Follow-up submission to the Education and Skills Committee re SQA

I made a submission to the inquiry into the performance and role of a number of key public bodies including the SQA and Education Scotland. I looked forward with interest to following the work of the committee and I was pleasantly surprised with the robustness of the questioning of both SQA and ES representatives. At the end of the evidence given by Dr Janet Brown (SQA) to the Pre-Budget Scrutiny 2017-18 - Scottish Qualifications Authority on 23rd November 2017, Mr Dornan (Chair) stated that:

“there is going to be changes and feedback which is the way it should be but two things that (the committee) should not be getting a similar response on and that is: relationships with teachers and communicating with teachers. At least be able to make sure whatever changes are required are communicated in a manner everyone can understand”

Now that we are 10 weeks further on, I thought it would be useful to document my most recent experience to allow the committee to consider how well SQA have responded to these points.

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In early January 2017, I was asked by a colleague to help clarify the assessment requirements for our current N4 Physics classes with regards their Assignment/ Added Value Unit.

Here is what transpired.

I first asked our SQA coordinator to retrieve the appropriate document from the Secure Site believing it be the definitive source of information. I went to my ‘drawer’ collect it (Time: 5 minutes).

From the SQA Secure Site (January 27th 2017):

H25C74 Physics Assignment National 4 Added Value Unit valid from August 2013
(This edition September 2015 v1.1)

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Assessment Standards</th>
<th>Making assessment judgements</th>
<th>Assessment for candidate 1: commentary on judgements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>candidate will</td>
<td>1.1 Choosing, with justification, a relevant</td>
<td>The candidate must:</td>
<td>This should be a task key area of the Cor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Aside: Potential for confusion over nomenclature. Initial N4 documentation referred to this piece of assessment being an Added Value Unit now described as an Assignment as well. This assessment is only referred to as the Added Value Unit on the N4 Homepage. In the information to candidates the assessment is referred to as an Assignment. I then read the 19 page document. (10 minutes).
On the physics online forum SPUTNIK I came across a post in which the author was bemoaning the difficulty he had encountered trying to find the new marking instructions for the AVU Assignment. As I could find no changes in the documents given to me from the secure site, I asked my SQA coordinator to look again at the secure site to check for updates. They replied that they could not find any (Time: ~20 minutes as we viewed all documents to check). I then looked on SQA Home:

SQA Home (January 27th 2017 – same day):

Physics Homepage

>October 2016 Update (Published August 2016 v1.0)

Changes to documents in August and September

As part of our agreed schedule of planned changes to documents for session 2016–17, the following documents have been revised.

National 3
Unit assessment support
A small number of typographical and formatting amendments have been made to questions and the marking guidance has been updated in various packs.

National 5
Coursework: General Assessment Information and Coursework Assessment Task
The marking guidance has been updated to reflect the changes to a number of the marking

No changes to National 4 mentioned. Further on in the same document under Guidance Notes

> <New Link> Understanding the next steps for 2016 – 2017 (September 2015 (version 1.1))

>Physics Assignment Added Value Unit

>Judging evidence for Physics Assignment (National 4) AVU

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment Standard</th>
<th>Expected response</th>
<th>Max mark</th>
<th>Making assessment judgements</th>
<th>Additi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Choosing, with justification, a relevant issue in physics</td>
<td>State clearly the issue to be investigated.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1 mark for clearly stating what is to be investigated.</td>
<td>Evidence is likely</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments:

This table has a Max Mark column which the table in the secure area does not. (Time to click through and read various screens and then compare this version with that on secure site ~40 minutes).

To clarify and cross check I remembered that there was a Notification of Changes spreadsheet.
I returned to SQA Home and searched the site for Physics Notification of Changes. This returned 2750 results – none of the top options were dated. I worked down the first few which were either out of date or irrelevant.

I then narrowed the search to N4 Physics which returned 1400 hits.

