

Education Reform

Consultation on behalf of Professor Ken Muir, University of the West of Scotland and Independent Advisor to The Scottish Government

Respondent Information Form

Please Note this form **must** be completed and returned with your response.

To find out how we handle your personal data, please see our privacy policy:
<https://www.gov.scot/privacy/>

Are you responding as an individual, group or an organisation?

- Individual
 Group
 Organisation

Organisation name

SCOTTISH YOUTH PARLIAMENT

Phone number

07305 105577

Address

1 MANSFIELD PLACE
EDINBURGH

Postcode

EH3 6NB

Email

CHELSEY.C@SYP.ORG.UK

The Scottish Government would like your permission to publish your consultation response.

Please indicate your publishing preference:

- Publish response with name
- Publish response only (without name)
- Do not publish response

Information for organisations:

The option 'Publish response only (without name)' is available for individual respondents only. If this option is selected, the organisation name will still be published.

If you choose the option 'Do not publish response', your organisation name may still be listed as having responded to the consultation in, for example, in the analysis report.

We may wish to contact you again in the future, but we require your permission to do so. Are you content for Scottish Government to contact you again in relation to this consultation exercise?

- Yes
- No

If you have any additional comments and suggestions relating to this consultation, please send them to EducationReform@gov.scot

Response to the Scottish Government's Consultation on Education Reform, Undertaken by Professor Ken Muir

Submission from the Scottish Youth Parliament
November 2021



Who We Are

The Scottish Youth Parliament - www.syp.org.uk

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is the basis for the Scottish Youth Parliament's (SYP's) vision, mission and values. In particular, SYP embodies Article 12 of the UNCRC, which states that young people have the right to express their views freely and have their opinions listened to in all matters affecting them. As a completely youth-led charity, the words and sentiment of Article 12 have profound importance for our work.

Our Vision

The Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP) is the democratic voice of Scotland's young people. Our vision for Scotland is of a nation that actively listens to and values the meaningful participation of its young people. Our goal is to make this vision a reality, in order to ensure young people in Scotland grow up loved, safe and respected, and able to realise their full potential.

Our Mission

SYP is a rights-based charity, with members supported by all of Scotland's 32 local authorities and 11 National Voluntary Organisations. SYP's mission is to provide a national platform for young people to discuss the issues that are important to them, and campaign for changes to the nation that they live in. We support our members in their work by training them, supporting their personal development, and empowering them, using a youth work ethos.

Our democratically elected members listen to and recognise the issues that are most important to young people in every community across the country and ensure that decision-makers listen to their voices.

Our Values

- **Democracy** - We are youth-led and accountable to young people aged 14 to 25. Our democratic structure and the scale of our engagement across Scotland gives us a mandate that sets us apart from other organisations.
- **Rights** - We are a rights-based organisation. We are passionate about making young people aware of their rights and ensuring that local and national governments uphold their rights.
- **Inclusion and Diversity** - We are committed to being truly inclusive and work tirelessly to ensure policymakers and politicians hear the voices of young people from every community and background in Scotland.
- **Political Impartiality** - We are independent from all political parties. By working with all stakeholders, groups, and individuals who share our values, we deliver the policies that are most important to young people.

Our Approach

As a youth-led organisation, we are constantly seeking the views of our MSYPs and other young people in order to stay as relevant with their views as possible. This means that we have numerous opportunities to collect qualitative and quantitative data on a variety of issues underneath the umbrella of education. With that being said, we pulled our information from various sources.

First, we consulted with the SQA Learner Panel. This panel is a partnership between SYP and SQA to deliver a space where learners and young people alike can come together to discuss important and relevant educational issues. The format of the panel is youth-led and provides information for the SQA to take away and feedback on. These panels happen once a month at the end of the month and topics are chosen by the learners. At present the membership consists of 28 young people, with the majority of them being in school and of learner age. For the purposes of this consultation, we consulted with 25 out of the 28 members over a panel and over two separate focus groups. A lot of direct quotes included within this consultation are taken from these three group conversations.

Second, as mentioned above we have collated a wide range of data over the last year or so around what MSYPs think about education and issues affecting education. We have used information from these briefings, responses, papers, and data to give an accurate picture within the consultation of what young people think.

These can be found within the following documents:

- [#HaveYourSay on the Future of Assessments Survey](#) asking over 400 young people how they felt about exams and assessments, conducted in October 2021.
- [SYP's response to SQA's appeals decision](#), written and sent in 2021.
- Learner Panel briefings were used to give context and quotes and can be sent upon request.

Important Information

All of the information gathered (quotes, comments, etc.) from learners were gathered with the understanding they would be anonymised. Therefore, there will be no direct quotes from named learners or young people.

