges of learning at home and missing out on classroom support, should all be considered by admissions staff when making their final decisions this summer. Universities should keep in mind that there were differential impacts this year both at a school level (for example, only a certain amount of material was covered by a class teacher due to disruption, poor remote learning provision, or assessments were done in particular ways), but also an individual level (for example, lack of access to the right equipment for online learning, less support in the home for learning, or an unsuitable working environment).

Following this year's abnormal assessment period, we are again approaching an unusual results day which, as was the case last year, students are understandably concerned about. Recent data from

UCAS has shown that this year there is a fall in offer rates (particularly amongst high tariff institutions) for the first time in 9 years, following a record high in 2020.<sup>42</sup> Having a higher than normal intake last year has meant that many institutions are nearing capacity (related to staffing as well as campus space).

Whilst the effect of this year's grading on admissions is still unknown, the increase in applications, alongside our polling showing a large proportion of students feeling confident that they will have done as or better than they expected, suggests there will once again be pressure on university places. As individual-level learning loss could not be considered in grading<sup>43</sup> (and it remains to be seen whether teachers have done this informally), students from less well-off backgrounds could be disadvantaged. If institutions feel pressed for capacity, they may reduce the number of offers made by discretionary confirmation (when students just missing out on their original offer are given a place), which are used by some institutions to support students from a widening participation background. They may then make decisions based on extra criteria, such as achieving a grade in a particular subject, making it even harder to get a place.

As a result, universities contextualising results where possible this year will again be vital, to prevent disadvantaged students narrowly losing out on university places. Universities should ensure that admissions and clearing teams are working closely with those in their institution's widening participation team, so that contextual data and access and participation targets are being taken into account in decision-making. When deciding who to admit onto a course and comparing students to each other, particularly when students have missed their offer by only a grade or two, staff should take the likelihood of learning loss and experience of adverse effects of the pandemic into account. A student's GCSE results could also be used as context, which could help to give a sense of a student's ability before the impacts of the pandemic on learning. If institutions are facing capacity constraints over the number of places they can offer, at the very

least, they should give particularly careful consideration to Widening Participation offer holders.

It is also more important than ever that schools support their pupils this summer with navigating the admissions and clearing processes, as well as with the appeals process for those who are unhappy with their grades, taking into account the changes to the process this year. This is important for disadvantaged students particularly, who are more likely to require support from their school and less likely to be able to get help from home and elsewhere.

Furthermore, extra support will be vital for next year's university applicants from both schools and universities, and should be a key part of any catch-up provisions, as they will have also missed out on support in navigating their options during school closures. Many outreach programmes, including Sutton Trust programmes, will also again have taken place online this year, meaning that young people are missing out on getting to experience a taste of campus life in person before applying.

### Starting university

Young people's concerns about falling behind in class because of the pandemic are important to keep in mind, even if students do achieve the grades required to get into university. If certain topics have been missed, there is a risk that students may arrive at university without key foundations of subject knowledge which could hold back their progress and success in future assessments, particularly those who have experienced more disruption to their learning.<sup>44</sup> And, if students start already feeling they are behind, it could make their transition harder, with potential impacts for their wider wellbeing and subsequent retention. Therefore, it is important that universities offer support to young people arriving this autumn and work with them to identify gaps in their knowledge that are important for their degree. Wellbeing support will also be vital for students settling into a new environment during such a tumultuous time, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds whose mental health

has been negatively impacted by the pandemic<sup>45</sup> – last year, the Trust found that working class university students were more likely to be concerned about their mental health and wellbeing compared to their better off peers.<sup>46</sup>

Before the university term begins, it will be key for universities to reach out to their new student cohort - after missing out on face-to-face visit days, universities should continue to share online content with students to ensure they know what to expect when, most likely, arriving in a new city. Moreover, when students can gather on campus, universities should do what they can to encourage opportunities for students to interact and socialise outside of learning time, to allow students to develop social, team-working and other vital life skills. This is particularly important for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are more likely to be the first in their family to go to university and have fewer family or friends who have been to university to share their experience. Previous research by the Sutton Trust found participation in extra-curricular activities fell considerably during the pandemic, and some of these activities may need additional support from universities to get up and running again.<sup>47</sup> Although some regulations, such as social distancing, depend on decisions made by the government, giving more clarity on the situations where universities have control will help to reduce the levels of concern amongst students about Covid-related restrictions.

