

Education, Children and Young People Committee
School Assessment: Alternative Certification Model 2021
Wednesday 22 September 2021

INTRODUCTION

As part of its work examining the Alternative Certification Model 2021, the Committee has agreed to take evidence from representatives from the Association of Directors of Education Scotland (ADES), the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), NASUWT teachers' union, and the Scottish Secondary Teachers' Association (SSTA).

This paper provides:

- An overview of the 2020 and 2021 assessment and appeals systems and arrangements for 2021-22;
- Consideration of the future of the assessment system in Scotland, including a summary of the recently published OECD report on assessment options for Scotland, the Scottish Government's response to this, and the views of young people. A summary of the Committee's engagement sessions with young people across week beginning 13 September 2021 is also included.

During these sessions, the Committee might wish to consider the purposes of certification. An [OECD paper in 2012](#)¹ noted a key purpose of a qualification is to provide portable evidence of knowledge and skills gained. This evidence can be used to inform further and higher education institutions and employers. The paper found that qualifications frameworks relied on standards and accountability and most OECD countries used a mixed system of in-school, teacher-based continuous assessment and external end of year exams. Another function identified by the OECD in relation to qualifications with summative assessments could motivate learners to higher achievements; although this is somewhat contested in academic literature².

ASSESSMENT ARRANGEMENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Alternative Certification Model 2020

External examinations were cancelled in 2020 and 2021 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Plans put in place in response to the disruption have differed each year, with the 2021 arrangements adapted following criticism of the 2020 system.

¹ [Assessment for Qualification and Certification in Upper Secondary Education: A Review of Country Practices and Research Evidence \(pp13-15\)](#)

² [Harlen and Crick \(2002\)](#), for example found mixed evidence for summative assessments motivating learning.

In [March 2020, exams were cancelled as the pandemic took hold](#)³. SQA made provisional arrangements for qualifications requiring externally assessed exams (National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher) and adjustments for other qualifications (e.g. Nationals 2-4 and Skills for Work). The SQA also produces qualifications for Higher National Diplomas and Certificates (HND and HNCs) at college level, so these arrangements also had an impact on colleges. In schools, the model to provide pupils with end of year grades was based on teacher estimates based on school work throughout the year, which were then moderated externally by SQA applying a statistical algorithm. This resulted in the downgrade of 134,000 teacher estimated grades, impacting 76,000 pupils, with SQA's own Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) showing pupils in the most deprived 20% of postcodes in Scotland (SIMD 0-20) were generally more likely have their grades revised down by the SQA moderators than those in the least deprived 20% (SIMD 80-100). Following concerns raised in public by parents and pupils, [the Deputy First Minister apologised to young people](#)⁴ and announced the downgrades would be reversed. Further detail on the 2020 assessment system is available in the SPICe briefing for the Committee's 15 September 2021 meeting⁵; the [SPICe Briefing for the Education and Skills Committee 1 May 2020 meeting](#)⁶ and [16 September 2020 meeting](#).⁷

The Scottish Government commissioned Stirling University Professor of Education Mark Priestly and colleagues to carry out a Rapid Review of National Qualifications experience 2020. The Scottish Government [published the review report on 7 October 2020](#)⁸. The review is explored in more detail in the [SPICe briefing for the 1 November 2020 Education and Skills Committee meeting](#).

It concluded that SQA, the government, local authorities and schools faced “an extremely difficult set of circumstances” with no easy solutions. The report found that: while all parties involved in the process acted with integrity; there were variations in the awarding of estimated grades; a lack of transparency around external moderation; equalities implications of the statistical approach used by SQA were “under-emphasised by both the government and SQA until late in the process”; and trust in the SQA had been damaged.

The review report made nine recommendations. These included: the suspension of National 5 exams in 2021; the development of a transparent system for moderation of teacher estimated grades; development of approaches to collaborated decision making around assessment; a commitment to equalities; ensuring young people are included in stakeholder engagement; ensuring clear communication of assessment arrangements for 2021; reviewing the appeals system, considering the rights of young people in line with UNCRC; commissioning of independent research into development and application of the

³ [Ministerial Statement, COVID-19 \(Education\), 19 March 2020](#)

⁴ [Ministerial Statement on Examination Results, 11 August 2020](#)

⁵ A link to these papers is unavailable as they were not published on the Committee webpage

⁶ [SPICe Briefing for Education and Skills Committee, 1 May 2020](#)

⁷ [SPICe briefing for Education and Skills Committee, 16 September 2020](#)

⁸ [National Qualifications experience 2020: rapid review, 2020](#)

2020 ACM; and the development by SQA and others of digital materials and systems for producing, assessing and moderating assessment evidence.

The Scottish Government accepted all review recommendations except for number 8, which it said would be considered as “a future project as part of our research strategy in education”.