Our Recommendations

- We do not believe that the Curriculum for Excellence reflects what matters for the education of children and young people in Scotland and recommend it's vision be revised to ensure a true commitment to a learner-based focus.
- The Curriculum for Excellence is too rigid and should be revised to encompass a more holistic offering which includes a wider range of topics, the experiences of marginalised groups, increased focus on life skills and a rights-based focus.
- Using the UNCRC as the framework for which Curriculum for Excellence and the entire education system operates is a necessity and will make the Scottish education system a world-leader in rights-based education.
- In its current form, Curriculum for Excellence, does not prepare young people for progression and should be amended to include a greater focus on skills devolvement and guidance on future academic and career options.
- Additional and specific support should be provided to those who may face additional barriers in their journey such as those with Additional Support Needs and disability.
- Whilst an agency to oversee the curriculum and assessment would be welcome, we believe that it will only help if it is designed using a human rights-based approach that ensures that young people can both have their voices heard and hold decision makers accountable.
- As part of Curriculum for Excellence we believe more support should be given to careers advisors to help learners develop as best as possible throughout their educational journey.
- An expansion of traditional qualifications to include subjects that contribute to a well-rounded education experience should be considered.
- Learners should be involved in their education and should have space and opportunities to meaningfully participate and engage in their education, especially in the context of inspections.

Section 1: Vision

1.1 The vision for Curriculum for Excellence reflects what matters for the education of children and young people in Scotland

We strongly disagree. After extensive consultation with young people, we do not believe that the Curriculum for Excellence is successful in the four areas that it has initially set out to accomplish: successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens, and effective contributors. Learners who we consulted have told us time and again that they feel they are not at the centre of their educational experience, with their education happening *to* them and not *with* them.

Our chief concern lies in what classifies as a ‘successful learner’. From discussions with our MSYPs and other young people, we have found that this can vary widely from school to school. Learners have told us that whilst some schools might put emphasis on a well-rounded rights-based education, one that includes civic responsibility and advocacy, others appear to put grade attainment as the benchmark on whether a learner has been successful in their educational experience.

After discussion with young people, we recognize that many factors can play into this, including funding, teacher capacity, school size, and availability of resources. There appears to be unevenness between these factors in different schools. This unevenness, and discrepancy in what determines success in school, creates inequity and significantly different school experiences.

Additionally, with the discrepancies in what a successful learner actually is, the learners we spoke with did not agree that they have a well-rounded general education that helps them become responsible citizens and effective contributors. There is not enough emphasis on skills development in areas outside of academic attainment or attempts to integrate an understanding of civic responsibilities.

Ultimately, learners believe that the four capacities are unequally weighted, with more attention paid to what a school’s subjective determination of what a successful learner is, instead of creating a holistic educational experience. Curriculum for Excellence does not consider the disparities that exist between schools due to lack of resources, teachers, and support, and this consistently creates difficulties for numerous learners.

We suggest that a revised look at the four main capacities, analysing if they are fit for purpose and reflect the individual needs of learners, and truly committing to a learner-based focus, will alleviate a large portion of the issues that learners are currently experiencing.

1.2 What do you think should be retained/and or changed?

The learners we consulted agreed that, overall, the Curriculum for Excellence is too rigid and creates boundaries for learning. The young people who shared their experiences agreed unanimously that they would like to see holistic changes within the Curriculum for Excellence. Changes should represent the world they are currently experiencing; they do not believe the current Curriculum is flexible or adaptable, and therefore is not entirely relevant to their education.

Alongside flexibility, young people would also like to be meaningfully included in the Curriculum. They want honest and transparent education that is aware of Scotland's actions within the wider world, and which accurately represents marginalised people and their history in a Scottish - and wider - context. To do this, they think marginalised groups should be directly consulted to ensure their curriculum celebrates diversity and is not biased.

We recognise and commend the work the Scottish Government are already doing through the LGBT Inclusive Education programme and the Race Equality and Anti-Racism in Education Programme. We would like to see these processes continued and broadened to encompass the experiences and issues affecting other seldom heard groups.

Learners acknowledged they would like to learn different topics and explore issues which are current. Many learners commented that their teachers had told them they would like to focus on what the learners are interested in but do not have time due to how fixed the curriculum and qualifications are. Teachers with less resources and more students were less able to go beyond the curriculum.

Learners agreed that the curriculum should also prioritise teaching life skills and should be about more than just exams. They would like to see life skills built into different subjects and want teachers who help learners gain knowledge around subjects, not just get them through their exams. Learners would prefer to have access to a much broader general education, so they have the basics covered, and then be allowed to choose specialist subjects that they are interested in afterwards. They also feel that building work experience into the curriculum would help to level the playing field and build confidence and contacts. The introduction of essential skills like basic first aid into the curriculum, learners agreed, would give young people the opportunity to save lives and gain invaluable skills.

Learners shared their experiences around their lack of substantive PSE. Many think the curriculum should be updated to reflect LGBTQ+ relationships, consent, and reducing the shame and stigma that often comes along with talking about these topics in a lot of schools.

With respect to children and young peoples' rights, learners want to see the incorporation of the UNCRC into Scots law in the curriculum itself, and highlighted a current lack of education on children's, human, and disability rights. The learners agreed that the curriculum should be more tailored to individuals and that choice, personalization, and adaptability are valued. They also felt that young people should be involved in the decision-making processes surrounding the curriculum as they have the most experience of recent education and are directly affected by the reform.

