The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

AGENDA

24th Meeting, 2019 (Session 5)

Wednesday 11 September 2019

The Committee will meet at 10.00 am in the Robert Burns Room (CR1).

1. **Declarations of interests:** Alison Harris, Daniel Johnson and Beatrice Wishart will be invited to declare any relevant interests.

2. **Choice of Deputy Convener:** The Committee will choose a Deputy Convener.

3. **Decisions on taking business in private:** The Committee will decide whether to take items 5 and 6 in private.

4. **Scottish Qualifications Authority - performance and role:** The Committee will take evidence from—

    Fiona Robertson, Chief Executive, John McMorris, Director of Business Development, and Robert Quinn, Head of English, Languages and Business, Scottish Qualifications Authority.

5. **Review of evidence:** The Committee will consider the evidence it heard earlier.

6. **Work programme:** The Committee will consider its work programme.

The papers for this meeting are as follows—

<u>Agenda item 4</u>

SPICe briefing paper   ES/S5/19/24/1

Submission pack   ES/S5/19/24/2

<u>Agenda item 6</u>

PRIVATE PAPER   ES/S5/19/24/3 (P)

Education and Skills Committee
Scottish Qualification Authority
Wednesday 11 September 2019

INTRODUCTION

The Committee invited the Scottish Qualifications Authority ("SQA") to give evidence to the Committee on a range of topics in a one-off session.

The SQA has a newly-appointed Chief Executive, Fiona Robertson, who took up post in July 2019. The context of this session is the Committee's ongoing focus on the work and performance of the SQA and of school education as a whole. Over recess, the results of the 2019 exam diet have been published and, in addition, staffing issues and the SQA's international work have been subject of media attention in 2019.

In 2016, the Committee also examined the role and performance of the SQA as part of a wider piece of work on the SQA, the SFC and Education Scotland. The Committee's report *Performance and Role of Key Education and Skills Bodies* included a number of recommendations in relation to the SQA and a theme of those recommendations was on improving communication between the SQA and the teaching profession. The list of recommendations can be found in Annexe A to this paper and the SQA's response to the report can be found in Annexe B.

The Committee had a similar one-off session in September 2018 on the 2018 exam diet and curriculum and attainment trends.[1] This followed a one-off session on 13 September 2017 with the SQA. The Committee concluded taking evidence on its inquiry into subject choices in May 2019; the SQA provided written evidence and appeared as part of that inquiry on 22 May 2019.

Panel

- Fiona Robertson, Chief Executive

- John McMorris, Director of Business Development

- Robert Quinn, Head of English, Languages & Business

The remainder of this paper focuses on: progress since the Committee published its report on the *Performance and Role of Key Education and Skills Bodies;* the governance and strategy of the SQA; changes to National qualifications; wider education policy; and the recent results of the 2019 exam.

THEME1: GOVERNANCE AND STRATEGY

The SQA is a Non-Departmental Public Body, sponsored by the Learning Directorate of the Scottish Government.

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[1] The Official Report and briefing papers for that meeting can be found online.

Its roles are set out in the Education (Scotland) Act 1996. Section 2 of that Act sets out the SQA's general functions, which are:

- to devise qualifications;

- to award qualifications;

- to keep under review and develop SQA qualifications;

- to approve education and training establishments as being suitable for presenting persons for SQA qualifications; and

- to make arrangements for, assist in or carry out the assessment of persons undertaking education and training.

In terms of the development and awarding of qualifications, the SQA have the power to determine the content and form of qualifications.

The SQA's board is chaired by David Middleton CBE, who was appointed in August 2017, and Fiona Robertson became the Chief Executive in July this year.

Corporate Plan 2018-21

The SQA published its Corporate Plan 2018-21 in August 2018.

The Corporate Plan provides the operational context and long-term factors affecting the SQA. It set out nine strategic goals:

1. Develop and deliver high-quality qualifications, products and services for the benefit of a broad range of learners and of Scotland.

2. Provide leadership and expertise in a range of areas including assessment, qualification development and quality enhancement.

3. Support the Scottish Government's internationalisation agenda to maximise the benefits of international engagement and co-operation.

4. Ensure communication and engagement between SQA and our learners, customers and stakeholders is appropriate, clear and timely and tailored to their needs.

