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# The Education Recovery Youth Panel



# Background and Overview

The Education Recovery Youth Panel, delivered by Young Scot in partnership with Children in Scotland, was created in November 2020. It is supporting the Scottish Government's Covid-19 Education Recovery Group – as a successor to the earlier Scottish Learner Panel project.

The Panel aims to embed the voices of young people from a range of backgrounds and experiences in the decision-making around education recovery from COVID-19. This follows our YSHive process allowing young people to share their experiences, lead the conversations, develop their own ideas, and drive change as part of decision-making.

Children and young people from across Scotland sit on the Panel, representing every age range from 9-18 years old, along with several young people declaring additional or complex support needs, from a variety of backgrounds and communities and 15 local authority areas. This has been key to ensuring those who have been the most affected throughout the pandemic are represented and can be part of decision-making going forward.

Alongside the children and young people's panel, Young Scot have been liaising with Scottish Youth Parliament to link in with an MSYP who sits on the COVID-19 Education Recovery Group (CERG) to ensure the views and insights of the panel are represented as part of the ongoing discussions.



# December 2020

This document provides insight into the Panel's work from December 2020 – March 2021. It details learning experiences and shifting priorities for the learners throughout the pandemic and suggestions for change in the medium-long term recovery period.

December's session focused on welcoming the group, setting out expectations and exploring initial feelings/thoughts about their current experience. This session was delivered before the lockdown restrictions implemented in December 2020, so reflects the Panel members experience during that time.

## Expectations and Aims

Young people set out their expectations of the Scottish Government and decision-makers in relation to the project. Their ask to this group is to listen fully to panel members, to follow through with suggestions made by the panel and ensure everyone's voice is heard. The group also wanted decision-makers to communicate using easy to understand language and providing regular updates. The panel's aims for the project included meeting new people from different schools, working collaboratively, developing new skills such as public speaking, and other future opportunities. They also wanted to help others by making a visible change for children and young people.

## Priority Areas

### 9-11 year olds

A key priority for the younger age range was school safety. Various safety measures implemented due to the Covid-19 pandemic were mentioned here. The young people noted a few discomfort issues with wearing masks, which impacted communication and concentration levels. In classrooms with open windows, they noted being cold and finding practical tasks like writing difficult. Some had mentioned the increased use of hand sanitiser had left a rash, particularly those who suffer from eczema. Overall, the majority felt safe in school but missed being able to share resources with other learners.

The younger learners noted a change in the learning support they received, with those who usually get support from Pupil Support Assistants were missing out. In relation to coursework and learning methods, the panel members said there were several aspects of the curriculum that had changed during this time, such as not being able to undertake subjects such as PE or Music. Because of the lack of school trips on offer, panel members felt they were missing out on valuable opportunities to learn about things outside the classroom. In the classroom, some learners were missing out on group table discussions.

"Sometimes I would get a PSA. I used to get taken out in wee small groups. All of this is happening less now"

"Windows open – and really cold hands. Can find it hard to write and can't hold the pencil properly"

### 12-14 year olds

The theme of school safety continued to present strongly here. The group noted missing out on learning time due to class finishing early for cleaning. They also spoke about the challenge of wearing masks, with one participant stating it was harder to concentrate with masks on, and noting the extra challenges experienced for young people with disabilities.

Support was also a widely discussed topic area for this age range. They felt a focus had often been on older learners in the Senior Phase, meaning they didn't get as much support as needed. The group also noted that learners with mental health issues such as depression and anxiety are finding lockdown difficult, which has been exacerbated by the lack of support. They had a small discussion around exams and the lack of clarity felt in this area. "When self-isolating [need] better support for those suffering mentally, specifically in terms of stress/depression/eating disorders"

**"Young people with anxiety and depression finding lockdown hard – less support whilst being at home"**

### 14-16 year olds

Older panel members spoke less about school safety, only briefly discussing increased use of masks and the environmental concerns around the use of disinfectant wipes.