One learner commented: *“You take so many subjects and it becomes more how well you can take the exams in the subject than if you are really learning the subject. I know I have taken some exams and then forgotten them the next day, is that really helpful? It would be great if you could see subjects through based on developing your skills in that area. I know some people who have been told they couldn’t take a subject because it wasn’t relevant, but they really wanted to do it and would have been good at it. It needs to change.”*

Below are some examples of current SYP policy, created by our members in consultation with young people, where changes in education are yet to be fully realised. They demonstrate the range of calls young people have for change in the curriculum and the importance this holds to them:

‘The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that all pupils should leave secondary school with an understanding of bereavement, and how to cope during the difficult time of losing a loved one, and that all teachers should receive teacher training in order to help them support pupils dealing with bereavement.’ - Members’ Motion, passed with 87% agreement

‘The Scottish Youth Parliament recommends that rights education should be made mandatory, included in teacher training, and teach about rights including the UNCRC, the Human Rights Act and the European Convention of Human Rights, to empower young people to be human rights defenders.’ - Policy recommendation from the Young People’s Rights Review

‘The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that education for young people on revenge porn and sexting, and support services for those affected by these issues, should be improved.’ - Members’ Motion, passed with 81% agreement

‘The Scottish Youth Parliament calls on the Scottish Government to reform the education curriculum to more accurately reflect the experiences of BAME individuals; and to ensure their historical influence on Scottish society and culture, as well as Scotland’s role in the slave trade and colonisation, is an integral part of the Scottish education system.’ - Members’ Motion, passed with 86% agreement.

‘The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that every young person should learn about politics in secondary schools across Scotland, including teaching about political systems and voting, to ensure that they have the best start for engaging in politics.’ - Members’ Motion, passed with 89% agreement

‘The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that in order to tackle domestic abuse in Scotland, schools should provide gender and LGBT-inclusive Relationship, Sexual Health and Parenthood Education (RSHPE) that covers the principles of equality, the signs of abuse, how to report abuse and where to seek help.’ - Members Motion, passed with 80% agreement.

Section 2: Curriculum and Assessment

2.1 Curriculum for Excellence provides a coherent progression in the journey of learners (3-18 and beyond) that gives them the best possible educational experience and enables them to realise their ambitions.

We strongly disagree. Our young people do not believe the Curriculum for Excellence, in the form it is currently being delivered, prepares young people for progression through school and beyond. Nor does it prepare them for reaching their goals and ambitions onward from school. Our young people have cited issues such as a lack of careers advice and support, and the prioritisation of examination grades, as reasons for this. They do not feel they are prepared enough progressing into each year, especially at the senior phase, and often feel they are not adequately prepared when leaving school.

On the issue of progression, many of our young people have described the difficulty in moving up from year to year, especially when transitioning in the senior phase from National 4s to 5s, and through Highers and Advanced Highers. They have described their experiences as being so focused on achieving the right grades in each subject that very minimal attention is paid on preparing for progression and the difference in academic expectation they will experience at each stage.

Learners have commented that they have felt extremely unprepared when going from National 4s to National 5s. Young people's experiences suggest it gets progressively more difficult, and there is little or no support at all for learners to feel they are adequately prepared.

Young people have suggested that one way of fixing this is to focus on overall skill development, so that progression through each year is seen as further developing their skills in a subject instead of teaching to an exam.

Others have suggested preparatory classes or guides on what to expect and what is expected of them (beyond exam grade attainment), to help learners feel ready and prepared for entering a higher and potentially more academically difficult year. Regarding Curriculum for Excellence helping learners to realise their ambitions, one issue that was shared by all young people consulted was the lack of careers support available to them at school. Learners discussed that in many cases they received only annual appointments with their careers advisors, with some going as little as once every two years. They felt these were a 'tick-box' meeting, meaning they would be guided around what they would be able to do with the grades they had and nothing more.

This can be seen in one of our recent policies created by members, which states:

'The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that efficient careers advice services are vital to ensuring young people are well informed about their options, and should cater for all accessibility requirements.' - Members' Motion passed with 94% agreement in March 2020.

Some young people described the lack of support as jarring due to the fact they received no guidance on what courses to choose or whether the subjects they were pursuing were even relevant to what they wanted to study. In some cases, learners had to abandon a university, college, or job path because they had chosen subjects that they wanted to study at school, rather than courses they would need for future study or work, and therefore did not have the right grades for certain areas.

While there may be opportunities within Curriculum for Excellence that *should* be implemented, the lack of careers guidance and advice to learners on where their academic progression will lead them clearly highlights there are many learners who are not receiving the guidance and support to achieve their full potential. This disproportionately affects groups such as learners with disabilities and/or additional support needs.

One learner in particular said: *“I go to a small school and while it is very supportive there are times when I have wanted to take something and it had been cancelled because so few students actually wanted to do it. I remember they almost didn’t have drama once, and I was required to take it, because only a few students had signed up and we just didn’t have enough students to do it”*.

