

Connect's Submission to the Scottish Qualifications Authority Consultation on Appeals

24 March 2021

Question 1: To allow learners to decide whether to submit an appeal, and to respect learners' rights, there is a need for centres to explain, in detail, the reason for their judgement. How can this best be done?

By centres well in advance of Results Day: the process and principles of assessment should be clearly explained, with details of what and how assessment has taken place, the centre moderation practices etc. Eg the only way for young people to know if there has been a clerical error by SQA, so they can appeal via their schools themselves is to know their predicted grades in advance. An end of year report, specifying predicted grades? This may happen in some centres already (but not always at the end of the year) – it should be consistent across Scotland.

Question 2. Is it appropriate that the result of the initial appeal is determined by the learner's school or college? Please explain the reason for your answer.

No, the centre is then the judge and the jury, with no external independent adjudication. This could be done by local authority moderators? Similar schools? School clusters?

Question 3. If the result of the initial appeal is determined by the learner's school or college, is there a need for some learners to be able to further appeal to SQA? If so, under which circumstances?

Yes, because otherwise there is no independent adjudication. How can we know centres have abided by SQA requirements? How can appeals based on unfairness or unconscious bias be addressed by the centre itself?

Question 4: Do you agree that an appeal outcome should be the grade that the evidence shows ought to be awarded? This means that an appeal could result in a grade remaining the same, being upgraded or downgraded.

How will this address unfairness or unconscious bias? Evidence is important ofcourse, but if there has been persistent unconscious bias and unfairness in the assessment of evidence, where is the independent adjudication? Some young people do much better in exams than in course work and this system may prejudice their outcomes. Appeals should not lead to a grade being downgraded this year. If the possibility of downgrading is supposed to be a deterrent to avoid multiple appeals, it does not actually address the issue of unfairness and unconscious bias if appeals are discouraged for this reason.

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Question 5: In the absence of fees and with limited capacity in the education system to support appeals, how can SQA ensure that appeals are only made when learners genuinely believe that they have been treated unfairly?

The implication here is that young people are not to be trusted, which is very unfortunate. Trust learners. If young people are feeling desperate enough to appeal, respect that. Policies cannot be predicated on the principle that a few may abuse the system.

Question 6: Are the proposed grounds for appeal reasonable? Are there any others that should be included?

Not clear how the grounds for appeal address unfairness and unconscious bias, lost learning and the impacts of COVID-19. It cannot be 'business as usual'.

Question 7: What might be required to help learners understand what will and will not be considered under the grounds of a lack of fairness in assessment?

Clarity from SQA and schools/centres; understanding that these are exceptional times and no young person should be disadvantaged this year by the impacts of COVID-19 on them. It cannot be 'business as usual' in any way. Reassurance for young people and support and help for young people must be the priority. Protecting the integrity of a qualifications system which is in – unavoidably – disarray is the last priority for young people and their families in the current situation. The focus needs to be on what the qualifications are there to do, and work for, not simply preserving the 'system'.

Question 8: What positive and negative impacts can you identify in relation to appeals processes on the needs set out in the public sector equality duty? How could the positive impacts be maximised, and the negative impacts be mitigated?

You have to include a right of appeal based on unfair treatment/unconscious bias, directly from young people to SQA. SQA can then go back to the school to investigate and adjudicate. The unfairness which exists in the system were laid bare in 2020: it is incumbent on SQA to demonstrate that it takes this seriously.

Question 9: How should the consideration of appeals be prioritised? Depending on the volume of appeals received and the education system's capacity to handle them, SQA may need to apply criteria to prioritise requests. The standard approach to prioritisation is based on immediate progression to employment, apprenticeships, college or university entry. Are there other factors to consider?

Young people's mental health and wellbeing. Make sure school staff are much more available than usual, that other partners are more involved than ever (including for mental health support), that helplines are open for longer hours, well in advance of Results Day and for a long time after Results Day. Colleges and universities must have staff available a lot more than usual to help young people urgently. Clear information must be shared with post school destinations about SQA appeals, the crucial importance of making sure help and advice is fully available for young people when they need it.