James Dornan MSP  
Convenor  
The Scottish Parliament  
Education and Skills Committee  
T3.40  
EDINBURGH  
EH99 1SP

Dear Mr Dornan

Thank you for your letter of 30 November 2016 following SQA’s appearance before the Committee on 23 November 2016. I appreciate the opportunity to provide further information to the Committee and hope that you will find the attached document useful.

Please let me know if you require any further information.

Yours sincerely

Dr Janet Brown  
Chief Executive

Enc
Additional Information of Education and Skills Committee (23 November 2016)

1. STEM Subjects and Enhanced Quality Assurance Processes.

There is a standard approach to the quality assurance associated with question paper development which is outlined below.

*Standard quality assurance process underpinning question paper development*

1. **Item writing** – writing individual questions to a specific writing brief which are added to a question bank for later use in question paper construction. This task is undertaken by practicing teachers/lecturers who are subject specialists.

2. **Item checking** – the checking of the individual questions before being added to the question bank to ensure the questions are valid and meet the needs of the specific writing brief. This task is undertaken by subject specialists (practicing teachers/lecturers), who were not involved in item writing.

3. **Question paper creation** – items from the question bank are selected to form a question paper that meets the requirements of the question paper specification. This task is undertaken by the Principal Assessor, who is an experienced subject specialist and practicing teacher/lecturer.

4. **Question paper review** – the created question paper is reviewed by a minimum of two senior appointees to ensure it meets the requirements of the question paper specification and that the proposed question paper is valid and accessible. This task is undertaken by practicing teachers/lecturers who are subject specialists.

5. **Question paper validation** – the question paper is issued to at least one validator for independent scrutiny of the question paper and provides feedback to SQA in relation to practicality, layout, clarity of graphics/artwork, as well as validity, level, and equality and inclusion. This task is undertaken by subject specialists – practicing teachers/lecturers, who were not involved in any part of the question paper development process.

6. **Final sign off** by Principal Assessor and SQA’s Qualification Manager.

At each of the stages identified above there may be some additional remediation and revision work undertaken as a result of the outcome of the previous stage of the QA process. The Qualification Manager has responsibility for ensuring that the SQA processes have been followed and provides assessment experience throughout the whole of the quality assurance process.

For all STEM based subjects which have a question paper component, the standard quality assurance process has been adapted, given that these subjects tend to be technical in nature and are more complex papers as they contain a significantly larger number of assessment items.

At stage 3 and 4 above for STEM subjects, Question Paper creation and review stage is supplemented by additional subject specialist meetings to finalise the draft Question Paper. The agreed draft then progresses through review and validation activities as for all other subjects.
At stage 5 above for all STEM subjects additional validators from the higher education sector have been appointed to consider the Question Paper and marking instructions from a more technical point of view.

At stage 6 above, for all STEM subjects, SQA’s Head of STEM qualifications is included in the validation activity and will provide, in conjunction with the Qualification Manager, the final sign-off for print.

National Courses which fall within the remit of STEM and that are subject to enhanced quality assurance processes are:

**Science:**
- Biology
- Chemistry
- Environmental Science
- Human Biology
- Physics
- Science

**Technology:**
- Computing Science
- Design and Manufacture
- Graphic Communication
- Practical Metalwork
- Practical Woodwork

**Engineering:**
- Engineering Science
- Practical Electronics

**Mathematics:**
- Lifeskills Mathematics
- Mathematics
- Mechanics of Mathematics
- Statistics

In addition, a number of National Qualification courses which have a question paper component have adaptations to the quality assurance processes, reflecting subject specific nuances. For example all Modern Language National Qualifications have a Validator as outlined in step 5 above, supplemented by an additional Validator who is a native speaker in the specific Modern Language being assessed and who provides technical feedback to SQA relating to any specific language issues. For English, a number of additional Validators are appointed to review a specific aspect of the question paper e.g. Scottish Text questions. For Economics an additional Validator from the higher education sector is appointed to consider the Question paper and marking instructions from a more technical point of view.

2. Updating SQA’s Information Systems

Information management and the associated systems used to process data and successfully certificate candidates are critical in supporting SQA in delivering its role and responsibilities. In line with SG’s Digital First initiative SQA is focused on how it can take advantage of technology solutions to drive improvements in its service delivery, provide better services to customers and create efficiencies in its processes. Updating our IT systems is a key focus of
our ongoing change programme, which aims to ensure our processes and procedures are robust, flexible and scalable, and enable us to respond quickly to the needs of those who use SQA’s services in a cost effective way.