Some universities have already announced long term plans regarding blended learning,<sup>48</sup> following the changes that had to be made during the pandemic. Whilst it is good to see that some institutions are setting out clear plans so students know what to expect in the future, the reception has been mixed amongst students, with many feeling they had not been properly consulted on the matter.<sup>49</sup> If blended learning approaches are to become commonplace, universities should take into account that learning away from campus will be difficult for some, particularly for those with inadequate access to the internet or a suitable study space (when in rented accommodation or remaining living at home). When any long-term

decisions are made regarding the university experience, it is important that students are properly consulted and the voices of all students are heard, to prevent changes that may negatively impact their learning experience.

While some of the mistakes of last year's grading system have been

learnt from, this year's solution is far from perfect. Many students are still likely to be unhappy with their results and, depending on the appeals process and how universities handle their application, may miss out on a crucial next step in their education which will have long term impact on their careers. Concerted action from

schools, universities and through national policy is required to ensure that disadvantaged young people do not carry the impacts of the pandemic through to the next stage of their education, so that they can thrive at university and beyond.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### For universities

- **Applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds who have narrowly missed their offer grades should be given additional consideration in the admissions process.** Universities should strongly consider that young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have faced additional challenges in their learning this year, which may not have been taken into account in their grades. It is more vital than ever to take such factors into account and recognise that grades may not reflect a young person's full potential. Widening participation should be a key factor taken into account when universities are giving discretionary acceptances to those who have missed their offers.
- **Universities should provide additional wellbeing supports for the incoming cohort.** This autumn's university entrants have been through an acutely difficult period. They are likely to have additional need of support for their wellbeing and mental health as they transition to life in higher education. This could also include stronger support around developing friendships, connections and taking part in university social life. Strong communication is important to set expectations on the university environment and blended learning, particularly if some restrictions will continue.
- **Universities should identify key gaps in learning at an early stage in the first term, and provide support if necessary.** Given the amount of schooling missed, there are likely to be knowledge and skills gaps among this year's entry cohort. The importance of such gaps will differ by subject studied, but plans should be put in place to support students who may need to develop in key areas necessary to succeed in their course.

### For schools

- It is more important than ever for schools to provide **as much support to students as possible around results day and during the clearing period, which could be done remotely if necessary.** Students who may be first in family to attend university, or those from disadvantaged backgrounds, may need particular support as they may lack the support from home and through networks to navigate what could be a complex and stressful period, compounded by the impact of the pandemic.

### For policymakers

- **Pupil premium and recovery premium funding, as well as National Tutoring Programme provision, should be extended to 16-19 year olds in education and training.** Given the events of the pandemic, it is more important than ever that targeted support for disadvantaged learners should not end at 16.
- **Data on this year's GCSE and A Level results should be made available to researchers at an early stage as possible, in order to understand patterns in this year's results.** Delays with the release of 2020 data have hampered our understanding of last year's process, with knock on effects for this year.
- **There must be a long-term plan for assessment in 2022 and beyond.** After two years of cancelled exams, lost learning, and substantial grade inflation, transitioning back to the 'pre-pandemic' status quo will be hugely challenging. Any return to pre-pandemic grade distributions should be done gradually, in order to avoid disadvantaging any one cohort unduly.

## APPENDIX A: ASSESSMENTS BEING USED FOR GCSE GRADING

When looking at GCSEs specifically, the vast majority (96%) of teachers again said that assessments sat in exam conditions were used to determine TAGs. As with A levels, assessments based on past papers were again the most common form of assessment being used (76%). 65% used mock examinations, 35% used assessments written by teachers, 19% used previous classroom work, and 11% used homework. 16% of teachers reported that their students had prior access to the questions in their assessments, 12% said their students could see the mark schemes before completing their assessments and 11% said the assessments were 'open book'. Again, a small number of teachers (3%) said the same papers were used multiple times to decide grades.

There were also notable differences in the types of assessments being used in private schools compared to state schools. Whilst teachers in private schools were almost just as likely to say that students completed assessments in exam conditions compared to state schools (98% compared to 96% respectively), they were more likely to report 'open book' assessments being used (18% compared to 10% in state schools), prior access to assessment questions being given (22% compared to 15% in state schools) and prior access to mark schemes being given (16% compared to 11% in state schools).

Looking at state schools specifically, unlike with A levels, the types of assessment being used did not appear to vary between the levels of affluence of schools.

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