2.2 Please share what you believe currently contributes to a coherent progression.

Overall, we believe the Curriculum for Excellence - as experienced by young people we have consulted - does not currently contribute to a coherent progression. We recognise there are many schools who do currently support a coherent progression for *some* learners. In particular, there are some schools that commit a lot of time to helping learners to prepare for progression, and we have heard of *some* schools which put learner goals and ambitions at the centre of their education, enabling some young people to develop skills and attributes that will enable them to progress successfully. However, this is not consistent across all schools in all local authority areas.

We recognise funding does not fall entirely under the remit of this consultation. However, it is important to note that existing economic disparities contribute to educational inequity and prevent Curriculum for Excellence from fulfilling its purpose.

2.3 Please share ideas you may have to improve learner progression across stages and sectors.

As mentioned above, it is prudent to note that funding and access to resources within schools to provide time and support to learners is crucial if any impactful reform is to be made. With that being said, there are actions that may improve learner progression across stages and sectors.

Classes that are created specifically to prepare learners for progression between years within the senior phase could make a significant difference to young people's lives. Learners we spoke with suggested that if they had dedicated time outside of just preparing for examinations, they would have found it a lot easier to cope with the increased expectations and levels of difficulty in higher years.

Possible practical changes within this suggestion include:

- Incorporating a dedicated end-of-year block within the curriculum which is designed for teachers to give learners an overview of expectations for the next year and support available to help them feel prepared.
- Approaching progression as furthering skill development instead of a standalone academic year.

- Creating a structure that enables learning to be built year after year, with a focus on developing learners' skills throughout their entire academic journey, instead of focusing on getting learners through examinations.
- Developing guides and providing teacher and school support to learners before they progress to the next year, and embedding this as good practice so that if they are struggling in their progression they are signposted, and teachers and schools are prepared.

In terms of realising ambition, increasing access to careers support and seeing careers advice as an essential part of any learners' educational experience can make a significant difference. Not prioritising this type of support means that learners are left on their own to make significant decisions about their future from as young as eleven years old. That is an unrealistic expectation and one that can damage their confidence and even their future opportunities.

Based on discussions with learners during focus groups, as well data from our wider work on this issue, here are some suggestions that learners felt may help to overcome this issue:

- Providing at least one career advisor per year from S3 upwards and make quarterly to every six months meetings a requirement for every learner and advisor.
- Young people felt that having a few career advisors in general for the entire school can be overwhelming and certainly let learners slip through the cracks.
- Additionally, making sure that required meetings take place (quarterly or every six months) means that learners are constantly involved in the decision-making process of their education, choosing the right subjects, and making the right choices when progressing from year to year.

Young people also suggested that providing a dedicated careers advisor who is specifically tasked with frequently communicating with learners about opportunities outside school, including vocational and apprenticeship opportunities, and is on hand for advice on pursuing different vocations and professions once leaving school. This is something that learners have highlighted is often missed in the current structure of provision and they would like to see specifically provided.

One learner we spoke with advised they have such an advisor at their school who communicates with them via an online app about opportunities to pursue professional qualifications, internships, apprenticeships, etc. and that they can set up appointments with the advisor to discuss future professional options and use this alongside the career advisor's advice on their academic progression.

In the interim to achieving these changes, young people believe that, at a minimum, it should be mandatory for every learner to speak with their career advisor at least twice a year every year until they leave school.

One learner in particular noted,

"I know it's different for me, I go to a really small school, but I can go to the library and make an appointment when it suits me and speak with my careers advisor. They've been really supportive and have helped me choose the subjects that interest me and tell me what paths I can take with it after school. But I know that's just my experience."

In addition to this, we believe additional and specific support needs to be provided to those who may face additional barriers in their journey. Here are some calls from our 2021-26 manifesto which link to this:

‘The Scottish Government and Councils should invest in more support for and awareness of learners with Additional Support Needs.’ - ‘From Scotland’s Young People’ manifesto statement passed with 85% agreement in November 2020

‘Every child or young person with a disability or long-term health condition should have the right to a Transitions Plan to help with their move from child to adult services.’ - ‘From Scotland’s Young People’ manifesto statement passed with 85% agreement in November 2020 (this statement includes educational progression).

4.1 The creation of a Curriculum and Assessment Agency will help to address the misalignment of curriculum and assessment

While an agency to oversee the curriculum and assessment would be welcome, we believe that it will only help if it is designed in a new and innovative way which places young people’s right to have their voices heard in decision-making at its heart. If a more traditional approach similar to that used currently in education agencies is utilised, we fear these issues will persist.

4.2 Please share your views of the potential advantages of establishing such an Agency.

Whilst it is important for stakeholders such as schools, unions, parents, and teachers to be involved, we believe the lack of inclusion of young people has historically created large disadvantages that have led us to the need for this type of reform. However, there are options for a curriculum and assessment agency to change this by leading the way and putting young peoples’ needs, in particular Article 12 of the UNCRC, at the center of the creation and implementation process. With Scotland being on the precipice of seeing the UNCRC being incorporated into Scots Law, a new agency would have a unique opportunity to shape itself to become a public sector leader in respecting children’s rights.

