

FOI 202000077980 – Emma Seith – Correspondence in scope

Request:

I would be grateful if you could provide the following information under the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002.

Could you please supply me with all correspondence/advice/emails/documents/papers advising against the moderation process being put in place by the Scottish Qualifications Authority for this year's school national qualification results. Please include any correspondence/advice/emails/documents/papers sent to, or seen by, John Swinney and Nicola Sturgeon.

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Enclosure no. 1

202000070030, Adnan Ros MSYP East Lothian, 30 July, PO deadline 18 August

SQA result modifications

Good evening,

I am writing this email to you because of some rumours circulating online which seem to have merit that the SQA are modifying results based on the schools past performance along with the students home being in a deprived area or not. I sincerely hope these rumours aren't true as if they are even partly true this would be highly disgraceful, not to mention illegal. I am urging you to look into this and if you find something, solve the issue. Students have been some of the most affected by COVID and to add this on top is betraying every SQA exam taker (or would-be taker). My constituents are primarily located in high deprivation areas and attend public schools making this issue much more personal for me so again i will urge you to have an investigation into this and the SQA's method of modifying grades.

on behalf of not only my constituents but every child receiving results on the 4th who might be stuck in a cycle of poverty with no fault of theirs,
Adnan Ros MSYP East Lothian

Enclosure no.2

202000068710, [Redact 38(1)(b)], 29 July, Deadline 28 August

To- John Swinney, Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills.

Dear Mr Swinney,

My name is [Redact 38(1)(b)] and I am a [Redact 38(1)(b)] currently attending [Redact 38(1)(b)]. The reason I feel compelled to write this email is to highlight to you an article I read online in the *Glasgow Evening Times* in relation to this year's SQA exam results, and more importantly, the effects a school's historical results may have on candidates awaiting exam results this year. I know it may seem a bit naïve of me to take a newspaper article as fact, considering they are often branded as 'non reliable', however, I felt it was necessary to state my upset if this is in fact true. This is primarily because, not only has [Redact 38(1)(b)] alone shown a great leap forward in its attainment levels in recent years (even exceeding the national average!), but also to remind you of the already existing disadvantages my school already faces due to it being in a deprived area.

Speaking personally, after achieving outstanding National 5 results in August of last year, it has led me to feel discouraged as to what I will receive for this year's Higher results, as it appears I am being held accountable for [Redact 38(1)(b)] previous historical results. I can appreciate that due to the COVID-19 crisis, it has forced the SQA to take an alternative approach to grades this year. Despite this, I firmly believe that it should not be the case for results to be 'modified' based on the school's previous placement in the league table, but instead be solely based on teacher feedback and hard evidence such as prelims, assignments, class assessments and Folio work to support these predicted grades, in addition to a student's own historical grades in the sessions prior COVID-19.

Additionally, the schools highlighted in the article [Redact 38(1)(b)] all share commonalities. The main factor being they are in "deprived" areas. This means that if students are to be presented with grades lower than their potential, this could add to this poverty cycle as students may not be able to take their education further due to being unable to meet university or college requirements. Consequently, this could result in these same students having no option but put themselves into low-skilled employment, which we know comes hand-in-hand with low pay, adding to the poverty already highlighted in these areas. In stark contrast, students who are seen to be in more affluent areas remain prosperous as they have the schools' historic exam results inherited by them as a safety blanket, which could enhance the results that they perhaps would not be able to attain had they been able to sit the final SQA exams.

Mr Swinney, I acknowledge that you have stressed in previous debates that one of your key targets is to reform education in under-privileged areas. I think by re-evaluating this approach by the SQA in assessing exam results as reported in the article, and adopting my own proposals, this would be a huge step forward in your quest for reform.

Thank you for your time.

Yours sincerely,

[Redact 38(1)(b)]

Enclosure 3

202000066136, [Redact 38(1)(b)] 17 July, Deadline 18 August

SQA 2020-not closing the attainment gap.

Dear Ms Sturgeon,

As a parent, I am most perturbed to hear that the SQA are revising teachers' predicted grades for pupils without consultation with schools or transparency prior to the distribution of results. It would appear that the actions of the SQA will unfairly disadvantage pupils from schools with a higher deprivation index. This will certainly do little to close the attainment gap among our most disadvantaged young people in Scotland.

Pupils who have worked tirelessly to achieve good grades may be adversely affected by the SQA's current stance as the previous attainment of the school will have some bearing on their results not just their own attainment to date. This will be replicated across the country and will have a negative impact on a great number of our young people.

As First Minister, I would ask that you seek urgent clarification from the SQA prior to pupils' receiving their results. Teachers are professionals and their judgement, backed with supporting evidence, should be the deciding factor for pupils' results not the attainment of previous students and most certainly not their postcode.

I look forward to your response but must reiterate the urgency of this situation.

Yours sincerely,
[Redact 38(1)(b)]

Enclosure 4

202000061918, [Redact 38(1)(b)], 13 July, Deadline 11 August

Request to Mr. Swinney regarding SQA.

