



# The performance of the SQA and Education Scotland

Response to the Scottish Parliament's Education and Skills Committee pre-budget scrutiny of the performance of the SQA and Education Scotland

Scottish Youth Parliament

November 2016

## Introduction

The Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP) represents all of Scotland's young people. Our Vision for Scotland is of a nation that listens to and values the participation of children and young people. Our goal is to do our utmost to make this vision a reality. We see this as vital to ensuring Scotland is the best place in the world to grow up.

Our democratically elected members listen to and recognise the issues that are most important to young people, ensuring that their voices are heard by decision-makers. We provide a platform for young people to discuss issues that are important to them, and support them to campaign for the changes they wish to see at community, local and national levels.

SYP's Values are:

Democracy - We are youth-led and accountable to young people aged 14-25.

Rights - We are passionate about ensuring that young people are aware of their rights and ensuring that local and national government deliver policies that ensure those rights are fulfilled.

Inclusion - We are committed to being truly inclusive and work tirelessly to ensure that we represent young people from every community and background.

Political impartiality - We constructively engage with, and challenge, decision-makers from all political parties to ensure the voices of young people are at the heart of policymaking in Scotland.

## Our approach

SYP welcomes the opportunity to comment on the performance of SQA and Education Scotland. Our response is informed by relevant SYP research, and the views of SYP's Education and Lifelong Learning Committee members. As a youth-led organisation whose mission is to ensure young people's voices are heard, we have focused mainly



on SQA's and Education Scotland's performance in relation to their systems and practices for engaging with young people.

We would like to take the opportunity to thank the SQA and Education Scotland for their essential and valuable contribution to ensuring Scotland is the best place for young people to grow up.

### **Engaging and involving young people**

SYP recognises there have been positive steps taken by Education Scotland and the SQA to engage with and involve young people, and warmly welcomes initiatives such as Education Scotland's Inclusion Ambassadors and the SQA's Equality and Inclusion Key Partners' Group.

However, we believe that more could be done to ensure that young people are engaged in the SQA's and Education Scotland's work at a strategic, meaningful level. Members of SYP's Education and Lifelong Learning Committee commented:

"I firmly believe much more work needs to be done to ensure young people's views are at the heart of key decisions and design of materials produced and made by the SQA and Education Scotland."

"I don't think young people are involved enough."

"Young people are not involved in SQA and Education Scotland services. Teachers are, board members made entirely of adults are, young people are not."

SYP has recently held very positive discussions with the SQA as to how SYP can engage with their work, and we welcome continued engagement between the organisations to ensure that young people's voices are heard. We are hopeful that, in the future, the two organisations will be able to develop a positive relationship that allows us to support SQA in ensuring that young people are at the heart of their decision-making.

We would welcome the opportunity to have similar discussions as these with Education Scotland, at a strategic level, which is something the Education and Skills Committee could explore in their evidence sessions, especially in the light of the Christie Commission's priority that "effective services must be designed with and for people and communities".<sup>1</sup> We have engaged with Education Scotland on other issues recently (eg; on our campaign on mental health, *Speak Your Mind*), and have found them to be constructive and eager to listen, and are hopeful discussions of this nature would be beneficial.

### **Meeting National Outcomes**

Members of SYP's Education and Lifelong Learning were asked for their views on how the SQA and Education Scotland are meeting the following National Outcome:

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<sup>1</sup> Scottish Government, 'Commission on the future delivery of public services' (pg. ix): <http://www.gov.scot/resource/doc/352649/0118638.pdf>



“Our young people are successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens”.<sup>2</sup> Committee members were largely positive about the performance of the SQA and Education Scotland in relation to meeting this Outcome. However, it was suggested that there needed to be a greater focus on meeting this Outcome in secondary schools specifically, and that “much more needs to be done [...] to ensure young people are not only prepared to do well in exams but are well rounded individuals with skills that will help them when they leave school to live happy, healthy and fulfilling lives”. Indeed, a key area in which SYP believes Education Scotland must take steps to improve its performance is in promoting the health and wellbeing of learners. Positive mental health in young people is essential to achieving the above National Outcome as well as the following:

“Our children have the best start in life and are ready to succeed.

