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Editorial

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Editorial

Welcome to the new online version of *Research Matters*. The first issue in our new format is a special issue devoted to research relating to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the UK the exams were cancelled in summer 2020, and in all four UK nations students were eventually awarded the better of a Centre Assessed Grade (CAG) and a grade produced by an “algorithm” which statistically standardised the CAGs with the dual aims of compensating for differences among schools in how harsh or generous their estimated grades were, and minimising overall grade inflation. The experience raised, and continues to raise, fundamental questions about fairness, standards, reliability, the meaning of grades, the purpose of assessment—and others. In this special issue we touch on many of these issues.

In our first article, Stuart Shaw and Isabel Nisbet discuss the fairness of methods of awarding grades in the absence of exams, in the light of the approach set out in their timely and widely praised new book on fairness of assessment, written before the pandemic (see details on page 100).

In the second article, Tom Benton shows that the grade inflation in England resulting from the decision to abandon “the algorithm” is explicable in terms of giving the benefit of the doubt in circumstances where there is more doubt than usual.

As is often the case, more media attention was given to GCSEs and A Levels than to Vocational and Technical Qualifications (VTQs), but solutions for grading VTQ students were needed too—and a single approach was not possible because of the variety of assessment models. In our third article, Sarah Matthey gives a brief guide to what happened with VTQs in summer 2020.

Our fourth article, by Melissa Mouthaan and colleagues, compares and contrasts policies on curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in the four home nations in the first six months of the pandemic. This is followed by Gill Elliott's overview of how the pandemic will have affected learners in England in all the different school age groups.

The word “unprecedented” has understandably been used many times since the start of the pandemic, but of course exams have been disrupted before. In our final article, Gillian Cooke and Gill Elliott draw on documents from the Cambridge Assessment Archives to see if the response to past disruptions can provide some perspective for our current situation.

I hope you find the contents interesting, and our new format easier to access and navigate. Do send any feedback to researchdivision@cambridgeassessment.org.uk

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