Dear Mr. Swinney,

I am writing, as a secondary teacher, of fifteen years' experience, to express deep concerns regarding this year's forthcoming SQA exam results. Teachers were very grateful to you for personally stepping in to end the dreadful unit system and we need your help again. The SQA have virtually no knowledge of pupil performance this year and will not mark prelims. The teachers have done all the work for them: producing deep and evidence based analysis to predict exam performance. Yet, my personal experience is that the SQA have a contempt for teacher's views and will try to undermine our judgements by significantly reducing grades on some ill-informed and inaccurate statistical analysis. As a consequence, most schools will be facing a mountain of unnecessary appeals. This bureaucratic burden is a waste of our time, a disrespect for our judgement and, as so few appeals are ever upheld by the SQA, an unfair assessment of pupil achievement.

Hence, I wonder if you would consider doing one of your impressive interventions to preclude this possibility. It would be great if the teacher's predictions were accepted except obviously with regard to *in extremis* situations. The SQA's lack of knowledge of candidates this year and their entire reliance on previous statistics on general performance and a few assignments in a minority of subjects, means that they are surely not justified in overriding or disregarding teacher's well informed judgements.

Yours sincerely

[Redact 38(1)(b)]

Enclosure 5

202000062726, Ivan McKee MSP, 13 July, PO deadline 31 July

Letter from Ivan McKee MSP

Dear Cabinet Secretary's office

Please find attached a letter from Ivan McKee, MSP.

Many thanks

Best wishes

[Redact 38(1)(b)]

[Redact 38(1)(b)]

Dear John

SQA announcement: Marking

A constituent, [Redacted - s.38(1)(b)], has written to me to share his concerns regarding the recent decision by the SQA announcement re marking.

My constituent considers that, in summary there are four major issues with this development. Rather than paraphrase, I have repeated these in full, below:

"Firstly, the SQA are going to change pupil's grades to ensure attainment is in line with "prior attainment" of that centre. This will disproportionately punish schools in more deprived communities whilst simultaneously over rewarding schools in more affluent communities. This is because the pass rate in the former is historically lower than that of the latter. This will only WIDEN the attainment gap.

"Secondly, on results day in August the SQA send out the results and refer pupils to contact their school if there are any issues. Schools of course play a critical role in supporting young people with re-coursing, identifying potential careers and general wellbeing support for pupils and families upset with their results. This will be the same in August where teachers (as ever) stand ready to support their young people.

"However, this year we will not know why pupil's grades have been changed. (E.g. a school predicted a pupil at a B but they have received a C.) This is because the SQA refuse to release their methodology of how they will actually moderate the gradings for August despite repeated requests from the Scottish Parliament Education and Skills Committee.

"This will put immense pressure on school staff creating huge workload implications of preparing SQA appeals in the first week back in August (as the deadline for appeals is the 21st August). This first fortnight back will be the first time back in school for almost 6 months for the vast majority of pupils and staff in Scotland. This will not be a valuable use of staff time in the wider context, but most teachers will feel they should appeal on a point of principle, on behalf of their pupils and to right the wrong of the injustice inflicted by the SQA's unfair system. This will create specific pressure on school leaders to either adopt blanket approaches of no appeals or appealing for every school pupil whose grade was changed or a third more nuanced approach of combing through the merits of appealing for each pupil. All three approaches have workload implications and will create stress on school, staff and parental relationships.

"Thirdly, it is widely agreed that supporting pupil well-being and mental health will be vital when we return to schooling due to the long-term effects of lockdown. In schools serving deprived communities (such as mine, where 81% of all pupils live in SIMD 1+2) these issues will be far greater in complexity and density across year groups. The SQA decision will only undermine the teacher-pupil relationship come August because pupils may likely apportion blame on to their teachers for their change in grade. For instance, if a teacher predicts a pupil to get a C but they get a fail due to an SQA change then the pupil will not see the faceless SQA but will focus on the teacher who supported them all year. This will only damage the teacher-pupil dynamic at a time when it needs to be stronger than ever, particularly in more deprived communities where there is a wealth of academic research highlighting how important positive role models are for young people in deprivation and how frequently those role models come from the young person's education.

"Finally, during lockdown, when 1000s of staff were shielding under lockdown rules and staff generally were not allowed to access their schools to keep in line with government guidance the SQA asked schools to complete the onerous task of ranking their pupils in each subject to help inform the estimates process. This has been raised already at the Education and Skills Committee ... this was time wasted if the SQA are going to change the grade anyway despite hours of teacher's efforts ensuring professional integrity and gathering evidence to support their ranking."

My constituent asks particularly about what action is being taken on behalf of the secondary pupils of Glasgow against the backdrop of the situation described above as he considers that, as deprivation is higher in Glasgow than national levels, the issues there will be amplified, compared to other local authorities.

He also asks if the Scottish Government has any plans to review the role and conduct of the SQA, both historically and during the Coronavirus pandemic?

Can you update me on the Scottish Government's current position on the issues raised above?

I look forward to hearing from you.

Many thanks

Enclosure no. 6

202000057009, Johann Lamont MSP, 2 July, PO deadline 20 July

Constituent Enquiry

Dear Cabinet Secretary

I have been contacted by teachers who are deeply concerned at recent reports that the SQA will change pupil grades for their August results without consulting with schools.

