

As A-level students across England, Wales and Northern Ireland [open their results](#) today it is fascinating to see how the public broadcasting of success is reaching ever wider audiences through [news streaming](#) and social media, where constant posting and comments will dominate news for the next few days.

Images of young people literally jumping for joy dominate the headlines and the exam results data is closely interrogated. Data analysis usually rests on pass rates and concern about whether these have risen or fallen; each year there are questions that challenge our trust in the so-called gold standard examination, because [A-levels](#) have the potential to open doors for (some) young people.

A record number of 18-year-olds (18,900 students) from the most disadvantaged backgrounds in England have been accepted into university this year; in Northern Ireland and Wales, there are increases too.

But another story lurks behind all of these discussions – not all students will necessarily meet their academic potential at school. This is not because they are lazy or unintelligent; the truth is more complex and it boils down to social class. While some commentators might scoff about accommodations being made for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, the reality is that without engineered opportunity those young people will not have the chance to see if they can do more. Equality of opportunity is not enough, what we need is equity.

Theodore Agnew, the Conservative minister for schools in the House of Lords, told a private schools' conference in May: "Why are we letting kids go to university with three Es at A-level? [It's a lunacy](#)". At face value, the decision to make early and unconditional offers to those with such profiles might appear perverse, but these young people aren't entering the system on an equal footing compared with the majority of their peers. Not all disadvantaged young people have such low results, but some research suggests that they are more likely to be predicted to have lower grades and this lowers expectations.

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[Universities](#) in England have been forced to reposition themselves as income generators within a competitive education market and they engage in fierce annual competition for students. Students are so valuable that larger numbers of unconditional offers are made earlier each year and students are cajoled into taking up a firm offer (to the exclusion of all others). It is disadvantaged students who are more likely to receive unconditional offers and, with an offer in the bag, this appears to hamper their motivation to aim for higher grades.

Why is this a problem? Because it is another factor in suppressing potential; that young person might have achieved more highly than expected, and had different opportunities open to them, or more options in terms of course or institution.

While an increase in the number of disadvantaged students being offered university places is to be welcomed, we should not assume the job of widening participation is complete. Much of the rhetoric about examination results is linked to future economic prosperity: good A-level results will provide a better lever into sustainable employment. However, getting to university is just the start for disadvantaged young people and once in, they face more challenges.

Disadvantaged students are more likely to [drop out](#) of their courses, due to the financial burden of studying and social and/or cultural barriers. I saw this regularly during 10 years teaching in a new university in London. The majority of my undergraduate students were from disadvantaged backgrounds. They were attempting to undertake a degree with little support from their families, limited funds, and often with poor accommodation or while struggling to bring up a young family alone. Just one of these variables is problematic, but combine two or more and it is unsurprising that even the brightest disadvantaged young people will lose the motivation and strength necessary to complete study at degree level.

If the government is truly committed to continuing the policy of widening participation then it has to also ensure that disadvantaged young people are given realistic financial and practical support during their studies.

After graduation, further challenges await many students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and here further forms of disadvantage emerge. We know that graduates who had been eligible for free school meals (FSM) are more likely to be unemployed following graduation, but they are also likely to be in employment that pays less compared with their well-off peers and this pay gap does not decrease. Data from the State of the Nation study for 2018-19 [reveals](#): “Five years after graduation, students who had been eligible for FSM were paid on average 11.5% less than their peers.”

But that is not all. Today it was heartening to see how well young women are achieving across the board, and in particular, their [increased success](#) in science subjects which is due in no small part to national campaigns such as [Wise](#). More women are taking up careers in Stem (science, technology, engineering and maths) subjects, but they still face wider discrimination than their male counterparts once in employment and are likely, over their lifetimes, to earn less.

A-levels are a hurdle – they are a test taken at a specific point in time. They don't define who you are, or even exactly what you are capable of, either now or in the future. However, they are integral to how our young people make decisions at a critical point in their lives and their outcome has a big impact on their life chances. We need to talk about equity, and we need to keep talking about equity.