

If my grades had been predicted, I wouldn't have gone to University

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Last week marked five years since I graduated from University. A time in my life that I will never forget, where not only did I learn so much from my course, and was inspired by my lecturers and peers, but also the place that gave me the opportunity to learn so much about myself and who I wanted to be.

With GCSE and A-level exams cancelled this summer due to the Covid-19 pandemic, teenagers in England will receive “calculated grades” based on predictions from teachers moderated by the exam boards for national consistency. However, MPs have warned that young people could miss out on the grades they deserve this summer because the system to replace exams risks “inaccuracy” and “bias” against disadvantaged groups (1). If that had happened when I was 17, approaching the final few months of Sixth Form, I’d have known there and then that I wasn’t going to get into any of my preferred universities.

Throughout school, I was quite good at most subjects. I excelled in the ones I was most passionate about of course, the likes of English and Sociology. Not so good at Maths, but the least said about that, the better. But as much as I worked hard during school hours and was up until all hours of the night doing my homework, I consistently found myself low down in the estimations of my teachers. It’s fair to say before my parents divorced, I lived a very middle class life; I had a ‘normal’ childhood and lived in a nice area. When we moved into a terraced house by a main road and didn’t appear to have huge amounts of money, we were suddenly seen as a totally different class as what we’d been just a few short months before.

My sister, four years older than me, wouldn’t argue with me if I was to say that she got involved with somewhat of a complex crowd in school. Her grades would tend to be around the D mark, and back then, the high school we both attended offered certain teenagers the chance to do two days a week working in an industry, and three days a week in school doing just core subjects. My sister accepted.

On the surface, it sounds like a good idea and for a teenager, it would, of course, sound great because they didn’t have to go to school five days a week. But this essentially stripped these teens away from the variety of subjects that school offers, and in lots of ways, limits what they can then go and do with their future, if they choose not to go ahead and work full-time in the ‘industry’ they selected at just 13 years old. Being away from school two days a week actually distracted the students more than anything, and they were left with just a few GCSE’s, and only a slight chance of being offered a job of where they’d worked for two years.

I was totally opposite. I always had the same group of friends, who were, on the surface, smarter than me, because they were in higher sets with good predicted grades. I pushed myself in every subject imaginable, and often did really quite well. However, my ‘predicted grades’ would hold me back. I would get a B in a mock test, but get a C or D predicted grade. I would do well in the classroom, but would be placed in a form group specifically created for students who ‘weren’t performing’. I’d do well at Science, but wouldn’t be allowed to study Biology, Physics and Chemistry separately, and instead was put in a ‘Applied Science’ class. I was plonked into Film Studies – because only the top two English sets were able to study English Literature, even though I was an A student in that subject. The school even suggested that I do the same work/school schedule that my sister did – but I politely declined. That was the story of my life for many years.

Recent research from Equality Act Review found that students who studied at alleged Trojan Horse Affair schools in inner-city Birmingham, demonstrated that there were heightened levels of anxiety and depression amongst the student body, due to potential discrimination they may be subjected to as a result of their schooling backgrounds (2). It seems to me that, even though I tried to fight it, my education always wanted to stop me from doing well. It felt like they saw my last name, and just presumed that I would get the same grades as my sibling. Or, they assumed because I was working class, I just couldn't compete with the upper sets. It was something that held me back, and often left me frustrated and confused. I knew within myself that I could do it. But my predicted grades said I couldn't.

This happened right through GCSE's and A-Levels. All my GCSE predicted grades were C's and D's, and I got mostly B's. My A-Level predicted grades were C's, and I got A's and B's. I'm not trying to brag here, but I know I'm not the only one that this will have happened to time and time again. Of course, I don't know all the ins and outs of predicted grades, and how they are calculated or determined. But my first-hand experience of them, is that they're not always right. It worries me that, if I'd have been in the 'Class of COVID-19' this year, and my future university would have looked at my predicted grades, I'd have never got onto my course.

I remember putting my final five choices of Universities into UCAS, and patiently waiting to find out who would take me on. But really, it all came down to how many UCAS points I would get. The very thought of UCAS points would keep me up all night, constantly looking into ways of getting more points, just in case I didn't do well in one of my subjects. I even took on an 'extra' Sociology project, just in case, which would give me another 40 odd points if I did well.

The day I found out my grades (A*, A, B, B), and that I'd got into University, I couldn't believe how much I'd worried, and was so proud of myself for smashing through the ceiling that seemed to constantly be above me throughout school. Grades aren't everything, but when you're desperate to go to University and have a whole new experience, it really can seem like the end of the world if something doesn't work out.

But the fact of the matter, is that my University wouldn't have accepted me with my predicted grades of all C's. They simply wouldn't have counted up to enough UCAS points for my selected course, and I would have been forced to go into clearing and try and find an alternative, or to not have gone to University all together. University isn't the be all and end all, and there are, of course, other options that young people can take. For me, that was the only option I really wanted at the time.

Which is why I completely emphasise with those students, who will now be worrying that their being judged on predicted grades, when *anything* could happen in an exam. There were times I saw friends get so worried that they didn't do too well in a mock exam, that they would go on to get A's. The vast majority of students won't revise for months of end for a mock. But they most likely will put the effort in with the real thing. What now for the students who will never get chance to do the 'real thing'?

The coronavirus crisis has managed to completely change all of our lives this year. Let us hope this year's A-Level students are not held back forever because of their predicted grades and what they *may* have achieved. University, for me, was the very first time in my life that I felt like I was more than just my predicted grades, and more than just my social class. It was a total fresh slate, allowed me to come out of my shell, and gave me the confidence to believe in my abilities. It is vital

that we do not miss out on a whole new year of talent due to those who could be held back because of what is predicted on behalf of them.

- (1) <https://inews.co.uk/news/education/gcse-a-levels-2020-mps-concerns-predicted-grades-527202>
- (2) https://bf653768-3166-4596-9be6-a084f0452700.filesusr.com/uqd/d09f8e_bdd35d239f0043efa726fedc954bb92c.pdf