My constituents are deeply concerned with the timing of this information being released when schools across the country are closed for the summer holiday.

I attach below, for your information, the comments that I have received from constituents which outline their main concerns:

1. *The SQA is going to change pupils' grades to ensure attainment is in line with "prior attainment" of that centre. This will disproportionately punish schools in more deprived communities whilst simultaneously over rewarding schools in more affluent communities. This is because the pass rate in the former is historically lower than that of the latter. This will only WIDEN the attainment gap.*
2. *On results day in August the SQA sends out the results and refers pupils to contact their school if there are any issues. Schools, of course, play a critical role in supporting young people with re-coursing, identifying potential careers and general wellbeing support for pupils and families upset with their results. This will be the same in August where teachers (as ever) stand ready to support their young people.*

However, this year we will not know why pupil's grades have been changed. (E.g. a school predicted a pupil at a B but they have received a C.)

This is because the SQA refuses to release their methodology of how they will actually moderate the gradings for August despite repeated requests from the Scottish Parliament Education and Skills Committee.

This will put immense pressure on school staff creating huge workload implications of preparing SQA appeals in the first week back in August (as the deadline for appeals is the 21st August). This first fortnight back will be the first time back in school for almost 6 months for the vast majority of pupils and staff in Scotland. This will not be a valuable use of staff time in the wider context, but most teachers will feel they should appeal on a point of principle, on behalf of their pupils and to right the wrong of the injustice inflicted by the SQA's unfair system. This will create specific pressure on school leaders to either adopt blanket approaches of no appeals or appealing for every school pupil whose grade was changed or a third more nuanced approach of combing through the merits of appealing for each pupil. All three approaches have workload implications and will create stress on school, staff and parental relationships.

3. *It is widely agreed that supporting pupil well-being and mental health will be vital when we return to schooling due to the long-term effects of lockdown. In schools serving deprived communities, these issues will be far greater in complexity and density across year groups. The SQA decision will only undermine the teacher-pupil relationship come August because pupils may likely apportion blame on to their teachers for their change in grade. For instance, if a teacher predicts a pupil to get a*

C but they get a fail due to an SQA change, then the pupil will not see the faceless SQA but will focus on the teacher who supported them all year. This will only damage the teacher-pupil dynamic at a time when it needs to be stronger than ever, particularly in more deprived communities where there is a wealth of academic research highlighting how important positive role models are for young people in deprivation and how frequently those role models come from the young person's education.

- 4. During lockdown, when 1000s of staff were shielding under lockdown rules and staff generally were not allowed to access their schools to keep in line with government guidance, the SQA asked schools to complete the onerous task of ranking their pupils in each subject to help inform the estimates process. Why was this time wasted if the SQA is going to change the grade anyway despite hours of teacher's efforts ensuring professional integrity and gathering evidence to support their ranking? How much better that time could have been spent on creating online resources, supporting pupil well-being and planning for the potential schooling models come August.*

I share the serious concerns of my constituents that teacher awarded grades may be marked down, or up, on the basis of a school's previous attainment to the detriment of pupils from more deprived communities, including in my own region of Glasgow. The Scottish Government must ensure that the SQA fulfils its legal duties with regards to equality issues when making contingency arrangements for exams. A national plan must be delivered.

Measures being developed by the Education Recovery Group to address the poverty related attainment gap must also include new and targeted interventions. It is not enough to simply rely on the measures that were in place before the crisis.

I would welcome your comments on the concerns raised by these teachers.

Kind regards,

Johann

Johann Lamont MSP (Glasgow Region)

Enclosure no.7

202000049140, [Redact 38(1)(b)], 15 June, Deadline 15 July

SQA Exams - Mental Health

Dear Mr Swinney

I am writing as I am concerned of the potential for further significant impact on young adults mental wellness in the event that fail grades are awarded by SQA.

As you are well aware, young adults are already experiencing massive mental health impacts due to lockdown.

For example:-

- 1/ Minimal contact with friends for 3 months so far.
- 2/ Normal school leaving experiences were not possible
- 3/ Some potential career paths are now less likely- airline sector
- 4/ Summer jobs unlikely
- 5/ Parents now unemployed
- 6/ Driving lessons and tests abandoned.
- 7/ Universities unable to confirm new term arrangements
- 8/ social aspect of college or university will be different
- 9/ possibly bereavement to deal with

etc etc,

Whilst I understand the idea of maintaining the value of any awards given, any “fails” could be devastating in already almost impossible circumstances.

Many students use the period between mock exams and actual exams and in some cases use a lower result in mock exams to motivate them into a much improved performance in the final exams.

I have also read that a high number of students due to start university in September are now considering deferring for a year which will only increase competition next year in the main for students in S5 now whom I would suggest will be disproportionately impacted by the current predicted grading system

Would it not be appropriate to consider a C pass as a minimum for all candidates and use A/B/C etc to differentiate.

In the absence of the actual exams where they would have the opportunity to invest the effort and time and be rewarded accordingly this would seem to be an appropriate compromise and avoid further mental health impacts.

They need a break!!

I would welcome your thoughts.

