SCOTTISH QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY

EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE - 13 SEPTEMBER 2017

BRIEFING

1. Introduction

The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) is the national accreditation and awarding body in Scotland. It is a Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB) and the Education (Scotland) Act 1996 sets out SQA’s functions and the governance arrangements to oversee SQA’s distinct accreditation, regulatory and awarding responsibilities. SQA is sponsored by the Scottish Government’s Learning Directorate.

In its accreditation role, SQA accredits vocational qualifications that are offered across Scotland, including Scottish Vocational Qualifications, and approves awarding bodies that wish to award them.

SQA is the statutory awarding body for qualifications in Scotland. Its duties are to develop, validate, quality assure and award a national framework of qualifications. In addition, SQA has a statutory duty as the regulator for National Qualifications in Scotland as defined by the Equality Act (2010).

Since SQA’s last appearance at the Education and Skills Committee, we have continued to review our approach to communication and engagement with teachers and lecturers, with the aim of enhancing the mutual trust and support between the teaching profession and the organisation.

1.1 Our review of communications and engagement

We recognise that there is a need to ensure all teachers and lecturers can easily and effectively access the information that they require to deliver our qualifications and that there are improvements to be made both in the structure of our materials, but also in the ways in which they can be accessed.

We have been actively seeking the views of teachers since last autumn to help us do this. To improve our communications further, we have appointed a new Head of Communications and Engagement who is assisting our established teams to review, measure and improve communication and engagement activity across SQA’s work.

In order for SQA to carry out its statutory duties and ensure accurate certification of candidates, we rely on centres to provide us with key data. In addition, we provide centres with important information that is required by teachers and centres to deliver our qualifications. With this in mind, an important part of the review we are carrying out is an audit of National Qualifications (NQ) communications. These communications include essential forms for gathering information, guidance materials, web text and printed publications. As a result of the audit, many of these documents have already been reduced in length and checked for plain English to make them clearer and easier to understand.
This is in addition to a weekly analysis we carry out of all written and verbal feedback we receive regarding the National Qualifications. This gives us an opportunity to gauge potential trends, and identify issues that may require additional support.

We have acknowledged feedback from teachers and lecturers about the length and complexity of some subject documents and have taken steps to address this. In particular, we have acted on feedback from teachers about the need to refer to multiple SQA documents in order to deliver our qualifications and have addressed this as part of the revision of assessment for National Qualifications.

In May 2017, we published streamlined Course Specifications for all National 5 subjects. In addition, other documents associated with each National 5 subject have been revised to remove duplication and improve the clarity of text. As a result, subject documents are shorter, information is easier to access and the overall number of documents has been reduced. The extent of this reduction differs across each subject, however as an example, the full Course Specification including appendices for National 5 Mathematics has reduced in volume by almost 60%, or around 10,200 words.

SQA recognises the importance of ensuring that teachers and lecturers are able to access improved subject materials available on our website.

As an example, to date, 1,577 teachers have downloaded the revised Course Specifications for National 5 English and 1,492 have downloaded the revised Course Specifications for National 5 Mathematics.

1.2 Means of communication

Our website – sqa.org.uk – is the main platform through which we communicate with all our stakeholders.

We are working with teachers and lecturers to ensure the information they need is easily found on our website. We user-test our pages extensively with practitioners, asking them to find particular documents, or pages, so they can rate their experience of using our website.

We ask for and act upon feedback on any difficulties teachers experience when searching for a specific page or document. We then refine and improve the webpage based on their feedback. Our latest user-testing survey indicated that out of 420 practitioners, 84% were able to easily find what they were looking for. Work continues to ensure that this figure increases further.

The National Qualifications subject, and qualifications webpages, are the sections of most relevance to teachers and lecturers. We asked for direct input from these users when deciding how best to display 2016-17 and 2017-18 National 5 subject materials on these pages. We will repeat this process for Higher documents for the 2018-19 session.

Since May 2017, we have improved the search experience for all our core users – teachers, lecturers, candidates and parents – by refining and clarifying our content, and reducing the number of pages on our website.

To highlight the changes to assessment within National 5 courses, we created sqa.org.uk/nqchanges a new section of our website, signposting significant changes to course assessments, and directing users to further information. Again, this section
is subject to the same continuous user-testing with practitioners, and since launching has been accessed by 36,677 unique users.

Our Understanding Standards website – understandingstandards.org.uk – helps practitioners understand the national standards required for assessments. We publish useful webinars and audio files for practitioners to refer to.

We also have Understanding Standards materials on our secure website, where secure course materials such as internally assessed course components are stored and can only be accessed by a school or college’s SQA Co-ordinator.