We have improved the life chances for children, young people and families at risk.”<sup>3</sup>

However, despite health and wellbeing forming a core part of the Curriculum for Excellence, SYP research strongly suggests that there needs to be greater focus on high-quality mental health education in schools.

As part of our *Speak Your Mind* campaign on young people’s mental health, SYP conducted research with young people between February and April this year on their awareness and experience of mental health information, support, and services. A total of 1,483 young people took part in the research. In addition, SYP conducted a Mental Health Discussion Day in March this year with 51 young people, supported by the Scottish Government. The purpose of the event was to gather young people’s views and experiences of mental health information and services and feed them back to the Scottish Government’s Mental Health Unit in order for young people’s views to be considered in the development of the next Mental Health Strategy.

These consultations both indicate that young people believe schools play an essential role in prevention of mental health problems. When discussing how mental health problems in young people could be prevented at the Mental Health Discussion Day, there was almost exclusive emphasis on actions schools could take in prevention and early intervention, including high-quality mental health and wellbeing education. However, many young people frequently stated that while pupils are taught about physical health from a young age, the same cannot be said for mental health.

This was echoed in SYP’s research with 1,483 young people; when asked what mental health support provisions were in place in their school, college, university, or workplace, the majority of respondents’ comments focused on school.

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<sup>2</sup> Scottish Government, ‘National Outcomes’:  
<http://www.gov.scot/About/Performance/scotPerforms/outcome>

<sup>3</sup> Scottish Government, ‘National Outcomes’:  
<http://www.gov.scot/About/Performance/scotPerforms/outcome>



Comments indicated that many young people feel there is insufficient focus on mental health in schools. Young people told us:

“Teaching pupils about mental health is way down the list of priorities.”

“We’ve had no information through PSE about mental health.”

“It’s all about how to pass exams.”

“It’s felt to be more important for you to get qualifications than be healthy and happy at school.”

Only 11% of research respondents stated that they would feel comfortable talking to a teacher about their mental health, with 55% saying they would not be comfortable, and 25% saying they were unsure.

While we recognise that the Curriculum for Excellence is predicated on the ability of practitioners to “exercise their own professional judgment in determining exactly what and how they should organise learning to meet the needs of the learners in front of them”<sup>4</sup>, we believe that, as the body responsible for building a world-class curriculum, Education Scotland is essential to driving an increased focus on health and wellbeing in schools. We warmly welcome the introduction of evaluating the quality indicator “Ensuring Wellbeing, Equality and Inclusion” during school inspections as of August 2016, and believe this is a positive step to improving the focus of mental health and wellbeing in schools. A potential complementary course of action could be the development of a Mental Health Standard to increase the focus of mental health in the Curriculum for Excellence, as recommended in SYP’s research report, *Our generation’s epidemics*<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Education Scotland, ‘Strategic objective 1: building a world-class curriculum’:

[http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/SO1strategy051214\\_tcm4-843942.pdf](http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/SO1strategy051214_tcm4-843942.pdf) (pg. 4)

<sup>5</sup> Scottish Youth Parliament, ‘Our generation’s epidemic: young people’s awareness and experience of mental health information, support, and services’ (2016):

[https://d3n8a8pro7vnm.cloudfront.net/scottishyouthparliament/pages/475/attachments/original/1467641786/SYP\\_MENTALHEALTH-REPORT\\_FINAL\\_2\\_\(1\).pdf?1467641786](https://d3n8a8pro7vnm.cloudfront.net/scottishyouthparliament/pages/475/attachments/original/1467641786/SYP_MENTALHEALTH-REPORT_FINAL_2_(1).pdf?1467641786)