First, having an agency that standardises methods of assessment that work for learners would provide legitimacy to grades achieved by learners who do not function well within the traditional boundaries of assessment. This can be implemented by incorporating skills development alongside examination grades; continuous assessment - which learners have told us they mostly prefer, with over half (54%) of respondents in our #HaveYourSay survey believing continuous assessment would be less stressful and give them better grades; and other means of demonstrable attainment.

If such an agency utilised these as standard practices of grading, there would be no confusion as to which methods of assessment should be used (exams or continuous assessments) and it would give flexibility to learners who may need alternative measures to demonstrate their skills and knowledge.

Having an agency that oversees the curriculum and can advise on changes that need to be made within the curriculum carries many benefits. There is potential for this agency to ensure the curriculum accurately reflects the world around learners as they are experiencing it, and to make rapid recommendations to ensure space is given for current affairs (for example) to be incorporated quickly, so learners have real time examples they can use while in school.

Another benefit would be the opportunity to review the curriculum continuously by the agency so that it is up-to-date and is accurately reflecting the needs and experience of our society and its members. Instead of curriculum reviews that are needed to be carried out on a mass scale every few years, having it devolved to an agency whose primary responsibility is making sure the curriculum is working for learners is a golden opportunity for education in Scotland to be continuously progressive and inclusive. For example, we have recently seen calls from learners to amend the curriculum to ensure it is inclusive of the history of black people and people of colour. This can be seen in the following policy:

'The Scottish Youth Parliament calls on the Scottish Government to reform the education curriculum to more accurately reflect the experiences of BAME individuals; and to ensure their historical influence on Scottish society and culture, as well as Scotland's role in the slave trade and colonisation, is an integral part of the Scottish education system.' - Members' motion, passed with 92% agreement in October 2020.

Having the understanding that specific histories carry different perspectives, and that learning is consistent and constant instead of stagnant as the underpinning for the agency would open up a lot of opportunities for learners to be engaged on different subjects and create a more transparent and safer environment for learning overall.

4.3 Please share your views of the potential disadvantages of establishing such an Agency.

Young people have told us they feel that they are expected to just go along with decisions made by adults and organisations without consideration of their views or experiences. This can be seen in the following call from our manifesto:

'Young people should be able to contribute to the development of the school curriculum and school budgetary decisions.' *'From Scotland's Young People'* manifesto statement passed with 76% agreement in November 2020.

One of our main concerns around establishing another agency that would oversee curriculum and assessment is that there is a risk it would continue the current culture of disengagement with young people.

Where there are attempts to involve young people by government and other agencies, there are often only a small number of young representatives. While we have seen some positive examples, many of these young people have told us they often find it hard to have their voice heard and feel their presence in these groups is sometimes tokenistic. While we hope this would be addressed with the establishment of a new agency, its remit would need to clearly state that authentic co-design and meaningful participation of young people is a necessity, in line with Article 12 of UNCRC¹.

Additionally, a further potential disadvantage to the establishment of another agency would be accountability and responsibility over maintaining the agency and consistent tracking to make sure it is faithfully fulfilling its duties.

At present, with the struggles and inequity learners have faced because of the disorganisation and disruption to their learning over the last two years, there has been little to no accountability towards those organisations who refused to effectively listen to learners and implement changes to a learner's benefit. We have seen this with the SQA, who despite holding Learner Panels for over a year with the express intent to gather the

¹ [United Nations General Comment on Article 12](#)

views of young people, did not account for their recurring calls for exceptional circumstances in the appeals process, as well as listen about their experiences with assessments really being exams in all but name. Further challenges to participation included creating a tight turnaround for learners to provide feedback on the appeals process (two weeks) and, from the perspective of the learners involved, not taking sufficient account of their comments.

Here are some direct quotes, collected in April 2021, from young people involved in the SQA Learner Panel that demonstrates these views:

'[An MSYP] is the only YP on the [SQA's] National Qualifications group and he doesn't get listened to. I know a few people who have told me they don't feel heard by the SQA when discussing these things. I mean for example the word "assessments", they're just exams.

'I just honestly think the majority of YP will say exceptional circumstances is important because we are all in the middle of a pandemic. Mental health has been impacted, people have been ill, have lost people. I just think it's really not being taken into account and being ignored.'

'We have gave up our time for them to instead take the constructive criticism just get defensive and not want to change. I really value the organisations we work with who actually care what we think.'

The young people we spoke to had several further questions about the introduction of a new agency including:

- Who would be in charge of this agency to make sure they are attending to the curriculum and assessments in ways that support, rather than penalise learners?
- Who would be responsible and accountable if they fail to do so, and if learners are affected as a result?

Learners felt there would need to be transparency on who is to be held accountable, and willingness to take action should the intended outcomes of the agency become not fit for purpose.

Changing the culture and creating real transparency and accountability are two steps forward to make sure learners are at the centre of any educational agency's remit.

5.1 The full breadth of existing SQA qualifications play an important part of the curriculum offered by secondary schools.

