



Fiona Robertson
Chief Executive
SQA
The Optima Building
58 Robertson Street
Glasgow
G2 8DQ

14 April 2020

Dear Ms Robertson,

I am aware that our Digital Media Officer has been in touch with your Key Communications Manager this week about information produced by the SQA around changes to exams and whether this is/will be available in a format easily understood by the young people affected.

Kerry McMillan's quick response was much appreciated, in which she indicated that the SQA is looking at engagement activities with 'key audiences, including learners', noting that the SQA's 'primary efforts have been focused on ensuring that practitioners are made aware of the next steps following cancellation of this year's exams'. She went on to say that you are 'now considering how these messages are translated for other key audiences such as parent, carers and learners'.

The Commissioner understands the considerable pressure the SQA will have been under to develop a robust response to an unprecedented situation, working under the pressure of a challenging timeframe whilst taking into account the needs of both practitioners and learners.

However, the Commissioner's office has been hearing about and from young people who are suffering high levels of anxiety and distress in regard to the potential impact of these changes. They have raised a number of issues we would like to bring to your attention.

Communication

Children and young people have expressed disappointment that SQA has not seemed to have prioritised them in its communications so far, and have said they do not feel well informed about the proposed way in which their grades (and their futures) will be determined. We believe this distress could be at least partially alleviated by a recognition that children and young people should be SQA's key priority in terms of communication. This would require more direct communication with young people: providing information in language that is young-person friendly, and more readily accessible—for example through the use of school communications channels and social media in addition to the SQA website.

Appeals

We are aware that traditionally the majority of appeals are initiated by teachers. However, given the unusual situation this year, that grades will be determined by those teachers, it will be important to ensure there is a distinct route of appeal for young people to use that does not rely on a teacher being asked to appeal their own determination. Actively communicating this and making it widely available and accessible to young people would support fair process and empower young people to take an active part in their education. This will be particularly



important for those young people who may not have an adult in their lives who is able or willing to act on their behalf.

Involvement in decision making

Young people have also told us that they are keen to be involved in the work of the SQA, allowing you to benefit from their experiences and point-of-view, and for them to influence the decisions that are being made. Although timescales have not allowed for this in the formulation of the SQA's immediate response to the current crisis, it does represent an opportunity for the SQA to consider and take forward how the organisation can meaningfully involve young people in support of their rights to participation (Art 12 UNCRC), and education (Arts 28 and 29 UNCRC).

We are aware that the Scottish Youth Parliament has offered to support the SQA in engaging with young people and would urge you to use their considerable expertise in both communications and engagement.

Finally, Kerry also helpfully told us that you are currently working on a dedicated section of your website to cover key topics and frequently asked questions, offering to send us a link once it is live to assist us in responding to questions received by our office from young people, their parents and carers. We would be happy to also share with you questions and concerns raised with us, if that would be helpful in developing the content of your website.

Yours sincerely,

Nick Hobbs
Head of Advice and Investigations