There were broad discussions around learning support, specifically noting the effects on their mental health and issues arising from self-isolating. The group felt the focus on academic work was priority, with wellbeing issues and mental health issues being overlooked. The lack of social interaction and support has a big impact, with the group suggesting more targeted mental health support is required. Exams proved to be another key topic for this age range. The group reported feeling pressured to gather evidence for assessments in the event exams don't go ahead. They noted a frustration at prelims in small classrooms permitted, yet exams in spacious halls cancelled. Some of the group also worried about missing out on coursework due to self-isolating measures.

A few members felt their education had been affected by the move to online learning. Some suggested improved guidelines on online learning would be useful. The impact of digital exclusion was discussed, with some young people sharing difficulties with Wi-Fi connections, and thinking about peers who might not have access to the necessary tech.



### 16-18 year olds

For the 16-18 year old group, there was a short discussion around learning support, with a lack of awareness about what is on offer. Many felt there hadn't been enough information relating to mental health support provided by schools.

In relation to exams, the group felt there should be more recognition for young people who struggled with poor internet or inadequate home learning environments. Remote learning was particularly important to this group, as they worried about potential learning that had been missed out on. They found it a constant challenge to catch up with work and worried about the impact it may have on their grades. They echoed a need for guidance to ensure consistency in online/remote learning.

The group spoke about increased tailored and individualised support for young people with disabilities. They also mentioned providing support for teachers, acknowledging the increased workload and challenge faced for them in adapting to digital learning. Finally, some members noted a general lack of motivation to learn when a worldwide pandemic dominates their lives.

**"There's no motivation to learn, feel like there's bigger things going on in the world"**

**"We also have a pandemic on mental health...one person in each school available isn't enough"**



# January 2021

The January session took place whilst most learners were learning from home. This session therefore offered the opportunity to reflect on their remote learning experiences, and the opportunities/challenges that exist within this.

## Opportunities/Challenges

The panel members were able to reflect thoughtfully on their experience, acknowledging that there were positive moments and opportunities to be had along with challenges to overcome. Many discussed the positives from being in a comfortable environment, having the flexibility to move around, go on walks, see family throughout the day. Along with honing important practical skills such as digital confidence and time-management, they acquired unexpected skills in the form of resilience and independence. However, struggles were experienced by many of the panel members, ranging from feeling isolated, being distracted, having tech/connectivity issues, experiencing higher levels of anxiety and stress, along with less opportunities on offer.

## Daily experiences

The group members were categorised into age-range for breakout room discussions and asked to reflect deeper about their current experiences and how they were experiencing learning on a day-to-day level.

**“Less variety – harder to stay motivated sitting in the same position all day”**

## 9-11 year olds

The children spoke a lot about missing out on opportunities to connect with others and not being able to see friends as much. They noted their enjoyment of live classes and how more interaction would be better. Many of the children missed elements of group working and learning with others. Further challenges related to technology, with one young person unable to connect to certain sites or apps at home when using a school provided device.

**“Want to see friends and classmates more”**

**“Developing resilience as nothing feels certain”**

**“Enjoy going for a walk in nature throughout the day”**

**“Would be good to do tasks with a partner”**

### 12-15 year olds

Discussion points between this age-range highlighted the difference in contact time with teachers between schools. Some panel members had more direct engagement with teachers than others. Some noted they felt less awkward engaging with teachers this way as they could message/email directly and not have to speak out in class. The group spoke about the workload feeling challenging, and that teachers are sometimes providing a higher volume of work. There was also discussion about the difficulty of learning new topics without hands-on teaching support to guide them through.

Some subject learning has been postponed during this time, with PSE and PE not running for a few learners. However, daily wellbeing challenges and other wellbeing initiative rolled out for some learners. There was mixed feedback on how well these initiatives were working, however the majority felt happy to have less classes to attend. Many of the group felt like teachers were doing their bit to support learner's mental health by checking-in occasionally and asking how they're getting on. One member noted the positive benefits of having a guidance check-in once a week. The group spoke briefly about technology, acknowledging the unreliability of Wi-Fi and the challenge in connecting to school calls when others in the household were using the same internet connection.

### 15+ year olds

The discussion centred on workload, timetable management and organising time effectively. Most of the group discussed the challenges of completing all coursework in the time provided. They acknowledged the work has to be done but that it's being covered in too short a time frame. Decisions about exam-grading and coursework playing on many of their minds. This feeling of stress was expressed several times throughout discussions with older panel members.

