SQA Procedures and Processes

I have been a teacher for 17 years, the last nine of them as a Principal Teacher of Geography. I have considerable experience of working with the SQA through Qualification Design Teams, Vetting and as a Marker for over a decade. I welcome the opportunity to comment on the SQA on a number of areas.

1. Design of New Qualifications

I was involved with the SQA approximately six years ago when the teams for the new qualifications were being put together. From the outset it was clear there was an agenda that was not going to be influenced by the people who would be ultimately delivering the qualifications, the teachers. There was clear and vocal disquiet in relation to:

- The excessive number of documents required to filter through to get information
- The proposal for outcome by outcome approach to assessment. Back in 2011 it was clear this would increase teacher workload significantly and this point was made repeatedly by members of the QDT (but ultimately ignored)
- The assignment process

The SQA was simply not for listening and six years on it has taken the threat of industrial action to alleviate these concerns, which should never have been necessary. However we still have a myriad of documents and an assignment process which is deeply flawed.

There was also a desire to group my subject, Geography within the social subjects domain, with the same timing and marks for exams and the same mark allocation for the assignment; despite the fact that in the senior school the teaching of Geography is very different to History and Modern Studies. Geography in some aspects shares more in common with the natural sciences. As a result the new Higher exam is now out of only 60 marks (far too few in my opinion to gauge a candidates’ performance) compared to 200 before the new qualifications were brought in. If Higher is supposed to be the gold standard, then there needs to be an urgent review to restore this.

2. Unit Assessments

The unit assessment process has been an absolute disgrace. Although the SQA have promised to abolish it, this came only after the threat of a withdrawal of support by the EIS, and they have not gone yet.
What merit is there in 365 centres across Scotland devising their own assessments, particularly if you considered the worked examples provided by the SQA to be utterly dreadful? It has been a complete waste of time and effort to produce your own version and then the complex spreadsheets required to track pupils through the myriad of assessment outcomes required to achieve a unit pass. You simply could not have thought up a more bureaucratic and appalling system to assess children.

3. Assignments

In my own subject, the assignment must be undertaken under exam conditions for a duration of 1 and a half hours following the research stage. In other subject the weighting is much lower (20% for instance for the science subjects) and these can actually be done in class time; whereas Maths does not even have an assignment at all. Where is the consistency? There is none whatsoever which totally undermines confidence in the assignment process.

Following on from this the SQA is keen to move goalposts each and every year. National 5 Geography has seen changes to the assignment specification every year since its inception in 2014 and these changes are announced at the end of September each year, despite the fact many centres start delivery of the new course sin early June. The SQA should not be permitted to change things during an academic year, it is totally unfair on teachers and pupils preparing for these pieces of work. All announcements to changes should be issued prior to the exams commencing in May.

Correspondence from the SQA earlier (via e-mail) this session also went down like a lead balloon in schools. This was from a person who has never taught a class in their life never mind prepared a class for a National 5 or Higher assignment. To effectively threaten presenting centres with the full might of the SQA if their assignments differed from the exam results was totally shocking and verged on bullying, and questioned the professionalism of teachers, who work hard to try and make complex systems devised by the SQA work in the best possible way for their pupils.

We are also now seeing a “trade” in tutors providing worked examples for assignments to guarantee course passes, which is effectively cheating. This was a problem which was always likely to follow such a process.


The Scottish Association of Geography Teachers has been very vocal in its criticism of this year’s Higher paper and rightly so, with over 350 of its members expressing disgust at this year’s paper, which sampled a very narrow area from the actual course. The structure of the exam also bore no resemblance to specimen, exemplar or the 2015 Higher paper. If the SQA was intent on throwing pupils a “curveball” this year, they certainly succeeded.

Marking standards are also questionable. Schools pack papers and assignments up in packs of 10 and it is very noticeable when you have rogue markers as all papers within a pack have depressed marks compared to their peer group and estimated grades. However there does not seem to have been proper scrutiny of individual
marker’s this session, and it is well known that probationer teachers with less than one year’s teaching experience were marking this session. I am aware that many other subjects have expressed similar concerns.

5. Marking Systems and Standards

Markers meetings, where once there was professional discussion on standards, are now effectively lectures where markers are told what to do and not to moan about it.

The electronic marking system used by the SQA is also deeply unpopular, such that many teachers refuse to mark for them now. Much of our jobs revolves around using IT equipment and to then come home at night or at the weekend to stare at a screen again is something that I and many of my colleagues have shunned. It may save the SQA considerable sums on postage and packing scripts out to markers, but it does not guarantee quality.

Electronic marking systems used (RM Assessor) are not the most user friendly and do not work with some browsers (e.g. Chrome, Firefox), nor can they be installed on Apple or Android devices such as tablets which in today’s age is frankly unacceptable.

I also have concerns about how my own subject fits with the other social subjects in terms of grades and passes. We are the lowest performing social subject at Higher, with 10% fewer A passes compared to History. Candidates who do both subjects openly express that History is easier and Geography much harder. This is manifest when you only have an exam offering 60 marks; one poorly understood question can be the difference between an A or a B, or pass or a fail. At Advanced Higher, the average grade for the exam paper was less than 50%. I can vouch for the calibre of students presented that they were not all D candidates on average and as a result marking boundaries had to be dropped so far that a mark just over 60% achieved an A and 40% achieved a C. This is totally unacceptable.

6. Removal of Appeals

The removal of appeals is also deeply worrying considering what appears to be declining marking standards. To counter a rogue marker now costs around £300 for a centre to request a marking review of 10 candidate papers. Many state schools are reluctant to be out of pocket for these sums in the era of austerity and unsurprisingly requests for remarks have fallen substantially. However private schools can afford these and can take this opportunity for reviews.

How does such a policy fit with closing the attainment gap? It simply doesn’t and suits the most affluent pupils.

7. National 4

National 4 is a complete joke of an award and will not have any integrity until some sort of external examination is restored. Virtually all candidates can now achieve this, even after half an hour of coaching to get a unit pass, and some subjects permit open book assessments.
You need to ask where all the foundation pupils have gone? It makes a mockery of those who just miss out on a National 5 award, compared to those who are effectively given this for free. Schools are under pressure to raise attainment and this means they don’t want anyone achieving less than National 4 across the board. As it is all internally assessed it is fairly easy to process this.

Conclusion

The SQA seem to forget that they are a service provider and local authorities and schools buy services from them. They do not dictate the terms of teaching and learning when they are a service provider. I believe very strongly they need to be reminded of this and put in place a system of examinations and assessments which suits pupils and teachers and not their own corporate agenda.