Kind regards,

[Redact 38(1)(b)]

Enclosure no. 8

202000045371, [Redact 38(1)(b)], 4 June, Deadline 3 July

Estimated grades for SQA examinations 2020

Apologies if this email is a duplicate. I sent a copy earlier today but suspect I used the wrong address.

As a retired Principal Teacher and grandparent of an SQA candidate, I have concerns over inconsistencies in the application of rules governing estimates for SQA awards.

As an example, in April 2020, Steven Quinn, Renfrewshire's Director of Children's Services wrote to parents & guardians of SQA candidates and wrote:

"A very helpful step is the extension given for teachers and schools to finalise decisions on determining estimated grades. This will give everyone an opportunity for detailed discussions within departments and with senior leaders in schools for each pupil and for each subject.

Teachers have worked with pupils for a significant period of time and have a wealth of evidence to draw on, in order to make an accurate professional judgement of what they are capable of achieving. For each pupil and in each subject, teachers will be able to draw on evidence such as their prelim performance; assignments and coursework; classwork; homework; and class tests and assessments.

In addition, and very importantly, teachers will also draw on their experience of how a pupil progresses throughout the year and especially leading up to exams based on standard of work already completed.

This analysis will allow teachers, departments and schools to arrive at an estimated grade which best reflects the work and the progress your child has made and therefore makes a best estimate of how they might have performed in the completed coursework or folio and final exam."

My understanding is that most local authorities prepared similar parental letters & assuming the above is implemented then estimates should be accurate, however, this is not necessarily the case.

Reportedly, in some authorities, head teachers were told to moderate & modify estimates as there is a possible danger of over estimating pupil performance compared with previous results.

It appears that no consideration would be given to: the introduction of new courses where there are no comparative statistics, new teachers being more or less effective, or more importantly, pupil ability. Moreover, in some cases there has been no discussion or consultation with teachers re estimate downgrades with evidence that estimates have been moved downwards by head teachers or faculty heads & teachers being unaware of this.

Only when estimates had been submitted to SQA did teachers become aware of the lowering of estimates. This is patently unfair, discriminates against pupils & undermines the professionalism of classroom teachers who, according to the above quote, it is teachers who have worked with pupils for a significant period of time and have

a wealth of evidence to draw on, in order to make an accurate professional judgement of what candidates are capable of achieving.

These estimates are then the highest grades that can be awarded as no appeals can be lodged if the candidates receive the estimated grade. This is patently unjust & denies some candidates awards that reflect their proven ability.

The EIS is aware of the downgrading of estimates & is making enquiries. I understand the media are showing an interest & investigating how widespread is this practice. In my opinion, you & your department have to take action & this action must be taken urgently to protect pupil awards, the reputation of Scottish education & before the issue is raised by the media & within the Scottish Parliament.

[Redact 38(1)(b)]

Enclosure no.9

202000040910, [Redact 38(1)(b)], 26 May, Deadline 24 June

SQA Examinations - Moderating Results

Please find attached a letter from concerned parents in relation to the steps being used to moderate the 2020 SQA Exam results.

Kind regards

[Redact 38(1)(b)]

~

Dear Mr Swinney,

As parents of a young person who should have completed Higher examinations this year, we have concerns about the criteria being used in Step 2 of delivering the SQA National results for 2020.

Step 2 - Awarding

We will then check and validate that information. We will moderate it, if necessary, to ensure consistency across schools and colleges and with results from previous years.

We will use the information from these estimates, in addition to prior learner attainment, where this is available.

For example, if learners achieved National 5 or Higher courses, in a previous year.

We will also look at schools' and colleges' previous history of estimating and attainment in each subject and level.

We may moderate these estimates, up or down, if that is required.

This process will produce the results for learners, using our national grades for each subject and level.

In particular, we question the validity of moderating results to ensure consistency with results from previous years. Does this mean that the SQA will look at the annual performance statistics of each school over the past year(s) and adjust the results to match? If so, I would like to flag that the introduction of Foundation Apprenticeships (which were strongly promoted in our daughter's school in 2018-19) had a negative impact in the number of people obtaining five or more passes at Higher level at [Redact 38(1)(b)], last year. Many pupils chose to take four Highers alongside a Foundation Apprenticeship and therefore these pupils who otherwise would have obtained five Highers are not included in the statistics. Also not included in the statistics are pupils who are granted exceptional permission to sit Advanced Higher instead of Higher in S5. Thus the overall rating in relational to other schools in Scotland based on the percentage of pupils obtaining five (or more) Higher passes is unfairly skewed. I would also argue that the results of an individual cohort can vary substantially from previous years (this year could be an outlier) and therefore individuals should not be penalised (or rewarded) just to fit in with statistics.

The timing of prelims and the importance placed on such exams has changed over the years and the content varies from school to school. The coursework elements that should have

been marked externally would have provided a more uniform picture and hard evidence of an individual's ability, but unfortunately was deemed *unsafe* to mark officially.

Could you please address the points that we have raised above, and explain in more detail how the SQA will moderate results, even if this requires reference to advanced statistical concepts?

