

Report on: Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) Exam Support Survey 2022

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The Survey

This was a survey for Parents/Carers of a dyslexic young person who had undertaken SQA Exams at school in April/May 2022. The survey was delivered on the Survey Monkey hosting site between mid June and mid August 2022 by Dyslexia Scotland. My thanks go to Dyslexia Scotland staff who were most helpful in supporting and promoting access to the survey via their website and social media. Paul Nisbet of CALLScotland was also extremely helpful, particularly at the report-writing stage. The biggest thanks to those who took time to respond to the survey!

The instructions were: “1 survey per young person – to be completed by parent/carer, alongside the young person if wished. If you have more than one young person, please complete a separate survey form for each.”

Reason for Survey

After the above instructions, I wrote: “The purpose of the survey is not to challenge individual schools or teachers. I would like a wider picture of the needs of parents to learn more about entitlement to support.”

As a specialist dyslexia tutor, I had been hearing from parents about poor support in secondary schools and SQA exams. I find this very disappointing as it is very close to my own experience as a parent 20 years ago. I was then a qualified English Teacher but have, more recently, gained dyslexia qualifications and professional experience in delivering SQA assessment arrangements for a large college. This Survey gave me a wider picture of current parental experiences and evaluations of school support in learning and assessment across Scotland.

School staff have had an incredibly hard time in the last two and a half years and will continue to have many pressures upon them. Whilst it would be good to have more teacher training in support for specific learning difficulties, I also believe that parents who gain an understanding can become “effective stakeholders” in the Scottish “Empowered” System and can then work with school staff towards the best outcomes for young people. As the Survey shows, some are doing this already.

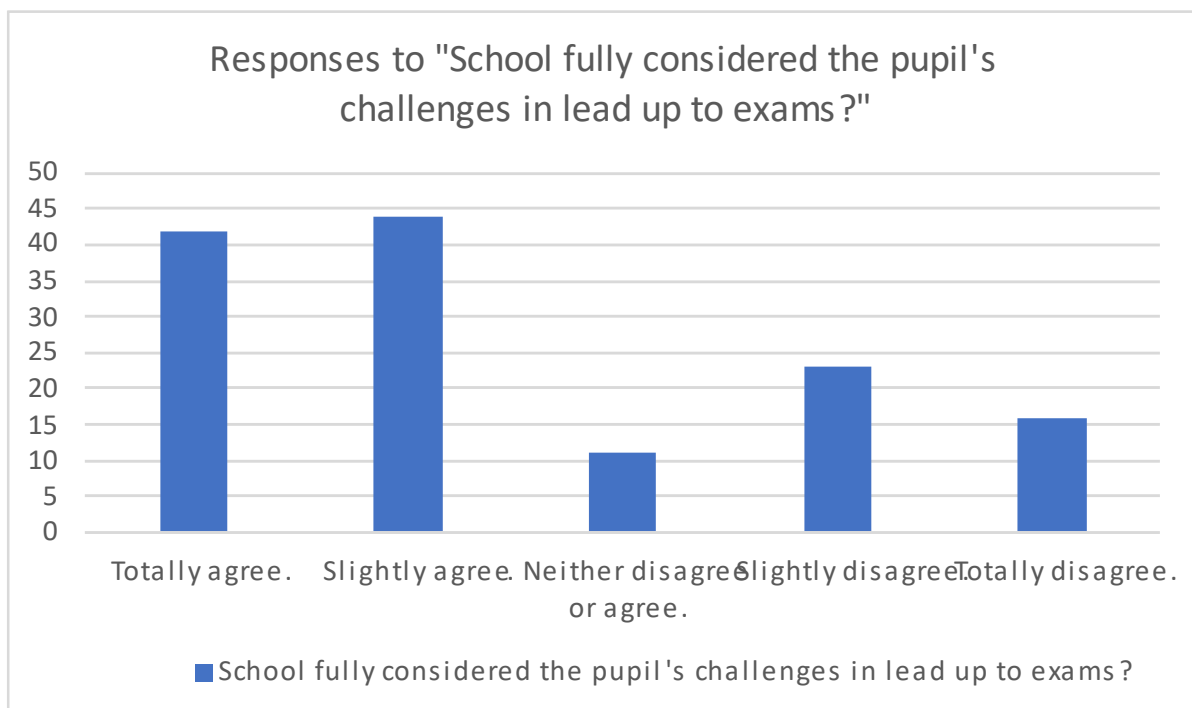
<https://education.gov.scot/improvement/learning-resources/an-empowered-system>