Flexibility and increased independence was highlighted as a positive to this form of learning, being able to work at own pace and in the evenings if it suits better. However, one member of the group spoke about the challenge in being "switched on" and available all the time.

The difficulty in balancing and prioritising workload and wellbeing was discussed. Group members are trying to be proactive by doing different things such as staying active, video calling friends and going for a walk. The group also spoke about the challenge in being self-motivated and struggling to stay motivated when there is a real feeling of uncertainty. Finally, the group were generally positive about learning resources, technology and teaching support. They felt that teachers had adapted well to processes and were organised with resources and assignments. They also spoke about school communication being strong between individual teachers and the wider school community.

**"It has been good, to have a level of flexibility but everyone feels like they have to be available and 'on' all the time."**

**"A lot more independent managing your own time, finding what works for you which has been positive."**

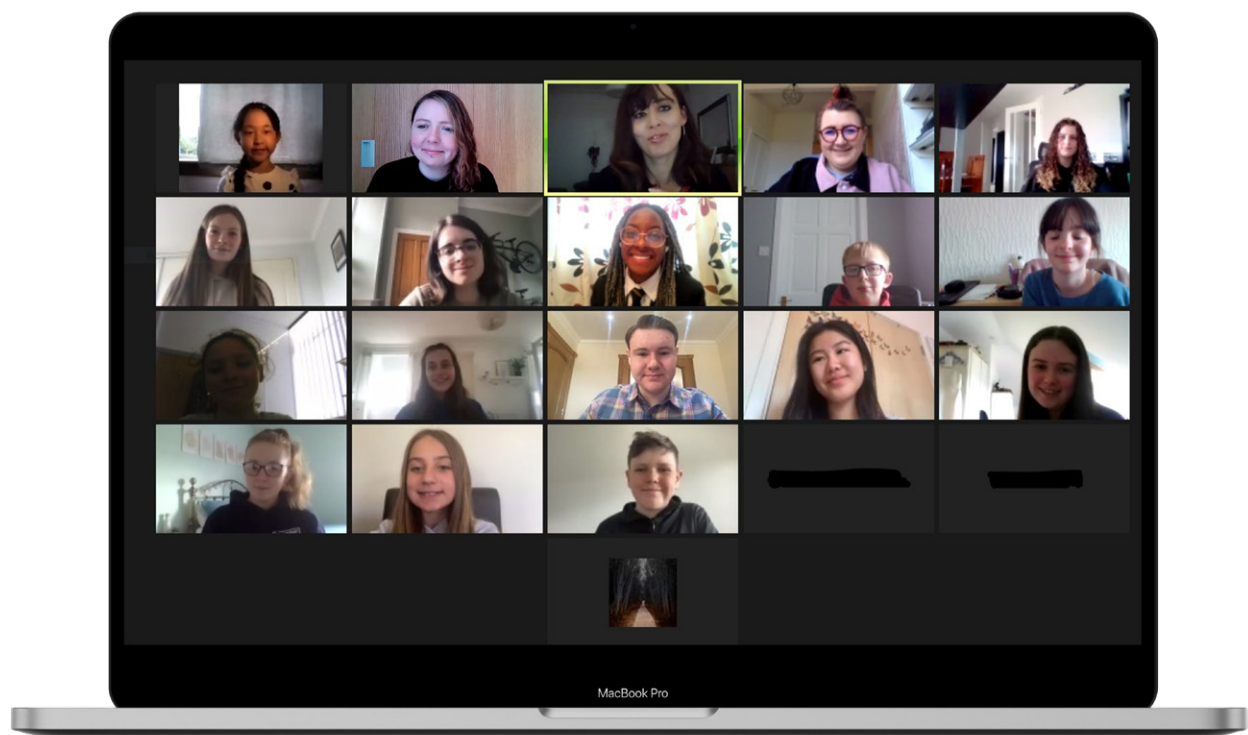
### Learner Priorities

The older group members had a deeper discussion around what they would like decision-makers to consider as highest-priority for their learning. A thread throughout many of the group discussions was around clarity over final grades and assessments. For the group, lack of clarity linked into a need for stronger mental health support now that normal coping mechanisms such as seeing

Another priority raised was to better understand the longer-term impacts of Covid-19 on future career/development goals. Concerns discussed in this area focused on potential changes to University/College funding and general confusion about what their future will look like, and if previous goals are still realistic.