Yours sincerely

[Redact 38(1)(b)] & [Redact 38(1)(b)]

Enclosure no. 10

202000040897, [Redact 38(1)(b)], 25 May, Deadline 24 June

FOR THE ATTENTION OF JOHN SWINNEY

Hi John

I hope you and your family are well. Thank you for the very clear plans for schools reopening and how they have been set out. You will have noticed the public appreciate the steps you and the FM have taken.

Just a wee update on myself.

I retired as headteacher at [Redact 38(1)(b)] after 10 years when I reached my 60th birthday [Redact 38(1)(b)]. I had one day off and returned to teach physics at [Redact 38(1)(b)]. My pals all thought I was crazy, but I have thoroughly enjoyed being back in the classroom. I am currently teaching at [Redact 38(1)(b)] as my wife and I have relocated to [Redact 38(1)(b)]. 42 years and still going! In the attached document I have outlined my concerns about the SQA arrangements for 2020.

I look forward to your response.

[Redact 38(1)(b)]

~

SQA ARRANGEMENTS FOR 2020

I understand that you are currently dealing with many challenging issues. However, I felt compelled to write to you about the approach being taken by the SQA as they plan for the replacement of the examination diet for 2020. As a teacher, I have worked on many occasions for the SQA and previous examining bodies, as a marker, exam setter and a member of an examination team. I am aware of how their systems and processes work. Over the years these approaches have not significantly changed. This year for example, they intend making use of the previously used 'order of merit'.

I am acutely aware of the challenges facing the SQA in trying to provide a valid results service this session, which is fair and as you yourself have said, ensures no pupil misses out on their opportunities because of the current pandemic. One of the concerns I know the SQA have is the risk of estimates from schools being potentially inflated, as teachers assess pupils' evidence and their likely performance had there been an examination diet.

I watched the broadcast Education and Skills Committee meeting on 1 May when the CEO from the SQA was invited to attend to answer questions. I was very concerned at Fiona Robertson's inability to explain in clear and straightforward terms how the systems to be used this session would work. The Committee were clearly alerted to this from their discussions with focus groups.

It was my perception that the Committee members were also quite frustrated by the inability of the CEO to provide answers. The letter sent by the Committee on 8 May following the meeting asked for information and answers to very specific questions.

I read the reply from Fiona Robertson in her letter dated 21 May and was astonished by the response to some of the questions.

I find it incredulous that Fiona Robertson has indicated that the SQA will only publish the processes and methodology used for assessing candidate performance **AFTER** the results are published. I cannot believe they would be so disrespectful to pupils and presenting teachers/Centres. If they are confident about the rigour and robustness of their approach, why do they seem unable/unwilling to publish these now? The Committee specifically requested this be published as soon as possible.

For ease of reference I have included the detail in the exchange of correspondence on the matter:

starts

Letter from Ed Sk Comm to SQA

In the absence of the opportunity for young people to sit final exams and complete other assessments, transparency on the alternative processes is essential to instil confidence in the system being used this year. Only by being able to understand the detail of the processes to be followed can the public be assured that the system for arriving at grades will be consistent and fair. On that basis the detail of processes being followed need to be published in full as quickly as possible. A key example of this is details of the moderation process. The Committee has real concerns about the use of past performance of a school or a statistical distribution curve to inform decisions on the final grades of individuals.

Moderation

Committee position: *The Committee recommends that the methodology be published before teachers are required to submit estimates.*

Questions

- *When will the methodology used for moderation be published?*
- *Will this be published in full?*
- *Will this be in advance of teachers submitting estimates to the SQA?*
- *Or, as a minimum, will it be published in advance of students being given their grades in August?*

Letter from SQA to Ed Sk Comm

1. Moderation

Questions

1a. When will the methodology used for moderation be published?

As I outlined in my evidence to the Committee on 1 May, I would expect on Results Day this year to be very clear about the process that we have undertaken and the resulting awards that we have provided to young people. This will include the impact of any moderation process. Results Day is normally the point at which we are clear about the outcome of our awarding decisions, and we believe it should be the same this year.

1b. Will this be published in full?

Yes. We will publish full details on our approach.

1c. Will this be in advance of teachers submitting estimates to the SQA?

No.

We believe it is in the best interests of learners, if teachers and lecturers only make estimate decisions based purely on their professional judgement and their strong understanding of how their learners have performed and, based on their experience and the evidence available, what a learner would be expected to achieve in each course.

Given the importance of estimates in this extraordinary year, it is right that, at the moment, the system is focused on the estimation process, and our key focus remains on helping teachers and lecturers with that process.

ends

The SQA are clearing rebutting the request from the Committee to publish this information now. In the interests of transparency, I do not think this is acceptable to pupils, teachers, and the wider community. There is a credibility issue here for the SQA and their processes. I would ask you to intervene directly, or through the Committee to ask them to publish the requested information.

If you would like any further clarification of my concerns and reservations about the current SQA position, please feel free to contact me.

I look forward to your response and what you would consider is the way forward.

Regards

[Redact 38(1)(b)]

Enclosure no. 11

202000030859, [Redact 38(1)(b)], 21 April, deadline 21 May

SQA Exam Situation R.E. Coronavirus

Mr Swinney,

I write to you today regarding the current SQA exam situation as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Like many others, I, a secondary student am greatly concerned about the approach taken towards the estimated graded system, and potential disadvantages this may give to students across the country. I hope to gain clarity and a reassurance of my worries of potential flaws in this chosen system.