I worked down those until the 5th link – which opened the October 2016 Update (as above). I re-read this and, in the middle of p3 is the following sentence:

The Notification of Changes spreadsheet has been updated to reflect the latest changes to documents. You can view the spreadsheet at [www.sqa.org.uk/nqssubjectchanges](http://www.sqa.org.uk/nqssubjectchanges)

Following the link and then scrolling down three screens gives:
Upon opening this link gives

Which shows no changes to National 4.  (Time: 40 minutes)

In Summary, halfway through the academic session:

- the Secure Site is not up-to-date.  The information is available in the public domain (if you search long enough).
- The Notification of Changes document is inaccurate.

The consequences of this are:

1. There is a real possibility that a teacher may well have already completed the AVU/assignment based upon the incorrect documentation on the secure site - having first cross checked against the incorrect Notification of Changes document.  The changes made to the AVU; Assignment changes the nature of the assessment from one where the pupil is required to demonstrate 100% mastery to one which requires an attainment threshold ( i.e. a pass mark).  There could then be pupils who have been told they have failed their assessment when they may have gained enough marks to pass.

2. Aside from the wasted time and effort, the resultant stress on teachers who are faced with such conflicting information is palpable.  It is clear throughout SQA documentation that it is the responsibility of teachers to ensure that assessments are carried out as stated.  The implicit threat of a charge of professional misconduct should teachers fail to administer assessment according to the ‘current’ arrangements is as worrying as it is unfair.  Which takes me to point 3.

3. I have been a PT of physics for 26 years and in that time I have been involved in many curricular changes and innovations. It has taken me ~ 2 hours seeking out clarification for
one piece of assessment for one course. That is the time to find the information. New methods of recording the results of the assessment will now have to be produced etc.

The colleague who initially asked me probably spent around the same time (as will physics teachers across Scotland). It may well be the case that a far simpler method of finding such fundamental information has been explained elsewhere (perhaps in the weekly update newsletters etc. that arrive in my inbox for which I simply do not have the time to read).

Throughout the 20 or so years at Standard Grade I had an Arrangements document. When a change was made I received, by post, a replacement for the relevant page containing the change (Time: 2 minutes).

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On 23rd January 2017 my Faculty Head and myself raised concerns (c.f. Appendix) with the school SQA Coordinator who forwarded them to SQA. The concerns were those pertaining to N4 Physics as detailed above as well as concerns regarding changes that were made to National 4 Biology Units in January for this year’s exam diet.

Email thread in chronological order.

EMAIL 1
FROM FACULTY HEAD TO SCHOOL SQA COORDINATOR

I have attached more concerns regarding the SQA (c.f. Appendix). These concerns are causing stress for colleagues, worried in case they miss a vital piece of information. The delay in receiving this information, end of October 2016, is simply unacceptable for courses which started in June/ August.

The information on the secure site is now out of date for N4 AVU marking. Having waited until September for updates, and copying the necessary secure information for colleagues, I have now had to retrieve this information. This has been a total waste of time and resources.

The information on the website - Support and advice, October updates and SQA secure - are all conflicting.

Please share these concerns with our SQA link.

EMAIL 2
FROM FACULTY HEAD TO SCHOOL SQA COORDINATOR

Can I ask again, that concern is raised with SQA link regarding the, almost constant, updating of information onto the SQA website and the secure area.

We plan all of our assessments at the start of the session and copy these for classes. There should be a cut-off date for the information required for the current session, with no
further changes until the same time the following session – this would allow the necessary planning process to take place.

**It had been my understanding that all updates should have been available by the end of September and waited until then to copy necessary information into our secure area and copy resources. There were then more updates in October (concern already raised) and now more changes to unit assessments. I would hope that SQA would accept the assessments that we have already used.**

Thanks

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**From:** SCHOOL SQA COORDINATOR  
**Sent:** 23 January 2017 11:39  
**To:** SQA LIAISON MANAGER  
**Cc:**  
**Subject:** ASSESSMENT MATTERS - CONCERNS

Good morning, I would be grateful if you can take forward concerns on our behalf. Our faculty head of Science has taken the time to prepare the attached document (c.f Appendix) which outlines the extent to which information has been out of date. In addition she has explained in an email to me, (EMAIL 1) the issues of conflict/anxiety that this is causing colleagues who simply don’t have the time to regularly check for changes to ensure that assessments being used are the most accurate. Having flagged this to me in the middle of last week, then at the end of the week the weekly bulletin made reference to further changes (specifically to Biology). I’ve copied this particular email/query EMAIL 2 and underlined the point of particular note.

