Education and Skills Committee — Teacher Workforce Planning Report

SQA response to the Committee’s recommendations

01 November 2017

Background

On 14 September 2017, the Convener of the Education and Skills Committee wrote to SQA requesting a response to the Committee’s recommendations in its Teacher Workforce Planning for Scotland’s Schools report.

Although the Convener has requested a response to two of the recommendations (numbers 33 and 34), we believe that there is a third (number 47) that impacts on SQA:

- **Number 33.** To help to remove this distance between certain public bodies and teachers, the Committee recommends that Education Scotland and the SQA should commence a 'back to the classroom' exercise. This should include short placements in schools work shadowing a range of teachers. These teachers can provide the SQA and Education Scotland staff with a deeper understanding of the practical issues with some of the documentation they provide and the time required for teachers to complete the processes the SQA and Education Scotland set in place.

- **Number 34.** The Committee recommends that the information gleaned from the exercises should form the basis of a joint piece of work by Education Scotland and the SQA on ways of streamlining and simplifying processes and documentation. This work should be submitted to the Government’s new Scottish Education Council and must include specific proposals for improvement. A continued emphasis on reducing teacher workload is vital in ensuring the education reforms proposed by the Government, and the Curriculum for Excellence, can be implemented with minimal impact on teachers and, by extension, on children and young people’s education.

- **Number 47.** The recommendation above for the SQA and Education Scotland to go 'back to the classroom' should also include a particular focus on headteachers, with the aim of identifying responsibilities that can be removed from headteachers and schools altogether. This is in recognition of the potential impact of a period of transition created by the Government’s education reforms.

SQA’s response to Number 33

We agree with the committee’s recommendation that distance between teachers and SQA should be removed. Indeed, we are already working on various initiatives to achieve this aim.
Teachers and lecturers are a fundamental part of SQA and are involved in the entirety of the qualification cycle — from designing and developing qualifications and support materials, to assessment, and verification.

On a daily basis our staff are in direct contact with schools, colleges and subject specialists across Scotland. This contact can be by phone, letter, e-mail, social media or, most importantly, in person. Indeed, it’s because we recognise the paramount importance of face-to-face contact between SQA and teachers that we have a Scotland-wide network of qualifications managers, regional managers and liaison managers all of whom visit schools and colleges regularly. Many members of these teams are former teachers and lecturers who bring invaluable expertise and knowledge to our organisation.

Building on this process of continuing partnership and dialogue we have in the last year appointed 51 subject specialists to work directly with teachers and lecturers across the entire spectrum of SQA’s qualifications. These specialists — known as subject implementation managers — are practising teachers and lecturers who are working with us on full or part-time secondments from their schools or colleges.

They spend their time working on the ground with teaching colleagues to share best practice and to be an accessible and recognisable point of contact for subject-specific concerns which teachers may have with SQA documentation and course materials. They are also talking to teachers about the revisions to the course assessment of Highers which SQA has been asked to make as part of the changes to unit assessment announced by the Deputy First Minister.

Feedback from the profession is that our subject implementation managers are a welcome resource and are an important extra link in the ongoing dialogue between SQA and practitioners which, in many ways, can be summed up as ‘teachers talking to teachers’.

The work of our subject implementation managers is part of a wider collaborative approach in which our teams aim to provide teaching professionals with relevant support and advice, listening to their feedback, and providing solutions, where we can, to any issues or concerns that they may have.

We also run an extensive programme of subject events for teachers, many of which now take place online in the shape of webinars and audio presentations so that teachers or lecturers can access them from their place of work (or from their home if they prefer), thus reducing travel time and time away from school.

Between January and August this year, we ran 18 subject-specific webinars with 844 delegates taking part live. Many more webinars are booked for the year ahead. Feedback tells us these webinars are welcomed by practitioners and are often re-played to entire departments.

Between January and August this year, our liaison managers met in person with 4,000 classroom teachers and principal teachers across Scotland. They also met with 1,700 SQA co-ordinators and senior staff, such as head teachers and depute heads. Co-ordinators are a main point of contact with SQA and it is co-ordinators who are sent all correspondence, materials and publications for dissemination to their colleagues. The co-ordinator, who is often a senior member of centre staff such as a depute head, is also responsible for important operational aspects such as candidate entries.
Through this face-to-face contact, and our regular review of all feedback from teachers, lecturers, parents/carers and learners, our teams have built up a thorough understanding of the day-to-day workings of a classroom and how those workings fit with the processes and procedures that are required to successfully deliver SQA qualifications.

