

The Education and Skills Committee

SQA 2020 Exam Results Provisions for COVID-19 - Young People's Perspectives

Submission from the Scottish Youth Parliament, in partnership with Young Scot and YouthLink Scotland

Background

The [Scottish Youth Parliament](#) (SYP) is the democratically elected voice of Scotland's young people. Their vision for Scotland is of a nation that actively listens to and values the meaningful participation of its children and young people. SYP is grounded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly Article 12, which lays out young people's right to be listened to on the issues that affect them, and for their views to be given weight.

Young Scot is the national youth information and citizenship charity for 11-26-year-olds in Scotland. They have been updating their dedicated [website](#) and social media channels seven days a week with the latest information for young people on COVID-19. This is helping to ensure that young people have quality-assured information on what's happening, the simple steps to take to help prevent catching COVID-19, and how to avoid spreading it to others.

[YouthLink Scotland](#) is the national agency for youth work. We're a membership organisation representing more than 100 youth organisation members across Scotland, including national voluntary organisations and all 32 local authorities. They champion the value of the youth work sector, challenging government at national and local levels to invest in youth work, which supports over 300,000 young people.

Approach

We welcome the opportunity to inform the Education and Skills Committee of young people's views on the SQA 2020 Exam Result Provisions. This response is based on the findings of the [Lockdown Lowdown survey](#) alongside the views from specific SYP members and YouthLink Scotland volunteers.

The Scottish Youth Parliament, YouthLink Scotland and Young Scot partnered to deliver LockdownLowdown - a survey of young people from across Scotland on their concerns about COVID-19. The survey results give a clear picture of what young people are currently worried about - and the impact it's having on their lives.

The survey received **2,419 responses** from young people aged 11-25 across Scotland, from all 32 local authorities and SYP's 11 national voluntary organisations.

These findings are supplemented by the views of six of the Scottish Youth Parliament's Education and Lifelong Learning (ELL) Committee members and one of YouthLink Scotland's [#iWill ambassador](#), who directly responded to the Committee's additional questions. ELL Committee members were also encouraged to feed in any comments their constituents have on this topic.

Background information of survey respondents

The **majority of respondents are at school (75%) and over half are aged 15-18 (52%)**. 65% of respondents are female, 31% are male, 1% identify as non-binary, and 1% identify in another way. 12.4% of respondents belong to minority ethnic groups.

Relevant Lockdown Lowdown Findings

- Over two fifths (42%) stated that they were **Extremely or Moderately concerned about school, college and university closures.**
- Respondents expressed more concern regarding exams and coursework, with around half (49%) stating that they were **Moderately or Extremely concerned.**
- Over half of the respondents (58%) stated that they had some concern over their ability to access their rights.
- Almost two thirds of respondents (61%) stated that they were **Moderately or Extremely concerned about the impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) on their future.**
- Respondents were given a list of six types of decision maker and asked who they thought should be providing information around coronavirus. **The majority of respondents (87%) stated that Politicians should be providing information around coronavirus.** Over half of the respondents selected **Teachers (55%)** and around a third selected **Youth workers (34%).** The least commonly selected group was **Young people (selected by 22%).**
- Respondents were asked to provide examples of actions that they would like to see decision makers take to tackle issues surrounding coronavirus, **10% of respondents noted they'd like to see improvements to the current impact on education.**

1. What are your main concerns regarding the impact of Coronavirus on assessment - this year there will be estimated grades (instead of completing coursework or exams this year)?

The main concern raised by young people was around how estimated grades **may penalise pupils who may have performed to a higher standard in exams.** There was additional concern about the **long-term impact** this may have on young people's **future education and employment opportunities.**

'...there will be a lot of people who would have really buckled down with their revision and got much higher marks than anything they have evidence for, meaning that the grade they will get will not reflect their true potential. This could then in turn mean that they will struggle to move on to the next stage in their education/career.'

'My main concern regarding covid-19 is, in fact, the attainment. A lot of young people may not be getting the result they may have done if they sat the exam. Predicted grades taken from a prelim at least three months before the final exam will not allow any leeway for improvement in that time. This may have a serious impact on a lot of school leavers intending to head to university, college or other further education routes.'

'...many people's grades improve by the final exam. Due to this it's caused worry that candidates wouldn't get the grade that they would have potentially gotten in the final exam leading to potential further impact regarding conditional offers for universities and colleges.'

There was also concern raised around perceived **potential bias from teachers** and how this could impact pupils' grades:

'[The] main thing I'm hearing from [my MSYP] constituents is what if teachers are biased? How are they going to regulate this.'

'[I'm] worried that it's down to the individual decisions of teachers to recommend grades and how individual relationships with different teachers will impact this.'

'I think that we have candidate numbers for a reason. Teachers might not always be fair...'

One young person noted their doubt around the **appeals process being left in the hands of schools:**

'...with the appeals being from schools [and] not pupils I highly doubt that a school would go against their own teachers as it would hurt their credibility.'

