SQA response to the Education & Skills Committee report on the Performance and Role of Key Education and Skills Bodies

06 March 2017

Background

At the end of January 2017, the Education & Skills Committee published its Report to Parliament on the Performance and Role of Key Education and Skills Bodies.

This included recommendations for the four public bodies the Committee had met with in November and December 2016, including SQA. Here are our responses to each of the Committee’s recommendations.

Education & Skills Committee recommendations for SQA

1) Engagement with Teachers

The Committee recommends that SQA should review its approach to engagement with teachers and is critical of its apparently poor relationship with the profession and its negative impact on teacher workload.

SQA response

1.1 Our review of communications and engagement

SQA is currently reviewing its approach to engagement and communication with teachers and lecturers and seeks to take forward its relationship with the profession, to ensure the mutual trust and support it has enjoyed with them throughout the history of the organisation.

This review is wide ranging and takes into account the following:

♦ Our means of communication
♦ Our means of engagement
♦ Who we communicate with – directly and indirectly
♦ Our geographical spread
♦ What we communicate

These aspects are explained in more detail in the following sections.

1.2 Means of communication

Much of our ongoing communication and engagement is via SQA’s website and social media channels. Currently we are using the following:

♦ SQA.org.uk website, which includes:
  − National Qualifications (NQ) subject and qualifications pages via the 'Updates and announcements' facility, and subject updates
  − Changes to assessment in National Courses and Review Reports
  − Understanding Standards, which helps practitioners in the understanding of the national standards required for assessment
SQA Secure – our secure website for SQA co-ordinators with functional information around using assessment materials

MyAlerts – our service that sends email updates to users whenever content they are interested in is added to or updated on SQA's website. This facility enables practitioners to keep up to date with changes affecting their subjects

Centre News – our weekly newsletter for SQA co-ordinators, but to which teachers and lecturers can also subscribe

Social media channels - SQA's Facebook and Twitter channels are updated as part of communications activity for major developments such as changes to new NQs

Subject blogs for practitioners - http://blogs.sqa.org.uk maintained by Qualifications Development teams

Customer enquiries - we respond directly to customer enquiries that come into the web team mailbox, eg queries around finding content on the website

We regularly test the website with practitioners to identify usability problems that are then addressed. We are currently undertaking an exercise on the NQ section of the site to review its effectiveness and to help to identify improvements that can then be implemented.

Some publications and letters are still printed and sent to schools and colleges but these tend to be annual publications such as Your Coursework and Your Exams for distribution to learners and our wall planner for SQA co-ordinators.

1.3 Means of engagement

There is of course overlap between communicating and engagement and the points made in 1.2 above also involve engagement – since many do not just provide information but seek interaction/responses from teachers and lecturers. However, in addition to our range of communications, we engage with teachers and lecturers in a number of other ways to gain feedback and to use the experience and expertise of the profession.

♦ We have a dedicated Liaison Team who work with teachers, lecturers, schools, colleges, and local authorities on all aspects of delivering National Qualifications.

♦ We are continuing to carry out research through focus groups, surveys and fieldwork. Fieldwork has involved 35 local authority schools (only missing one authority whose school could not meet us) and two independent schools. We are about to visit four special schools and five colleges. We have set up meetings with the two parental groups and with a group of local authority representatives. We have had very measured and professional discussions. This information is currently being analysed.

♦ Working with SQA is another crucial aspect of engagement, as it brings teachers and lecturers into the heart of what we do. Each year we appoint around 15,000 practitioners (mainly drawn from schools and colleges) to carry out exam setting, assessment item writing, vetting, marking and verification. This arrangement has proved extremely beneficial to the education system as a whole, in terms of ‘ownership’, staff development, and building a bank of expertise in Scotland.

♦ Qualifications Support Teams (QSTs), which represent subject-specific areas and whose members are drawn from the profession – thus representing subject teachers and lecturers. QSTs advise on all aspects of a subject’s development, eg curricular content and assessment approaches.
The Understanding Standards programme aims to build teachers’ and lecturers' confidence in preparing and assessing learners in National Courses and Units. In addition to publishing candidate evidence, commentary materials and subject-specific audio presentations, SQA provides face-to-face engagement through:

- Training events for SQA nominees
- Subject-specific course assessment events for teachers and lecturers
- Continuing professional development (CPD) training events and webinars

1.4 Who we communicate with

We communicate with teachers and lecturers in two ways:

- Directly – through our website and web facilities (open to all teachers and lecturers) and through events and activities, as outlined above, where practitioners attend or participate. After review, we have increased the means by which practitioners can be informed directly about changes and updates, eg through social media. We are also exploring other channels that may be helpful to teachers and lecturers.

- Through head teachers, principals, senior managers and SQA co-ordinators. As not every practitioner from every school or college can participate in every event or communication, SQA also works through local authority/school/college management structures to convey information and hear representative views. Recent activities to update and review proposed changes have included events for local authorities across Scotland, and individual meetings between members of the Liaison Team and head teachers from each local authority. Updates and changes are also sent to each school and college SQA co-ordinator, who is responsible for disseminating information to practitioners.

