

# **Teachers in the Pandemic:** *Practices, Equity, and Wellbeing*

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

Since March 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic has continued to have a considerable impact on education policy and practice across the UK. The onset of the pandemic has also been characterised by its uncertainty, with education practitioners having little in the way of prior experience to call upon in order to predict future developments or to support their decision making. We have observed how social distancing requirements have disrupted long-established practices, with teachers shifting to online platforms at times to provide remote education. The pandemic has also impacted assessment arrangements. National examinations have been cancelled across the UK in 2020 and 2021, with a good deal of uncertainty during this period around any assessment replacement measures.

As education researchers, we find ourselves at a particularly significant historical moment, where we are able to observe a unique event as it unfolds. Gathering information about the lived experiences of teachers during the pandemic allows us insight into how and why local pedagogic and assessment practices changed during this period and inform our engagement in debates about future policy proposals.

## Methods

Our research gathered information about the experiences of teachers in England during the second and third terms of the 2020-21 academic year. We wanted to understand the impact of COVID-19 on education in three areas: *pedagogy* (teaching methods); *curriculum* (taught content); and *assessment* (assessed content and assessment methods). We also wanted to explore how these areas affected *teacher workload*, *teacher and student wellbeing*, and *the equity of educational provision and performance outcomes*.

## Participants

We involved 15 teachers from a spread of regions, localities, school types and sizes across England. The teachers were working with students in Year 11 or 13 across a range of subject areas (English Literature, Science, Geography, PE, or Drama). We suspected that these teachers would be particularly prone to the effects of any moves towards remote learning or any disruption to formal assessment in 2021.

## Procedure

We gathered data from the teachers between January-May 2021 using three approaches:

- Interviews at the start and end of the data collection period.
- Workload and wellbeing surveys at the start and end of the data collection period.
- A series of six diary submissions (each generally covering a two week-period) across the study period.

Project planning and recruitment began prior to the UK Government's January 2021 announcement of the return to remote schooling and the cancellation of examinations for Summer 2021. The data collection period began in the last week of January, and at this time the specifics of how qualifications would be awarded for 2021 had not yet been decided. Data collection was completed by the end of May, at which point teachers were teaching in-person and were in the process of submitting Teacher Assessed Grades (TAG).

## Findings

### Teaching in a time of transition

Transition was a defining feature of the teachers' experiences in this period of the pandemic and the teachers described a series of adjustments to their practice. Schools varied in their preparedness for the initial move to remote teaching. A variety of communication platforms were used for remote 'live'

and pre-recorded teaching, and teachers needed to adjust to new practices and technological tools. Some teachers received school support for this adjustment process whilst others had to teach themselves.

Teachers reported that there was limited time and (a large amount of preparatory work) involved when they subsequently returned to in-person teaching around 8<sup>th</sup> March 2021. Some teachers expressed their nervousness about returning to in-person teaching due to health and safety considerations. Some students also struggled to re-adapt to in-person learning, with teachers needing to be more flexible than usual in their planning and delivery.

During this time, the teachers continued to work in a state of uncertainty as COVID-19 outbreaks continued to occur that led to short notice self-isolation for students and staff. Most teachers continued to carry out blended teaching<sup>1</sup> throughout the study period (e.g., for self-isolating students).

## **Curriculum and Pedagogy**

### **Changes to what was taught**

There was evidence that lockdown (and the move to remote teaching) led to some changes in content coverage. These changes included teachers:

- Dropping some content/skills, e.g., avoiding practical skills teaching.
- Introducing some new content/skills, e.g., the development of IT skills and a greater focus on wellbeing.
- Changing the balance of the content/skills taught, e.g., a greater focus on key subject content.

It was notable that many of the teachers were generally concerned about their students' loss of social skills and confidence.

### **Changes to the way things were taught**

Lockdown and remote teaching led to many changes to the ways that content was delivered. These changes included teachers:

- Altering the speed of content delivery. At the beginning of remote teaching the delivery of learning slowed but it then tended to speed up (or become 'rushed') once in-person teaching resumed.
- Engaging less in discussion activities with their students and using fewer group tasks. On returning to in-person teaching the teachers returned to using more interactive approaches.
- Rearranging the order in which they covered topics in their subjects. Teachers delayed teaching some of the more demanding elements of their courses until returning to in-person teaching.
- Covering aspects of their course in less depth during remote teaching.

### **Changes to interaction quality**

Lockdown and remote teaching led to changes to quality of teaching interactions. Teachers reported that:

- It was more difficult to gauge student learning during remote teaching.
- Giving remote feedback was more challenging, although some felt that remote communication allowed them to capture a tangible record of students' work.
- The quality of teacher and student interaction was less good during remote teaching, with them using more didactic or teacher-led approaches and fewer group activities.
- Some students generally disengaged from learning during the remote teaching phase, and these tended to be the less affluent students.

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<sup>1</sup> Blended learning is the simultaneous 'mix of face-to-face and remote methods'. (Ofsted, 2021).

- Remote teaching was more successful with smaller class groups and older learners, and there were concerns about meeting the needs of Special Education Needs and Disabled (SEND) students.

## **Assessment**

### **Attitudes to assessment in 2020**

- A small number of the teachers had positive attitudes to the Centre Assessment Grades (CAG) arrangements used in 2020. These schools seemed to be those that routinely collected a lot of assessment data.
- Some teachers felt they had followed the CAG guidance more strictly than other schools, and that their students had 'lost out' when it was used as the sole measure of students' achievements.
- Some schools seemed to be very data driven in their CAG decisions whilst others had less data and relied more on intuition.
- Some schools had been accused of bias and were keen to avoid this in 2021.

### **Prior to the release of full TAG details**

- A third of the teachers felt the types of things they assessed had not changed in 2021.
- Other teachers were assessing less than in previous years. This was due to a number of reasons. Some teachers wanted to focus more on student wellbeing, some teachers had concerns about teacher-assessment validity, and some teachers reported challenges around assessing practical skills.
- Several participants were using assessment for formative purposes more than previously.

### **The release of initial TAG guidance**

- Teachers felt the initial TAG announcement and guidance lacked clarity and left them uncertain. Teachers' actions based on the initial TAG guidance varied. Some teachers held off making decisions on what to do about assessment until further guidance was released, whilst others had already made assessment plans.
- Teachers gathered assessment evidence through various methods. All the teachers were using mock examinations to inform their judgements, and for some teachers this was the main basis of their judgement.
- Schools were establishing procedures to avoid bias and also to avoid accusations of bias (e.g., marking with candidate numbers, double marking, moderating etc.).
- Some teachers mentioned that they were going to gather additional evidence for those students who were underachieving following their initial grading decisions.

### **Release of full TAG guidance and resources**

- Reactions to the full TAG guidance was predominantly negative. Teachers felt that the guidance was unclear, difficult to use, and had arrived too late to be useful. Many of the teachers were specifically unhappy with the assessment support materials.
- A third of the teachers felt there was minimal tension in performing both teaching and assessing functions for their students. These teachers had examining experience. Other teachers noted tensions. They felt that there was an inherent conflict of purpose in their role as both teacher and assessor, or that the dual role had negatively affected their relationship with their students.

## **Equity issues**

- Some teachers were concerned that their more affluent students were accessing private tuition during the remote teaching period.
- Most of the teachers raised concerns about how some students' lack of access to adequate technology impacted on their ability to make the most of remote learning.

- Teachers identified several groups of students who they felt were adversely affected by remote teaching. These included SEND students, those with working parents (even though they might be working at home) who had less time to support their children's learning, students who were caring for siblings or relatives, and the less able students.
- Some teachers were concerned that there were disparities between schools in the ways that they assessed their students.
- Many of the teachers were concerned about the lack of attention they were giving to the non-examination year groups (reflecting an over-focus on GCSE and A level classes).

### **Teacher wellbeing and workload**

- Teachers were concerned about the negative effect of remote teaching on their own wellbeing, this included concerns about prolonged screentime and social isolation.
- The transition back to in-person teaching increased teacher workload, as did the need to prepare for blended learning in response to student self-isolation/illness.
- Teachers had additional workload around helping their students to catch up on any lost learning.
- Some schools initially reduced the amount of assessment they carried out. This impacted teacher workload as they needed to gather evidence in different ways or in a more concentrated way once the TAG arrangements were announced.
- Uncertainty around TAG arrangements negatively impacted teacher wellbeing and increased their workload (largely due to anxieties about whether they were collecting enough or the right type of assessment evidence).

### **Student wellbeing**

- Most teachers had concerns about the wellbeing of at least some students throughout the pandemic.
- Teachers observed that students who suffered from mental health issues were more likely to opt out of education when it was delivered remotely.
- Teachers worried that they found it difficult to identify when students were struggling with their mental health and were less able to deal with these issues when interacting remotely.
- Returning to in-person schooling benefitted some students, however many teachers felt that it had not provided quite the boost to students' wellbeing and engagement that they had anticipated.
- Teachers felt that TAG, and uncertainty around this, harmed the wellbeing of examination year students.

### **Teacher support and attitudes towards stakeholders**

- Teachers made exclusively negative comments about the Government's handling of education during of the pandemic. They were unhappy with the TAG decisions, and the last minute and reactive nature of decisions.
- Teachers had mixed attitudes about the examination boards' support for assessment. Negative comments focused on how TAG decisions were made and communicated, and about the provision of resources and guidance. Others felt that the examination boards were doing the best they could and that the DfE was ultimately at fault.
- The teachers were roughly evenly split in their attitudes to the support that they received from their school's Senior Leadership Team (SLT).
- Some teachers highlighted how some parents tried to influence the TAG process (e.g., putting pressure on them to alter grades).
- Teachers felt they had been underappreciated during the pandemic and that this was reflected in media attention and attitudes. Others reflected on unhelpful media speculation and attitudes around TAG arrangements.

# 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly had a significant impact on education. Looking at England in particular, since March 2020 there has been much uncertainty in the education sector. Social distancing requirements have disrupted established practices, with teachers shifting to using online platforms at times to provide remote teaching for many of their students. During this unsettled period, teachers have had to try to keep students engaged in their learning, ensure that there are no gaps in students' learning, and support their students' mental health and wellbeing.

The pandemic has also impacted assessment arrangements, not least with the cancellation of national examinations in 2020 and 2021. There has also been uncertainty around the measures that should replace these national examinations. There have been criticisms that qualification awarding policy changes have been relayed to schools at short notice, with long periods of waiting to hear the outcomes of consultations, and this has contributed to heightened levels of teacher and student anxiety. For those teaching or learning in key national qualification years, such as Years 11 and 13, there has been insecurity around the content to cover and whether, or how, this content would be assessed at the end of the course of study. Consequently, teachers have found themselves having to prepare for multiple possible scenarios and to adapt quickly to changing circumstances.

The unprecedented scale of the pandemic and its impact on education makes it of interest to research. Moreover, the complexity and unpredictability of the context makes 'real time' data collection appealing as it is more likely that teachers' perceptions and actions would not be lost in the mists of retrospective memory recall and reconstruction. Gathering information about teachers' experiences and perceptions during the pandemic allows insight into how and why local pedagogic and assessment practices changed during this special period, which could inform our engagement in debates about future policy proposals.

## 2. Education in England and the COVID-19 pandemic

Before outlining the details of our study and the literature around the issues relating to the pandemic and education, it is useful to set the context of the project. Our project was developed in September 2020, six months after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in England, and when it became clear that its educational impact would be ongoing for some time. We then planned for data collection to begin at the end of January 2021 and to run for around four months (19 weeks). For our study we wanted to focus on key qualification years, working with teachers of students who were working towards their GCSE or A Level examinations. We felt that this group would be important because they would help us to explore some of the anticipated tensions that could emerge around the interplay of teaching, learning, and assessment practices in uncertain times.

In this section we outline the key events of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on schools in the months preceding and during this research project (Figure 1). This overview highlights the uncertainty and change those teachers experienced during the pandemic and shows where our study fits in relation to these events.



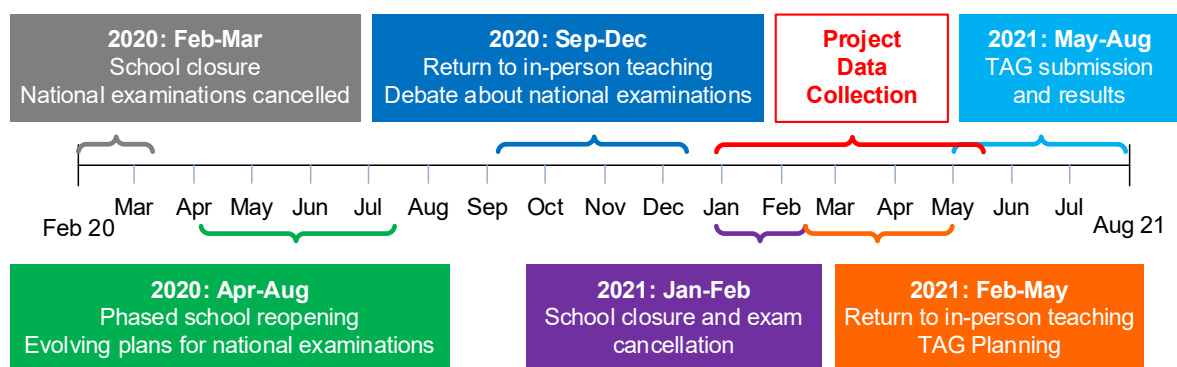


Figure 1: Term dates and data collection timeline (February 2020 – August 2021)

<b>February - March 2020</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Onset of COVID-19 pandemic</li> <li>Remote education</li> <li>National examinations cancellation</li> </ul>
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With COVID-19 spreading in Europe, some individual schools began closing in late February due to concerns about COVID-19 cases being imported during the half term break (BBC, 2020a). By the 20<sup>th</sup> March, schools across the UK were formally required to close (BBC, 2020b), with exceptions for vulnerable children and the children of keyworkers (Cambridge Assessment, 2020a). National examinations were cancelled and teaching became remote, with much of this relying on digital technology (Cambridge Assessment, 2020b, 2020c).

<b>April - August 2020</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Phased reopening of schools</li> <li>Evolving plans for national examinations</li> </ul>
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In England, the phased reopening of schools began in June 2020, with the intention of allowing students in Years 10 and 12 to return to in-person teaching from the 15<sup>th</sup> June. However, attendance was not compulsory and only a quarter of students were allowed in school at any one time (BBC, 2020c; Department for Education, 2020a).

In terms of assessment, Ofqual ran a consultation in July to gather views on proposed changes to the arrangements for 2020/21 GCSE and A level examinations (Ofqual, 2020c). As a result, some changes to GCSEs, AS and A level examinations for 2021 were announced (Ofqual, 2020a). These included changes to how content would be assessed in GCSE Geography, History, and Ancient History examinations; the introduction of topic choice in English Literature; and changes to fieldwork requirements in GCSE/AS/A Level Geography and Geology specifications.

During this period, there was a change in the plans for awarding students' GCSE and A Level grades based on nationally moderated teacher predictions. Following the publication of A Level grades there was public and political criticism of the outcomes, particularly around the differential effects of the algorithm on students' results from different school types. This reaction resulted in students' A Level grades being reissued in their unmoderated teacher predicted form. For GCSEs, students were awarded the higher of the teacher predicted or the algorithm standardised result.

<b>September - December 2020</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Return to school</li> <li>Ongoing debates about examinations and in-person teaching</li> </ul>
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In September 2020, school students in England started to return for compulsory in-person teaching (BBC, 2020d). Instances of COVID-19 outbreaks, and the need for student and teacher isolation due to COVID-19 positive contacts, meant that there was a need for blended teaching arrangements.

Ofqual held a second consultation in September on the proposed arrangements for 2020/21 examinations. This re-confirmed the conclusions from the earlier July consultation (Ofqual, 2020b).

On the 12<sup>th</sup> October the Department for Education in England (DfE) announced that summer 2021 examinations would be going ahead, but that they would be delayed by three weeks (Department for Education, 2020c). This decision was reaffirmed on the 3<sup>rd</sup> December (Department for Education, 2020d), and a package of exceptional measures was announced to make the examinations as fair as possible. These measures included more generous grading, advanced notice of some topic areas, access to examination aids (such as formula sheets), additional examinations for people to sit if they missed the main examination due to illness or self-isolation, and a new expert group looking at issues of differential learning.

It is also important to recognise the parallel changes to examinations that were occurring at this time in the other countries of the United Kingdom as these inevitably contributed to the uncertainty of the situation in England. In contrast to England, the governments in Scotland and Wales announced shifts towards the use of teacher assessment for qualification grading. Between October and December, the Scottish Education Secretary announced that National 5 Examinations, Highers and Advanced Highers would be cancelled and replaced by teacher assessment and coursework (Scottish Government, 2020a; 2020b). Similarly, on the 10<sup>th</sup> November, the Welsh Education Minister announced that GCSE, AS and A Level summer 2021 examinations would be cancelled, moving to grades based on classroom assessment (Welsh Minister for Education, 2020). Northern Ireland did not announce any changes to their examination plans at this time.

Throughout December, alongside a continued rise in COVID-19 cases and new variants, there was an evolving picture regarding the best arrangements for teaching in England. For example, there was pressure from some London Boroughs to allow schools to close and to return to remote teaching (BBC, 2020e), backed by the mayor of London (BBC, 2020f), which ended in the threat of legal action from the Education Secretary if the schools did not remain open (BBC, 2020g).

Looking towards the second term, in mid-December the UK Government announced a roll out of weekly mass coronavirus testing in schools from January 2021 (Department for Education, 2020e). They also announced that secondary schools' return to in-person teaching would be pushed back a week, allowing a staggered return (Department for Education, 2020b). There was a backlash to these announcements from teaching unions who issued a joint statement criticizing the plans as chaotic, rushed, and inoperable for many schools (Gibbons, 2020).

On the 30<sup>th</sup> December, the DfE and the Education Secretary reiterated that most primary schools would be reopening, as planned, from Monday 4<sup>th</sup> January. They also delayed the staggered return to in-person teaching for secondary students by a further week. The DfE also announced contingency plans for a small number of areas affected by high infection rates, meaning that remote education would be implemented for most students in these areas (Department for Education, 2020f).

#### January - February 2021

- Return to remote education
- Cancellation of national examinations

Going into January 2021 there was a somewhat confused picture. On Monday 4<sup>th</sup> January primary schools officially re-opened, although there were many local closures (BBC, 2021). Teaching unions maintained their call for schools to remain closed to most students and for a widespread return to remote education (Trade Unions Congress, 2021).

Later that day, the UK Government announced a national lockdown, including a return to remote education (Prime Minister, 2021). On the 6<sup>th</sup> January it was confirmed that GCSEs, AS and A Level examinations would be cancelled (Department for Education, 2021a). A consultation on the approach to awarding for these qualifications was held between 15<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> January (Ofqual & Department for Education, 2021). Remote education continued throughout January and into February with no defined end date.

### February – May 2021

- Roadmap out of lockdown announced
- Return to in-person teaching
- Teacher Assessed Grades (TAG) confirmation, details and guidance published

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> February the 'roadmap out of lockdown' was announced, which outlined the planned stages for easing lockdown in England. As part of this, school re-opening plans for the 8<sup>th</sup> March were announced (Cabinet Office, 2021). Secondary students and staff were required to wear face coverings where social distancing requirements could not be met, and had to take multiple weekly COVID-19 lateral flow tests (Department for Education & Department for Health and Social Care, 2021). Schools were expected to continue to provide remote learning to students as necessary, such as those shielding or self-isolating due to COVID-19 exposure (Department for Education, 2021b).

The UK Government then announced plans for Teacher Assessed Grades (TAG) for GCSE and A levels on the 25<sup>th</sup> February, providing initial information on the process and key dates (Ofqual & Department for Education, 2021). From the end of March and throughout April, Ofqual published more specific guidance on awarding arrangements for 2021, as well as support materials for teachers.

### May – August 2021

- TAG work and submission by teachers
- Awarding body quality assurance
- Release of grades

Schools were able to begin submitting TAG data from the 26<sup>th</sup> May and had to do this by the 18<sup>th</sup> June. Awarding organisations then carried out quality assurance procedures before results were released on the 10<sup>th</sup> August (A Levels) and the 12<sup>th</sup> August (GCSEs). There was then a window for appeals to be submitted and reviewed from the 10<sup>th</sup> August until end of October (Joint Council for Qualifications, 2021).

## 3. Literature review: Issues in education during the pandemic

When considering curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment practices during the time of the pandemic, several key issues emerge in the media and academic literature. Some of these issues take the teacher as the primary focus, for example, considering pedagogic practices, and teacher workload and wellbeing. Other issues focus more heavily on students, for example, considering issues of equity, learning 'loss', and student wellbeing.

Although the separation of focus between teachers and students is convenient from an analytical and reporting perspective, it is obvious that these issues are not discrete. For example, pedagogic change is likely to influence student equity, and student wellbeing is likely to impact teacher workload which, in turn, affects teacher wellbeing. In this review we look at the literature around five important issues: *remote and blended learning, assessment, equity, teacher workload and wellbeing, and student wellbeing*.

### 3.1. Remote and blended education

The UK Government defines remote education as a 'broad term encompassing any learning that happens outside of the classroom, with the teacher not present in the same location as the pupils' (Ofsted, 2021). As we have shown in our timeline, there have been two main periods where schools have been closed in England, and where students have received remote education. It also needs to be reiterated that even when schools have been generally open for in-person teaching, there have always been some students receiving remote learning (due to COVID-19 related self-isolation or shielding).

Much of this remote education is digital, relying on online learning materials and platforms. Remote education may be synchronous (where live teaching is delivered through online platforms or chat

groups) or it may be asynchronous (where the teacher prepares teaching material, such as pre-recorded videos, and students access it later).

Blended learning has also occurred throughout this pandemic. Blended learning is 'a mix of face-to-face and remote methods' (Ofsted, 2021), and can either refer to learning situations where all students receive some of a lesson in-person and some of it remotely, or situations where some of the class is accessing the learning remotely and others are accessing it in-person.

There is much variation in the terms that have been used to discuss education that has been happening outside of the typical classroom context during the pandemic (Coleman, 2021). In this review we consider remote teaching and remote learning to be subcomponents of the broader term 'remote education' and use all terms as appropriate. Given our focus on teachers, 'remote teaching' is used in much of this review. We use 'in-person' education, teaching, and learning where it is appropriate to the context. We also refer to 'blended' education, teaching and learning where discussing education that has simultaneously used both face-to-face and remote methods.

The provision of remote and blended education has required a significant shift in teaching practices as teachers have had to learn to utilise new technologies and adapt their teaching practices for remote education. Kim, Dundas, & Asbury (2020) interviewed teachers in June 2020 in a period of partial school reopening following the first school closures. They found that teachers reported that remote teaching had a negative impact on their pedagogy. For example, the teachers found it difficult to provide immediate and individualised feedback and to have dialogue with students. The teachers also reported that they missed out on non-verbal cues from students. Kim et al. (2020) also found that some schools and teachers chose to stop teaching new material during the first period of school closure, or made curriculum changes if they felt particular content could not be successfully taught remotely.

## **3.2. Assessment**

We have already noted that the summer 2020 A Level and GCSE examinations were cancelled by the UK Government and replaced by Centre Assessment Grades (CAG). At the time of planning this project there was a broad expectation across the UK that the 2021 examinations would be carried out as usual. It is possible that there was a general sense that the assessment arrangements for 2020 were some sort of aberration, and this may have contributed to the fact there was a lack of research literature at the time of project planning that considered the assessment experience of teachers during the pandemic. It may have also been the case that any such research was 'in the pipeline', and so had not made it through to public discourse by this time. As a result, we have no prior literature that addresses assessment during the pandemic, and this partly informed our interest in going out and collecting such data.

## **3.3. Equity**

It is recognised that equity is difficult to define (Jurado de los Santos, Moreno-Guerrero, Marín-Marín, & Soler Costa, 2020), but Salmi & Bassett (2014) note that it can be seen as 'equal opportunities for access and success' in education (p.365). They also highlight that this access and success should not be influenced by circumstances beyond an individual's control (e.g., birthplace, gender, ethnicity, etc.).

### **3.3.1. Disadvantaged students**

A concern in the literature is that COVID-19 has exacerbated existing educational inequalities. Prior to COVID-19, research has demonstrated that disadvantaged students have poorer educational attainment (for example, see Education Policy Institute, 2020). It is thought that disadvantaged students have been affected by COVID-19 disruption to a greater extent than other students, with emerging research highlighting this impact on disadvantaged students' learning outcomes (e.g. Coe, 2020; ImpactEd, 2021; Sharp et al., 2020).