Alternative Certification Model 2021

Following the publication of the Rapid Review of National Qualifications, [the Deputy First Minister announced in October 2020 that the recommendation to cancel National 5 exams in 2021 would be accepted](#)⁹. The initial intention was to go ahead with Higher and Advanced Higher exams, however the [decision to cancel these exams as well was announced in December 2020](#)¹⁰. Announcing the cancellation, the Deputy First Minister said:

“...we will adopt a new model that is based on the one developed for National 5 qualifications and make awards on teacher judgement of evidence of learner attainment. This approach is more flexible and takes account of the reality of the disruption so many pupils have already had to their learning.” – [Scottish Government news release, 8 December 2020](#)

The Alternative Certification Model (ACM) was developed by the SQA with reference to the National Qualifications 2021 Group. The ACM for 2021 was a five-stage process:

- **Stage 1:** November 2020 until April 2021, teachers and lecturers accessed subject specific guidance, assessment resources and Understanding Standards materials and webinars from SQA.
- **Stage 2:** April to May 2021 School, college and local authority quality assurance continues. During May, SQA requests, reviews and provides feedback on samples of assessment evidence from each school and college.
- **Stage 3:** End of May to 25 June 2021 Schools, colleges, local authorities and SQA work through final stages of local and national quality assurance and feedback to reach provisional results that are consistent, equitable and fair.
- **Stage 4:** By 25 June 2021 Schools and colleges submit quality assured provisional results to SQA.
- **Stage 5:** Appeals process for 2020-21 A free appeals service, available directly to learners for the first time, is the fifth and final stage of the alternative certification model.

⁹ [Scottish Government news release: SQA Awards 2020](#)

¹⁰ [Scottish Government news release: SQA Awards update](#), December 2020

Further information about this process is available on the [SQA website](#).

In its [March 2021 submission to the Education and Skills Committee](#)¹¹, the EIS said that a majority of secondary school teachers expressed:

...deep anxiety about the timescales remaining for assessment to be undertaken by senior phase students. – [EIS submission, March 2021](#)

EIS listed young people sitting multiple assessments across multiple subjects in a tight timeframe as a key concern, with the lack of support and information from SQA also highlighted numerous times. [NASUWT provided subject-specific evidence to the Committee](#)¹² highlighting that course content had not been adapted or removed in certain subjects including Dance at National 5 and Higher; there was insufficient time available to gather required assessment evidence in English and Geography; and confusion around requirements for History. In evidence to the [3 March 2021 meeting of the Education and Skills Committee, SQA Chief Executive Fiona Robertson said that SQA had](#)¹³:

“...sought to take a proportionate approach across the subjects. In the sciences, and in a number of other subjects, the assessment is synoptic—that is, it is not topic by topic; you are looking at a range of issues in any assessment approach. It can be difficult to remove elements in those subjects, whereas it may be more straightforward to do that in other subjects.

...we have worked hard to ensure coherence of approach across the considerable number of subjects that we offer while being cognisant of the well-established differences in assessment...For many practical subjects we have, in effect, carried out a second round of modifications, which bear in mind the current circumstances. For example, in music, young people can record themselves playing, so they do not have to be in the school physically.” – [Official Report, 3 March 2021](#)

The [SQA issued an update on the assessment process in April 2021](#)¹⁴ which said:

“Evidence should be gathered under controlled conditions to ensure a degree of equity. It is the quality of evidence which is critical, rather than quantity and therefore there is no need for a large portfolio or ring-binder of classroom based work. There is no requirement to replicate full formal exams or prelims this year. Classroom based assessments should be spread over the remaining weeks to help manage the marking and quality assurance activities as well as reduce pressure on learners.”

The SQA provided schools with exam scripts that could be used. The SQA also provided advice for teachers on how to develop their own assessments. Schools were not required to use the SQA scripts, and, if they were, they could be used in full or in part. However,

¹¹ [EIS submission to Education and Skills Committee, March 2021](#)

¹² [NASUWT subject specific evidence to Education and Skills Committee, March 2021](#)

¹³ [Education and Skills Committee, 3 March 2021](#)

¹⁴ [SQA: National Qualifications 2021 Group update: Alternative Certification Model Stage 2, April 2021](#)

some of the guidance for, particularly more paper-based subjects, indicated that the closer the assessments were to normal end of course assessments the more realistic and reliable teachers' estimated grades would be¹⁵. During the Spring there were reports of schools appearing to replicate exam conditions, with [Connect highlighting schools across the country were taking different approaches](#)¹⁶.

Results on were published on 10 August 2021. [SQA's summary of results showed](#)¹⁷:

- A-C attainment rates for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher (85.8%, 87.3% and 90.2% respectively) were down on 2020 but are higher than A-C attainment rates in each year in the period 2017 to 2019
- Grade A attainment rates for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher (46.7%, 47.6% and 51.0% respectively) were up on 2020 and are higher than grade A attainment rate for each year in the period 2017 to 2019.

[UCAS data published on results day](#)¹⁸ showed rising numbers of Scottish students placed at Scottish universities continues to rise.

- The number of Scots domiciled students with a university place through UCAS is up 12% on last year's results day with 32,580 students placed in universities across the UK.
- 31,070 of these Scottish students have a place at a Scottish university – up 10% on the previous year and higher than any year of the past decade. [In 2021/22 SFC is funding an additional 2,500 student places](#)¹⁹ because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of exam cancellation.
- The number of EU students placed has fallen from 2,670 to 1,190 – this is a fall of 56%. [Following the UK's withdrawal from the EU, EU students are now required to pay the same tuition fees as international students](#)²⁰.
- However, the number of placed international students has increased from 2,360 at results day last year to 3,690 on results day 2021; an increase of 56%. This would suggest universities are recruiting increased numbers of international students to make up for the fall in EU applicants and acceptances.

