



# COVID-19

## UK Political Analysis

By Tim Hames, Senior Adviser | 28 August 2020



**Sense of Proportion. The A-levels and the school reopening sagas are embarrassing. The infection rate, testing and the vaccine truly matter.**

After months on end during which the Department for Health and Social Care had been at the centre of the coronavirus storm, ministers and officials there have had a period of relative relief of late from the intense spotlight. Their place in the public domain has now been taken by those responsible for education at a UK-level and in the devolved nations.

This started with the Scottish Government suffering severe adverse comment as to how it had handled the examinations undertaken this year north of the border. This would be repeated in England as well as a rogue algorithm was blamed for a number of unfair and illogical A-level results being issued that were retracted within days in favour of the ones that were exclusively the consequence of teacher assessments. At warp speed, the GCSE outcomes were also revised in the same direction (leading to a sharp increase in the pass rate). This storm would lead to the Chief Executive of Ofqual walking the proverbial plank with the Permanent Secretary at the Department for Education to follow. While the dust was still settling, an argument resumed as to whether or not it was wise to attempt to reopen all schools across the UK and, if that was to be the stance, whether face masks within those buildings should be compulsory. In all this, ministers looked all at sea.

This has served as an unfortunate distraction for what have been some fundamental (and overwhelmingly positive) developments in terms of lifting the lockdown in the UK and navigating the challenge that resumed large-scale international travel would pose. It is this progress (if sustained) that will truly count as August makes way for September.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Most of the media coverage relating to the coronavirus crisis in the UK this month has focused on the difficulties that have been encountered with producing exam grades absent formal examinations and the circumstances under which pupils will return to schools across the whole of the country.
- While these have been awkward and politically embarrassing they are not fundamental to the control or and eventual eradication of COVID-19.
- They have served to disguise three developments on the public health front that are of real consequence to the control and eradication of COVID-19.
- The first of these is that the strategy of lifting the lockdown while keeping the reproduction number under control has produced results that are clearly at the better end of expectations compared with a month ago and where the UK has performed strikingly well by contemporary European standards.
- The second is that the quantity and quality of testing in the UK is now in a far superior position than was the case in the earlier stages of the crisis. This has a considerable beneficial impact on the effort to control the spread of the virus.
- The third is that nothing has emerged during August that has derailed the status of the prospective Oxford/AstraZenica vaccine as the front-runner in the race to find a vaccine that can be deployed at scale in the comparatively near future (or to be most precise, before the end of the current calendar year).
- Maintaining progress on these three fronts (or not) will determine whether September proves to be a pivotal month within the coronavirus crisis.

August is, as noted, most likely to be remembered for a series of mishaps and mistakes relating to education. Although these have been labelled as a (predictable) “fiasco” on a number of fronts, there is a strong case for a more balanced assessment. The closure of mainstream education since March meant that examination grades had to be awarded in a completely novel context. Reopening schools after the summer break across the UK

would always be a challenge as had been demonstrated by the essentially abandoned effort to return large numbers of pupils to primary and secondary schools before July. The debate about face masks and their relative virtues has also been a tortured one.

To take the examinations affair first, it is not obvious that there was ever a right answer.

As a matter of principle, most people would probably agree that exam grades should not be under the direct control of ministers and their senior officials at the Department for Education as this creates the opportunity for what are basically political and ideological instincts to enter what a desirable distribution of grades might be. Ofqual, therefore, should have been in the lead and should have regarded part of its central mission as maintaining the integrity of exam grades and ensuring a consistency from year to year.

Again as a matter of principle, most people, on reflection, would also probably accept that allowing grades to be awarded solely on the basis of teacher assessment is an exercise which involves some moral risks in that in a sense teachers are being asked to play Solomon between their own students and to resist the temptation to mark their own homework with an undue element of sympathy. There would be the danger (which has come to pass) that at A-level the class of 2020 would see a spike in A\* and A grades, which would create serious problems for universities in managing higher admissions, and in many ways be an unfair comparison for attainment in previous examination cohorts.

