

Functional Skills exams: the final pandemic fiasco

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The depths of the detriment caused by the pandemic to education have yet yet to be assessed. All educators know well the immediate effects of COVID: lockdowns, digital poverty, learners' lack of IT skills, family economic disadvantages, physical health issues, mental health issues, and new caring responsibilities that plagued learners.

Teacher Assessed Grades certainly have their downside: the moral impetus to be 'fair', the constant self-checking for 'unconscious bias', and the repeated analysis of evidence. The decision made by each teacher with so much investment for each learner is then fed into a college 'machine' to produce a result. Once results are published, it is then followed by the 'appeals process' that certainly provided a torturous period for FE managers. However, despite the crushing workload, this system would have been so much fairer to Functional Skills exams too.

For some Functional Skills learners, whose employment depends on securing a pass, the need to take an exam is understandable, a decision outlined by Ofqual, albeit dependent on COVID-secure exam conditions. However, to take this model of assessment and extrapolate it to fit with all Functional Skills learners is completely unfair.

For Ofqual to announce in February 2021 that, because of 'the disruption' to learning, A-levels and GCSEs would be awarded based on predicted grades not only seems to deny the existence of Functional Skills as a qualification, but also renders our learners invisible. Moreover, these learners have not simply been 'overlooked', as Jennifer Wilkinson argues in her pertinent and persuasive article 'Functional Skills: Why doesn't the Government care?' but have been discriminated against.

Why would the decision be made to make these vulnerable learners sit exams? My Level 1 English,

16-19-year-old groups consist of learners from inclusion units, learners who have 'opted out' of learning by other methods, those who struggled because of (identified or, staggeringly, unidentified) learning needs, those with already existing mental health and behavioural issues - all my Level 1 learners fall into one or more of these categories.

As Functional Skills tutors, we accept that our course may not inspire learners to continue to A-level English. To pass it is just a tick box that will help them pursue their real ambitions. However, tutors try to inject a sense of some enjoyment into either maths or English. These subjects were notoriously 'disliked' by these learners at school. Functional Skills courses enable them to achieve success - academic success - something many have not achieved in a while. As the results slowly emerge, this success story may not be guaranteed for this year. Learners who have already felt failed by the secondary education system and who subsequently embraced FE colleges and their different function, will discover that the taste of failure is still the same, wherever they go.

As a society, we desperately need to educate these learners, even more so post-pandemic, but we have failed them.

These learners were not 'overlooked', they were discriminated against. It would be too outrageous to suggest that 'society' needs an educational underclass and that this was a deliberate ploy, but, deliberate or not, the consequences will be the same: a cohort of learners who feel like failures again, who have completely lost faith in a system that offered them another, fairer, chance. This is all because of a misguided decision that Functional Skills exams are not worthy of being compared to GCSE or A-levels and even though they experienced the same 'disruption' in progress, by default, the learners too are not of the same calibre.