

## Transcript: Is that an option? Episode 2- A level-headed chat about A Levels

Betsan Powys

Results day. Delight for some disappointment for others, it's always the same. But in this year, the year of COVID-19, no exams, little certainty, and the differences in approach between neighbours in the UK pretty difficult to ignore- a particularly tough day. So let's have a level headed chat about a level of results and offer some no nonsense useful advice. If you are celebrating, well, congratulations. But if you have questions, if you feel you need to look again at what's an option for you, then keep listening. And we'll turn first to a couple of familiar voices. We've met Scott and his mom Catherine from Meifod already, Scott was hoping his results would be strong enough to get to Durham to study law. Catherine was simply hoping in this of all yours, that all would go well. So what news from the Gilmore family.

Scott Gilmore

I got 2 A\*'s and an A and I managed to get into Durham University to study law.

Betsan Powys

Fantastic. So your first option really that's what you really had your heart set on. Is that right?

Scott Gilmore

Yes, yes.

Betsan Powys

Brilliant. So come on Mum, Catherine, who is there ensuring the work was done, exams or not? How's today turning out for you?

Scotts' mum, Catherine Gilmore

Oh, well, in lots of ways it's a great relief. Because Scott kept saying, I'll be alright mum. We weren't quite so sure about it as he was. So yes, great relief and delight. And, you know, the end of such a long slog, really, you know, right through school, and then through all this period of not knowing what was going to happen. So yeah, we're delighted.

Betsan Powys

I'm sure. Scott, how did this flood of stories you know, coming from Scotland first and then from England and Northern Ireland and Wales, and changes to how things were going to be done. How did all of that affect you over the last few days?

Scott Gilmore

Well, when, we heard about these, the use of grades in Scotland and the use of mocks in England basically throwing the moderation system out of the window I became a bit worried. But I'm very grateful to the Welsh Government that they haven't sort of done that and they've maintained. So my results now I feel happy with because they're credible. And they mean something because they were moderated.

Betsan Powys

Yes, Catherine, what was your response? Because I certainly know that as a parent, I kept watching each change and all you can do is but wonder what effect it's going to have on your children, isn't it?

Catherine Gilmore

Yes, yes. Well, I was disappointed in the Scottish Government response. I think they rolled over very quickly. I think that in a normal examination process, an examiner that the chief examiner, would take in a number of scripts from each person marking the exams and make sure that everyone was marking to the same standards. So, the fact that teachers submitted their predicted grades for pupils and then that was moderated by the exam board, that made it as credible as it could have been. So for Scotland to just say you can have your teachers predicted results, I just think that's so disappointing. And then we heard about in England the mock results which are even less meaningful, really. And I was nervous that if Scott dropped a grade, if Wales, if we stuck to our guns in Wales, and then and Scott dropped a grade he wouldn't have he might not have got into Durham, which is where he's luckily got into a bit and the Scottish pupils who'd been given their predicted grades might have got in ahead of him. I was preparing myself for a fight.

Betsan Powys

Yeah, it's an inevitable that you just start running through these things really, isn't it and wondering, you know, how is it going to hit home and suddenly devolution very much feels as though it's hitting home?

Catherine Gilmore

Oh, yeah, definitely. I think devolution has been very dominant not just you know, throughout this COVID crisis and also especially with this, with the education results coming out in the last week and going forward to next week. But I think that the fact that ours are still going to be linked to something externally -so the AS results from last year. I mean, Scott's fortunate that he's got his results today and they're going to stick because you don't get A\*'s in AS levels. And the fact that we are linking our results to those, that'll be the minimum people get, I still think ours will be the most credible out of all the nations.

Betsan Powys

I imagine its a year when Wales will be delighted that we make our pupils go through AS tests at the end of at the end of year 12, this year of all years, because there's something to hold on to, as you say. Scott, so what happens next? So I'm hoping there'll be a bit of a celebration, but what are the next steps for you?

Scott Gilmore

Well, I've got to sort of keep an eye on what's going on with the university because I think they've been working through this whole problem of results and they've still got the headache of now appeals and all that and keeping places open. But now I think they're going to look more into how it's gonna work when we actually get there. So student bubbles or social distance bubbles, that kind of thing, and how we're going to be, who we're going to be living with and whether my accommodation might change or whether I stay at the same college. I don't know how it's really going to work. So, I've just got to keep an eye on all that.

Betsan Powys

But I suppose those are the sort of concerns you're glad to have on a day like today because you know that you're going to Durham and you know, that you did exceptionally well in your in your A levels. So congratulations, Scott. Congratulations, Catherine. And now Catherine, all you have to do is start worrying again, for next week, for next Thursday and GCSE results. So it's not over for you yet.