I would like to assist Dyslexia Scotland in providing opportunities for parents of dyslexic pupils to learn more about support in secondary and exams. I also aim to include Education Scotland and SQA in the findings of the survey and relevant research and ask for help.

Findings and Comments

There were 136 responses to the Survey. Responses came from 27 out of 32 Scottish Local Authorities. The most common exam level referred to was Nat 5, with a slightly smaller number of Highers mentioned and some Advanced Highers. At several points in the survey an opportunity to comment was provided. These opportunities were well used by participants and provided evidence of very good practice, very poor practice and a great deal in between. In writing negatively about support in school/exams, several parents acknowledged the additional difficulties which Covid had created for both learners and teachers. Some respondents did not answer all the questions relevant to them which is understandable in such a complex subject. For that reason, some of the later questions will have a respondent number lower than 136.

Question 7: "To what extent do you agree with this statement: This young person's school fully considered his/her challenges in the lead up to the exams."



Question 5: Has a member of teaching staff at the current school ever put in writing that this young person has dyslexia or requires some support for learning?

Most said “yes” to this: 107 yes / 29 no. However, many who said “yes” made comments such as:

“After 7 years of learning support at Council and constant emails for support.”

“My son was diagnosed 3 weeks before exams started.”

“...not (assessed) until S4 class tests.”

“..only after I initiated the assessment.”

Of the 29 who responded “no” to Q5, some commented that a primary school had assessed the pupil as dyslexic or that they had had a private assessment carried out. However, more disturbing were the following comments:

“Formal diagnosis just made June 2022!” (After Nat 5 exams.)

“They don’t think dyslexic even with specialist primary teacher input.” This participant chose “Totally disagree” to the statement “This young person’s school fully considered his/her challenges in the lead up to the exams.”

“My daughter failed her prelims then was tested for dyslexia which was confirmed but it was too late to help at this stage apparently.” That pupil had not had any classroom or exam support in her Nat 5 year or previously.

It is so important to explore dyslexic-type difficulties thoroughly at primary school so that teachers understand how support could help pupils thrive. All learning and all subject assessments should be supported, not only formal external exams.

One young person had been assessed as dyslexic in the secondary school but the respondent was told “this does not come in the form of writing a written diagnosis is not needed”. However, SQA’s Quality Assurance system does in fact require a school to keep written evidence of “the candidate’s disability /difficulty and how this generally affects the learning and teaching situation”.

“In order to determine the need for an assessment arrangement, there must be evidence that the nature and degree of the difficulty has been assessed together with the impact on learning and assessment. Evidence could include psychological and other assessments, Individual Learning Plans, support plans and records. Information may start in Primary School and be comprehensive.”

https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files_ccc/Quality-Assurance-Assessment-Arrangements-schools.pdf

Any such documents would be kept in the pupil’s file. Parents have access to pupil files on request and may ask for copies.

SQA carries out Quality Assurance Audits of procedures used to provide Assessment Arrangements (AAs) in schools and colleges. If a school cannot show the evidence of a candidate’s dyslexia at the Audit, the school would be required to put steps in place to rectify this in future.

https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files_ccc/QA2exemplar3-school-audit-of-evidence.pdf

Life after school also has some requirements for evidence of dyslexia: evidence may be required to have Driving Theory Test questions read out or to have help filling out job applications at a Job Centre. Evidence is also required to apply for Disabled Student Allowance which is available for dyslexic students at HNC-level and beyond.