5. Deliver high-quality, continually improving, efficient and responsive services to our customers.

6. Ensure our culture and values support the engagement and wellbeing of our staff and foster their commitment to the success of SQA.

7. Continue to develop SQA as a leading public body and key player in the skills, training and education landscape.

8. Continue to pursue a longer-term business model that would enable SQA to reduce its dependency on the public purse and invest in and improve the education and skills system.

9. Independently accredit, quality assure and regulate approved awarding bodies and qualifications thereby safeguarding the interests of learners, employers, parents, funding bodies, providers and the Scottish Government.

These strategic goals are linked to the Outcomes of the National Performance Framework. The strategic goals are linked in to the previous Outcomes of the NPF. The NPF and its Outcomes were updated in June 2018, shortly before publication of the SQA's Corporate plan.

To achieve these goals, the Corporate Plan identifies four approaches: efficiency, effectiveness and economy; customer engagement and feedback; programme management; and measuring and evidencing performance.

The most recent SQA annual report available is for 2017-18. It noted that it had prioritised improving communications during that year and stated—

> "We continually seek feedback, including face-to-face contact with teachers, head teachers, lecturers, college principals, and training providers at as many centres as possible. We have used their comments to streamline qualifications development and course documentation, and to improve the ways we communicate with them, as well as with learners."

A difference between the current and previous corporate plans is the inclusion of the fourth strategic goal in relation to communication. This reflects the Committee's work on the SQA in 2016 which highlighted concerns in this area. The SQA's submission also noted that it had streamlined its course documentations and it stated—

> "Examples of improvements include recruiting experienced teachers as Subject Implementation Managers, to work with schools and colleges on their understanding of each National Qualification subject; streamlining our communications into one weekly newsletter; and introducing a 'You said/we did' report, following the 2018 SQA Co-ordinator school conferences – providing transparency of feedback collated at the events as well as information on SQA's actions in response, which ranged from providing inductions for new SQA Co-ordinators, to making reports and resources more accessible."

The 2017-18 annual report set out examples in how it is measuring its performance which were: delivering qualifications; employer accreditation (e.g. Scottish Living Wage Employer); and through surveys of stakeholders.

The annual report also identified four significant risks during 2017-18:

- budget pressures;

- management of conflicting priorities and implications for staff;

- government policy changes which might present challenges to the implementation of assessment changes for National Qualifications; and

- cyber threats.

The budget of the SQA is significantly funded through entry fees and is subject to regular in-year budget allocations from the Scottish Government. Therefore, the Scottish Government's annual budgets provide an incomplete account of the funding of the SQA.

The most recent figures available were published in the Corporate Plan covering the financial year 2018-19[2], these figures are reproduced below.

Figure 1, SQA Income and Expenditure (provisional) 2018-19

Income 2018-19	£m		Expenditure 2018-19	£m
Qualifications Entry Income	43.2		Staff	33.8
Other Income	9.1		Appointees	21
Grant Funding	14.3		Other Operating Costs	26.2
Additional Grant Funding	14.4		Programme Grant Expenditure	7.3
Programme Grant Funding	7.3		**Total Expenditure**	**88.3**
Total Income	**88.3**			

Source: SQA Corporate Plan 2018-21

International work

The SQA's 2017-18 Annual Report stated—

> "There is demand worldwide for SQA qualifications and services. We offer our qualifications through SQA centres in a wide range of countries. We also work in co-operation with governments and international bodies on projects to improve education, skills, and training."

The annual report noted that its work internationally supports two of its strategic goals regarding internationalism (goal 3) and financial sustainability (goal 8). The annual report also notes that "other income" in its accounts is "mainly from fees charged in relation to contract services, award development fees, and international consultancy income." The Annual Report identified other benefits from this work—

> "SQA's engagement with international partners, organisations and agencies also ensures that we continue to enhance our expertise and skills."

The SQA's website lists 31 consultancy projects the SQA has undertaken to clients outside of the UK. Much of this work is in relation to vocational and technical education. Some examples of this work are: quality assurance of the Botswana Technical Education programmes (2003-2011); support for the establishment of a training fund in Kyrgyzstan (2000-2001); revising and developing national occupational skills standards in Saudi Arabia (2013-2014); strengthening the workforce development authority to establish an integrated technical and vocational education and training system in Rwanda (2010-2012). The example above from Saudi Arabia is the latest project listed.