The first point I would like to bring to your attention is the fact that preliminary exams are set, for the most part, internally, and as such, vary in content and difficulty. As such, candidates of similar academic ability may have received grossly differing results for their prelim. Students may also be in the position where they faced exceptional circumstances during prelim season, will this be considered?

Something which also came as a great concern was this statement:

“We will also look at schools’ and colleges’ previous history of estimating and attainment in each subject and level. We may moderate these estimates, up or down, if that is required.”

Source: <https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/93920.html>

I am within the group of students of whom this decision may negatively affect. I want to make it unequivocally clear that the attainment and results at my school in prior years do not accurately reflect both mine, and my cohort’s potential, and the prospect that this will come into consideration when ultimately deciding our awards is deeply concerning. I feel that making a judgement on a student based on the generalised attainment of a school is extremely unfair. Think of the number of students with potential, and all that potential looked over merely because of their social standing and demographic. Conversely, a student attending a school with higher levels of academia may be disproportionately advantaged by this choice. Their school’s history of academia presents them with good standing to be awarded good grades, without them necessarily having worked for it.

I think I speak for all students across Scotland when I say that this situation we face is putting an enormous burden on our shoulders. There is a great deal of uncertainty, in what is already an uncertain time for all of us, no direct way for us to voice our concerns, but rather lectured in what is going to happen, without vigorous thought about the impact this may have on both our current lives, our mental health and our future.

I thank you for taking the time to read this and I look forward to your reply.

[Redact 38(1)(b)]

S5 SQA Candidate

[Redact 38(1)(b)]

Enclosure no. 12

202000026850, [Redact 38(1)(b)], 2 April, deadline 4 May

Hello. Sorry to bother you as im sure you have so much on your plate already but i would just like to ask this question of:

Are you seriously going to allow the Scottish qualifications authority to ask teachers to "rank" their students from best to worst?

Imagine the out come of this and the significant imapact it would have on students looking for the qualifications this year. Peoples mental health would increase as they would think they are not as good as their class mates or the teacher thinks less of them. So i ask is there any other way to do this as putting this on teachers to decide their students rank and capability would seriously be heart breaking and put so much stress on them as a teacher.

Enclosure no. 13

202000028814, Jamie Greene MSP, 14 April, PO deadline 29 April

Further enquiries over grading, exams, appeals processes and HE funding

Dear John,

Further to my letter 2 April 2020 with general queries, I have received a number of specific comments and (I hope) helpful feedback from stakeholders on Higher grade awarding and access to HE. I have summarised them in a single letter, as attached.

I would be grateful of your response.

As always, if I can be of assistance in the current clime, please do advise.

Best,
Jamie

~

14 April 2020

Dear Cabinet Secretary,

Further to my letter to you dated 2 April 2020, I would be grateful if you might address the following concerns which have been raised directly with me in recent days.

- How will the SQA achieve consistency of marking across schools and even within schools by subject? My understanding is that SQA, in normal times, operates an exam marking grid to which all markers sign up. Given that the exams are cancelled, and teacher judgment is the criterion, how will consistency be assured?
- Some teachers have raised concerns with me that their estimated grades might be set aside in favour of national average measures. If this happened, there are concerns that the final result might not reflect the teachers' own experiences in the way that it is intended. Could I ask you to comment on those concerns and offer some clarity over the situation?
- Could clarification be offered over why coursework is not being taken into account in grading and how pupils may be able to access that coursework? This is particularly important when it comes to the appeals process and the role that coursework might play in this.
- Can you confirm; that there will be no charges for an appeal, when a detailed plan for that process will be published and if the government can comment on why the approach being taken in Scotland differs from other parts of the UK whereby the result of an appeal may involve the option to take an examination later in the year if a student is unhappy with the grade awarded?
- Can you confirm that if a pupil has recently changed their address, SQA records are currently able to be updated and their certificates will arrive at that new address?
- Many parents have sought reassurance that Scottish pupils' qualifications will be no less valid this year than those sat by other pupils from other countries that have managed to do exams. More so in the context of a competitive entry process into higher education in the

next academic year and against a backdrop of universities concerns over their finances and which students to accept.

On the issue of further and higher education finances, what exploratory work is taking place to work with colleges and universities in Scotland to identify those who may find themselves in dire financial need in the next academic year and is the government developing any specific measures to assist them.

Universities Scotland have produced a specific paper "*An existential challenge: the financial threat facing Scotland's universities as a result of COVID-19*". If I may, will the Scottish Government be formally responding in print to this important analysis of the HE sector?

Could I ask for your views on the notion of a "no detriment" safety-net policy on grading, such as those views portrayed by the NUS and others?

I would be most grateful if you could address the concerns I have raised above and revert back to me.

Thank you for your time in this matter.

Enclosure no. 14

202000021952, [Redact 38(1)(b)], 18 March, due 21 April

SQA exams

John,

We've met a few times. I'm a Depute Head in [Redact 38(1)(b)]

I think that the SQA exams should be postponed or cancelled.

I think that the SQA should work from Estimated grades.

This would show trust in the Teaching profession.