Another highlighted their worry that current provisions will have a **negative and disproportionate effect on pupils from disadvantaged schools/backgrounds:**

'[I] think that it could strongly disadvantage young people from certain schools/backgrounds. One part of the grading is the sqa looking into what the pupils in the school achieved previously however grades can change drastically between years depending on the students and the teacher teaching the class especially in smaller subject departments.'

2. Do you think the Scottish Government and SQA have taken the correct approach to certification given the physical closure of the schools? What would you do differently?

The majority of ELL Committee Members and #iWill ambassadors agreed that, whilst they do have concerns around elements of the current provisions, the Scottish Government and SQA took the correct approach to certification.

'Myself and some of my constituents feel the approach could have been communicated to candidates a lot better however it was the best option that they could have come up with.'

'Although using estimates from teacher might leave some students at a disadvantage I think it is the best way to ensure the majority of students get the grades they deserve.'

'During these times I think it is impossible to predict what will happen so delaying exams may not have been viable. I think estimating grades has many flaws but is the best way without holding exams.'

However, some of the Lockdown Lowdown respondents did note they **disagreed with the current approach taken**, expressing that decision makers should find a way to allow exams to take place as scheduled or at a later date.

'...can we not just delay exams and sit them after this is all over. I don't feel what's been suggested is fair, I feel I have wasted a year of study, not being given the opportunity to sit exams and better my prelim results.'

'Find a way to make exams possible even if we may need to take them spread apart with masks and gloves on. I truly think this will allow young students to achieve the best grades possible and will reduce judgment from employees and universities accepting applications as they may be skeptical...Personally I want to know that the results I get in August are because I worked hard and put my all in to them.'

There was also **criticism of the decision not to mark coursework:**

'I think that some evidence should have still been used because pupils feel that their hard work on coursework has gone to waste.'

'Some students may see the SQA's choice to not mark course work as an easy alternative which will save time, effort and finance. However, this makes students feel as though their work is unimportant or even a waste of time and effort as it is not being formally assessed.'

'I think that it's frustrating that there're not marking coursework in subjects where its very important - I do Design & Manufacture and coursework is what I've spent most of the year on but they've released a statement saying they wont mark it.'

Young people also felt that specific elements of the chosen approach could have been improved, including **communications and involving young people in the decision making process.**

3. How would you describe the communication and support provided to you during this time?

ELL Committee members and #iWill ambassadors generally felt that communication was **'confusing'** and found the statements **hard for young people to understand.**

This correlates with the Lockdown Lowdown findings, with 7% of respondents noting they wanted to see more official communication around education and qualifications. Individual responses highlight that this is due to current guidance **not being easily accessible, clear or understandable for young people.**

In addition to this, respondents across our three sources noted that they were **still confused around the provision for estimating grades.** A few respondents also noted that this uncertainty was **negatively impacting their mental health.**

Several respondents highlighted that they were receiving **'mixed messages' from teachers,** especially in regards to which elements coursework they should be completing.

'I feel that there are many mixed messages being sent to pupils with some teachers still putting an expectation on them to complete and submit work for their use to produce estimates and others not. It also goes against what the sqa has said in numerous statements and makes times even more confusing.'

The fact that some Lockdown Lowdown respondents appeared to be under the impression that course work may still count toward their final grade further demonstrates the confusion that exists.

There were also requests for:

- **Clearer information around the appeals process**
- **Transparency around the Scottish Government and SQA's decision making**
- **Full details of how grades will be assessed**

Going forward, young people indicated they would like to receive information around SQA exam result provisions:

- **In youth friendly, accessible formats**
- **Directly from their teachers**
- **On different platforms including TV announcement, social media and through online portals such as Google Classrooms and GLOW.**

Only one young person mentioned their opinion of the support given, noting that:

'The support on the other hand has been at a very high standard. Between teachers, the Scottish government and the SQA many constituents have found that they have been very open to questions.'

4. Do you have any other comments about the approach taken to the challenges presented by this situation? For example different impacts on different groups of young people, or impact on different subject areas?

Several young people felt that subjects with a **more practical and course-work heavy workload** may disproportionately feel the negative effect of the current provisions.

'I fear more practical subjects will be at a disadvantage as it is perhaps harder to access'.

'I think it impacts highly on more practical subjects because the pupils did not get to show their performance on one day after lots of preparation. These subjects are usually more hard to judge a mark for on the practical side without an examiner.'

'I think that it's really bad for people doing subjects where coursework is the main percentage of the assessment - a prelim and estimated grade doesn't really give a fair representation. For subjects like maths with no coursework it isn't really a problem'

There was also worry that this could have a bigger impact on future opportunities for **6th year pupils** because they will not have the opportunity to retake subjects.

Furthermore, there was concern that **young people from more deprived areas** may feel an increased negative impact if previous attainment statistics are used by schools.

Contact us:

Should you wish to digitally meet with us or update us on how the findings will feed into your work, please do not hesitate to get in touch with us using the details below. We hope you have found this briefing to be informative and valuable.

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