

Connect's Position on the 2020 National Qualifications

Connect is a long-standing independent parents' group and a registered charity which provides support to parents and carers all over Scotland. We provide membership services to individual Parent Councils and PTAs, as well as offering advice and information to individual parents who have concerns about any aspect of the education of their child, or the wider education system. We support education professionals in developing their skills and understanding around effective partnership working with families and the wider community.

We welcome this opportunity to submit a position paper to the independent review into the 2020 National Qualifications. Drawing on our conversations with parents throughout this period, we would like to make the following points on how this impacted on them and their children:

- There was a particular and not unreasonable sense of worry and 'unfairness' in this year's qualifications because the system was changed (however unavoidably), shifting from the known exam system with all its inequity, to (largely statistical) modelling rather than the work and effort of the young people themselves. It seems inevitable that the efficacy of the process would be challenged for very many reasons
- Previous concerns about SQA lack of transparency, and perceived organisational resistance to open communication came to the fore - lack of clear communication on how grades would be determined, with the SQA publishing their methodology on results day in a technical way which was not in clear language for young people or parents/carers
- Other significant concerns have now come front and centre stage (eg generalised benchmarking across subjects/year groups/previous years etc) which is founded on models for schools and cohorts rather than individuals, which surely disadvantaged some individuals
- A qualification system cannot be expected to iron out inequality; however, the SQA needs to be sure that year on year comparisons within schools does not build in disadvantage, and individual downgrading is resolved prior to appeals

Connect's position is that there has been too much focus on preserving 'The System' and maintaining the status quo at a time of unprecedented upheaval, and not sufficient on the individual learner and recognising their achievements. 'The System' is not there for those who work within it or the organisations that shape it, but for the individuals who rely on it to evidence their learning and achievement, which in turn supports their journey through education, training and work.

Communication and engagement with young people and their parents was woefully inadequate. While Connect made efforts to support SQA's engagement with parents, this scratched the surface of a long standing communication gap for SQA.

Connect's Lockdown Surveys of Parents

During the lock down period we ran two surveys of parents and carers. The first of these ran in April, and received **1578** responses across **29** local authorities. In the comments parents expressed concerns that the grades given would not reflect the work their children had put in or well capable of, as well as a lack of clarity about how grades would be calculated. A brief sample of comments:

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'My son is in 5th year and would've been due to sit his higher exams. It's a worrying time as he didn't do well in prelims as his grandad had just passed away before them. I'm worried he won't get the results he deserves having put in so much extra work since January'

'Child is in S4 and missed exams. Not sure what her grades will be as teachers deciding. I read that not all kids will get A's and B's even if they were working to that level because we can't have kids all getting great results!'

'My son was to sit for his highers, he always gets his best results in main exams, his class performance is not strong either, in nat 5 he got all A's. But his teachers were expecting b or c for him and he got A's. Same again. Worry about my son as his teachers again expecting b or c for him. Not fair at all as he always shines at peak.'

'SQA examinations - too many unanswered questions and no formal communication of process and timescales. Different schools in different authorities doing different testing before 20/3 finish. England have offered exams in September what about Scotland?'

The second survey ran from the end of May and throughout June, with **7858** responses across all **32** local authorities. Having identified themes of concerns from our April survey, we asked parents which of these areas concerned them now. **13.68% (1064)** of parents identified exams/coursework for SQA qualifications as a concern.

Parent comments:

'The SQA exam results are a real concern. I don't think the option of no exams should have been taken so early. It demotivated teenagers who find it hard anyhow. Lots of depression and anxiety caused.'

'SQA need to let teachers know if changes to courses ASAP for 2021 diet so they have time to prepare materials/resources.'

'I think SQA need to push exams back to later next year or cut the curricula so that anything 'covered' in the past few months can be gone over in August/Sept and not assumed as taught, when not all children will have been engaging or understanding.'

'I am concerned about my eldest son's SQA exams - and whether or not these will go ahead next year. I think a decision should be made now so that teachers can plan accordingly, and course work set appropriately.'

'Worried about SQA intentions from my kid's point of view as well as my own as a secondary teacher.'

Due to this parent feedback, we reached out to SQA and we offered the opportunity to joint host an online information session where SQA staff could provide information and answer parent questions directly. Two sessions took place on 22 July.

Eileen Prior

Executive Director

7 September 2020