Reflections

The power of humans and the algorithm

THERE has been so much noise in recent days about the Ofqual exam results algorithm. Public outcry, debate and student protest have now ensured the sensible use of teachers' assessments for GCSE and A-level results.

I felt so relieved when the Government and Ofqual at last relented to public pleas, unlike our Indian government, which is using a similar approach to bring in a new nationwide educational system known as the New Education Policy (NEP).

One of the mistakes spotted in the algorithm's calculations was associated with users' lack of understanding of maths during the data input.

As a student of advanced statistics, I used to scratch my head sometimes, especially when the output was totally rubbish and incompatible with the input data. Anyone who has worked with computers knows the expression 'rubbish in, rubbish out', and this will reflect how the algorithm operated. Common sense and conscious reflective thinking — two distinct characteristics of humans — are incompatible with an algorithm. This is the major difference between humans and algorithms.

Algorithms are mechanical and incredibly useful. They are involved in almost everything we use today including our computers, digital apps, GPS mapping and artificial intelligence. However, for best results there is a need for an efficient and good human being to direct its operation. Humans are not free from errors, bias, and prejudice mbut unlike algorithms civilised humans are more likely to employ a sense of competence, justice and sympathy on conscientious grounds. That is the reason that teachers' assessment is welcome news at this challenging time.

It is not about whether the algorithm or human ability is best. It is about how well we bring these two together for the good of all, not just selected few.

'You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbour' (Leviticus 19:15).

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