This is a Science specific query, I haven’t had this flagged from other curriculum areas however, I’m assuming that this might be the same scenario. Can this issue please be considered at SQA and a response to us at the centre would be appreciated, in particular we need guidance to ensure if we have used a previous assessment, prior to a change, that this will still be valid.

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**From:** SQA LIAISON MANAGER  
**Sent:** 07 February 2017 11:52  
**To:** SCHOOL SQA COORDINATOR  
**Subject:** RE: ASSESSMENT MATTERS - CONCERNS

Hi ,

I have been advised that you should refer to the Subject Review Report May 16 and Next Steps Sept 16 documents for this session to ensure you know the options for session 16/17 and can apply the assessment. I’ll also pass on any further advice I receive.

Hope that helps.

Best,
I Googled *Subject Review Report May 16*. The first link took me to:

Review Reports for each subject
  >Browse to Physics THEN National 4 THEN Review Report LEADING TO

30 August 2016

- [Understanding the next steps for session 2016-17](#) (235 KB)

This is the document referenced above which contained information that differs from the Secure Site!

The SQA email suggests *you should refer to the Subject Review Report May 16 and Next Steps Sept 16 documents for this session*. In reality, the first document simply links to the second document.

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With reference to Mr Dornan’s remarks quoted above:

“there is going to be changes and feedback which is the way it should be but two things that (the committee) should not be getting a similar response on and that is: relationships with teachers and communicating with teachers. At least be able to make sure whatever changes are required are communicated in a manner everyone can understand”

**Relationships with teachers:**

Given the extent and detail of the concerns raised and the time taken to point them out to SQA (the cumulative work of 1 teacher, 1 Principal Teacher, 1 Faculty Head and an Assistant Head (SQA Coordinator) to receive a three line response is not acceptable.

**Communication of Changes**

I set out with the simple task of finding out how to mark a test and I have ended up in Parliament to get help. Says it all!
APPENDIX

CONCERNS SENT TO SQA FROM FACULTY HEAD

SQA and National Qualifications Concerns

Assignments

Equality

Concerned about the lack of equality for pupils.

Many pupils will have considerable support at home in terms of supportive parents, access to text books, access to technology etc. Many may have parents or siblings with a qualification to help with the subject being researched. Indeed, many may have a parent who is a teacher in the subject for which the research is being carried out. These pupils will have a considerable advantage over pupils who do not have similar support. Many pupils do not have supportive parents or access to necessary research materials out with school. For those able to afford a tutor the Assignment has become a ‘gift’ of marks.

Stress

Pupils are extremely stressed about writing up assignments. These pupils want to get it right and are concerned about losing marks. They are worried about the fact that teachers cannot give them valuable feedback (although not sure is this is the case in all subjects).

Professionalism

SQA have already alluded to the fact that, in some centres, there is evidence that pupils have had feedback on their assignments. Are some colleagues being put under pressure to get good marks? Regardless of the reason, this cannot be a fair system of assessment while some pupils are (wrongly) being given feedback while others are not.

What are we assessing 1?

The marks for these assignments do not reflect a pupil’s ability in the subject – they are more of a reflection on the support that pupils get and their motivation to do the necessary research. A pupil could do very well in an assignment but perform poorly in the exam because of a basic lack of knowledge – or, indeed, vice versa. The fact that SQA has indicate that it will investigate centres where there is a lack of correlation does not make any sense.

What are we assessing 2?

In N5, 6 marks of the assignment (in the sciences) are for ‘knowledge & understanding’ – surely KU is being assessed through the external exam.

In N5, 14 marks are for skills. For pupils doing 2 or more sciences, they are having to demonstrate these skills multiple times throughout the session.
Also having demonstrated these skills at N5, why are we reassessing these at higher – only the KU is higher order?