A major feature of our IT systems update is that it will ensure we have a more integrated, flexible and user-friendly technology base to support our development and delivery and meet the needs of our stakeholders and centres.

A significant piece of this work will be to simplify the way in which centres, businesses, teachers, parents and candidates engage with SQA online, ensuring they need only visit one website to access the tailored information they require depending on their role.

This will address the current situation in which our customers often have to use various different SQA websites or portals to access different information. Detailed project planning is being carried out to determine when this outcome can be delivered.

Another project is also ongoing to implement a simpler and more flexible awarding organisation system to manage centre, qualification, learner and appointee information.

The new system, which is due to be in use next year, will support qualification development, the delivery, certification and reporting of vocational qualifications and the associated assessment quality assurance.

The initial phase of the project will deliver a more user-friendly system to manage Higher National and Vocational Qualifications verification activity for appointees and staff in the early part of 2017.

3. Higher Geography – 2016 Question Paper

The 2016 Higher Geography question paper aligned with the Course Assessment Specification, Specimen Question Paper and the 2015 question paper. It examined Physical Geography, Human Geography and Global Issues that are fully detailed in our published course documentation.

We received no (zero) complaints about the 2016 question paper after the examination had taken place. The only feedback received was from Fife Council on behalf of its Geography teachers which was positive in nature. Please let me know if you wish to see this response and I can request permission from Fife Council to send to you.

The A-C pass rate was as expected with A passes matching teacher estimates for 2016.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Entries</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>A-B</th>
<th>A-C</th>
<th>A-D</th>
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<td>2133</td>
<td>4187</td>
<td>5959</td>
<td>6772</td>
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</table>

3. Higher Geography

The coverage of Human Geography, Physical Geography and Global Issues across the Higher course is balanced for learning and teaching purposes. However, one topic within the Physical Geography section of the Course Assessment Specification has a Human
element to it, the section on Land Use, which has the effect of increasing the element of Human Geography assessed in the question paper.

Following discussions with the National Qualifications Support team (NQST) for Geography and the Scottish Association of Geography Teachers (SAGT) SQA undertook a review of the Higher Geography Course between November 2015 and January 2016 involving focus group discussions with a wide range of teachers from across the country. As a result of the review, a decision was made to review the balance between the assessment of Human and Physical Geography to deal with the above issue. A decision was also taken to increase the number of marks for the question paper. These decisions were communicated to the Scottish Association of Geography Teachers in September of 2016 and the NQST in November 2016. We can confirm that both groups were supportive of the proposals.

SQA will continue to work with the NQST and SAGT in relation to the National Courses for Geography.

4. Invigilator Payments

SQA is a living wage employer, and while appointees are not employees, we apply the same living wage conditions to all appointees, including invigilators. We recruit and deploy 6000 Invigilators each year to support the examination process. Chief Invigilators appointed by SQA directly manage the deployment of Invigilators and record associated payments.

We expect Invigilators to work 15 minutes before and after an exam to complete their duties.

Invigilator pay is based upon session fees. Varying session lengths are worked during the course of the examination period enabling a balance to be achieved across the period. SQA makes a payment at the end of the examination period and the fulfilment of our commitment to pay the living wage is based on that basis.

All work undertaken by Invigilators is monitored by Chief Invigilators to ensure that Invigilators are assigned to a variety of examination sessions with differing lengths of duration to achieve a balance across the examination period.

We have had productive discussions with the Poverty Alliance and will continue to work closely with them. Additional guidance to Chief Invigilators and Invigilators is being issued for the 2017 exams. Revised claim forms are being introduced to ensure SQA has visibility of the hours worked and payments made to Invigilators. Guidance issued to Invigilators will direct them to discuss with the Chief Invigilator any areas of concern regarding their individual circumstances and to ensure that appropriate fees are paid in all instances. It is worth emphasising that from a pool of 6000 Invigilators the number of concerns regarding fees raised each year is less than 5. A survey is being organised for the 2017 Invigilators to give them the opportunity to feedback comments and views on the current fee arrangements.

The analysis on the length of exams for 2017 is given below.
### National 5 – Total Examinations 45

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of Exam</th>
<th>Number of Subjects</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>2 hours 5 mins</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>1 hour 10 mins</td>
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<tr>
<td>- 45 mins</td>
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### Higher – Total Examinations 47

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<thead>
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<tr>
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<td>5</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>- 45 mins</td>
<td>1</td>
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</table>

### Advanced Higher – Total Examinations 35

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<th>Length of Exam</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<tr>
<td>3 hours</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>2 hours 30 mins</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 hours</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 hour 15 mins</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Costs of Low Uptake Courses.

