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Members' Virtual Question Time

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CONTENTS

	Col.
MEMBERS' VIRTUAL QUESTION TIME	1
EDUCATION AND SKILLS	1
Exam Candidates (Ranking).....	1
Schools (Reopening)	2
Pupil Grades	3
Pupil Grades (Estimates and Appeals).....	4
Moving Schools (Effect on Qualifications)	4
Attainment Gap.....	5
Higher and Further Education (Financial Support).....	6
Higher and Further Education (Financial Support).....	7
Universities (Offers of Places)	7
Reopening Schools (Pupils with Additional Needs)	8
University of the West of Scotland (Zero-hours Contracts).....	9
Covid-19 (Financial Impact on Universities and Colleges).....	10
Pupil Grades	10

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 23 April 2020

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 14:00]

Members' Virtual Question Time

Education and Skills

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Hello, and welcome to a Scottish Parliament virtual question time on education and skills. I am joined today by 14 members of the Scottish Parliament from their homes and constituencies around the country, and by four Government ministers from the education and skills teams, led by the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, John Swinney. We will go straight to questions: the first is from Clare Adamson.

[Temporary loss of sound.]

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): Presiding Officer, I am afraid that I was unable to hear Clare Adamson's question.

The Presiding Officer: I beg your pardon, Mr Swinney. In that case, I ask Clare Adamson to repeat her question.

Exam Candidates (Ranking)

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): In relation to the guidance that the Scottish Qualifications Authority has issued, will the cabinet secretary assure us that the ranking of candidates will not undermine teacher judgment? How can moderation processes ensure parity across schools and subject areas?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): It is important to remember that we are dealing with an unprecedented situation in which we are having to ask teachers to refine their judgments about the potential attainment of young people. The SQA has asked teachers to go into more detail about their expectations for young people, and that will be done across a higher number of bands than would normally be the case. Teachers will be invited to set out the expected rankings of individual young people within those bands.

That is essential, because it will enable the SQA to make judgments about awarding qualifications around the country. That will involve individual schools in a process of moderation, but there will be another moderation process involving the SQA, as there is in every exam diet when moderation is

exercised across the whole country, in order to make sure that an A grade in one school is achieved by the same contribution as an A grade in other schools. That is essential for the maintenance of standards across our national examinations system.

Schools (Reopening)

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): The Deputy First Minister has previously indicated that schools might remain closed at least until the summer break, and the prospect of their remaining closed until August is of concern to many people. Given that a review of the restrictions will take place every three weeks, the public will rightly expect clarity on and details of the Government's plans for education. Many people will also reasonably expect that if the country eases out of lockdown, schools could or should do the same.

What tests or criteria will the Scottish Government use to decide whether, when and how schools should reopen? Given the potential negative impact on attainment of a lengthy closure, is it possible that schools might, even in part, reopen during the summer, with all the benefits that that would bring to parents and pupils?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): First, I recognise the difficulty that will be caused by the prolonged closure of schools, and I do not want schools to be closed for a minute longer than is required.

As was mentioned in the First Minister's briefing today, the Scottish Government has published a document that sets out the conditions and tests that the Government will have to consider before we can relax the restrictions that are in place across the board, in our society. I also answered a Government-inspired question on the subject, earlier today.

An important element of the restrictions is the restriction on opening schools. The key test, which is what Mr Greene asked me about, is that we must be satisfied that the reproduction number of the coronavirus is as close to zero as possible. We know that if the reproduction number of coronavirus goes above 1, we would be in a very acute situation in which our national health service would face significant challenges, and there would be significant loss of life as a consequence. The work that members of the public are doing to suppress the virus is important in interrupting its flow. Any judgment that is made about opening schools has to be set in that context; it cannot be made apart from the overall decisions that we make as a society.

I assure Jamie Greene that active discussions are under way with all stakeholders in education. Tomorrow, I will convene a discussion on all the practical issues that arise from the question about reopening schools. Fundamentally, the judgment must be based on the public health advice that is available to us, in order that we can determine the right and safe course of action in the context of the wider public health issues.

Jamie Greene: I thank the cabinet secretary for his update. If the scientific evidence demonstrates that it would be safe to open schools, how quickly could they open?

John Swinney: A number of practical issues would have to be borne in mind, but one of the important things to remember is that I do not envisage schools simply being able to go from being closed one day to being open a couple of days later. As a number of scientific commentators have made clear, we will be living with social distancing for a considerable time. The principle of social distancing is not—members will be familiar with this—habitually observed in Scottish education, and would therefore have to be applied in our educational settings. A number of imponderables will have to be considered with regard to how we open schools, and in what format we can do so.

