

# SQA Advisory Group Project Report



Scottish Youth Parliament  
September 2024

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- St Ambrose High School, Coatbridge
- Cults Academy, Aberdeen
- Brae High School, Shetland
- Lockerbie Academy, Lockerbie

The following young people were members of the Advisory Group 2023-24:

- Alannah Logue
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## Recommendations

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The SQA Advisory Panel make the following recommendations:

### Exams and Accessibility:

1. **Breaks and Scheduling:** Introduce short breaks during exams and avoid back-to-back scheduling to reduce stress and improve performance.
2. **Accessible Formats and Resources:** Provide digital tools like text-to-speech, video transcriptions, BSL translations, and easy-to-read materials to ensure exams are accessible to all, including students with language difficulties or disabilities.
3. **Clearer Exam Guidance:** Address confusion about exam expectations, including a better understanding of course content and available resources.
4. **Consistent Support and Equal Access:** Standardise exam support across schools and regions to ensure fairness and ensure all students have equal opportunities regardless of their background or needs.
5. **Inclusion and Mental Health:** Engage seldom-heard groups to ensure their voices shape solutions and provide more mental health support during exams to reduce anxiety.

### Pathways:

1. **Continuous Consultation and Transparency:** Maintain an ongoing dialogue with young people and involve them in decision-making regarding assessments and post-school pathways.
2. **Improve Communication on Pathways:** Provide clear, comprehensive information on university, college, apprenticeships, and work-based qualifications early in students' school journey to help them make informed decisions.
3. **Support Guidance Teachers:** Equip teachers with materials and resources to advise students on a wide range of post-school options, ensuring balanced guidance for both STEM and humanities subjects.
4. **Promote Vocational Qualifications:** Raise awareness of vocational qualifications through initiatives like a "Vocational Qualifications Week" to highlight their value and opportunities.
5. **Standardised Guidance:** Ensure consistent, quality guidance across schools to reduce disparities in the support students receive regarding post-school pathways

# Introduction

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This report provides a summary of the Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP) Advisory Group project, carried out with the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) between April 2023 and August 2024.

**The aim of this project was to support the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) to gather the views of young people from across Scotland on key issues relating to qualifications.**

Prior to 2023, SYP worked closely and constructively in partnership with the SQA on many projects, including during the COVID-19 pandemic to gather young people's voices of assessment, facilitate the SQA Learner Panel, and participate in the National Qualifications (NQ) groups in 2020, 2021, and 2022.

Between 2020 and 2022, the SQA Learner Panels comprised groups of MSYPs (Members of the Scottish Youth Parliament) who met with SQA representatives approximately monthly to discuss a range of topics identified by the SQA. While this approach offered an effective way for young people to feed their views into the SQA, evaluation and consultation with Learner Panel members found that they would like to see more opportunities for more young people to have their views heard by the SQA. As a result, the approach was changed in 2023-24 to enable wider engagement with groups of learners across Scotland.

## **The anticipated outcomes of the 2023-24 project were:**

1. Young people will have a meaningful opportunity to share their views and opinions on crucial decisions that will affect them
2. The SQA will get an accurate perspective of the views of young people from across Scotland on key issues, including from groups who might otherwise be hard to reach
3. The SQA will be perceived as a trail-blazer in the area of young people's rights and participation, in advance of the likely implementation of the legislation that will incorporate the UNCRC into domestic law next year

## **The key activities carried out to achieve the 2023-24 project objectives were:**

1. **Recruit and support an Advisory Group comprising ten Members of the Scottish Youth Parliament (MSYPs).** This Advisory Group would meet monthly and work with SQA colleagues to plan and support Learner Panel meetings. The Advisory Group would be co-chaired by two MSYPs on a rolling basis to give MSYPs an opportunity to develop their facilitation skills. The Advisory Group would also act as the Communications Subgroup, with a dedicated meeting in each quarter focusing on the topic of SQA Learner Communications.
2. **Host four Learner Panels in different geographical locations across Scotland.** Learner Panels would take place every 3-4 months, with around 20-30 young people attending each panel. Each panel was planned and facilitated by members of the Advisory Group, to ensure young people had a safe and comfortable environment in which to share their experiences with their peers. The aim of this approach was to enable a wide range of young people to give their view and opinions. SQA staff were invited to attend each Learner Panel, and following each panel, SYP staff shared a summary of the findings with the SQA.

3. **Hold an annual meeting of the Advisory Group with the SQA Executive Management Team.** The aim of these annual meetings was to present the findings and emerging themes of the overall project and allow discussion with the key decision makers within the SQA.

## Our approach

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This section describes the approach taken to achieve the agreed outcomes for this project.

### Recruit and support an Advisory Group

In line with SYP's youth-led co-design approach, all of our projects are planned, delivered, and evaluated by a working group of young people. This approach creates a safer and more comfortable space for young people to share their experiences with their peers, allowing for authentic youth voice, and ensures adults will not inaccurately represent young peoples' views.

The Advisory Group comprised ten members of the Scottish Youth Parliament (MSYPs) who were recruited through an open application process in spring 2023. The group met for the first time online for an induction and training session with SYP and SQA staff. During this session, the group received information about the project, filled in a baseline skills survey, created a group charter, and practised their facilitation skills.

When asked for one word to describe how they were feeling about this project, the majority of Advisory Group members were positive, using words such as 'optimistic', 'excited', 'empowered', and 'encouraged', while one member said they were 'cautious'.



empowered  
encouraged  
excited  
cautious  
optimistic  
intrigued

Following their initial induction, the Advisory Group met online monthly with SYP staff and SQA colleagues. The meetings featured a rotating chair system, which allowed MSYPs to develop their leadership skills. One MSYP would serve as the Chair, leading the group and asking questions, while another would serve as the Vice Chair, taking notes. Prior to each meeting, the new Chair and Vice Chair met with SYP staff to ensure they were well-prepared.

Monthly meetings focused on planning and preparing for the four Learner Panel events, and on reflecting on the outcomes from the previous Learner Panel. These meetings were supported by SQA staff, who shared insight into the topics to be discussed at each Learner Panel.

The Advisory Group also acted as a Communications Subgroup, with a dedicated meeting in each quarter focusing on the topic of SQA Learner Communications. During these meetings, the SQA presented various topics for consultation with the Advisory Group members. The topics covered at these meetings included:

- Return of Coursework and Information regarding modifications for session 2023/24.
- The SQA Learner Hub.
- MySQA website.
- SQA social media around exams.
- SQA Results service.
- The SQA corporate plan.

In January 2024, following the end of SYP's 2021-23 membership, new members of the Advisory Group were recruited through an open application process. These members replaced group members who had decided to step down when their term as MSYPs ended. The Advisory Group

met in person at SYP's projects residential event in Stirling at the end of January 2024, which brought members of various different project groups together for training and project-specific activities. At this event, the Advisory Group members developed their understanding of rights and meaningful participation, took part in training on inclusive facilitation and staying safe (basic child protection), and discussed plans for upcoming Learner Panel events.

Throughout the project, Advisory Group members were asked to fill in an evaluation survey to track their experiences. A summary of their feedback is shown in the results section.

**"I like that it feels like a true partnership - SQA Staff join our calls and listen to our views directly and then come back to us to share what they have done with our views." - Advisory Group member, November 2023**

**"The SQA Advisory Group has allowed me to become more confident and learn how to chair and co-chair better" - Advisory Group member, November 2023**

**"The meeting with the Executive Management Team was good but a little short... we weren't able to delve that deep into the conversations but hopefully they take away what we have said!" - Advisory Group member, August 2024**

**"I've loved learning and doing things that were out of my comfort zone like talking to important decision makers and leading sessions with young people on something they probably wouldn't find interesting and something that is complicated." - Advisory Group member, August 2024**

## **Host four Learner Panels in different geographical locations across Scotland.**

**The aim of the Learner Panels was to enable a wide range of young people to give their view and opinions on aspects of the SQA's work.**

Between September 2023 and June 2024, four in-person Learner Panel events were held at high schools across Scotland, in Coatbridge, Aberdeen, Shetland, and Lockerbie. Each Learner Panel was planned and facilitated by members of the Advisory Group, to ensure young people had a safe and comfortable environment in which to share their experiences with their peers.