I believe that anything else would work against the agenda to reduce the attainment gap.

Teachers know pupil performance better than anyone.

Of course the SQA could use data to check for less than truthful estimation.

Yours,

[Redact 38(1)(b)]

Enclosure no. 15

Sent by email [Redact 38(1)(b)]

Dear First Minister and Deputy First Minister,

I write to make an urgent call for the extension of time for grading of SQA courses as children have been excluded from the assessment and teachers have been told by the SQA not to discuss grading with the students. This is contrary to Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and fails to take account of their best interests in all decision making.

What I convey to you within this letter are the concerns children and parents have after being refused the opportunity to discuss estimated grades as schools quote Scottish Government guidance as preventing them from disclosing grades or discussing the processes. As a direct result of this, pupils are not able to make informed decisions about subject choices when they return after lockdown and potentially more significantly many must accept conditional offers for universities and colleges, via UCAS by next week without having any idea of whether their teacher's subjective grades will be good enough to guarantee their placement. This is grossly unfair and has huge implications for each young person's future. It is also completely unnecessary given that a short extension and offer of engagement with teachers to get advice, support and discuss grades with an appeal process therefrom would ensure their human rights are being complied with.

This seems even more urgent given that the SQA has refused to return the assessment work to children or their schools so that they can be assessed and taken account in the grading process.

What follows is a list of concerns from some of the children and parents who have contacted me.

My colleagues and I stand ready to assist you make this compliant with the UNCRC.

Student reflections:

Lack of Support

- There are concerns about students not being able to speak to anyone about their worries – lack of mental health and pastoral support – due to the system put in place by the SQA in partnership with the Scottish Government. This impacts young people's ability to participate in these decisions which have a large impact upon each individual.
- Some students said that their mental health had become affected by the exam situation because they found themselves feeling as though their future opportunities were in the hands of others.

Lack of ability of schools to make grade estimations

- Students at some high schools report not having teachers in some of their classes due to teacher illness and general teacher shortage. Therefore, most of the work and study was completed at home. Students argue that no one knows what they were doing at home and therefore their overall ability will not be reflected in the exam results, as judged by the school and SQA moderation.
- There is a concern that some teachers have openly said 'you are not going to pass this subject' and now have the ability to ensure that is the case..
- Concern that students did not know their teachers in some subjects due to staff shortages.
- The youngest of three children at a school stated that the difference between what the school expected from her older brother, who was estimated to fail some of his highers, was inaccurate as he went on to achieve AAAAA in his final exams.
- Lack of opportunity to show teachers what they are capable of was also mentioned. This was especially concerning for those students who found school difficult for a variety of reasons and spent a great deal of time at home working with support from parents and other family members.

Lack of participation

- A student from [Redact 38(1)(b)] said he felt 'forgotten and cast aside' and as though his exam results will now depend upon 'how my school is judged'.
 - This reinforces educational inequality which is contrary to the aims of the Curriculum for Excellence, and the Getting It Right For Every Child initiative.
- Those with additional support needs have expressed concern that they do not routinely have their scribe or reader in class therefore there is a lack of information from which a teacher can make an estimation of grades. This places those with additional support needs at a greater disadvantaged position.
- Students expressed concern that they could no longer speak to their teachers about their greatest concerns – their SQA exam results – because they have been told not to speak to students about them.

- Students advising that they feel as though they have been working towards something for a long time which has suddenly been cast aside, placing their ambitions at risk – some saying they feel their future plans have been ruined by Covid19.
- Some students said they felt frustrated and a bit conflicted because they felt as though the hard work they put in at home has been wasted just because they didn't tell their teachers they were working so hard in class.
- There was a concern that teachers – English teachers were specifically mentioned – had been asking for work to be submitted to them but that this was not then marked and given back to students. Lack of feedback ultimately impacting learning but also reducing the work which some teachers have in order to make grade estimations.
- There were also concerns that much of the feedback students had received, again in English classes, was done through peer review which left little opportunity for teachers to assess abilities of the students, or for the students to learn how to improve.
- Overall the discussion from students lay around the lack of recognition for the work they have done at school and at home. The lack of discussion, consultation and participation with young people has clearly added to the concerns and uncertainties which many young people have.
- Some students said they were 'devastated' that the control over their future now lies with their teachers and past school exam performance instead of with themselves.
- Some students stated that they were in process of increasing their study time considerably at the time of lockdown therefore their grades would have improved before the examinations in May.
- There were students who stated that they did not get on well with their teachers, and are concerned this will count against them.
- Overall there was a feeling of helplessness expressed due to the lack of opportunities students have been given to express their concern, have support they require as well as being able to feel in control of their education and future opportunities once again.

The lack of opportunity to sit exams after lockdown as a first attempt

- 'I was working towards my exams after my school said prelims did not matter. My brothers improved a lot between prelim and final exams, but our school is under performing so I won't be given the same opportunity to achieve high grades. I want the chance to sit my exams.'
- Some students said that they did not want to be awarded a grade that their teacher estimated they would achieve and instead they wanted the opportunity to show what they were capable of themselves.
- The word 'devastated' was used by numerous student (and their parents) to convey the lack of control students feel over the opportunities available to them.

