

Old Grovian Association AGM 2021: Headmaster's Report

The last academic year saw the best of times and the worst of times. Just as it had been worldwide, this was a year of great anxiety and uncertainty for the entire Grove community. However, it is clear that the resilience, positivity and creativity demonstrated by our pupils and staff, who adapted superbly to these unique circumstances, was quite outstanding. I have been enormously proud of them all and genuinely enjoyed watching them rise to the challenges and do things they did not believe they could, or would ever have to, do.

Trying to find the time and space to reflect on all that has happened, whilst so much is still happening, is not easy. However, I see this process of reflection as being hugely important. What we have to accept is that Covid-19 has changed things; and we should try to resist just going back to how it was, and instead work to embrace positive changes we can make. Our pupils and staff were much more adaptable to change than we might have expected before the pandemic.

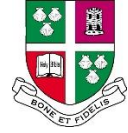
Perhaps the greatest success over an incredibly challenging period was that pupils and staff simply found ways to carry on, to keep learning, to keep smiling and to make the best of the situation. The outcome, quite remarkably, has been that the gap in attainment amongst our students was much narrower than expected – particularly when compared to their maintained sector counterparts – to the point where there is plenty of evidence of significant progress was made during this unsettled period.

Much has been written about Teacher Assessed Grades replacing Public Examinations. Given that the approach to determining grades in 2021 was different from any previous summer, the overall grade distribution in 2021 was always likely to look different from 2020 and years when exams took place. It is, therefore, difficult to draw comparisons with previous sets of results. However, it is very important to stress that while these grades were 'teacher assessed', they were very much the results of our students' own work in the final part of their courses.

All exam candidates sat a series of assessments in all courses, in exam-like conditions. Grades were generated from the marks attained and the evidence the students produced. These marks were then examined through internal and external quality assurance processes. The results were better than they would have been under the stress of the full exam series, perhaps, but the results attained were testament to the hard work, determination and maturity shown by our students, despite the disruption of the pandemic, and thanks to the careful preparation and dedication shown by their teachers. We quite rightly celebrated the many highlights from these results proudly – they are richly deserved.

On Saturday 03 July 2021, the School hosted a Year 13 Leavers' Celebration. A truly memorable event at which I reflected on the fact that our 2021 Leavers' greatest legacy to the Grove lies in what they have given each other and the rest of our community. Those small but important every-day moments of kindness, friendship, and generosity of spirit. The Grove is a special place because our young people make it that way. Accepting of the fact that they are all individuals, yet knowing they are part of something bigger.

There is no escaping the fact that the Covid-19 generation of Grovians has been hit hard. In the months that have passed, they have had to adapt, learn, re-organise, re-think and re-imagine how they work. Out of war time, I cannot think of a group of young people of whom more has been asked, or from whom more has been taken. However, our students are also a generation that is politically aware, socially responsible and engaged with the world.



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Like you all before them, the current crop of Grovians display energy, creativity and a sense of purpose and this has never been more evident than over the last 20 months. When they returned to school, full-time, after the second period of school closures in March, it was clear that, as a result of their enforced time away, they had a unique sense of the value, not just of education, but of community and social interaction. This could well turn the Grovians of today into a remarkable and powerful generation.

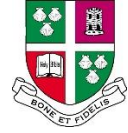
Thanks to the advent of Teacher Assessed Grades, the Summer Term was a very intense period, creating a huge additional workload for our teachers, who have also had to turn around End of Year assessments for other year groups whilst meeting tight Reporting deadlines. While setting, marking and moderating Year 11 (Fifth Form) and Year 13 (Upper Sixth) student work to assign and award Teacher Assessed Grades, my colleagues were, quite understandably, constantly questioning themselves over whether they had been following the guidance properly. They felt like this because they are dedicated, professional, conscientious and care deeply about our young people and the School's reputation. We are very fortunate indeed to have such a group of outstanding teachers who, first and foremost, believe teaching to be a caring vocation.

When stepping back and reflecting, for me, there are three key issues that come to mind when considering the School's recovery plan post-pandemic. Firstly, **Mindset**: as teachers we need to be prepared to evolve our approach to teaching. Those of us who regard ourselves as traditional in our approach need to ensure that this is not a barrier to innovative approaches, such as flipped learning and incorporating technology fully inside and outside the classroom.

Secondly, **Creativity**. There needs to be a shift away from our pupils being simply good at exams, good at answering exam questions, getting good grades and securing places in higher education. They need to be good problem finders and problem solvers. Teachers need to facilitate this problem finding which comes back to my first point about teacher mindset. Careful planning over how the curriculum is presented to pupils is required. Allowing students the time and space to go off on tangents makes for far more interesting lessons, albeit one must get through the syllabus within a given time frame. The use of Microsoft Teams to facilitate one-to-one and small collaborative groups within lessons is one example of how students can learn in the future, whilst also providing them with a taste of university style collaborative teaching.

Finally, we need to **Embrace But Not Replace!** Embrace the modern technology and ensure we develop our understanding of how it can assist with education by facilitating greater collaboration and team working. However, it should never replace the face-to-face contact which is so crucial to our basic human needs and those of our pupils. Let us never forget that teachers have the single largest impact on pupils. Teachers who love their subject and have excellent subject knowledge enjoy the company of youngsters and have remarkably high expectations of all their pupils. As I've already recorded, at Woodhouse Grove, we are remarkably lucky to have so many teachers who, first and foremost, believe teaching to be a caring vocation. We should not take them for granted.

At the end of the academic year, we said goodbye to Mr David Hole, who retired after 31 years of loyal and dedicated service. After 8 years leading the School's boarding community, Mr Vernon departed to take on a Senior Leadership position overseas.



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I cannot hide the fact that it was incredibly frustrating, and at times heart-breaking, to see our children miss out on various events and activities that, prior to the pandemic, we had taken for granted. As we all know, going to school is not just about academic achievement and narrow educational development. Children need other children and, in the vast majority of circumstances, teachers need to have face-to-face contact and interaction with their pupils. This being the case, the kind of disruption to normal school routines we saw during the periods of school closure and towards the end of the last academic year, when positive cases in school increased sharply, cannot be repeated.

Having navigated our way through to the end of an academic year like no other, in a backdrop of the easing of national restrictions and systems of control in schools, and embarked on a new academic year with optimism, it is perhaps the time to consider what the future of education will look like in a post-pandemic world. The reality is that, even now, we simply do not know what the next 18 to 24 months will hold. I am hearing calls from some that education needs to be radically different, whilst other commentators and eminent educationalists are promoting a more cautious approach of 'let us wait and see'.

While we attempt to make sense of what has happened and how to best recover from the past few months, The Old Grovian Association should be reassured and comforted by the fact that the current generation of Grovians have been remarkably well looked after and have remained at the forefront of everything the School has done in response to the pandemic.

In this context, I believe the words written by the Apostle Paul in Romans 12:12 to be hugely relevant, *"Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer"*. As are the words recorded in 1 Peter 5:7, *"Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you"*.

For my part, I am enormously grateful for the continued support and encouragement I have received from the Old Grovian network and am very relieved that, to some extent at least, the 'reset button' has been pressed since the School's return in September; and am delighted to report that life at The Grove has felt a lot more like normal!

Sadly, owing to the ongoing situation, we are still not able to run our normal programme of gatherings and reunion events. However, we very much hope to resume normal service in the New Year. Plans are afoot for a Golf Day in May and a Leavers' Thirty Year Reunion event in the summer.

Xaipete!

James Lockwood MA
Headmaster