

19 February 2021

Clare Adamson MSP
Convener
Education and Skills Committee

Dear Ms Adamson

Thank you for your letter of Tuesday 19 January, requesting further information from SQA and Education Scotland, following our appearance before the Committee on Wednesday 13 January. You have also written to SQA on Thursday 11 February.

This is a joint response, and we will endeavour to provide you with further information on each of the topics and related questions you raise in your letters. As you have acknowledged, we are in a fast-changing situation, and the responses we provide today reflect the current position and may be subject to further change as the public health situation develops.

As you will be aware, the next Scottish Government review of the latest situation is due on Tuesday 2 March. We will keep the Committee fully updated on developments over the coming weeks and months.

1. Alternative Assessment Model

- *Senior phase pupils have told the Committee that they are unclear how the alternative assessment model will function in practice. Whilst there are established mechanisms in place to communicate with Local Education Authorities and individual schools, how will you ensure that there is good communication with pupils themselves, so they understand what is expected of them? How soon do you anticipate further detail of arrangements being available?*

The National Qualifications 2021 Group includes representation from the Scottish Youth Parliament, supported by a Learner Panel. We have worked with them on developing specific communications for learners and distributing the group updates to young people, ensuring that messages are relevant and understandable and issued through a range of channels.

Young people have told us that they want to receive information directly from SQA. We continue to update them on developments, the most recent of which was the National Qualifications 2021 Group's update on the revised Alternative Certification Model, published on [16 February](#).

We also published an [Equality Impact Assessment](#) and [Children's Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment](#) on the Alternative Certification Model. They will continue to be developed as we progress with the Appeals service.

- *Please quantify the staffing and resource required for every school to deliver this alternative assessment model effectively.*

As highlighted above, on [16 February](#) the National Qualifications 2021 Group published revised arrangements for the Alternative Certification Model and the timeline for delivering National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher results in session 2020-21.

Part of this includes the agreed [roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders](#) at each stage of the model, and sets out what needs to be done by each organisation – schools, colleges and training providers, local authorities, Regional Improvement Collaboratives, Education Scotland and SQA.

Schools, colleges, and training providers are best placed to determine the resources they need for learning, teaching and assessment.

The Scottish Government has announced teacher and lecturer payments as well as additional assessment support days to support assessment and quality assurance activities.

- *In SQA's evidence to the Committee, it was suggested that 'teachers' professional judgment is at the heart of the approach' this year. However, the Committee heard that young people had significant trust issues arising from the way in which teacher assessments were managed last academic year. How do you hope to rebuild that trust this year?*

After the Deputy First Minister commissioned an Alternative Certification Model, the National Qualifications 2021 Group was established. The Group consists of a steering group and a working group and ensures that all parts of the system can co-create the model together.

The Group has been meeting weekly to consider qualifications arrangements in the 2020-21 session and appropriate communication updates to the system.

The Group is made up of representatives of the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES), Colleges Scotland, Education Scotland, the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), School Leaders Scotland (SLS), the Scottish Council of Independent Schools (SCIS), Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), the Scottish Government, National Parent Forum of Scotland, and the Scottish Youth Parliament.

This year, teachers and lecturers will be providing SQA with provisional results based on their professional judgement of learner assessment evidence measured against the published requirements for each subject.

Quality assurance is at the heart of fair and credible certification, as explained in the revised [Alternative Certification Model](#). Schools, colleges, training providers, local authorities, Regional Improvement Collaboratives, Education Scotland and SQA all have a part to play in making the model work, as outlined in the [key roles and responsibilities](#).

Local quality assurance ensures consistency and fairness within schools, colleges, and training providers. It is carried out in schools (with support from local authorities where appropriate), colleges and training providers.

National quality assurance is carried out by SQA. The aim of national quality assurance is to provide an evidenced based assurance to teachers, lecturers, learners, parents, carers and the wider public that the application of national standards when assessing learner evidence this session is accurate and consistent across the country.

Schools, colleges, and training providers can also ask SQA for further support and advice regarding the national standard should they find it helpful. Lots of resource materials on understanding standards are also available.

SQA continues to work with all stakeholders, including learner and parent/carers representatives, to raise awareness of the part everyone plays in delivering results to learners in 2021.