In short, there have been no opportunities for students to be involved in the decision making processes.

Students have felt isolated, without support and with their work being cast aside and forgotten.

Students largely want the opportunity to sit their exams when it is safe to do so instead of being awarded estimate grades. Students are concerned their school's previous performance will lead to their long term potential being constrained. Allowing those who would like to sit the exams this opportunity would give the element of choice which has been missing in this process.

Parental reflections:

Overall system in place for exam results in 2019/20:

One parent outlined the following concerns:

- My eldest two sons are currently at [Redact 38(1)(b)] and [Redact 38(1)(b)] universities studying [Redact 38(1)(b)] and [Redact 38(1)(b)] – having bucked the trend in their school peer group. They both worked hard at school but did not get straight A's in their National 5's. They worked much harder for their Highers having understood the importance of these exams. Their prelim grades were really not good, but they massively increased their effort, at home, post prelims.
- During this pandemic both universities have set things in place that allowed my two eldest to sit the exams they needed to and i question why this is not in place for Higher examinations for my youngest son especially since the local authorities have provided them with IT.
- The emphasis was upon the lack of communication between schools and parents. However, many parents outlined their helplessness at not being able to help their children.

SQA amended grading system:

- Having to choose a university course without knowing how the SQA will determine my grade increases the uncertainty I currently feel. My future seems uncertain and I am expected to choose a university without knowing how my grades will be calculated.

Lack of contact with school since March:

- Some parents reported that most of their child's study time for a subject is done at home: 'We have consistently invested in our three sons education through providing a supportive framework at home to allow for their development and also in tutoring. The youngest was **having an additional 10 hours of tutoring per week and was himself studying for approx a further 40 hours per week all of which his teachers were oblivious to.**
- One parent advised that interchangeable teachers meant that a school progress report had comments cut and pasted on to it from another report – with the wrong name attached. The parents tried to raise our concerns with his Head teacher in February and early March but despite frequent requests his School Head refused to respond to our request for a meeting.

This general lack of engagement from schools has led to parents feeling 'petrified' that the grading given to his child will not be reflective of his ability to perform in a Higher Grade examination.

Some of the other questions which parents stated were still unanswered due to non-engagement with schools included:

- Without parental input how will the teachers understand the significant effort being put in at home and are they engaging with tutors to form a balanced view?
- Who is forming an opinion on a subject that has been learnt from home due to there being no teacher since December?
- Will the teacher who referred to another child in his progress report actually figure out which child they are grading?
- If we as parents have not input into a grading and the children themselves are denied the right to perform in an exam - students at many Scottish Universities where accreditation and the quality of the degree are strongly regulated – law, medicine, accountancy, for example, what appeal process is in place and can students sit their exams as a first attempt if they are unhappy with their grades?

Lack of opportunity for achievement when compared with English students

A parent in the Scottish Borders stated their dismay that 'less than 20 mins drive away in England it appears that their kids will at least have an appeal in

the form of an exam at a later date.’ They questioned why Scottish children are not being afforded the same opportunity.

The overall message from parents was that they wanted their children to be allowed to a chance to achieve their full potential. There was great concerns about the lack of communication between schools, the SQA and themselves. The closing down of communication in schools and the helplessness their children had because of having lost the opportunity to achieve their potential came across strongly.

Moving Forward:

I hope you will consider these extensive concerns as a matter of urgency. As stated at the outset, the extension of time for grading would permit the Scottish Government to address the current unfairness and breach of children’s rights which is occurring. A short extension and offer of engagement with teachers to get advice, support and discuss grades with an appeal process therefrom would ensure the human rights of our young people are being complied with.

I have written to Mr Swinney’s office since the pandemic began to offer help to ensure the rights of our adolescents are recognised – something I know that the Government continues to place great emphasis upon. I would like to repeat that offer here. There is a balance which recognises the unprecedented circumstances, aids the SQA and teachers, as well as being underpinned by the rights of adolescents.

Scotland can be the best place in the world for a child to grow up, and I urge you to ensure that the long term development of these young people is not adversely impact for longer than necessary – we can have a balance of approaches, and my colleagues and I are here to assist.

Wishing you and your families the best of health at this time.

Kind regards

[Redact 38(1)(b)][Redact 38(1)(b)] University

Enclosure no. 16

Your Reference:

Hayden Atkin,

[Redact 38(1)(b)]@gmail.com

From: Hayden Atkin
Sent: 02 May 2020 15:38
To: Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills
Subject: SQA

Hope your well,

I am emailing you again, to discuss some issues which has came up from a friend telling me, about the SQA saying they are going to downgrade students in deprived areas as well as check previous years, I don't know much about this and I sorta seen the statement which said they would do that, I personally believe that this is shocking if they are, it shouldn't matter about the previous year, it should matter about the present and not the past.

As a Youth Councillor, I then said that I would ask yourself.

I ask about and then a parent at another school asked me about this, I said I don't know, she then told me that she seen something about it and was deeply concerned, I said I am going to try and find out for you, I'll let you know.

So I thought I would email you if that was okay to try and get some calcification.

Kind regards

Hayden Atkin

Global Peace Ambassador for the United Kingdom

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