

P-05-1055 Cancel GCSE and A level examinations, Correspondence – Petitioner to Committee, 10.11.20

Bethan Amy Hellard-Gair

29 October 2020

Petition ref P-05-1055

Titled "Cancel GCSE and A level examinations"

Dear Petitions Committee,

I really appreciate you taking your time to listen to our pupil voice. As a Welsh student I have been very impressed with how the Welsh Government have proactively dealt with the Coronavirus pandemic in keeping us safe. As a member of the Welsh student body I can relay the pupil voice from a unique perspective. I have canvassed the student body opinion so I better represent the students response. We greatly appreciate our opinions being listened to in this way.

What are your thoughts on the attached document?

We were very pleased when we received a response from Kirsty Williams. Within the document the £50 million investment including the Recruit, Recover and Raise Standards Programme was mentioned alongside an A-level revision plan. We do not feel that this would equally benefit all learners. Revision for exams is something that is unique to every individual and these resources therefore cannot be guaranteed to aid every student. The £50 million invested by the government could be used to improve student wellbeing during these unprecedented times. The financial support from the government could be used to further schools in supporting their students. Another £1.2 million was proposed by Kirsty Williams to support GCSE students, once again the development of new "high-quality revision resources" may not suit all learners and this would again provide a fairness issue. The letter provided by Kirsty Williams indicated no timescale as to when these pending revision resources would be accessible to students and this again causes more worry. Students and teachers alike are already feeling the time pressure and so these resources could not come fast enough. This makes us question the quality of the revisions resources if the time scale they must be provided in will be so small.

As well as this, Kirsty Williams mentioned the adaptations that have already been made to the WJEC. I have consulted with many of my peers and we are only aware of few adaptations made. The WJEC website clearly states that "qualifications will be adapted for assessment in 2021," however reducing content at this point would be a challenge as many schools over Wales have started their own study. Different teachers may have begun at varying points meaning reducing content may prove disadvantageous to some schools making the validity of examinations void.

Does it adequately address the issues you raised?

As a pupil body we do not believe that the letter provided by Kirsty Williams clearly represents the petition put forward. We believe that within this letter Kirsty Williams has not recognised the mental health impact the current situation has had on young people suffering from stress and loneliness. For students suffering with possible anxiety or depression, Covid-19 has had a dramatic tole on their mental health and yet they are still expected to tackle the challenge of examinations. The uncertainty surrounding the upcoming summer 2021 is draining for all

pupils. We do not believe that our student wellbeing is being considered when making vital decisions concerning our own futures. Many students over Wales have had to self isolate when a member of their class have received a positive coronavirus test result. Had a student been in two incidents of a positive test, 1 month of learning would have been missed from that student's education. It is simply not fair expecting them to sit an exam in which their peers have had an extra month of education. This puts students in high risk areas such as Merthyr Tydfil at an extreme disadvantage having to self isolate more frequently than others.

Alongside this, Kirsty Williams fails to recognise the difficulties that have been caused by working virtually throughout Wales. As I'm sure you are aware Wales is home to many remote communities that lack access to quality wifi provision. Funding has been provided to some schools to allow every student to have access to a laptop to aid with this blended learning, but with connection issues there is no solution for every student. Not all students are currently accessing the same resources and this demonstrates the disparity of this academic year. It has always been the message that exams are the best way to ensure every student is assessed as equally as possible, and under normal circumstances this is the case. Exams are used to ensure fairness for all participants whilst testing their knowledge. This year the fairness among all Welsh students simply wouldn't be possible.

Do you have any further questions in response?

Please See Below

Is there anything additional that you would like the committee to know at this stage, either in response to this document or as an update to the committee?

Please See Below

LEADERSHIP

This year we have seen exceptional leadership demonstrated by the Welsh Government facing the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic. As a government you have the moral obligation to do what's right for your people. You had the opportunity to issue our predicted grades and you did so saving the future for many year 11 and 13 students applying for college and university. It was such a beneficial impact on last years qualifications and you have the chance to make another positive difference in this coming academic year. As a team, you have the ability to do what is in the best interest of your students.

As leaders, what are you prepared to do now?

CLARITY OF COMMUNICATION

Overall communicating what is expected of us as students this year hasn't been very successful. Many students have been left in the dark about their impending examinations which leads to increased levels of anxiety and stress. As well as this, university have refused to delay deadlines for UCAS applications despite being deprived of open day experiences. This creates even more pressure and tension for students anxious about their future. Uncertainty leads to anxiety for students and clarity from the government creates potential for us to succeed. Welsh students need all the clarity they can get in a short space of time to reduce anxiety and increase confidence in their work. The uncertainty of an exam is concerning for most and this is why other options would provide a much more reliable way of testing.

How are you going to ensure clarity of communication?

LACK OF PARITY

Likewise, there is no set way to decide whether a student in Wrexham or Anglesey has received the same level of education as a student in Powys or Rhondda Cynon Taff right now. Due to this fact the theory of examinations is simply unarguable. There is no parity and this raises serious concerns with the upcoming exams. All schools are responding in their own individual way and this means they should be the holders of their own fate.

What do you intend to do to ensure parity?

OUR SOLUTION

The title 'Cancel GCSE and A level examinations' must be troubling for the Welsh Government, however, we are not asking for a GCSE or A level to be handed to us due to pity. We are proposing that our coursework is given a higher weighting so that we can better control our educational performance. We haven't had enough face to face teacher contact to feel confident walking into an exam hall. The government should consider creating a system that will allow fair grades to be awarded in summer 2021. In addition to this, we propose teacher assessed examinations should be used as reference for our end of year grades. To improve the validity we believe the school districts could help each other by marking each other's test papers. This would decrease the chance of favouritism or heightened predicted grades.

Yours Faithfully,

Bethan Amy Hellard-Gair