2. Sampling

- *In the session last week, you suggested that every school would be sampled to ensure that the alternative assessment model was being applied fairly and consistently. How will this happen in practice, given the limited time available to you? Can you provide further information of what this 'sampling' is likely to involve?*

As highlighted above, on [16 February](#) the National Qualifications 2021 Group published revised arrangements for the Alternative Certification Model and the timeline for delivering National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher results in session 2020-21.

During May, on a proportionate basis, SQA will select courses from each school, college, and training provider for national quality assurance and will provide subject-specific feedback. We can confirm that this will involve every school, college, and training provider.

This package of evidence can be less than that used for reaching provisional results — SQA does not need to see the final evidence gathered by teachers and lecturers to determine learners' provisional grades.

One or two pieces of key evidence from a small number of learners in the subjects selected is sufficient for SQA's national quality assurance exercise. Therefore, for the purposes of national quality assurance, assessment evidence can be partial or incomplete.

We will keep schools, colleges, and training providers updated.

3. Resources

- *Following the recent publication of the Equity Audit, can you confirm what additional resources and support have been requested from the Scottish Government to deliver a high standard of remote learning to all pupils across Scotland? Specifically, the Committee is interested in measures to support pupils from disadvantaged areas, pupils with additional support needs and those living in remote and rural areas, where access to broadband may not be reliable.*

The experience of lockdown and the evidence in the Equity Audit point to the importance of access to technology (devices and connectivity) for children and young people in allowing them to access a high standard of remote learning. The Scottish Government are investing £25 million to support digital inclusion amongst school-aged children and in total they expect to benefit over 70,000 disadvantaged children and young people through the delivery of devices and connectivity solutions across Scotland.

In addition, a further £45 million is being invested by the Scottish Government to assist families with remote learning and this funding can be used flexibly by local authorities to not just purchase additional digital devices but to recruit additional staff and provide wider family support throughout and following the current period of lockdown.

Since June 2020, Education Scotland has been playing a very significant role in leading coordination of the [National e-Learning Offer](#) (NeLO) and in working with partners in the design and development of the offer through the National e-Learning Partnership: Education Scotland, the Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES), e-Sgoil and Scottish Government. All partners are working together to deliver this single offer that builds coherently on what is already available from schools and local partners, the local authorities and the RICs. This offer is initially bringing together the **live** learning option from e-Sgoil, **recorded** content led by the West Partnership and **supported** materials identified by teacher networks and organised by Education Scotland.

e-Sgoil has been widening access to a range of programmes covering ages 3 to 18 since September 2020 to support the plans of classroom teachers across the country. This includes the offer of daily **live**, interactive sessions for learners in primary and secondary schools' lessons to young people having to work from home due to Coronavirus (Covid-19) and an after school study support programme for senior phase learners. From the start of the current period of remote learning beginning on 11 January, and until it ends, eSgoil will provide a daily Lockdown

Live programme to support teachers, learners, and parents. Current figures show over 211,000 views for the Lockdown Live webinars. The programme includes an extension of the study support programme into the school day and an increase in the number of courses available. The current number of courses available is 66 (25 during the lockdown daytime provision and 41 in the evening provision). Registrations for all the Study Support webinars sit at just over 11,000 from over 4,000 learners.

Over 1000 10-minute online [recorded](#) lessons are available through the National e-Learning Offer (largely senior phase and for national qualifications, but also increasing numbers of BGE materials.) These recorded lessons are available through Glow by local authorities signing up to ClickView, free of charge. Several hundred practitioners from local authorities across Scotland will continue to prepare, quality assure and share materials.

Over 16,000 [supported](#) resources are available across 16 subjects. The materials have been developed by teachers for teachers and are available through Glow. Since its launch in early November, over 12,000 unique users have been making use of the materials, viewing over 32,000 pages on the blog.

In addition, prior to and since the Covid-19 school closures from March 2020, Education Scotland has provided an extensive range of professional learning opportunities to support teachers in improving their e-learning skills. This includes engaging with the key features of digital platforms and programmes, and providing learning, teaching and assessment effectively in online environments.

As well as this direct support, Senior Regional Advisers have remained in regular contact with authorities to gather intelligence on their needs in relation to digital access free school meals, additional support needs etc and to assist in the development of support for these areas.