Learners spent one period of their school day with SYP's Advisory Group members, so each session lasted around 50 minutes. Three sessions took place at each school (twelve sessions in total). On average, there were around 15 learners in each session.

At three of the four schools, one session was with S1-S2 learners, one session was with S3-S4 learners, and the third session was with S5-S6 learners. At the final school, there were no S1 learners because the panels took place after the timetable change before the summer holiday, when students had transitioned to the next year group but S1 students had not yet started at the school. At this school, one session was with S2-S3 learners, one was with S4 learners, and one was with S5-S6 learners.

The format of each Learner Panel session was similar and included a range of interactive activities to explore a range of different topics. In Coatbridge and Aberdeen, the focus was the learner journey and exams and assessments, while learners in Shetland and Lockerbie discussed work-based learning. Each session concluded with a discussion about young people's expectations for the new education body.

SQA staff were invited to attend each Learner Panel, and attended three of the four schools (they were unable to attend the visit in Shetland because of other commitments). SYP staff shared a summary of the findings with the SQA following each panel.

## Hold an annual meeting of the Advisory Group with the SQA Executive Management Team.

The aim of these annual meetings was to present the findings and emerging themes of the overall project and allow discussion with the key decision makers within the SQA.

### Executive Management Team meeting - Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> September 2023

The first meeting of SYP's Advisory Group and the SQA Executive Management Team took place on Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> September 2023. It was attended by seven MSYPs, eight members of the SQA Executive Management Team, and SYP / SQA staff involved in supporting the project. As this meeting took place before the Learner Panels started, the key agenda items at this meeting were:

- **An overview of the project.** MSYPs spoke about how the project has changed following the evaluation of SYP's previous Learner Panels and outlined the plans for the 2023-24 project.
- **Meaningful youth participation.** MSYPs gave a presentation about SYP's *The Right Way*<sup>1</sup> project and facilitated elements of youth-led meaningful participation training, including exploring the Lundy model of participation through interactive activities.
- **Recommendations for Scotland's new education body.** MSYPs concluded the session by highlighting their top five recommendations, developed through discussions between the previous years' Learner Panel members and the SQA. *See Appendix 1 for the Advisory Group's recommendations.*

### Executive Management Team meeting - Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> August 2024

The second meeting of SYP's Advisory Group and the SQA Executive Management Team took place on Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> August 2023. It was attended by eight MSYPs, members of the SQA Executive Management Team, and SYP / SQA staff involved in supporting the project. The key agenda items at this meeting were:

- **Reflections from the SQA since the previous meeting with the Executive Management Team:** MSYPs gave an overview of the activities they have been involved in since the 2023 meeting. SQA CEO, Fiona Robertson and other members of EMT then spoke about the actions SQA has taken as a result of their work with SYP this year.
- **Themes from Learner Panels:** MSYPs gave presentations on the three main themes that had emerged from the four Learner Panels and from the Advisory Group's monthly meetings. These were **Pathways, Exams and Qualifications, and Accessibility.**

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<sup>1</sup> *The Right Way* is a project run by the Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP) and funded by the Scottish Government's Children's Rights Unit. It aims to support and challenge officials and decision-makers, as duty bearers, to work to ensure young people's UNCRC Article 12 right is respected. More information and resources are available at: <https://www.therightway.scot/>



- **Next steps.** MSYPs and members of the Executive Management Team were split into breakout groups to discuss the three themes from the Learner Panels. They discussed the following questions:
  - How do you think young people should be involved in addressing the issues highlighted?
  - How can we make sure these topics are prioritised within the new education body.
  - How will you [SQA] feed back to the schools that have been involved in the Learner Panels?

After the group discussions, attendees were invited to share feedback on their discussions. *A summary of this feedback is shown in Appendix 6.*

# Results

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This section summarises the key findings from the four Learner Panels.

## Learner Panel Findings

Four Learner Panels took place between September 2023 and June 2024. A summary of the findings from each Learner Panel are outlined in this section. *More detailed information is outlined in Appendices 2-5.*

### Awareness of the SQA

- Overall, students in all Learner Panels were not aware and/or did not understand what the SQA is or does, but many learners said they wanted to know more.
- Older students were more aware of the SQA, with greater understanding of the organisation's role in relation to exams and assessments.

### Learner journey and post-school pathways

- Learners in all year groups commented on the need for information to be given in different formats and for more support with studying, and for uniform policies to be less strict.
- Learners in different year groups focused on different aspects of their learner journey:
  - S1-S2 students focused on the transition into high school. They would like to see more support which lasts for longer, more clubs and support with making friends. They don't want to learn about exams until they are in S2, but would like revision booklets, clearer guidance on what to practice, and information which is shared with learners and their parents.
  - S3-S4 students felt there was a big jump in expectations on them between S3 and S4, and they would have liked more study support earlier in high school, with information given in a range of different formats. Learners would have liked more information and taster sessions on subjects they hadn't previously studied. They would also like the opportunity to give feedback to teachers more often, and to give input on their experiences. Some learners in this group felt they had been particularly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic when transitioning to high school and indicated they would have liked more support with this.
  - S5-S6 students focused primarily on exams and assessments. Lack of support with studying was a prominent theme across all S5-S6 groups, with learners saying they would like more support with exams and throughout school. Learners in this group said they would like more revision materials and online guided revision resources. They also made a number of suggestions regarding the timings and strictness of exams, and about the appeals process. Some students indicated that they sometimes have to travel to a different school or college because their school does not offer a broad range of subjects. This can impact learners' education in a range of ways. Some learners said S5 was difficult because they felt there was too much information to fit into a short time period, and this created an unfair system which

puts too much pressure on students. Learners also felt the UCAS application process was rushed, and they didn't have information early enough to help them make informed decisions. Similarly to the S3-S4 group, learners in this group would like to be able to give feedback to teachers more often, and to be consulted on their education and curriculum content more regularly.

- In relation to post-school awards and pathways, the majority of learners were unaware of the options available to them, and almost all learners were not aware of work-based learning opportunities.

### **Exams and qualifications**

- Overall, learners used negative words to describe the current exam and assessment system.
- Older learners indicated they feel significant pressure to do well in exams and assessments, and that this leads to nervousness and anxiety.
- Learners want exams and assessments to be a more positive experience which is less pressurised and more interesting to motivate them to learn.
- Learners would like their grades to be less focused on exams as a test of their ability to memorise information. They would like more focus on ongoing assessment across their time in high school.

### **The new education body**

- Communication was a common theme across the Learner Panels. Learners would like the new education body to have better communication with learners, using a range of different resources and communication methods.
- Learners would like the new education body to focus more on ongoing assessment and changing the exam format
- Learners would also like the new education body to have a more inclusive appeals system which centres young peoples' rights.

# Appendices

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## Appendix 1: Executive Management Team (EMT) meeting - Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> September 2023

### Recommendations for Scotland's new education body

The following five recommendations were shared with the SQA Executive Management Team at their meeting with SYP's Advisory Group on Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> September 2023:

**Continuous improvement and feedback loops:** SQA should continuously be evaluating their effectiveness with learners, and there shouldn't have to be a once in a lifetime reform. Learners are the people who are most impacted, so it is essential to feedback to them where their views and ideas are going and how they are being used. It is also essential that young people are involved in discussions from the earliest stages.

