

Note from the clerk – summary of focus group discussion

Background

On Tuesday 12 January, members of the Committee held a focus group with young people to help inform the Committee's evidence sessions the following day with teaching unions, Education Scotland and the SQA. Due to the size of the focus group, participants were split randomly into two breakout rooms to have a free-flowing discussion of their education experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic. This note is an anonymised summary of some of the themes to emerge from the focus group.

Breakout room 1

How have the events of the last 10 months impacted your education?

I've been at college for 6 months now and haven't met a single one of my classmates. I live in a different local authority to what my school was in so haven't seen my friends from school since I left. I had everything I needed in terms of devices etc for distance learning but I know people who didn't find it a nice experience to have to request these things. I do feel we've had good support from college on this.

I found my school has been pretty good at online learning although we haven't had any live meetings over zoom. Our teachers have only just been given permission from the council to do that. There has been so much uncertainty. We were expected to revise for prelims over the Christmas Holiday but we have no idea when these prelims will be. We get powerpoints or a list of work that we have to complete but we don't have set teaching hours.

Has anyone had live classes or is it just learning materials?

I am a 2020 leaver but I have gone back to school to do my S6 again. My school is doing an hour of live teaching a week but the school have set work for the normal periods we would have to do at home. It's a nice balance because we are also still revising for prelims.

I started online learning when preparing for highers and didn't get any online teaching. We are really just being set work which is easy for something like English which is coursework based but for things like Maths we are just given new coursework with no explanation. The Communication from school was quite bad and last minute. Teachers seem to be doing their own things and using their own platforms with no consistency. Today I tried to email my teacher for help and if she doesn't quite answer in the way I need it's a whole other email to get to the bottom of it. Satchel one, email and Teams are getting used all at the same time but no text communication or anything like that and nothing from anyone higher up than my teachers.

I'm not getting any live teaching but I think 100% it would be helpful

Estimated Grades

My grade was lower than what I thought it would be. There seems to be no continuity in what grades we were given. I have had to go back and do S6 again. This is a year out of my life now that I have had to wait.

I was frustrated by 2 results. Was re-sitting Nat 5 Maths and got 66% in the prelim then I got a B (would've liked an A). Then the announcement came that they were going with teacher estimates and I ended up with a lower grade. I Don't understand the logic. In German I got a C in the prelim and ended up with an A. There is no consistency.

On results day I was given 4 A's and a B. I knew that the teacher for Chemistry had predicted an A and I got a B and it was really frustrating because I knew SQA had just used statistics. The appeal process was quite intimidating as it felt like you were challenging your teachers. With exams being cancelled I feel like I'm getting a lot of assessments now and there is a lot of pressure on them because you don't know which one will be used for grades. SQA gave out the message that Prelims aren't everything and yet schools seem to be emphasising the importance of them.

Higher Biology I went from a D to an A. My teachers had consistently said an A and 2 B's and then ended up with a B and 2 C's. Appeal process is not helping and it's an exhausting process.

Is there enough support?

My school used to call everyone at home after results to check up and they didn't do that this time due to COVID even although I think it was even more important than ever this time around.

I was really disappointed with the contact from my schools. After the SQA U-Turn I got a letter that just said they Acknowledged it. The wording was so poor it gave the impression my results were going to be changed and that ended up not the case. Took me 2 weeks to eventually get through to my Guidance teacher who said she'd email and 5 days later I got an email simply saying "your results weren't changed all the best for the future".

When the text came through on results day I was shocked and I phoned the school to say I'd been downgraded and the school said that "no, that's what we awarded you". I was at quite a high achieving school and they were worried about being moderated. My teachers had told me they thought I could get an A in the exam. I had a follow up meeting with all my evidence and prelim results but the school just told me that I got the results I deserved. I asked for my personal statement to include the report that said they had predicted me higher than my grades but this ended up being a battle to get them to include that. I felt like just a number in the system.

I think Wales used predicted and past exams to give marks. England are allowed to re-do exams if they didn't get the results they wanted. We just have to rely on the opinion of people who we don't know too well.

Mini Poll –

Would you like the ability to appeal to SQA after this years result or do you prefer the current system of going through teachers and schools? – unanimous SQA

If you had the option of sitting an exam later in the year would you take it? – half and half

Who thinks exams are the best way to award grades and who thinks continuous assessment would be better? – 3 exams – 1 assessment others don't know

Confidence in plans and system this year? – Not huge confidence

I feel a bit more comfortable that we know what's coming but I don't know who is going to fight my case for last year.

More confident this year but still know very little.

I would be worried about the ranking system

Were you told enough about the process last year? –
No

Will you get more comms this year? – I think there may be less communication this year. The teachers don't know either it's the government who make the decisions. If the plan doesn't work then find solutions rather than leaving people in the dark.

Breakout Room 2

Resources and school preparedness

Those taking part reported that their schools had provided them with devices for online learning, and had been in contact with pupils and parents to make sure that they had devices (and, in some cases, contacted the local authority should pupils need improved broadband access). Participants also empathised with the workload for teachers in moving to online learning and said that they felt teachers were performing well in fast-changing circumstances. However, there was also a general feeling that there was not a back up plan should there be issues with Microsoft Teams.

Some of those taking part were taking practical subjects, and said it was challenging to keep up to speed with those subjects from home. Those with more full timetables, and those with additional support needs which would usually be provided/supported in school such as a scribe found the move to online learning challenging too. Others said that there were benefits to home learning, such as being able to concentrate better without ventilation issues and changing classrooms and the stress of being in school with a lot of people during Covid, particularly if they were in the shielding category. Again, participants reflected on the need for teachers to change lesson plans at pace and welcomed their schools' communication with pupils.

Grades and assessments

The other main topic of discussion was assessment in both 2020 and 2021. All of the participants had experienced some challenges, either in the last academic year or in this academic year.

Participants reported a mixed picture of whether their schools were using “prelims” this year as part of teacher assessment, or other types of assessment which participants felt were very similar to prelims anyway. Some also reported spending time on exam techniques despite not expecting to sit exams this year. Participants also reflected on the impact on pupil-teacher relationships of the changes to assessment, with some reporting a detrimental impact on trust due to the lower grades they had at least initially received in 2020 compared to their own expectations.

Those who attend schools perceived to be “lower” in unofficial rankings reported that a high number of their peers had received lowered grades, and that there was still a lot of concern that would happen again this year. This was linked for many to uncertainty over what evidence would be used to assess pupil performance this year, as well as a lack of clear communication to date on what methods teachers could use and a perceived lack of consistency between different teachers, schools and local authorities stemming from a lack of clear direction.

Communication over next year’s appeals process was also highlighted as a key concern in the immediate future, with pupils wondering how they could appeal if they disagree with the teacher estimate. Participants wanted an accessible and clearly communicated appeals process, with some disadvantaged by last year’s awards system also hoping that any new appeals process this year could also be opened up to the 2020 cohort of pupils given the potential impact on their future education/job prospects.