Impact of assessment arrangements on young people

The Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP), YouthLink Scotland and Young Scot surveyed young people across Scotland as part of their Lockdown Lowdown series. The [Lockdown](#)

¹⁵ E.g. https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files_ccc/guidance-estimates-n5-physics.pdf

¹⁶ [BBC: Parents question fairness of exams, 13 May 2021](#)

¹⁷ [SQA Attainment Statistics. August 2021](#)

¹⁸ [UCAS daily clearing analysis, results day 2021](#)

¹⁹ [SFC Final University Funding Allocations AY 2021-22](#)

²⁰ [SPICe FE HE Subject Profile, 2021](#)

[Lowdown 3 survey²¹](#) was carried out between March and June 2021 and published in July 2021, received 2,404 responses from young people across the country. Members should note that the survey was an open online survey, the respondents may not be representative of young people as a whole and therefore the results should be treated with caution.

As part of the survey, respondents were asked:

- to what extent they agreed they felt prepared for 2021 assessments: 34% neither agreed nor disagreed, 44% selected 'strongly disagree' or 'disagree', while 22% said 'strongly agree' or 'agree'.
- to what extent they were confident that teacher assessment of grades would be delivered fairly in 2021. 40% neither agreed nor disagreed, 38% selected 'strongly agree' or 'agree', while 22% said they 'strongly disagreed' or 'disagreed'.

Of those who believed teacher assessment would be fairly delivered, 'trust in teachers' was the most common theme in their responses, with 'teachers being supportive and understanding' coming in second.

Of those who disagreed, 'criticism of approach' came top of the list, with the impact of COVID on results coming second.

Of those who neither agreed nor disagreed, 'difficulty with remote learning' was the most common response theme while 'criticism of approach' came second.

When asked what support pupils would most like from schools or organisations for young people, the most common ask was for study support groups and extra lessons if needed. In person and online study groups were both popular suggestions.

The need for meaningful mental health support was highlighted, as was the need for more time between assessments to prepare. More targeted support for those needing help and support with assignments and tasks was also highlighted.

SQA appeals process: 2020 and 2021

Questions around the SQA appeals process and its transparency were raised in 2020 and 2021. The campaign group SQA Where's Our Say, which was set up following Results Day 2020, [wrote to the Education and Skills Committee in February 2021²²](#) to highlight SQA's perceived lack of engagement with young people around the 2021 appeals process. The letter also raised concern about the closure of the 2020 appeals process in December 2020, stating:

"This simply implies that the SQA have simply turned their backs on the students affected last year, some of whom have been left with no redress, with doors

²¹ [Lockdown Lowdown 3: What young people think as lockdown begins to ease, July 2021](#)

²² [SQA Where's Our Say? Letter to Education and Skills Committee, February 2021](#)

slammed shut behind them with no to get justice, something the UNCRC promotes for young people. The young people affected have told us at ‘SQA: Where’s Our say’ that they feel ‘left alone’ and that they ‘got not that much help from the Scottish Government’.” – [Letter to Education and Skills Committee, February 2021](#)

Child and Family Law Lecturer Dr Tracy Kirk [shared research with the Committee in March 2021](#), highlighting her research work on SQA and international human rights obligations. Dr Kirk’s research concluded in her research that the SQA have breached the Equality Act 2010 with their approach to students “disproportionately disadvantaged by the SQA processes of 2020”. Dr Kirk also stated there were young people who had lost places at university “because no appeals process has been forthcoming”.

During the [10 March 2021 meeting of the Education and Skills Committee](#)²³, Children and Young People’s Commissioner Young Advisor Abigail McGill raised concerns about the fairness of the appeals system and SQA’s lack of engagement with young people:

“We are just as concerned that the appeals process will not be fair this year [2021] either, because everything has been up in the air and nothing has come back down. The SQA has said that it is working with our office, but it is not, and its current appeals process is not rights compliant, specifically in respect of the right to redress and remedy. At the minute, our future seems to be very much out of our hands.” – [Official Report, 10 March 2021](#)

The SQA ran a consultation from 12 until 26 March 2021. It received a total of 1,114 responses²⁴ – 78% (868) of which were from teachers, 9% (104) from parents and carers and 2% (23) from learners²⁵. Themes emerging from the consultation included: a need for clear communications with learners about the ACM and appeal arrangements; exceptional circumstances facing learners should be considered; mixed opinion on whether or not a result could be downgraded on appeal; and some support for learners to have a direct route of appeal. Respondents had mixed views as to whether schools and centres should handle appeals in the first instance. While learners and parents were supportive of this, teachers expressed concerns about the additional workload and damage to relationships with learners, parents and carers.

Ahead of Results Day 2021, SYP, the Children and Young People’s Commissioner, NUS Scotland, Who Cares? Scotland, SQA Where’s Our Say? and a number of organisations and academics signed an [open letter in June 2021](#) to SQA calling for changes to be made to the appeals process to ensure their grade would not go down on appeal and the impact of the pandemic on learners would be taken into account. [In response, SQA said](#) that it had “consulted widely” on the approach to appeals, including an online session with its learner panel, adding:

²³ [Education and Skills Committee, 10 March 2021](#)

²⁴ SQA [2021 National Qualifications Appeals Process Consultation Analysis](#)

“There are clear, broad grounds of appeal in place and, for the first time, learners have a free direct right of appeal.” – [SQA response to open letter, June 2021](#)

Assessment plans for 2021-22

On 18 August 2021, the [Cabinet Secretary announced that exams are to take place in 2022, dependent on public health advice](#)²⁶. Two contingency plans will be in place:

- If it is safe for exams to go ahead but there has been “further significant disruption to learning as a result of COVID-19”, coursework and assessments will be modified.
- In the event exams cannot take place due to public health conditions, grades will be awarded based on teacher judgement of in-year assessments.

