The Performance of the Scottish Qualifications Authority: Comments to the Scottish Parliament Education and Skills Committee

Summary

- The introduction of the new qualifications has involved an unintended and unsustainable level of work for learners and teachers. The assessment arrangements have been disproportionate to need and excessively time consuming.

- While we recognise that SQA and its partners have provided additional support and taken action to improve teachers’ confidence through clarifying aspects of the assessment and associated guidance documentation, we have been concerned at the reactive nature of these developments.

- Fundamentally, a strategic approach to the development programme for the CfE and qualifications’ reforms has been lacking. Notably, no independent evaluation has been undertaken or planned for, that would enable an assessment to be made of whether the CfE reforms “have made any difference”. It is a great pity that the National Qualifications were introduced without any piloting.

- As the single provider of qualifications and assessments in publicly-funded secondary schools in Scotland, it is paramount to ensure effective scrutiny of the SQA’s operations. Consideration could be given as to whether external oversight should be strengthened.

- Other important considerations include: ensuring there are mechanisms that enable teachers and learners to submit formal feedback on qualifications and assessment; making progress on addressing multi-course teaching which is particularly prevalent in the sciences; and reviewing what is planned for the Scottish Baccalaureate.

Introduction

1. The Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) welcomes the invitation from the Scottish Parliament Education and Skills Committee to submit comments on the performance of the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). We have focussed our response on issues relating to SQA’s contribution to education policy, through its responsibilities for the development and delivery of the new national qualifications. We should be pleased to discuss our response with the Committee.
2. We recognise that the SQA has not had unilateral control over the implementation timetable for the new national qualifications and assessment given that the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) reforms have been developed in association with Scottish Government, Education Scotland and other organisations represented on the CfE Management Board. While the SQA has, by and large, met the deadlines associated with the introduction of the new qualifications, the implementation process has been challenging, particularly as the SQA has had to deliver so rapidly a National Qualifications system without any piloting. Additionally, it has had to manage the complexity of the range of qualifications that were available during the transitional period of the CfE reforms.

The need for a strategic approach

3. The report from the Working Group on Assessment and National Qualifications makes clear that the introduction of the new qualifications has involved an unintended and unsustainable level of work for learners and teachers. This workload has been a result of a variety of factors, including the design and operation of unit assessment, preparations for qualifications, the number of courses being taken by pupils in S4 and the time available for learning and teaching, and the operation of verification processes. The conclusions of the working group reinforce the findings of the earlier report from the CfE Management Board that made a series of near- and longer-term recommendations aimed at addressing bureaucracy and workload issues. The SQA’s own evaluation work undertaken across 2015 and 2016 confirms that the overwhelming view of teachers was that too much time was being spent on unit assessment and that there was duplication across Unit and Course assessment. These various reports serve to demonstrate that the main – although not the only – failing in the assessment arrangements is not that they are of poor quality, but that they have been disproportionate to need and excessively time consuming for both teachers and learners. This has been borne out by the Government’s current imperative to reduce the assessment burden and related workload.

4. While the adverse impacts of the new qualifications were unintended, they were not necessarily unpredictable. Indeed, RSE representatives served on a number of the original Qualification Design Teams in 2010 and in doing so, raised concerns about the fragmentation of the qualification design process as well as some of the potential consequences of the national qualifications.

5. While we recognise that SQA and its partners have provided additional support and taken action to improve teachers’ confidence through clarifying aspects of the assessment and associated guidance documentation, we have been concerned at the reactive nature of these developments. While we agree with the recent decision to phase-out mandatory unit assessments from 2017-18, this move is nevertheless symptomatic of the reactive approach that we have been concerned about.

6. We note that teachers continue to raise concerns about the quantum and timing of changes to course arrangement documentation, with changes to coursework assignments being notified in September when most schools will have started the courses in June. It will be important that SQA ensures changes are communicated timeously to teachers and in a way that does not exacerbate workload issues.

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1 Working Group on Assessment and National Qualifications; May 2016 http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Education/Schools/WorkingGrouponAssessmentandNQs/ANQGroupPaper


7. Fundamentally, it is apparent to us that a strategic approach to the development programme for the CfE and qualifications’ reforms has been lacking. This, of course, extends beyond SQA and is a challenge to the CfE Management Board. In our view, coherent strategic leadership, especially at an educational professional level, has been virtually non-existent. As a result, no consideration has been given to whether the CfE development programme works as a whole or whether its constituent parts are proportionate.

8. Notably, no independent evaluation has been undertaken or planned for, that would enable an assessment to be made of whether the CfE reforms “have made any difference”. We therefore do not have a proper understanding of these important reforms and how to improve the system. It is a great pity that the new national qualifications were not piloted in sample schools as this would have been a means of trialling their use in real school settings, allowing for adjustments to be made prior to widespread introduction. Had there been a more central role for research and evaluation from the outset of the CfE reforms, research would have been able to develop a fuller understanding of what is actually happening, and why. It is critically important that research and evaluation considerations should be a pre-requisite of any education innovation.

9. The preceding points make clear the importance of using appropriate processes for bringing about change. This would include reflecting on the introduction of previous education innovations in Scotland with a view to plotting a coherent way forward. We are concerned, however, that the Scottish education system has not fully learned lessons of previous experiences. For example, assessment-related workload and complexity were key factors highlighted by the Scottish Parliament’s substantial inquiry\(^4\) of 2000 into the examination certification crisis and the implementation of Higher Still.