Question 6: Select the challenges you are aware of for this young person in tests/exams (Total responses = 136)

Challenge	Number of times selected
Reading	116
Writing	115
Memory (e.g. for mental arithmetic)	92
Speed of work	116
Concentration	86

This was asked to compare the parent/carer's understanding of the challenges with the list of Assessment Arrangements (AAs) made by the school. Schools can only ask SQA for AAs in exams if they have noticed a support need, set up a method of support available in school and acceptable to the pupil which has improved the pupil's work and, if sufficient time has allowed, recorded that the support has become the pupil's "normal way of learning and producing work" (SQA: Assessment Arrangements Explained). That is the ideal for both pupil and teacher. The pupil gains by learning better and producing better work in that supported way. For the teacher, initially putting in the support/organising some training may take a little time but when setting up the AAs, no further "evidence" of the need for the support is required, only the statement that the support has become the "normal way of learning and producing work".

Parents learn differently at home about the support needs of their young people. They will hear things that teachers don't and obtain a different understanding which can enhance the school understanding. Dyslexic pupils are highly aware of the things they "can't do" and often suffer in self-esteem or in their mental health because of the reactions of their peers or teachers. When my daughter admitted to me that, in a German listening test, she deliberately sat next to a friend who had lived in Germany for several years, I considered this to be a sign of resilience, but then I had to admit to her German teacher what she had done in order to have support continued! If schools can encourage parents into more discussion around the support needs of their young people (and Education Scotland says they should....see <https://education.gov.scot/improvement/learning-resources/an->

empowered-system) then more young people might be provided with the best support to learn and to show what they have learned.

Q9: Please list Subjects and Assessment Arrangements provided

At this point the number of responses fell away to 77 responses.

Reading and Writing support has been provided by Readers and Scribes but technology is now taking over. Independent use of technology to support reading and writing prepares pupils for life after school. There has been steady growth in the use of computers (still referred to as ICT) and Digital Exams/Digital Answer Books (DABs). Now that most schools have more technology available for pupil use (since 2020) it should be easier for pupils to access in the classroom.

Whichever technology (Microsoft, i-Pad, Chrome Book) has been bought in, it will have built-in support for dyslexia, in terms of text-reading software, changing the size of text, increasing the space between lines and changing the colour of the background to the text. For writing assistance, there will be a spellcheck, and the possibility of a grammar check, text prediction, speech-to-text and the use of text-reading software to read back what the pupil has written to aid proof-reading. Schools have to request all these additional ICT supports so that the equipment can be set up appropriately on the day of the exam. Unfortunately, not all technology is compatible with SQA exam formats. Pupils may have to accustom themselves to a different device for their exams and additional practice time should be allowed for this. (See CALLScotland for more information.)

28 respondents mentioned use of a human reader. "My son's History teacher secured a reader and scribe one day a week so that he could be supported in class. She was an amazing advocate for him."

A scribe was mentioned 17 times. 44 respondents said that either ICT support or digital answer books (DABs) were used. There was some overlap of pupils who had human support in one subject and ICT support in another. Whichever method, parents commented on the need for practice in advance, to become comfortable with the technology or with the person, and sometimes, this had not happened.

"Our school does not allow practice with a reader in advance generally. Only because I complained last year did daughter get same reader she had already practiced with. School does not provide digital papers and does not have the technical know how to implement them."

"He was given a DAB (Digital Answer Book) for his prelims, but not shown how to use it, he didn't know there was a spell check function. We complained to school and he was shown how to use the DAB for one period."

"Having never used this before, I had to contact the school to ask for head of support to go over how it works before the exam." (Text-reading software for English)

“Daughter had never used IT in class and was unaware how to use the IT prior to the prelim and was not shown before the actual exam. We’ve no idea how this may have benefited her.”

“My child’s school wanted to change to an immersive reader between prelims and final exams but she fought to have a reader as this is what she has always had.”

There are also Reading Pens which can be used in exams with earphones. Pupils who have had access to a Reading Pen in class would find it very useful in, for example, a Maths exam when there are short pieces of reading which require absolute accuracy. However, there were no mentions of use of a Reading Pen in this year’s survey.