Responding to this announcement, [EIS Scotland said](#) the union would rather have seen S4 assessments cancelled “in the interests of supporting education recovery and wellbeing among this cohort” and stated that assessment and learning in future should better serve the needs of Scotland’s learners. The [Scottish Secondary Teachers Association \(SSTA\)](#) said in its Members’ Bulletin that it was not consulted ahead of the announcement and has concerns around increased teacher workload due to a potential increased number of exams. [NASUWT said it welcomed the announcement of plans](#), however further detail of how they will work in practice is needed.

On 15 September 2021, [SQA published further information about 2021-22 assessment plans](#)²⁷. This put forward three potential scenarios:

- **Current public health advice: SQA exam diet with modifications (as announced by the Cabinet Secretary):** In this scenario, exams take place as planned in spring 2022. In recognition of ongoing disruption, SQA has kept modifications from 2020-21 in place and “in most cases” learners will do less assessment than in a normal year. [A subject breakdown of modifications is available on the SQA website.](#)
- **Increased levels of disruption: SQA exam diet with modifications plus additional measures:** Further additional measures to will be introduced to take into account any disruption faced. For example, learners may be provided with additional information to help them focus study. Assessments will not change.
- **Public health advice leads to exams being cancelled: Teachers and lecturers determine provisional results:** The exam diet will be cancelled in the event of the introduction of restrictions on in-person gatherings. The main focus will be learning and teaching, with teachers and lecturers using “the type, quality and volume of evidence that would be needed to support quality assured estimates in a ‘normal’ year”. This will be used to support provisional results. The guidance states: “there is no requirement for schools, colleges and training providers to run additional

²⁶ [Scottish Government news release: National Qualifications 2022](#)

²⁷ [SQA National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher assessments 2021-22](#)

assessments. Doing so would place excess workload on teachers, lecturers and learners. Provisional results would be based on in-year assessments that normally take place during the school year such as prelims, practical activities, performances and class tests.”

Following publication of the guidance, the EIS raised concerns in [newspaper reports](#)²⁸ about a “dual assessment approach where schools prepare for exams but also need to gather extra evidence in case exams are cancelled.”

In the same report, senior SQA figures were reported as saying pupils are likely to have a direct route of appeal to challenge results in the event exams are cancelled.

Members may wish to explore with the panel:

- **What has been the experience of pupils, teachers and schools using the appeals process following Results Day 2021?**
- **Are there arrangements in place for any appeals still outstanding?**
- **What has been learned from the use of teacher estimated grades and is there an appetite to retain this method as part of any future system?**
- **What assessment has your organisation made of the SQA’s scenario planning for 2021-22?**

THE FUTURE OF ASSESSMENT IN SCOTLAND

Two recent OECD reports have considered aspects of Scotland’s assessment system:

- [Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future](#)²⁹ (June 2021)
- [Upper-secondary education student assessment in Scotland](#)³⁰ (August 2021)

[Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future](#)³¹ considers Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) overall. In relation to assessment, the [report states that](#):

“...the approach to student assessment and the nature of the learning experience in the classroom will not change in the Senior Phase unless the approach to the assessment of qualifications is fully aligned to match CfE ambitions.” – p121

It goes on to suggest approaches that could be piloted when moving toward this approach. These include: more portfolio assessments in line with CfE’s four capacities; increased emphasis on flexible and continuous assessment rather than end of year external exams; more use of digital opportunities for feedback and support; maintaining and possibly

²⁸ [The Herald: SQA: Direct appeals likely to be retained if exams axed](#)

²⁹ OECD [Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future, 2021](#)

³⁰ [Upper-secondary education student assessment in Scotland, OECD, 2021](#)

³¹ OECD [Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future, 2021](#)

strengthening a strong role for teacher judgement with appropriate moderation. Further detail on the report can be found in the [SPICe briefing for the Committee's 8 September 2021 meeting](#).

Outlining the Scottish Government's response to the OECD CfE report, [Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills Shirley-Anne Somerville MSP announced in a Ministerial Statement on 22 June 2021](#)³² that:

- The inspection function will be moved out of Education Scotland in order to balance the need for local flexibility with consistency in outcomes;
- SQA will likely be replaced with a "new specialist agency" responsible for curriculum and assessment.
- Professor Ken Muir, former Chief Executive of the General Teaching Council for Scotland, will take forward a review on the reform of Education Scotland and the SQA. He chairs an [External Expert Panel of teachers and academics](#)³³ which will begin consulting with stakeholders this autumn. The panel will then have a role in drafting next steps.