Catherine Gilmore

No, it's not. It's not. It's not. So, yes, Imogen just keeping her thoughts to herself. She's quite confident about it. But we don't know do we whether there'll be an intervention with the GCSE results, perhaps there will.

Betsan Powys

A week is a very, very long time, as we've discovered in politics at the moment, and especially education, politics, but we wish you well Scott, congratulations really, really pleased to hear that you've done so well and that you're on your way to Durham. And thank you, Catherine, and we look forward to speaking to you again soon.

{music plays}

Betsan Powys

Good news, then in Meifod and a good bit of analysis by both Scott and Catherine on the sorts of issues that have been causing concern. What if students from Scotland do better because of decisions taken by politicians there? What if the system in Wales throws up the same sorts of issues? What if you simply feel your results aren't fair? Well, whatever your take on this year's results here in Wales, you will want some sound advice as to what to do next. And so welcome to Matthew Cadman, an experienced Careers Adviser with Careers Wales and a add who knows that young people don't always listen to their parents.

Matthew Cadman, Careers Adviser

So I've worked for Careers Wales, in its various guises for about 19 years. So I've worked with age kind of 12 up to the end of sixth form, but also I work with adults. And so I've been working with those people for a long time.

Betsan Powys

So this is always a busy time of year for you then nothing new in that.

Matthew Cadman

No, not really. I mean, it's always a time where people are trying to ask questions about their future. It's kind of like a kind of moving day kind of thing, you know, where people are trying to make decisions, the best they possibly can.

Betsan Powys

But in the year of COVID-19, I suppose we all feel that there's more urgency this year. There just has to be doesn't there?

Matthew Cadman

Yeah, exactly. And I think the if we heard the phrase new normal one more time, we'll get a little bit upset. And the fact that we're all working very differently, we're all being taught very differently. And we're all trying to pass exams in a very different way has just thrown lots of cats amongst lots of pigeons. Personally, myself I've got three daughters, one in primary one in secondary and one in university. So they all are at different stages and it's been interesting for me and my wife to see how differently the education is dealt with in in the different sectors you know.

Betsan Powys

So you can wear a dad hat as well then.

Matthew Cadman

Yeah, I love wearing my dad hat.

Betsan Powys

(Laughs) And there's been so many Noises in the last few days you know, the A level results and how it's all going to be worked out has been top of the news, you know, for days on end. First, you get a decision in Scotland knock on into England knock on into Wales. It can't have been easy for this year's cohort, for A level and AS, having to face today and face results day with all of that going on.

Matthew Cadman

No, exactly. I think Scott, the young person who you've who you've interviewed before, he put it quite well. And I think the word he used was nothing has really changed with his decision making, because he's still hoping to do what he wanted to do in the first place. And then Aled from Careers Wales, he also talked about the surveys that we've been doing and the fact that it has been showing that exact thing: that people are using that word quite a lot. They are hoping to do exactly what they wanted to do, even though the goalposts have changed and things have changed dramatically. They're still sort of hoping for that outcome to happen.

Betsan Powys

So we heard from Scott. He was delighted. He's got the results he needs. He is on his way to Durham, and there'll be a bit of celebration, but there's stuff he needs to do just like anybody else who've got the results they needed. What are the sorts of things you need to be doing quite quickly and over the next few days?

Matthew Cadman

Scott has done very well, and he's received the grades that he wanted and he needed, and there's hopefully going to be lots of lots of other people just like him. And so he's going to be looking at contacting the universities, unless they've already sent him an offer via email. Obviously, we live in a in a very digital age now. So that kind of thing happens. People get their results in the middle of the night on results day. So people like Scott are already going to be in those kind of processes of sorting out the practicalities around the university. But it was interesting to hear him saying about the fact that the University have already organised a bubble for him to be working within. And it's going to be a bubble where he's not necessarily going to be in the same kind of socio economic or the same subject backgrounds as the people he's going to be in. And to kind of prepare yourself for having to use soft skills you might not have to use before. Because it is a difficult thing to go into a completely new situation, face to face. So the fact that you might not have been having to deal with different kinds of people is going to be a bit of a bit of a sharp, steep learning curve for him.

Betsan Powys

Yeah, that's true, because even though he's getting to do what he wanted, and he really wanted to go to Durham, you know, to do his law degree, and that's what he's really hoped for. He's fairly relaxed about any changes that might happen. He'll take them on but as you say, you know, it will be a different experience. So just to think ahead and think that through, sounds like no bad thing.

Matthew Cadman

Yeah, exactly. I remember my first my first day university, I sat in my halls room and left my door open and that was my socialisation. That's all I did. So I think they have for people this year, that's not really going to be an option. So they are going to have to look at their, their kind of confidence levels and the way they maybe communicate with people and maybe think of different ways of doing it you know.