Finally, if a reasonable person were asked to participate in an exercise in which there was an attempt to simulate what A level grades would have been achieved if there had been a conventional examination season this year, then it is far from outrageous to include a variable for the past performance of schools overall and buried within that the previous accuracy of a school's predicted grades for a candidate and their actual final exam result.

Parents do not spend a fortune in some cases on the education of their children or make enormous efforts to reside in certain catchment areas in other instances because they believe the role of the school in exam outcomes to be minimal or incremental. It is not the task of a computer programme to offset or to eliminate this fact of national life.

Politically, however, this is explosive territory and that is reinforced by the fact that in most years August is a quiet month for news and exam results always fill that void. A cool rational assessment has to be that there were almost certainly more “misgrades” in the second version of the A level results and the hastily revised GCSE results than there were in the first set of A level results influenced by the computer calculation. The difference is that the first set of misgrades were small in number but almost entirely skewed towards producing lower results than teachers had anticipated which understandably prompted immense anger and distress from the individuals concerned, whereas the second scores for A levels and the GCSEs involved a larger number of “winners” who would hardly be inclined to complain that it was appalling that they acquired an A\* in Maths when they would not have been remotely surprised or especially disappointed with a B instead.

The melodrama around the reopening of schools also needs a dispassionate analysis. It is manifestly an absolute priority that conventional education should be resumed instantly. The longer that it does not, the worse for the children concerned and it is those from the most deprived backgrounds will suffer the most from their absence from a classroom. All of the medical evidence about COVID-19 is that children are very unlikely to catch it and if they do it is relatively rare that they pass it to other children or to teachers or to other family members in their own household. This is a highly unusual feature of this virus but the evidence for it is overwhelming. Children wearing face masks in school can do little or no harm but it is hardly a necessity. The biggest risk in terms of transmission is more likely to be between teachers in the staff room and in that context face masks could be of some value. This sort of analysis does not, however, fit with a simplistic “yes” or “no” on face masks, so ministers have been driven into a stance that is excessively cautious.

In any case, this is a sideshow besides the really important developments relating to the control and eventual elimination of the virus in the UK which will be set out here.

## **Lifting the lockdown in the UK has so far been relatively successful.**

Any liberalisation of lockdown rules anywhere is bound to invite the risk of raising the reproduction number. More freedom means more movement and more movement means more contact points and that in turn increases the possibility of transmission. The

delicate and difficult balancing act, entering a period where both social distancing and the restrictions on whom one can meet are destined to be of diminishing power, is (a) how to open the economy and society while maintaining the overall reproduction number at or ideally below one, (b) be in a position to act swiftly when localised surges of virus cases are found and (c) to ensure that those who would be most likely to be hit the hardest by the virus should it be acquired are the least likely to catch it in practise.

All the above is further complicated by the unknown element as to the extent that travel internationally during the traditional summer holiday season both in terms of the visitors to the UK and what UK citizens might acquire via infection abroad compounds the risks.

A month ago, ministers were anticipating an anxious August. They had, after all, been forced at the last minute on Friday July 31st to defer a number of additional easing measures planned to come into force the very next day and there had been some high-profile local restrictions re-imposed in Leicester, North West England and Aberdeen. There were reasons to fear if not a full “second wave” then some severe challenges.

This has largely not been the case. This is best illustrated by a series of comparisons involving the UK and eleven other European nations. These are instructive.

The first table sets out the cumulative 14-day infection rate per hundred thousand of the population as it stood on the last Tuesday in July, the 28th. The data is collected and published daily courtesy of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control.

**Table 1: Cumulative 14-day infection rate per 100,00 people on July 28 2020.**

1. Spain	47.2
2. Portugal	33.9
3. Belgium	29.1
4. France	16.0
5. UK	15.0
6. Poland	13.7
7. The Netherlands	11.9
8. Germany	8.8

9. Ireland	5.2
10. Italy	5.1
11. Turkey	5.0
12. Greece	3.7

The consequence of lifting the lockdown and allowing international travel have forced these numbers up everywhere (with a single exception in Portugal which sealed its border with Spain as part of a series of containment measures). This is, though, the league table as it stood four weeks later on the late Tuesday in August, the 25th.