Mental health is another significant challenge in ensuring that children and young people remain engaged in remote learning and it is an area that Education Scotland are taking very seriously. A range of support for children and young people has been developed around this including the following.

- Published [Positive mental wellbeing - resources to support children and young people](#) on the National Improvement Hub.
- Planned and delivered Webinars and 'Wee Blethers' with partners such as Educational Psychologists and NHS Education for Scotland to build practitioner capacity to support learner wellbeing.
- Professional Learning Activities (PLA's) on Compassionate & Connected Community and Supporting young people with grief and loss available on the Education Scotland online Professional Learning and Leadership resource.

- Practical education resources to support learning at this time, such as The Resilience Alphabet - building inner strength and wellbeing for kids - primary and The Journey: Adventures in Resilience
- Education Scotland's wakelet: [Learners with Complex Additional Support Needs: Resources and guidance for parents to support their child's learning at home](#) is designed to support parents with children who have severe and complex learning difficulties and has received 5,000 views since being uploaded.

Education Scotland has published [technical guidance](#) to local authorities and secondary school staff which is intended to provide clarity and support for local authorities and secondary schools on providing arrangements for small groups of senior phase learners to return to school. This limited return of learners is for the purpose of completing the learning and teaching of critical practical work in relation to qualifications in 2021 (for example NQs, NPAs, SfWs and FAs and others) that can only be carried out in school. The guidance identifies key principles for local authorities and schools to consider in providing local arrangements. Local knowledge of school staff with regards to learners, their course choices and needs, availability of school transport and school accommodation will be central in setting individual school arrangements that take account of their particular circumstances. Also included are a range of exemplar timetables prepared by senior managers, who are experienced headteachers and timetablers from schools across Scotland, for schools to reflect on, and draw upon, in setting their own timetables for learners.

4. Remote Invigilation

- *In your evidence to the Committee you confirmed that remote invigilation would not be the default for senior phase pupils. However, you acknowledged that it may be used in some circumstances. Where do you anticipate remote invigilation being used, will this be a requirement you impose and how will it work in practice?*

SQA will not be imposing remote invigilation approaches for the assessment of 2021 National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications.

[Guidance](#), published in December 2020, contains more information about remote assessment. It is for individual employers, training providers, colleges, and schools to consider their options around remote assessments and invigilation for all qualification types.

5. Appeals

- *The Committee has heard from a number of pupils from the 2020 cohort who continue to feel disadvantaged by the appeals system in place last year, and it is evident lessons must be learned to ensure confidence in the system. The Committee would appreciate further detail of the appeals system which will be in place this year, including:*

- *whether candidates will have the final say whether to submit an appeal;*
- *how wider circumstances affecting a pupil's performance will be factored into in this process (e.g. family illness, caring responsibilities or bereavement);*
- *which factors will be considered in deciding whether or not to grant an appeal;*
- *whether this appeals system will also be open to candidates who sat exams in 2020, given the similar circumstances facing 2020 and 2021 candidates.*

SQA will shortly be undertaking a public consultation about the appeals process for 2021 awarding and further details will be available thereafter.

We can confirm that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is at the centre of our considerations.

Information on the 2020 appeals process was published on 2 December 2020 and is now closed as we focus on arrangements for 2021.

6. Cost Savings

- *Please provide further details of the cost savings arising from the cancellation of the exam diet last academic year. What proportion of those savings (if any) was re-directed into supporting learners?*

The income SQA receives from fees and charges does not cover the full cost of SQA services including the delivery of National Qualifications. The charge made against local authority centres for National Qualifications is a levy rather than a charge based on the number of entries. The levy has remained unchanged since 2012-13 and provides a contribution towards the cost of awarding rather than recovering full cost.

The shortfall in funding is made up from the Scottish Government which for 2020-21 was originally planned to be £48.8 million.

SQA plans annually to utilise only those resources it needs to deliver the services it provides. Where reductions against budgeted expenditure occur, regular dialogue with the Scottish Government adjusts the level of grant received.