I assure Jamie Greene that I want to ensure that we open schools as early as possible and in a manner that is consistent with scientific advice, and that we always make decisions and take actions that are in the interests of preserving public health and public safety.

Pupil Grades

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): With exams having been cancelled, parents and pupils need absolute clarity about how they will be graded. I listened very carefully to John Swinney's answer to Clare Adamson's question, but there has been confusion on the matter.

Yesterday, the Scottish Qualifications Authority said:

"Our moderation process ... will include analyses of centres' estimates and outcomes, prior attainment, progression statistics, and grade distributions."

By "centres", the SQA means, of course, schools or colleges—exam centres. For the avoidance of doubt, will the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills confirm that a pupil who is awarded a pass grade through their teacher's judgment could subsequently be failed by the SQA, on the basis of their school's performance in previous years' exams?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John

Swinney): It is important that all the factors that have been identified by the Scottish Qualifications Authority in respect of its exercising its moderation functions—which Iain Gray correctly outlined—are taken into account. As I said in my answer to Clare Adamson, there will be moderation at different levels: in classrooms, in departments, in schools and by the SQA. Each step in that process is important in ensuring that we have confidence, across the country, that a robust approach is taken in relation to certification of qualifications this year.

All the factors that Iain Gray cited will be relevant factors for the SQA to take into account. It will be the case that the SQA might increase or decrease a grade that is awarded. That is an essential element of the moderation process, and it is undertaken annually.

Pupil Grades (Estimates and Appeals)

Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green): My question is for the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills.

In relation to the current exam diet, will pupils be informed of the grade that their teacher proposed be awarded to them in addition to the grade that the Scottish Qualifications Authority eventually issues? Will pupils be able to appeal their grade directly, even if their teacher and the SQA are in agreement?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): The issue of what information about teacher judgment is given to an individual pupil is a matter for the individual school and the local authority concerned, because they are the ones who retain the data. The Government does not hold that data, so we do not have a locus to exercise a responsibility there. That is a matter for the school and the local authority.

As far as the issue of appeal is concerned, any pupil will be able to appeal the qualification that they are ultimately certificated with by the SQA. I am pleased to say that a free appeals process will be available to any pupil as part of this year's exam diet.

Moving Schools (Effect on Qualifications)

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): This is a question for the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, and it follows on from the questions about the Scottish Qualifications Authority.

When it comes to the awarding of qualifications and the moderation process, how will the system deal with situations in which pupils and teachers have recently changed schools and the effect of that with regard to teachers not knowing their pupils?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): I think that it would probably be best for me to ask the chief examiner to respond directly to the point that Beatrice Wishart has raised, which I recognise is an important issue. My sense is that there would have to be dialogue between the relevant teachers from the pupil's current school and their previous school to enable the estimated grade to be submitted by the school at which the young person is currently registered as a pupil.

However, given the level of operational detail to which Beatrice Wishart's question relates, I think that I had better ask the chief examiner to write to her on it, and I will arrange for that to happen after this question time.

Attainment Gap

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): My question is for the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills.

How is the Scottish Government continuing to monitor the attainment gap? What work is being done to ensure that all pupils have the same opportunity to gain a place at university in this year's admissions, regardless of their background?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): The closure of the poverty-related attainment gap is the central theme of Government education policy, so it is clear that the period of educational disruption that we are going through is a matter of great concern. I want to ensure that every effort is made to close the poverty-related attainment gap and that every young person who is dealing with the impact of poverty on their life is able to achieve the support to which they are entitled.

Through pupil equity funding and the Scottish attainment challenge, more than £180 million-worth of resources are directed directly to schools and relevant local authorities. We have told schools and local authorities that they have the freedom and flexibility to judge how best to use those resources to maximum effect. I want to make sure that, in the period of remote learning that we are currently going through, young people are directly supported by their schools and their needs are met. I know that, in different parts of the country, schools and local authorities are providing that support in a variety of ways.

There will be practical issues. Some young people in poverty might not have access to digital connectivity, and I know that schools are working in a very focused way to overcome that, either through the distribution of devices or by enabling

access to data, so that young people can continue their learning.

A lot of practical work is under way to support young people in that context. Of course, when we are operating our education system in the more habitual fashion to which we have been accustomed, we will want to reinforce our efforts to close the poverty-related attainment gap as part of that work.

Finally, and briefly, university access will hinge on the results that young people achieve, but our universities remain absolutely committed to the widening access agenda, on which they have made significant progress. The Government is committed to maintaining that progress.