This increasing gap in attainment is likely to relate to a variety of factors. Research in January 2021 by the Sutton Trust showed that students in state schools, and particularly those in the most deprived

areas, were less likely to have access to devices for accessing learning compared with students in private schools (Montacute & Cullinane, 2021). The research also found school-level differences in how remote teaching was carried out. The gap in the use of live video conferencing widened, with 86% of private schools doing this compared with 50% of state schools. There were also differences in provision between the most and least affluent state schools. Similarly, socioeconomic gaps in the number of hours spent learning were noted. Whilst 40% of students in middle class homes studied for over 5 hours per day, only 26% of students in working class households studied for this amount of time. Similarly, private schools' students were twice as likely to be studying for more than 5 hours a day compared with those in the state sector.

### **3.3.2. Special Education Needs and Disabled (SEND) students**

Research has highlighted concerns around the education provision for SEND students during the pandemic. Greenway & Eaton-Thomas (2020) conducted a survey of parents of children with SEND in June/July 2020 and found that 43% were dissatisfied with the resources they had received to support home schooling. There were concerns that these resources were unsuitable for their child's level of understanding. 72% of the surveyed parents were dissatisfied with the support received for their child's educational needs, and 85% were dissatisfied with the support for their psychological needs. Over three quarters of the parents also felt their child had been disadvantaged by not attending school.

Other research has focused on the mental health and wellbeing of SEND students during the pandemic. Sideropoulos et al., (2021) asked parents about the anxiety and wellbeing of SEND children and their typically developing siblings. They were asked to reflect on these in the time before COVID-19, when COVID-19 started to impact them (March 2020), and at the time of completing the survey (April-June 2020). They found that the anxiety levels for both groups of children increased over time, but that the SEND group had the highest level of anxiety overall. They also found differences in the nature of the worries in the two groups, with the SEND group having higher levels of concerns relating to a lack of structure. They suggested that challenges around comprehending the complexity of events around COVID-19 for some SEND students may lead to increased anxiety levels.

### **3.3.3. Students in Year 11 and Year 13**

For students due to take GCSE and A Level examinations in 2021, and for the teachers preparing them, there were additional specific concerns around the impact of school closures. There was ongoing uncertainty about assessment arrangements for GCSEs and A Level examinations in 2021 and, following the grading controversy in 2020, many teachers and students were concerned about what would happen in 2021.

ImpactEd (2021) found that GCSE students consistently scored lower on the COVID-19 Learning Index between June and November 2020 compared with students in Key Stage 3 (KS3). This index measures learning resilience and suggests that GCSE students' learning had been particularly affected by COVID-19 related school closures. There were also particular challenges with home learning for the GCSE group. This group were more likely to report being unable to get help with their work, and least likely to report having a suitable learning routine. Year 11 students had the lowest wellbeing score compared to all other year groups, and anxiety levels were reported to have increased upon the return to in-person teaching in the first term.

## **3.4. Teacher workload and wellbeing**

Research has already established that many teachers reported having a poor work/life balance and poor health and wellbeing before the pandemic (e.g., CIPD Good Work Index as cited in Education Support, 2020b). Concerns have been raised that the COVID-19 pandemic placed increased workload demands on teachers and had a negative impact on their wellbeing. Education Support (2020a) examined teacher wellbeing during COVID-19 and found that 52% of teachers felt their mental health and wellbeing had declined since the onset of the pandemic, and that 62% of education professionals described themselves as 'stressed from working' (rising to 84% in a follow up survey in October 2020). These findings highlighted that the start of the new school year during the pandemic caused a large increase in stress levels. Education Support (2020a) explored the most common

COVID-19-related causes of stress and found these to be 'organising/maintaining 'bubbles' of pupils for social distancing' (33%), 'possibilities of me testing positive for COVID-19' (30%), pupils' learning loss (29%); and behaviour issues (29%). These findings were supported by NFER research in May 2020 (Walker, Sharp, & Sims, 2020). This research found that COVID-19 had placed additional pressures on teachers, which related to both work and personal circumstances. They also report that 36% of teachers found that 'being responsible for pupils' examination grades' was a significant pressure.

Education Support (2020b) also highlighted that many teachers felt under-supported and underappreciated by various stakeholders. Whilst 72% felt appreciated by their school's Senior Leadership Team (SLT), 61% felt appreciated by parents/carers, only 15% felt appreciated by the UK Government, and only 12% by the general media. There were concerns that teachers' negative experiences during the pandemic would lead to teachers leaving the profession. An Education Policy Institute (2021) survey found that teachers were almost twice as likely to have an intention to leave teaching compared with before the pandemic. Furthermore, they found that 71% of teachers felt that the UK Government's handling of COVID-19 had made them more likely to leave teaching. Schools' responses to COVID-19 also impacted teachers' intentions to leave teaching, with 35% of teachers suggesting that the way that their school had responded to the pandemic had increased their likelihood of leaving the profession.

Kim, Oxley, & Asbury's (2021) analysis of teacher mental health and wellbeing in England across three time points (April 2020, July 2020, November 2020) found that teachers' mental health and wellbeing had declined during the pandemic. The teachers' responses highlighted job demands that were negatively impacting their wellbeing, including the ongoing uncertainty, increasing workload, negative public and media perceptions of the teaching profession, and personal health struggles.

Teacher wellbeing and workload continued to be an issue in 2021 and was affected by unfolding uncertainty around assessment arrangements for 2021. Research suggests that teachers were thinking ahead to Summer 2021 examinations well in advance of any UK Government proposals on examination arrangements. Kim et al., (2020) found that in June 2020 teachers were already considering how to factor in preparation for 2021 examinations when considering what to teach. They highlighted that making curriculum decisions was challenging amidst uncertainty about the future for education, and that it was difficult to make plans whilst waiting on UK Government guidance on school re-openings and curriculum and examination content. There were also concerns that TAG plans placed an additional burden on teachers, both in terms of workload and in terms of responsibility for grades. Some commentators noted that the shift in terminology from 'Centre Assessment Grades' in 2020 to 'Teacher Assessed Grades' in 2021 signalled a transfer of sole responsibility for grading to teachers (Kay, 2021).

### **3.5. Student wellbeing**

Student wellbeing during the pandemic was also a common concern in the literature. NFER research found that supporting 'pupils' emotional and mental health/wellbeing' was the most commonly reported key priority for the new school term in September 2020 (Sharp et al., 2020). There was also evidence that there had been an increase in students' mental health problems during the COVID-19 pandemic. One comparison of students' mental health in 2018/2019 and in April-June 2020 found that there was a significant increase in their depression symptom scores (Bignardi et al., 2020). Another population health study conducted by Wright et al. (2020) compared mental health scores of students aged 11-12 in December 2019, March 2020, and June 2020. They found that the students reported a 44% increase in depression scores and a 26% increase in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder scores. This study also examined mother's ratings of their children's mental health and found that, adjusted for maternal depression, mothers reported a 71% increase in their child's depression scores. Mothers also reported a 44% increase in their child's disruptive behaviour problems. Interestingly, neither of these studies found an increase in students' anxiety levels.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student mental health is complex. Several studies have found that some students' wellbeing may have improved whilst they were learning remotely, and decreased as they returned to attending school in-person. Widnall, Winstone, Mars, Haworth, &

Kidger's (2020) research with secondary school students in Southern England in August 2020 found that there was an overall decrease in risk anxiety and an increase in wellbeing in the April/May 2020 lockdown compared to pre-pandemic levels, although there was no change in risk of depression. Additionally, more vulnerable groups had higher anxiety depression and anxiety scores and lower wellbeing on both occasions, and showed less change across the two timepoints. Other research, conducted in Autumn 2020, found that 61% of young people who had pre-existing mental health needs reported that returning to school had a negative effect on their mental health (Young Minds, 2020).

In August 2020 the UK Government launched a Wellbeing for Education Return programme, allocating £8 million to support schools' and colleges' responses to staff and students' mental health and wellbeing. There remained concerns that this provision was inadequate. In March 2021, as schools prepared to re-open for in-person teaching, the NSPCC called for young people's mental health to be put at the forefront, and for a long-term recovery plan and funding to be put in place (TES, 2021).

## 4. Project outline

Our project plan was developed in September 2020. At this time, schools had just re-opened for the first term of the new school year. Most students were returning to in-person teaching for the first time since March, and it would be anticipated that there would be ongoing fallout from the 2020 GCSE and A Level examinations grading controversy as the schools reopened.

Recruitment for the study started in December, as schools neared the end of the first term, and amidst much debate about whether schools should remain open in the January term. The data collection period for our research project began in the last week of January, when schools were mainly teaching remotely. At this point examinations had been cancelled, but specifics of how the qualifications would be awarded were yet to be announced.

Our research aimed to understand the experiences of teachers in England during the second and third terms of the 2020-21 academic year. Although the period from January 2021 was the focus, teachers also reflected on their experiences over the previous school year. Building on the emerging research literature we wanted to understand the impact of COVID-19 on education in three principle (and overlapping) areas: teacher practice relating to **pedagogy** (teaching methods); **curriculum** (taught content); and **assessment** (assessed content and assessment methods). We also wanted to explore how these areas affected **teacher workload**, **teacher and student wellbeing**, and **the equity of educational provision and performance outcomes**.

We focused our study on teachers in Year 11 and in Year 13 as we anticipated that teachers preparing students for GCSE and A Level examinations in 2021 would be particularly affected by the move to remote learning and any disruption to formal assessment in 2021. Of course, although we had a specific focus on the examination preparation years it was always likely that the teachers would also report on their experiences of teaching other year groups. We focused on a group of subject areas that we felt would be affected by the conditions of the pandemic. These subjects included English Literature (where there were newly introduced changes to topic choice), and Science, Geography, PE, and Drama (where student performance would involve aspects of teamwork, practical activity, or fieldwork).

## 5. Methods

It was clear to us that eliciting information about teachers' lived experience during the pandemic would involve the use of a qualitative methodology. Qualitative methods 'are used to answer questions about experience, meaning and perspective, most often from the standpoint of the participant' (Hammarberg, Kirkman, & de Lacey, 2016, p. 499). We used a series of qualitative methods over a 19-week period. These methods centred on the use of solicited teacher diaries that were augmented by interviews and surveys. Our data collection approach involved eight broad stages, from invitation to participation through to post-diary interviews (Figure 2).

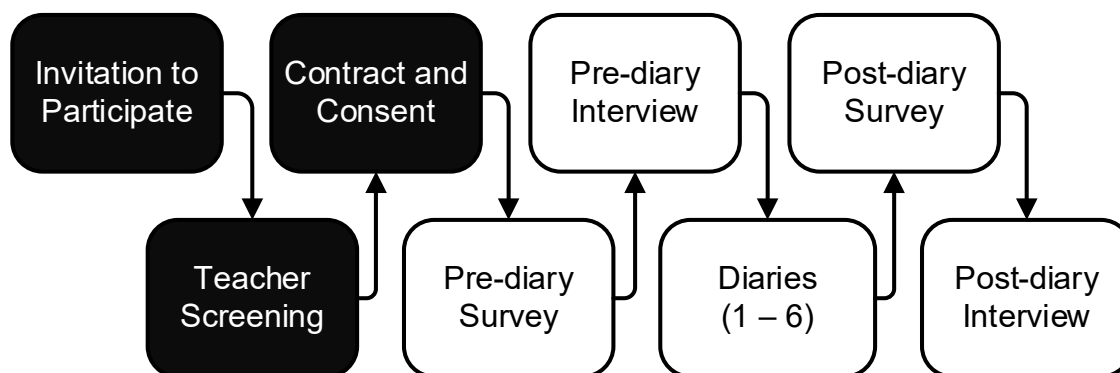


Figure 2: Organisational stages of our study

The table below shows the spread of the different methods that we used over the 19 weeks of data gathering. It also shows how some of the methods overlapped with each other (e.g., in weeks 1 and 2 some of the teachers were involved in diary writing and with interviews). Table 1 also shows the dates of key policy announcements during the data gathering period. This reiterates the utility of employing a longitudinal methodology to capture the interplay of changing conditions on teacher practices during this 5-month period.

As key events unfolded, we were able to modify the diary prompts and incorporate specific questions relating to these as appropriate. Broadly speaking, Diaries 1 and 2 largely covered the period when England was in full lockdown. During this period remote education was taking place for most students, and it was prior to the release of information about how qualifications would be graded. Diary 3 covered a transitional period following the Government's initial TAG announcements and the transition back to in-person learning. More detailed TAG information was released during the Diary 4 and Diary 5 period, and so this was a period of uncertainty as teachers reacted to and familiarised themselves with the guidance. By Diary 6, teachers had all of the TAG information and were well underway with their TAG-related work.



Table 1: Outline of methods and key dates

Date (w/b)	D <sup>2</sup>	I	S	Key announcements and events
25 Jan 2021		1	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Remote education continues (for most students).</li> </ul>
01 Feb	1	1		
08	1	1		
15	2			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Half term week (most schools).</li> </ul>
22	2			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>UK Government Roadmap for easing lockdown announced. It includes details of plans for full school reopening in England (8<sup>th</sup> March).</li> <li>DfE announces a £700m education recovery package to help young people catch up on lost learning. £200m of this is available for secondary schools to deliver face-to-face summer schools.</li> <li>DfE &amp; Ofqual announces TAG plan.</li> </ul>
01 Mar	3			
08	3			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Step 1 of UK Government Roadmap: full reopening of schools.</li> </ul>
15	4			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>DfE reports that 89% of students are attending Secondary School.</li> <li>Ofqual publishes guidance for schools on arrangements for submitting data for general qualifications.</li> </ul>
22	4			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ofqual publishes guidance for schools on awarding arrangements for general qualifications and advice on 'making objective judgements to support qualification awarding'.</li> </ul>
29	5			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Spring Holiday (most schools).</li> <li>Examination boards publish assessment support materials (questions, mark schemes and mapping).</li> </ul>
05 Apr	5			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Spring Holiday (most schools).</li> </ul>
12	5			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Spring Holiday (some schools)</li> <li>Examination boards publish additional assessment support materials (marking exemplification).</li> <li>School Policy submission (for determining student grades) open (until 30<sup>th</sup> April).</li> <li>Step 2 of UK Government Roadmap: indoor activities for young people are allowed.</li> </ul>
19	5			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ofqual publishes proposed guidance for grading appeals.</li> <li>Additional support materials (grading exemplification) and additional sets of questions publicly available.</li> <li>Examination boards review School Policies and carry out virtual visits (until 11<sup>th</sup> June).</li> </ul>
26	6			
03 May	6			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ofqual publishes outcomes from consultation on general qualifications in the Autumn.</li> </ul>
10		2	2	
17		2		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Step 3 of UK Government Roadmap: removes the requirement for mask wearing in the classroom.</li> </ul>
24		2		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>TAG data can be submitted (until 18<sup>th</sup> June).</li> </ul>
31		2		

We managed most of the administration and data collection process through *Recollective* software (<https://recollective.com/>). Interested teachers were invited to register onto the system and to provide some demographic information. We were then able to screen and select teachers who fitted our research design. We wanted to involve 16 teachers, so that we could include participants with a broad

<sup>2</sup> D: Diary; I: Interview; S: Survey

range of experiences. Unfortunately, one teacher dropped out following the teacher screening phase, which meant that it was too late to bring in a replacement participant at that stage.

We wanted to include teachers who were currently preparing students for GCSE or A Level examinations in the Arts (e.g., Drama, Music, Art), Sport, Science, Geography, or English Literature across Comprehensive Schools, Independent Schools, and 6<sup>th</sup> Form Colleges. As we outlined earlier, these subjects were chosen because they were likely to involve student teamwork, practical performance, fieldwork, or were likely to have had changes to their specification during 2020. We also wanted to include teachers from across different regions as the experiences of 'tiered lockdown' arrangements in England varied in the latter part of 2020<sup>3</sup>.

The demographics of the selected teachers are shown below (Table 2). We had a relatively even split of teachers across the subjects taught (except for PE, where we only had two teachers). There was a relatively even split between teachers working in the north and the south of England, and most worked in state comprehensive schools/colleges. Only one teacher worked exclusively in a 6<sup>th</sup> Form College. Most teachers worked in suburban schools.

Table 2: Teacher demographics

Teacher	Subject <sup>4</sup>					School Locality <sup>5</sup>			School Region <sup>6</sup>		School Type <sup>7</sup>	
	E	D	P	S	G	R	S	U	N	S	C	I
1												
2												
3												
4												
5												
6												
7												
8												
9												
10												
11												
12												
13												
14												
15												
Total	4	3	2	3	4	3	8	4	8	7	9	6

Following screening, we managed the consent and contracting process through *Recollective* software. We were also able to communicate with the teachers through an integrated email application in the system.

At the start of the data collection we assigned the teachers a survey task. This asked the teachers some questions about themselves and their teaching context and contained rating scales about their current perceptions of their workload, wellbeing, and sources of support for their assessment preparation. These rating scales were also repeated again following the diary data collection for comparative purposes. The wellbeing and workload survey rating scale was adapted from Collie, Shapka, Perry, & Martin (2015) and is included in Appendix 1.

<sup>3</sup> Following screening and recruitment we became aware that one of the teachers was located in Jersey which had different arrangements for dealing with the pandemic compared with the rest of the UK at that time.

<sup>4</sup> E: English Literature/Language; D: Drama; P: PE; S: Science/Biology/Physics/Chemistry; G: Geography

<sup>5</sup> R: Rural; S: Suburban; U: Urban

<sup>6</sup> N: North/Midlands; S: South

<sup>7</sup> C: Comprehensive/Non-selective Academy/ Non-selective Sixth Form College; I: Independent

We then carried out a virtual interview with each teacher. The schedule for these interviews is included in Appendix 2. These interviews focused on gathering information about their curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment arrangements over the previous year (in the earliest stages of the pandemic in March 2020, during the relaxation of lockdown in September 2020, and then during the renewed lockdown in January 2021). These interviews also allowed the teachers to ask the researchers any questions about the research project and to establish rapport with the researchers.

Following the interviews, the teachers were able to access 6 *Recollective* diary tasks. These tasks were set for fixed submission intervals of every 2 weeks<sup>8</sup>, allowing the teachers to complete them at their convenience. The prompts for the six diary tasks had some common themes (wellbeing, equity, workload, and teaching content). We also added specific prompts to each diary. These elicited additional information about curriculum, pedagogy, or assessment issues. We reviewed the prompts on an ongoing basis and made changes and additions in response to issues of interest around the time of data collection (e.g., what practical arrangements were being put in place around the announced return to school for most students in March 2021). The outline of these diary tasks is included in Appendix 3.

Following the diary phase, we asked the teachers to repeat the workload, wellbeing, and assessment preparation support survey that they had completed at the outset of the project (Appendix 1). We then invited the teachers to a follow up interview. The schedule for these interviews is included in Appendix 4. These interview and survey data were designed to supplement the diary data as it is considered that qualitative longitudinal research is most effective when it draws on more than one source of data (Bytheway, 2012).

The potentially personal nature of the data being collected, as well as the pandemic conditions in which these data were being collected, meant that we needed to consider several ethical issues. We had to ensure that the participants' data was held securely, anonymized, and was only visible to the project team. It was also of paramount importance that we considered participant wellbeing. One of these considerations was linked to our responsibility for supporting a participant if they disclosed that they were suffering from severe wellbeing issues. In anticipation of this we collated a group of resources and organisations who we could point a participant to if they felt that they might need additional support.

Another consideration was that we needed to ensure that participation in the study was not unduly contributing to any wellbeing and workload issues. In recognition of the additional work attached to their participation in the project we paid the teachers for the time that they spent on the project. We also made it clear that the teachers could withdraw their participation at any time without giving a reason. This issue also had implications for how we dealt with the teachers in the case of any non-completion of diaries in accordance with the project schedule. Where this happened, we decided to send messages which offered to amend the project timescale in case the teacher was encountering a difficult set of circumstances.

It was important that we considered how we could maximise teacher commitment levels for the project, as participant drop-out is recognised as a problem for diary methods. Participant payment was a clear inducement. We also felt that the interviews that we carried out at the beginning of the project had an important role in establishing trust relationships with the teachers (so they could meet the researchers virtually and could understand the research agenda).

Our interviews were auto transcribed by the meeting recording software and then we quality assured the transcripts. These were then added to MAXQDA software (VERBI Software, 2020) alongside the collected diary text data. The study researchers each took responsibility for coding different texts. These codes were, in the first instance, based on our study research questions (e.g., thematic codes

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<sup>8</sup> Diary four was open for four weeks rather than two. This was to allow for the fact that Easter holidays fell during this period with schools closed for approximately two weeks, but with regional variation in the exact closure dates.

of wellbeing, workload, content/skills teaching practice changes). During analysis, we generated additional codes and subcodes as they emerged during the data read through (e.g., parental involvement). To standardise our coding, we created memos to describe each code. We also met regularly to discuss instances where we struggled to allocate codes.

An accepted feature of qualitative diary and interview data is its holism. Participants are likely to expand on their experiences so that they result in descriptive overlaps (e.g., for question prompts around working with one year group of students, teachers may find it necessary to also talk about other year groups, or the experience of other teaching colleagues). We used double coding to cover areas where issues overlapped with others in the data.

To analyse the diary codes, we took each area of enquiry and identified any related codes (e.g., the question of 'what is taught' also linked with our 'content change' code). To see how each code interacted with other variables or codes we carried out distribution and code relations analyses.

The distribution analysis meant looking at how the codes linked with any variables of interest (e.g., did teachers only mention certain challenges in the first stages of the project, or were these things predominantly reported by teachers in particular school types or subject groups?). Where there was any suggestion of a relationship trend between a code and a variable, it was also possible to carry out further fine detailed analysis using the *QUAL Themes by QUAN Groups* function in the MAXQDA software. This function allows any coded segments attached to any different variable groups to be compared in a side-by-side manner so that any potential differences may be identified (Figure 3).

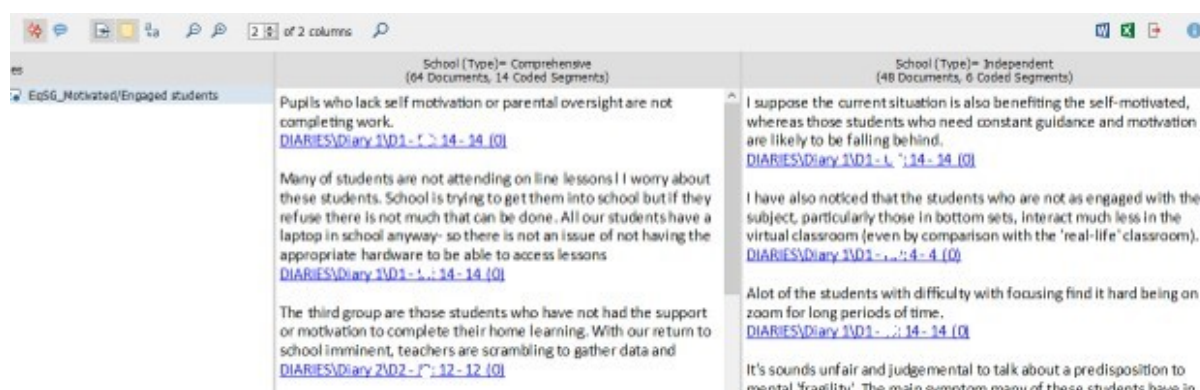


Figure 3: Extract of MAXQDA QUAL Themes by QUAN Groups analysis

Code relations analysis is another function in the MAXQDA software, and this allowed us to identify where codes overlapped with each other. The extract below shows a cross tabulated output for various codes of interest, identifying the frequency of any interacting codes (Figure 4).

Code System	Year Group - Differences	Workload	Wellbeing: Student	Wellbeing: Teacher	Content/Skills: Neutral/No change	Content/Skills: Changes/Challenges
Year Group - Differences						
Thematic Codes						
Workload						
Wellbeing						
Wellbeing: Student	9	18		43	4	16
Wellbeing: Teacher	1	58	43		1	2
Practices (inc interaction, pedagogy)			1		2	1
Content/Skills: Neutral/No change	1	2	4	1		6
Content/Skills: Changes/Challenges	7	6	16	2	6	

Figure 4: Extract of code relations analysis

## 6. Findings

In this section we describe some of the most salient features of our participants' experiences of teaching during the study period. After some additional consideration of the shifting pandemic context, we report the impact of the pandemic on *curriculum and pedagogy, assessment, equity, teacher*

*workload, teacher and student wellbeing and teacher reflections on support and attitudes towards stakeholders*. Naturally there is some overlap within these sections as they are highly inter-related.

## **6.1. Teaching in a time of transition**

'Transition' was a defining feature of the teachers' experiences of working through this period of the pandemic. In Table 1 we outlined some of the key events that took place during our study period. In their diaries and interviews the teachers described how they experienced a series of adjustments to their practice as these events unfolded. These adjustments included the movement between in-person and remote teaching arrangements, accommodating new technologies for teaching, and implementing practices to ensure that the teaching environment was safe (as the extent and general understanding of the pandemic continued to develop).

An important aspect of the context of transition was that the conditions of the pandemic were in many ways unprecedented in nature, and that changes were often sudden and unpredictable. This meant that the teachers could not draw on their prior experience to inform their adjustment to the new reality, and this helps to account for the sense that accommodating to adjustment was a tiring experience.