Betsan Powys

So you spoke to Scott. Scott is delighted. He's got what he needed. He's on his way to Durham. That's really what he hoped to do. But not everybody, as we said, will be celebrating as Scott is, you know, might just have missed out on what they'd hoped for, even more importantly, what they needed. So, if you're in that situation, Matthew, what do you do?

Matthew Cadman

The appeals process is going to be free. Kirsty Williams announced yesterday and it's a very similar kind of process to last year really, and even before before COVID. If you don't get what you want, then I think in the last hour clearing has actually opened on UCAS.com and so that people will be able to look for alternative courses. But aside from that, if you've contacted the University of your choice, they'll be able to give you some information. And obviously the place where you picked up your results in the first instance will be able to help you too. The school would be able to help you out. In my area it's just colleges there's no school 6 forms. So it would be the college helplines that you'd need to go to, to actually get information. But obviously, Careers Wales is used to doing this. We've been doing this for quite a few decades, giving advice on the hoof with regard to the results days. So, you know, feel free to, to involve us in your decision making.

Betsan Powys

Because you know, as well as the messages don't just, you know, look down and think, 'what am I going to do next?'. Communicate, I suppose, is the message, isn't it?

Matthew Cadman

Yeah, exactly. And there's always options. And I think that's the important thing when you're when you've been in school for so long, and you're kind of on the conveyor belt of education, and you suddenly find yourself maybe faced with the fact you're not going to be on that conveyor belt anymore. There are options for you. It's not the end of the road. And it's definitely not the end of the world either. There are there are certain options outside of formal education and formal university education. Higher degree apprenticeships are available. Lower Level apprenticeships are available too -whether you can get the similar equivalent qualification to university degree, but through a work-based learning aspect. So those are available to young people as well. So it's definitely not the end of the world. And it's just about getting the right information from the right people.

Betsan Powys

And one point that's been made is that perhaps Brexit has played a role or certainly COVID-19 has played a role that there appear to be quite a few places in clearing even in places where you might not have expected to see them, and you wouldn't usually see them. So would the advice also be to have a good look, because even perhaps you could go with your first option or a second option, even though perhaps you haven't got the results that you'd hoped for. There might be space for you.

Matthew Cadman

Yeah, that's right. That's exactly right. I mean, before COVID-19 here, we were in uncertain waters anyway, with Brexit happening at the end of January. And then we've had COVID-19 as well. So there's no surprise that the businesses out there the educational establishment out there, are feeling very nervous about what was what was happening. But I, I would give them all the credit that they deserve. Universities definitely and certain organisations have stepped up and they've changed the way they do things, you know, but there's no there's no getting away from the fact that opportunities have changed and some opportunities that might have been available this time last year maybe aren't going to be there. But as you said Betsan, the way you need to address those issues of getting the information from the right people at the right time.

Betsan Powys

And where is it going to be tough? Because as you said, you know, there are some opportunities that aren't going to be there, they might have been somebody's option, and now they have to accept, you know, there's no point hiding the fact that actually, that's not going to be the best area to go into for the next few years. What are those sorts of areas that you should have a good long think if that's really what you want to do?

Matthew Cadman

I don't think even business, the business experts, forecasters, even they are struggling to sort of tie down where the best areas are to go.

Betsan Powys

And here we are Matthew insisting that you give us an answer. But give it a shot. (both laugh)

Matthew Cadman

All right. Well, I will. I'll give it a whirl. I mean, there's you know if you've listened to the to the news headlines over the last kind of six months, you know that the travel industry is taking a massive hit. But that's not to say that this time next year, the travel industry might be booming. And you'll also know that supermarkets have done have really stepped up to the mark amazingly well over the last six months. But that's not to say that in a year's time, we might have moved all of our shopping habits away from high street supermarkets or high street shops. So it might be that retail might be amazing. Next year, it might be not so amazing next year. Our website has got specific spotlights written regional spotlights as well, where the labour market might be heading in the in different regions of Wales. So that's a good place to start. But as we always say, in Careers Wales, if you research you'll never find yourself in the wrong place. If you've done your research and you follow that research and you speak to the people who know about this kind of stuff and Careers Wales is one of them, you'll always find yourself on a good wicket.

Betsan Powys

And what about those who they prefer work based learning and they've decided, Okay, that's where I'm headed. You know, it's an apprenticeship that will work for me. That's what I'll do best. That's what I enjoy most as well. A lot of that is practical, obviously goes with the territory. And if you're in the workplace, it means you need to be around other people. COVID-19 again, raises its head. We've heard a few times on the podcast that that's, you know, problematic for people not sure they're going to get the experience that they'd hoped for. Is that still a real difficulty? So those considering apprenticeships and so on, can they start finding out how different the courses might be? So they can decide whether it's still what they fancy doing?