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.

In addition, SQA has National Qualification Support Teams, made up of practising teachers, lecturers, 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.

On an annual basis SQA has between 13,500 to 15,000 teachers and lecturers who work with us in a range of roles such as markers, invigilators, and principal assessors. Around 7,500 of these appointees are teachers and lecturers who we work with every year. We continue to be extremely grateful to them all, for their commitment and hard work.

We also meet regularly with teaching unions and professional associations as part of SQA’s commitment to partnership and dialogue. In addition, the EIS union is formally represented in our governance structure and sits on the SQA Advisory Council.

We will continue to work with teachers and their professional bodies to strengthen still further SQA’s understanding of the challenges faced by the profession in accordance with the committee’s aspirations. SQA will always be keen to explore any proposed new mechanism to help achieve this deeper understanding where the proposal is welcomed by the teaching profession.

**SQA’s response to Number 34**

We agree that there is a need to ensure all teachers and lecturers can easily and effectively access the information they require to deliver our qualifications.

We have been actively seeking the views of teachers to help us do this and will continue to do so.

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, we are carrying out 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 as clear and easy to understand as possible.

This is in addition to a weekly analysis we carry out of all written and verbal feedback we receive from teachers, lecturers and candidates 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%.

SQA recognises as well the importance of ensuring that teachers and lecturers are able to access improved subject materials easily and efficiently via our website. Since May this year, we have reduced the number of pages on our website by more than half, making it easier for our customers to search for what they are looking for. Our latest survey indicates that out of 420 users, 84% were able to find what they were looking for on the SQA website. We are working hard to improve this still further and a key part of this process is getting practising teachers to user-test the website to help us identify areas for improvement.

Over the last year we have been involved in an extensive engagement exercise aimed at deepening our understanding of how classroom teachers use our documents on a daily basis and what challenges or obstacles they may face in accessing the information they need, at the time they need it.

Part of this engagement exercise has involved SQA representatives sitting alongside teachers in their classrooms as they access our documents to see how we can improve both our documentation and our processes to make them as accessible and user-friendly as possible.

We’ve also run a series of workshops and focus groups with classroom teachers, school leaders and SQA co-ordinators so that SQA can hear first-hand feedback about how our documents and processes for accessing them can be streamlined and bettered.

Various suggestions for improvement have been made to us by teachers during this exercise and we are now acting on these. For example, at the moment SQA secure assessment materials are contained in an area of our website where access is restricted to SQA co-ordinators. Co-ordinators then share the materials with teaching colleagues in their schools who need to see it. Co-ordinators and teachers have told us they find this process time-consuming and frustrating. We are therefore now investigating how we can enable individual teachers to directly access secure materials for their own subjects through a sign-on process.
which is user-friendly but satisfies our necessary security requirements.

Our weekly newsletter to schools and colleges, Centre News, was introduced in response to requests from centres that the volume of e-mail traffic from SQA be reduced. Centre News now contains, in one shareable format, information which previously might be sent in a number of different communications. Centre News is viewed approximately 25,000 times a week after being sent to around 3,500 SQA co-ordinators and other teaching staff.

**SQA’s response to Number 47**

We agree with the committee on the importance of freeing head teachers from any bureaucracy which may negatively impact on their workload.

SQA has a long-established relationship with head teachers, including their professional association, Schools Leaders Scotland (SLS), with whom we meet regularly to discuss issues of concern and to hear their views on any changes we are planning, as well agreeing appropriate next steps.

We are grateful for the insight we gain from our meetings with SLS. Indeed, we welcome the full and frank feedback we receive at these meetings, which are a formal platform for SLS to challenge SQA process and policy and to thoroughly voice any concerns about SQA which school leaders may have.

Over the past year, we have 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.

In addition, two serving head teachers sit on SQA’s board of management, where alongside other board members they shape strategic policy for SQA and ensure good governance for all aspects of our work. As with all our members of our board of management, we are grateful to them for their expertise and their input.

Our qualifications committee provides strategic, policy and technical advice to the board and senior officers on SQA’s qualifications and their assessment, quality assurance and awarding systems. It also oversees the work of SQA in developing qualifications that meet the needs of candidates, centres and employers, now and in the future.

The committee’s membership includes senior leaders from schools, colleges and higher education and meets five times a year.

SQA benefits greatly from this engagement with school leaders, and it helps us to shape our policy and practice.