**Attendance**

Teachers set aside time for pupils to write up their assignment using their research notes. If a pupil is absent at the time set aside for writing this up, how should they be supervised? If this was part of the SQA examination diet and a pupil was absent, they would require a medical certificate and the exceptions circumstances route would be followed. Given that this is not part of the diet, if the pupil is removed from class to write up the assignment at another time they will miss the learning and teaching taking place in the class during that time.

**New Changes to N5 Assignment**

Assignment **must** now include a practical activity as one of the sources. This is a workload issue, with subjects which have previously not had a practical element in the assignment having to develop resources to address this issue. The introduction of a practical element to the assignment will also result in further management issues for teachers if pupils are absent. Previously if there were attendance issues, returning pupils would have had the opportunity to undertake an assignment with no practical element. Budget cuts are preventing the purchase of new apparatus which would allow a range of suitable assignments to be available (not an issue in fee paying schools. Equality?).

**National 5 Changes**

**Assignment** - See above

**Exam – number of marks**

Previously the exam was out of a total of 80 marks for N5 Biology & Chemistry; 110 for Physics.

Due to the removal of the need for pupils to take the Unit Assessment, SQA decided that the assessment had to be more ‘robust’ and have increased the number of marks (100 marks for Biology and Chemistry; 135 for Physics). The additional marks simply means more questions. It is the nature of the questions that indicate how robust the exam is. In Standard Grade, Credit Level Chemistry was examined through 40 marks of Knowledge & Understanding and 40 marks of Problem Solving; there were no Unit Assessments – are SQA now implying the examination for Credit Level Chemistry was not robust?

Workload implications – new prelims will have to be prepared. While prelims are adapted on an annual basis and colleagues try to modify these in order that they are good predictors of final grades, additional questions will now have to be incorporated. It is important that these exams replicate the final exam in order that pupils have experience of what is expected.

Workload implications – additional marking
Workload implication – marks have to be scaled back to 80.

**Exam – length of examination**

In order to accommodate the additional marks, the length of the exam is to be increased. For pupils undertaking exams for the first time, 2.5 hours (? Still to be decided) is a long time. Previously, Standard Grade Credit Biology & Chemistry was assessed in 1.5 hours; Standard Grade Credit Physics was assessed in 1.75 hours – were these examinations not robust? Longer exams will require more markers. Are SQA sure they have enough? What additional cost will this be to the taxpayer?

**National 4 Qualification**

**Value**  Without an external exam, this qualification has little value to pupils.

In order to answer some of the questions in the Unit assessments (such as writing chemical formulae), pupils in National 4 Chemistry require information from a Chemistry data booklet.

SQA have produced no such booklet for National 4 level.

SQA have produced booklets for National 5 and Higher/Advanced Higher.

While one could argue that National 4 pupils could use the information from one of the other data booklets, this is simply another way in which our National 4 pupils are made to feel that their qualification is undervalued.

**SQA Website**

**Advice and Guidance** Course Support Notes are all out of date

- National 4 Biology updated May 2014
- National 5 Biology updated May 2015
- Higher Biology updated May 2015
- National 4 Chemistry updated May 2015
- National 5 Chemistry updated May 2015
- Higher Chemistry updated May 2016
- National 4 Physics updated May 2015
- National 5 Physics updated May 2015

CfE_Anon_1
National 4 Assignment (AVU) Sciences— the SQA Secure website is out of date (September 2015)

Information, advice and guidance for the marking of N4 AVU on the SQA Secure website is out of date (September 2015). I printed out all of the marking guidelines for N4 AVU for colleagues from the SQA secure site – these are now out of date and we find that the marking instructions are no longer on the secure site.

The most up to date information for course running in session 2016-17 (most of which began in June 2016) was only made available in October 2016 – 5 months too late!!!

SQA should have ONE date for updating information on National Qualifications and further updates should be held until the next session.

Instead, teachers have to constantly check for updates and, even then, are unsure if they have the most recent and accurate information.