“What does it [final grading] actually look like?”

“Worried about long-term impacts on future career path”





# March 2021

Sessions delivered throughout March began to look towards the future of their learning environments and the children and young people's vision for what they would like to see being developed, continued and improved upon. This was in the context of moving back to classroom learning for many and a blended learning approach of face to face and online teaching for others.

## Recovery Priorities

The children and young people identified key priorities in looking forward towards recovery:

- ⦿ Mental health support
- ⦿ Digital learning, support and equipment
- ⦿ School safety measures

Other priorities for focus from the Scottish Government identified included: Children's rights; Pupil Voice; ASN support; Vaccinations; Supported study; Free school meals/Inclusion and Equality; and Learning resources.

**"Community spirit and a sense of togetherness/unity"**

**"Online workshops with different organisations are more accessible"**

**"More fun at home – Lego, pets, food"**

## Experiences and Opportunities

The panel members explored a discussion around potential opportunities and new ways of learning experienced during the pandemic. They spoke about the benefits of spending more time with family members and feeling a sense of community during lockdown. Similarly, they discussed an increased sense of gratitude, more independence and flexibility, having different ways of learning on offer and accessibility of opportunities. They also mentioned the home comforts such as having pets nearby and music playing as a welcome change.

**"Learning the importance of people around you and appreciating key workers"**

**"Opportunity for blended learning – not every day has to be in school"**

### Future Vision

The group were asked to discuss how recovery could take place over the next year and beyond, in pursuit of their ideal vision for learning. Topic areas were provided as prompts to support discussions.

### Primary school panel members

#### Wellbeing and Support

For the primary aged pupils conversations centred around emotional and wellbeing support. They hoped for an environment of understanding, kindness and communication, highlighting that the support you receive affects the way that you learn.

There was a vision of engagement, inclusivity and variety described by the younger members in learning – highlighting the importance of clubs to suit different learners' interests.

“The children/ teachers you spend time with at school can affect how you learn.”

#### Resources

In terms of resources, the group had a passionate discussion about access to a variety of high-quality books ensuring access to up-to-date modern books as well as older texts. They also spoke about the increased need for access to digital devices in the classroom to support learners who might not have access at home and to support with learning difficulties such as dyslexia.

“More books – up to date, not old”

“Different pupils need different resources”

#### Diversity and Inclusivity

Diversity in teaching staff and role models was raised by panel members to ensure all learners feel comfortable and can see someone they relate to. They suggested ensuring all schools had teacher representation from different religions, countries, and ethnicities.

“More teachers from different countries to make kids from those countries more comfortable”

#### Learning Environment

Thinking about a move back to face-to-face learning, the panel members hoped that table arrangements would allow for group working again. They also mentioned some practical aspects of the environment such as toilets could be in better condition and the importance of spending time outdoors.



### Secondary school panel members

The secondary aged panel members identified a variety of hopes for the future of education, clearly highlighting mental wellbeing and learning support as a priority.

### Teaching and Learning support

Secondary aged panel members wanted to see an environment created where everyone's opinion matters, with an individual approach rather than one size fits all. Teaching approaches were acknowledged to greatly impact the learning environment, with the group discussing the teacher's role in creating an environment where everyone's opinion matters. Relationships between teachers and pupils were pivotal to their experiences, with teacher's having a 'can do' attitude instilling a positive mindset in learners, reflecting that if teachers feel supported and positive this will be passed on to learners. The young people highlighted that mutual respect and honesty was needed.

The group spoke about the progress that needs to be made with a digital approach, with better integration of digital and in person learning, as well as internal communication. Challenges around spotting learners who may not be receiving enough support via the digital approach, therefore falling behind, were raised here. The group discussed teachers ensuring a level of comprehension has been reached before moving onto the next topic area.

