

Rennie demands more data to clarify SQA moderations

Following the publication of exam results yesterday by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) the matter of those pupils whose results were downgraded has been in the news.

In 2020, candidates received results based on estimates provided by schools and colleges, with SQA applying a moderation process to 'ensure fairness to all learners and to maintain standards and credibility in Scotland's qualification system'.

Fiona Robertson, SQA's Chief Executive and Scotland's Chief Examining Officer, said: "Everyone receiving their results today can have confidence that their achievements and hard work have been rewarded.

In a short space of time and amidst uniquely challenging circumstances for everyone, the Scottish education system has come together to ensure that candidates in 2020 can be certificated. This is a strong set of results and they should feel very proud of their achievements. They can now progress with confidence, to continued education, training or employment.

We have:

- Delivered fairness to learners, through a consistent, evidence-based approach to awarding, supported by an Equalities Impact Assessment and a Child Rights and

Wellbeing Impact Assessment.

- Ensured safe and secure certification of our qualifications, taking difficult decisions when needed, following public health advice; and
- Maintained the integrity and credibility of our qualifications system, ensuring that standards are maintained over time, in the interests of learners, through judicious moderation of grades.

Full information on our approach to certification is being published today.

I would like to thank the thousands of teachers and lecturers, SQA co-ordinators, school and college staff, local authorities, professional associations and national organisations, who have worked together to provide us with their candidates' estimated grades, without which we would not be able to issue certificates today.

I would also like to acknowledge my sincere appreciation to all SQA staff and appointees who have worked very hard to deliver.”

In response to the results issued yesterday and the explainer document also published which shows the way that the SQA moderated the results, Scottish Liberal Democrat leader Willie Rennie has written to the First Minister criticising these methods which he warned “has shackled well performing pupils in average schools by historical results over which they have had no control”.

Mr Rennie warned “I cannot fathom why there was no early transparency, scrutiny and discussion of the complex methodology used by the Scottish Qualifications Agency that has led to this injustice on a such large scale” and called for an expanded appeals process and immediate discussions with universities and colleges about the admissions criteria and

deadlines to ensure that pupils disadvantaged do not lose out on sought after places.

Mr Rennie's letter is as follows:

Dear First Minister,

I am sure you will agree that young people have made tremendous sacrifices right through the pandemic forgoing many opportunities that may never be afforded to them again. It is the responsibility of their political leaders to mitigate, not accentuate, those disadvantages but with this year's "exam" results there is little doubt that they have been failed.

The disadvantage and inequality that has been growing over the last decade and more has been baked-in to the results this year. The large readjustments imposed by the SQA has placed a magnifying glass over the failure to close that performance gap between the most and least deprived. This has shackled well performing pupils in average schools by historical results over which they have had no control.

I cannot fathom why there was no early transparency, scrutiny and discussion of the complex methodology used by the Scottish Qualifications Agency that has led to this injustice on a such large scale. Leading academics such as Professor Guy Nelson of Imperial College have called for the immediate publication of the algorithms and the sample data sets deployed. He, along with others, are very critical of the opaque explanation published only yesterday detailing exactly what has been done. I ask that you publish this without delay and provide a full explanation as to why this was not done earlier when the situation could have been rectified.

That this comes within weeks of the reopening of universities and colleges and within days of the full-time restart of school only compounds the injustice and limits the opportunity to rectify. Because of the secrecy and delay time is now

running out.

The appeals process is likely to be overwhelmed and place considerable demands on teachers who have also been charged with health and safety of our pupils who return to school full time next week for the first time during this pandemic.

The funding and the resource for the appeals process must be increased to meet the considerable demand. There must be immediate discussions with our universities and colleges about the admissions criteria and deadlines to ensure that pupils disadvantaged do not lose out on sought after places whilst they await their appeal conclusion.

Thousands have been let down by the government just when they needed it most. It is now your responsibility to correct this and everyone – especially pupils, parents and carers – will be watching.

Yours sincerely,

Willie Rennie

Leader, Scottish Liberal Democrats