We partly agree with this. While the subjects available at present offer learners a range of choices, there is little opportunity for young people to develop skills and broad understanding of subject areas, particularly where there is pressure to complete a course to prepare for examination. The heavy focus on examinations in order to achieve qualifications means some learners miss out on practical skill development within their subjects.

This leaves a lot of learners forgoing meaningful practical development within their subjects and learning only to test for the examinations at the end of the year, with no demonstrable progress carried over throughout their academic journey.

5.2 Please identify the main factors, if any, that support a broader range of SQA qualifications being included in the curriculum in secondary schools.

While there are many options of courses that students can opt to take, there are still many that would be beneficial and aid in long-term skill development that a lot of the current course options could provide.

We believe there are two main factors that support a broader range of SQA qualifications being included in the curriculum in secondary schools: Firstly, the incorporation of the UNCRC into Scots Law will require any organisation who supports children and young people to ensure young people's rights are upheld. With this in mind, qualifications should give equal weight towards providing a well-rounded education as mentioned in the UNCRC (particularly Articles 28 and 29), and towards civic skill building and outside traditional academic choices so that learners leave with qualifications that impact every aspect of their lives instead of just academic or specific professional/trade skills.

For example, young people we consulted were not aware of what Scotland's national values are, and - following discussion about these with the group - the consensus was that they had not been taught these in school. Furthermore, young people felt subjects such as modern studies, do not provide opportunities to understand different countries, cultures, religions, and backgrounds.

Secondly, there is a need for upskilling opportunities in areas that could be lifesaving and create responsible adults once leaving school. For example, a few learners we spoke with argued the need for First Aid to be taught in schools so that young people are prepared for varying eventualities, as First Aid is only normally offered through private courses or organisations. This is reflected in the following SYP policies:

'The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that the Scottish Government should introduce comprehensive first aid training as a compulsory part of the education curriculum.' - Members Motion, passed with 84% agreement.

Opportunities like integrating some professional qualifications reserved for school leavers or professional adults into learner choices can expand learner's options for what they want to do outside of school instead of being reserved to a few vocational trades and linear academic progression. These would also present opportunities to gain new skills alongside their academic achievement and create a more well-rounded educational experience. Young people have been calling for this, as can be seen in the following policy statement:

'The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that every school pupil in Scotland should have access to a form of Work-Based Learning.' - Committee Motion by SYP's Education and Lifelong Learning Committee, passed with 97% agreement.

Overall, there is room to broaden the opportunities for more qualifications, but they should not solely be based on subjects that offer traditional exams or an expansion of subjects that are already available. An inclusion of upskilling, civic, and personal development opportunities should be considered and weighted just as important as current academic subject choices.

5.3 Please share any ideas you may have on what is needed to enhance the role of a broader variety of qualifications in the curriculum in secondary schools.

This will require a change in how the curriculum is approached and implemented in practice. In theory, Curriculum for Excellence encourages personal development and enhancing skills through academic journeys. However, in practice this is not necessarily the case, with schools often having to focus their efforts on teaching towards examinations and struggling to cover additional subjects due to a lack of resources.

We believe that once the curriculum effectively shows in practice an equally weighted driver focused on personal, civic, and skills development as a necessary part of a learner's education, it should be the responsibility of whatever agency does replace the SQA to see that further qualifications are expanded, and this prioritisation of non-traditional academic qualifications is seen throughout schools.

Young people appreciate that teachers and schools can only do so much when they are trying to make sure their students are getting the best grades they can to progress into viable options once they leave. Increasing the number of teachers within schools, expanding subject areas for new teachers, and increasing the amount of teacher support available (like teacher development) will all combine to create a space where broader qualifications can be offered and weighted similarly to current qualifications.

It's also important to note that some schools still don't have access to some traditional qualifications that are offered to other schools with more resources. If there are more teachers and resources available to all schools, there will be more opportunities to broaden the subject options available and create a more well-rounded experience for the learners.

For example, MSYPs have found that arts subjects are not provided across the board. This issue was of such importance to them, they created and passed the following policy:

'The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that arts subjects are a valuable element of the Scottish high school curriculum and believes that access to them should not be restricted due to financial pressures.' - Members' Motion passed with 91% agreement in March 2020.

6.1 Technologies are fully and appropriately utilised as a support for curriculum and assessments.

On balance, we agree with this statement, however we are aware this is not the same for every learner, in particular those who come from rural areas throughout Scotland and those who have ASN. These are two crucial groups who need to be accounted for and SYP has called for action to be taken to overcome these barriers in our 2021-26 manifesto, *From Scotland's Young People*.

6.2 Please share any comments you may have on the use of technologies to support curriculum and assessments, and what could be done to deliver improvements.

In these instances, technology has not been adapted enough to allow those with ASN to properly access their work and keep up with their learning in the same way as those without ASN, chiefly because there is a lot more 1:1 interaction that is required that has not necessarily translated to an online platform. Additionally, for those in rural areas with limited access to internet, or who share teachers with limited access, assignments tended

to be online and not a lot of lectures were made available due to these limitations, which made going back in a face-to-face environment overall difficult.