As an NDPB, SQA must provide qualifications across a wide portfolio with a range of subjects, sectors and levels for the benefit of Scotland. Many of these qualifications have by their nature low and very low uptake, however the fixed costs of development of qualifications are broadly similar. There is also a variable cost for delivery associated with marking and quality assurance that is largely dependent on volume of entries.

The income generated by charging ‘candidate entry fees’ does not cover these costs but does offset some of this expenditure. In 2016 the fees charged for Higher English entries contributed £1,372,425 to offset these costs, those for Higher History £421,050 and Higher Spanish £97,875 with low uptake courses such as Higher Italian £8,250 and Advanced Higher Latin contributing £2,963. The current average cost of delivery per entry for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher is approximately £67 whereas the average income received by SQA per entry is £37.50.

As SQA is unable to cover the costs of delivering its services the remaining funding requirement is met through Scottish Government grant in aid from the Learning Directorate.

6. Provision of Scribes in Examinations and Assessments.

SQA remain committed to ensuring that all candidates have equal access to qualifications and takes seriously its responsibilities to minimise disadvantage for disabled learners and to maintaining credibility and public confidence in its qualifications.

A human scribe can be allowed, as a reasonable adjustment, to meet the needs of disabled candidates who have substantial difficulties with writing and who cannot produce written text by any other more appropriate means, for example using ICT such as a word processor.

A scribe records a candidate’s dictated responses. This may involve scribing all the candidate’s responses, or the candidate may request only certain questions or words are scribed. The scribe cannot enhance or refine the candidate’s dictated responses, but can use their discretion with regard to the correct spelling of a word and, where necessary, the correct punctuation.

The restriction on the use of a scribe applies only:

• to the National Literacy Units and to National Units and Courses in Modern Languages and Gaelic (Learners) at all levels
• where writing skills are being explicitly assessed

National Literacy Units

Writing is a key skill in the National Units in Literacy and candidates must be able to show that they have this skill. A human scribe is not allowed because all candidates must be able to demonstrate that they can, amongst other skills, write technically accurate texts. It would not be possible to maintain public confidence in the National Units in Literacy if candidates are given credit for ‘writing’ when that process has been carried out by someone else. This is why the provision of a human scribe where writing is being explicitly assessed is not an appropriate support.
However, a wide range of support is allowed in the National Literacy Units enabling many candidates to achieve the required standards for the Units. For example, candidates can use dictionaries, word processors, word banks, spell checkers, and many forms of assistive technologies.

Modern Languages and Gaelic (Learners)

In the assessment of Writing in Modern Languages and Gaelic (Learners), where the ability to write with technical accuracy in the target language is being explicitly assessed, a scribe is not allowed. For example, the spelling of a particular word in French can indicate a particular tense and this can be of significant importance in the marking process. For example, the French word ‘passer’, sounds the same as ‘passez’, ‘passé’, ‘passée’, ‘passés’, it would not be acceptable for a scribe to choose the word (and tense) that should be recorded.

7. Additional Information for the Committee

- Support for Teachers

Communication and engagement with teachers is fundamental to the successful delivery of Scotland’s National Qualifications. Building trust and confidence with teachers and other key stakeholders across the education system is a pivotal fundamental aspect of our activities.

SQA continues to work to enhance the way in which we communicate in order to effectively reach each individual teacher. There are approximately 23,000 teachers employed in the secondary school system. Current SQA’s communication direct into schools for both subject and generic details goes via a single reference point, the SQA Co-ordinator. Co-ordinators work with us to ensure messages are cascaded.

Our website is also a communication tool to provide information to teachers. We recognise that significant changes need to be made to make the information on the web site more easily accessible and more tailored to the need of teachers, parents and candidates.

SQA continues to provide support for teachers through Understanding Standards and Nominees training events as well as bespoke training at the request of individual schools and Local Authorities. These 384 events engaged over 8,000 teachers. To address the challenge of distance and increase access for teachers, we have delivered 34 webinars in the past year (November 2015 – November 2016) to 1500 teachers. Video coverage of these webinars is available on SQA’s secure website for all teachers to view.

The following summary statistics might provide an illustration of the extent of aspects of teacher engagement and the feedback from participants on the events in the past 3 years.