In its 2017 report *Performance and Role of Key Education and Skills Bodies* he Committee sought "assurance and evidence from the SQA that its commercial work is not diluting its focus on its core business". The SQA's response stated—

> "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

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[2] These figures were published in-year and therefore may have changed.

engagement. This ensures that the resources for, and the focus of, National Courses is directed to Scotland's learners."

The SQA's international work has been subject of criticism in in a series of articles in the Sunday Mail. This criticism focuses on the expenses of the SQA officials[3] and the countries in which the SQA does business[4]. Ross Greer MSP asked a written question on any human rights and equality checks are carried out by the SQA prior to it entering relationships with international partners. The Scottish Government passed on a response from the SQA and this can be found online (S5W-23456). The SQA's submission to the Committee stated—

> "SQA has a long history of working across the world, which has many benefits, such as supporting the development of qualifications and qualifications frameworks in emerging nations, reinforcing the value of Scottish education in the global arena, encouraging shared learning, and promoting Scottish values.

> "All of the associated costs of our international work are paid for by the revenue the work generates, with the remainder being re-invested into Scotland's education and skills system and reducing our dependency on the public purse."

IT systems

One issue that has come up during the Committee's work on the SQA over the past few years has been the SQA's change programme and particularly a renewal of its Information technology systems. Dr Brown, the previous Chief Executive of the SQA, stated—

> "The current system in the SQA has been in place since the late 1990s, and we need to bring our systems up to the speed and efficiency that will enable us to do some of the things that we have been talking about, in relation to engagement, transparency and giving people access to our systems." OR 13 September 2017, Col 26

Dr Brown indicated that this would take a modular approach with a number of smaller systems being developed. The 2017-18 Annual Report stated—

> "This activity is steadily laying the foundations for more robust, effective, and scalable operations. In line with the Scottish Government's Digital First initiative, SQA's Change Programme is using technology to drive improvements in service delivery, ensure better and more responsive communication with our customers, create efficiencies in our processes, and ultimately make it easier to do business with us."

Staffing

The SQA experienced a threat of industrial action this summer. Unite had planned three days of strike action over the summer, including on results day. Unite highlighted a "substantial lack of trust and confidence in SQA management" and said that 62 workers had accepted a voluntary redundancy offer, which it said was 8% of the workforce. Unite stated—

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[3] https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/scottish-news/fury-sqa-exam-bosses-blow-14824992
[4] https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/scottish-news/sqa-blasted-saudi-arabia-deal-17280387

"The restructuring process which has led to the dispute has left a number of workers without specific job roles and others in roles that they are not best suited to but had no option to accept to ensure continued job security. A separate collective grievance on the Business Systems (IT) restructure was also raised, the outcome of which was that Unite members' concerns were valid and upheld."

Industrial action was averted after a meeting in July between the SQA management and the trade union. This led to a "large joint programme of work to make improvements across the organisation which will benefit all staff". Unite said after this meeting—

"The intervention of the Scottish government and the commitment from the SQAs's incoming chief executive Fiona Robertson has been key to addressing the issues at the heart of this dispute."

Support from the profession and appointees

Much of the SQA's work relies on the expertise of teachers to help develop the qualifications and for marking. These roles can be crucial; for example, the Principal Assessor "is responsible for ensuring all duties and tasks associated with externally set/assessed Course assessments are undertaken within the conditions, timeframes and arrangements set by SQA."

During the Committee's work on the SQA in 2016 there was some concern raised over the pay for invigilators not being paid the living wage in some circumstances. They were paid a set fee for a session and sometimes the sessions could be lengthy.