### **6.1.1. Shifting between in-person, blended and remote teaching arrangements**

The return to in-person teaching on March 8<sup>th</sup> was perhaps the most significant event that affected the teachers and students during the research study period. Some of the teachers felt that there was limited opportunity for them to prepare for the shift from remote- to in-person teaching and would have preferred a staggered return.

It was common for teachers to highlight the additional number of meetings and the preparatory work that the return to in-person teaching required. It was also fairly common for teachers to comment on how the students struggled to re-adapt to the return to in-person learning. Teachers felt that some students were unpredictable in their reaction to school learning, and that teachers needed to be more flexible than usual in their planning and delivery to accommodate these variances in students' needs. It is also noteworthy that with the return to in-person education many teachers continued to carry out blended teaching, so that they could teach self-isolating students, or students who failed to return to in-person teaching for other reasons (such as poor mental health).

As the pandemic continued to unfold, the teachers needed to deal with erratic student and staff absences (e.g., due to self-isolation and shielding requirements). The consequences of this form of instability, which involved shifts between in-person, remote, and blended teaching approaches, are discussed below.

### **6.1.2. Accommodating new technologies**

A variety of communication platforms were used by the teachers across the study cohort. Teachers engaged in 'live' and pre-recorded teaching interactions with their students through applications such as *Zoom*, *Microsoft Teams*, *Google Meet*, and *Flipgrid*. Some of the teachers also described how they had become more familiar with new applications for delivering and gathering learning content, such as *Microsoft Forms*, or their school's learning management platform (e.g., *Canvas*, *Sims Engage* and *GO 4 Schools*).

Engaging in these new practices had implications for teachers' learning requirements, particularly where some schools recommended new software solutions partway through the pandemic. Teachers were explicit about how, in some cases, they needed to learn how to use these innovative technologies (and it was also the case that many students also needed teacher support to learn how to interact and upload work in these systems). This meant that, alongside the other shifting elements of practice during the pandemic, the teachers needed to accommodate new practices that involved technological tools. For some teachers there was school support for this accommodation process (in the form of professional training), whilst some teachers needed to get to grips with the technology in isolation.

The schools varied in terms of their preparedness for moving to remote teaching. A few of the teachers described their school as being highly digitally connected even prior to COVID-19, with some

teachers outlining how students in their school used devices as part of their usual practice. One teacher was already carrying out lessons using live streaming to enable students in another campus to join remotely. Another teacher described how their school had already started to increase its use of IT in lessons, and that having anticipated the disruption of the COVID-19 early in 2020 (after observing the impact it was having in China) they had accelerated their use of technology. Consequently, some schools were better prepared than others to adapt to remote education when the first school closures occurred.

### **6.1.3. Implementing new safe working practices**

The data conveyed some of the emotion related to working in a context where others were becoming unwell or leaving the profession. Some teachers expressed their nervousness about returning to in-person teaching. This reluctance was connected with considerations of their personal health and safety, or that of older members of staff. This issue was accentuated by the additional workload around organising school days where there were gaps in staffing due to shielding and self-isolation (e.g., monitoring students' free times).

The teachers also highlighted how their teaching arrangements were affected by health and safety concerns. In addition to the pedagogic and curriculum changes that we outline in the following section, teachers needed to engage in a new set of monitoring arrangements to ensure that the working environment was safe. For example, teachers talked about needing to complete protocols where students were not wearing masks. These new arrangements had implications for teaching (e.g., causing difficulties when trying to plan group tasks within social distancing compliance, or needing to make additional plans for separating mask wearing and other students), and was an ongoing source of tension with some teachers describing how parents were pressuring their school not to implement face mask wearing. The teachers also worked in a state of uncertainty as COVID-19 outbreaks continued to occur in their schools, leading to significant numbers of students and staff having to isolate at short notice.

### **6.1.4. COVID-19 cases**

Throughout the research the teachers made references to student COVID-19 cases or self-isolation, and the impact that this had on teaching practice. During the first interview, all of the teachers mentioned self-isolation as an issue during the first term of the 2020-21 school year. Several teachers highlighted that they had COVID-19 outbreaks in their schools that led to significant numbers of students having to isolate, particularly towards the latter half of the first term.

We did not specifically ask teachers about incidences of COVID-19 in the diary prompts, however some of the teachers raised this issue once they had returned to in-person teaching. They discussed how blended teaching approaches were being used for students who needed to self-isolate, with many teachers feeling that those students were 'missing out' as they were not able to provide them with the same quality of teaching compared with other students.

For some teachers COVID-19 cases seemed to be more of an issue than for others, although this did not seem to be related to school location, region type or size. Two of the teachers who most frequently reported COVID-19 cases and self-isolation expressed concerns that this was because lateral flow tests were not reliable and that they might be resulting in too many false positives.

## **6.2. Curriculum and pedagogy: How teaching was organised and how it changed**

This section is organised into three broad (and sometimes overlapping) sections. In the first section we deal with the teachers' reflections on the content of teaching during the course of the pandemic - and how this changed up to the end of our study period. In the second section we look at the way that things were taught, covering remote, blended, and in-person teaching, and how this changed during the pandemic. Finally, we consider the nature of teacher and student interactions, and how these changed over the period of time covered by this study.

### 6.2.1. Changes to what was taught

There was evidence that lockdown and the move to remote teaching led to some changes in content coverage; these included the dropping of some content/skills, the introduction of some new content/skills, or a change in the balance of the content/skills. When asked specifically about 'catch up' needs, teachers reflected on what they felt their students had missed during the pandemic teaching period.

#### 6.2.1.1. Dropped content/skills

Teachers reported that they **avoided practical skills** for several reasons. Part of this was because students were now not able to easily demonstrate practical content (e.g., applied group work in Drama, and data analysis and graph drawing skills in Science) or to apply skills to practice (e.g., demonstrating sport in PE).

*Year 12s: I have not been able to cover the practical aspects of their course while in lockdown and this is a problem in developing their skills and their engagement in the course. (Science Teacher, Diary 1)*

A lack of appropriate resources also meant that students could not apply certain skills (e.g., a lack of mapping resources for Geography students). One Geography teacher also highlighted how fieldwork skills were challenging to teach at this time. Since field work trips were not feasible, data analysis and interpretation skills could not easily be covered. Similarly, Drama teachers reported that they made a conscious decision to alter the content of the course, with one teacher describing how they lost a course component, and another describing how they asked their students to focus on 'reading and research' rather than Drama during this period.

Changes to **assessment arrangements** also influenced changes to content coverage. Teachers talked about how they 'scrapped new learning' in favour of revision work once examinations were cancelled.

*Due to teacher assessed grades, we have had to develop a plan to gather enough evidence to determine current working at grades. This means we have scrapped any new learning with this year group (Year 11) and instead, planned weekly revision and assessment lessons. (Geography Teacher, Diary 3)*

In some cases, teachers 'abandoned' certain areas of content as they were now not a requirement for their subject (e.g., Geography). Some teachers also reflected on the way that the uncertainty around assessment freed them to some extent from the expectations of assessment and allowed them some flexibility to cover content that was more suited to supporting their students' wellbeing.

#### 6.2.1.2. New content/skills

The teachers discussed how there had been an opportunity to focus on new skills and content. Many teachers, particularly in the earliest stages of our data collection, highlighted how their students had needed to develop a **greater proficiency with using IT skills** during the remote teaching period. One teacher also explained that their students were now much better at note taking, as this supported their remote learning. In Drama, it was noted that screenwriting skills had become a new feature of the course. Some teachers also described how they were building in more time to discuss **students' wellbeing** issues.

*I think [wellbeing] is definitely suffering. It is certainly something many students are keen to talk about openly during lessons - and sometimes I feel this is the most useful thing I can be doing during lesson time (in effect offering some amateur counselling). (English Teacher, Diary 1)*

#### 6.2.1.3. A changed content/skills balance

Many of the teachers highlighted that they were using the same materials and resources during remote teaching as before the pandemic. This reflected the way that the teaching content is largely stipulated by examination specifications for the teachers involved in our study.

A number of teachers outlined how they were placing a **greater focus on key content** for other non-examination year groups (e.g., covering 'only the essentials' in Geography or focusing on 'basic literacy' in English). There was some concern that this focus on the basics also coincided with them being covered in less depth.

*There is greater focus for Year 9 and Year 10 on picking up key aspects of content, teaching with a 'lighter touch' instead of covering the material in the same level of depth as in the past. (English Teacher, Diary 2)*

Across the different subject areas, teachers outlined how **certain skills were being privileged** during remote teaching. In English there was more focus on 'private reading', with some observing that there was a 'more conservative approach' to text choice and less focus on diverse content. In Science there was more of a focus on students observing skills demonstrations, and less opportunities for them to collect data and to 'make mistakes'. In Drama, the lack of remote camera use meant that there was an inevitable focus on aural, talk, and writing skills for some schools.

#### 6.2.1.4. 'Catch up' concerns

As outlined above, teachers readily acknowledged that some content was not covered during the remote teaching period of the pandemic (e.g., some missed sports in PE, or some missed texts in English). However, teachers were far more concerned about the significance of the **students' skills loss**. These lost skills included the application of knowledge to practice (e.g., practical skills in Science), interaction and social confidence, literacy, spelling, grammar, and attitude to writing and longer, sustained tasks.

*So, in terms of content, they had all the content – but the missing learning – that's what it should be called, was more of the skill. One of the big things in A Level PE is being able to apply practical examples to the theory that you've learned. (PE Teacher, Interview 2)*

*I think it was more kind of the social skills [that] they kind of missed out on and, but it's obviously knocked their confidence and maybe it's not lost learning. It's kind of lost confidence and it maybe affected their independence and their ability to kind of work and problem solve themselves. (Geography Teacher, Interview 2)*

Teachers were also very concerned about the **lost learning opportunities** over the pandemic learning period. Many of the teachers highlighted that there were numerous instances of students not completing work or being absent from lessons during the remote teaching period. It was also more common for teachers from comprehensive schools to share concerns about students lacking access to technology for learning or concerns about students not having supportive home environments for learning.

The teachers outlined how their institutions were providing a variety of **additional arrangements** to help their students to catch up on any lost learning. These arrangements included organising additional lessons, sometimes at lunchtimes, to help to cover things like rescheduled coursework requirements or to cover missed 'lockdown lesson content' for some students. In some cases, these lessons were put on voluntarily by staff, whilst in others they were mandated as additional lessons for certain year groups. Teachers also reported that they were involved in the provision of extra-curricular activities for students to supplement the school's standard educational offer. These additional lessons included the provision of exercise sessions for key workers' children during the lockdown period, as well as new courses that were developed to prepare students for their 6th Form courses or for Higher Education.

#### 6.2.2. Changes to the way things were taught

When reflecting on how teaching changed during the pandemic, teachers reported that there were minimal changes to teaching once the 'new normal' teaching arrangements were planned. Despite this, lockdown and mainly remote teaching led to many changes to the ways that content was delivered. These changes centred on shifts in the speed of content coverage, changes to teaching approaches, modifications to the order of content covered, and alterations to the depth of treatment of



the content taught. We reflect on the challenges of this form of teaching in relation to other forms of delivery in the final part of this section.

#### 6.2.2.1. Shifts in the speed of content delivery

Despite some concerns that students were generally less motivated to learn during the mainly remote teaching period, teachers made many references to the way that **content delivery slowed down** during remote teaching. During the earliest stages of remote teaching, teachers highlighted some common delays when teaching in the remote classroom. These delays were caused by the time taken by students to log into lessons as well as the transition time taken up as students moved from one remote lesson to another. Teachers also noted that wellbeing concerns meant that they were reluctant to discipline students if they were late to access their lessons.

*I get a bit eager, and I tend to call my students straight away at the beginning of the Teams session, even though it's in their calendar to get them all there. But then I've been told that that's quite stressful, so you know [I'm] trying to change that, so that I let them have their five minutes to drift in even if it wastes time. Well, this is not the biggest deal in the world. (English Teacher, Interview 1)*

Similarly, at the earliest stages of the remote teaching period, teachers indicated that learning was slowed down because students had limited access to some resources (such as reading materials for English lessons), and that it generally took students longer to get through reading texts online. This issue was exacerbated by 'lagging' video connections for some teachers, which meant that they felt that their remote lessons did not flow as well as their in-person lessons.

Several teachers explained how remote teaching slowed down their teaching compared with in-person teaching, making it difficult for them to plan how long a series of lessons might take. Some suggested that it took longer to explain learning tasks online, and it took students longer to access their learning resources. This meant that a series of lessons that might usually take two weeks to deliver now took three weeks. Once students returned to in-person teaching, teachers also outlined how teaching was slower than they would have normally anticipated due to a need to recap learning content that had been covered during remote learning, or because students were behind with practical skills and needed to catch up with them.

*Some students are taking longer to settle back into school routines than I would have anticipated. There is a real dichotomy between students who engaged during lockdown and those that did not. Some material has to be gone over so not as much new content being covered. (English Teacher, Diary 4)*

At the earliest stages of the mainly remote teaching period, it was common for teachers to highlight how their teaching was slowed down due to a reduction in the amount of homework that they were setting. This reduced homework setting was a common wellbeing concern, with fears of overloading students during the remote learning period. This meant that the teachers needed to use their remote class time for things like revision or catch-up work, which would usually have been deferred to homework activity.

Wellbeing concerns also had an impact on the pace of teaching. Teachers were encouraged to include wellbeing initiatives during their remote lessons, which eroded teaching time. In some schools, students were also given additional time off, or allowed a later start to the day on occasions in consideration of their wellbeing concerns.

*Last week the school had a 'Wellbeing Wednesday', where the last 90-minute lesson was cancelled and replaced by encouraging students and staff to do something away from the screen. A nice gesture, but the work I needed to do did not simply go away it still needs doing. (Geography Teacher, Diary 1)*

Finally, several teachers highlighted how blended learning led to the slowing down of teaching. Although we discuss blended learning in more detail below, it is worth noting that teachers found the practical demands of simultaneously teaching online and in-person led to slower coverage since it

was difficult, for example, to make 'board work' visible to both sets of learners, or to concurrently lead different types of discussion with the different learner sets.

In addition to the messages around the slowing down of content delivery, teachers also highlighted how the pace of teaching changed over the study period. Teachers described how, in contrast to the early stages of remote teaching, they **speeded up or 'rushed' teaching delivery** once in-person teaching was largely reinstated.

Some teachers indicated that they increased the speed of their content coverage in anticipation of new school assessment arrangements. During the period of the widespread return to in-person teaching there was a clear sense of teachers being anxious about the consequences of having lost teaching time earlier in the year. Some described this period as one where they were 'accelerating through the syllabus' and 'rushing' to catch up. There are also indications that some teachers felt less able to complete practical work as they needed to go over lockdown content and recap things that they perceived had not previously been covered well.

*In my Year 10 GCSE classes there are a huge number of students who have completed little to no work throughout this most recent lockdown. I really can't see that we will have time to re-teach this content so I'm not sure what this will mean for next year's exams. (Geography Teacher, Diary 3)*

#### 6.2.2.2. Changes to teaching approaches

Teachers indicated that they made several modifications to their usual teaching approach when they moved to remote teaching. Teachers of English and teachers of Drama were heavily represented in the group of teachers who reported that they **engaged less in discussion activities** with their students and that they involved less group work in their delivery. The teachers also recounted how they adopted more didactic, teacher-led approaches and less active and practical learning approaches.

*My text-based work with other classes (e.g., Shakespeare in English lessons) has become a little more didactic and 'knowledge'-based than it usually would. (English and Drama Teacher, Diary 1)*

This shift was partly the result of the teachers finding it difficult to use the same tools for remote teaching than they would use for in-person teaching. In the case of English teaching, some teachers suggested that they could not use the board to annotate for students in the usual way, or that they could not mark up their students' essays when marking them online (although there was some evidence that teachers, with the support from their schools, gradually adapted their teaching so that they could involve group work by the end of the lockdown period). Some teachers described this learning experience as being less than adequate, suggesting that students were not getting the inspirational experience that they were entitled to, or that 'the guts' of the subject was being lost.

A corollary of the shift to mainly remote teaching was that some teachers felt that their teaching was **less spontaneous** compared to their in-person lessons. It was suggested that in remote lessons there was less of an opportunity for the students to influence the direction of the lesson, and that online learning was more 'regimented'.

On the return to in-person teaching, the teachers indicated that they also **returned to using more interactive teaching approaches** that involved practical and active tasks. It was felt that this increase in discursive tasks was important as the students were lacking social interaction during the remote teaching phase.

*I am tending to teach classes more open-ended and active tasks (preparation for presentations, group work, acting, performance outside in the fresh air). (English and Drama Teacher, Diary 6)*

Teachers outlined how they used **online resources** to cover important course content when teaching remotely. It was common for teachers to use video resources (e.g., YouTube) to convey practical

aspects of their coursework, such as fieldwork simulations in Science or Geography, or to demonstrate live practical exercises in Science. Some teachers also alluded to how they seemed to set shorter and more independent tasks for their students, including more quizzes and knowledge checks than they would otherwise have done.

*Learning is generally more individual and based around written resources/videos.  
(Geography Teacher, Diary 1)*

#### 6.2.2.3. Modifications to the order of content covered

Teachers indicated that they **rearranged the order** in which they covered topics in their subjects when they moved to remote teaching. Some teachers explained how they reserved the more demanding elements of their courses for the return to mainly in-person teaching (e.g., poetry in English courses). Some practical course elements were also postponed until the return to in-person teaching (such as fieldwork in Geography). Teachers also suggested that they focused on areas of content that they anticipated would be closer to the students' own experiences during the remote teaching phase. It was anticipated that this content would be easier for the students to relate to and would be more engaging.

*The A Level content being taught now is slightly different than last year as I rearranged the curriculum last year to teach appropriate topics during lockdown 1. (Science Teacher, Diary 1)*

#### 6.2.2.4. Alterations to the depth of treatment of the content taught

We have already alluded to how some teachers reported that they covered a reduced level of content in the remote teaching phase. Some of the teachers of English also reported that they **covered aspects of their course in less depth**. It was clear that the practical aspects of some courses were adversely affected by the shift to remote learning. For example, in Geography it was reported that the focus of planning fieldtrips shifted to an abstract consideration of the process of planning (rather than actually carrying out the plan), whilst in PE there was less opportunity for the students to engage in 'physical, leading, thinking, and socialising' skills.

#### 6.2.2.5. Teaching arrangements: Remote, in-person, and blended experiences

We have already mentioned in passing to some of the challenges of blended teaching, highlighting, for instance, how the practical demands of simultaneously teaching online and in-person led to slower coverage of material. In this section we analyse in some detail the teachers' reflections on the relative advantages and disadvantages of remote teaching, in-person teaching, and blended teaching.

##### 6.2.2.5.1 Remote teaching: Advantages and disadvantages

Several teachers highlighted that a useful corollary of remote teaching was that **it tended to provide a tangible record of students' work and their interactions**. Teachers felt it was positive that the chat function in online systems allowed them to give direct feedback to students. Other functions (such as 'polls') also allowed teachers to capture a record of students' responses, to 'see what they all think', and to see misconceptions emerging in real time (rather than at the end of the day when the teacher marked students' working).

*I have learnt how to have live documents open which means that I can monitor what students are doing and give them some feedback during the lesson. This has proved really useful as before I did this I was getting students to upload completed work... but I could only see misconceptions after the lesson ended - so I am able to intervene in a more timely manner as I would do in lessons in school. (Science Teacher, Diary 1).*

Teachers also explained that the chat function in remote interaction allowed some students to thrive or 'to come out of themselves more'. This reflection hinted at the way that some teacher and student **relationships were influenced in a positive way** through online teaching. One teacher described how they were able to get to know students in ways not possible before, and that remote teaching provided an opportunity to get to know students who were typically overlooked in large classes.

*I had students who contacted me every day through lockdown in my form, and I thought it was almost a positive that came out of lockdown as I talked to students that I don't talk to normally because, you know, we had a chance of 1 to 1. And some students who are a complete pain when they were at school, actually, they wanted the contact, and you know, obviously they're being a pain because they still need the attention, but in lockdown they didn't have to be the pain to get the attention. (English Teacher, Interview 2)*

Teachers also suggested that online teaching was prone to **fewer behavioural issues** than in-person teaching. Teachers described not having to 'chase' students' lateness, and that there were fewer interruptions and disruptive behaviours in online classes, particularly since difficult students did not 'have to be a pain to get attention'. It was also mentioned that some students tended to move through tasks more quickly due to a lack of distraction, and that hearing impaired students benefited from a lack of extraneous classroom noise in the online learning mode.

Most teachers were very clear that there were **many disadvantages of remote teaching** compared with in-person teaching. One of the main criticisms was that the quality of their interaction with their students was detrimentally influenced by their students' **lack of visibility** during remote teaching. Some schools, in line with union guidance, did not specify that teachers and students should have their cameras on during teaching sessions, and in fact some prohibited it. In other schools, teachers reported that some students were reluctant to turn their cameras on, with this becoming more pronounced during the latter stages of the remote teaching period. Some teachers also noted that they were involved in 'battles' with their students about getting cameras switched on, and that students with special needs were less likely to use cameras.

A consequence of the lack of camera use was that it was more difficult for teachers to ask questions to students, the lack of non-verbal cues made it more difficult to gauge their students' levels of understanding, and it made it much more difficult to pace lessons.

*Interactions are heavily influenced by whether students have cameras on (it's easier to ask questions to students if you can see them to know who's there), some students won't put cameras on, some aren't comfortable with cameras on or talking. In a normal lesson it's easier to gauge who to ask questions to. (PE Teacher, Diary 1)*

It is possible that the lack of visible accountability for students also influenced their likelihood to engage in lessons. It was very common for teachers to report that some students were **failing to access remote lessons** or tasks (or some only partially). It was also a common frustration that some students were engaging in a form of 'presenteeism' where they would show up briefly and then disappear.

Teachers also alluded to the variability in the quality of interactions across different student groups, and how this potentially had implications for learning equity. Some teachers highlighted how **older students** who were generally more **proficient at IT** and who tended to have **higher literacy levels** were able to engage more actively with online learning and to contribute more to their lessons than other students. Similarly, it was noted that **less able** students were more likely to use verbal communication, which led to students increasingly 'talking over' each other. Many of the teachers, particularly those working in comprehensive schools, expressed concern that some students' lack of adequate **home ICT** provision hindered their access to learning. Finally, there was some reflection that managing online teaching was easier in **smaller classes** where the students could more easily interact with each other.

*Age is a key factor. In a few households, younger students lose out to older siblings in the competition to access devices for live stream lessons. Ability level is also important, higher ability students are more likely to understand the topics and it is easier to [set them] mini assessments/plenaries which allow them to check their own understanding. They are also more likely to be able to put constructive comments into the chat facility as they tend to have higher levels of literacy. Lower ability students seem more likely to*

*switch on the mic (which can lead to students talking over each other) or remaining silent in the background. (Geography Teacher, Diary 1)*

The increase in the amount of screen time also had several **wellbeing considerations** for both students and teachers. Some teachers mentioned that the many hours spent in front of the screen was leading to some potential **physical and psychological harms**, including students complaining of sore eyes or them 'switching off' from learning. It was also noted that students were suffering from loneliness and a lack of social interaction with friends and peers. Linking with the previous issue of how remote teaching could influence interaction quality, a concerning observation from one teacher was that they felt that students found it difficult to know how to discuss their wellbeing online.

*Students are incredibly resilient, but they are also still young and need support from their key adults to get through this. This has been due to welfare calls I have made with parents over the last 2 weeks, a lot of whom mention that whilst they seem to be doing okay now (a lot are struggling with the limited social interactions) they are unsure of the long-term effects of what is going on. (PE Teacher, Diary 1)*

Several teachers expressed the opinion that teaching **staff morale was suffering** during remote teaching, and this related to a number of issues. The amount of time spent in front of the screen was a significant contributor to poor teacher wellbeing. Teachers reported that these protracted periods of screen working were linked to the time it took to support students remotely (including reading, processing, and responding to emails), the time it took to record, edit, and upload lessons, and the time it took to learn new online teaching skills. Reduced morale was also linked to the concept of social isolation, with the perception of 'talking to yourself' considered to be detrimental to teacher wellbeing. Some teachers also reported that they perceived a need to deliver 'more perfect' lessons when working online. This perception was linked to that way that their lessons were publicly visible. This visibility resulted in some additional pressures as teachers were contacted by parents to discuss the levels of demand in their lessons, or parents expressing the desire for teachers to present more lessons 'live'.

#### *6.2.2.5.2. In-person teaching (following the end of remote teaching): Advantages and disadvantages*

Following the large-scale return to in-person teaching for most students in March 2021<sup>9</sup>, the teachers were well placed to reflect on how this experience contrasted with their experience of large-scale remote teaching.