The second report, [Upper-secondary education student assessment in Scotland](#)³⁴ was published on 31 August 2021. This work, by Professor Gordon Stobart, was commissioned as part of the OECD's work on the Scottish education system. Professor Stobart is an Honorary Research Fellow at Oxford University and was appointed by the OECD to carry out the work. The report compares Scotland's approach to assessment in the senior phase of secondary school with systems used in nine other countries. Arrangements being implemented in these countries are explored in the report. For example, in Norway some exams are now computer-based and pupils have access to online resources. Pilot studies in New Zealand, Israel, Norway and Finland also found online and on-screen assessments could be implemented, though there were logistical challenges of doing this. The report also looks at how other countries adapted assessment and examination arrangements as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. A full summary of the report is available in the [SPICe briefing for the Committee's 9 September 2021 meeting](#); recommendations are highlighted below.

The report recognises the challenges countries face in aligning broad visions for education such as CfE with examination policies in the senior phase of school. It explains that many other countries use alternative forms of assessment such as school-based exams, teacher assessment, presentations and practical assessments as part of their qualifications systems.

The OECD sets out options for the future of assessment for Scotland to explore, including: Removal of National 5 examinations in S4 and move toward a school graduation certificate or diploma; developing a more resilient upper-secondary assessment system, with a

³² [Ministerial Statement: Curriculum for Excellence, Official Report 22 June 2021](#)

³³ [Scottish Government: Reform of SQA and Education Scotland Expert Panel: draft terms of reference](#), 2021

³⁴ [Upper-secondary education student assessment in Scotland, OECD, 2021](#)

qualifications system based on a combination of continuous assessment, school-based exams and external exams; better alignment of assessment with CfE through broadening forms of assessment, including interactive approaches such as computer-based exams, e-Portfolios and practical assessments used in countries such as Norway, New Zealand, Finland and Israel; increasing the role of teachers in school-based assessment and moving away from centralised moderation; ensuring students are a key stakeholder in development of assessments; and further developing the role of vocational qualifications.

The [Scottish Government news release](#)³⁵ announcing the publication of the review states that the recommendations:

“...will be considered as part of a wider conversation with learners, teachers, parents and others on how Scotland’s qualifications and assessment system can best evolve in line with the curriculum and society of today.”

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills Shirley-Anne Somerville MSP will update Parliament on how the Scottish Government intends to take the OECD’s recommendations forward as part of wider work to implement the OECD recommendations following their review of CfE.

The [EIS](#) response welcomed the report’s suggestions for “de-cluttering” the S4-S6 examination “ladder”, stating this could help ease assessment overload. Suggestions on the enhanced role of teacher assessment were also welcomed for consideration, however EIS stated the use of more digital based assessment would need “careful consideration”.

[Connect’s](#) response outlined the challenges of the current system and said the findings “chime with what many educators, parents and young people have been saying for many years”, adding: “We look forward to a radical overhaul and a move to a system which meets the needs of all our young people and reflects their skills, knowledge and achievements.”

The [Scottish Youth Parliament](#) welcomed the report’s call for continued engagement with young people on the issue of exams and assessments.

Sector views on the future of assessment

In [evidence to the Education and Skills Committee on 10 March 2021](#)³⁶, Young Adviser for the Children and Young People’s Commissioner Coll McCail said there was now an “amazing chance” to look at the way assessment and exams are carried out in the future:

“For two years now, we have used a model of continuous assessment. This is the chance to look at reforming the education system in that regard, because there is a perception—certainly among young people—that exams are outdated. After working

³⁵ [Scottish Government news release: National qualifications and assessments, 2021](#)

³⁶ [Education and Skills Committee Official Report 10 March 2021](#)

for a year, being assessed on two hours of work in a pressure cooker environment in May might work for some, but it does not work for the majority.” - [Official Report, 10 March 2021](#)

In a briefing provided to the Committee, SYP highlighted work carried out by MSYPs looking at how assessment might change in the years ahead. MSYPs were generally supportive of an assessment system with less emphasis on external exams. However, they also stated improvements to the 2021 ACM system were needed. MSYPs suggested improvements could include:

- Ensure young people are included in the development of assessment systems.
- Assessments that help pupils not planning to head to college or university. These could include vocational qualifications and apprenticeships.
- To make the appeals system fairer.
- Standardising continuous assessment across schools, as the 2021 ACM saw pupils in different schools sitting different assessments and this can potentially result in disparity of grades awarded.
- Assessment training and support for teachers.
- Making sure grades awarded under the ACM have the same recognition as grades awarded in previous years.

Who Cares? Scotland (WCS) also provided the Committee with a briefing setting out steps to incorporate into a future assessment system to ensure it does not unfairly disadvantage care experienced people. These are:

- A no detriment policy built in to the appeals process, giving young people a guarantee that their grade will not go down if they appeal it and that exceptional circumstances they have experienced are considered.
- Ensure a learner’s care experienced status can be considered in appeals. WCS notes that while there is a route for protected groups to access a ‘Discrimination’ route of appeal, this is not open to care experienced people as the Equality Act 2010 does not list care experience as a protected group in law.
- Include care experience within Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) to ensure the needs of care experienced young people are considered.
- Create tailored information and support for care experienced learners to ensure they are aware of how to access processes such as appeals.

WCS also suggested Committee members should meet with WCS to engage in ongoing dialogue to understand the needs of care experienced learners and how the assessment system and appeals process might better meet these needs.