**"Every hand up is an idea worth sharing, every thought is of importance."**

### Wellbeing and Extra-Curricular

Transitions were identified by the group as pressure points that may not have been fully supported or experienced yet, for example moving into secondary education during this past year. Providing opportunities to re-

integrate into the social aspects of school were raised as an important way to transition back to in person learning.

Many of the secondary school members spoke about the benefits of peer support, and that schools should be encouraging learners to support one other. They discussed the possibility of a pupil support club initiative, a place where learners would feel less intimidated to ask for help as it can be hard to feel comfortable to fully share with teachers.

**"Sometimes adults don't always understand".**

**"Pupils supporting pupils"**

### Resources and Curriculum

Secondary panel members felt that there could be a larger pool of resources on offer for those who have fallen behind during the pandemic, resuming booster classes, or supported study as a priority upon returning to school. A suggestion about funding tuition for those who are on lower incomes was also made. Encouragement to "break away" more from the standard curriculum and have some freedom to learn about individual interests was another talking point. Learners thought that increased independence and autonomy would provide extra motivation.

**"More resources for those that have fallen behind"**

### **Inclusivity and Diversity**

There were a variety of discussions around inclusivity, involving thinking about the individual situations and challenges learners may have experienced over the pandemic, and the effect this may continue to have on their learning experience - understanding and a space to communicate these challenges would be required.

They also spoke about lessening stigma for different groups such as those in LGBTQ+ community, through education, support and use of correct terminology.

### **Learning Environment**

The group expressed the connection felt between a learning space and positive wellbeing. Older panel members liked informality of learning over Zoom and enjoyed having the freedom to listen to music or get into nature whilst working.

They would like to see more focus and awareness of this connection moving forward, thinking about how it could feel more informal and comfortable.

### **Learner Voice and Participation**

They spoke about ensuring opportunities for all ages to contribute to decision-making. Some panel members felt that there were less opportunities to get involved and would feel more heard if opportunities were accessible regardless of age.

**“Lots of people dealing with loss – it’s going to be a really hard year for many”**

A few of the members discussed the presence of a pupil council, and how many of these opportunities had been relatively “inactive” since the start of the pandemic. The members thought that effort could be made to continue to run this, advising the pupil council should’ve been consulted on decisions about going back to school and supported decision-making processes.

**“Make sure there are opportunities for all ages that continue throughout the year and the pandemic”**

### **Learner Priorities**

The Panel members began to identify medium to longer term priorities they feel will have the biggest impact on them as individuals and on their futures.

A thread throughout many of the group discussions was around clarity over final grades and assessments, providing teachers and students with more guidance to ease the anxiety in this area.

The lack of clarity linked into a need for stronger mental health support now that normal coping mechanisms such as seeing friends were limited. Many mentioned spending more time away from the screen would help, but that they don’t feel able to due to workload.

Another priority raised was to better understand the longer-term impacts of Covid-19 on future career/development goals. Concerns discussed in this area focused on potential changes to University/College funding and general confusion about what their future will look like, and if previous goals are still realistic.

# Decision-Making and Next Steps

Throughout the project so far, the Panel have engaged directly with decision-makers to ensure their voices and experiences can be threaded into decision-making processes.

Panel members met with Deputy First Minister in December around potential alternative qualifications models for higher courses, which directly aided in final decision-making around cancelling this year's higher exam diet.

A further session was hosted by the Deputy First Minister in February, allowing panel members to present questions to the DFM and share some of their current experiences to highlight what's most important to their learning. This has been valuable to the young people in ensuring they can explore the topic with decision-makers as well as develop their own thinking.

Education Scotland engaged directly with the members during the January sessions, which fed directly into their nationwide work around understanding children and young people's experiences of remote learning.

The Panel also engage in activity outwith the sessions through an online digital platform, where they can speak with each other, finish tasks and respond to questions and ideas quickly and directly.

Regular sessions continue to be delivered every 4-6 weeks. These sessions provide panel members with an opportunity to reflect on their current experience whilst supporting decision-makers to map out priority areas and identify next steps in future-proofing their learning experience.



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