

Exam Results, Fairness, & Trust: A response to Karen Lancaster and Mary Richardson

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This is the third post in a PESGB Blog series focussed on educational assessment and the UK Government's handling of England's national examinations system in the wake of Covid-19. The first post, by [Karen Lancaster](#), is available [here](#); the second, by [Mary Richardson](#), is [here](#).

If, [as Karen Lancaster proposes](#), fairness is viewed primarily through the restricted lens of relative year-on-year grade allocations and associated university placement outcomes for students, it is logical to conclude that the grade prediction approach taken in 2020 was unfair. Likewise, if [the broader view that Mary Richardson takes](#), where a hyper-concentrated examination oriented and competitive/punitive system produces behaviours in schools (such as grade over-prediction in state schools) that, on the one hand, exaggerate perceived inequity (due to those very over-predictions) and, on the other hand, seem to reproduce it (in terms of outcomes), then a more appropriate response to inequity would be the transformation of that system.

These arguments are not incompatible. It is possible to believe that the grade prediction approach of 2020 was *relatively* unfair in a limited way, while also believing the system itself is fundamentally flawed and in need of an overhaul, also in the name of fairness. The main point of disagreement between Richardson and Lancaster is whether or not over-prediction of grades (in state schools in ‘normal’ years) ‘matters.’ However, it is possible that if Lancaster had approached the issue from the broader perspective that Richardson takes, rather than the limited context of unfairness she addresses, this might not even be in dispute.

What seems implied in both Lancaster and Richardson’s arguments is the sense that fairness *would* be possible within the current schooling system, if different approaches were taken, either at the level of algorithmic application in 2020, or through a major revision of the national assessment system. Again, these are logical conclusions, drawn from evaluating the issues within specific contexts. Taking an even broader view than Richardson, it might also be possible to ask what exactly educational ‘equity’ means for children as they become adults.

Determining which university young people attend, or whether or not they attend at all, is the single major function of A level results. Even if we ignore the [direct and dramatic correlation between family wealth and school examination outcomes](#) as well as on the [graduate outcomes of those who studied the same subjects at the same universities](#), is equity in the national

assessment system really able to be a determining factor in broader social equity? Or does 'assessment equity' simply help to justify the continued reproduction of broader social inequity from generation to generation?

The more 'reliable' our examination results, the more they serve to uphold the inequity they reproduce in terms of a 'neutral' conception of 'fairness.' The scare quotes around these terms are to indicate how they are often used more as legitimating rhetorical tools, detached from deeper realities, than as useful motivators of dispensing fairness in a broader social and experiential sense. In this case, a critical focus on the assessment system *on its own terms* could be perceived as something of a red herring, when considering the function of the education system in a broader social system that perpetuates social inequity and unfairness.

When we know that wealth inequity has a substantial effect on educational attainment and graduate and non-graduate outcomes – in a [context where, on the one hand](#) the average family in the UK's poorest 10% have debts that exceed their assets and, on the other, almost all the gains in financial wealth since 2006-08 have come from changes in asset prices rather than personal savings – there is something profoundly disingenuous in promoting, as politicians often do, the education system as a means of producing social equity. This is, of course, not what Lancaster and Richardson are doing, and in terms of the specific contexts of relative equity *within schooling and*

examinations that they evaluate, their arguments are entirely valid and principled.

However, the focus on educational inequity that the grading process of 2020 brought with it might also provoke attention to the fundamental issues that befall a social system which defers the achievement of social equity to an education system that history and the present shows it cannot deliver, while, at the same time, further entrenching social inequity with other policies and inaction. Despite [meritocracy](#) long being a subject of critique, not least significantly for its basis in eugenics, it nonetheless continues to exert rhetorical force on educational thought and practice. By continuing to seek a fairer society by means of a meritocratic education system, with a ‘reliable’ assessment system at its core, we risk doubling down on a fundamentally flawed approach to social equity. At best, if we are going to examine education primarily through the lens of equity and fairness (rather than anything else it offers), then considering how radical non-educational policy measures might achieve social equity *first* seems a necessary prerequisite. At worst, making the education system ‘fairer’ can help to further legitimate an unfair society.

Might it not be possible to also see last year’s exam debacle, less as a problem to be solved, than as an opportunity to bring to the surface some of the more fundamental issues in the overreliance of political discourse and policy on education as the primary solution to social inequity?

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