**Curriculum:** The school curriculum should include inclusive language and learning which supports all learners to develop vital life skills, rather than just focusing on specific subject learning. The curriculum should also create a more even playing field for all learners.

**Youth-led approach:** The SQA should understand the importance of a youth-led approach and should incorporate the principles of *The Right Way* into their consultations to ensure engagement with young people is accessible, inclusive, and meaningful.

**Clear, effective communication when consulting young people:** The SQA should ensure direct consultation of young people, particularly those with lived experience from seldom heard groups, is informing their work on an ongoing basis. Any decisions that are made need to be communicated to learners, teachers, and guidance teachers at the earliest opportunity. Communication needs to be clear, making sure everyone understands what is happening to their learning from the beginning. Accessible information is essential for all learners, and learners should know where to find it.

**Empathic approach:** The SQA should take an empathic approach to appeals and exceptional circumstances, recognising the pressure these processes can put on young people's health and wellbeing.

## Appendix 2: Learner Panel 1 - St Ambrose High School, Coatbridge.

Three sessions were carried out, with S1-S2 students in the first group, S3-S4 students in the second group, and S5-S6 students in the third group. The three topics discussed at this panel were:

- The learner's journey.
- Exams and assessments.
- The new education body.

### *The Learner's Journey*

In each session, participants were separated into groups of 3-4 learners and were asked to draw a timeline highlighting significant moments that happened during their time at school and potential solutions that could help learners along this journey.

The main theme that emerged in the S1-S2 group was **transition between P7 and S1**. They wanted teachers to allow **more time for learners to settle into a routine**. This group also wished for a **longer time with guides** (older learners who show them around the school) to find their way around the school. They also wished for the school to have **better signage** for their first few weeks at school. All groups said that they **did not want to learn about exams until S2**. S1 was a time for making friends and trying our subjects.

The S3-S4 groups spoke about the **lack of help and support during the pandemic**, in their early years of school. They wished more support had been provided at the start to make it easier to engage in schoolwork and develop friendships. One group highlighted the challenges they were finding in S4 - **they experienced a big jump from S3 to National 5 studies**. They started to receive study support in S4 but had wished this had been offered in earlier years. Across all groups there was a **lack of understanding of the SQA** and knowledge of what the organisation, and they wished they had known more.

The S5-S6 groups focused more on studying and exams than other groups. They wished for **more support throughout their exam periods**. All groups talked about how they have/are finding S5 to be a struggle. This is because they found that there is too much information to fit into the short time periods. Appeals were another theme discussed by this group. **The key word used to describe the current system was 'unfair'**. They believed that **appeals should have been made better available**. They also felt like there was no consistency. Lack of support emerged as a consistent theme, and students **wished they had received more support throughout their time in school**.

### *Exams and Assessments*

In each session, students were separated into groups of four or five. They were asked to consider and write down 'what words come to mind when you think about the current SQA exams and assessments system?' They were then asked 'What words **should** come to mind when you think about exams and assessments?'

When discussing what words come to mind when students think about the current SQA exams and assessments system, all age groups responded with **negative** words. Whilst different words were used between different learner stages and groups, one theme that repeatedly came up was anxiety and nervousness. The learners said **the life-changing nature of exams and**

assessments created significant pressure on them to perform well. Other words used included: **scary, hard, complicated, terrifying, study, nervous.**

When discussing words that **should** come to mind when students think about exams and assessments, overall the words that were used were more **positive**, such as: **easier, happy, and enjoyable.** Learners highlighted the **need for alternative assessments** as one of the means to change towards these positive words. Allowing students to do oral exams or having ongoing assessments throughout the year could result in less pressure on learners and allow for more time. They also said that **assessments should be interesting to motivate them.** Multiple groups also suggested study skills and cheat sheets to **move exams away from memory exercises.**

### *The new education body*

In each session, students were split into small groups and were asked to consider a new education board to replace the SQA, including the name, how the body would communicate and give feedback, and forms of assessment. Each group then presented their ideas in a 'Dragon's Den' style presentation.

A common theme throughout the age groups was communication. They wanted the new education body to have **better communication with learners.** A range of different ideas were presented for this, such as social media posts, booklets, emails and texts. They also wished for the new education body to set up **in-person and online events** which different year groups and learners would be able to attend to find out information on different topics.

Learners wanted to make sure everyone would **know all about exams from S2 onwards.** The S1-S2 group believed everyone should receive assessment results through **text message and email.** Other year groups wanted the **time results would be announced to be known before the day** of results rather than having to wait all morning for the message. Older years also highlighted that all groups wanted to be able to opt into a service where they could **get exam scripts back.**

S3 and up wanted there to be **more communication between subjects.** This means that assessments would be set so that learners had time between assessments rather than all subject deadlines happening at the same time.

**Alternatives to exams** were another theme that was highlighted throughout all age groups. Learners wanted more alternatives to exams, including more focus on alternative assessments and more opportunity for appeals. They also wanted **exams to have a different format** and to be less formal. This could include being able to take breaks, to leave when they have finished the exam paper, and to be able to take notes into exams. This would also stop exams from being solely memory tasks.

Students also wanted the new education body to have an appeals system which is more inclusive and centred around young peoples' rights.

## Appendix 3: Learner Panel 2 - Cults Academy, Aberdeen.

As with the first Learner Panel, three sessions were carried out, with S1-S2 students in the first group, S3-S4 students in the second group, and S5-S6 students in the third group. The themes and activities carried out at this Learner Panel were developed using evaluation from the previous panel, to ensure the questions and activities were more meaningful for each age group.



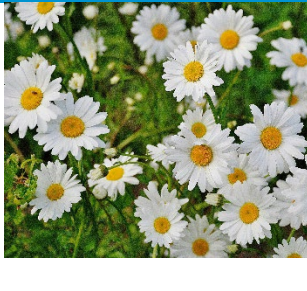
The topics discussed at this panel were:

- The learner's journey.
- Exams and assessments.
- Pathways after school (S5-S6 only)

### *The Learner's Journey*

In each session, participants were separated into groups of 3-4 learners. Learners were shown a selection of images and asked to interpret these to represent their time at school. Learners were then asked to discuss solutions to create better support at school.

The images learners most selected are shown below, with comments from learners about why they chose these images.

	<p><b>Picture One: Rocks</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Different levels piled on top, gets heavier at the top.</li><li>• Rocks are hard, and school seems very hard.</li><li>• One mistake and all the work comes toppling down.</li><li>• All the work piling up.</li></ul>
	<p><b>Picture Two: Green, lightbulb</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Brain and knowledge growing and becoming vaster.</li><li>• Ideas and knowledge growing slowly.</li></ul>
	<p><b>Picture Three: Flowers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How teachers see school compared to students.</li></ul>



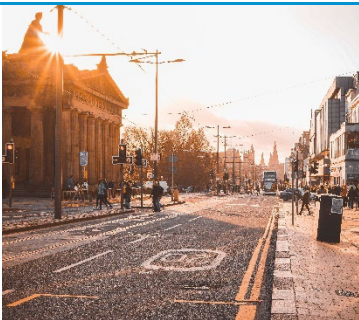
***Picture Four: Statue with Plants***

- Brain explodes with the knowledge you have to learn - overwhelming.
- Filling up with knowledge.
- Ideas sprouting.



***Picture Five: Person opening book***

- People know they have to remember books upon books.
- Feels when you're not given enough time for tests.
- Deciding what subjects to prioritise.



***Picture Six: Landscape, with sunset***

- A long road with clear skies is the calm before the storm of exams. The road represents the journey ahead of learning, before the stress and pressure of exams.
- Rewarding, end of school.