The Committee may wish to explore the panel:

- **Details of the work the SQA has undertaken since 2017 reflecting the recommendations of the Committee's report on the Performance and Role of Key Education and Skills Bodies.**

- **Where the financial pressures (e.g. leading to redundancies) have come from, e.g. increased costs, insufficient fee income etc.**

- **The work the SQA has undertaken to improve communication with teachers and whether this is leading to improved outcomes for young people.**

- **What recent international work it has undertaken and the annual net income arising from this.**

- **The change programme in respect to developing the SQA's digital resources and when this will affect high-volume school and college qualifications.**

- **The current relationship between the SQA's management and its staff and the programme of work to "to make improvements across the organisation".**

- **Whether the SQA is filling its appointee posts and markers.**

THEME 2: CHANGES TO NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

After concerns about teacher and pupil workload, in September 2016 the Deputy First Minister announced that units and unit assessments would be removed from National 5 to

[Advanced Higher courses](#). The changes were implemented for National 5 in the 2017-18 session, for Higher in the 2018-19 session, and for Advanced Higher in the current 2019–20 session. In addition, the SQA will periodically update its qualifications.

The removal of unit assessments typically now leaves the assessment of these qualifications as a coursework assignment and final exam. As part of this process, the SQA redesigned its courses and often extended the exam element to ensure that it samples a greater amount of course content.

Many schools begin their courses of work the academic year prior to the pupil sitting the qualification. That is, a course in S5 begins upon the pupil's return from exams before the summer break.

Members have heard that updated specifications of courses have not been available at the commencement of those courses. The [SQA's website states](#)—

> "All Advanced Higher coursework assessment tasks, specimen question papers and course support notes, for use in session 2019-20 onwards, will be available by the end of September 2019."

The SQA's website also states—

> "We are committed to addressing workload concerns for teachers, lecturers and candidates. As part of our [Understanding Standards programme](#), we are providing CPD webinars, face-to-face events and published materials to help teachers and lecturers prepare for the changes to assessment."

The Committee may wish to explore the panel:

- **The impact of changes to National Qualifications on teaching and learning and the workload of teachers and pupils.**

- **Whether the publication of updated course documentation in September is early enough for teachers to deliver courses which may start earlier.**

- **The Scottish Government's role in directing the SQA in terms of how assessments are designed.**

THEME 3: WIDER EDUCATION POLICY

The SQA's recent submission to the Committee stated—

> "SQA is proud to be at the heart of the education and skills system in Scotland, and is committed to working with partners to help learners realise their potential and achieve their ambitions."

The SQA is part of the wider policy network in Scotland.   It sits on the Scottish Education Council and a number of other bodies, including supporting the Developing Young Workforce agenda. The SQA does not have direct responsibility for teaching and learning, but its participation in policy forums indicates a wider role within the Scottish education system. Furthermore, through its statutory powers to determine the content and form of qualifications, it is influential in what is taught in Senior Phase.

The SQA has almost a monopoly position in Scotland in terms of the summative national standardised assessments for pupils taken by Scotland's 16-18 year olds. Some of these assessments have very long histories (e.g. Highers) and therefore provide comparable longitudinal data on the performance of the system. In previous sessions with the Committee, the SQA has drawn a distinction between the production of its data and the SQA having a full understanding of what is happening in schools. In May 2019, James Morgan Head of Research, Policy, Standards & Statistics told the Committee—

> "Once certification has taken place, we see different things in terms of data, but it is challenging for us to find out real causality as to what is happening, because we see learners only once they are entered. We do not know the richness of the system, the richness of those individuals' lives and their learning or how they have come to the SQA." OR 22 May 2019, Col 26

The SQA has told SPICe that it provides the Scottish Government with its full data set each year and this populates the Government's Insight tool. Dr Gill Stewart told the Committee—

> "The Scottish Government can look nationally at what the data tells it, but what is more important is that schools can use the Scottish Government's insight tool to look at how their young people are performing locally." OR 22 May 2019, Col 26.

The SQA's submission highlights that it works to ensure that its qualifications and that this includes gathering intelligence on how effective they are. The submission said—

> "To maintain the quality, flexibility, and relevance of our qualifications, we are welcoming and responsive to feedback from all parts of the skills, training and education system, and we research the impact and effectiveness of our qualifications."

The Scottish Government's policy intention is for a more "empowered system" where greater decision making will lie at the school level. These developments are alongside the establishment of Regional Improvement Collaboratives and a changing role for local authorities.