**Enhanced External Scrutiny**

10. As the single provider of qualifications and assessments in publicly-funded secondary schools in Scotland, it is paramount to ensure effective scrutiny of the SQA’s operations. We have referred already to SQA having completed its own evaluation of the design, assessment and implementation of the National Qualifications. In addition, following the annual diet of examinations, SQA publishes a Course Report for every subject summarising candidate performance against the questions posed in the examination. We welcome the fact that SQA undertakes regular reviews of its performance in the development and operational delivery of its qualifications. However, in the interest of providing reassurance and confidence in its performance, especially when problems arise, it would be useful to explore whether external scrutiny of the SQA’s operations should be strengthened. Principle 12 of the SQA’s Code of Practice\(^5\) states that, “SQA will ensure that its qualifications and assessment are open to evaluation by appropriate national and international bodies.” This would seem to confirm that there is scope to strengthen external oversight of the SQA’s operations.

11. Perhaps based on the recent problematic experiences of the National 5 Computing Science (2016) and the Higher Mathematics (2015) examinations, we understand that SQA has instituted an additional check stage for setting future examinations in the STEM subjects

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\(^4\) Exam Results Inquiry; Scottish Parliament Education, Culture and Sport Committee; 2000  
http://archive.scottish.parliament.uk/business/committees/historic/education/reports-00/edr00-11-v1-01.htm

\(^5\) SQA Awarding Body Code of Practice; June 2014 (as amended in August 2016)  
whereby subject specialists will meet to discuss and finalise the draft question paper. This contrasts with recent examination diets where question setting and review has been largely undertaken by people working independently. We welcome SQA’s recent decision to revert to an approach which provides for professional collaborative working in preparing draft question papers in the STEM subjects. However, there is perhaps a case for exploring whether this revised approach should be adopted for all subject areas.

Other areas for consideration

Teacher and Learner Feedback

12. Teachers and learners were able to submit formal feedback on courses and assessment through the SQA’s annual National Course Assessment Survey. This web-based survey was last undertaken in 2014. In view of the importance of ensuring that it meets the needs of those it serves, the Committee might consider enquiring with SQA as to how it currently formally captures the views of teachers and learners.

Multi-course teaching

13. As a member of the Learned Societies’ Group on STEM Education (LSG)\(^6\), the RSE has monitored developments in the delivery of STEM qualification courses. A prominent issue for the teaching of the sciences relates to the current practice of multi-course teaching (i.e. where two or more distinct courses e.g. National 4 and 5 are being taught simultaneously in one class). Science teachers have expressed concern that multi-course teaching does not allow them to fully support the needs and aspirations of pupils undertaking different levels of national qualifications. While N4 and N5 courses adopt the same unit titles, the learning outcomes and content of the courses are significantly different, which means multi-course teaching is very demanding. The issues are exacerbated when teaching of N4 and/or N5 is combined with the teaching of Higher in a multi-course class. The RSE highlighted the potential consequences of multi-course teaching during the design phase of the qualifications. The Scottish Government along with the SQA and Education Scotland recognise that this issue needs to be addressed. However, it is notable that the guidance that has been issued over recent months does not make clear what steps will be taken to address this important issue. Making progress on it will depend on ensuring that local authorities and schools are given appropriate guidance and support on the way in which the senior phase (S4-S6) is structured, including on the timetabling of science courses.

Breadth of course choice

14. The RSE has consistently highlighted the potential for narrowing of the curriculum in the senior phase, particularly in relation to the number of qualification courses that can be taken by learners in S4. In recent guidance\(^7\) Education Scotland has sought to address this issue by setting out that schools should be planning for young people to follow between six and eight qualification courses from S4. However, continued vigilance will be required here as it relies on schools striking a balance between preparing learners for qualifications in S3 without compromising learners’ entitlement to a broad general education up to the end of S3.

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\(^6\) Information about the Learned Societies’ Group is available from: [https://www.rse.org.uk/policy/standing-committees/learned-societies-group/](https://www.rse.org.uk/policy/standing-committees/learned-societies-group/)

**Interdisciplinary Learning**

15. A central and distinctive context for learning in CfE is *interdisciplinary learning* (IDL). There is accumulating evidence and argument to support the importance of IDL in imparting skills for learning, life and work, transferable and higher order skills, and the capacity to engage disengaged learners. Employers seek school leavers and FE/HE graduates with these enhanced skills and attributes. While IDL has been recognised as an important aspect of the curriculum for many years, it requires better understanding, articulation and exemplification if it is to be embedded in school education. Assessment has a powerful effect on what is taught. It will be important to consider the recognition that IDL is accorded in formal qualifications as teachers will look to SQA to provide leadership in IDL implementation. Currently, the only qualification within the SQA suite which formally recognises interdisciplinary learning (IDL) is the Scottish Baccalaureate (on which we comment in the next section).

**The Scottish Baccalaureate**

16. The RSE has been supportive of the Scottish Baccalaureate, particularly its capacity to provide a valuable bridge between school and entry to higher education. However the number of candidate entries is very low. In the case of the Sciences Baccalaureate, which is the most popular Baccalaureate, in 2012 there were 151 entries declining year-on-year to 82 in 2016. The low level of entries indicates that the Baccalaureate does not carry sufficient currency among learners, teachers, parents, universities and employers to make it an attractive enough proposition. Given its low and declining uptake, and issues relating to schools’ ability to offer the qualification, there would seem to be a strong case for reviewing the role of the Baccalaureate in Scottish education. It would be useful to learn about the SQA’s intentions in this area.

**Additional Information**

This Advice Paper from the RSE Education Committee has been signed off by the RSE General Secretary.

Any enquiries about this Advice Paper should addressed to Mr William Hardie (email: whardie@theRSE.org.uk)

Responses are published on the RSE website (https://www.rse.org.uk/)

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