## Exams and Assessments

In each session, students were separated into groups of four or five. Each group was asked to draw an outline of a backpack. On the inside of the backpack, learners were asked to draw or write the support they already have, and on the outside of the backpack they were asked to draw or write the support they haven't got but would need.

Each year group was asked to consider slightly different questions:

<b>S1-S2: What support do you need for the first couple of years at high school?</b>	
<b>Inside the backpacks (support we already have)</b>	<b>Outside the backpacks (support we need that we haven't got)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transitions days</li> <li>• Early lunches</li> <li>• Footballs - more equipment</li> <li>• More help with tests</li> <li>• Guides around school - with the guides for longer - S6 Buddies</li> <li>• Some Sports clubs for S1</li> <li>• Friends - making friends can be hard but it is important in S1</li> <li>• Support groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Better food</li> <li>• Revision booklets - questions to know what section to practice</li> <li>• Uniform - no blazers, but black hoodies</li> <li>• Uniforms are annoying to wear in corridors.</li> <li>• Separation of sports, gives girls more opportunities and gives them more confidence</li> <li>• Give information out to both parents and kids</li> </ul>

<b>S3-S4: What support do you need for learning and to help you pick subjects?</b>	
<b>Inside the backpacks (support we already have)</b>	<b>Outside the backpacks (support we need that we haven't got)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explaining what secondary school was like in primary school.</li> <li>• Explaining what each subject was.</li> <li>• Variety of subjects - a wide range of subjects.</li> <li>• Made friends by this point.</li> <li>• More flexibility.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More information on subjects that they had not already experienced. This could include taster days</li> <li>• More Support: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Support Teachers - more variations of pupil support teachers.</li> <li>○ Study Help - Different ways to give information, not just writing it all down.</li> <li>○ Feedback - give space to students to give opinions on their teachers more often, and the chance to give input (more days like this where they can speak about their experiences)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Less strict around uniform.</li> </ul>

<b>S5-S6: What support do you need for exams and assessments?</b>	
<b>Inside the backpacks (support we already have)</b>	<b>Outside the backpacks (support we need that we haven't got)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge about pathways.</li> <li>• Nat 5's are over two years, gives more chances to learn the course.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nat 5 results are after you've picked subjects which can affect what subjects you should/can take.</li> <li>• Subjects</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Narrow range of subjects actually at the school, and often have to travel.</li> <li>○ College is not accessible to everyone (because of travel / cost), yet seen as a positive. There's not as much support at college, but also missing out on other periods and teachers are supportive. Students might also have other responsibilities.</li> <li>● UCAS - Rushed application and there was no early information.</li> <li>● Feedback <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Teachers need to be regularly evaluated, and pupils need to be spoken to.</li> <li>○ Be able to block emails they no longer want to be subscribed to.</li> <li>○ Have more access to teachers.</li> <li>○ Have more access to SQA, providing in-person feedback sessions.</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Studying <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ More revision materials made by SQA, separated into sections, even if there are no past papers available.</li> <li>○ Guided revision online - website hub.</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Exams <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Have them in the afternoon, early morning is hard to prepare for.</li> <li>○ Less strict, should be allowed to take food in, have breaks, less formal.</li> <li>○ Appeals - should be revisited by SQA and their preference is that the former appeals process should be reinstated.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
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### *Pathways after school*

This activity was only carried out with the S5-S6 group. Learners were asked to consider the following questions:

- What pathways do they know about?
- Do they think they have a true understanding of each option?
- Do they know about minimum wages and wages of apprentices?

In response to these questions, learners discussed the following topics:

**Lack of Knowledge:** there has not been enough information on the different pathways that a student can take after school. Some S5 learners did not know what UCAS was, and S6 students believed the application process should be spread out more. If a wider range of careers were talked about it would help students be able to make better informed career decisions.

**Wider Access:** Learners would like improved options on subject choices, and not to be forced to take certain subjects such as English and Maths.

**Life Skills:** Learners across all groups wished that they had been taught life skills like CV writing, taxes etc. They felt these skills would have been much more useful for their future pathways. Learners also agreed they had no idea what their working rights were, and what the minimum wage or apprentice wages are.

**Lack of consistency:** Learners agreed that often their support for pathways would be down to luck as different teachers give different support. Some learners said their teachers act as if it is a tick box exercise, while others actually try to help.

## Appendix 4: Learner Panel 3 - Brae High School, Shetland.

Three sessions were carried out, with S1-S2 students in the first group, S3-S4 students in the second group, and S5-S6 students in the third group. The themes and activities carried out at this Learner Panel focused on:

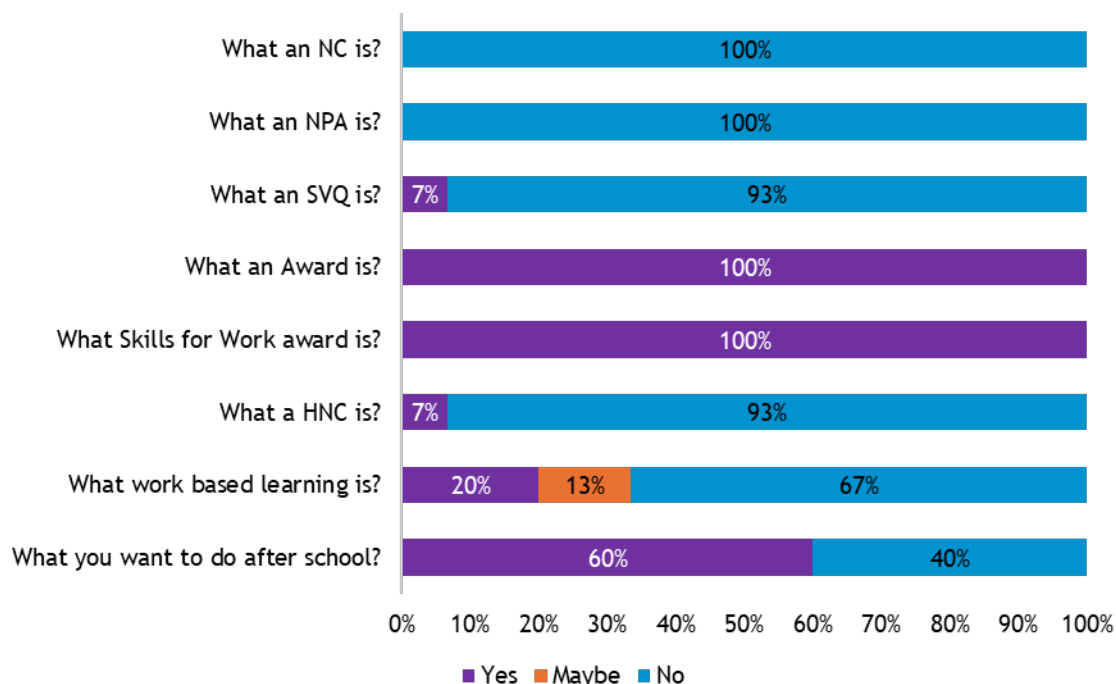
- Work-based learning.
- The new education body.

### *Work-based learning*

In each session, learners were asked to stand in the middle of the room. One side of the room represented ‘yes’ and the other side represented ‘no’. Facilitators read out a series of statements and learners were asked to move to one side of the room or the other. If they were unsure, they could stay in the middle of the room.