In a [submission to the Education and Skills Committee in March 2021](#)³⁷, SSTA stated that it had long called for an assessment system that prioritised teachers' professional judgement. With regards to SQA's role as a qualifications body, SSTA stated:

The general view from teachers is that the SQA is adrift from teachers and, as an organisation, has not led the way during the crisis nor anticipated the challenges that teachers have faced. The guidance has been seen by many members as too little and too late. Unfortunately, this has been a view held by many teachers for a number of years. – [SSTA submission](#)

Young people's views on the future of assessment

Over the course of the week beginning 13 September 2021, the Committee held nine informal evidence sessions with young people with experience of the 2020 and/or 2021 ACM. The sessions were based around four questions:

- What worked well about this year's assessments and how it might be used in future?
- What about this year's assessments did not work?
- How should pupils be assessed in the future? For example, how might exams, practical assessment and other forms of assessment be used? Will colleges, universities and employers still have a good picture of what pupils are capable of if pupils took more assessments throughout the year and fewer exams?
- How should young people be involved in decisions about the future of assessments?

During the session, young people also raised the issue of mental health and wellbeing, so this is covered in the summary below under an additional heading. Additional points raised are also noted under a separate heading.

Nine sessions in total were held across the week beginning 13 September 2021. The following groups took part in the sessions:

- Care experienced young people facilitated by Who Cares? Scotland;
- Pupils from Buchanan High School for pupils with additional support needs, Coatbridge;
- Pupils from St Joseph's College, Dumfries.
- Young carers facilitated by Carers' Trust Scotland
- Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP)
- Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland (CYPCS) Young Advisers
- Young people facilitated by Children in Scotland (CiS)
- Pupils from Inverness Royal Academy
- Pupils from Shawlands Academy

³⁷ [SSTA submission to Education and Skills Committee, March 2021](#)

A summary of responses grouped by question is included below.

What worked well about this year's assessments and how it might be used in future?

Young people across the groups mentioned one positive of the ACM was nothing was based on a single exam and assessments happened later in the year, giving pupils chances to improve. The flexibility of ACM was also highlighted, with young carers welcoming the ability to sit assessments on a different date if needed. One young carer noted their school had helped to rearrange an assessment they had been unable to sit. School pupils also highlighted the flexibility of the assessments as a plus.

Young people in the SYP session said they saw continuous assessment as an opportunity to move away from the pressure of a single exam, but the system needed to be trialled. Participants in the CiS session said they felt they had achieved good results because of continuous assessment. One school pupil highlighted assessments meant pupils' best work was used as evidence toward their final grade.

Pupils from one school said it was good that teachers had to have evidence for awarding grades this year, rather than making a decision without access to assessment evidence.

One school pupil noted that they could still carry out placement work for their course in gardening as this took place outside. Another said that while they missed the experience of learning in school, the council provided an online training programme and this was good, though there were challenges when trying to present work online.

Pupils also highlighted:

- Attending a hub for the children of keyworkers during lockdown had been a positive experience.
- School called at least once a week to check on pupil welfare.
- Teachers were as helpful as they could be with the limited information they had.
- The positives of having one single exam board following previous experience with multiple exam boards.

What about this year's assessments did not work?

Communication was highlighted as problem by young people in almost every session. Young people said they felt that schools and learners were not given the information they needed and may have been able to better cope if this had been provided. Pupils from one school said they often found out about arrangements via the media rather than through schools and felt SQA did not give teachers enough information. There was a feeling of being spoken about without being able to speak up. One group described this as "infuriating" as they did not feel their wellbeing was being considered.

In the SYP session, one participant stated communications about assessments were not young people friendly. CiS also said SQA's communication seemed as though it was "made up as they went along", however they highlighted the [Appeals 2021](#) leaflet had been co-designed with young people and was an example of good communication.

Many young people said they did still feel like they were sitting exams, with some stating they felt like they sat exams every day for two months straight; an example of a pupil having 39 assessments in an eight-week period was given. A lack of time to prepare for assessments and disappointment at the final grade awarded as a result of this was also highlighted. The number of assessments was described by young carers as "overwhelming", and the message that exams were cancelled was described as "a bit misleading". A young person in the SYP session stated they felt it was a last-minute rush to finish some assessments.

Confusion around what evidence would be used to assess pupils was a common theme across the groups. Pupils said it was unclear what emphasis there was on different aspects of assessment, and this also differed by subject. There was confusion around whether course work was to be marked; some teachers did mark it while others did not. Participants in the CiS session said Drama was one subject that had been particularly hard to assess during the pandemic. Young people in the SYP session stated that it was hard to be clear about continuous assessment, particularly following the winter lockdown. There was a feeling that the system would have worked more effectively had the second lockdown not happened.

Several pupils from one school said that they could not carry out the practical elements of their courses such as cooking, going on placement in a primary school and working in a café. As a result, they missed the social contact this provided. Wifi problems were also highlighted as a challenge when working from home. CYPCS Young Advisers also said some pupils had not achieved the final grades they needed due to lost learning. One young person in the CiS session said their prelims had been cancelled and they did not know what to expect when they went into their final assessments.

One pupil also mentioned that subject choices going into S4 were limited because only certain practical elements could be carried out due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Another said leaving school had been hard due to not being able to meet people face to face.