Through our MyAlerts service, we encourage users to register to receive emailed updates on specific topics, or subjects, on a weekly, monthly or quarterly basis depending on their preference. Currently almost 12,500 subscribers are informed regularly about changes to web pages which are of interest to them.

SQA qualifications managers also publish a number of subject specific blogs – blogs.sqa.org.uk – for subjects including Computing Science, Social Sciences, Scottish Studies, Life Sciences and Social Care, and practitioners are encouraged to engage with SQA staff through these channels.

In addition, we regularly publish detailed subject updates for teachers, outlining available resources and support, the next of which is due in October.

We publish a weekly edition of Centre News, which is a regular update on operational, and development news from SQA. Every week Centre News is sent to 3,500 subscribers, including SQA Co-ordinators – who are our main point of contact within a school or college – and other teachers and lecturers; resulting in the newsletter being accessed over 25,000 times a week. We regularly ask for – and act upon – reader feedback so that we can improve further both the content and the format.

SQA’s social media channels are an integral part of our communications activity. Our Facebook page, and Twitter accounts are updated regularly to include the latest news on any developments or changes to National Qualifications.

For example, our first post on the changes to National 5 Course Specifications reached 15,032 people and resulted in 62 likes and 43 shares. But again, we look to improve upon this and welcome feedback from users as to how we can provide information in the format that suits them best.

1.3 Means of engagement

SQA recognises that there is an important overlap between communication and engagement. We also recognise that face-to-face contact between SQA, teachers, lecturers and other stakeholder is of paramount importance.

Our staff are in direct contact with schools, colleges and subject specialists across Scotland. Our Qualifications Managers, Regional Managers, and Liaison Managers – many of whom are former teachers or lecturers – visit schools and colleges regularly providing them with support as requested.

In addition, SQA has National Qualification Support Teams, made up of practising teachers, union representatives, and representatives from professional associations.
These groups provide specialist insight to our Qualifications Managers, advising them of any issues, or matters that arise over the course of the year.

We also meet regularly with teaching unions and professional associations as part of a process of on-going dialogue.

In session 2015-16 we carried out a programme of fieldwork visits across 42 centres in Scotland and including every local authority area. Each visit met with three focus groups in each centre to gather views from teachers, senior staff and pupils, about the new National Qualifications.

In session 2016-17 we carried out follow up visits in 36 of the 42 centres to gain further insight into teacher and pupil opinion; this time meeting with four different focus groups per centre. We met with over 400 pupils each year.

Over the past year, we arranged meetings with groups of head teachers from across Scotland, in 30 of the 32 local authority areas (two authorities were unable to schedule seminars due to local circumstances). The meetings took place in January and early February 2017, where discussion topics included the removal of units from National Courses.

We work closely with SQA Co-ordinators, and host annual regional conferences to ensure a continuing process of dialogue between SQA, schools and colleges.

This year, conferences were held in Inverness, Dundee, Stirling, Edinburgh and Glasgow, attracting 357 delegates. The events were well received and provided further opportunity to engage with SQA Co-ordinators face-to face on key topics, upcoming developments, or changes to processes. Feedback from delegates was positive, with many finding them beneficial and extremely worthwhile. Others felt that the frequency of the conferences should be increased. Some remarked that communication with, and from, SQA had improved significantly.

This year, delegates were told about our plans to introduce a ‘communications toolkit’ later in the year, which will assist schools and colleges in communicating SQA information with pupils, parents, and carers. This will include materials that schools can adapt for pupils, parents and carers including presentations, pre-written text that can be incorporated into newsletters, and suggestions for social media updates. A number of Co-ordinators also volunteered to help user-test our website, and we are grateful for their assistance.

1.4 Improving SQA services

SQA acknowledges that many teachers and lecturers would like our communication to be more targeted toward their individual role, or specific subject need.

Over the last year we have carried out an extensive series of workshops across Scotland, meeting many teachers and lecturers, to discuss how best to do this.

We are now at the preliminary stages of identifying the key priorities and establishing what changes to our procedures and culture should follow.

We want to improve how teachers access our online and digital services, providing a more efficient and intuitive experience.
1.5 Summary

We will continue to communicate and engage with the teaching profession on changes to assessment of National Qualifications and, as these feed through, we anticipate an improvement in teachers’ perceptions.

We will communicate with practitioners:

- directly;
- through head teachers, principals and senior managers;
- through SQA Co-ordinators;
- via local authorities; and
- through their colleagues, who work with SQA as markers and in other roles.

Teachers and lecturers are a fundamental part of SQA. They are involved in the entirety 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 and thank them for their continued assistance.