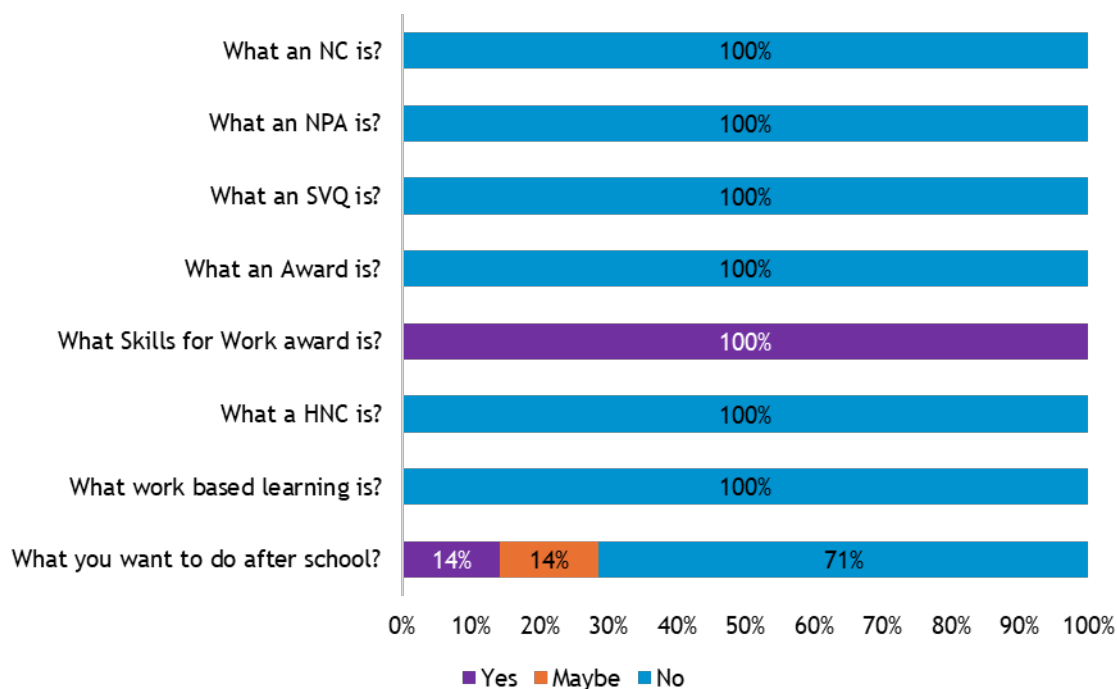
Overall, all the older students (S5-S6) said they knew what an award is and what the Skills for Work award is, and the majority (60%) said they knew what they wanted to do after school. Conversely, none of the older students knew what an NC [National Certificate] or an NPA [National Progression Award] is, and only 7% of the older students knew what an SVQ [Scottish Vocational Qualification] or an HNC [Higher National Certificate] is. Whilst one fifth (20%) of the older students knew what work-based learning is, 13% were unsure, and 67% did not know.

### *S5 - S6: Do you know...*



While the oldest students in this group were aware of some awards available to them, the majority of S3-S4 learners were less confident. None of the students knew about any of the awards discussed, with the exception of the Skills for Work Award, which all students were aware of. In this group, only 14% of learners knew what they want to do when they leave school, and 14% said they maybe knew what they want to do when they leave school.

### S3 - S4: Do you know...



Following this, students were asked to match each of the awards listed in this activity to the SQA definitions of each. All learners found this extremely difficult, with only one group being able to match more than one definition to the correct award.

### Defining work-based learning

All groups were given the SQA descriptions of work-based learning (see table below), and learners were asked to reword these descriptions in a way that they would use when discussing work-based learning with their friends and family.

SQA term	SQA descriptions
Work preparation learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Designed for individuals who are preparing to enter work.</li> <li>It focuses on developing positive attitudes and building employability skills.</li> <li>It may include experience and assessment in a realistic working environment, such as a greenhouse in a college, or a workplace.</li> <li>Qualifications are developed with representation from industry and assessed by a teacher or lecturer.</li> <li>An example would be a National 5 Skills for Work Engineering qualification.</li> </ul>
Work related learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It focuses on a defined set of skills related to a specific job and links to occupational standards (these are what employers say you need to do the job).</li> <li>It includes learning in the workplace and may include some assessment in the workplace too.</li> <li>Developed in partnership with employers and industry experts.</li> <li>Assessed by a teacher or lecturer with relevant subject knowledge.</li> <li>Examples would be a Professional Development Award (PDA) in Office Administration.</li> </ul>

Workplace learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learners are in a role in the workplace, so all or most learning and assessment happens in the workplace.</li> <li>• It focuses on a defined set of skills related to a specific job and links to occupational standards (these are what employers say you need to do the job).</li> <li>• Developed in partnership with employers and industry experts.</li> <li>• Assessed by a qualified assessor with relevant subject knowledge.</li> <li>• An example would be a Scottish Vocational Qualification (SVQ) in Hospitality Management for a Restaurant manager.</li> </ul>
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Learners said:

- They understand that this type of learning takes place out of schools.
- SQA should support teachers so all pupils get the same information.
- It's kind of like an apprenticeship, but they couldn't differentiate between the three different types. The work-related learning and work preparation learning options are too similar - there should be more difference between the definitions.
- They would like clearer definitions and for the definitions to be in more young-person-friendly language.
- They like that there are different categories.
- They would like more information about:
  - The difficulty of the course.
  - How the course is assessed.
  - The age you would take the course.
  - How long the qualification takes.
  - Step-by-step guidance on how to apply.
  - How taking part in one of the options would affect their future.
  - What jobs can come from taking part.

### *The new education body*

In each session, students were asked to imagine they could wave a magic wand to create a new education body, and to consider what would they want this to look like. Learners across the three sessions focused particularly on exams and assessments, appeals, and on information and communications.

**Exams and assessments:** Learners would like exams to be spread out so they only have one exam per day. Some students said they felt exam conditions are intimidating, and don't help them feel comfortable. They would their overall grades to be less focused on one final exam, and more focused on ongoing assessment which can show a better representation of their learning and are not based on a test of their memories. Some learners said they would like **invigilators to have better training and clearer standardised expectations** to make sure invigilators are not talking or using their phones during exams.

**Appeals:** Some learners said appeals should include their prelim marks and previous work as they felt remarking of exam papers does not always give a fair representation of their learning over the course. One student gave an example of an appeal in which their remarked exam paper went up by two bands, which damaged their trust that other grades were correct.

**Information and communications:** Learners would like to receive more information from and about the SQA. Some suggested information should be given in person and online, and that QR codes could be used to give the option of links to extra information.

## Appendix 5: Learner Panel 4 - Lockerbie Academy, Lockerbie.

Three sessions were carried out, with S2-S3 students in the first group, S4 students in the second group, and S5-S6 students in the third group. The themes and activities carried out at this Learner Panel focused on:

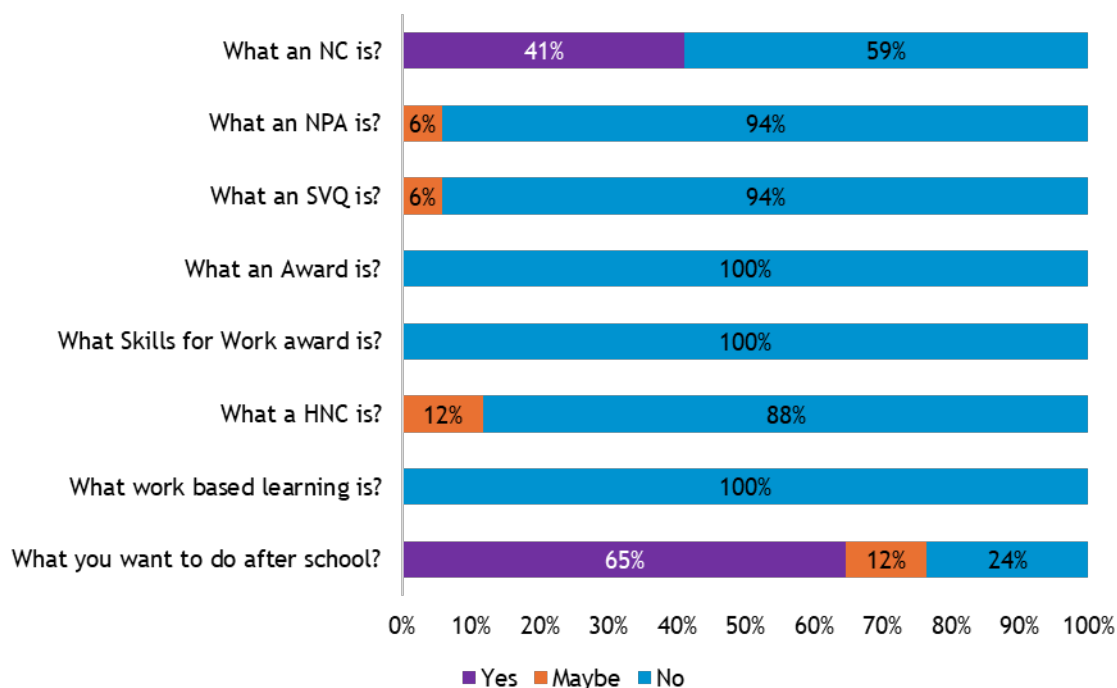
- Work-based learning.
- The new education body.

### *Work-based learning*

In each session, learners were asked to stand in the middle of the room. One side of the room represented ‘yes’ and the other side represented ‘no’. Facilitators read out a series of statements and learners were asked to move to one side of the room or the other. If they were unsure, they could stay in the middle of the room.

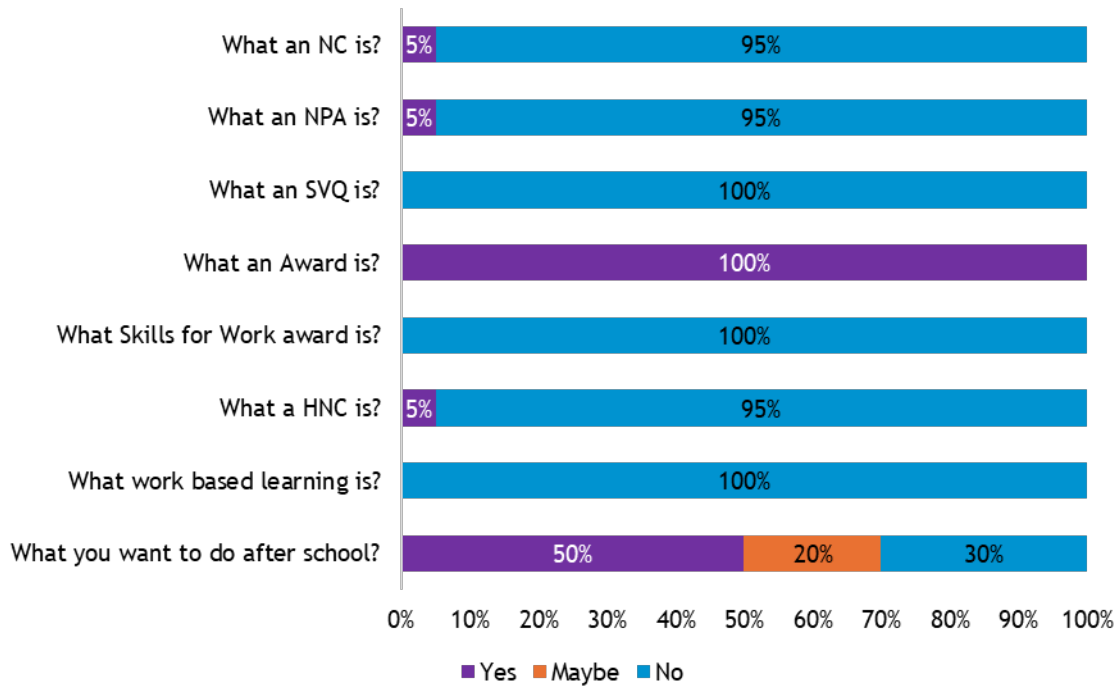
Overall, none of the youngest students (S2-S3) knew what an Award is, what the Skills for Work award is, or what work-based learning is. Only 6% of learners in this group (one student) said they maybe knew what the NPA [National Progression Award] or an SVQ [Scottish Vocational Qualification] are, and 12% of learners said they maybe knew what an HNC [Higher National Certificate] is. Although 41% said they knew what an NC [National Certificate] is, all said they thought this referred to National 5s. In this group, two-thirds of learners knew what they want to do after school (65%) and 12% said they maybe knew.

### *S2 - S3: Do you know...*



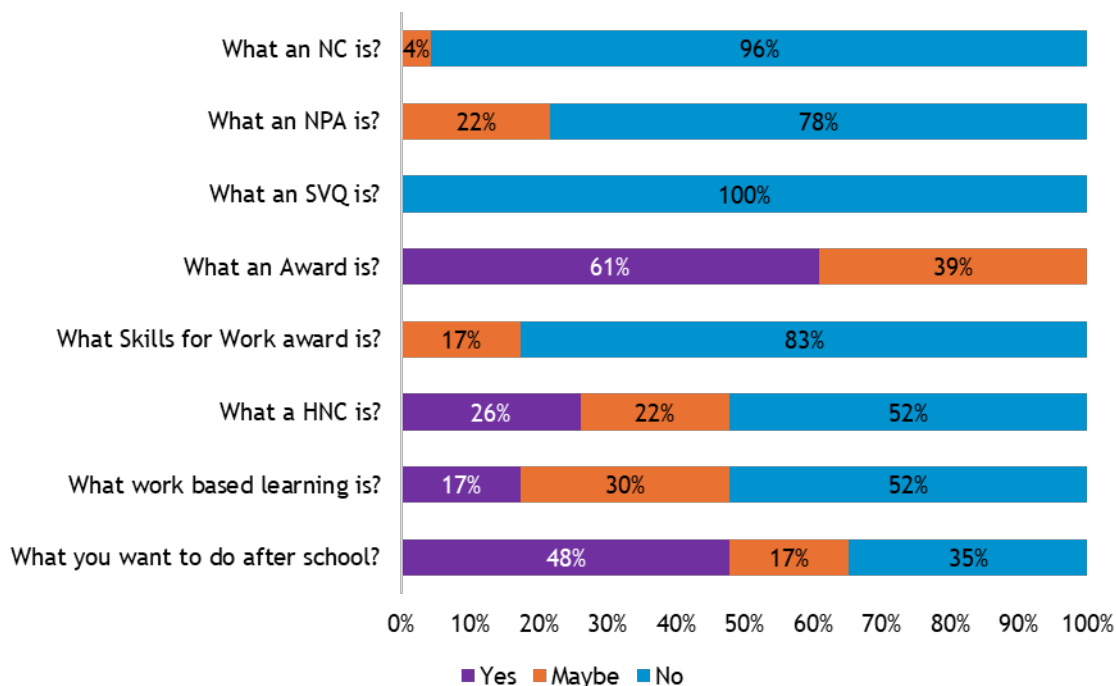
Similarly to the S2-S3 group, the majority of S4 learners were not aware of any of the awards available to them, although 5% (one learner) said they knew what the NC, NPA, and HNC are. Unlike the younger year groups, all learners in S4 said they knew what an Award is, although discussion during the session suggested they understood the concept of awards in general rather than being able to name any specific SQA-related awards. In this group, half of learners knew what they want to do after school, and one fifth said they maybe knew.

S4: Do you know...