Concerns around the potential for pupils to cheat were highlighted during some sessions, with reports of pupils being able to access assessment papers and questions online. Pupils at one school reported feeling misled by papers posted on social media by others. They also stated there was no way for teachers to know who had seen papers online and who had not.

Pupils felt they were being taught to pass assessments and felt pressure to get high marks in every assessment. A pupil in one school felt assessment content had been reduced compared to previous years, and this meant some might miss out on their "chance to shine" if the topics they performed best at were removed. Another pupil felt like they were being "processed" just to get through the course and get the grades with no full learning

experience. A focus on exams rather than learning prior to the pandemic was also highlighted as a problem of the existing system.

Pupils in one school said they found it was more difficult for teachers to explain tasks via remote learning, and this made it harder to understand what was required. Technical issues caused problems and some classes would see their teacher over online learning while others would not.

One school pupil who was fasting during the assessment period highlighted the lack of study leave as an issue, leaving them with only three hours a day to study. Young carers also said that not having study leave was unfair. They also highlighted that supported study had not been allowed and this had been difficult. It was mentioned that some pupils had dropped subjects and this would have an impact on their future.

CYPCS Young Advisers said they felt colleges had been forgotten and many college students of all ages had spent their year online.

Some young people also felt support provided varied by teacher. Differences around the way schools recognised pupils' exceptional/mitigating circumstances were highlighted during the SYP session.

How should pupils be assessed in the future? For example, how might exams, practical assessment and other forms of assessment be used? Will colleges, universities and employers would still have a good picture of what pupils are capable of if pupils took more assessments throughout the year and fewer exams?

Young people in many of the groups felt that the introduction of continuous assessment throughout the year would be a positive development. Some suggested assessment structured by units would ensure these assessments had enough time between them. Many young people did want to see a final exam take place in some form, but the majority wanted this to count toward less of the overall grade than it does during a normal exam year. Only one school pupil said they favoured a final exam over continuous assessment.

During the SYP session, one participant stated there was an opportunity now to look at change but also a risk of no action being taken as teachers may be scared to change the system. Similarly, young people in the CiS session said the current system needs to change as it doesn't value learning and is focused on pupils being able to "regurgitate the correct answers", which young people felt was not useful for future careers. They felt there could be a long transition period and suggested the first step toward change could be to decrease the value of exams, making them count less towards final grades. Young people recognised schools wanted to make improvements but are unable to do this because of pressure to retrieve results; this was the collective failure of a system.

Care experienced young people supported the recognition of pupils' effort throughout the year being recognised in final qualifications awarded. This could consider willingness to learn, performance in ongoing assessment, behaviour and other work. Young people in the CiS session were also supportive of this idea, as were pupils from one of the participating

schools. One care experienced young person suggested average grades could be taken from school work; for example, a pupil could complete three essays in one subject as part of school work and then an average grade could be taken from these. There was also a suggestion that 'assessments' could be renamed as pupils sometimes "freak out" about work given this label.

The need for a new system to give recognition to challenges facing individual pupils was raised by a number of groups. Care experienced young people felt additional challenges such as moving care placement during prelims and exams must be recognised, and the assessment system should not add additional stress to their lives. CYCPS Young Advisers also stated continuous assessment could allow pupils with different skill sets to show these in presentations or practical work. This would lead to more equity in learning.

Consideration of different learning styles was also highlighted by care experienced young people, as not everyone responds well to an exam hall environment and this may impact on attainment. It was felt young people should have a say over how and if they sit a final exam. It was suggested that pupils could complete school-based assessments across the year with the option of sitting an end of year exam if they wished to.

Young carers said assessment throughout the year was helpful as this takes some of the pressure off juggling study with caring responsibilities, which can be mentally draining at times. They felt multiple assessments take the pressure off and enabled pupils to fulfil their potential, rather than a system where an end of year exam determines a pupil's grade. When asked if they trusted teachers to mark assessments fairly, young carers said that they did. Similarly, CYPCS Young Advisers said midyear tests would give a good indication of learning and development. Young people in the CiS session said that continuous assessments needed to be structured and delivered so they know what to expect.

CYPCS Young Advisers saw clear benefits in continuous assessment, stating it gave pupils the opportunity to learn more and gain better skills for college, university or the workplace. They also said teachers became really stressed at exam time, and continuous assessment could help lessen teachers' stress, stop them having to teach to what is likely to be in an exam and allow them to focus on knowledge.

Young people in the CiS session said the Advanced Higher model was a good example of how qualifications should be as it focuses on exploring and learning about a subject as opposed to being all about exams. History was mentioned as a specific subject that needs to be improved as the current Higher is seen as too prescriptive and does not prepare pupils well for the Advanced Higher.

One school pupil said they would like to see each subject split into four branches in line with Curriculum for Excellence as this would allow learners to develop their skills more effectively.

The “big jump” from National 5 to Higher was highlighted by pupils in one school. They felt National 5s were not good preparation for Highers and suggested pupils could be given information about Highers before the summer holidays in fourth year to familiarise themselves.

One pupil said they would welcome wider learning opportunities within schools, as some employers don't see exam grades as a benchmark for a young person's abilities.

Pupils from one school highlighted the need for fun to be put back into learning, and students should have the opportunity to do things that they are passionate about. The Duke of Edinburgh award was given as an example, as this gives students the opportunity to work in their communities and such activities should be recognised for their value. Practical activities are as important as academic study.

