

12 May 2022

Clerk of Education, Children and Young People Committee
By email: ecyp.committee@parliament.scot

Contact: Fiona Robertson
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Dear Convener

Thank you for your letter of 6 April, outlining the next steps in relation to the Committee's scrutiny of education reforms and inviting me to give evidence to the Committee. Given the first national exam diet since 2019 has begun, and with exam procedure being held in June, we have agreed that I will appear before the Committee after the summer recess in September.

In the meantime, I shall address the points raised in your letter.

Education Reform

SQA engaged fully and positively with Ken Muir during the course of his Review and my letter of 1 December 2021 provided the Committee with details of the SQA's formal response to the review consultation.

The conclusion of the Muir Review and the Scottish Government's response has provided some clarity on the way forward. The Review recognises the strength and coherence in our broad range of functions and that much of these will stay together in a new qualifications body, and this is welcome. We are however disappointed in some aspects of Ken Muir's report, including the recommendation that the accreditation function should be removed from the new body, since it already operates independently of our awarding function, as set out in SQA's existing legislative framework. Helpfully, the Scottish Government has recognised that further consideration of this issue is required before decisions are taken and we are engaging further on this.

As you will know, SQA operates and fulfils its responsibilities within a clear statutory framework, set within governance, accountability and budgetary frameworks agreed by the Scottish Government and policy decisions made by Scottish Ministers. The report - and Ken Muir's evidence to the Committee on 23 March - neither fully acknowledges the context within which we operate nor the work we have done to deliver, including during the very challenging circumstances of the last two years. For the approach to awarding qualifications last year, I chaired the NQ2021 group which was composed of all the principal education stakeholders in Scotland, including the Scottish Government and learner and parent representatives. This group has continued to meet in 2022.

We will continue to work with the Scottish Government to deliver on the Education Reform Programme, including Louise Hayward's review of qualifications and assessment, and realise the positive opportunities for change. I am keen to ensure that SQA's experience and expertise in designing and delivering high volume qualifications and assessment are an integral part of the work that lies ahead. Continuity of delivery will remain important alongside the successful implementation of reforms.

2021-22 National Qualifications

As you will know, the exam diet started on Tuesday 26 April and will finish on Wednesday 1 June. More than 128,000 learners are sitting exams for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses.

Many thousands of young people will also be in the final stages of completing National 1 to National 4 qualifications, Awards, National Certificates, National Progression Awards, Skills for Work courses and Foundation Apprenticeships, which are continually assessed throughout the year. In total, more than 142,000 learners are expected to receive their results on Tuesday 9 August.

We are doing everything we can, within our remit of awarding qualifications, to help learners while also maintaining the integrity, credibility, and standard of their qualifications.

The modifications to course assessments, first introduced in 2020/21, and the revision support are both designed to take account of the ongoing disruption to teaching and learning caused by the pandemic, while the exam exceptional circumstances and appeals services are in place to support learners who either cannot attend an exam or do not perform as well as they expected.

We are also prepared to be more generous in our approach to grading than in a normal year. During the grade boundary setting process, SQA appointees – practising teachers and lecturers who are subject experts in each course – will work with us to determine the 2022 grade boundaries by looking at all the available assessment evidence and course information, including how learners have performed in the assessments.

In line with the approach being taken across the rest of the UK, and as announced in February, SQA therefore expects that the overall outcomes in 2022 will represent an intermediary position between 2021 and pre-pandemic years.

2022-23 arrangements for National Qualifications

As highlighted above, SQA made significant modifications to the assessment of all National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses, and some National 3 and National 4 courses, at the beginning of the 2020-21 academic year to take account of the ongoing disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This was to help reduce the volume of assessment and ease the workload of learners, teachers and lecturers. These modifications were kept in place, with some updates, for the current 2021-22 year.

Over recent weeks, we have been engaging with learners, teachers and lecturers, parents and carers, as well as SQA's Advisory Council, to consider whether these modifications should remain in place for the 2022-23 academic year.

Following this engagement, and with the approval of the SQA Board, we have announced that the current modifications will remain in full for 2022-23. We recognise the ongoing disruption to teaching and learning since 2020, and the longer-term impact this will have on learners. This decision will help to provide some certainty for learners, teachers and lecturers and help free up more time for learning and teaching of the course content, while maintaining the integrity and credibility of their qualifications.

We have also confirmed that the current alternative assessment approaches to our Higher National and Vocational Qualifications will continue for 2022-23.

I hope this is a helpful update. Our focus remains on working with the education system to deliver for learners and engaging positively in the reforms that lie ahead.

I look forward to discussing these matters further with members of the Committee in September.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Fiona Robertson', with a stylized, cursive script.

Fiona Robertson

SQA Chief Executive and Scotland's Chief Examiner