1.5 Geographical spread

Electronic communication and engagement ensures we reach the whole of Scotland. We also work closely with all local authorities to ensure opportunities for face-to-face engagement, eg central events for updates on changes to National Qualifications, planned visits to every local authority by the Liaison Team, and invitations to local authorities to send representatives to Understanding Standards events.

1.6 What we communicate

Section 1.2 above, gives a flavour of the content of our communications.

Dedicated subject-specific web pages have been created to allow practitioners to go directly to the documents and updates that affect their subject area. These pages also contain general guidance, or updates that cut across all subject areas.

We are currently reviewing and user testing our architecture to improve the experience for users so they can quickly find relevant information and documents.

1.7 Conclusions

Workload issues are being addressed through agreed changes to National Courses, and these will be implemented as indicated in the agreed plan. We will continue to communicate
and engage with the profession on the changes and, as these feed through, we anticipate an improvement in teachers’ perceptions.

We will continue to review and improve how we communicate and engage with teachers and lecturers:

- directly
- through head teachers, principals and senior managers
- through SQA co-ordinators
- via local authorities
- through practitioners and the work they carry out for SQA

Teachers and lecturers are a fundamental part of SQA. They are involved in the whole of the qualification cycle – from designing and developing qualifications and support materials, to assessment, and verification. We are committed to having a positive relationship with teachers and lecturers.

2) Impact of New Qualifications on Teacher Workload

The Committee also suggests that SQA, Local authorities, Education Scotland and teacher unions should have a clear focus on how teachers will be given time and resources to understand what is required to deliver new and redesigned qualifications. The Committee seeks regular updates on this.

SQA response

Since the Deputy First Minister’s (DFM) announcement to reduce workload for young people and practitioners, by removing units and unit assessment from National Courses, SQA has been planning the necessary structural changes to the courses and course assessment as requested by the DFM.

These workload issues were also highlighted in SQA’s research into how the new qualifications were performing. That research and analysis informed discussions at the ministerial Assessment and National Qualifications (ANQ) Group. The group also heard evidence of a number of other factors across the education system contributing to workload for teachers and young people, and which have a direct impact on delivery and assessment.

SQA is committed to addressing workload concerns, but must ensure that standards are maintained and that the integrity of the qualifications is protected.

The original course assessment strategy for the current National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses was based on a combination of unit and course assessment. The SCQF credit points for the current courses also reflect the breadth of learning outlined in each course and its units.

To hold the course to the same SCQF points, SQA has extended the course assessment to take account of the removal of units and their assessment, while maintaining the breadth of learning within the current courses.

From the start of the process, SQA has been clear that the current course aims, content and rationale will not change.

The timescales within which SQA is being asked to make these changes are very challenging.
Broad consultation with the profession was simply not possible against the timescales. SQA has therefore used its National Qualifications Support Teams for each subject - made up of subject teachers, lecturers, professional associations and Higher Education representatives.

SQA has used these groups to help explore options and decide on the best way forward. We have also informally engaged with a range of subject teachers on our proposals and in some cases modified our original proposals based on their feedback.

3) Quality Improvements

The Committee seeks general improvements in the design and delivery of supporting documents for, and the marking of, national qualifications.

SQA response

SQA has been very clear about the recommended entry requirements for each course. For example at National 5, learners should have achieved curriculum level 4 or National 4, prior to embarking on the course, and should be given 160 hours to complete the course, assuming the recommended entry requirements have been met.

The evidence from our research and field work suggests that the approach to presentation varies significantly with the result that learners may not have been at the appropriate level of learning prior to entering for a National 5 course, and in other cases there may not have been sufficient time allocated for learning and teaching.

Course documentation

As the changes to the assessment of National 5 courses, announced by the Deputy First Minister in September 2016, are made, SQA is taking the opportunity to streamline the course documentation that will address many of the concerns raised by teachers.

The removal of units from the course documentation will make the course documents more straightforward and streamlined for teachers and lecturers. The information needed by the teacher or lecturer to deliver and assess the courses will be contained within one document, and duplication of information will be removed.

The documents will have an introductory section, a content section, a course assessment section and other information, as required for the subject. The index page will allow teachers and lecturers to go quickly to the section of the document they wish to view. The information about course assessment will be contained within the streamlined course documents along with any revised or new specimen question papers or coursework tasks.

The units will be removed from the National 5 courses but will still be available as free-standing units at SCQF level 5, and will be externally quality assured by SQA.

Setting and marking exams

Each subject examination team uses a more detailed technical assessment brief for each course assessment, including item specifications for each type of question. From these, live course assessments and the associated marking instructions are developed. They all adhere to the published course assessment specification within the course arrangements. This includes sampling across the course content and the approach to discriminating across the grades.

Within each subject there are general marking guidelines that apply plus marking instructions that are specific to each live exam. Once the exam has taken place the examination team will review a sample of answer papers to add additional acceptable
answers to the marking instructions.

