**CIE conundrum: the sequel**

Dr Ayesha Razzaque

Monday, Aug 28, 2023

A few weeks ago, A-level students in Pakistan and the region received their grades for the May/June 2023 exam session. The results came as a shock to many students and parents. For many of them, their A-level grades came two and even three grades below expectations.

The reason is Cambridge International Examinations’ (CIE) policy to gradually retreat from the inflated grades it awarded during the years the pandemic disrupted examinations.

Covid-19 hit in early 2020 and with very little reaction time until the May-June exams, CIE first hurriedly put together a policy to award grades by asking teachers to collect evidence of student performance during the school year and submit their predicted grades for each student and then moderating those grades based on statistics. That last step turned out to be a disaster, and only a week later CIE had to reverse course and decided to simply award students the awards their teachers had submitted. As expected, grade inflation shot through the roof, and it rained A\* and A grades that year. In effect, in 2020, teachers had awarded students their A-level grades.

The following year, in 2021, CIE conducted exams in countries whose Covid policies allowed for it and resorted to teacher-predicted grades with better thought through moderation where they did not. Nevertheless, the result was one of the highest inflation in CIE-awarded grades ever witnessed. Covid vaccines started becoming available that same year.

Schools the world over reopened, but students were still reeling from the effects of learning losses caused by pandemic closures. Students’ learning had been disrupted for two school years by remote / online learning and by not having had an exam in supervised conditions. When the 2022 exam season rolled around, most countries had gone back to regular exams. While there may have been the odd under-informed commentator left here or there, it was amply clear that students had suffered from the sub-optimal online teaching and were suffering from learning losses and misaligned grade expectations.

CIE had to make the return to its original, pre-Covid level of grading/assessments standards to bring down the grade inflation of the previous two years - it had to be done, but gradually. And CIE decided to do it over two years. This year was the second of those two years, finally bringing its marking standards back to the 2019 pre-pandemic level.

CIE had publicly announced the return to 2019 marking standards well in advance to prepare student expectations. Nevertheless, we know from some of the media coverage that followed that when international and UK students received their A-level grades on August 10 and 17, respectively, the lower-than-expected results still came as a shock to many. Many fewer students were awarded grades between A\* and C grades – which are considered passable – and many fewer received top grades A\* and A.

Many graduating high school students hold conditional admission and scholarship offers. They need to achieve certain grades in the final result to convert those conditional offers into unconditional offers. If grades come in below expectation, a university is within its rights to rescind a provisional offer of admission or scholarship they made. This year was especially tough on students in this regard, and I can only sympathize with students who find themselves in this unfortunate situation. Students from less wealthy families who depend on scholarships, particularly to study at universities abroad, will be especially hard hit.

A rescinded offer at this late stage means the remaining opportunities for admission are limited, leaving three main options: one, reapply for admissions for next year with actual grades in hand; two, retake exams and try to improve grades; and, three, those very confident in their exam performance may apply to have their papers re-check (for a fee). In either case, students with rescinded offers have to delay going to university by a year or pick one of the few remaining admission offers still available to them for this year. For CIE A-level students across the world, these are the choices they are faced with this year.

Like I said, all of the above is true for all A-level students across the globe in 10,000 schools in 160 countries. But in addition to all of the above, A-level students in Pakistan had to contend with some additional circumstances this year – the riots on May 9 and the following day after the arrest of the PTI chairman which forced CIE to cancel exams scheduled for May 10, 11 and 12 for safety reasons. Fortunately, CIE has a long-standing pre-existing procedure to fairly extrapolate marks for a missed exam paper based on a student’s performance in papers of the same subject that they did take. This provision allows students who miss a paper for legitimate, acceptable reasons to graduate instead of waiting for a year to retake it next year.

Students and parents put forward two demands: one, replace grades with school-assessed grades the way it was done at the height of the pandemic in 2020. This demand ignores the fact that CIE deflated grades globally. Two, an alternative proposal asks that marks thresholds (at which one grade ends and another begins) be lowered for Pakistani students, citing the country’s exceptional circumstances, political uncertainty, Internet suspensions, and the billions CIE collects from Pakistan in the form of exam fees. Students were also demanding the CIE to put aside its long-existing provision for extrapolating marks for missed exam papers.

The world does not owe us anything. If we have violent outbursts in the streets at the drop of a hat without regard to the damage they cause to education in general and students taking high-stakes exams, there is only so much CIE or anyone else can do about it. Furthermore, paying exam fees only entitles one to attempt to earn good grades, not buy grades of one’s liking. We may think of ourselves as exceptional, but many ordinary people in the rest of the world have a hard time telling us apart from Afghanistan.

Parents will always strongly advocate for their children, but I fail to see how asking to put students across the world at a disadvantage can be termed a fair demand just because we as a country cannot get our own act together.

While both communities are quite diverse, collectively students pursuing A-level in private schools and their parents enjoy greater privilege than the community of HSSC students of mostly public schools and their parents. That privilege was on full display in the way the issue of deflated A-level grades was reported on online social and local print and electronic media. Even the MoFEPT got involved in taking up the cause of A-level students with CIE.

At one point even the PM Office got involved and called a meeting on the issue. Originally, that meeting was to be attended by the prime minister himself until he was advised of the optics of such preferential attention from his office for what is considered a privileged segment of society and the stark contrast with the routine indifference with which issues of public-school education are met. After all, it is easy to issue demands to a foreign exam board to fix something, but it is notoriously difficult to take any action in the public-school sector that the government is responsible for itself.

Note that it was the PM who stepped in while we have yet to hear a peep out of the federal minister of education. This is indicative of how seriously the minister takes the job and where the people who appointed him have education on their list of national priorities. I am glad these students were able to make high offices in the government pay attention to them; I just wish we could draw the same kind of attention to issues of public schools as well.

The result of the MoFEPT’s involvement and advocacy to CIE on students’ behalf has brought about two compromise options: one, students, with support from their schools, can apply to have their exams rechecked, with 80 per cent of the cost to be borne by schools (which schools are fighting) and 20 per cent by students, which will be fully refunded if there is a change to their grade. And, two, students can retake papers that were canceled as a result of street riots in the October/November session, free of cost.

The only perfect solution to make up for canceled exam papers that comes to my mind involves a time machine. CIE’s return to 2019 marking standards affected all students equally, but the cancellation of exam papers will now cost some students a year of their lives. If anything is to blame for this, it is the lack of self-control and disregard for the line that divides the right to protest and voicing one’s opinion on the one side and flat-out rioting with no regard for anyone else’s life on the other. Having a rally or political protest without shutting down an entire city is a skill this nation has yet to master. You can either have a revolution or you can get an education, but you cannot have both at the same time.

The writer (she/her) has a PhD in Education.