Our ambition is for our communication to be clear, concise and confident.

2. Revision of assessments for National Qualifications

The Revision of the National Qualifications Programme announced by the Deputy First Minister will mean further change over the next three years and will also demand significant staff resource and focus. Whilst the timetable for these revisions is challenging, we are continuing to manage these demands and wherever possible will seek to take advantage of new ways of working to deliver improvements and efficiencies. We are continuing to deliver to SQA’s other commitments for vocational and college provision. We recognise that the timeline for the introduction of the revisions to the assessments is challenging for schools and that ideally they would have wanted the revised arrangements earlier. It must be recognised that we have had a very short timeline to deliver these changes alongside the safe and secure delivery of the annual examination diet.

SQA developed a detailed plan to revise the assessment approach for National 5 and is currently finalising its approach to similar revisions at Higher. Unit assessments are being removed and course assessments revised to ensure course coverage and maintenance of the credibility and standards of our qualifications.

SQA has enlisted the support of subject specialists in the work through its National Qualification Support Teams (NQSTs). These subject-specific stakeholder consultation groups comprise of a selection of teaching professionals from a wide geographical spread, and who are actively involved in delivering the qualifications.

Within the timeframe for introduction of the new assessment approach, SQA has consulted with NQSTs and a number of professional associations, such as: Computing Schools Scotland (CASS), the Modern Studies Association (MSA), the Scottish Association of Geography Teachers (SAGT), and the Association for Media Education in Scotland (AMES) to consider the assessment requirements for each subject following the removal of units. We will also engage with teachers through telephone surveys and local subject network meetings.
2.1 Timetable

Units will be removed from National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses on a phased basis over three years, as follows:

- National 5 from session 2017-18;
- Higher from session 2018-19; and

In January 2017, we published a high level overview of what the changes to assessment would be for each subject.

The timeline for publishing documents and assessment support materials, which provide more detail on the changes and the assessment requirements for each subject, is as follows:

- End of April / early May 2017: Revised National 5 course specifications.
- End of May to end of September 2017: New or revised specimen question papers; new or revised coursework assessment tasks; course support notes.

All of the revised National 5 course specifications were published by 5 May 2017. They were produced by merging four documents into one, including the course support notes, which were added as an appendix. This follows feedback from the teaching profession that there were too many documents for each subject.

We are continuing to publish, specimen question papers, coursework assessment tasks and course support notes, and are on track to deliver these materials by the end of September.

We have been reviewing this process throughout, and have incorporated improvements into the changes for the Higher and Advanced Higher documents.

2.2 Communications and engagement

We have a carefully selected plan of communications and engagement activity regarding the changes to assessment in National Qualifications, which is shared with partners. Communications activity for National 5 included a message from our Director of Qualifications Development that was viewed 35,000 times after being sent to 1,500 Heads of Centres and SQA Co-ordinators. This message was also copied to key stakeholders across the education system.

Since December 2016, we have provided a range of supportive resources to help teachers and lecturers prepare for the changes to assessment in National 5 courses. This has included:

- 33 subject-specific online webinars that focus on the requirements of the revised assessments. Recordings of the webinars are available from our website and have so far attracted 981 views. Feedback has indicated that the webinars are often being shown to entire teaching departments. We continue to receive positive feedback on the webinar format and look forward to its continued success.
- 27 subject-specific audio presentations that follow a similar format to the webinars. The full list of audio presentations is available on our website and can be accessed here.
Starting this month, we are hosting a total of sixty subject-specific National 5 course events for teachers and lecturers. These events will run through to January 2018 and already have 2570 delegates booked on them.

3. **SQA National Qualifications – Certification August 2017**

In May 2016, we published Subject Review Reports that outlined some actions that were implemented for National 5 units for the 2016-17 session – including some changes to unit assessment to help with pupil and teacher workload especially around re-assessment. On the whole, centres have transitioned well to the new qualifications.

There has been a small reduction in the uptake of wider achievement and vocational qualifications at SCQF levels 2 to 6. This is the first year in which Foundation Apprenticeships were available, although as these are two-year courses, no certifications have been made this session.

In order to share the experience gained during the session, each year we publish information for teachers and lecturers about what is working appropriately and areas in which future candidates could improve. This information is published in a report for each course on the subject pages of our website and provides important information from principal assessors as to how the candidates have performed in the assessments. This allows centres to reflect on the approaches being taken in delivering the courses.

We provide subject-specific ‘Understanding Standards’ support through webinars and support materials as part of the Continuing Professional Development for teachers and lecturers delivering particular courses. These activities provide additional support and exemplification of standards.

