28 March 2018

James Dornan MSP
Convener
Education & Skills Committee
T3.40
The Scottish Parliament
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Dear Mr Dornan

Structure and Implementation of National Qualifications

Thank you for your letter of 9 March 2018 requesting SQA’s position on the areas raised by Mr Iain Aitken in his letter addressed to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, and copied to the Committee.

Please find attached SQA’s response. I trust this addresses the points raised; however, should the Committee require any further information, I will be happy to provide this.

Yours sincerely

Dr Janet Brown
Chief Executive
Education and Skills Committee

SQA response to issues raised by Mr Iain Aitken, Principal Teacher of Geography, on the structure and implementation of National Qualifications

28 March 2018

Background

On 9 March 2018, the Convener of the Education and Skills Committee wrote to SQA requesting a response to a letter they had received from Mr Iain Aitken, a Principal Teacher of Geography, regarding his concerns around the structure and implementation of the new National Qualifications, with particular reference to Higher Geography.

SQA's response

We have provided a response to Mr Aitken’s concerns that are relevant to SQA’s remit.

SQA Implementation Dates and Teacher Workload

The revisions to Higher courses follow from the Deputy First Minister’s announcement in September 2016 about the removal of units and unit assessments from National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses.

The timelines for making these changes (National 5 in 2017-18; Higher in 2018-19; Advanced Higher in 2019-20) were set by the Scottish Government, to address concerns on assessment workload.

The announcement was welcomed by teaching unions. Feedback from teachers and unions had suggested that teachers and candidates spent considerable time completing unit assessments.

The removal of units also reduces teacher workload around administering units, particularly in instances where candidates needed to be re-assessed.

As a direct result of the removal of units and unit assessments, SQA needed to strengthen course assessments to maintain 24 SCQF credit points and protect the integrity, breadth and standards of National Courses.

In January 2018, we published a document summarising what changes are being made to the assessment of all subjects at Higher, including information about the question paper and coursework.
The changes to each subject followed considerable engagement through our National Qualifications Support Teams and through dialogue with teachers and professional associations.

We have also acted on feedback received from teachers on the changes made to National 5 courses, last year.

Higher course specification documents will be published by the end of April and updated support materials including a specimen question paper and, if appropriate, a specimen coursework task will be published between May and September.

Quality of SQA Documentation and Examinations

SQA has a quality assurance process for the production of Geography question papers that involves both experienced geography practitioners and SQA staff. Additional checks have been put in place to reduce the likelihood of errors in a question paper.

The post-examination analysis and grade boundary processes are designed to take corrective action if required.

The 2016 Higher Geography question paper performed as intended. An adjustment was made to the grade boundary as a result of a question which did not function as intended. Candidate performance nationally was in line with expectations for this subject at this level.

Analysis of candidate responses found that there was no negative impact on candidate performance as a result of the issues Mr Aitken mentions in the 2017 National 5 and Advanced Higher Geography question papers. No adjustment to either of the grade boundaries was required. Candidate performance nationally was in line with expectations for this subject at both levels.

The New Higher Geography Examination, Allocation of Marks, Marking Standards and Appeals

The new Higher, introduced to support Curriculum for Excellence in 2015, had one question paper worth 60 marks. Concerns about the accessibility of marks in this model had been identified by our post-examination analysis and from feedback from external stakeholders, such as the Royal Scottish Geographical Society and the Scottish Association of Geography Teachers, as well as a number of individual Geography teachers.

To address these concerns the structure of questions and marking instructions have been subject to detailed review and grade boundaries have been adjusted to take inaccessible marks into account and ensure that candidates receive the results they deserve.

As a result of the removal of unit assessment, wider sampling within the course assessment has been required. For Higher Geography, it was more appropriate to do this in the question paper rather than the assignment.

Through review, and in consultation with the National Qualifications Support Team for Geography, it has been agreed that to widen the sampling of content in the question paper, whilst retaining the depth required at higher level, would require an increase in marks from
60 to 80. These 80 marks will be doubled to 160 marks to make the marks more accessible to candidates and then scaled to be worth 73% of the total course assessment. This provides clarity in relation to how marks are allocated for candidates, teachers and markers.

The marking of all Geography components is carried out by experienced Geography practitioners and is subject to the same quality assurance processes as other National Qualifications.

As with all externally assessed qualifications, a marking review can be requested if candidates do not obtain the result expected. If a candidate is upgraded as a result of this review the centre will not be charged.

Further information is available on our website – www.sqa.org.uk/resultsservices

The Attainment Gap and the Assignment Process

Curriculum for Excellence offers a broad general education from the age of 3 through to the end of S3, followed by the opportunity to develop specific skills for learning, life and work in the senior phase of education (typically 15-18). This is designed to help prepare young people for further study and employment as well as develop skills which will help them in their wider life.

In designing the qualifications, our aim has been to help schools better prepare young people to thrive in this fast changing world and to give them the confidence to use their skills and knowledge to tackle new things. To this end, the qualifications provide a better balance of skills and knowledge.

The structure of the Higher Geography course assessment includes an assignment because it allows candidates to demonstrate and gain credit for the geographical skills and techniques that practitioners say are integral to Geography.

The skills candidates develop in the National 5 and Higher assignments prepare them for progression to Advanced Higher Geography and beyond.

It is the responsibility of schools and colleges to ensure that candidate evidence is the candidate’s own work. Guidance is available for both candidates and our centres, on avoiding malpractice - www.sqa.org.uk/learners ; www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/1418.html

SQA will, and does, take action in relation to both centre and candidate malpractice.

Impact on Pupil Welfare

Assignments

The assignment for National 5 and Higher Geography requires candidates to complete a write-up which takes place in one sitting. The time allowed for National 5 is 1 hour and for Higher is 1 hour 30 minutes.

Schools and colleges can arrange the write-up at a time which best suits them and their
candidates, but the write-ups must be submitted by the deadline.

**Question Papers**

Where exams have been extended, an increase in the time allocated is required to ensure that candidates have sufficient time to complete the question papers. This increase is small in comparison to the time that candidates would have previously spent completing their unit assessments.

The revised National 5 Geography question paper is now 2 hours and 20 minutes.

The revised Higher Geography will be assessed over two question papers, one at 1 hour 50 minutes, the other at 1 hour 10 minutes.

As part of our work to strengthen course assessments at National 5 and Higher, we have carried out equality impact assessments on the changes, to consider the potential impact of them on learners with protected characteristics, and how our existing arrangements can support them.

Our Assessment Arrangements Team will be monitoring the impact of the changes on these candidates to determine if any further actions are required. Equality impact assessments will be built into our processes for revising the course assessments at Advanced Higher.