There is also still great disparity for those who were not given technological items like Chromebooks or iPads. Prioritising funding for those who lack these resources means that they are not behind from other schools or pupils who have access to these devices.

One learner commented on their experience being a disabled student, saying *“I had to fight really hard to get basic accommodations made so that I could take exams. Teachers weren’t prepared for me and online learning was really hard. We had to really push to get adjustments made and it still ended up being a very upsetting experience”*.

Here are the specific calls from our 2021-26 manifesto related to these issues:

‘Every young person in Scotland should have access to fast and reliable internet and devices to access the digital world, regardless of their geographical location or financial standing.’ - ‘From Scotland’s Young People’ manifesto call, passed with 83% agreement.

‘The Scottish Government and Councils should invest in more support for and awareness of learners with Additional Support Needs.’ - ‘From Scotland’s Young People’ manifesto statement passed with 85% agreement.

7. Please share any additional comments you have on curriculum and assessment.

After various discussions from learners, young people have the following asks and reflections to add on this topic:

Making **rights and participation**, more specifically **UNCRC**, a main educational goal overall. Learners have a right to be included in the development and reform of their education and curriculum, as they are the only ones who are truly affected by it. However, equally centring them in the spaces where they are not being included is just as important. In every aspect, whether young people are present or not, those that sit to reform or change the education system and its curriculum should always be underlined by a **rights-based approach**. By doing this it will almost become automatic in engaging and including learners in the development process and adapting the system to meet their needs.

Legitimate **meaningful engagement** with young learners across Scotland, *especially with seldom-heard groups*. It’s important that there is consistent consultation as much as possible with young people and learners from seldom-heard groups on the functionality, development, and reform of education and curriculum. As one of our MSYPs mentioned, himself and other chosen young people who are invited to provide their perspective or give advice are not monoliths of youth perspectives, especially seldom-heard perspectives. Engaging as often and as much as possible with different diverse communities and young people will help guide decision-makers in making decisions that continuously involve young people and allow learners to have a real impact on their education and curriculum.

Looking at education, the framework, and the curriculum **through the lens of young people** is also essential. As mentioned earlier, by taking a rights-based approach it almost becomes automatic, but it doesn’t stop there. Making sure that the young learners coming out of school with experiences that don’t just serve them good grades but add up to encourage them to grow into well-rounded people is as important as any exam or

assessment and considering the ways learners perform best so they get the most out of their education is essential.

Making **health and wellbeing** a priority as much as academic achievement. Mental health and wellbeing are not seen as equal to academic achievement, and this is something young people have been highlighting for some time, especially during the pandemic. There is often not enough support within their schools as schools were not prepared for the number of students seeking mental health support. With a backlog of CAMHS referrals, a lot of students have been left trying to manage their stress, anxiety, and pre-existing mental illness or health issues on their own. Integrating mental health and wellbeing within the curriculum should be mandatory as the effect it would have would be massive. Also making sure that staff within the schools have basic understandings of how mental health and wellbeing in young people manifest and how to help diffuse situations or offer support is as essential as them being able to teach their subjects. Mental health and wellbeing feed into performance and what young people can take away from their education. Both are interlinked and by weighing attainment the same as mental health and wellbeing, there will be a natural shift in the curriculum (like implementing emotional literacy and staff support training) that will inevitably centre and favour the young people overall.

One learner mentioned, "Everyone learns differently and some people, like myself, I really don't mind exams because I'm quite good at memorising, but that only works for me. Others don't do well and might be better at assessments or like art or essays or something and it should really be about how can we show we know something in a way that works for us instead of just doing the same thing as everyone else. I think I disagree with this because it needs to be individual and not the same for everyone because we all learn differently."

Another student agreed, adding, "Yeah I agree and also like we're not being respected in the process...I mean in terms of making choices about what we want to study and being included in our education, it just feels very much like here is what you do and then you go to uni or something. I lucked out with my teachers who are supportive and let me learn what I want to and make sure it matches with my exams and stuff, but I know because no one helped my friend she picked the wrong subjects and now can't study what she wants at uni. I just wished they helped and like guided us, you know."

Additional points around curriculum and assessment:

- A general agreement that assessments throughout the year are fairer and less stressful.
- Emphasising that education should be more than just assessments and qualifications.
- Making sure that continuous assessment is still structured.
- Highlighting that continuous assessments have different meanings to different people.
- Making sure that assessments vary depending on the subject.
- Understanding that alternative assessments like portfolios and practical skills work for some but overall, there should be choice in which grading works best for you.
- Learners should have access to a much broader general education so that they have their basics covered, and then be allowed to choose specialist subjects that they are interested in afterwards.
- Having bigger variety in the subjects you are allowed to choose so that you are not making a massive commitment to a subject you are not that keen on around 13/14.