**Table 2. Cumulative 14-day infection rate per 100,000 people on August 25th.**

1. Spain	175.7
2. France	62.8
3. Belgium	52.9
4. The Netherlands	45.6
5. Greece	28.6
6. Portugal	28.2
7. Ireland	27.5
8. Poland	26.1
9. Turkey	23.5
10. UK	22.5
11. Germany	20.3
12. Italy	15.7

So, in simple terms the UK has moved down the league table from 5th to 10th and is clearly one of the safest countries in Europe in terms of the risk of infection. The above, however, understates the extent to which policy appears to have worked in the UK. The next two tables carve these numbers up in a manner which sheds extra light on them.

**Table 3. Numerical increase in 14-day cumulative infection rates, July to August 2020**

1. Spain	128.5
2. France	46.8

3. The Netherlands	33.7
4. Greece	24.9
5. Belgium	23.8
6. Ireland	22.5
7. Turkey	17.5
8. Poland	12.4
9. Germany	11.5
10. Italy	10.6
11. UK	7.5
12. Portugal	- 5.7

A look at the percentage increase in infection rates is also a revealing endeavour.

**Table 4. Percentage increase in cumulative infection rates, July to August 2020**

1. Greece	673%
2. Ireland	429%
3. Turkey	341%
4. France	292%
5. The Netherlands	283%
6. Spain	272%
7. Italy	208%
8. Germany	131%
9. Poland	91%
10. Belgium	82%
11. UK	50%
12. Portugal	- 17%

The past month has, on the basis of hard comparative numbers, been an outright success in terms of minimising an inevitable rise in the reproduction number while also seeking to reopen the economy and society and to allow international leisure travel. It is also plain why the decisions were taken when they were taken to impose quarantine rules on UK residents returning from the likes of Spain, France, Belgium and the Netherlands and why Portugal moved to the approved list once its infection rate started to move down.

Arguably, ministers could have been tougher on Greece and Turkey with some validity (their overall rates are not high but have increased sharply in the past month). Politics and practicality meant imposing quarantine across the Irish border would not happen.

In many ways – assuming that it is maintained – this is a stunning outcome. There were a number of entirely sensible reasons to fear that the UK would suffer a second spike of substance. The demography of the country – densely populated, extremely urban and home to a mega-city in the form of London – makes it very vulnerable to the virus. It is overwhelmingly a service economy which, if allowed to resume business, is more likely to involve more contact points that would be the case for a different sort of economy. Even in 2020, the so-called year of the staycation, a disproportionate number of UK residents will have travelled abroad for their holidays, which opens up added risks.

Objectively, therefore, although the reproduction rate is bouncing around one and will be higher than that in certain places, the UK enters September in a better place than it was entitled to think that it would be a month ago. Any extra risk that reopening the schools might involve (which is low) will almost certainly be cancelled out by the fact that international travel overseas (especially to higher-risk countries) will soon start to fall. Unless there is a late surge due to certain British citizens returning home from, say, Greece (such as captains of Manchester United FC), then there is a relative breather from the threat of a spectacular second spike until much closer to the winter flu season.

## **The quantity and quality of testing in the UK is now much higher.**

A further factor which makes the outcome in the UK more impressive still in that a comparatively small increase in the infection rate has been seen despite much more testing and a deliberate attempt to target testing at sites of local flare-ups. It would be fair to assume that such a strategy would inflate the overall infection rate recorded.

Testing was one of two massive matters (the other was the supply of personal protective equipment) that bedeviled ministers in the first few months of the pandemic. It is in a far better place now. The quantity of tests being conducted per day, which only reached



2,000 at the end of March, is considerably superior. Indeed the challenge now is that the supply of testing is much larger than the demand for it on a day-to-day basis because not enough people are detecting virus symptoms which mean that they should be tested.