SQA says:

- ◆ ensure that both the candidate and the reader are well prepared for working together
- ◆ ensure that the candidate has had previous practice in working with the reader
- ◆ ensure that candidates using a reader have been using this arrangement as part of the support normally provided during their course
- ◆ ensure that candidates are trained on how to work effectively with a reader under the various constraints which apply when used in an assessment situation

And for using technology:

Remember: Candidates must be confident, competent users of the technology before it is used in any SQA examination or assessment.

https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files_ccc/nq-2023-asesment-arrangements-centre-guidance.pdf

Speed of Work

Speed of work is probably the easiest challenge to support by setting up extra time in timed assessments/exams. The need may not have been spotted by staff, however, since written work can often be finished at home or is wholly carried out as homework. It is a pity if not set up till the last minute as some guidance and practice can help in obtaining best use of extra time.

Speed of work was listed as a challenge 116 times. Of the 77 respondents to the AA questions, 69 reported that the young person had extra time set up for some or all of their exams. Some parents had to contact the school to ensure that extra time was agreed in all the subjects in which they felt it was needed.

Memory

92 respondents listed memory (e.g. for mental arithmetic) as a challenge. This is not surprising. Any list of “signs of dyslexia in childhood” includes difficulty in learning to tell the time and memorising times tables, both of which are part of numeracy/maths. Parents who support with homework will have been aware of dyslexic children having difficulty

memorising their times tables. They can often memorise a table they have been working on for some time, but, a few weeks after they have begun to work on the next table, they lose their memory of the previous one.

However, from 77 responses to this question, there were only 6 mentions of Numerical Support in Mathematics. I have suspected for some time, that this arrangement is the least well known or understood by teachers and the survey confirms that. It was previously called "Use of the Calculator in the Non-Calculator Paper" and did not use the word "dyscalculia".

This parent's comment reveals her son's experience.

"In 5th year I paid privately for a Maths tutor who asked why my son wasn't assessed for a calculator for non calculator paper as he had difficulty with writing, times tables and slow processing speed. They tried him with and without and identified that it was the difference between him being able to finish a paper. I contacted the school who refused to consider this or try this accommodation as he didn't have a formal diagnosis of dyscalculia. I had to contact his educational psychologist to ask for a review. They spoke to the school and I was then advised that he would be able to try this in the prelim. This is insufficient time as it didn't allow him any practice ahead of a formal exam condition."

In the case of numerical support, use of a calculator in class as the "normal way of learning and showing work" is crucial. It allows pupils with memory difficulties to progress in mathematics, one step after another, by practicing on paper, like others, but using a calculator for the adding, taking away, multiplying and dividing bits, which they have forgotten how to do. It is not only times tables which dyslexic pupils are likely to forget, but the written processes, e.g. whether to start the sum from the right or the left, where the carrying figures go, etc. Parents might think that teachers would know if their young person had forgotten how to lay out a division sum in S1 or S2 but generally they don't and I have evidence that the impact of Covid has played a part in that.

More from the above Maths parent, illustrating the potentially life-changing consequences of lack of support in maths:

"Not having Nat 5 Maths in 4th year stopped him being eligible for a foundation apprenticeship and this year he was unable to progress an application for a joinery apprenticeship with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde as he did not have his Nat 5 Maths. This is fundamental for all progression and I am advocating for my son. What happens if you don't have anyone to advocate for you?"

One more from another parent: "The Maths Dept. knew nothing of special provision for Dyslexic students so my son only put forward for a Nat 4." (A calculator can be used in all parts of Nat 4.)

Concentration was listed as a challenge 86 times. Some pupils with dyslexia have concentration difficulties and many do not. However, when unrecognised overlapping difficulties such as Autism and AD(H)D are taken into account, there is likely to be a

considerable percentage of concentration difficulties. With extra time, pupils can be working on a Nat 5 exam paper for 2 hours or more. There is an arrangement called Prompting. A prompter can draw the pupil's attention back to the task they are on if attention lapses or tap on the desk to remind a pupil to move on to the next question if stuck. There is a strong possibility that this arrangement has been underused by this cohort. It was only mentioned 2 times. There are also options of supervised breaks and rest periods.

Q10 was an exploration of the extent to which the assessment arrangements set up were the "normal way of learning and showing work" in the classroom (which SQA recommends) or whether it was last-minute and the pupil was unprepared.

