

Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills submission of 6 February 2024 PE2014/C: Revert to the appeals system used in 2022 for SQA exams

Thank you for your letter of 5 June 2023 on behalf of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee regarding Petition PE2014 seeking to “Revert to the appeals system used in 2022 for SQA exams”. My office cannot find any record of this having been received at the time, however officials have since been furnished with a copy. You had asked that I:

I note that you had asked that I:

- clearly set out how the approach to appeals in 2023 differs from the appeals process that was in place before temporary measures were introduced during the pandemic; and
- provide more detail on the rationale behind the decision not to consider additional evidence as part of the appeals process in 2023.

In relation to these points, there is little that I can add to the information I previously provided to the Committee in April 2023.

As I previously set out, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) is an executive Non-Departmental Public Body and as such operates at an arm’s length to Ministers. As the awarding body for Scotland, as set out under the Education (Scotland) Act 1996, the SQA is better placed to provide detail and explanation of its operational processes and decisions around the qualifications. I understand that you also wrote to the SQA in June last year and that it provided a detailed response at the time.

However, I would set out again that all decisions were taken with the best interests of learners at the centre, and informed by an extensive evaluation at the time.

In 2023, all candidates had the right to have a marker review, which included a clerical check, of their exam paper or coursework, irrespective of their estimated grade. This is the same approach used in 2019 before temporary measures were introduced during the

pandemic. What differs between 2019 and 2023 is that the service was free, and young people had direct access to it, which is also a divergence from the approach taken by awarding bodies in the rest of the UK. Appeals in 2022 were only for those whose teacher estimates were above their certificated grades.

Alternative evidence was not needed for the Appeals service in 2023. As the SQA set out in its response, its evaluation indicated that the 2022 Appeals Service was not, on balance, fair to all learners in Scotland because the standard and coverage of evidence varied between centres. It was also indicated that feedback suggested that an appeals process based on alternative evidence increased the assessment burden on young people. The SQA's evaluation also highlighted the importance of alternative evidence remaining available for learners who really need it — for example those who experienced exceptional circumstances and were unable to sit the exam.

You will note that the SQA's Appeals Service for 2023 has now completed and is closed, and the 2023-24 academic session is underway. Based on the 2022 evaluation, the SQA has removed the modifications introduced during the pandemic and reintroduced coursework for the majority of the National Qualifications for 2023-24, providing a return to a more balanced assessment approach for many subjects, which will benefit young people. The SQA has also now undertaken an evaluation of the 2023 arrangements and expects to confirm the 2024 arrangements, including for grading, exceptional circumstances and appeals before the end of February.

I hope the Committee finds this letter helpful.

JENNY GILRUTH