Most of the teachers felt that the return to in-person teaching contributed to an **increase in the quality of interactions** with their students. These improvements included teachers reporting that they had more frequent and more detailed interactions with their students. It was also reported that these interactions allowed teachers to convey greater levels of instructional clarity and to involve more emotion.

*The interactions in my GCSE PE class this week in face-to-face teaching have been of much higher quality than during the online lessons. Face-to-face teaching allows so many more interactions between the student and teacher AND the students to each other and as a result, interactions were more frequent, tended to be more detailed and involved more emotion. I think this is due to these being face-to-face, in their normal classroom (learning environment), in their normal seating plan, surrounded by familiar peers and not having to worry about how they sound or act online. (PE Teacher, Diary 3)*

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<sup>9</sup> It needs to be noted here that some students did not return to in-person teaching at this stage. This might be due to them contracting COVID-19, their membership of a student 'bubble' where another student has received a positive COVID-19 test, or because of the student's continued requirement to shield due to underlying health issues.

Some teachers pointed out that they found it **easier to plan** for the pace of in-person teaching, and that tasks seemed to go more quickly than in remote teaching. Teachers also suggested that the types of learning tasks changed with the return to in-person teaching. For example, Science teachers noted that they carried out **more practical learning** tasks and **more collaborative** peer working. Finally, teachers felt that they were better **able to support students** when they returned to in-person teaching. Teachers reported that they were more able to see students' engagement levels and were better able to deal with struggling students, students with special needs, and students with English as an additional language.

Most of the teachers also considered that the return to in-person teaching had some **positive impacts on student and teacher wellbeing**. Many of the teachers noted that the students were generally happy to be back to in-person learning. Similarly, many of the teachers reflected on how being with the students, being away from the screen, and being part of a collegiate organisation with other teachers made them feel happier.

*Teachers and students alike seem very happy to be back in school which I think has really provided a big lift. At the start of the previous week, I felt students were struggling to engage in online lessons and I am well aware of a number of students in my classes alone that have very much struggled in that week with their wellbeing. Teachers were quite clearly tired by the end of the online lessons, and all welcomed the students back. (Geography Teacher, Diary 3)*

The teachers were also able to reflect on some of the disadvantages that they perceived around the return to in-person teaching. When considering these reflections, it is important to consider what the teachers were basing their comparisons against. In some cases, the teachers were contrasting their experience of the return to in-person teaching with the immediate experience of remote teaching, whilst in other cases they were contrasting the return to in-person teaching with the experience of 'normal', pre-pandemic in-person teaching.

More than half of the teachers commented on how the return to in-person teaching was characterised by **increased levels of distraction**. Teachers described how their students lacked focus, with increased levels of noise and loitering as they started to socialise again. Some teachers also felt that student behaviour was worse than before the lockdown. It was also noted that some **students clearly lacked motivation** when they returned to school. Some of the older students were described as being angry, tired, overwrought, weary, and fed up. The fact that the return to in-person teaching also overlapped with students' revision work for upcoming assessments could also have fed into this effect.

*Year 10 have been problematic for many teachers across the school, seeming angry and ready to pick an argument with teachers - this seems, also, to have been stoked up by the Meghan Markle interview on ITV - Year 10 seem pretty desperate to pick a fight with anyone older or more 'establishment' than they see themselves at the moment. The 6th Form seem tired and overwrought, which is how the teachers feel. (English Teacher, Diary 3)*

Finally, teachers were able to reflect on how the return to in-person teaching involved some new inconveniences. Adhering to social distancing requirements and separating out 'mask refuser' students from other students made organising **group working more challenging**.

#### 6.2.2.5.3. Blended teaching: Advantages and disadvantages

When reflecting on the experience of blended learning, it is also important to note that this was not the same experience for all teachers. Whether blended teaching was a short- or a longer-term arrangement depended on the specific circumstances of each teacher's professional context. At times blended teaching was a transient arrangement (e.g., covering students who were temporarily isolating due to having received a positive COVID-19 test or students who were initially anxious about returning to school). For some teachers, blended teaching was a semi-permanent arrangement (e.g., those teaching 'key worker' students who were attending in-person school, those in Independent

Schools teaching students who were located outside of the UK and who could not return to school, and teachers who were themselves shielding and needed to continue to work remotely).

Most teachers highlighted how one of the main benefits of blended teaching was that it allowed **access to learning** for students who would not otherwise be able to do so. Teachers observed how at the point of returning to in-person learning some of their students were struggling to adapt to school and needed to be taught through remote methods. There were several reasons why students were reluctant to return to in-person learning, and these included the anxieties of students who were young carers and were concerned about attending school, as well as those with mental health problems.

*We've had a lot of students who've been reluctant to return to school. And so that's kind of forced more blended than maybe some comparative schools... There's still a couple of students in Year 8 who are so anxious about returning and they're accessing online lessons still. (Science Teacher, Interview 2)*

Most teachers were also clear that **blended teaching was challenging**, with some claiming that it was unsatisfactory and stressful. These challenges related to the problems of trying to involve remote students alongside those students in the classroom. Teachers stated that they **could not support the needs of both sets of students**. In particular, teachers found it difficult to maintain engagement with the remote students on chat whilst they remained mobile around the classroom.

*Found it difficult to involve the remote student in the lesson as I was more mobile in the classroom than I would have been had it been entirely streamed. Meant I did not keep a close eye on the chat and the student did not have the confidence to switch on the microphone and contribute verbally. Think she felt rather forgotten about, probably disengaged from the lesson. (Geography Teacher, Diary 3)*

Teachers also highlighted how remote students found it difficult to see what was going on in the class, particularly during practical demonstrations. This left some teachers feeling like they were devoting less attention to the online learners. Teachers also noted that the pace of learning was slower in blended teaching sessions, with some group tasks not translating to the remote environment, and with the remote learners generally being more passive and less motivated than the other students. Finally, teachers in Independent Schools with students located outside of the UK also sympathised with the plight of these students who had to attend lessons very late at night due to time zone differences.

#### 6.2.2.6. Consequences of remote teaching

The teachers recounted how remote teaching (including blended teaching) had consequence for the way that they understood their students' progress. This is important as it would also be anticipated that this would influence the ability of teachers to plan the next teaching stages for their students. Several teachers reported that they found it **more difficult to gauge their students' learning** when teaching remotely. One teacher described the frustration of trying to separate out the demands of the learning task from the demands of the learning medium. For example, a student's inability to perform a task may be due to either their lack of ability, their lack of application, or the real difficulty of completing a particular task remotely. There were also concerns that it was difficult to verify whether the students had completed their own work (when working online), with this concern being more pronounced when the outcomes might be used to contribute to students' TAG data.

*It is hard to assess how well they are learning when the lessons are remote, and this takes more time than it might do in a lesson. (Science Teacher, Diary 6)*

Some teachers argued that the **process of giving students feedback on their work was different** when working remotely. In some cases, teachers felt that they were increasingly trying to catch students out rather than finding out what they did know. It was also more common for teachers to give feedback in written form when working remotely, with some frustration that the written mode took more time to deliver than the verbal feedback that students would have received if they were in class.

This last point, relating to the time taken to complete remote teaching tasks, links to the issue of the additional workload of the shifts between in-person and remote teaching (and back again). Most

teachers pointed out that the shifts between in-person and remote teaching required them to engage in a large amount of **planning and resource creation**. In particular, moving to remote teaching meant that teachers needed to reimagine resources, often to remove practical learning elements. There were also additional demands due to the common experience that some students did not complete work tasks. This meant that teachers needed to spend more time differentiating materials to cater for the students who had failed to submit previous work. Beyond the demands of day-to-day lesson planning, teachers with management responsibilities also needed to take on additional work to review students' curriculum coverage, consider the implications for their departments, and to plan the curriculum for the coming academic year.

*Having to create new resources or reimagine how to deliver lessons remotely is difficult. Science is best taught experientially - this is hard to achieve online. Whilst there is less workload to do with behaviour and discipline, there is much more planning and assessment. (Science Teacher, Diary 2)*

Another element of teachers' additional workload related to their own learning process as they adjusted to remote teaching. In addition to planning and delivering lessons, many of the teachers needed to engage in some training to support their remote teaching. At times, this demand was in tension with their other Continuous Professional Development (CPD) commitments.

*I think that knowing the extra work that we are having to undertake, school should have provided more opportunities to not have as much CPD (as this has been happening since lockdown, during lockdown and on our return). We have constantly had to keep improving and developing our practice. (Drama Teacher, Diary 6)*

Although some teachers recognised that they were already fairly competent at using IT for teaching, others expressed their initial anxiety as they started to get to grips with technology. In general, it was common for many of the teachers to acknowledge their learning in this area, indicating that they got better at using technology for teaching over this period.

Finally, teachers indicated that remote teaching added to their workload through demanding **additional time on tasks**. Some teachers described how **dealing with students' and parents' emails** took up a significant amount of their evenings and the weekends. Some teachers, and in particular those teaching English, also recounted how **marking and annotating students' essays** took a lot more time on screen compared with in-person teaching.

### 6.2.3. Changes to interaction quality

In this section we consider the teachers' perspectives on the quality of their interactions with their students over the period of time covered by the study. There was a general sense that the quality of **teacher and student interaction was less good** during remote teaching compared with in-person teaching. Teachers suggested a number of reasons for this. Besides the disruption caused at times by unavoidable **technological difficulties**, there were persistent concerns about students being **reluctant to use their cameras and microphones** (an issue that was compounded by the way that some schools had 'no camera' policies in place during this time). Teachers reported that the lack of a visual connection to the learners' body language was problematic for a number of reasons. It made it difficult for teachers to monitor the state of their students' wellbeing, it made it difficult to tell if the student had anything to offer in an interaction (adding needless hesitation), and it made it more difficult to judge student understanding (making it less easy to pace the lesson).

*The students were unwilling to turn on cameras - so most interaction was to students' school photographs - we have noticed a steady decline in willingness to be seen on screen. It does limit discussions somewhat and therefore requires use of the hands up function or typing in the chat box. Our policy is to request but not demand that the cameras are on, which largely means very few cameras are on. (Geography Teacher, Diary 2)*

A significant limiter on interaction was the relatively common report from teachers that some **students generally disengaged from learning** during the remote teaching phase. Teachers suggested that



this disengagement was more prevalent with Pupil Premium (PP) Students, or where students had non-supportive parents, or where students suffered from mental health problems.

*I feel that PP students are still disadvantaged by the teaching that is taking place and many seem to lack engagement. This is often compounded when they are sanctioned for a lack of homework completed when struggling to submit their homework via their mobile phone. These students should all have laptops. (Geography Teacher, Diary 5)*

Even where students attended remote learning, teachers reported that the interaction quality was reduced and that some **students failed to submit work** remotely.

*In general, the amount of work received was about the same as previous weeks (about  $\frac{1}{2}$  -  $\frac{2}{3}$  of KS3 lessons and approx.  $\frac{3}{4}$  of GCSE students). Very few students could be said to have responded to feedback. I was asked to email some students who were noted to be struggling and received no response; this was somewhat irritating as [one] student's mother had emailed in specifically asking for support in my subject. (Drama Teacher, Diary 2)*

This issue appeared to link with the observation from most of the teachers that their students were generally lacking in motivation during the lockdown period. Teachers reported that their students were becoming tired of online lessons, becoming more passive, and 'mentally switching off'; a process that could have been accentuated by the uncertainty of the teaching (and assessment) process during this time. Many of the teachers expressed **concerns about the mental health of their students** during the remote teaching period, mentioning the increased prevalence of student depression and stress, suicide attempts, and a general sense of their disengagement with education.

*We have had a suicide attempt and lots [of students] now on anti-depressants. (Drama Teacher, Diary 6)*

*Some [students] are struggling with depression and not attending very often. (Science Teacher, Diary 6)*

The teachers were also able to talk about some of the ways that remote teaching supported successful learning (although these reflections still generally implied that remote teaching was second best to in-person teaching).

Teachers felt that remote teaching worked best in some specific contexts. Teachers reported that **remote teaching worked more successfully with smaller class groups**. This set up allowed verbal feedback to be more similar to that given during in-person teaching. Teachers also reported that smaller groups allowed them to better organise collaborative tasks, they allowed the teacher to monitor student contributions more easily and made it more difficult for students to withdraw from interacting with others.

Teachers also felt that **remote teaching worked better with older student groups**. They reported that these students were generally better at navigating the technical processes of submitting work online. They also felt that older students were better equipped to interact effectively in an online environment; they were more able to interact through chat and ask questions as they generally had better literacy skills than younger students. Older students were also more capable of maintaining attention when working remotely for longer periods.

*It is easier to teach very similarly to the 'real-life' classroom in the smaller, Sixth Form sets - much less so for the larger Year 9-Year 11 sets. Some of this is due to being able to receive verbal contributions from all of them more frequently, but also due to a difference in maturity, which has kept them more engaged. Furthermore, it is much more difficult to keep track of the classwork younger students are completing and offer feedback in real time. This is partly due to these students finding the submission of work more challenging online. (English Teacher, Diary 1)*

As a result of the experience of teaching remotely, the teachers described how they developed approaches that they felt were increasingly successful. These approaches centred on **encouraging the students to engage in more active learning strategies**. The teachers described how they developed the ability to use breakout rooms to replace the use of extended independent activities. Some teachers also became more proficient and confident in using chat functions<sup>10</sup> to give individual feedback and to ask questions. Teachers also reported that they became more confident in managing remote discursive tasks. These tasks took the burden away from students to have to type their responses, and the teachers took more of an active role in volunteering students to demonstrate to others or on picking up on students who were not saying much.

*By the end of the day and the last lesson, sometimes that's when I feel more mentally tired. Also, when I teach three lessons back-to-back, it's very hard. I have to remind myself to keep going, think positively, I praise any effort a bit more, (I've noticed that), I drink more water and have to make sure I have things ready. I have tried to make sure that they are doing more than me and questioning or answering more. Sometimes this has improved outcomes and the way the students are thinking, so improves the overall quality of the lesson. I have then applied this to my other lessons. (Drama Teacher, Diary 1)*

The teachers generally reported that the **return to in-person teaching led to an improvement in the quality of their interactions** with students. Teachers described these interactions as being more 'normal' (for social distancing times) and conveyed more detail and emotion than remote interactions. Teachers reported that these in-person interactions allowed them to check understandings and to gauge student engagement. Teachers were also more able to develop tasks that encouraged collaborative activity and peer interactions, which some teachers noted were more engaging and enjoyable for their students.

*8th-9th March we returned to school with KS5 returning first - lessons were great students glad to be back. 10th March had lessons with Y11, really engaged in the work we did, made sure that they had lots of activities where they had to collaborate. (Science Teacher, Diary 3)*

Finally, the teachers reflected on the role of assessment on the quality of their interactions with their students. The return to mainly in-person teaching broadly coincided with the schools receiving more policy information and clarification on how the students in Years 11 and 13 were to be assessed. It appears that this development influenced the ways that some students engaged and interacted with their school in a number of ways.

In one sense it appears that there was a degree of instrumentalism for some students, with the **new assessment arrangements giving the students a renewed motivation** and purpose that became evident in their interactions with teachers. Some teachers observed that their Year 11 classes were asking more questions, submitting more work, and showing greater levels of engagement when their assessment plans were published by the school. Teachers also reported that the assessments provided a focus for the content of their teaching interactions with their students, and that this involved a greater level of intensity (and stress).

*One notable change in the quality of interaction has come with my Year 11 classes. Having introduced our school's plan to deal with the teacher assessed grades that are upcoming, students asked a lot of questions in a very mature manner. (Geography Teacher, Diary 3)*

At the same time, teachers expressed some real **concerns about the mental wellbeing of students around these assessments**. Some teachers described how they needed to focus on bolstering the confidence of their students. A number of teachers described how their students became more

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<sup>10</sup> Chat functions are text-based messages that allow teachers and students to share information, either on a one-to-one basis or with whole groups.

reluctant to interact and answer questions around this time. They suggested that students were unwilling to risk getting answers wrong in front of other students due to their assessment anxiety and emotional fragility.

*I have felt the interactions have decreased in their quality and frequency over the last 2 weeks. I believe that for my Year 11 GCSE class, they have been feeling very anxious and pressured by their upcoming mock examination papers, so their interactions overall have been far less and have been a lot shorter in length. Asking open questions over the last 2 weeks has led to less responses and interactions with the class teacher, despite the lessons being taught in the same way and using the same activities and approaches from prior revision lessons in the build up to prior mock examinations. A lack of confidence to answer a question and risk getting the question incorrect in front of their peers so close to the exams I feel is definitely something I have noticed. (PE Teacher, Diary 6)*

### 6.3. Assessment: How it was organised and how it changed 2019-21

In this section we explore teachers' assessment practices and perspectives in five parts. The first four parts are organised chronologically: CAG practices in 2020; assessment before TAG arrangements were formally clarified as the replacement to 2021 examinations; assessment as TAG plans emerged; and assessment after the release of TAG guidance materials and resources. The final part of this section considers the teachers' perspectives on the future of assessment.

#### 6.3.1. Centre Assessment Grade (CAG) practices

In the first interview the teachers were asked to reflect on their experiences of the 2020 assessments. This was when examinations were cancelled and replaced by a grade which was originally intended to be determined by both centre assessment and examination board standardisation (but which was ultimately based on CAG). A small number of the teachers expressed generally positive sentiments about their CAG experiences in 2020. They **felt confident in the grades they had given**, which seemed to be driven by **confidence in the data they had collected and in the procedures that their school used** for calculating CAG. It seemed to be that these teachers were in schools that collected a lot of data as part of their normal practice.

*I felt 100% with, with our grades. I think that the process we used was very robust internally. I felt that we had the data and I felt that once the ranking sort of was spat out by the data, the ranking was right broadly speaking, so it didn't take a lot of tweaking. But obviously we, we have some of these kids here from at least Year 9, if not younger than that. So, there is a lot [of data] on them. (English Teacher, Interview 1)*

Others felt that their **students had 'lost out' because of the CAG process**. They were concerned that their school had followed the rules more strictly than others, and possibly underestimated their students' grades in comparison to other schools. As part of this, one teacher reflected on how they had expected that their grades would be moderated up. Therefore, when teachers' grades were used in place of the algorithm, their students lost out in comparison to others.

*We stuck very rigidly to the three-year rule. So, we went back and looked at their last three years' records. Or rather, one of our deputy heads went back to that information and therefore told us that we should be coming up with that kind of certain structure, the number of grades 9s, 8s, 7s, 6s, and so on. And although we didn't stick to it very rigidly, we did kind of bear that in mind when we were dishing out the grades to be passed onto the (examination) boards, who were then, of course, going to moderate them. And our feeling was that probably we would be moderated up a little bit later, so we actually we kind of underestimated, just slightly, I think, thinking that the Board would then push things up a little bit. And of course, then that stage didn't happen. It did cause trouble because we've got fairly vocal parents. (English Teacher, Interview 1)*

Some of the teachers reflected on how they had lots of data to draw from as their school regularly collected data from in-school assessments. Similarly, other teachers discussed how they were quite

fortunate as they had sat their mock exams prior to the lockdown and they used these as the basis for CAG. For several of the teachers it seemed that the mock grades were the main basis for CAG, although others emphasised that the mocks were only a steer and not definitive.

*Well, luckily, we always do March mocks and just Year 11 and Year 13. So, we had just finished those last year. And they're always the full three papers, or the full set of papers that they would normally sit. So, they had just done all of those. So basically, they got those grades, unless there was somebody who I thought was, maybe just had a bad day in the exam, they might have got a bit higher. But yeah, so we were quite lucky because we always do those, so they were already planned in and done in exam conditions so. (Geography Teacher, Interview 1)*

Not all teachers felt they had sufficient assessment data, and therefore some carried out additional assessment to inform CAG. A few teachers outlined how their school had remotely carried out formal mocks using technological options. However, these teachers discussed how **carrying out and collecting assessment during remote learning had been challenging**. Some students had not returned assessments and there were concerns about student cheating (e.g., using their notes or having parental input). One teacher highlighted that because of all these challenges they did not feel confident that they knew what level their students were at.

*I gave them an assessment piece. I told them that the piece was going to be assessed, but in reality, I only got about half of them back, so the other half of the class I had nothing on which to base an assessment because they hadn't been engaging with work. And the ones I got back were either stunningly good, as in I think they had had an awful lot of support, or they were, you know some had obviously done them themselves, but some were a lot worse than what they would have done had they done them in school conditions. You know, I don't know if they're sitting on their bed or doing whatever, so I found assessment really hard. Hand on heart by the end of last summer I didn't really know where a lot of my students were. (English Teacher, Interview 1)*

Other schools chose to **cancel planned mock examinations** rather than running them remotely (for student wellbeing reasons), instead using previously collected data and ongoing classwork to inform CAG.

*So, assessment wise we kind of, we just scrapped all the exams here. We were supposed to have all the mocks. We managed to get the Year 13 mocks in but not the Year 11 mocks. And we kind of, I think we just kind of went into 'just get by' mode really and we didn't worry about the end of year exams, we [decided that we] should take the pressure off [the students] completely. (Geography Teacher, Interview 1)*

Many schools seemed to be using **data driven approaches for deciding CAG**. The schools used spreadsheets of past assessment results and data on the schools' previous grades over the past three years to inform CAG judgements. Others described their approach as more reliant on **teacher intuition**. In some cases, this seemed to be due to having a lack of data to draw from. Whilst our teachers' responses did not reflect any subject differences, one English teacher suggested that within their school there were departmental differences in approaches.

*Well from what I've heard, the Maths Department used obviously a lot of kind of statistics and data and projections, which we're not really capable of. With us it was a bit more holistic, so we look at their essays, we look at their mocks, also a bit of teacher instinct in terms of who was probably likely to potentially get like, I don't know, like an A or an A\* eventually with the right kind of coaching and the right kind of practice. So yeah, again, it was, it was mainly like essays and stuff like that really, but also knowledge of our students. But I don't think that was the approach for all departments. (English Teacher, Interview 1)*

It was also clear from the responses that many schools had used internal moderation procedures to try and mitigate bias. Two teachers, who were both from Independent Schools, discussed how there

had been some **accusations of bias** in their CAG results processes from parents that they were keen to avoid in 2021. Consequently, these schools had implemented equality training and decided to record assessment conversations to fully document their decision-making processes for 2021.

*I mean, I think we were far from unique in this, but it did bring up issues of, kind of, matters of equality and fairness and how we're making our decisions, and any bias that might be inherent in that as well. So, we have had a lot of training in that kind of thing in the last year. And we know how to apply it this time round. Thank goodness. (English Teacher, Interview 1)*

### 6.3.2. Prior to TAG full announcement

Diary 1 and Diary 2 took place in February. At this point, there had been the initial announcement in January 2021 that schools would be teaching remotely and that examinations in the summer would be cancelled and replaced by some form of teacher assessment. Therefore, teachers had limited information about how assessment would be carried out and were waiting on further guidance. They were asked about what their assessment practices looked like at this time.

A third of the participants felt that **the types of things they assessed had not changed** because these were tied to the qualification course requirements. That said, they did note that there had been **changes to assessment delivery**, with it being a slower process than usual.

*As I mainly teach upper school exam groups, the things that I assess have, broadly, had to remain the same. The only difference is that everything takes longer, and I have to be slower, more methodical and more patient in my delivery. (English Teacher, Diary 2)*

Other teachers felt that there were some areas of change in terms of the amount and the methods of assessment. Several participants noted that they were **assessing less** for a variety of reasons. Some were focusing more on student wellbeing and engagement, and others suggested challenges around remote learning were driving their decision to do less assessment. Some chose to do less remote assessment because of concerns about validity, as students could easily cheat when taking assessment at home. There were also issues with some students not submitting work.

*When we return to college face to face, when assessments can be more valid (as I know they won't have cheat sheets) I can do more then. (PE Teacher, Diary 2)*

The PE teachers, as well as a Drama and a Science teacher, noted that it had not been possible to carry out practical skills assessment due to remote teaching.

*For GCSE we are still assessing their knowledge and exam technique through their lesson work, homework and lesson interactions, so this stays the same. However, we are unable to assess any practical based activities for obvious reasons, so this aspect has not been able to occur out of face to face teaching. (PE Teacher, Diary 2)*

The Science teacher observed that they were focusing assessment on AO1 skills (knowledge and understanding rather than application) as those were easier to assess remotely.

Several participants also discussed changes to the assessment methods they were using. There was a **greater focus on using assessments formatively** to gauge student understanding and engagement. This included making use of online assessment tools, such as quiz sites.

*Yes, I would say this has changed, it has become more important to start the lesson with Kahoot or Quizlet as a form of checking understanding before moving onto the next section. As you are not able to 'look over the shoulder' at work you may need to include different ways to check the understanding. (Geography Teacher, Diary 2)*

### 6.3.3. Release of TAG plans

Towards the end of the Diary 2 data collection window, the UK Government announced that schools would be returning to school on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March. They also outlined initial plans for TAG, so teachers

were just beginning to familiarise themselves with this information, whilst also reacting to and preparing for the imminent return to in-person teaching.