Learners in the S5-S6 group had a more mixed understanding of the different awards available to them. The majority of learners (61%) said they knew what an award is, and the rest said they maybe knew. While none of these learners knew what an SVQ is, and only 4% (one learner) maybe knew what an NC is, around one fifth said they maybe knew about NPA and the Skills for Work award. Slightly more learners knew (26%) or maybe knew (22%) what an HNC, although over half did not know. Similarly, 17% knew and 30% maybe knew what work-based learning is. Of this oldest age group, one third of learners (35%) did not know what they want to do after school, while nearly half (48%) did know, and 17% said they maybe know.

S5 - S6: Do you know...





## Defining work-based learning

All groups were given the SQA descriptions of work-based learning (see table below), and learners were asked to reword these descriptions in a way that they would use when discussing work-based learning with their friends and family.

SQA term	SQA descriptions
Work preparation learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Designed for individuals who are preparing to enter work.</li> <li>• It focuses on developing positive attitudes and building employability skills.</li> <li>• It may include experience and assessment in a realistic working environment, such as a greenhouse in a college, or a workplace.</li> <li>• Qualifications are developed with representation from industry and assessed by a teacher or lecturer.</li> <li>• An example would be a National 5 Skills for Work Engineering qualification.</li> </ul>
Work related learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It focuses on a defined set of skills related to a specific job and links to occupational standards (these are what employers say you need to do the job).</li> <li>• It includes learning in the workplace and may include some assessment in the workplace too.</li> <li>• Developed in partnership with employers and industry experts.</li> <li>• Assessed by a teacher or lecturer with relevant subject knowledge.</li> <li>• Examples would be a Professional Development Award (PDA) in Office Administration.</li> </ul>
Workplace learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learners are in a role in the workplace, so all or most learning and assessment happens in the workplace.</li> <li>• It focuses on a defined set of skills related to a specific job and links to occupational standards (these are what employers say you need to do the job).</li> <li>• Developed in partnership with employers and industry experts.</li> <li>• Assessed by a qualified assessor with relevant subject knowledge.</li> <li>• An example would be a Scottish Vocational Qualification (SVQ) in Hospitality Management for a Restaurant manager.</li> </ul>

Learners said:

- They understood that these options are developed and delivered in partnership with employers.
- They felt this opportunity could help young people develop skills for a specific job and to increase their learning in a workplace.
- The definitions felt overwhelming. They should use simpler language which is more accessible to young people.
- There should be more examples of what these options look like in reality.
- They would like more information about:
  - The difficulty of the course.
  - How the course is assessed, and the balance between theory and practical assessments.
  - How long the qualification takes and how many hours would be involved.
  - What jobs can come from taking part.

Learners were shown a set of resources relating to work-based learning and were asked to discuss what they would keep, what they would change, and what they would get rid of.

Learners said:

- There should be an easy read or simplified version.
- The documents were dark, boring and dull. They would like to see more colour and images.
- There was too much text, and the writing was too small.
- The documents had a weird layout and looked a lot like a PowerPoint presentation.
- They would like to see a link or QR code to take them to a webpage with more information.

### ***The new education body***

In each session, students were asked to imagine they could wave a magic wand to create a new education body, and to consider what would they want this to look like. Learners across the three sessions focused particularly on the range of subjects and activities; exams and assessments; and support for learning.

**Range of subjects and activities:** Younger learners said they enjoy the mixture of different subjects they have at high school, but they would like more interactive and outdoor learning, and less homework. Older learners said all students should have their own digital devices and there should be more interactive learning based on real-life examples.

**Exams and assessments:** Learners felt assessments should be more representative of their learning, and that students should be able to take qualifications at their own speed. They suggested their overall grades should be determined through multiple assessment routes, including exams and course work. They would like more time to complete exams, with a toilet / snack break during the exam time. Some learners said it takes too long for exam papers to be marked and for their results to be communicated. Some learners said they would like invigilators to have more training.

**Support for learning:** Some learners said they would like the SQA to provide more information and revision materials that all schools can use because students don't want to be reliant on their teachers.

## Appendix 6: Executive Management Team (EMT) meeting - Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> August 2024

### SQA reflections since the previous Advisory Group meeting with the Executive Management Team:

- A new education body, Qualifications Scotland, has been proposed with:
  - A Learner Committee to inform decision making.
  - A Learners Charter, outlining clear expectations from the organisation to learners.
- SQA has been improving feedback, for instance through the appeals process.
- SQA has clarified communications around what they've done and why. For instance, they carried out a recent consultation with learners about what set texts they want to have in their English classes. Additionally, their Communications team was recognised at a recent Marketing Awards for their campaign doing outreach with learners.
- This is the final Learner Advisory group meeting under SYP's leadership. SQA expressed a big thanks to this group in ensuring learner voice is threaded through everything SQA does. A new stakeholder group is now convening to think through learner engagement now and into the future.

### Summary of Advisory Group presentations:

- **Pathways**

When speaking about pathways, one young person said:

*“Most learners we spoke to have no knowledge about work-based qualifications and the pathways they can lead to, but they also said they want to know more about these pathways, and many showed interest in taking this type of qualifications. Some learners suggested this information be shared earlier in their school journey to make their BGE [Broad General Education] years feel more relevant to their career choices.”*

- **Exams and Qualifications**

On exams, young people fed back the challenges they experience in taking exams, including the impact on their mental health. In the meeting with SQA officials, one young person said:

*“The pressure put on them can be overwhelming with an inconsistent amount of support provided pupil to pupil, school to school, and local authority to local authority. This can make the process extremely daunting for young people, especially if it is their first time working towards qualifications and exams. Throughout our in-person panels learners have been extremely eager to share their thoughts and opinions on a plethora of issues however exams and qualifications is one that has come up more often than not.”*

- **Accessibility**

On accessibility, young people fed back that they heard a number of issues young people could experience which disadvantaged them in their exams. In the EMT meeting, one young person said:

*“Another key issue we heard about was the format of exams. Many students, particularly those who struggle with reading or writing, or for whom English isn't their first language, found*

*digital formats to be a lifeline. Tools like text-to-speech software or video transcriptions can be incredibly empowering.”*

## Summary of Advisory Group and EMT discussions in breakout rooms:

- **Pathways:**

SQA representatives acknowledged that the pathways landscape can be complicated but highlighted that lots of different education establishments deliver different types of qualifications. However, they recognised that most young people primarily engage with pathways through schools, and that information about the range of options might not be accessible to young people.

The group discussed potential links with Skills Development Scotland and with careers and guidance teachers to simplify the information and access to the range of qualifications on offer. They also discussed creating more accessible information to help parents understand the options to enable them to support their young people.

SQA representatives outlined that pathways are a priority for the new education body, and they are engaging with learners about progression routes to ensure parity of esteem. MSYPs agreed that this is important, but asked SQA to ensure the discussion includes young people who need clearer information about the options to enable them to be part of the conversation.

An SQA representative said “I don't think there's a finishing line for this stuff. It's an ongoing piece of work for us to do.”

- **Exams and Qualifications**

SQA representatives noted that they try to avoid scheduling lots of exams on the same day, and that they have learned from previous qualifications uptake to avoid scheduling clashing exams in future years. They indicated they talk to a range of stakeholders, including young people to make this as effective as possible, but with approximately 20,000 different combinations it can be difficult to avoid conflicts.

In relation to the range of support available from SQA, representatives recognised that it is important for the support available to be clear. However, they felt that if SQA was more involved in supporting preparation for exams they would be stepping on the toes of other organisations they work with, which could cause tension. They felt it is important to signpost to sources of support, and to ensure signposting is available in places young people can easily engage with it.