Higher and Further Education (Financial Support)

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Scotland's universities face significant financial difficulties in the weeks and months ahead. Given the loss of revenue from commercial activities and real uncertainty about the number of overseas students who will take up places next year, a financial black hole of £500 million is a real possibility. What discussions has the Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science held with Scotland's higher education sector? What assurances has he been able to give that the Scottish Government will provide the financial support that the sector will so desperately need?

The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science (Richard Lochhead): Jamie Halcro Johnston is quite right to say that there will be potential huge impacts on further and higher education in Scotland as a result of Covid-19. I have established a high-level response group comprising the university and college principals, other sector representatives, all our Government agencies, the unions and so on, so that we can steer the sectors through this crisis. We have already announced a £5.5 million package of support to address student hardship and to help students, who face a tough time at the moment.

We are in regular contact with our United Kingdom counterparts to discuss what other support might be available at the UK level to help the UK's universities, including Scotland's universities, at this time. We are also in regular dialogue with the Scottish Funding Council, which, next week, will provide updated figures on the financial impact of the current situation on further and higher education.

We are determined to support our universities and colleges to get through this, because of the huge challenges that they currently face. Jamie Halcro Johnston quite rightly highlighted that the

biggest challenge for our universities, in particular, is the expected huge drop in the number of international students coming to Scotland, given that they represent a large slice of income for Scotland's university sector.

Higher and Further Education (Financial Support)

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): My question follows on directly from Jamie Halcro Johnston's question. Some institutions' reserves are significantly less than their annual fee income, so does the Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science agree that there is a real risk that some institutions might fail financially without Government intervention? Is the Scottish Government ready to step in to ensure that that does not happen?

The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science (Richard Lochhead): Over the past week, I have had individual conversations with every university principal in Scotland, over and above our on-going interaction with Universities Scotland and other stakeholders on that issue. They are doing a grand job of trying to get to grips with what is a very serious situation. They are putting in place contingency plans, and they are prepared to take all kinds of measures to ensure that they can get through this.

Daniel Johnson is quite right that the Scottish Government is ready to stand by our universities. We are exploring every avenue that is available to us to support our universities in getting through this and to avoid the potential scenario that he outlined. There is no reason to think that that will be the case at the moment. What I am hearing from universities is that they are being incredibly responsible. They are meeting this challenge as best they can, but, of course, we still do not know the scale of it, which will become clearer over the coming weeks and months. That is why the Scottish Government has said that we will do everything that we can to support the sector. We are having regular discussions—I spoke to my United Kingdom counterparts today—about what more can be done at the UK level to help us to ensure that our universities survive the crisis and contribute to Scotland's recovery at the same time.

Universities (Offers of Places)

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): The Scottish Qualifications Authority has stated that pupils will get their higher results on 4 August. That information is most welcome. However, I have a question about what the Scottish Government is doing with regard to working with universities to ensure that people are getting offers of places. A lot of pupils have conditional offers at the moment, and they are wondering whether

what happens in that regard will follow the same kind of pattern—that is, that there will not be a delay.

Supplementary to that question, what discussions are happening with universities outwith Scotland, in the rest of the United Kingdom, in relation to people who are waiting for offers from them?

The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science (Richard Lochhead): In all my discussions with our universities over the past few weeks, I have emphasised the importance of a close dialogue between further and higher education, and our colleges and universities accept that this is a time when we must all work much more closely together to ensure that we are supporting students during the transition from school to college or school to university.

Clearly, universities are being sympathetic to the plight of our students, given what they are going through at the moment, and they will do all that they can to support them. Because of the current situation, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service has extended the window for students to accept offers, and we are paying close attention to the levels of applications for further and higher education places in Scotland.

I can say to the member that the number of applications from students applying for funding support through the Student Awards Agency for Scotland is far ahead of where it was this time last year. That might be down to a timing issue involving young people being at home and being able to fill out the application forms, but it shows that there is a significant interest among young people in going to college and university at this time. We are paying very close attention to the situation.

Reopening Schools (Pupils with Additional Needs)

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): When schools reopen and social distancing measures are still in place, will the cabinet secretary consider taking a phased approach to attendance that ensures that pupils with additional physical and other disability needs go back in a slower way than those within mainstream education?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): That might well be one of the options that we have to take forward. We will have to give considerable thought to the options and take part in detailed discussions with our partners about how our pupils might be able to return to our schools. As I said earlier to Jamie Greene, whenever we move away from the current, very

restricted conditions that apply right across society—which, of course, are what has led to the closure of schools—there will be a persistent presence of the need for social distancing within our society. If we assume that social distancing will be an essential part of the way in which we relate to each other in our society in the future, there will, obviously, be implications for the way in which we organise and run our schools.