#### 6.3.3.1. Reaction to return to school and TAG announcement

In Diary 3 many of the teachers reflected on their reactions to the TAG announcements. Whilst they acknowledged that there was slightly more information at this stage (than previously), the teachers highlighted their **uncertainty around the lack of clarity** and how this made their planning difficult.

*I am delivering revision lessons to Y13 and Y11 but as we have no guidance on what type of assessment we will be doing and when I will be doing them it is not clear if I am even revising topics that are useful for these assessments. While I know that education is not about preparing for the test, but if I decide to revise a topic from a module which we do not assess students on in the short period of time we have in school before we have an assessment - it feels like a wasted opportunity. (Science Teacher, Diary 3)*

Some teachers reflected on how this **ongoing uncertainty negatively impacted teacher and student wellbeing**, as well as **increasing teacher workload**. Teachers felt that the burden seemed to be on schools to try and establish procedures to preserve the integrity of their students' TAG data despite a lack of clarity from the UK Government.

*I would only like to say how distressing the Government guidance about assessments has been for so many colleagues (and indeed students). It is a difficult situation, and I am sure that individuals are doing all they can, but the demoralising effect of the lack of information and the delay to the release of details really has had an impact on morale. It seems that diligent schools (like mine) are trying to make up for the lack of clarity and safeguards in national guidance in this area by ensuring that their internal processes are thorough and careful. This is likely to cause a lot of extra work for teachers and - most sadly - considerable stress for students. (English Teacher, Diary 3)*

Some of the teachers specifically highlighted that they were **waiting for the extra guidance** and resources to be released, with one teacher being unimpressed that the guidance was due to be released just before the Easter holidays. They felt that this reflected an expectation that teachers would not take a break and would instead be undertaking TAG planning at this time. Several teachers discussed how they or their school had begun developing their TAG plans, although in some cases it was clear that **establishing school TAG policies and procedures was not straightforward**.

*I have finished teaching Y13 content, so am planning how to gather evidence for assessment - SLT want this submitted to them so they can publish a timetable. I had pretty much finished my plan on Friday when I found out SLT were disagreeing about the GCSE plan... Y11 are almost finished content - Head of Science has told us his plans, but SLT members of the department have thrown it all into disarray by disagreeing about it on Friday. Can't plan until this is decided. (Science Teacher, Diary 3)*

#### 6.3.3.2. Teachers' TAG evidence plans

In Diary 4, the teachers were asked what types of evidence they and their school were planning to use for the TAG process. Their responses highlighted that teachers and schools had been proactive and had started to make plans to collect various forms of evidence. However, many teachers highlighted that they were **continuing to wait on clearer and specific TAG guidance** so that they could adapt and finalise their plans. From their responses it was clear that TAG evidence decisions were school led in some cases, whilst in others it was the case that individual departments and teachers were making their own decisions. The teachers outlined a **range of evidence**, some of which they already had, and the rest which they planned to gather.

*2 exam papers sat this week. Collating evidence from end of topic tests, practice questions and a Geography coursework research project. Still awaiting guidance (due 31 March) on what more is expected of the profession in deciding the TAGs. Year 11: 2 mock exams sat in December. 1 exam sat in March. 1 exam to be sat in April. Further*

*evidence will be gathered once we are clear on what is expected. (Geography Teacher, Diary 4)*

All of the teachers reported that they and their schools planned to use evidence from **formal mock examinations**. Some schools had already carried these mocks out in the autumn term as part of their usual practice, whilst others carried these out proactively in anticipation of ongoing COVID-19 related disruption. Other teachers mentioned using evidence from mocks which students were currently sitting (having taken the opportunity to hold them as soon as students returned to in-person teaching), whilst others had mock examination sessions scheduled for just after the Easter 2021 holidays. Almost half of teachers reported that they were planning to use evidence from more than one mock examination session.

*For A Level, our school is still deliberating over the kind of evidence that they will require. Our department have, therefore, taken a proactive approach and, consequently, we are proposing that coursework, our two A Level mocks, and an additional essay (perhaps more than one) will be used for evidence. We will see whether this is acceptable to the school (eventually...). (English Teacher, Diary 4)*

Beyond mock examinations, which were a core part of the TAG evidence gathering for all of the teachers, various other evidence types were mentioned. Some teachers and schools planned to use evidence from **NEA/coursework**, with a few indicating that this was already completed whilst others indicated that this was ongoing. Teachers discussed using past data gathered from **in-class assessments or unit tests**, as well as ongoing evidence collection from in-class assessment.

*We have to identify 6 pieces of work over the two years - either 3/3 or 2/4. Four pieces are in class/end of unit test type pieces of work and two are exams being sat just after May half term. The exams are one hour in length. All is assessed with candidate numbers and will be double marked and moderated to avoid bias. (Geography Teacher, Diary 4)*

In some cases, TAG evidence plans were quite specific, even though the teachers were still waiting for the full guidance to be released. There was reference to school procedures, such as using candidate numbers, double marking, and moderation to **avoid bias**. Some mentioned the relative weighting they were giving to each piece of evidence, and it was clear that most schools were planning to use **mock examinations as their core TAG evidence**.

*Plans for this have shifted as the guidance from Ofqual and JCQ has changed. We will be collecting together the required 'basket' of evidence and we will base our judgements on this. We are running a series of internal assessments at the start of next term (a total of three weeks' worth for each of the two Year Groups involved). We will be using the past paper material which Boards will be releasing soon. We will give some guidance in advance and our marking will take into account the unusual nature of the situation. We also have evidence available from earlier in these courses (e.g., the September mock exams) but the official guidance seems to have narrowed so much that nearly the whole of our judgement will be based on achievements in these April internal assessments. (English Teacher, Diary 4)*

One teacher also mentioned that their school **intended to gather additional evidence** for those students that they felt were underachieving after their initial grading decisions.

*At the moment all the Y11 and Y13s are completing exams which will link into them. Also, the Y13 have the NEA to complete and be marked. Once these grades have been discussed any students that are still below target will be completing other work to help support further evidence. (Geography Teacher, Diary 4)*

#### 6.3.3.3. TAG: Assessment evidence differences with previous years

Teachers reflected on the ways in which the evidence they were planning to use for the TAG process in 2021 was different from the evidence used for CAG in 2020 (as well as from the type of

assessment evidence they would use in a typical year). Some of the teachers suggested that the **evidence they were using was similar to last year**, with most of them using mocks as the main source of TAG evidence. However, most teachers noted that they had **less assessment evidence and data to draw from compared to 2020**. This was because in 2020 most of their assessments had already been carried out prior to the bulk of the COVID-19 disruption. They also discussed how this year's examination year students had experienced disruption across two school years, which had limited the collection of assessment data. For this cohort, some coursework/NEA was incomplete, and internal mocks had been cancelled due to lockdown.

*2020 we had mock grades too and for my subject all students had completed NEA - this year they haven't. (PE Teacher, Diary 4)*

Interestingly, two teachers suggested that they had **more evidence this year** compared with previous years. For one of the teachers this was because they had needed to cancel planned mocks and practical assessments due to the first lockdown in 2020, and so had set out to collect additional evidence. For the other teacher this was because they were planning to combine mock paper evidence with a series of small assessments on each topic rather than relying on a large full mock examination.

Teachers also mentioned that there was a **difference in the nature of the CAG and TAG**. For CAG, the teachers had projected the grades that students would have achieved if examinations had been sat, whilst they needed to calculate currently 'working at' grades for TAG.

Related to this, some teachers reflected on the guidance given by the examination boards. One suggested that they **needed more guidance on grade boundaries**, and the extent to which they should be mitigating for the disruption students had experienced. Similarly, another felt that the current TAG system was placing a huge burden on teachers, with only limited examination board support and guidance.

*The key difference is that we need clear guidance on grade boundaries. Last year's cohorts had virtually finished the curriculum, had not been subjected to lockdowns and had completed mock exams in the summer of Year 10/12 and December of Year 11/13. This gave us reliable data on which to base grades. The current cohorts have endured 6 months of remote learning (with some of these having had self-isolation periods in addition to this). The current exams are the first the candidates have sat. How much should we mitigate for this when deciding on grades? (Geography Teacher, Diary 4)*

Teachers felt there were two broad differences between the assessment evidence that they were using this year compared with a typical (pre-pandemic) year. Several teachers highlighted that they had **added in more assessment**, and specifically added formal mocks at the end of the course.

*Yes: totally different. We did have important markers along the way during each course when we would acquire results for students in tasks like end-of-year exam, mocks, etc. but - on the whole - we are a 'data-lite' school (unless there is a clear, positive benefit from it) and we do not routinely collect student data just for the sake of it. The coming internal assessments (as described above) are a completely new concept for us, so we have never been involved in a system like this before. (English Teacher, Diary 4)*

Teachers also highlighted that they **used assessments differently**, because they were now being used to inform final grades rather than being used formatively. One teacher described how this led to a **different marking approach**, as the purpose of the assessment had changed.

*Before 2020, we would have set the same type of work/tasks for our students, but as we would not have contemplated that they could be used as evidence, I would have marked them quite differently: I would have taken a very pessimistic approach when marking mocks in order to shock students into working harder and eradicating silly mistakes - now this is impossible as those mocks may be called on as evidence, so I have to give them a realistic grade. (English Teacher, Diary 4)*



#### 6.3.4. Release of TAG guidance and resources

TAG guidance began being released in Diary 4, with various guidance documents published over the two weeks of Diary 5.

##### 6.3.4.1. Reactions to TAG guidance

In Diary 5 the teachers were asked about their reactions to the newly released examination guidance material. The teachers' **responses to the TAG guidance were almost universally negative**. Some teachers were dissatisfied with the guidance provided, feeling it was unclear, difficult to use, and that it had arrived far too late. Others described how it was not useful, and therefore it would not cause them to alter their already established plans that had been put in place prior to receiving the full guidance.

*It's arrived far too late for any changes to be implemented. The grade descriptors are incredibly difficult to use and are being seen as irrelevant. (Science Teacher, Diary 5)*

Many of the teachers were specifically **unhappy with the assessment materials** supplied. They highlighted that these were simply past examination papers, which many of them had already used, and which students could also access. Some of them were surprised by this, and others felt frustrated that it had been sent so late, given that it was not new material.

*The support materials from [the examination board] have baffled our department as they are mainly all just previous exam questions from past papers. (Geography Teacher, Diary 5)*

Some of the teachers were feeling extremely **overwhelmed with the workload** due to having to read and interpret the guidance and having to carry out the TAG assessment work alongside their usual teaching commitments. They did not feel that this had been considered in the TAG decisions.

*More than anything, it's overwhelming - again, exam boards need to realise that we already have full-time teaching jobs without having to read pages of guidance. (English Teacher, Diary 5)*

Finally, one teacher was very unhappy with the guidance, and extremely concerned that **teachers would be blamed for grade inflation**. They felt they had had all the responsibility of the grading passed onto them and had been abandoned by examination boards and external bodies. It was clear that this was negatively affecting their wellbeing, and they also felt that the challenges and workload around TAG was affecting their ability to teach.

*Utterly useless - it is clear, teachers have been cut adrift to do all the work, and will be vilified when grades are inflated - as they will be. Parents are already trying to influence grades. The workload is through the roof and other classes in other year groups are affected by the focus on Year 11 and 13. We still have all our reporting deadlines and internal assessments to do to monitor the impact of lockdown on learning. I can't believe how exam boards have been so poor despite so much time to provide resources, I personally feel let down and so do my colleagues. We are still working with Covid restrictions and have had minimal support from external bodies. (Geography Teacher, Diary 5)*

##### 6.3.4.2. Reflections on TAG progress

In Diary 6 the teachers were asked how TAG was progressing and where they were in the process of gathering submission evidence. The majority of teachers were still in the process of collecting the evidence, with some of them using a final mock examination and others using 'mini-assessments'.

*We are about to start Final Assessments, which will provide the main basis of Teacher Assessed Grades. We have already gathered a body of evidence from the last couple of years, including from our most recent set of practice assessments and a series of timed practice assessments over the last few weeks. (English Teacher, Diary 6)*

A quarter of the teachers had finished collecting evidence and were about to finalise their TAG data. As part of this they outlined the various forms of evidence they had gathered and the moderation procedures that their school had in place.

*In my department we have the evidence for GCSE now. The teachers will this week decide on what they think the TAGs for each student should be based on a range of assessments. The Heads of Department will collate the information and then we will go through a moderation process within school run by SLT. This will involve lots of meetings and providing summaries for SLT to read. (Science Teacher, Diary 6)*

Only two teachers indicated that they had completed their TAG data for at least one of their year groups, although one expressed concern that the grades would now be moderated by non-subject specialists.

*A Levels - 1st set of TAGs submitted today. These will be reviewed by SLT, with a second window for TAGs by 28 May if other assessments are required. Concerned that non-subject specialists will be reviewing based on computer generated target grades and previous years' data. (Geography Teacher, Diary 6)*

In their responses many teachers discussed **the moderation process** they were going through, outlining how SLT colleagues would review and moderate the TAG evidence. Additionally, some schools had **plans to support individual students** (e.g., to consider individual mitigating factors), or were planning to run additional assessments to allow fine tuning, or the collection of extra evidence if they felt a student was underachieving.

*I have an initial teacher grade for all students (mainly based on this evidence but with some mitigation based on individual student circumstance). We are going to run some diagnostic assessments in May which will allow for some fine tuning. (Drama Teacher, Diary 6)*

Whilst some of the teachers were quite matter of fact in their responses and seemed to feel that things were progressing okay, it was clear that others were finding the TAG process to be **stressful and time-consuming**.

*The students are still being assessed and we are trying to mark as we go. I haven't even looked at creating a rationale yet, so I'm behind where I should be. It's very overwhelming and I feel stressed just thinking about everything that has to be done in such a short time. (English Teacher, Diary 6)*

There was also more criticism of the TAG guidance, with one teacher feeling that although they had now collected all of their evidence, they were still **not confident that they had sufficient evidence** as the guidance lacked clarity.

*I have got as much evidence as I can collect, 2 mock exams completed this year which will be the strongest evidence. With very little guidance from the exam boards on how much you need etc. it is impossible to figure out if you have enough. (Geography Teacher, Diary 6)*

#### 6.3.4.3. Reflections on the TAG assessor role

In Diary 6 the teachers were asked whether there were any tensions as a result of their dual role as teacher and as assessor. This issue also emerged in the diary and interview data. Five of the teachers felt that there were no, or minimal, tensions. All of these teachers had been examiners, and several of them noted that their **examining experience was helpful in reducing any sense of tension**.

*No - I am a very experienced examiner of over 20 years' experience and have no concerns about assessing students dispassionately. (Drama Teacher, Diary 6)*

The remaining teachers felt that there were some tensions. Many of the teachers felt that there was an **inherent conflict of purposes in their role as a teacher and assessor**. As a teacher they were supposed to be looking at their students as a whole, and trying to identify their potential and encourage them, whilst as an assessor they were supposed to be making judgements on limited information.

*Definitely. As a teacher I measure and look for potential. On the other hand, as an assessor, I am judging students I know on a limited amount of writing. (English Teacher, Diary 6)*

In order to try and mitigate against these tensions, some schools had given out training to their teachers and had **implemented processes such as blind marking and moderation procedures** to increase objectivity and remove bias. Whilst they felt that they had made a good effort to ensure objectivity, the teachers reflected on how it was very uncomfortable to know students personally and know their future aspirations, whilst potentially giving them grades that meant they would not meet their university goals.

*I do feel tension in this, as a teacher I am there to support my students to achieve the best that they can, I provide them with both academic and emotional support but as an assessor I have to remove the emotion and just look at what they are capable of. As a teacher I know what the student's hopes and dreams are and how important these assessments are to them. But as an assessor I need to separate this from the performance of the student. (Science Teacher, Diary 6)*

Some teachers also reflected on how as a teacher they **knew what their student was capable of, but that they could not necessarily reflect this in their TAG data** due to their need to take into account students' prior performance. These teachers felt that some students were performing better than they had previously, due to the pressure of examinations having been removed, and were concerned that this could not necessarily be reflected in their grades.

*There are tensions yes. I feel like my students are overachieving at the moment due to this current assessment process (which is a good thing), but we might have to look at previous data etc. and give these students a grade less than what they actually are working at. (Geography Teacher, Diary 6).*

For some of the teachers, this dual role **impacted their relationship with their students**. They felt that they had become **more distanced from their students** in order to be able to objectively determine TAG outcomes and to avoid any appearance or accusations of malpractice.

*As a teacher, I like to be empathetic and encouraging to students. I also deploy a considerable amount of psychology in my relations with students - telling them what grades they should aspire towards and giving them motivational feedback. This year, it feels like I have to be much more detached and closed off from students as any suggestion that I have discussed grades with them could be construed as malpractice. (English Teacher, Diary 6)*

For other teachers, they felt that the dual role was **affecting how their students perceived them**. In knowing that their teachers were deciding their grades, some students were **more anxious, or more hostile** towards their teachers, almost in anticipation of not getting the grade they wanted.

*Yes, especially as students feel that they want to question you more and exactly how they are being marked. They seem more concerned in that maybe staff are doing things differently and trying to catch us out, instead of just being concerned in doing their best. (Drama Teacher, Diary 6)*

Building on this, some teachers expressed concerns that the effect of these tensions would be more visible when grades were released, and that some students would **inevitably be unhappy and blame their teachers for their grades**. For some teachers this went as far as concerns about legal threats from students' parents, based on what they had seen occurring in some schools in 2020.

*Apparently, a student has said to a colleague “if I don’t get an A [grade] you will have ruined my life!” Although students will be told all of the separate grades we are using as evidence so their overall grade shouldn’t come as a surprise, I worry a little that those receiving the lower grades will ‘blame’ the teacher. (PE Teacher, Diary 6)*

### 6.3.5 Future of assessment

Teachers also reflected on the future of assessment, both in general, and around assessment in the 2021-22 school year.

#### 6.3.5.1. Concerns about the impact on Year 10 and Year 12 students

Throughout the research many of the participants raised concerns about **the impact of COVID-19 for their current Year 10 and 12 students**. As well as equity concerns that non-examination year groups were being neglected and not receiving the expected quality of education, teachers were concerned about equity around formal assessment arrangements for next year’s exam students. Teachers felt it was important that plans for 2022 assessment should consider the disruption that next year’s GCSE and A Level students had faced over the preceding two school years, with next year’s A Level students not having had the usual experience of sitting their GCSE examinations. They also highlighted how students were already beginning to worry about this.

*I have concerns about the current Years 10 and 12. Their exam curricula will need to be adapted. In some ways they have suffered more than any other groups during the pandemic. (English Teacher, Diary 3)*

As part of this concern, they were worried that there would be an attempt to ‘correct’ for grade inflation in 2020 and 2021 by tightening up grade boundaries, which would then penalise next year’s examination year students.

*However, Year 10 and 12 are also having disruption and they are concerned that lost learning potentially will affect them even more as TAGs/CAGs for other years seem rather favourable, they feel that they will be hit with exam board grade boundaries more harshly and they will have less exemplar scripts to use as practice with no summer exams this year. (Geography Teacher, Diary 1)*

Concerns about 2022 arrangements were raised throughout the duration of the research. As part of this, **teachers were concerned about a lack of proactive thinking** and felt that the UK Government was in danger of repeating some of the problems experienced in 2021 (e.g., making last minute decisions about examinations). Many of the teachers’ responses show that whilst the teachers had been thinking ahead for some time, they did not necessarily feel that this was matched by proactive planning at the governmental level.

#### 6.3.5.2 Teachers’ hopes for the future of assessment

During the project the teachers were asked to reflect on their hopes for the future of assessment. Several teachers felt happy for the qualification system to largely go back to normal and did not necessarily feel that there was a better alternative to examinations. A number of these teachers emphasized how they **did not want teacher assessed grading to become standard practice** in a normal year. Interestingly, several teachers reflected on how they had previously thought that more teacher assessment would be positive, but that having experienced it they no longer felt like that. For some of them this was because they found the experience very challenging, whilst others related it to concerns about bias.

*One of the things that I’ve always thought up till this year is it would be great if assessment was more teacher based. I’ve always thought that you know, we know our kids. Going in and doing a couple of exams is quite high pressured and for certain kids that that doesn’t really reflect [their ability]. This year I’ve almost changed my mind about teacher assessment because there is that bias. (Science Teacher, Interview 2)*

A number of teachers referred to the **need to incorporate digital technology** into assessment. This was discussed both in terms of examinations being taken digitally, and in terms of online examination marking administration. One teacher noted that whilst they thought a move to digital assessment was likely, issues of technology failure needed to be considered.

Some teachers suggested that the exam system should be kept but that a more on-going approach to assessment should be used, with examinations taken in modules, and other sources of assessment evidence feeding into students' grades. According to the teachers, these additional sources could include teacher assessed grades, 'working at grades', supervised in-school assessments, or open book assessments.

*Maybe some of the GCSEs [should be] starting to think more modularly, so you could have like an exam at the end of each year. And you know, maybe a bit more like the American system where you sort of do like coursework that feeds into it, sort of stuff, not coursework, as coursework takes forever to mark, but, you know, just having that sort of continual feeding it, maybe like a blend of exams and teacher assessed grades sort of thing. (Geography Teacher, Interview 2)*

Only two of the participants specifically stated that **examinations should be removed altogether**. One of these teachers thought that GCSE examinations should be removed as they were meaningless as students no longer left school at age 16. The other teacher thought examinations should be abolished altogether because they felt that most students did not perform well in examinations. When asked to elaborate on their views, they had concerns that there was disproportionate emphasis on examinations at the expense of the practical elements of the subject.

*My ultimate joy would be to see exams abolished because I hate end of course exams. I think it, I think they're great for kids who can sit exams. I think they're rubbish for the majority of kids. I think one of the things they do is demonstrate a lack of trust in teachers, teacher assessment. (Drama Teacher, Interview 2)*

## 6.4. Equity issues

Our literature review indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic had potentially exacerbated existing educational inequalities. The teachers in our study expressed equity concerns at four distinct levels. At the highest level, there were some concerns about potentially unfair **variations in practices (and student outcomes) between schools**. At the second level, teachers expressed some concerns that there were **systematic variations within their schools** that could differentially influence students' academic opportunities. Teachers expressed general concerns that **different groups of students would have varying educational opportunities** due to the characteristics of that group. These concerns were distinct from teachers' reflections on how the conditions of some **students' home learning environments adversely impacted their learning access and achievement**. These home learning conditions included consideration of the significant challenges posed by **students' lacking access to adequate learning technology** for remote education.

### 6.4.1. Variations in assessment practices across schools

Teachers shared concerns that there were disparities between schools in the ways that they assessed their students. There was some concern that students **at larger schools and colleges would be disadvantaged** for courses where assessment required close observation of performances (e.g., PE). Some teachers argued that schools with large cohorts would need to **assess more students in the same amount of time** as small centres. This had several potential consequences. Students in smaller schools may have more attempts at an assessed task, or they would be able to do their assessments later when they had covered more of the course.

*We've got 67 students on the course, so if I'm told you have to [observe and assess performances], that's like 2 full weeks off timetable to do it. Whereas the school down the road has got one student. Well, they can do it probably 10 times, last minute. And that's unfair because our students will get one go with short notice. (PE Teacher, Interview 1)*

This concern was mirrored in reflections that some schools were **not covering the same amount of content** compared with others. Two teachers noted that some schools had stopped covering new content early, despite national guidance, whilst their own schools had maintained an ethos of covering all the course content. The teachers were concerned that this meant that their students would have a greater revision load than the other schools that had covered less content.

Most of the teachers shared anxieties that other schools would be able to game the assessment system due to **variations in standardisation** arrangements across schools. Around half of the teachers worried that there would be inadequate checks and balances in place to ensure that assessment outcomes would be equitable across different schools.

*This year's grades might as well just be thrown in the bin really because what my school does is so different to what the school next door does, and the school across town.  
(Science Teacher, Interview 2)*

Several teachers based this concern on their experience of assessment in 2020, where they perceived that they had followed the spirit and letter of assessment guidance whilst other schools had not. They felt that this practice resulted in their own students being under-recognised because other teachers had 'pushed the boundaries'.

*I think my own students suffered because we followed the procedures that were set down, rather than just throwing in these enormously inflated grades, which in retrospect is what we probably should have done. So now of course, for this year we're making sure that, I think everybody will be in all schools around the country, we're going to make sure that our students are not the ones who suffer, and they get the really high results, which they probably deserve anyway. They work at a really high level our students.  
(English Teacher, Interview 1).*

#### 6.4.2. Variations within schools

Around half of the teachers expressed concerns that there were differential and unfair levels of **attention being paid to different year groups** in their school. It was common for teachers to observe that they were paying more attention to the Year 11 and Year 13 examination classes, with this resulting in a better quality of teaching for these classes compared with those in the other year groups. Teachers also noted that their expense of energy on the 'examination classes' was accentuated once the TAG process was announced. There was a general sense of frustration from some of the teachers at this prioritisation of certain year groups.

