SQA Art and Design National Qualifications

Overview

On the whole, National 5 Art and Design seems fair and is pitched at a level manageable for learners. However the National 5 level does not articulate well with Higher Art and Design. There is a gulf between an 'A' at National 5 and a 'C' at Higher. Although a 'D' at Higher gets more SQA points than an 'A' at National 5, it is a fail, and is perceived as a 'fail' by candidates, teachers and employers, which seems quite negative for all concerned.

Over all, it seems that Higher Art and Design is a great deal harder for young people to attain than other Highers. Last year this seemed to get worse. This even applies to young people who are capable and extremely committed, regularly working long hours after school, and being disappointed with the marks in comparison to their other subjects at Higher.

Practical

The marking of Higher Art and Design Practical work (Design in particular) seems very harsh, expecting much more of young people than we feel is reasonable for their age and stage. This was more pronounced in the results of the 2016 Marking.

SQA Higher marks seem to suggest that the only good 'Expressive' art being done in Scotland is photo-realistic in style. Could there be some discussion or re-think on this? It should be written in the marking instructions if that is really how SQA intend to mark Expressive.

Some Expressive work we submitted had a painterly maturity beyond the age of the candidate, and you would not see much better work in an art school's general course. We expected full marks on that unit. It attained 46/80. This has shaken my teaching practise to it's core, and 10 years into teaching, I am no longer at all confident about estimating marks, after this year's Higher marks.

Where centres are using poor practise such as spoon-feeding candidates to do precisely the same style as the teacher and using projections, there seems to be no intervention or even questions raised - it goes on year after year.

Critical
The National 5 Critical Exam paper seems fair and seems pitched at the right level. The structure fosters critical thinking skills and a broad range of artists and designers can be studied by young people.

In the Higher Art and Design Critical Exam paper, there are too few choices on the 'image' questions. As there is specialised subject vocabulary and knowledge needed to be able to perform well in either a Graphics or Product question, this builds in extra layers of challenge for candidates and teachers. Covering all of these with enough depth with the timescales we are working to in schools would mean taking too much time from Practical work.

The Higher Art and Design Critical Exam paper tests teachers more than students. The work needed to prepare for the 'Social and Cultural' questions requires so much in depth research that it relies completely on teachers drafting and re-writing very robust notes. I believe this task could not be done by any but the very best 16 and 17 year olds in Scotland. It would need quite a bit of research to even be certain that enough information is available about an artist or designer, potentially wasting a lot of time. Most contemporary designers and artists can't be studied as there just isn't enough information available about how 'social and cultural and other influences' can be seen in one specific example of their work. People who teach Advanced Higher English have commented that the phrasing of this question is more pitched at university level.

The (b) parts of the 'image' questions, known as 'the differentiator' test verbal reasoning much more than visual literacy. (Candidates are asked to explain how two combined design issues affect a third design issue, and must add new points not already mentioned in the (a) part.)

This could be largely addressed by having candidates answer more ‘image’ type questions instead, or setting questions asking them to compare two examples of something.

I genuinely hope this will help the Scottish Government make changes which benefit the young people sitting exams in Scotland.

Thank you for launching this consultation.