How should young people be involved in decisions about the future of assessments?

There was clear agreement across the groups that young people should be involved in the design of any new system. A broad range of views should be listened to, and pupils from rural, city, small and large schools should all be included due to their different experiences and the meaningful involvement of young people must be clear for all to see. CYPCS Young Advisers also highlighted the need to engage with learners from less affluent backgrounds, feeling the voices of this group were not currently being heard and their experiences of lockdown had been difficult.

Use of online platforms accessible to young people and their schools was suggested as a means of ensuring pupils could access information relevant to them and provide feedback and suggestions on assessment and other issues within school. CYPCS Young Advisers also felt schools should get feedback from their pupils, and that the Scottish Youth Parliament could be used more to feed in the views of young people.

There was clear support for pupils being involved in decision making all year round and on a range of issues. The importance of good support from teachers was also highlighted.

Young carers said they would like to continue to take part in sessions with MSPs and had felt heard during the session. Participants in the CiS session also cited the session as a good example of group discussion. They welcomed the establishment of a Children and Young People's Education Council, suggesting the Committee should hear from them regularly in the same way they hear from other stakeholder groups. Pupils said failure to engage with stakeholder groups “will be a tragedy”. Participants felt pupils in primary school should also be spoken to in order to let them know about exams and reduce the worry they may feel about them.

Young people from one school suggested that communications with young people should be carried out via other young people as it was felt they are more likely to be frank and honest with their peers who can then pass on their views.

Mental health and wellbeing

Concerns around mental health and wellbeing was highlighted by nearly all groups. Pupils mentioned the pressure they felt under to achieve good marks in assessments and said this led to stress and exhaustion. Pupils also spoke of crying regularly and suffering from headaches. Young carers said they had felt mentally drained at times. Participants in the CiS session felt some schools were too elitist and cared more about results and statistics than pupil wellbeing.

Problems around moving schools during the pandemic was highlighted by a care experienced young person. Hold ups within the Children's Hearing System meant progress was slow, and this led to problems including less support from school teachers, confusion around final grades achieved, lack of communication between schools leading to timetable issues, and a lack of attention to individual support needs.

One Young Adviser in the CYPCS session said that young people felt they had been "put on the backburner" to protect older people, without having their voices heard and without the consequences on their mental health being considered.

A young person in the CiS session said that there was not enough support available for young people's mental health and the ACM did not take impact on mental health into consideration. In the same session, a young person spoke of feeling at an "all time low" due to constant revision for exams that "never seemed to happen" and said their school counsellor had been overwhelmed with demand. It was also mentioned that some pupils "disappeared" during the second lockdown with teachers and schools have difficulty contacting them for a range of reasons such as home life, rural locations and additional support needs.

While pupils said they are told exams are not the be-all-and-end-all, this was the message that they felt they ultimately received. Pupils in one participating school said their mental health is affected if too much value is attached to good grades; it can lead to a feeling of being under a lot of pressure to do well.

Pupils in one school said that as lockdown affected everyone, they felt better able to have conversations with teachers about any difficulties they faced.

Additional points raised

Young people from a number of groups said they were worried about going to university having never sat a formal exam, and the impact this might have on their performance. However, participants in the CYPCS Young Advisers session said they felt a system of continuous assessment would be more aligned to the university and workplace learning.

There was concern around being unable to complete extra-curricular activities to boost applications. Competition for university places was also highlighted as a concern.

One care experienced young person said the university they applied to did not initially stick to the terms of the Care Experienced Guarantee³⁸ which states that universities should offer places to care experienced young people who meet the minimum entry requirements for the course they have applied for. The young person was initially not offered a place, but with support from school the pupil's mitigating circumstances were highlighted and the university eventually offered a place.

Pupils worried what employers will think of exam results achieved this year and whether they will have the same standing as exams sat in other years. CYPCS Young Advisers were concerned that pupils may not be as prepared for life out of school and did not have the practical skills they would have developed in a normal year.

Pupils said lockdown and additional COVID-19 safety measures made them anxious.

Pupils were keen for Plan A and Plan B for next year, with clear communication around this.

Members may wish to explore with panel members:

- **How will your organisations ensure that young people's views are listened to and acted upon going forward?**
- **Young people have reported being under extreme stress during this year's assessment process. How can this be avoided in future?**
- **What assessment options would panel members be keen to see included in Scotland's assessment system in future?**
- **To what degree should we expect to maintain a focus on individual subjects in certification?**
- **What weighting could be given to each form of assessment in the awarding an overall qualification?**
- **Has any work been carried out by any of the organisations on the panel to explore how non-external assessment options might be developed? What can be learned from the experience of countries such as Norway, New Zealand, Finland and Israel?**
- **What is your organisation's view on the introduction of 'no detriment' to the appeals system, as called for by Who Cares? Scotland and others?**
- **What is your organisation's view on whether and how consideration of learner's individual circumstances might be built into the appeals system?**

³⁸ <https://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/scotlands-universities-to-guarantee-offers-to-care-experienced-applicants-who-meet-minimum-entry-requirements/>

- **What do the panel view as the opportunities and risks of change to the current assessment system? How might these be balanced and managed?**

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