*My additional workload has made me seriously consider leaving the teaching profession over the Easter period. I have questioned my ability to support students effectively across all year groups and I think that the time we will have to use to complete the TAGs will be to the detriment of our teaching of other year groups. (Science Teacher, Diary 5)*

Some teachers felt that the students who already had **established relationships** with teachers (e.g., who had already been taught by those teachers) were least affected by the shift to remote teaching. Finally, nearly half of the teachers suggested that their ability to perform, relative to other teachers, was affected by the **teachers' lack of access to adequate technology** at the start of the lockdown teaching period. Some teachers had no laptop computer, and others described their schools as suffering from slow equipment procurement. It was also the case that some teachers who had their own personal IT equipment felt that it was inadequate to meet software needs, whilst others noted that they had poor home internet access.

#### 6.4.3. Student group characteristics

Teachers described a variety of groups of students who they felt were differentially affected with regards to their learning access or in their ability to make the most of their learning opportunities.

##### 6.4.3.1. Students from lower socioeconomic groups

Most of the teachers highlighted that **less affluent students were attending remote lessons less** frequently than other students. They also noted that these students were more likely to be falling

behind with their on-going work, or that the **quality of their work tended to be weaker** than that of other students. One reason for the discrepancy related to resource access. Some teachers pointed out that **more affluent students were more likely to be accessing private tuition** during the remote teaching period.

*Some pupils have far less resources than others. Some of my exam pupils are receiving private tutoring - the impact on their grades will be enormous. Less well-off pupils are having to be self-reliant and study independently. (Geography Teacher, Diary 5)*

In some cases, teachers were taking it upon themselves to donate learning resources from their own homes to students from less affluent homes.

*I have a girl in my Year 8 class I actually take books in for, because I ask them to read for 10 minutes every lesson. There are no books at home, so I literally take books off my own kid's bookshelves. (English Teacher, Interview 1)*

#### 6.4.3.2. Special Educational Needs and Disabled (SEND) students

Half of the teachers felt that **SEND students were adversely affected by the shift to mainly remote teaching**. Teachers highlighted that when working remotely they could not satisfy the needs of their SEND students as well as when they taught them in-person. Teachers reported that SEND students struggled to understand basic instructions in remote lessons, required additional input, and struggled more frequently than other students to use online resources. Teachers also noted that the students were missing out on the additional support that they would normally receive from Teaching Assistants.

*SEN students are struggling using online resources. This uses a lot of skills and organisation which students often do not have. Cognitive load is very high when you are switching from TEAMS to a word or ppt to get the work done and some SEN students are just not able to do this. (Science Teacher, Diary 1)*

Reflecting on the return to in-person teaching, teachers also reported that some SEND students were adversely affected. The requirement for teachers to wear **face masks hindered learning for hearing impaired students** who relied on lipreading. In the schools where lesson length was extended (e.g., as part of a return to school catch-up programme), teachers reported that SEND students were more easily distracted and found the **longer lessons more challenging** to maintain attention.

#### 6.4.3.3. Students with mental health issues

The pandemic situation had obvious impact on students' mental health. Around half of the teachers described situations where some of their students were displaying anxieties due to them **dealing with personal and family illnesses or with the loss of loved ones**.

*I am also aware that in the last couple of weeks at least 6 students I teach have had close family bereavements. While this always happens during the school year, I would expect 2-3 a year, so to have 6 in a week is high and this will affect students. (Science Teacher, Diary 1)*

These teachers highlighted how **students who suffered from poor mental health were adversely affected by remote teaching**. The teachers also recognised that remote teaching arrangements also impacted on their ability to identify and support their students' mental health.

Teachers observed that students with mental health conditions were **generally opting out of online contact**, and even when in-person teaching had resumed the students were refusing to attend. Teachers also observed that anxiety was a factor in the underperformance of some students. In parallel with these observations of the existence of students' mental health issues, some **teachers also highlighted how they felt less able to deal with the issues** due to the conditions of the remote interaction.

*I think we've not picked up necessarily students who are struggling emotionally, or with their mental health quite so much, or have got a problem at home. So, for example, yesterday I had a student who did our final AS Biology paper. Yesterday a student came out of it, walked straight into my lab and just burst into tears. And it's like, "OK, it's only a test don't worry". And then it turned out that she's been having some quite difficult times with a cancer diagnosis in the family which has been going on since January. And I think if we'd have been in form [class] we'd have probably picked it up, in form time you see them every day. (Science Teacher, Interview 2)*

#### 6.4.3.4. Student ability

There was some disagreement around the impact of remote teaching on students with different ability levels. A small group of teachers argued that the more **diligent, motivated, and high achieving students were adversely affected** by remote teaching.

*Some of the most high achieving hardworking pupils are tying themselves in knots to make themselves sick. (Science Teacher, Interview 2)*

On the other hand, more teachers felt that **students at the lower end of the ability range were being adversely affected** by remote teaching arrangements. Teachers reported that they felt that many lower ability students had lost learning that they were secure with prior to lockdown, and that the gap between them and other students had widened during the pandemic.

*Lower ability groups have been more affected, and the gap seems to have widened between the most able and least. (English Teacher, Diary 6)*

Reasons for this discrepancy included reflections that these students needed higher levels of interaction with the teacher and therefore struggled without the support they would normally receive. Teachers also noted that these students found independent working more difficult than other students. Lower ability students were often reluctant to ask for help, generally relied more on verbal interaction (rather than text-based chat), and found the increased number of independent tasks difficult to manage.

#### 6.4.3.5. Gender

A small group of teachers reported that the move to mainly remote teaching and the move to TAG had a **more negative impact on male students** compared with female students. Teachers observed that boys were falling behind, and that the tendency for some boys to wait until the examination to raise their performance would not work well for them under the current arrangements.

*I feel that boys will be impacted with the results. Most of the more able boys tend to leave all the work to near the exams and then put the time in to get the grade. These students are now having to play catch up to get the evidence required for the grade that the students need. (Drama Teacher, Diary 1)*

#### 6.4.3.6. Students with English as an Additional Language (EAL)

A small number of teachers also reported that the move to mainly remote teaching and the move to TAG had a **more negative impact on students with limited English or whose parents struggled with English** compared with other students. These teachers felt that these students generally had less engagement with the teachers compared with in-person teaching arrangements.

#### 6.4.3.7. Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students

One teacher was concerned that the TAG arrangements had the potential to **adversely affect BAME students**, arguing that teachers could underestimate the ability of students in this group.

### 6.4.4. Student home learning environment

Around half of the teachers outlined how a **lack of support for student learning from home harmed some students' progress**, and how the impact of this was noticeable during the period of remote teaching. Teachers suggested that where parents did not value learning there was a lack of



'firm boundaries' and a lack of parental oversight which contributed to some students failing to complete work.

*If a student is going to be successful in education, it is not just the teacher who is the driver of that, it's the parents, it's the young person themselves... Students who are least affected by this lockdown are those where a parent does the simple routine of ensuring that their child is awake, dressed and in front of the device on time. (Geography Teacher, Interview 2)*

Many teachers also described how the home conditions for some students meant that they could not focus on learning. It was observed that **parents could not always adequately support their children as they also needed to work from home**. This situation was sometimes exacerbated when the parents were sharing limited working spaces with their children, and where students were competing for space with other siblings. Teachers noted that **some students lacked space** to access live lessons, and that these home environments could be overcrowded and noisy.

It was also noted that students were distracted from their learning because they **needed to act as carers** for other family members. In some cases, students needed to look after younger siblings, effectively acting as a teaching assistant whilst their parents worked. Teachers also felt that some students' achievements were affected by the way that they were responsible for caring for ill parents (e.g., taking their blood pressure at night), or through caring for grandparents (meaning that there was family pressure for the student not to return to in-person teaching because of the fear of picking up an infection and bringing it home to vulnerable family members).

Most of the teachers raised concerns about how **students' access to technology impacted on their ability** to make the most of remote learning. These considerations have clear overlaps with the previously stated concerns about the impact of students' home background factors on their attainment. Some teachers related how some of their students had **no access to laptops or printers** at home, although other teachers pointed out that there were schemes organised by their school for providing laptops to students who needed them. The lack of technology meant that students could not participate in some tasks (such as annotating scripts in English), or needed to rely on **using their phones to access remote learning** (which limited their access to certain functions, such as the use of tabs on spreadsheets). Other teachers discussed how their students only had access to **out-of-date or second-hand equipment**, which interfered with their access to learning due to crashes and unreliable functioning.

*Some pupils have older devices and can't unmute or raise their hands - this reduces the quality of the live lesson for them. (Science Teacher, Diary 1)*

It was also relatively common for teachers to report that students struggled at times with some persistent and longer-term Wi-Fi access issues. The result was that students tended to drop in and out of lessons, or they could not access video resources. This issue was particularly problematic for rural students, and sometimes required additional work on the part of teachers to send physical resources home to students.

*Most students have got their own equipment, but there were some that haven't. So, college has lent out some dongles and some laptops. This second [lockdown] there was a student I taught. She's classed as vulnerable, so she was actually going into college for the lessons, but then the buses stopped. So she's now learning from home, but she's not been in the lessons for a week because she didn't have any Internet, which is a bit of a worry, but literally, today she's messaging me to say 'my dongle's now arrived. My laptop's now arrived'. (PE Teacher, Interview 1)*

Teachers also described how students in some families struggled to access technology because of a shortage in the number of available devices. It was reported that younger siblings could lose out to older family member in the competition for access to devices, and that this sometimes led to delays in them submitting their work.

*We've also got large numbers of kids who are trying to work on a phone, or who are trying to share a device with mum, dad, granny, and grandad... I will get a message like 'I couldn't stay in the lesson because my brother needs the laptop'. (Geography Teacher, Interview 1)*

## 6.5. Teacher wellbeing and workload

We asked the teachers to complete a wellbeing and a workload survey at the start and at the end of the data collection period. These surveys were adapted from Collie, Shapka, Perry, & Martin (2015). In both surveys the teachers were asked to rate on a 7-point scale the extent to which various aspects of their teaching work impacted upon their wellbeing (Figure 5). Teachers tended to report that **relations with students** ( $\bar{x}$  5.7, Survey 1;  $\bar{x}$  5.9, Survey 2) and **classroom management** ( $\bar{x}$  5.4, Survey 1 and 2) **contributed positively to their wellbeing** (i.e., ratings between 5-7). Ratings for relations with students tended to improve during the study – perhaps linked to the return to face to face teaching.

Teachers tended to report that **marking work** ( $\bar{x}$  2.6, Survey 1 and 2), **fitting everything into the allotted time** ( $\bar{x}$  2.9, Survey 1;  $\bar{x}$  2.7, Survey 2), **teaching work completed outside of school hours** ( $\bar{x}$  3.0, Survey 1;  $\bar{x}$  2.7, Survey 2), and **administrative work** related to teaching ( $\bar{x}$  2.8, Survey 1 and  $\bar{x}$  3.0) **contributed negatively to their wellbeing** (i.e., ratings between 1-3).

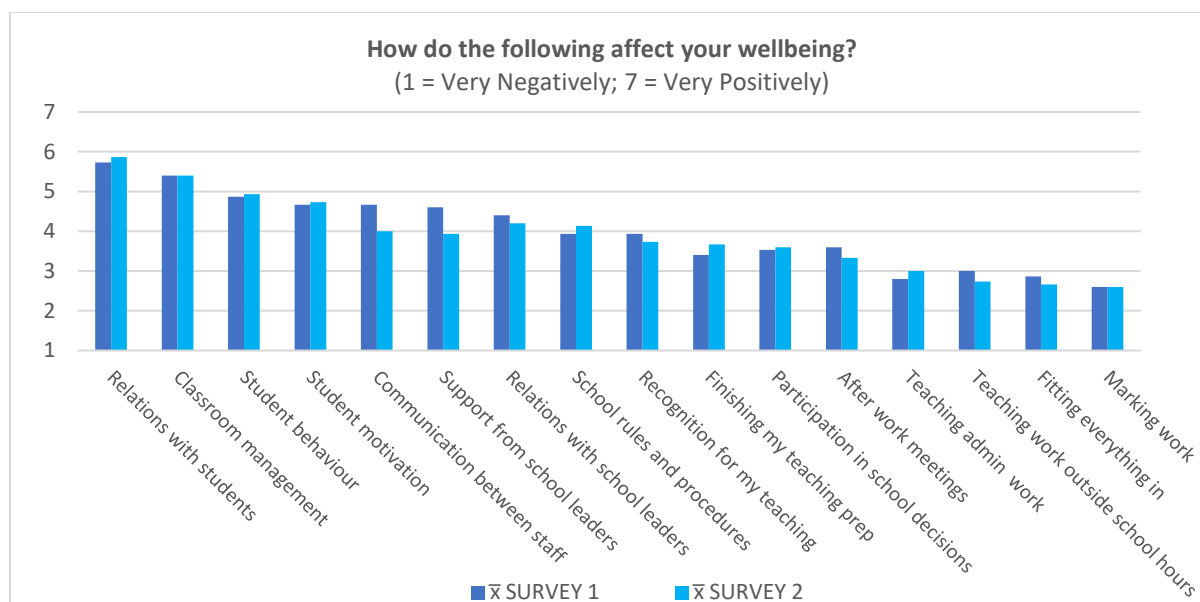


Figure 5: Workload and wellbeing survey responses

There were no clear subject level differences in wellbeing, and there was no clear impact of examining experience on wellbeing. There were a few areas where differences in ratings were noted between teachers at schools of different types. Teachers in Independent Schools tended to report that student behaviour ( $\bar{x}$  5.4) and student motivation ( $\bar{x}$  5.0) had a greater contribution to their positive wellbeing than did teachers in Comprehensive Schools ( $\bar{x}$  4.6;  $\bar{x}$  4.6).

In each diary, teachers were asked to describe their workload and wellbeing levels during that period (Figure 6). Most of the teachers described **high levels of workload throughout the diary study period**. Only one teacher (Teacher 8) felt that their workload was consistently low (this was a PE teacher who suggested that their lack of workload was down to them not needing to carry out practical PE lessons during the pandemic).

Teachers' comments on the state of their wellbeing (although not all teachers responded to this in every diary) were varied. Despite this variation at an individual level, teachers generally reported **low wellbeing levels throughout the study period**.

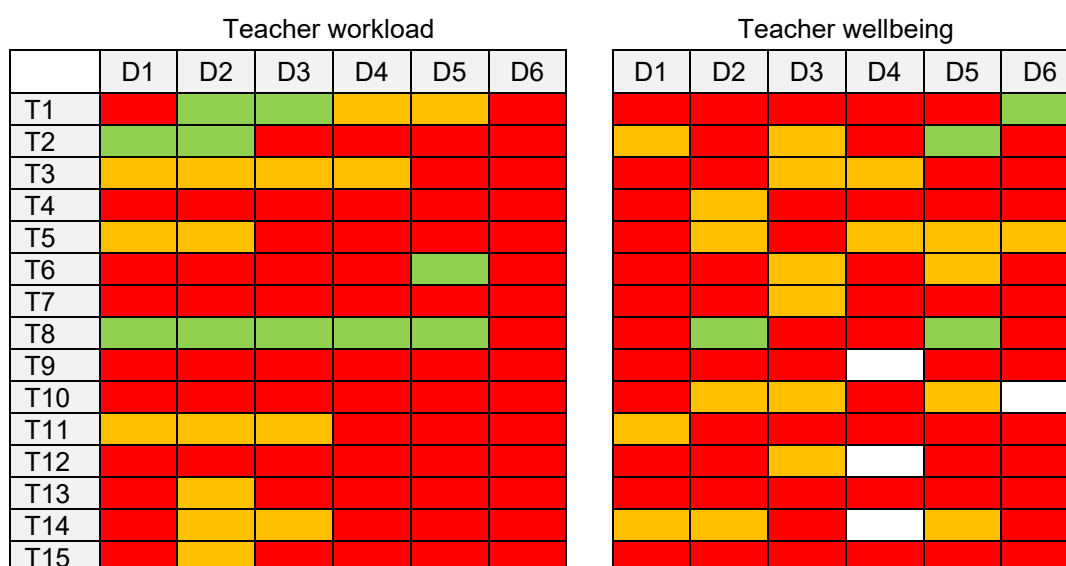


Figure 6: Teacher workload and wellbeing across the diaries<sup>11</sup>

In their diary responses, teachers discussed some of the issues affecting their workload and wellbeing. Throughout the diaries, the teachers noted that they and their colleagues experienced **high levels of teacher illness**, and particularly **mental health and stress related illness**. For some teachers, colleagues' illness impacted their workload and wellbeing as they had to take on additional responsibilities.

*I have had an almost constant headache over the past 2 weeks and have been struggling to sleep. (English Teacher, Diary 4)*

*I also had to mark additional papers because of staff absence and there was additional marking for the A Level as one member of staff was off sick. My Head of Department is still off sick following a heart attack, but he is very stressed about not being there to deal with the TAGs so he is phoning me regularly for updates. It is kind of an additional stress on me, but it is the way it is. (Science Teacher, Diary 6)*

Some of the teachers had additional challenges to their wellbeing because of personal circumstances, such as family members experiencing problems with their physical or mental health.

*Due to ongoing difficulties my daughter is facing in her own education my wellbeing is suffering although work is my sanctuary! (PE Teacher, Diary 4)*

Teachers also reflected on the impact that managing and responding to their students' wellbeing challenges had on their own workload and wellbeing.

*As teachers we have - to some extent - had to take on the burdens our students might be facing, acting as a kind of buffer between them and the situations they are finding stressful. There has also been a great deal of work required to ensure that School is running with some degree of 'normality'. (English Teacher, Diary 3)*

The workload and wellbeing challenges around the pandemic led many of the teachers to reflect on their professional future. For some, this meant that they were considering whether or not to remain in the profession, whilst others were planning to apply for jobs in other schools.

<sup>11</sup> We converted the reported workload levels to colours for each diary. Each diary is represented by D1-D6, and each teacher is represented by T1-T15. For the workload table, green indicates low/manageable workload; amber indicates a moderately high workload, and red indicates a very high workload. For the wellbeing table, green indicates positive wellbeing, amber indicates a mixed wellbeing response, and red indicates negative wellbeing. Non-response is indicated by a blank cell.

*This was one of those times when I was calculating how much it would cost me if I retired early. (Drama Teacher, Diary 5)*

*My additional workload has made me seriously consider leaving the teaching profession over the Easter period. (Science Teacher, Diary 5)*

*I've never come home and thought 'I don't want to be a teacher anymore' until this term. (Science Teacher, Interview 2)*

The remaining concerns that arose around workload and wellbeing are summarised below, organised by three key time periods: during lockdown; transition back into the classroom; and after they were back to in-school learning.

#### **6.5.1. Teacher workload and wellbeing during lockdown**

Teachers' **responses about workload levels were mixed during the early diary phase** when schooling was remote. A small number of teachers described their workload as being the same or less than in a normal year at this time. Their reasons for this varied, one was a PE teacher who had more free time as they were not completing practical lessons. Other teachers felt they were dealing with fewer behavioural issues and less class work marking, whilst one teacher found they could multi-task and complete administrative tasks during remote lessons (which was not possible during in-person teaching).

*My workload has decreased compared to last year and has stayed steady since this most recent lockdown period. The biggest contribution to this is probably due to being able to complete tasks additional to teaching during a live lesson (e.g. making emails home or to year teams etc.). Another huge factor contributing to my workload is the lack of marking I'm currently being expected to undertake, which is a huge positive. (Geography Teacher, Diary 1)*

However, **most teachers felt that they had significant increases in their workload**, and this was largely related to remote education challenges. Many teachers reported that planning lessons, delivering lessons, and marking remotely was time-consuming or harder than for in-person teaching. They also felt that there was increased administrative and CPD work linked to remote education.

*My workload has increased significantly. This is mainly because of the amount of time it takes to record, edit, and upload lessons to YouTube and Teams. Furthermore, the feedback and monitoring process is a lot more onerous than it has been in the past; just logging and chasing missing work adds an additional hour to each day. I would say that I am working two hours per day longer than at this time last year, plus an extra two hours per weekend. (Drama Teacher, Diary 1)*

Some teachers noted **increases in their assessment related workload**. These included carrying out online assessments or planning for the new TAG assessments.

*Already we are discussing assessment strategies with senior leadership acknowledging the additional workload but stating it will be unavoidable. (Science Teacher, Diary 2)*

Most of the teachers reported that staff were **struggling with their wellbeing** and poor mental health during this period of remote education, with this being exacerbated by the conditions of the pandemic more generally. For many teachers there was a sense of fatigue and uncertainty underlying this.

*Both teacher and student wellbeing remain heavily affected by the situation. Personally, I am finding it very difficult to sleep at the moment - not because I am awake working, just because of feeling anxious about what is yet left to get through this academic year and exhausted after a year of holding it together. (English Teacher, Diary 2)*

Some teachers felt that their school was contributing to the worsening mental health situation due to the pressures they were placing on staff, without appearing to understand the workload and strain that teachers were feeling.

*From a staffing point of view, the expectation that we explore exotic and unusual ways of delivering content does not take into account the amount of time it takes to simply create, upload, monitor and feedback the basic lessons; these directives seem to stem from senior colleagues who do not have anything like the teaching load that some of us have. Simply to manage a days' worth of lessons feels like a win (and I would say for the majority of students, being able to submit a small amount of work should be seen equally as a success). (Drama Teacher, Diary 1)*

During the two weeks covered in Diary 2, schools had their February half term break. Half of the teachers discussed the positive aspects of the half term break. Some teachers felt that that it had provided them with time to take a break from work. Others felt that working during half term had enabled them to get back on top of their workload, which had also benefitted them upon their return to school. However, many of the other teachers talked about negative aspects of the half term break, highlighting that they had had a lot of work to complete, and had not been able to take a proper break.

*I had to work a lot more during the half term than I normally would in order to "bank" lessons for the forthcoming half term. (Drama Teacher, Diary 2)*

### **6.5.2. Teacher workload and wellbeing and the return to the classroom**

As the teachers transitioned to in-person teaching, most continued to find that their workload was high. Some teachers felt that the **transition back to school had increased their workload**. The reasons for this included the additional workload related to planning for in-person lessons, as well as making backup plans in the event of the possible self-isolation of themselves or their students.

*Greater. Stressful. Trying to plan lessons for every eventuality including if I have to isolate and deliver a lesson online to my class in school. (English Teacher, Diary 3)*

A few teachers commented on how their balance of time had changed when they returned to in-person teaching. They highlighted that they now had less free time to complete tasks compared with when they were remote teaching. They also reported that they now spent more time on tasks such as attending meetings and supervisory responsibilities, as well as increased student wellbeing-related work now that they were teaching in-person.

*However, since students have returned it's been full-on, and I can only start my own work in a free period or at the end of the day. This has had a huge impact on my workload and has shocked me to be perfectly honest. In addition, the printing and trimming of resources, the pastoral side of things, students coming into school before form and having just supportive conversations with students have been huge. Break and lunch duties have also contributed to this. (Geography Teacher, Diary 3)*

**Assessment related work was a cause of increased workload** for many of the teachers. Some teachers reported that their school was starting TAG-related mocks and preparation in advance of receiving any guidance from examination boards. Many teachers continued to express concern that they were on the precipice of even greater workload when TAG work started in full.

*My workload remains entirely unsustainable. The greatest contributor to my workload has been preparing students for Practice and Final Assessments held by the school, which is entirely different to previous years. Effectively, marking two sets of mocks and a set of final exams, while still teaching a normal load, has been a huge contributor to my workload, which I could not have anticipated or planned for. (English Teacher, Diary 3)*

When **considering the impact on wellbeing, teachers had mixed responses to the transition back to in-person teaching**. Some teachers reported that there was a general feeling that staff were fed up with remote learning, and so the return to school provided a boost to their wellbeing. However, other **teachers reported some negative feelings around the return to school**, and the workload that a rapid return to 'normal' in-person education had caused. Some teachers suggested that the

return to school process was rushed, and that their school showed a lack of understanding as to the impact that lockdown and remote education had had on staff and students.

