

Heartbreak for Scottish cheerleaders forced by SQA to choose between exams and Florida world championships

SNP ministers urged to intervene to save talented pupils from ‘real injustice’

Teenagers in Scottish cheerleading teams are “devastated” after their plans to compete at a prestigious world championships in Florida were thrown into doubt following a rule change by the nation’s exams body.

For more than a decade, cheerleading clubs from Scotland have been sending teams to [The Summit Championship](#), a major event held in May at the ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex at the Walt Disney resort in Orlando.

The teams say the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) has previously made arrangements to enable competitors to sit exams while they are in the US, if the dates clash with the trip.

But now their young athletes have been told alternative arrangements will no longer be allowed, meaning those impacted have been left to choose between missing their exams or pulling out of the event at huge cost to their families.

Scottish Liberal Democrat leader Alex Cole-Hamilton said it appeared the SQA was being “unhelpful and inflexible”, as he urged SNP ministers to intervene to prevent a “real injustice”.

It is understood the new rules mean alternative exam arrangements are only available if an athlete is selected to represent Scotland or another country in an international event by their sports’ governing body, but not for club competitions like The Summit, despite its prestigious status.

Cheerleading coaches, who have lodged complaints against the SQA over its handling of the issue, say they were not informed of the change in rules until October, months after they had qualified for the event and booked their flights and accommodation.

The SQA insists schools and colleges were told in May last year.

Natalie Samuel, coach of the Black Diamond Cheerleaders, was due to take a team of 20 girls to Florida, aged between 12 and 16. However, two of them have now been forced to withdraw.

She said: “We have had an absolute nightmare and we’ve had to take two of the girls out of the team. They worked so hard to get this bid, they are two of our strongest members, they were in the team two prior as well, and then at such short notice we had to take them out.

“They lost deposits. They are absolutely gutted. It is heart-breaking for us to see as well, to tell them they’ve to come out of the team - they are crying their eyes out, their parents are gutted.”

Ms Samuel said it has had a “huge impact” on the team as well, which has “kind of had to start again”.

“It has been really tough. I thought we were supposed to be promoting young women in sport, and this was a great opportunity to represent their country, and it has just been taken away from them,” she said.

“It’s not even the policy, it’s the timescale of it. If they brought this in and said, ‘right from next year, this is happening’, then we all would have taken it on board and would have had time to prepare.

“But instead we’ve had to have kids come out mid-season, and they are devastated, really upset. It has just been an absolute nightmare.”

Joanne Smith, another coach, said two members of her Capital Allstars team were also impacted, but that they would not be pulling out of the Florida event.

She said: “We were told by the schools we had to wait for the alternative venue service to open in October, and then on 22 October, which is already two months into the academic year, the SQA formally released updated guidance, which excluded our athletes from being able to do their exams in an alternative venue.

“By that point, based on a 10-year precedent that had been set, we had already heavily financially committed to the trip, to the point where these athletes from my team are not in a position not to travel.

“They are too financially invested, it would be a huge financial loss. They are not able to turn back now and not attend the trip.

“The SQA has taken no accountability, no acknowledgement of the fact this was communicated way too late. And now are just accepting that these kids are not going to be able to sit their exams.”



A sign for the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) building in Edinburgh. | PA

Mr Cole-Hamilton, Lib Dem MSP for Edinburgh Western, said: “This feels like a real injustice. Many of these athletes have spent years in training to get to this stage but now they are faced with either missing exams or missing out on representing their country.

“It seems as if the SQA is being unhelpful and inflexible. If it's possible for some athletes to complete exams abroad then it seems like there is no good reason why this cannot be extended to others in similar circumstances.

"If the SQA won't see sense then perhaps it is time for the education secretary or the sports minister to have a word in their ear.”

A spokesperson for SportCheer Scotland, the governing body, said: “We empathise with our members who are unable to compete with their club teams internationally during the exam period. The updated guidance from the SQA was shared with SportCheer Scotland on 21st October, and we promptly communicated this information to our member clubs.

“While we believe that an exception for 2025 would have provided Scottish athletes and schools with a grace period to adjust to these changes, we are grateful that the 114 athletes selected from 45 clubs are able to represent Scotland as part of the national team at the International Cheer Union World Championships in April 2025.”

An SQA spokesperson said: “SQA informed schools and colleges of changes to its alternative venue guidance in May 2024.

“The updated guidance came into effect for the 2024/25 academic year, following consultation and feedback from teachers, lecturers, the Scottish cheer and performance cheer governing body, SportCheer Scotland, and other stakeholders.

“The updated guidance states that if a learner has been selected to represent their country in an international sporting event by their sports’ governing body, they must provide written confirmation to their school or college from that governing body.”