The group discussed how to feedback to the schools who were involved in this project, and to schools more widely. SQA indicated that going forward they plan to engage with young people in the spaces they are in, and not just in SQA spaces, for instance through schools and online through social media.

- **Accessibility**

SQA representatives noted that they were struck by the points made during the presentations, but that some of the issues highlighted are not within the SQA's remit to

address. Some of the actions are for the Scottish Government, local authorities, and schools to address.

MSYPs highlighted that some young people need support to be able to access the exam process and to make sure they understand what they need to do. Accessibility includes having exams in languages they understand and in different formats. SQA responded that digital assessments can make exams more accessible for learners, but there is a need to explore how to roll this out in a way that doesn't exclude other people.

SQA representatives agreed there is a lot they want and need to do about accessibility, and that they now have an obligation to do this under the UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act. One member of the EMT said "there's a stick as well as a carrot in terms of actions around accessibility." They recognised that communication has been a major theme emerging throughout the Learner Panel discussions, and it was suggested that they needed to rebuild their communications strategies to better suit the needs of young people. EMT members also noted that the new education body plans to have accessibility at the heart of the new website, with accessibility for learners being a primary concern.

MSYPs noted that this is the final activity of the SYP-led Advisory Group, and asked the SQA to ensure there is consistency in engagement with young people following the end of this project. SQA representatives said they would like to see a Learner Advisory group that doesn't just represent a range of young people, but a range of organisations, so actions can be taken from a centralised, national level, and so learners "wouldn't have to navigate organisational boundaries".

After the Advisory Group met with the SQA Executive Management Team in August 2024, we asked EMT members who attended the meeting to fill in a short survey.

All EMT members who responded strongly agreed that they enjoyed taking part in this meetings, and that it is important for young people to take part in meetings like this.

**Respondents were asked complete this sentence: "This meeting was..."**

"Really engaging and information highlighting a number of key topics that are top priorities for learners"

"A great opportunity to hear directly from learners and their experiences and to share some of the work that we are doing."

**What takeaways have you/your organisation gathered from this meeting?**

"Members of our learner panel are as ever highly engaged and informed and put a huge amount of effort into preparations and content"

"The need to continue engaging and listening. Explanation and communication also critical"

"The need to continually communicate, engage and share what is being done and what still needs to be done"

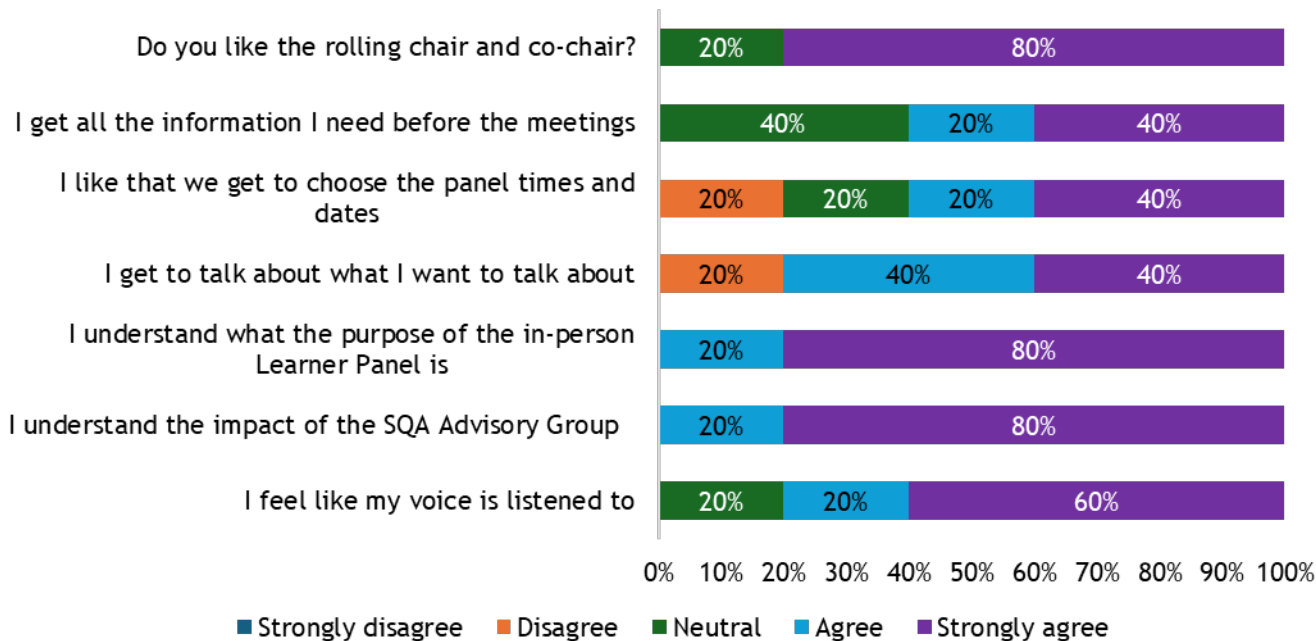
## Appendix 7: Advisory Group Members' Feedback

### Half-way through project evaluation

In November 2023, at the halfway point of the project, Advisory Group members were asked to evaluate their experiences.

All members of the group said they are enjoying the Advisory Group, but only half of the group said they were enjoying the online meetings, while the other half said they were partially enjoying the online meetings.

Group members were asked to rate the following statements:



### What do you like about the SQA Advisory Group?

“The fact that Jacqui and Claire are in the room with us and we always get an agenda well before it so we know what we will be discussing.”

“The rotating chairs, when you don't hold an additional role within SYP you can often feel left out. Good to get opportunities like this.”

“It always feels very solution focus, it is nice to have that space to vent but the activities always pull things back to finding solutions.”

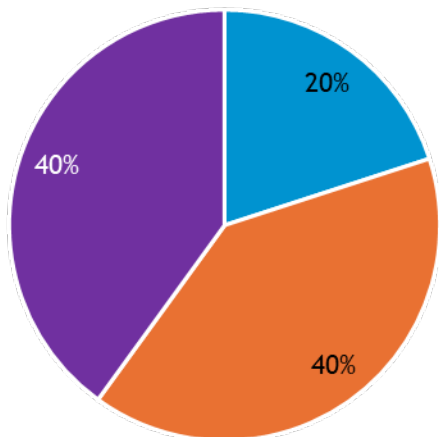
“Sometimes acronyms come up so maybe make sure if people (MSYPs or Staff) use acronyms those are being explained wherever possible.”

“I like that it feels like a true partnership - SQA Staff join our calls and listen to our views directly and then come back to us to share what they have done with our views.”

## Final project evaluation

At the end of the project, Advisory Group members were asked to fill in an online survey to share their experiences of the project.

### How did you find the Advisory Group?



■ Average ■ Good ■ Very Good

Overall, the majority of Advisory Group members said the group was 'Good' (40%) or 'Very Good' (40%).

All members of the Group strongly agreed that they enjoyed taking part in this project.

All members of the Advisory Group agreed (60%) or strongly agreed (40%) that they felt supported by SYP throughout this project, and all members of the group agreed (20%) or strongly agreed (80%) with the statement 'I would take part in another education project'.

With regards to skill development, all members agreed or strongly agreed they have developed **communication skills** (40% agree / 60% strongly agree), and **leadership skills** (80% agree / 20% strongly agree) through this project.

However, only two fifths of group members agreed (20%) or strongly agreed (20%) that they feel they have **created change** through this project. All other group members felt neutral about this statement.

All members of the group agreed with the statement 'It is important for young people to take part in projects like this.'

**Please finish this quote: 'The thing I liked most about the Advisory Group was...'**

"SQA being in the room - it felt like our voices are being listened to"

"The changing Chairs"

"Online panels were ok, but they could be better"