*Generally, I think that the situation has been a little worse than previously. Although I am happy to be back, I think that the process has been rushed and a more staggered approach would have benefitted both staff and students. Remote teaching has been a lot more challenging than normal classroom teaching and has had negative physical and emotional effects both on students and teachers. To expect everyone to return to the classroom and things to be normal demonstrates at best naivety and at worst a lack of regard for the toll this whole experience has taken. As noted above, our Senior Leadership Team do not seem to really understand (or more seriously care) about the effect this lockdown has had. (Drama Teacher, Diary 3)*

### **6.5.3. Teacher workload and wellbeing and in-person teaching**

As in-person teaching continued, and TAG deadlines drew closer, the teachers continued to report an increasing workload. For most of the teachers **the main source of workload was related to TAG**, with teachers highlighting that this was overwhelming when carried out alongside their usual teaching workload and other responsibilities (such as parents' evenings and reports). The initial TAG-related workload pressures were around interpreting the guidance and then developing and implementing an assessment plan. Workload then became focused on carrying out and marking assessments to inform TAG outcomes. Finally, data analysis and deciding the grades became the main source of workload at the end of the TAG process. Some of the teachers noted that this workload felt higher than in 2020 or compared to normal examination year pressures. This high level of workload around assessment negatively impacted staff wellbeing.

*Almost overwhelming. Marking and grading assessments as well as marking other teachers' [work] for moderation purposes as well as normal teaching for other year groups is massive. Much more than last year. (English Teacher, Diary 5)*

In the last few diaries, the **majority of teachers reported that they were suffering from poor wellbeing**. Most of the teachers also felt that teacher wellbeing was low during the period of in-person teaching. Many of the teachers described being stressed and exhausted, having experienced high levels of pressure for an extended period, with some feeling that this was not being taken into account by their school leadership.

*I genuinely think that things are pretty terrible right now. It feels as if we are just about keeping our heads above water. A lot of colleagues I have spoken to are unhappy, tired and frustrated. This is partly due to the general misery of the situation and partly due to our SLT seeming to have their collective heads in the sand about the impact this is having on us. (Geography Teacher, Diary 5)*

Whilst most teachers were generally happy to have returned to in-person teaching, several teachers commented on how it had been quite intense and tiring.

*The students and staff were fairly exhausted on the run up to Easter. Despite being back in school for a relatively short time, everyone was exhausted by the intensity of the time in school when shifted from remote learning. (Geography Teacher, Diary 5)*

The Easter holidays also fell during this time. Teachers were asked about how they had used the Easter holidays. Half of the teachers gave fairly positive responses, such as discussing how they had used it to rest and spend time with family and friends. Three of these teachers specified that they had made a point of not working during the Easter holidays. The other half of the teachers gave responses which were more negative, highlighting the work they had had to complete during the holiday. Some teachers suggested that this was fairly usual for them whilst others felt that they were having to work far more than usual.

## 6.6. Student wellbeing

The teachers were also asked to comment on the state their students' wellbeing (although some did not respond to this for every diary) (Figure 7). Whilst there was variation between individual teachers, they generally reported **low student wellbeing levels throughout the study period**. Teachers were most positive about student wellbeing around Diary 3, which was when they transitioned to in-person teaching. Many teachers did not comment on student wellbeing in diary 6. Their responses seemed to focus on concerns around their own and colleagues' wellbeing due to pressures around TAG workload.

Student wellbeing

	D1	D2	D3	D4	D5	D6
T1	Red	Red	Red	Green	Red	Red
T2	Red	Red	Amber	Blank	Red	Green
T3	Amber	Blank	Amber	Red	Amber	Amber
T4	Red	Red	Red	Red	Blank	Blank
T5	Red	Amber	Red	Amber	Amber	Amber
T6	Red	Red	Amber	Red	Amber	Red
T7	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red
T8	Red	Green	Amber	Red	Red	Blank
T9	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Blank
T10	Red	Amber	Red	Red	Amber	Blank
T11	Amber	Amber	Green	Red	Amber	Amber
T12	Red	Red	Amber	Red	Red	Red
T13	Red	Blank	Green	Red	Green	Amber
T14	Red	Red	Amber	Red	Red	Red
T15	Red	Amber	Red	Amber	Red	Red

Figure 7: Student wellbeing across the diaries<sup>12</sup>

The concerns that arose around student wellbeing are summarised below, organised by three key time periods: during lockdown; transition back into the classroom; and after they were back to in-school learning.

### 6.6.1. Student wellbeing during lockdown

Most of the teachers reported that students were also **struggling with their wellbeing** and poor mental health during this period of remote education. This was due to uncertainty, high levels of screen time and social isolation, and exacerbated by the conditions of the pandemic more generally. Some teachers felt that their school was contributing to the worsening mental health situation due to the pressures they were placing on staff and students.

*Over the last week alone, I have had several outstanding students who have confided in me regarding mental health difficulties they are experiencing as a result of the pandemic. I find it all the harder to accept the way in which our school piles work on to both teachers and students without much seeming thought being given to these issues. (English Teacher, Diary 2)*

This poor wellbeing impacted student engagement, with many teachers noting that students were struggling to focus during remote learning.

*Student wellbeing for my form group has been a major concern, some of the students have struggled. The students do find it hard to focus away from the school environment.*

<sup>12</sup> We converted reported wellbeing levels to colours for each diary. Each diary is represented by D1-D6, and each teacher is represented by T1-T15. Green indicates positive wellbeing, amber indicates a mixed wellbeing response, and red indicates negative wellbeing. Non-response is indicated by a blank cell.

*One student in a class is struggling with not being able to keep up with students that are more able in the same breakout rooms. (Geography Teacher, Diary 1)*

During the two weeks covered in Diary 2, schools had their February half term break. Whilst half of the teachers discussed the positive aspects of the half term break, several teachers expressed concerns that students' wellbeing had not improved after returning from the half term break.

*I expected the students to return after half-term in a better frame of mind, but they've been pretty demotivated and tired all week. (English Teacher, Diary 2)*

### **6.6.2. Student wellbeing and the return to the classroom**

When the transition back to in-person education was announced teachers reported that their students had **mixed feelings about returning to school**. Some students were excited about being back in school and seeing their friends, whilst others were anxious about their health and safety.

*I have asked some of my classes if they had the choice between carrying on with online learning or returning to college full time which would they prefer - most said that although they like getting up later whilst at home and are worried about the R rates, they want to get back to college to be with their friends. A small number said they are feeling anxious and don't see the point in returning. (PE Teacher, Diary 2)*

Teachers had **mixed responses about the impact that transition back to in-person teaching had on student wellbeing**. Some teachers reported that there was a general feeling that students were also fed up with remote learning, and so the return to school provided a boost to their wellbeing. However, others reported that **transitioning back into school had been challenging**, with some students struggling to adjust.

*The return to school initially resulted in an increase in well-being (both my own and most of the students'). I have also noticed that some of my students have struggled to readapt to the school environment - especially true for those students who find social interactions challenging or experience unkindness from their peers. (English Teacher, Diary 3)*

### **6.6.3. Student wellbeing and in-person teaching**

In the last few diaries, the **majority of teachers reported that at least some of their students were suffering from poor wellbeing**. Several teachers noted that whilst the return to in-person school had increased student engagement, the negative impact of the pandemic and lockdown on student wellbeing remained apparent.

*It seems to me that both students and teachers are re-engaging with school (Y9 notwithstanding). A number of students seem to be suffering from anxiety (one or two have actually been absent from school citing this as the cause). I can see that the lockdown and the measures taken to deal with it upon returning to school have taken a toll on many members of the school community. (Drama Teacher, Diary 4)*

Following the return to in-person teaching, several teachers noted that some students were still **choosing to attend their lessons remotely** due to mental health challenges, and so staff were trying to encourage these students to return to school and offering remote options for those that refused.

*A student that has previously missed some lessons has now been in class and attending online too which was a positive. Another 2 have requested to be taught online when their class are due in college, so we get them to join a Teams call. (PE Teacher, Diary 4)*

Many teachers were **particularly concerned about the wellbeing of examination year students** who were experiencing high levels of stress relating to TAG assessment pressure and uncertainty. Some exam students were experiencing significant mental health challenges.



*Y11 pupils are stressed. We have had a suicide attempt and lots now on anti-depressants. Many are refusing to try in class and assessments. Other year groups seem okay. (Science Teacher, Diary 6)*

## 6.7. Teacher attitudes towards support and stakeholders

In this section we reflect on the sources of support that the teachers drew on during the period of interest to the study. We also consider their attitudes towards stakeholders such as the Government, examination boards, SLT, parents, and the media more generally. Underlying this interest is the idea that teachers' reactions to workload (e.g., heightened stress levels) relate to their resource availability, and the extent to which these could be expected to help the teacher to meet their task demands (Kasl, 1978).

### 6.7.1. Survey responses

During the surveys and interviews we asked the teachers to reflect on their perceptions of assessment support that they received from a range of stakeholders (e.g., the DfE, examination boards and their SLT). They also made comments relating to this and their general attitude towards these stakeholders throughout the diaries.

We asked the teachers to reflect on the support that they received for assessment at the start and at the end of the study period (Figure 8). **The teachers felt that none of the suggested forms of assessment support were adequate** (i.e., with a mean rating greater than 5), however they felt that they received most support from their school leadership and least support from the DfE. Altogether, most teachers reported that they felt slightly less supported in their assessment work at the end of the study compared with the start of the study.

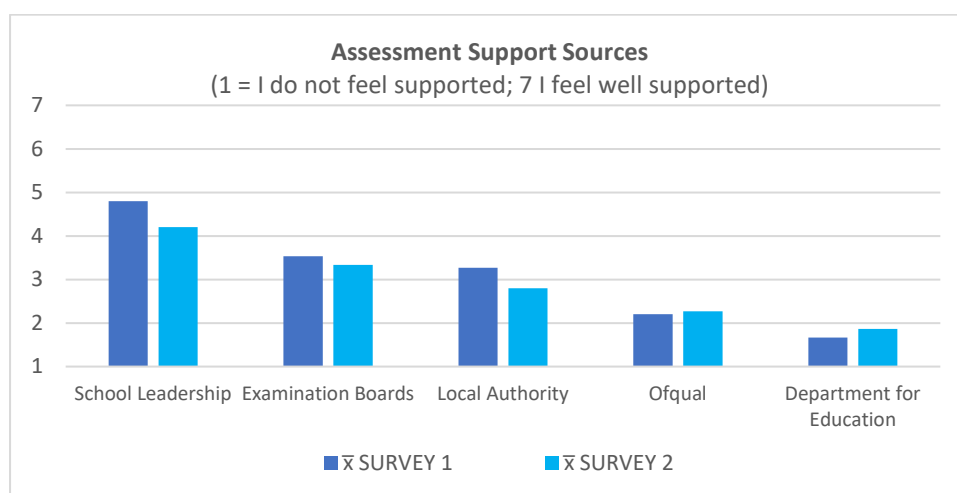


Figure 8. Assessment support ratings

There was no evidence of any difference in teachers' perceptions of support according to school type or size. However, teachers who had no examining experience tended to report that they did not feel well supported by the examination boards ( $\bar{x}$  2.4) compared to those who were currently examining ( $\bar{x}$  3.9) or who had been examiners in the past ( $\bar{x}$  4.7).

### 6.7.2. Government/DfE and Ofqual support

Teachers made **exclusively negative comments about the Government/DfE's handling of education during of the pandemic** in 2020 and in 2021. In their responses they discussed how the decisions around TAG and the lack of support increased workload and wellbeing issues for teachers and students. Furthermore, several teachers expressed concern that the TAG process was fundamentally flawed and unfair.

*There's a million things the [Government/DfE] should have done. They should have given schools a little bit more autonomy over things like face masks and that, just to set*

*the tone of discipline. They should have been consistent about what sort of assessment was going to be carried out. Just speaking to colleagues in nearby schools, every school is doing something completely different. So, there should have been a decision, 'this is going to be how it's assessed, and while people can be assessed perhaps on different areas, it should be the same for everyone'. (Science Teacher, Interview 2)*

The teachers were angry at what they considered to be the last minute and reactive nature of UK Government decisions (particularly in relation to the way that the 2021 examinations were cancelled). There was a sense that the ongoing impact of the pandemic into the new school year had been entirely predictable, and that planning should have been carried out much earlier for dealing with disruption to schooling and to examinations.

*The Department for Education had a whole year to come up with a plan and they just didn't, and even when they knew that they were changing it, they still didn't have a plan. (Science Teacher, Interview 2)*

Several teachers felt that the DfE was out of touch with the realities of teaching and with the challenges that teachers were facing when making TAG-related decisions.

*I think it was the complete lack of forward planning by them and the complete lack of a sense of reality of what it's actually like in schools, and the amount of extra work that it involved and a feeling of being let down by both organisations [DfE and Ofqual], that they didn't have the kind of systems in place that we thought were going to be there. (English Teacher, Interview 1)*

### 6.7.3. Examination board support

**Several of the teachers made positive comments about examination boards.** For these teachers there was a sense that the examination boards were not getting everything right, but that they were doing their best to provide clear and honest communications and updates, resources, and teacher training opportunities. Many of the teachers who spoke positively about the examination boards had examining experience, and many of them were quite empathetic about the challenges experienced by these organisations and their colleagues working in them.

*In a way it is worse I think for the awarding bodies because... this must be like an existential crisis for them. I mean, knowing people who work for the awarding bodies. I mean, I have a real empathy for my colleagues, who work for [an examination board] because it must be awful. (Drama Teacher, Interview 1)*

**There were also negative comments about the examination boards**, particularly around the TAG process. These comments focused on how the decisions about the TAG process were made and communicated, and on the provision of resources and guidance. Despite this sentiment, many of the teachers highlighted that they felt that the examination boards were doing the best they could with the information they had, and that the DfE was ultimately at fault.

*And I understand, the school's done the best that it possibly can, and the exam boards have done the best that they possibly can. My frustration really is with Department for Education really because I think they could have planned a little bit better for this. It's too late, to be honest, to be doing this. (Science Teacher, Interview 1)*

### 6.7.4. School level support

Teachers' perceptions of the support that they received from their school were **more balanced than their perceptions of support from DfE/Ofqual and the examination boards**. A third of the teachers expressed predominantly positive attitudes towards their school leadership's decisions and support. Another third of the teachers had very negative attitudes towards their school leadership and expressed quite negative views about the support received from their SLT. These teachers often qualified their position by explaining that, ultimately, the problems stemmed from the challenges created by DfE decisions and communications. The remaining third of teachers had mixed or neutral attitudes.

Some of the teachers reflected positively on support they received from their school leadership and from colleagues when faced with challenging personal circumstances (including bereavement, and personal and family ill health).

*For some context, my father passed away earlier in January, and the headteacher has been absolutely amazing and supportive. And the Science line manager has been supportive and said all the right things. (Science Teacher, Interview 1)*

Additionally, some of the teachers commented on how their schools had been helpful in emphasizing **the importance of focusing on the wellbeing of staff and students** (although it should be noted that this was most frequently noted in interview 1 before TAG-related workload started to dominate teachers' time).

*The Head constantly tells us 'Don't overthink, don't try and do things perfectly, you know, just, just, try and get by and think about your own mental health and the happiness of the kids at the moment', which is the message, should be the main thing. (English Teacher, Interview 1)*

Several teachers mentioned wellbeing initiatives that their school was putting in place to monitor and support staff and student wellbeing. These reflections were mixed, as some felt it would be better to concentrate on reducing workload instead.

Teachers discussed the training they had received, and also had mixed views on this. Some felt they had been well supported in terms of **training for carrying out remote education**, whilst others felt that they had not been given sufficient training, or that the training had not been useful, or that it was too time consuming.

Another way that some SLTs were supporting teachers was through providing **support for some of the practicalities of teaching and assessment**. This included the provision of administrative support for TAG arrangements or modifying teacher timetables to support them with managing their workload.

*We've had admin support because we're putting lots of stuff into spreadsheets, and then spreadsheets we're putting onto SIMs [data management system]. So we've had, like, support to put that on. So, it's been kind of like SLT have been trying to do their best in a difficult situation. (Science Teacher, Interview 2)*

However, in other schools, teachers felt that their SLT were placing excessive demands on them and not considering their workload. This included concerns around excessive administrative requirements and high levels of assessment for non-examination year students.

*I could not say that I felt particularly well supported, and perhaps some of the more admin-related tasks could have been downscaled with a little more imagination from SLT. (Drama Teacher, Diary 2)*

For some teachers, even where they were critical about the support provided by their school leadership, they felt that there was **good peer support from colleagues**. Additionally, some of the teachers were themselves in leadership roles, such as being a Head of Department (HoD), or had other roles such as being Union representatives, and so they found themselves providing support to colleagues.

*Support has been available as-and-when it is needed. I have certainly found myself, as HoD, providing a lot of this. Support I have received has sometimes been helpful. Senior managers in the school really have their work cut out for them as they administer the internal testing arrangements, but I know that there are colleagues I can turn to if I have any concerns or problems. (English Teacher, Diary 4)*

Many of the teachers **expressed some unhappiness with how their school had handled TAG decisions**. Teachers' concerns about SLT handling of the TAG process varied greatly. Some felt that

SLT were micromanaging TAG decisions and not trusting them, whilst others were concerned that they had been left to make TAG decisions unsupported. Other teachers were unhappy with the decisions that their SLT had made around TAG, with concerns about teacher workload or fairness for students. In some cases, teachers highlighted how their SLT had been indecisive, whilst others felt that their SLT had made TAG decisions too early before all of the information had been received.

*My workload was increased by the requirement to devise an assessment strategy for A Level Physics without SLT providing an outline of their requirements. My plans were then subjected to alterations as they decided what they wanted. SLT were disagreeing amongst themselves about how much guidance pupils should receive in preparation for internal assessments. (Science Teacher, Diary 4)*

#### **6.7.5. Reflections on parental attitudes and involvement**

During the research some teachers reflected on parental attitudes and involvement, and the impact that this had on them. Several teachers reflected on parents' views on live remote or blended learning. In some cases, parents had asked for more live lessons for students who were learning remotely. **Parents' expectations around online learning were a particular concern for teachers** from Independent Schools who had to adapt to online learning very quickly to ensure parents were satisfied.

*We got to grips quite quickly with online learning, because obviously being a private school if you don't, parents might not pay, or they might take the kids out. So, we had to adapt quite fast. (English Teacher, Interview 1)*

A few of the teachers mentioned how parents being able to view their lessons online added pressure. For example, one teacher discussed how parents had complained about a student being reprimanded for misbehaviour, and as a consequence they were no longer carrying out live online lessons for self-isolating students.

*I had an issue where I had a complaint from a parent because they were listening in at home to their child's lesson. Fair enough. But I had a class in front of me as well, so I was doing it because they were off isolating. In the class in front of me I told two people off by name, and the parents could work out who it was, and they said it was a breach of confidentiality and they actually complained to the school... They didn't like the idea of other parents being able to tell when their child was being told off. I mean, I didn't call them by their full names, it was just they could work it out. So, I've actually stopped doing it because it caused such a kerfuffle. I just went to the Senior Leadership Team and said, 'I'm not doing it anymore if that's what parents are going to do'. (English Teacher, Interview 2)*

Teachers also reported that parents contacted them in relation to their teaching content. One teacher reported that they had a parent complaining about the difficulty of the class work, whilst others had parents asking for additional support or catch-up work for their children. Building on this, several teachers reflected on how initiating contact with parents, or responding to parents around their child's learning, created workload issues.

*I always contact the students first to say you haven't done your work, why haven't you done it? If I don't get a response then I try and contact parents to try and keep the pressure on, keep that motivation up. But nine times out of ten, to be honest, that parent response comes back with more work for me to do, because they're not happy with something I've done, or not happy with something in the school. And I don't blame the parents at all, you know, someone's contacted them and then they suddenly go, 'oh yeah, and by the way, this isn't happening, and this [technology] is not working'. And I've then got to spend more time kind of forwarding stuff to other people. (Science Teacher, Interview 1)*

Parental attitudes to TAG were also reflected on. In the early stages of the project, three teachers expressed concerns around not being able to answer parents' questions about the arrangements for students' examinations and grades.

*I think this is the part that I am struggling with most - students and parents seem to feel that we should have the answers about what is happening about Y11 and Y13 assessments, but we only know what they know at the moment. (Science Teacher, Diary 1)*

A few teachers highlighted negative **parental pressures around TAG**. This was both in terms of pressure around the process, and in terms of grade outcomes. In some cases it was benign, with parents asking about the grades their children were going to get. In other cases, parents were putting pressure on teachers to give their child a particular grade, arguing that their child needed special consideration, or placing blame on teachers if their child did not get a good grade. The teachers who mentioned this issue most frequently were from Independent Schools.

*And now we've been getting parents and pupils putting pressure on saying 'well, my son's mental health is affected by this, he's not coming in to do that assessment today, but he's been working really hard, so he deserves this grade surely'. And that started straight away, and that's really put the pressure on staff. (Geography Teacher, Interview 2)*

#### **6.7.6. Reflections on media representation**

Several teachers discussed the role of the press in promoting particularly negative attitudes towards teachers. For some teachers there was a sense that they had been **underappreciated** during the pandemic and that this was reflected in media attention and attitudes. They felt that teachers had been under considerable pressure and had gone above and beyond during the pandemic, but that this was not recognised in the same way as it had been for other industries.

*I watch the news regularly. I watch the 10 o'clock news every night, and sort of virtually every profession has had a report about the impact of COVID. You know, the shop worker, the nurse, the doctor, the bus driver, the plumber. I've not seen anything about what teachers have been doing. And you think, hold on a minute. And I get that lots and lots of people have worked incredibly hard in incredibly difficult circumstances during the lockdown, and most of all parents, especially those at primary level. It must have been an absolute nightmare trying to do your job and teach. But there's been absolutely nothing of recognition at national level as to the role that teachers have played in getting young people through the pandemic. (Geography Teacher, Interview 2)*

There was also reference to **negative media representations** of teachers' attitudes around returning to school. Teachers felt that their legitimate concerns around the safety of returning to school were framed in terms of them not wanting to work, which also failed to recognise the amount of work being undertaken in order to make remote education possible.

*I think, you know, if, for example, when they were planning to reopen the schools, and I can't remember which time it was, it's probably all of them. And you know, teachers are a bit like, 'oh, why don't we wait until...', and then you get the newspapers saying, 'oh teachers don't want to go back to school'. And it's like, no, we want to be safe in school. And, you know, like taking the masks off the students, now like where was the consultation with the education sector about that? There wasn't one. They just decided to do it. (Geography Teacher, Interview 2)*

Altogether there was a feeling that media attitudes towards teachers were negative and were encouraging a **lack of respect for teachers** more generally from parents and students. A related concern was that the press was already starting to create a teacher blame culture around anticipated problems with TAG results.

*So, I think there was, you know, a lot of stoking up of hatred for teachers. And it will definitely happen again when exam results come out, like the evil teachers, as well with any inflation, which of course there will be. It will be us again getting it wrong and this is why we can't be trusted. And I think the general regard in society for authority figures or anything is so low right now anyway. (English Teacher, Interview 2)*

Teachers felt that the **press attitudes around TAG were unhelpful** in suggesting that the grading system was not going to work, it would be unfair, and it would lead to grade inflation. Teachers saw this as a **source of anxiety for their students**, as well as for themselves, as they felt that the press was pre-emptively blaming teachers for anticipated problems with the results.

*I think exam classes are starting to feel the pressure - not from the weight of the announcements made this week but by the increasing uncertainty and the number of press reports about how the system is unlikely to work in the summer. (English Teacher, Diary 2)*

*I kind of feel there's almost this press build up that the grades are going to be inflated. It's all teachers' fault. They're not managing schools very well, and there's almost this blame game being built up, so when the grades come out and everyone complains about it, because I'm in no doubt that's what's going to happen come September. (Science Teacher, Interview 2)*

A few of the teachers mentioned that they were **unhappy with media speculation** and how news had emerged about changes affecting teachers (e.g., the return to school, possible extension of school days, and around assessment). They felt that press leaks were a significant driver of stress for both students and teachers, and that teachers should be told in advance of any changes.

*The government announcements haven't helped - leaking information steadily to the press creates stress. (Geography Teacher, Diary 2)*

## 7. Discussion

In this section we relate our findings to the existing literature. We highlight where there are overlaps between our data and other research, and also explore areas where our data extends any previous research.

Before looking at the details of how our findings relate to earlier work, it is noteworthy that one of the major contributions of this study is in the way we look at the interaction of assessment with other aspects of teaching. Most of the research that we reviewed did not explicitly consider assessment, whereas this was a key feature of our study design.

A benefit of using a diary method is that it captures experience in a holistic way (so, although we selected our participants because they are GCSE or A Level teachers, they talked about the totality of their experiences). As a result, we are able to explore how the instability of the emerging assessment arrangements during the study period influenced behaviours in schools (e.g., teachers' curriculum and pedagogy decisions) and the perceptions of those engaged in learning at this time (e.g., teacher and student anxiety and wellbeing). In so doing, we shine a light on the way that assessment appears to be part of the structural fabric of schooling in England. This means that any study that sets out to make sense of the experiences of teachers and students during the pandemic needs to recognise the instrumental influence of assessment.

We had anticipated that we might find that the teachers' experiences of working through the pandemic might have varied due to some of the differences in their working contexts (e.g., school type or size, or subject taught, etc.). Despite actively looking for these differences, our analyses found relatively little evidence that the experiences of the teachers in our study were affected by these contextual differences.