In 2017, National Courses were assessed through unit assessments and course assessment. The course assessment of the majority of National Qualifications include both final examinations and coursework, in order to allow candidates to demonstrate a breadth, depth and application of skills and knowledge. However, it is important that the final course grade is a combination of both coursework and exam to give a true picture of the candidate’s ability to demonstrate their skills, knowledge and understanding.

Coursework also allows for personalisation and choice and there is some evidence of this emerging across the system. This should continue to develop as centres gain more experience in delivering the new qualifications.

For those candidates who are unsuccessful at National 5 there is recognising positive achievement (RPA). This requires the candidate to have passed the units from National 5 and the added value unit at National 4. The attainment at National 4 reported in the statistical tables reflects both the candidates who are achieving National 4 through direct presentation and those through RPA. Levels are similar to last year.

4. **SQA – Customer and Digital First**

We have launched a Change Programme to review our approach to delivery and to improve the support available to our customers. The overall target is to enhance the customer experience, and make it easier to do business with us.
Based on a ‘Digital First’ approach, it will involve customers and stakeholders to improve access to our information and services, and improve our understanding of the ways in which each of our stakeholders accesses and uses our services.

This work aims to:

- Understand more deeply the ways in which partners use our information;
- Focus on the specific needs of individual teachers, learners and parents;
- Ensure the organisation is easier to do business with; and
- Reduce risk and improve the robustness of SQA’s critical business systems.

As an added advantage, the programme will allow us to be able to adapt, respond and deliver to our customers in a more agile way.

In order to deliver on our commitments, SQA needs to manage and process substantial volumes of data safely, securely and efficiently. This is fundamental to the successful delivery of the organisation’s responsibilities and is critical to maintaining the quality and credibility of SQA qualifications and, by extension, of Scotland’s education system.

In April 2016, SQA submitted our Change Programme ambitions for the next five years to the Scottish Government. These ambitions are in line with the Scottish Government’s ‘Digital First’ Initiative, with a focus on an improved customer experience.

One major aspect of the changes is the implementation of a new corporate business system, which will provide SQA’s ‘back office services’ and manage all transactions relating to the 15,000 teaching professionals who work with the organisation on an annual basis. This will enable smoother processes to be put in place and result in efficiencies for both SQA and our centres.

The Change Programme’s focus on learner/customer journeys is ensuring that SQA works closely with representatives from the many stakeholder groups who have an interest directly or indirectly in SQA’s products and services through their participation in a number of working groups and consultations.

SQA’s investments in new web enabled systems will provide centres, candidates, teachers, appointees and other stakeholders with secure and tailored online access to SQA’s products, materials and services.

SQA’s Award Processing System (APS) which runs all of the results and certification processes for Scotland is 20 years old. Whilst APS has served SQA well, a systems review has been undertaken to ensure continued delivery over the medium to longer term. Some aspects of functionality are being addressed through the new corporate business system which will make it easier for centres and appointees to work with the organisation.

This project will allow the organisation to transfer transactional and other processes from APS to the corporate business system, and sets the foundations for the development of the award processing for the medium to longer term.

As well as making SQA easier to do business with, investment in systems is essential for SQA to make further improvement to its business processes and achieve longer term efficiency savings.
5. Submission from Association for Media Education in Scotland (AMES)

SQA notes the submission received by the Education and Skills Committee from AMES. SQA’s formal response to this submission is contained in Appendix 1 to this document.

6. Conclusion

SQA welcomes the opportunity to provide the Committee with an update on its activities.
Appendix 1

SQA response to the Association for Media Education in Scotland (AMES)

SQA notes the submission received by the Education and Skills Committee from AMES. SQA’s formal response to this submission is as follows:

SQA – partnership working with AMES

SQA has a long standing and proactive relationship with AMES. Several AMES committee members have held ongoing senior roles in our current Media qualification exam teams helping to ensure that the assessments developed are aligned to the Media course specifications and that national standards are maintained. SQA staff regularly link up with AMES and attend their annual conference, which often covers sessions with a focus on SQA qualifications.

A good example of proactive partnership working with AMES was the development of the new Media National Courses (National 3, 4, 5 and Higher) which replaced the original Media Studies course as part of the development of qualifications to support Curriculum for Excellence. AMES had key representation (two standing members) of the Qualifications Design Team (QDT) that was formed to oversee the development work of the new courses. Other members of this QDT included representatives from both schools and colleges, industry and Scottish Screen. AMES members of the QDT played an integral role in shaping the agreed content and assessment approach of the new Media course.