**Understanding Standards Events 2014 - 2016**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Events Delivered</th>
<th>Delegates Attended</th>
<th>Overall Customer Satisfaction rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>7486</td>
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<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>9342</td>
<td>88%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>4396</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Nominee Training Events 2014 – 2016**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Events Delivered</th>
<th>Delegates Attended</th>
<th>Overall Customer Satisfaction rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>2714</td>
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<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>1612</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>1328</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*customer satisfaction rating based on planning and delivery, event content and support materials provided at the event

SQA Liaison Team

The Liaison Team provide a dedicated resource for every school and college throughout Scotland, delivering support and advice for National Qualifications. The team visit every school and college across Scotland gathering feedback and ensuring teachers and lecturers have the information they need to prepare learners. They also meet with parents and carers and work with employers to ensure that they understand the changes to National Qualifications.

The team works in partnership with SQA’s Business Development and Customer Support (BDCS) Team, who provide advice and support to centres about existing qualifications. In the period November 2015 – November 2016 our Field Teams visited 556 centres, contacted schools 1614 times and engaged 5279 teachers.

- Changes to Documents

SQA solicits and receives feedback from centres and teachers about all aspects of our work. During the development of the national qualifications SQA, sought to respond as quickly as possible to the suggestions for change we received. However, feedback from centres made it clear that the number of changes being made during the session was creating a significant concern for teachers. As a result, SQA committed that as much as possible that no further changes will be made to documents outwith those scheduled in session 2016/17. Additional changes to documents will only be made if it is identified that candidates could be disadvantaged.

SQA is currently revising the assessments in line with the decision to remove units from the national courses. We have recently communicated to schools the timings of the release of the documents that will be applicable for National 5 in session 2017/18. SQA will take this opportunity to refine the documentation associated with National Qualifications which will address an area of concern for teachers.

- Quality Assurance

In relation to consistency of marking a range of quality assurance processes is deployed and continually refined with the aim of enhancing the reliability and consistency of marking. This is a key component of maintaining the confidence not only with the teaching profession but of candidates and parents. SQA employs a variety of methods to quality assure marking including detailed training, routine and on-going monitoring of marker performance to ensure that national standards are being applied consistency.
Each year SQA reviews the quality assurance data from across its process and across subjects to identify further enhancements that can be made.

- **National 4**

The design of National 4 qualifications is in line with that agreed by the CfE Management Board and provides candidates with the opportunity to achieve certification in a wide range of subjects at SCQF Level 4. The assessment approach for National 4 qualifications consist of three Units and an added value unit that covers a broader aspect of the course. All units are internally assessed.

All internally assessed qualifications are subject to robust quality assurance by SQA to ensure that the qualifications are being assessed at the national standard. In addition to the national quality assurance, all schools will have their own local quality assurance arrangements in place and teachers play a key role in assessing internally assessed qualifications in a professional manner.

Internal assessment and external quality assurance is employed in a wide variety of contexts in both the academic and vocational sectors in Universities, Colleges and training providers. Internal assessment is used in the awarding of degrees, Higher National Certificates and Higher National Diplomas, vocational and other qualifications. All of these qualifications are internally-assessed, subject to quality-assurance by the awarding organisation and are recognised and highly regarded by employers and educational institutions.

SQA has begun a round of field work to understand how National 4 is operating and is being perceived within schools through discussions with focus groups of Senior Managers, teachers and pupils. Additional work will be undertaken to gather evidence outwith schools with employers, further education and parents and carers. This information will be shared with the Assessment and National Qualification Group as it begins to consider National 4.

- **Curriculum Models within Schools**

SQA plays a significant and key role in Scotland; however it is important to understand that role in the education system as a whole. SQA develops and delivers the qualifications, specifies the recommended experience at entry and the nominal time required to cover the course. National 5 for example requires nominally 160 hours for delivery and has a recommended entry of a candidate being secure in their learning at curriculum level 4 or having successfully completed National 4 course.

The structure of the curriculum models, the nature and number of subjects undertaken by an individual learner or group of learners is determined within a school or college and the qualifications any individual candidate undertakes is a matter for those centres in consultation with learners and parents and carers to support the best interest of that young person.

This does not fall within the remit of SQA.
• **International Work**

The work that SQA undertakes internationally supports the Scottish Government's international strategy. This work is focused on supporting the development of education and skills systems and qualifications frameworks in other countries and qualification and awards provision related to SQA’s higher national and vocational qualifications that are subject to internal assessment and external verification. As well as contributing to the Government’s international aims, any income generated from international work helps to offset the requirement for Scottish Government grant that has been highlighted in previously.