## 7.1. Curriculum and pedagogy

The prior literature highlighted that remote learning involved teachers adjusting to new technology, and that this had a negative impact on teaching interactions (including feedback to students) and teachers' curricular choices (Kim et al., 2020). Our findings, in line with the prior literature, also highlighted the way that the pandemic involved the teachers transitioning through a series of adjustments to their practice. As well as accommodating new technologies for teaching, the teachers needed to implement practices to ensure that the teaching environment was safe. We also noted that since the pandemic was an unprecedented event, the teachers could not draw on their prior experience to inform their reactions to it, and this helps to account for how demanding the teaching process appeared to be at this time.

Our teachers also concurred with the reports in the literature that giving student feedback was more challenging during remote teaching, and that this sometimes affected the quality of teaching and learning. We also found that some teachers celebrated the way that remote communication allowed them to capture a tangible record of students' work and their real-time interactions. In this way, the pandemic emergency was responsible for advancing some teachers' technological awareness and making them more conscious of the possibilities of using communication technologies in their teaching practice.

Our teachers were very clear in expressing how remote teaching had diminished the quality of their usual teaching interactions. Many teachers described how they adopted more didactic, teacher-led approaches, and engaged in less discussion activities and group work with their students. Teachers also struggled to engage with their students where the students were not visible to them. The lack of physical student cues meant that teacher interactions were constrained as they could not gauge students' readiness to participate or their levels of understanding. It was also significant that some teachers reported that remote teaching made it difficult for them to monitor the state of their students' wellbeing.

Our findings also extended the prior research or presented a more nuanced picture of the teachers' experiences during the pandemic. Teachers observed how their relationships with some of their students were influenced in a positive way through online teaching. Our study generated more detailed evidence about the nature of teachers' curricular practices than we found in the prior literature. Teachers reported how, during remote teaching, they dropped certain content and skills (e.g., practical tasks) whilst also rebalancing the priority of other content and skills (e.g., privileging key content and deferring practical and more demanding work until the return to in-person teaching). The teachers pointed out that content delivery tended to slow down during remote teaching, and that they generally covered content in less depth. A corollary of this was that the pace of teaching tended to speed up (or become 'rushed') once the return to mainly in-person schooling resumed and assessment arrangements became more clear. Finally, the teachers highlighted how their students covered new content during remote teaching, with this centring on IT skills proficiency gains and an increased emphasis on wellbeing content. Many of the teachers noted how their students seemed to have lost their social confidence to interact, alongside a loss of an ability to use practical skills and to engage in longer, sustained tasks.

Our project contributes to the prior literature particularly where it shines a light on the teachers' experiences of blended learning. The teachers were clear in articulating how blended teaching was challenging and how it was difficult to simultaneously support the needs of both in-person and remote students. When we consider how blended teaching may be seen as a relatively longer-term solution to issues of student and teacher self-isolation as the pandemic continues, these concerns may be amongst the most significant ones that we raise in this study.

## 7.2. Assessment

Our findings also extended the prior research by looking specifically at the interactions between assessment, pedagogy, and the pandemic. Over the course of the study, the assessment landscape for teachers was a changing one. Using our diary approach, we were able to collect evidence about the state of uncertainty that the teachers experienced as assessment policy evolved towards the final

TAG arrangements. The teachers' perceptions of the arrangements for assessment in 2021 were also clearly being considered in relation to their CAG experiences in 2020. A number of teachers were concerned that they felt that their students had not received the grades that they deserved through the CAG process. Additionally, many of the teachers had anticipated disruption to 2021 examination long before it was announced in January 2021. As a result, teachers engaged in heightened levels of assessment data gathering, but they also raised concerns around the challenges of students being assessed remotely and how assessments were potentially harming students' mental wellbeing.

In the period prior to the TAG arrangements being announced, the teachers described a diverse landscape of assessment practices. Some teachers described how they were continuing their usual assessment arrangements whilst others described how they were assessing less than usual, or were engaging in more assessment practices with formative purposes.

As the policy environment shifted towards the TAG arrangements, many of the teachers highlighted their uncertainty around the lack of clarity and how this made their planning difficult. The data shows that teachers in some schools were reluctant to implement any new arrangements whilst awaiting clarification from the UK Government on the TAG requirements, whilst in other schools there was a sense that teachers did not have time to wait for such an announcement and needed to start to gather assessment evidence. There were some similarities in approaches across school, for example it was clear from all of the teachers that the use of mock examinations was highly important to their grading decisions. However, beyond this, there was a lot of variation in the approaches to TAG that schools and teachers were taking, which was something teachers themselves were aware of and concerned about. Our findings also highlight that teachers have substantial concerns about formal assessment arrangements in 2022, and that this cohort of examination year students will be even further disadvantaged by attempts to return to 'normal'. As to the future of formal assessment more generally, teachers' views were mixed, but for many the experience of CAG and TAG highlighted both opportunities and challenges around modifying the current focus on examinations.

### **7.3. Equity issues**

Research showed that the pandemic threatened educational equity in a number of ways. For example, disadvantaged students disproportionately struggled to show their true levels of attainment due to problems with accessing technology and live lessons. These students also tended to spend less time studying during the pandemic compared with other students (Montacute & Cullinane, 2021). Literature raised concerns about the progress of SEND students during the pandemic, with particular worries around a lack of adequate resource provision (Greenway & Eaton-Thomas, 2020). Finally, research highlighted the negative impact of the pandemic on students in Year 11 and in Year 13. The literature suggested that during 2020 these students were experiencing heightened levels of anxiety, and there were concerns about the quality of their learning routines and levels of home support as they prepared for their GCSE or their A Level assessment (ImpactEd, 2021).

Our findings were in line with the previous research with regards to differential levels of access to education for some student groups. Some teachers shared concerns that their more affluent students were accessing private tuition during the remote teaching period whilst others did not have this opportunity. Most of the teachers also raised concerns about how some students' lack of access to adequate technology impacted on their ability to make the most of remote learning. Most of the teachers also highlighted that less affluent students were attending remote lessons less frequently than other students, were more likely to be falling behind with their on-going work, or were producing work of poorer quality than other students. We also found that many of the teachers felt that SEND students were adversely affected by the shift to mainly remote teaching, suggesting that they felt that they were not able to adequately meet the needs of these students.

Our findings also extended the prior research. Our focus on gathering evidence around assessment practices showed that some teachers were concerned that there were disparities between schools in the ways that they assessed their students. There was also some clear concern that students at larger schools and colleges would be disadvantaged for courses where assessment required close observation of performances.



Our findings also add some nuance to previous research outcomes. Whereas there has been a focus on the impact of the pandemic on disadvantaged students' learning, our data suggests that disadvantage might also stretch to students with parents who work at home and with less time to support their children's learning. We also had evidence that students who were caring for siblings or relatives were also detrimentally affected by the move to remote teaching. Our data suggested that less able students found it more difficult to learn remotely, with many teachers feeling that the progress for these students was slowing.

Finally, building on the observations in literature around the impact of the pandemic on students in Years 11 and 13, we found that many of the teachers were concerned about the lack of attention that was devoted to the other year groups during this time. These observations related to how teachers felt that their focus on GCSE and A Level assessment outcomes resulted in them delivering a better quality of teaching for these classes compared with others.

#### **7.4. Teacher workload and wellbeing**

As shown in the literature, teacher workload and wellbeing was adversely affected during the pandemic. This research found that teacher wellbeing was negatively influenced by a number of factors, including high levels of workload, personal challenges, concerns about their students' learning loss, a decline in the standards of student behaviour, challenges due to ongoing uncertainty and new requirements to grade students' performances as part of their GCSE or A Level qualification award (Education Support, 2020a; Kim et al., 2021; Walker et al., 2020).

Our findings were generally in line with the prior research. Teachers in our study expressed concern about how their wellbeing was negatively affected by the amount of time they spent at the screen, and that staff morale was particularly low as a result of feelings of social isolation. As teachers returned to schools, they noted that transitioning back to in-person teaching created additional workload, especially with the need to prepare for blended teaching at all times. TAG was also a significant source of workload which impacted on teachers' wellbeing. Our findings also mirrored others' findings around teachers' workload around dealing with student learning loss. Teachers explained that they were involved in a variety of additional arrangements (e.g., extra lessons or extra-curricular activities) to help their students to catch up on any lost learning.

Our study had a greater emphasis on gathering evidence around assessment practice during the pandemic compared with previous research. We found that many teachers altered assessment practices to limit any potentially negative impact on students' wellbeing (e.g., reduced assessment). This affected teacher workload, as they needed to gather evidence in different ways or in a more concentrated way once the TAG arrangements were announced. Teachers reported how uncertainty around the TAG arrangements negatively impacted their wellbeing and increased their workload, largely due to anxieties about whether they were collecting enough assessment evidence. The teachers also reported that the new grading expectations impacted their relationships with their students. Teachers explained how they needed to create some objective space (e.g., through blind marking and moderation) to avoid potential accusations of bias or malpractice, and that some students appeared more hostile towards them. Interestingly, it appeared that those teachers who were already experienced examiners reported fewer tensions in juggling the 'teacher as motivational teacher' and 'teacher as judge' roles.

As we have noted above, teachers observed how their relationships with some of their students were influenced in a positive way through online teaching. There was a sense that it was possible to get to know students in a different way as there was time to communicate with students who may have been generally overlooked in class (due to the distracting behaviour of other students), or with students who would normally have adopted distracting and problematic behaviours to attract attention. This last point related to the reflection from some teachers that there were less behavioural problems to manage when teaching remotely compared with in-person teaching.

## 7.5. Student wellbeing

Research has shown that the pandemic had influenced students' mental health. There was recognition that student wellbeing was affected at a general level by the lockdown and remote teaching, but that this influence varied across the student population (Widnall et al., 2020; Young Minds, 2020).

Our findings were generally in line with others'. The teachers in our study observed that students who suffered from mental health issues were more likely to opt out of education when it was remote. Teachers also worried that they found it difficult to identify when students were struggling with mental health, and less able to deal with these issues when relying on remote interaction. Challenges around student wellbeing continued as students returned to in-person schooling, highlighting that wellbeing issues were not solely related to remote education, with some students finding the return to school particularly challenging.

Concerns around assessment were a big driver of wellbeing issues for students in examination years. Teachers highlighted that the uncertainty around TAG had negatively impacted their student's wellbeing, with the way that changes were being communicated and reported in the press contributing to this.

## 7.6. Attitudes towards support and stakeholders

Our literature review found that many teachers felt under-supported and underappreciated by various stakeholders (Education Policy Institute, 2021; Education Support, 2020b; Kim et al., 2021), and for some this was leading them to reconsider their professional futures (Education Policy Institute, 2021). Our findings were in line with this, with many teachers being unhappy with the support provided by the Government, DfE, Ofqual and the examination boards, as well as around attitudes towards them from the press and parents. Our research found that attitudes towards SLT level support were most mixed, with some feeling very positive about support provided by their school, whilst others felt very negative. This aligns with the Education Policy Institute (2021) finding that school responses to COVID-19 had a mixed effect on teachers' intentions to leave the profession.

Teachers in our study felt very negatively about the assessment support that they received from the Government, DfE and Ofqual. Many teachers felt frustrated that there had been a lack of foresight and planning which had resulted in a great deal of uncertainty, and which had impacted teacher workload as well as student and teacher wellbeing. Teachers told us that they had anticipated problems with assessment in 2021 and had started to make contingency plans following the disruption to examinations in 2020. This aligns with Kim et al. (2020) who found that teachers were already considering how best to prepare for the 2021 examinations up to a year in advance, although planning was challenging amidst the ongoing uncertainty.

## 8. Conclusion and recommendations

There were a variety of benefits from using a diary method data collection approach (e.g., able to collect data while conforming to social distancing requirements, maximising the close relationship between data collection and the events of interest, enabling the capture of information and interpretations of everyday experiences in an accessible format, etc.). The method also had some limitations. Diary methods elicit a large amount of qualitative data and tend to limit the number of participants that can contribute to a project (due to research resource limitations). This meant that we were able to gather information at a fine level of detail but only for a select group of teachers. The teachers were extremely busy at the time of the study, and some found it challenging to submit the diaries on time, and as a consequence we decided to accept diary submissions up to three days after the diary closed. Another limitation was that the diaries were open for two weeks and we could not edit the questions after they were released. This meant that there were occasions where large and unanticipated changes occurred (such as the release of information about TAG), and we were not immediately able to include a specific diary question on this. In order to account for this, we had an

'any other comments' question so that participants could give us their immediate reaction to any significant events.

Despite screening participants by location so that we could focus on teachers in England, we found out that one of our teachers was based in Jersey. Despite their experience being slightly different from the other teachers (they were not experiencing lockdown in January 2021), we found that their experiences were largely similar to the other participants (e.g., they were dealing with remote teaching for some students, and affected by the same assessment arrangements as the other teachers during the study).

Diary methods also present challenges for analysis because they encourage participants to report on their experience at a holistic level. Whilst we were focusing on examination year students, most teachers were teaching across multiple school years. It was sometimes challenging to disentangle where teachers were reflecting on their experiences in relation to examination year students rather than other students.

A major contribution of this study is how it looks at the interaction of assessment with other aspects of teaching. Most of the prior literature that we reviewed did not explicitly consider assessment, whereas this was a key feature of our study design. As a result, we highlight how the instability of the emerging assessment arrangements during the study period influenced behaviours in schools, reinforcing the idea that assessment is a key influence on how schooling works in England.

Our findings extended the prior research on teachers' experiences during the pandemic, and specifically outline an analysis of the benefits and challenges of remote, blended, and in-person teaching. The concerns reflected in teachers' candid reflections on the challenges of blended learning may be amongst the most significant ones that we raise in this study. Our study also generated detailed evidence about the nature of teachers' curricular practices, with the changing conditions of the pandemic and subsequent assessment arrangements leading to shifts in learning content and teaching approaches.

We found that teachers' perceptions of the assessment arrangements in 2021 were forged through their experiences of assessment in previous years, and this helped to contribute to variations between teachers' assessment practices across different schools and colleges. Student wellbeing also had a clear influence on teachers' assessment and teaching practices. Concerns about protecting students' mental health at the early stages of the 2021 lockdown period led to a need to increase the pace of teaching and the amount of assessment later in the year.

Teacher and student wellbeing was severely impacted by uncertainty around assessment arrangements. The teachers felt that they had limited support for making assessment decisions from beyond their schools. The support that teachers received from within their school also varied across our participants.

Our findings reflect others when considering the high impact of the pandemic on disadvantaged learners. We also broaden the concept of disadvantage to include groups such as students with parents who work at home and students who are carers. We also shine a particular light on how there was a potential for teachers to focus their attention most heavily on Years 11 and 13 and to overlook students in other year groups.

## General recommendations

- **Digital education** – It is likely that blended learning and the increased use of technology in education will continue. Remote and blended teaching during the pandemic has highlighted that schools have different levels of preparedness for digital education, with different levels of teacher and student skill and access to technology. This is an ongoing area of concern for reasons of equity, and it is likely that some teachers and students will require further training around the use of technology as well as common access to appropriate equipment.
- **Teachers feel undervalued and underappreciated** – Many teachers have felt undervalued and underappreciated during the pandemic, and there is a sense that the media and public do not hold much respect for teachers. More messaging in the public domain around the challenges

overcome by teachers during the pandemic (e.g., including research outputs) may help to redress this issue.

- **Targeted support for students and schools** – Teachers have concerns about particular groups of students, and targeted support for the most marginalised is important. More research that identifies the students who are most vulnerable during remote learning (and in the aftermath of the return to in-person teaching) would help to inform the targeted support for such students.
- **Future disruption** – COVID-19 is likely to continue to cause ongoing disruption to education for the foreseeable future, whilst other disruptive events may also occur. Uncertainty was a significant source of workload for teachers, and it contributed greatly to undermining their wellbeing and that of their students. As well as the general uncertainty caused by the pandemic, there was a great deal of uncertainty around the arrangements for formal assessments. This highlights the importance of having as stable an assessment system as possible (unpredictable assessment leads to contingent volatility across the education system – including curriculum and pedagogic practices). In the event of future disruption greater decisiveness and earlier decision making is crucial to enable teachers to plan more effectively.

### **Recommendations relating to assessment**

- **Be proactive around 2022 qualifications** – Many teachers were unhappy with how the Government (and to some extent the examination boards) handled TAG. They felt that there was a lack of foresight and contingency planning around disruptions to the 2021 examinations. Many remain concerned that this will be repeated in 2022, and so it is imperative that teachers are kept informed about ongoing plans in this area.
- **Do not treat 2022 qualification year as ‘normal’** – Teachers are concerned that there will be an attempt to return to pre-pandemic assessment arrangements in 2022, and there are concerns that attempts to correct for grade inflation will penalise their students.
- **Digital assessment** - As possibilities for digital assessment in the future are discussed it is important to remain mindful that not all students and schools have the same level of access to technology or proficiency in technology skills. Many schools attempted digital assessments during the pandemic, with varying degrees of success, which has highlighted concerns around fairness and validity.

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# Appendix 1: Teacher workload and wellbeing survey

## About you and your teaching

Please indicate your age:

Please state your gender:

What is your role at your current school?

How many years have you been teaching?

Please briefly describe the students at your school, in terms of their demographic characteristics (e.g., ethnicity, first language, special educational needs status, free school meals eligibility and socioeconomic status). For example: "Approximately 75% of students are white and 25% are Black, Asian or minority ethnic. 10% of students are eligible for free school meals."

## Wellbeing rating scales (from Collie et al. 2015)

Currently, how do the following aspects of being a teacher affect your wellbeing (comfort, health, happiness)?

Very Negatively

Very Positively

Marking work

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Relations with school leadership at my school

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Student behaviour

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Fitting everything into the allotted time

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Support offered by school leadership

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Relations with students in my class

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Administrative work related to teaching

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Recognition for my teaching

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Student motivation

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Teaching work I complete outside of school hours

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

School rules and procedures that are in place

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

Working to finish my teaching preparation tasks

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

Communication between staff members of the school

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

Classroom management

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

Staying late after work for meetings and activities

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

Participation in school level decision making

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

**How confident do you feel in your ability to prepare students for their 2021 examinations?**

Thinking about your ability to prepare your students for their 2021 examinations, how do you feel about the support you have received from the following:

Very Negatively - I do not feel supported      Very Positively - I feel well supported

School leadership

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

Examination boards

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

Ofqual

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

Department for Education

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

Local authority

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

Professional associations

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

Subject associations

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

Are there any other forms of support that have helped you prepare your students for their 2021 examinations? If so, please outline these and rate the level of support.

## Appendix 2: Teacher interview 1 (schedule)

Throughout this research we are particularly interested in three crosscutting themes:

Equity – We are interested in issues of equity between students, including relating to the impact of remote/blended learning

Wellbeing – We are interested in issues relating to wellbeing of staff and students

Teacher Workload – We are interested in issues relating to teacher workload

### Questions to follow up on survey responses

We will first follow up on any specific points we'd like to clarify based on the survey responses

- Follow up questions about their school context (if not clear – e.g. who their students are - ethnicity, free school meals, second language speakers etc.)
- Can you tell me about what things contributed to the highest and lowest response of the wellbeing scales?
- Note their confidence rating about preparing their students. In terms of support, can you tell me about what things contributed to the highest and lowest response of the preparation scales?

### Covid Context

About 2019-20 school year

Teaching delivery How did you deliver teaching during the period of school closure in March 2020-Summer 2020?

- How did your school handle remote learning?
- Did you use any technology platforms?
- Technology provision for students and teachers
- Classes combined?
- Physical resources (such as print outs, or workbooks...)?

Teaching and Pedagogy

- How did your teaching approach change during the school closure?
- Any changes to the types of learning activity you used?

Curriculum

- Please tell us any changes you made to the curriculum in terms of content, balance of content?

Assessment

- What was your school's approach to mock exams and Centre Assessed Grades (CAG) for the 2020 examinations?

Open - Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your experience and your school's Covid response during the 2019-2020 school year?

## **2020-21 school year (First term)**

Teaching delivery

- In the Autumn term of 2020, was your teaching affected by any instances of school or classroom closure, teacher or student absence due to Covid?
- If some students have been absent - how have you managed teaching when some students were in-person and some are remote?
- How have you approached blended or remote learning and technology use?

## **2020-21 school year (January term)**

Teaching delivery How are you currently delivering teaching during this period of school closure?

- How are you approaching remote learning?
- Are you using any technology platforms?
- Technology provision for students and teachers
- Classes combined?
- How is your school balancing in person schooling for children of key workers vs remote learning?
- Physical resources (such as print outs, or workbooks...)?

## Appendix 3: Diary 1-6 tasks

### Diary 1

How many lessons did you teach over these weeks? <sup>\*13</sup>

Were there differences in the quality of your interactions with your students in the different classes?\*

Did you teach all the content, and teach it in the way that you had planned over these weeks?\*

Is there anything that what went particularly well during these weeks?\*

Is the content that you taught over these weeks different from the content that you taught at an equivalent point last year?

Have you any thoughts on the state of teacher and student wellbeing over these weeks?\*

Have you any thoughts on whether any individual or groups of students are being affected differently?\*

How would you describe your workload over these weeks?\*

Have the types of learning activities and resources that you use changed compared with before the pandemic?

Is there anything else that you would like to share with us? Are there any issues that have significantly affected your work beyond the things that are covered above (these can include any significant events that have affected your teaching such as enforced absence, government policy changes, personal life events, etc.)?\*

### Diary 2

[Common questions +]

Have the types of skills that you teach changed since the start of the pandemic? Please explain?

On balance, have the types of things that you now assess changed since the start of the pandemic? Please explain.

### Diary 3

[Common questions +]

How has the announcement of return to school for all students on the 8th March impacted on your curriculum planning?

Have you concerns about students catching up on lost learning?

Has any 'catch up' work influenced your teaching practice, and how? (e.g. is it affecting how you teach new content?)

How are you and your school responding to the practical arrangements around the return to school of all students (e.g. covid testing and masks)

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<sup>13</sup> \*Common question used in all of the diaries.

#### **Diary 4**

[Common questions +]

What type(s) of evidence are you and your school/department planning to collect and use for TAG?

Is this type of evidence different from the evidence you used for assigning grades in 2020, and different from what you would have used before 2020?

#### **Diary 5**

[Common questions +]

How have you used the Easter holiday time?

What are your reactions to guidance around support materials around 2021 assessment?

#### **Diary 6**

[Common questions +]

When you are both a teacher and an assessor are there tensions in this dual role

Where are you in the process of evidence gathering for the submission of Teacher Assessed Grades, and how is it going?

## Appendix 4: Teacher interview 2 (schedule)

Thanks for all of your contributions to our project so far, they have been so valuable to building our understanding of the experience of teaching during the pandemic. In this interview I'd like to ask you to reflect on a few questions about your experience over the past 4 months.

At the end of the interview I'll share with you the instructions on how to claim your payment for your work on the project.

As you may recall, throughout this research we have been particularly interested in three crosscutting themes: Student Equity; Teacher and Student Wellbeing; and Teacher Workload.

### Clarifications\*

I would first like to just clarify one point from your diary entry.

*Note here if there are any specific questions from the diaries that need to be explored.
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### Wellbeing Survey

I would like you to think about your responses to the Wellbeing Survey that you filled in.

Can you tell me about what things contributed to the highest and lowest response of the wellbeing scales?	HIGHEST RESPONSE	LOWEST RESPONSE
There are some differences in the responses that you submitted for the most recent wellbeing survey compared with the one you submitted in January 2021. Why might there be a difference between these two surveys?	HIGHEST RESPONSE DIFFERENCE	

### Support for Assessment Preparation Survey

Next, I would like you to think about your responses to the Support for Preparing for Assessment in 2021 Survey.

In terms of support for your assessment judgements, can you tell me about the things that contributed to the highest and lowest response of the preparation scales?	HIGHEST SUPPORT	LOWEST SUPPORT
There are some differences in the responses that you submitted for the most recent assessment preparation scales compared with the one you submitted in January 2021. Why might there be a difference between these two surveys?	HIGHEST RESPONSE DIFFERENCE	
How could the government and exam boards have supported you better in preparing your assessment judgements?		
Could your school have supported you better in preparing your assessment judgements, and if so, how?		

### The Future

I'd like to ask you about your thoughts for the future



What do you think you will take forward / or have learned from the experience of teaching during the pandemic (e.g. use of digital technology etc...)?	
It seems that blended learning in some form is going to be around for some time. How are you managing blended learning – and what impact is it having on you and your students?	
Thinking about the future of assessment. What do you think will happen to assessment in the future - and what would you like the future of assessment to be?	
According to the NEU, around 1/3 of teachers are thinking about leaving the profession. Does this surprise you, and does it fit with your experience from talking with other teachers?	
In press and political rhetoric there are concerns expressed about students' 'lost learning'. What do you think about this phrase? And do you agree with these concerns?	