Taking into account all factors affecting SQA's financial position in 2020-21, including cancellation of the exam diet, the impact of COVID-19 on SQA's operations including the restriction on commercial and international activities, SQA has advised the Scottish Government that it will not require to draw down £20.2 million of grant in aid. This position reflects the continued impact of COVID-19 on SQA's activities and requirements for the delivery of the Alternative Certification Model in the remainder of the current financial year 2020-21.

7. Updating the Committee

- *The Committee would appreciate regular updates on progress on these issues. Please can confirm that you will provide such updates and when the Committee is likely to receive them?*

Please be assured that SQA and Education Scotland will both keep the Committee regularly updated on developments, including sending you updates from the National Qualifications 2021 Group.

8. SQA guidance for Higher and Advanced Higher courses

As you will note from the [Official Report](#) [of the evidence session with the Deputy First Minister on 3 February], the Committee was particularly interested in what guidance is being provided to support teachers in providing assessments of the performance of pupils studying for National Qualifications in 2021/22. In particular, the Committee is concerned whether guidance for all subjects at Higher and Advanced Higher has been published.

The Committee would welcome confirmation from the SQA of when the full suite of detailed guidance for Higher and Advanced Higher subjects will be published, and how the guidance will clearly communicate both to staff and to pupils the methodology for assessment.

The Committee is also aware of the potential for different pupils studying subjects deemed to have a practical element to be disadvantaged in terms of assessment. We would therefore welcome confirmation of whether an impact assessment has been carried out in relation to these elements which will be undertaken on school premises.

Following the decision by the Deputy First Minister to cancel National 5 exams on 7 October 2020, SQA developed a set of subject guidance and evidence requirements to meet these circumstances. This followed the public consultation and subsequent publication of modifications to assessment for all courses at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher, on 7 October. Guidance was published from 2 November to 19 November 2020. Following the cancellation of Higher and Advanced Higher exams on 8 December 2020, SQA published all subject guidance and evidence requirements throughout January 2021.

A total of 116 subject-specific guidance documents across all National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses have been published and regularly communicated to schools, colleges, training providers and all stakeholders.

These documents summarise the key pieces of evidence and associated standards required as the basis for provisional results. They also highlight the flexible ways in which such evidence can be generated so that teachers and lecturers can assess learners at times and in ways that are appropriate to their needs.

For example, in English, flexibility is offered in the assessment of Critical Reading. The Scottish Text element can be assessed at a separate point in time from the Critical Essay in a way that suits the needs of learners, and the circumstances of their learning.

In Music, rather than learners performing all their pieces in one sitting, it is acceptable for evidence to be generated and assessed on a piece-by-piece basis.

In addition, 134 individual assessment resources have been published on the SQA secure website for supporting teachers and lecturers. These include new assessments that can be used, in part or in full, this session.

For example, in the sciences and Mathematics, SQA has provided whole question papers that can be separated and used flexibly by centres. This allows teachers and lecturers to take a pragmatic approach to delivery and focus their learning and teaching on the contexts/content required for assessment. The subject-specific guidance also highlights assessment conditions for generating evidence.

Examples of how to use the assessment resources can be found on the [SQA website](#).

In addition, we are providing a significant programme of [Understanding Standards materials and events](#) across [all subjects](#). These include guidance and exemplification on judging evidence, webinars, and audio presentations.

Additional webinars and materials may be added depending on teacher and lecturer needs. Recordings are made available on SQA's website for anyone who is unable to attend a live webinar.

SQA has continued to monitor the public health situation and its impact on the delivery of practical and performance subjects. As part of this review, we have scaled back the evidence requirements to the minimum whilst preserving the validity of these qualifications. Additional guidance around flexible and holistic approaches to generating evidence has also been published. In addition, we worked together with Education Scotland on the technical guidance for the delivery of practical subjects to ensure learners can attend school at the appropriate point to progress work in these areas. The guidance is based on the current public health advice. Schools and local authorities are best placed to assess and prioritise the need for in-school learning for practical elements that young people have either not been able to access from home or which have not yet been covered.

We hope this provides helpful clarification on the range of issues.

Everyone at SQA and Education Scotland, as well as our partners and stakeholders, continue to work extremely hard, in challenging circumstances, to deliver for learners.

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19 February 2021

Yours sincerely

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Gayle Gorman
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