All markers are then briefed on how the marking instructions are to be used and taken through these in detail to ensure understanding. Markers then have to apply marking instructions to a range of practice answer papers, to ensure they can apply the marking instructions. Once the marker has demonstrated that they are qualified to mark, by showing they can apply the standard, they are then allowed to mark live candidate answer papers. Their work is supervised by a team leader, who is part of the examination team.

Grade boundaries

All of the data from the marking of each subject is fed through into SQA systems, and statistical information is generated for every question, for all candidates, and for every exam. The statistical information generated allows us to see if each question performed as intended and allows us to conclude whether the exam has been on standard, harder than intended, or easier than intended. If an exam is easier or more difficult than intended, then grade boundaries are adjusted. This ensures that a candidate receives a particular grade irrespective of which year they sat the exam.

SQA also uses statistical measures each year to look at the relative degree of difficulty across subjects at a level. Our aim is to attempt to keep all subjects within plus or minus one band or half a grade of each other. This is one of the pieces of information that we consider at grade boundary setting stage.

Post-results services

SQA operates post-results services where schools and colleges can ask for the marking of a candidate’s work to be reviewed. We look at the outcomes of these for each course as it allows us to see if subjects have a higher success rate after post-results services have concluded. This may indicate that we need to consider how to enhance the Quality Assurance of marking.

Monitoring of standards over time

SQA carries out monitoring of standards over time, which is a rolling programme of work. We keep an archive of candidate work that scored different grades. We carry out standards monitoring exercises where we ask the Principal Assessor of a subject to review candidate evidence for a previous year with candidate evidence from another year. The reports from these exercises are published along with a commentary, where we think any action is required in specific subject areas.

4) SQA Workload and Resources

The Committee suggests that SQA consider how to reprioritise resources to ensure it fulfils its core functions. This relates to criticism of claims from SQA that errors in exam marking were caused by excessive workload.

SQA response

The Scottish education and skills system is built on collaboration and partnership working. The input and expertise of teachers, lecturers and trainers is critical to the successful development and delivery of Scotland’s qualifications system.

Many of these experts - around 15,000 practitioners work with us every year - are working in the education and skills sectors across Scotland.
To be able to utilise their expertise at the right time, without negatively impacting on their day job, takes detailed planning and co-operation with local authorities, schools, colleges, training establishments, and the individuals. Additional work to the qualifications requires input from the same pool of experts and sufficient time needs to be negotiated with all concerned.

Each year we review and capture experiences and ideas from the examination diet process. This ensures the continued improvement of our services, and identifies what has worked well and where changes need to be made. We review all stages of our processes, including:

- detailed planning and execution
- qualification and question paper development
- information gathered during the marking and grade boundary processes
- certification of candidates
- completion of post-results services

SQA, like many other public bodies, is seeking to take advantage, where appropriate, of the opportunities offered by the application of technology to its procedures and processes. This will have the effect of creating efficiencies, reducing costs, offering better customer service, and quality improvements.

5) **Minimum Wage for Invigilators**

The Committee seeks improvements in information sharing so that SQA can ensure that invigilators are not paid less than the minimum wage.

**SQA response**

SQA is a living wage employer and, while appointees are not employees, we apply the same living wage conditions to all appointees, including invigilators. With regard to the invigilators, SQA makes a payment at the end of the examination period, and the fulfilment of our commitment to paying the living wage is calculated on that basis. We have had productive discussions with The Poverty Alliance on this issue and will continue to work closely with them.

It is not SQA’s intention that any invigilator’s payment should be less than the equivalent of the Scottish Living Wage. Additional guidance has been issued to Chief Invigilators and Invigilators for 2017 and revised claim forms have been introduced to ensure that SQA has visibility of hours worked and payments made to Invigilators.

Guidance issued to Invigilators will direct them to discuss with their Chief Invigilator any area of concern regarding their individual circumstances and to ensure that appropriate fees are paid in all instances.

Each year we enlist the services of more than 6,000 invigilators. The number of concerns raised by them regarding their fees in any year has been fewer than five.

6) **Self-financing Model**

The Committee seeks assurances that SQA’s commercial work is not diluting its focus on its core business.
SQA response

National Courses (Nationals, Highers, Advanced Highers) are **not** offered outside Scotland with the exception of a very small number of qualifications that are offered in the Isle of Man, which has come about as a result of a government to government engagement. This ensures that the resources for, and the focus of, National Courses is directed to Scotland’s learners.

Through its commercial activities, SQA has increased its contribution to overhead year-on-year. However, in addition to this financial contribution, SQA’s commercial activity has led to a higher profile for Scotland and Scottish education on the international stage.

For 30 years, SQA (and its predecessor bodies) has been undertaking international and commercial work that goes beyond its statutory duties. There are a number of benefits to this, which include:

- providing opportunities to promote Scotland and enhance the reputation of Scottish education outside Scotland
- engaging with international partners, organisations and agencies, which allows SQA to enhance its expertise and skills through mutual learning
- continuing to support the Scottish Government’s international strategy and its plans to engage with specific countries through SQA’s international work
- generating income and making a contribution to overhead – thereby reducing the grant contribution required from Scottish Government

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