- Teaching to help learners gain knowledge around subjects, not just how good they are at taking exams.
- Creating a more inclusive curriculum and including marginalised groups in this to make sure their history is reflected accurately and respected.
- Making sure that continuous assessment is standardised so that it supports learners and making sure that exams are adapted to support learners as well.
- Understanding that because learners have different needs, using things like portfolios and practical skills should be implemented to capture everyone.
- Making sure exams and continuous assessments are adapted for those with different abilities and that they are not ableist.

To ensure that the qualitative findings we had in discussions with learners reflected the wider views of Scottish young people, we carried out a survey specifically on the on the topic of future assessments of national 4 and 5 qualifications. The survey has been shared with various education policy makers and the full results can be found [here](#).

- Over 400 people participated in the survey, with the main majority being of learner age (12-14/15-17)
- Majority of respondents (45%) wanted a blend of both continuous assessment and exams overall
- Majority of respondents (54%) felt continuous assessment made them feel less stressed overall
- Majority of respondents (53%) felt continuous assessment would give them the most accurate grades
- Majority of respondents (74%) felt teachers should have a role in grading but with input from others

Section 3: Roles and Responsibilities

11.1 There is sufficient trust with all stakeholders, including children, young people, parents & carers, so they are genuinely involved in decision making.

We disagree. When it comes to young people and young carers, there is a large degree of mistrust when it comes educational agencies. Young people have told us that they do not feel like they are being listened to on important topics that directly affect them, and young carers are often left out of the discussion entirely, when they are some of the most affected learners. The decisions that were made around exams, assessments and appeals in 2021 eroded any trust that many young people had that their views and circumstances would be taken into account by those in power.

In general, young people in Scotland have told us that they believe policy makers need to do more to listen to seldom heard groups when making decision, as can be seen in the following manifesto call:

‘Children and young people from seldom heard groups (such as immigrants and refugees, gypsy traveler communities, single parents, disabled people, Armed Forces, care experienced, and justice experienced) must be listened to by policymakers on issues that affect them.’ ‘From Scotland’s Young People’ manifesto call, passed with 80% agreement.

In the words of a young parent we consulted for our manifesto, some young people “think decision makers focus on things that will make a change to them, but act like they care about things that will change for us”.

Whilst we do not believe this is the intention of decision and policymakers, this statement shows the journey required to ensure that trust is there.

11.2 Please share any ideas you may have on how trust and decision making can be further improved.

By putting into practice that learners - who are the most affected by decisions made about their learning - are an equal stakeholder to others involved and they should be consulted with directly and consistently so that they can be involved in legitimate meaningful participation around their education.

All learners we spoke to agreed that in their experience, when given opportunities to voice their concerns or issues in a meaningful way, they were listened to and action was taken to make it better, highlighting that if young people are listened to from the start, a lot of these issues tend to be less prevalent.

One learner suggested that their school often does school surveys every 6 months to a year on gauging learner satisfaction around the school and the curriculum in place. It allows both teachers and learners to have a say in how their learning is developed, with these changes taken onboard. A collaborative approach to designing learning is a good start to developing a trustful and symbiotic relationship between schools, teachers, learners, and agencies.

Additionally, by making the UNCRC one of the main capabilities within Curriculum for Excellence, it will become a requirement to listen to young peoples’ voices and include them in processes that affect them, thereby closing the feedback loop and ultimately offering a de facto space for young people to engage and contribute in a meaningful way.

There is perhaps no better way of increasing trust amongst stakeholders than by giving them space and allowing them to engage with and contribute to their own issues.

12.1 Independent inspection has an important role to play in scrutiny and evaluation, enhancing improvement and building capacity.

We agree with this to a degree, by acknowledging that inspections are important and have their place, but that currently they are not inclusive of a learner's voice and tend to reflect what the school deems important and not what learners deem important.

12.2 Please give examples of how you would like to see scrutiny and evaluation being carried out in future.

In terms of inspections, young people should be a part of the inspection process and be able to contribute towards them, raising issues and having a role in how solutions are approached.

For example, we had many learners tell us that often the school tends to 'scrub up' and present the school in a way that may not always be an accurate portrayal, picking students who reflect what the schools want to show and often leaving students - especially marginalised students - who do have legitimate issues that would benefit within the inspection, left waiting in the wings. Learners also noted that they typically see inspections as a "performance" and do not take them that seriously.

On this one learner said, "They tend to pick like...you know like a very specific student. Like one who looks nice and is usually getting really good grades. And I guess I get that, but then you leave all the other students, especially like students who might have a really hard time in school [agreeing to seldom-heard groups] yeah, them. Like they get left out and then maybe the teachers who aren't teaching the best or students who are struggling they are pushed to the back and they don't have their voices heard and then it just feels like why are we having inspections anyway? I think if students had an opportunity to be involved in the inspections it would look a lot different and a lot of people who don't get put in front would be able to, you know, talk about the issues they are having and maybe get them fixed. I don't know, I think we should be involved, you know?"

Involving learners within the inspection process would create higher levels of scrutiny and more legitimate evaluation. It would encourage teachers and schools to be more in touch with their learners, consistently have evaluations on progress and learning, and allow those with legitimate issues to share them with inspectorates that have an important and wide-reaching remit.