SQA received positive feedback on the new approach from AMES officials – see below:

“The new SQA Higher Media qualification seems to me to show all the characteristics of Doll’s 4Rs. It builds on the basic skills of earlier years as giving pupils a lifelong framework for appreciating, creating and critiquing the media.

“The course has two units: Analysing Media content and Creating Media content. The course assessment is an assignment which focuses on researching, planning and developing media content, and a question paper that focuses on analysing media content and contexts. A welcome change of emphasis is that pupils will have to consider the role of Media within society…”

Rick Instrell, Tuesday, 13 May 2014

See below for the full article: http://www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/media-studies-course-is-gaining-in-value-1-3408501

Proposal for a new National Course in Film/Moving Image (based on the CCEA A-level approach)

SQA staff worked with AMES on the above proposal and a detailed business case was prepared and given due consideration by SQA. Unfortunately this proposal was not approved as it was felt there was not a strong enough rationale for creating an additional and separate National Course in this related area. AMES was informed of this outcome. While we understand the positive delivery models for the CCEA A level, our view is that the position in Scotland is different, as we already have a new broad Media course that can be delivered through a number of media forms including film/moving image. Creating another National Course would also potentially split the existing Media cohort and make the maintenance of national standards very challenging.
We currently already see a lot of very innovative work in film/moving image in the existing Media course and we showcased this recently in a special event at the Glasgow Film Theatre, which included a first-hand industry insight from a leading Scottish writer, director and producer.

See below:  
[https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/80115.html](https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/80115.html)

SQA is positive about promoting the opportunities, via our National Course provision in Media and English, to encourage teachers to use film/digital media in teaching and learning to develop and enhance literacy skills. However, for this approach to be sustainable, the focus has to be on exposing young people to this pedagogy throughout their Broad General Education.

Although the proposal to develop a new general course was not approved, SQA has moved forward with the development of a new National Progression Award at SCQF level 6 in Film and Media (working title). Such awards are increasingly becoming an important part of the mixed economy of qualification offering for the senior phase in the school sector often in partnership with colleges. In addition, SQA has also - this year - validated a new National Progression Award in Creative and Digital Media. This award has strong industry buy-in and forms part of the new Foundation Apprenticeship set up by Skills Development Scotland, again to widen the choice and relevance of opportunities for school pupils in the senior phase.

In summary with our existing National Courses and these newly created Awards we believe we have been proactive in creating a range of opportunities for development and progression in this area.

We have also had discussion with AMES colleagues around the potential to develop a Professional Development Award for teachers in Media. This proposal is still under consideration; however, there are issues around sufficient demand and appropriate funding to make this viable not just for SQA but also for schools and colleges. In terms of teacher CPD, there may be other avenues that could be explored in order to address some of the current issues around teaching and learning in Media, and SQA would be happy to be part of discussions with colleagues in Education Scotland and AMES about possible approaches.

**Attainment in the current National Courses in Media (particularly Higher)**

While there was a drop in the pass rate this year for Higher Media, we did observe some very strong performing centres with A grade rates of 40% and also some very high scoring marks for both the question paper and assignment.

The assessment standards for this course have remained the same for the last three years and the role of SQA is to ensure, via our exam team, that these standards are consistently maintained and appropriately benchmarked at Higher level. It is not appropriate to simply compare the pass rates of one National Course with another, as each has its own unique cohort – this is particularly so in Media, where the vast majority of candidates access the Higher course without first completing the supporting National 5 course.

Our comparative statistics indicate that nationally, candidates undertaking Media courses are performing at a broadly similar level in Media as they are in other subjects. However, given the results profile over the last 3 years, SQA has been very proactive in offering enhanced Understanding Standards events and online exemplification materials in this subject; we have also recently appointed a new Subject Implementation Manager who can provide more bespoke subject specific CPD opportunities to centres/local authorities.
Two further points of clarification:

Access to Understanding Standards events/website
Currently the Understanding Standards events and website are only available to staff from SQA approved centres as these events and website include access to live assessment materials across all subjects. SQA can consider exceptional access to the secure site for bodies such as Initial Teacher Education Institutes when certain agreed conditions are met.

SQA Qualifications staff churn
There has only been one change of SQA Qualifications Manager for National Courses Media in the last twelve years. For capacity reasons, a separate fixed term development team was put in place to manage the development of the new National Courses for all subjects. SQA’s existing team, who looks after National Courses in both English and Media, worked in parallel with this team until their work was complete. The Qualifications Manager who manages our vocationally related provision including our HNC/D and Professional Development qualifications has been in post for many years and worked proactively with centres and industry contacts to develop and maintain our provision in this area.