Out of a total of 69 respondents, 30 reported that their young person had "Not enough time/training" for a subject's assessment arrangement and that may have applied to more than one or all their exams.

"Scribe/reader- has never used this in advance of prelim"

"School started to look at scribing for the prelims but not for all subjects. It was only when he failed history at prelim (with ICT AA) then passed with an A (with scribe AA) that the whole school team got behind the idea. Our son had been resistant to scribing as he wanted to 'just be normal and fit in' but even he then agreed that 'scribing was best'. We've come to this v late- should have been normalised with ICT voice recognition in P7/S1. School good around exams but do not anticipate and prepare in early years."

"It would have been helpful for X to have met with his scribes a few times before the exams, he's very nervous to talk to people he doesn't know well."

"Had never used a pdf booklet before and found it difficult to navigate and font size changing automatically."

It is clearly very unfair to put an AA into place without plenty of previous classroom use. For pupils who are being directed towards human support, this is a problem in schools as there are too few support assistants to act as reader/scribes in class. All the more reason to prepare pupils from S1 in use of technology where possible. This would require a coordinated approach and the sharing of support information with all teachers and parents.

Questions 11 and 12 asked about "a letter with a list of the AAs being requested for the different subjects" being sent home and whether parents were asked to sign it. The school may use the SQA's "candidate proforma".

"You must have confirmation from your candidate(s) that they have been involved in discussions about, and have agreed to the assessment arrangements being provided, and that they intend to use them. Candidate's parents/ carers can be involved in this discussion. You must also have confirmation from the candidate(s) that they have been made aware that **information about them** and their assessment

arrangement(s) will be shared with SQA as part of the request process. You may wish to use the SQA candidate proforma...”

https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files_ccc/Quality-Assurance-Assessment-Arrangements-schools.pdf p7”

The SQA candidate proforma would be used when a school either calls a pupil to a meeting to sign it or sends it to the home address so that parents/carers can also see it and sign it.

“Information about them” means the nature of their disability/difficulty – dyslexia. Is it right or reasonable for a school to share sensitive information with SQA if it has not shared this in writing with the pupil/parents?

SQA suggests that, “where applicable” parents are asked to sign as well. It is not made clear, but I think that “where applicable” means if pupils are under 16. A Scottish-born pupil with a February birthday, who has started a Scottish primary at the expected time, will turn 15 when the process of requesting arrangements from SQA will be well underway for National 5 exams. He/she will just have turned 16 the following spring when preparing for Higher exams. Many secondary pupils hate to stand out amongst peers as “requiring support” and hate to speak to teachers about support. Not all young people and families manage good communication!

Survey responses of parents use words such as: “fight for all assessment arrangements”, “we need to advocate for dyslexia-friendly schools and “I had to ask for the Head of Support to show him how it (technology) works”. Failure to send a copy of the form home for parents and to include them in the signing process (where possible) could be seen as disrespectful of the massively important stakeholder role performed by many. Here is an example of why parents should be asked to sign: “We got an exam timetable with the AAs, which was good. Unfortunately there were mistakes - only spotted them as I was being extra vigilant!”

Only 40 of 77 respondents reported that they had been asked to sign and return their copy of the assessment arrangements form.

Q13 asked respondents “Are you satisfied with the communication from school about support in this year’s exams?”

very satisfied	satisfied	neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	dissatisfied	very dissatisfied
17	21	25	16	5

Comments ranged from “They called me to discuss over the phone, so I was well informed” to “Had to contact the school for both prelims and actual exams to find out if any arrangements were being put in place.”

Conclusion

While good practice can be seen to be in abundance in Scotland, there seems to be plenty of room for improvement and plenty of scope to encourage parents to play an active role together with teachers to ensure the best possible qualifications for dyslexic pupils using SQA Assessment Arrangements.

I will be in touch with Education Scotland and the SQA regarding some of the detail discovered whilst working on the 2022 Survey.

I am hoping Dyslexia Scotland will organise an online event, possibly in January, to reach more parents on this topic. It will be a chance to prepare parents to respond to the 2023 Survey on Dyslexia Support in Secondary School and SQA Exams!