The Department for Health and Social Care today finds itself in the somewhat surreal situation that it is spending millions of pounds on an advertising campaign to try to drive more traffic to its enhanced testing apparatus. In the second week of August, for example, there were 1.2 million tests conducted or an average of 170,000 per day. The capacity for testing in that same week was almost double that amount at 2.36 million or 337,000 tests per day. Back in July (on the 17th to be precise) the Prime Minister stated that the UK would have the ability to conduct 500,000 tests “by October”. There is now little doubt that the Government will meet that target but whether there will be the need to conduct anything like that number on a daily basis is very doubtful indeed.

The quality of those tests has also improved sharply and will do so further. This is despite some seasonal anomalies. The percentage of tests returned within 24 hours fell in mid-August but that was for the simple reason that a large number of those who analyse the tests went on holiday. It will recover very quickly by next week.

The technology is also making huge strides forwards. As one illustration of this, it was announced earlier this week that the Oxford University Department for Engineering Science and the Oxford Suzhou Centre for Advanced Research were being backed by Oxford University Innovation to launch a spin-out company, Oxsed Limited, to market Oxsed RaViD Direct. This is a virus test which costs less than £20 per unit, it is easy to administer, and can produce its results in 30-45 minutes. It is the nearest that ministers have come to a version of a home pregnancy test since the antibody tests which promised back in March that they might fulfil that role (and which were bought by the million) turned out to be incapable of producing results of sufficient accuracy outside laboratory conditions.

A testing capacity of this scale and with the prospect of considerably enhanced speed is a sizeable asset when it comes to lifting the lockdown further without a second spike. The UK Government is, again, much better positioned than it was several months ago and arguably only Germany is today in a stronger position in terms of testing capacity.

## Nothing has emerged to derail the prospects of the Oxford vaccine arriving first.

Then there is the classic Sherlock Holmes “dog that did not bark” element. At the outset of the summer holiday season, an article was published in *The Lancet* that set out the encouraging performance of the Oxford/AstraZenica vaccine in “Phase Two” trials. The essence of the study was that the vaccine appeared to be effective, was safe in terms of avoiding undesirable side-effects and could be administered relatively simple (a hugely important dimension, a vaccine that is a nightmare to deploy is of limited utility). The process has moved on to “Phase Three” trials, initially in the UK, but then to Brazil, South Africa and the United States where larger infection rates made for better circumstances.

All of the clues and hints that have escaped in the past six weeks have been encouraging. The trials in Brazil are largely completed and there is nothing to suggest any difficulties. AstraZenica have ramped up production even though the process is not yet finalised. In a major indicator for those of us poor souls who have become the vaccine equivalents of the old Kremlinologists, it was announced that Australia would be purchasing the Oxford vaccine and begin to manufacture it on its own soil. Ask yourself, with the United States under its present political management, which country in the world would a centre-right UK Government be most willing to share its private assessment of the prospects of the Oxford/AstraZenica vaccine than that of Australia under Prime Minister Scott Morrison?

An announcement, if it comes next week or in October, is a beginning and not the end. There are some logistical complexities involved in the Oxford vaccine (it needs to be kept refrigerated if moved around) and it may be that the optimal deployment of it involves not one but two jabs over a period of time (three to four weeks). Most of the challenges that can be expected relate not to it but those who are the intended beneficiaries of it. The Australian PM sparked a storm at home by musing as he made the acquisition of the vaccine public that it might be necessary to make it mandatory to be injected with it. His hasty retreat from that statement matches any U-turn by a UK Education Secretary.

A mass vaccination would involve far deeper ethical issues than whether or not children and/or teachers should wear face masks only in the corridors of a school or everywhere. Nonetheless, one strongly suspects that these are dilemmas that Boris Johnson would not be especially concerned about being the first Head of Government to mull over.

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