

Cheerleaders signal a problem with SQA exam venue rules

Last year Scottish students sat exams in five other countries via the ‘alternative venue’ process – but an update to this guidance is affecting young cheerleaders due to compete overseas

14th March 2025, 3:30pm

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Last year 170 students in Scotland due to sit their exams were given permission to take at least some of them in an “alternative venue” - with 71 making the request because they were attending a “sporting event”.

Ultimately, some Scottish Qualifications Authority exams in 2024 were sat in Germany, Italy, Poland, Portugal and the US.

SQA guidance advises that the “alternative venue” process allows young people to represent their country in major international sporting events, such as “European or world championships”, or to attend events that are “essential for academic and professional advancement”, including “university admission interviews and practical assessments that require in-person attendance”.

The special arrangements can also apply if a student has relocated from Scotland between completing a course and the exam, or if they are in hospital, prison or a residential secure unit.

Rise in requests for alternative exam venues

It is a contingency that has been available for years. However, *Tes Scotland* understands that requests have risen since the Covid pandemic - from little over a dozen a year to 183 in 2023.

Now the SQA arrangements have hit the headlines because, after the SQA updated its guidance last year, some young athletes due to compete in a prestigious cheerleading world championships in Florida this year - part of The Summit Championship, which showcases various performing arts - are being forced to choose between it and their exams.

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The new rules mean that alternative exam arrangements are only available if an athlete is selected to represent Scotland or another country in an international event by their sport’s governing body, but not for club competitions such as The Summit Championship in May, despite its prestigious status.

Joanne Smith, coach of Capital Allstars Cheer and Dance in Edinburgh, said the rule change has been “devastating” for young athletes who have invested thousands of pounds in the trip and have been training hard for months.

Two girls in Ms Smith's squad affected by the change, who are sitting their National 5s this year, have decided to press ahead with their plans and miss their exams in media, geography, chemistry and English.

Ms Smith told *Tes Scotland* that it was the timing of the guidance that she took issue with, not its content.

The SQA said the updated guidance - including a requirement to provide "written confirmation" of selection from "their sport's governing body" - was shared with schools and colleges in May 2024. It is only available to SQA centres, such as schools, on the secure SQA website and is not publicly available.

Concerns over timing of changes

But club coaches said that even if this information was shared in May 2024 - something they dispute - the rule changes failed to filter through to them until October, two months into the school year, and long after places in The Summit Championship had been won and tickets and accommodation booked.

Ms Smith said: "I understand completely that the SQA have the authority and the right to review these processes and where they find that something is not being utilised correctly or there needs to be stricter guidance implemented. It is their right to do that - I would support that if it means safer, better processes for students.

"However, the issue that I have is they have implemented these guidance changes two months into the academic year they want them to take effect in."

This, she said, gave clubs no time to react.

SportCheer Scotland, the national governing body for cheerleading, said it would also have preferred "a grace period" to adjust to the changes.

For a student to take an exam outside their school while attending a sporting event, a member of the group has to be trained up as an invigilator.

The invigilator - typically a parent or coach - is responsible for securely storing the papers before the exam and securely transporting them to the new venue. If they are heading overseas, the exam materials have to be kept with the invigilator "at all times", says the guidance, and stored in their hand luggage.

When they arrive, papers have to be placed in "a safe, cabinet or dedicated secure room, accessible only to them" and removed only "up to 90 minutes before the agreed-upon exam start time".

It is also necessary that the suitability of the proposed exam venue is assessed beforehand, including the temperature, lighting, furniture and whether a clock is visible.

'Protecting exams' integrity'

School SQA coordinators have reported that this guidance puts them in a tricky position: they have to sign off on arrangements - which in the past have led to exams being taken in hotel rooms - without seeing them close up.

One exam that clashes with the Florida competition is National 5 English; in 2024 there were almost 50,000 entries.

Ms Smith and her squad will travel to Florida on 26 April, with the N5 English exam on 6 May. For anyone familiar with the rigour around protecting exam papers, it is mind-boggling to imagine papers being out in the world over a week before the date of the exam.

Graham Hutton, general secretary of School Leaders Scotland, supports the idea that students can sit exams in other venues - including overseas - but stresses that criteria have to be clear and the provision should be “rarely used”, given the “security aspect” and the need to protect the “integrity of the exams”. He pointed out that exams cover roughly the same period every year, so people should “plan around that”.

Ms Smith acknowledged that it would be “a massive responsibility” to be responsible for overseeing exams, but said she would have been prepared to take it on: “I would do everything that was asked of me to ensure the security and integrity of the exam process.”

However, it looks like she will not get the chance.