Matthew Cadman

Yeah, they can, I mean, they can find out from us. We've got a dedicated apprenticeship part of our website, where there's loads of information on there, but we also carry lots of vacancies as well. Again, they are regional. There also lots of companies that don't advertise with us the they advertise on their own websites, normally look quite large companies and their apprenticeships range from needing some GCSE passes to needing A levels and also needing experience along with that as well. There are apprenticeships out there, there's not as many in certain areas, as we may expect this year because of what's happening in the world at the moment, just because employers maybe aren't looking to recruit as many as they would have this time last year, but also there might be opportunities that have happened because of the situation that we're actually in. So again, the research is just at the click of a mouse and the tip of your fingers on the keyboard. You just need to be looking and researching as much as you can.

Betsan Powys

Something else we've heard a bit about over the past few days is transferable skills. So when you're considering your options, and how do you go about considering, okay, I might not have got quite what I wanted in terms of my results, but these are my transferable skills that I need to big up now and tell people about. How do you sort of go about considering what those transferable skills are that you've got?

Matthew Cadman

Yeah, when I speak to young people of school age, about transferable skills, they do look at me like I'm speaking another language. And they do, even though they may have done a lot of skills and a lot about qualities in Welsh Baccalaureate skills challenge qualifications, they still struggle to kind of equate that into the working world. But school skills are just as transferable, as working skills or skills that you or I who have been in the workplace for a number of years would have put to another employment. There's a great thing on our website, it's called a job matching quiz. And in part of that programme, there is an actual skills assessment as well. And that will actually highlight the skills that you may have. And then you can align those skills with other job families or careers you might be interested in as well. And yeah transferable skills, even though young people have been in school for a number of years, skills that have been learned in schools are just as valuable as ones learned in the workplace.

Betsan Powys

So now I'm going to ask you Matthew to put on your dad hat as well as your 19 years experience hat and talk to us parents. You know, I've got children who are going through first year of GCSE and AS levels, so they're part of this story as peoples all over all over Wales are. So let me ask you to talk to us parents who have children. We know we can tell them all it's not the end of the world. And, you

know, well done, think about the next option and so on. No they are bound to concentrate on how they've done, they're bound to point to those grades and they're going to matter a lot to them. So what can we do to help?

Matthew Cadman

I'm in a strange position because I'm a careers advisor and I've been trying to give career advice to a couple of my daughters, the older ones, for quite a while.

Betsan Powys

Do they listen to you at all?

Matthew Cadman

Not on a daily basis anyway, maybe in a long term they might do but definitely they've got their own ideas. I mean as a parent, the, the fact that you have just got to roll with those kind of roll with those punches is something that we've always done as parents, you know, to be there to reassure your children is probably the best thing I could say. But also, we speak to a lot of parents as careers advisers. We can help the parents through these kind of bumps in the road as well if you know what I mean. And we can give advice to the options that are available. It's a worrying time for parents too, a worrying time about what their children are going to be faced with, in these very uncertain times that none of us have ever lived through before. So it is a case that parents need some advice. And our website again, offers that that too. It offers sections for 'What do I do? How do I advise my child on the best way to make decisions and the best way to go now?' you know.

Betsan Powys

So that website and phone number social media and so on, tell us where we should turn?

Matthew Cadman

Okay, so [careerswales.gov.wales](https://careerswales.gov.wales) -it's got a lot of information on there, but it's very well set out. So it's quite methodical so you don't have to search too hard for things. Our free phone helpline is 0800 0284844 and then we're on social media on Facebook and Twitter. So you can go on on there and find out lots of information. And also, you can be referred for direct careers advice as well. We offer video interviews, as well as email and phone interviews as well. So even though COVID has stopped us working face to face, we can still offer the same service through those channels. And on our website as well there's a live chat feature. So just like when you receive something that you didn't want in the post from certain online retailers, you get on there and you can have a chat to somebody. We do exactly the same on the [careerswales.gov.wales](https://careerswales.gov.wales) website as well.

Betsan Powys

Matthew Cadman, Careers adviser and dad. Thank you very much. Thank you to Scott and Catherine and to Matthew for joining me. That image of a lot of cats amongst a lot of pigeons is going to stay with me. And I hope some of Matthew's sound advice will stay with you. He's in the thick of it, and is no doubt preparing for another busy week as the story of GCSE results in the year of COVID-19 unfolds. Is that an option? Will be back too, to guide you through that second wave.