The assurance that I would give to Mr Balfour is that we will be having extensive discussions with all the stakeholders in education about how we do that. It is important that we understand the requirements of individuals with special needs and that we support those individuals, to enable the continuity of their education. There will be myriad issues to resolve as part of moving away from the lockdown situation that we are currently in so that we can ensure that we can get society functioning again. However, we will all have to acknowledge that that will be a different way of operating from the one that preceded the outbreak of Covid-19.

University of the West of Scotland (Zero-hours Contracts)

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): This morning, I heard that not only is the University of the West of Scotland refusing to pay furloughed staff on zero-hours contracts but, when students who are also on zero-hours contracts with the university apply to the university hardship fund that is administered by UWS, they are being given £100 and told to find another job. Further, if they are a European Union student or a student who has paid their own course fees as opposed to going through the Student Awards Agency for Scotland, they are being told that they will get nothing. A student in the latter case has been left with just £3.92 to live on for the rest of the lockdown period. There appears to be something wrong at UWS.

Will the minister agree to discuss those matters urgently with the principal of UWS, and to ensure that all UWS students facing hardship receive a payment and that all zero-hours staff receive payment or are furloughed?

The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science (Richard Lochhead): If Neil Bibby wishes to write to me on that, I will investigate those points. Although the current situation is very challenging for our universities, we have re-emphasised the Scottish Government's determination that all our further and higher education institutions should abide by our fair work principles and fair work agenda. Those institutions have given me assurances that that is their intention. Of course, there are myriad circumstances and I cannot comment on each individual circumstance of employment in each

university. However, we expect the sector to adhere to the fair work principles that the Government supports.

We are paying close attention to the issue of hardship funds for students. We recognise that the current situation is very difficult for Scotland's students and for students from elsewhere who are studying in our country. Along with our universities, we are doing our best to look after those students while they are here. Many students may have lost part-time jobs or other means of income, which will reinforce their hardship. On top of the £5.5 million that we have already announced, we are looking for further opportunities to support our students at this time. I will certainly look into the circumstances that Neil Bibby has outlined.

Covid-19 (Financial Impact on Universities and Colleges)

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): If the lockdown continues until the end of the year in some form or other, how will the Scottish Government work with the higher education sector to help to mitigate the financial impact of Covid-19 on our universities and colleges, such as Heriot-Watt University, the University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh Napier University and Edinburgh College in my constituency?

The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science (Richard Lochhead): As I have said, our universities are putting in a monumental amount of work to try to plan for all the different scenarios. We expect a drop in the number of international students, but we do not know the extent of that. However, for instance, a drop of 50 per cent could cost our education sector £400 million in lost income. Heriot-Watt University, which the member mentioned, has been particularly successful in attracting international students.

We are working closely with the Scottish Funding Council, Universities Scotland and individual institutions to plan for all different scenarios. As I said earlier, it is not only Scotland's universities that face the issue; those in the rest of the United Kingdom are affected, too, so we are making representations to the UK Government that we need a support package for Scotland's universities, and for further education. We will continue to keep members updated on progress on that and on the steps that the Scottish Government is taking to support the sector.

Pupil Grades

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Due to the cancellation of exams, teachers have been tasked with issuing grades for pupils

based on previous coursework, marks and prelims. Some teachers have raised concerns that grades might be set aside in order to better reflect national averages. Can the cabinet secretary confirm that that will not be the case and that no pupils will be disadvantaged as a result of efforts to secure year-on-year comparisons?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): The Scottish Qualifications Authority, in setting out the approach that it intends to take in the current unprecedented circumstances, has said that fairness for learners will be at the heart of its approach. The SQA will want to ensure that that standard is met throughout the assessment process.

Teacher judgment will be at the core of the assessment process this year. The SQA has issued guidance to teachers to assist them in the identification of grades. That process will inevitably involve a great deal of dialogue in individual schools to determine what should be submitted on behalf of individual pupils.

Clearly, in any national examination system, we must have confidence that the same standards are being applied in all parts of the country: an A, B or C in the north of Scotland must be the same as an A, B or C in the south of the country. Moderation across the education system has been a hallmark throughout the exams process that we have had and it will have a role to play in the process that we take forward. The SQA has been clear about what will be involved in that moderation process and will set out further guidance on that approach in due course.

The system, however, depends on the fundamental question of the delivery of teacher judgment—school by school and classroom by classroom—around the country. The SQA has given teachers a longer period to formulate those judgments in order to enable the assessment process to come to a conclusion so that certification can be issued on 4 August—the date on which it was always designed to take place.

The Presiding Officer: I thank our members and ministers very much for participating. We will be back tomorrow for another virtual question time at 3pm, on the twin subjects of rural affairs and the environment. I thank everyone for joining us.

Meeting closed at 14:31.

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