The Committee may wish to explore the panel:

- **The SQA's role in developing Scotland's overall education policy.**

- **Whether the SQA's role within the policy making framework helps or hinders its role as a national qualification body.**

- **How the SQA is empowered to highlight any trends in its data it may find concerning.**

- **The strengths and weaknesses of National Qualifications as a performance indicator of the Scottish education system.**

- **How the SQA ensures that its qualifications match and reflect the taught curriculum in Scotland's schools.**

- **What the impact is of the empowering schools agenda on the work of the SQA and its relationship with local authorities and schools.**

THEME 4: 2019 ENTRIES AND RESULTS

Results of the 2019 diet of SQA qualifications were published on Tuesday 6 August 2019. The key messages from the results identified by the SQA were:

- The number of Course entries for National Qualifications is 636,085 representing an increase of 1,754 compared to 2018 (634,331)

- Attainment of SQA Awards, National Progression Awards, and National Certificates has increased from 41,526 in 2018 to 44,744 in 2019

- A-C attainment rate for National 5 (78.2%) has increased by 0.7 percentage points compared to 2018 (77.4%)

- A-C attainment rate at Higher (74.8%) has decreased by 2.0 percentage points compared to last year (76.8%) and Advanced Higher (79.4%) has decreased by 1.1 percentage points compared to 2018 (80.5%)

- More than 60,000 candidates receiving their results by text and/or e-mail

The early releases of SQA data do not provide a detailed breakdown by entries by the type of centre the qualification was taken at (i.e. school/college). This data is expected to be published on 17 September and further details are released over the coming months. Last year, the SQA published data by local authorities and the independent sector for the first time. At the time of writing, the data available shows the entries and attainment by qualification (subject and level).

Entries

Entries are where candidates are entered for a qualification. An important factor in the number of entries is the size of the pupil roll. The intention of the Senior Phase is that individuals have a bespoke approach to qualifications, taking different qualifications at different stages of their learner journey.

The S4, S5, and S6 rolls of publicly funded schools is shown in Figure 2, below. These data are collected in September, so the 2018 pupil census relates to the academic year 2018/19 (i.e. 2018=2018/19); SQA data is presented as the year in which the exam diet took place, at the end of the academic year (i.e. 2019=2018/19).

Figure 2: pupil numbers in Senior Phase (publicly funded schools)

Number of pupils	S4	S5	S6	Total SP
2016	50,244	44,862	32,745	127,851
2017	49,705	43,934	31,837	125,476
2018	51,175	43,660	31,232	126,067

Source: Pupil Census 2018

The S4 roll has been decreasing for some years, from a high of 61,697 in 2006 to the low of 49,705 in 2017. The data for younger cohorts indicates that the S4 roll will increase year-on-year for several years to come.

Figure 3: entries in National Qualifications (all centres)

| SCQF Level	Qualification	Entries 2017	2018	2019
2	National 2	1,896	2,077	2,070
3	National 3	17,114	17,646	19,285
3	Skills for Work and Personal Development	15	11	13
4	National 4	116,032	106,033	104,866
4	Skills for Work and Personal Development	3,767	3,601	3,698
5	National 5	293,220	281,785	288,552
5	Skills for Work and Personal Development	6,126	6,632	8,023
6	Higher	194,813	191,951	185,914
6	Skills for Work and Personal Development	433	264	204
7	Advanced Higher	24,112	24,331	23,460
	Total	**657,528**	**634,331**	**636,085**

Source [SQA Attainment Statistics (August) 2019](#), press release

There have been some changes in the numbers of entries at different levels. These variations may be due to changes in the rolls at different years. For example, the increase in National 5 entries between 18/19 and 17/18 may be explained by the increase in the S4 roll.

The Committee's inquiry into the Senior Phase highlighted some of the debates around the impact of Curriculum for Excellence on subject choices in the Senior Phase. The Senior Phase is designed to be a 3-year stage of education where young people gain qualifications. Figure 4 below shows the percentage change in the nominal number of qualifications per pupil in the Senior Phase from 2012/13 to 2018/19[5]. It is described as nominal because the data for pupil rolls includes only publicly funded schools whereas the entries data also includes colleges and independent school. Entry data for schools is available up to 2018 and the percentage changes per pupil match closely Figure 4 below. The graph shows the percentage change since 2012/13.

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[5] The average is calculated by dividing the total row in Figure 3 (and equivalent) by the sum of the relevant years' S4-S6 cohorts.

Figure 4, Nominal Average Qualifications per Senior Phase Pupil % Change over time
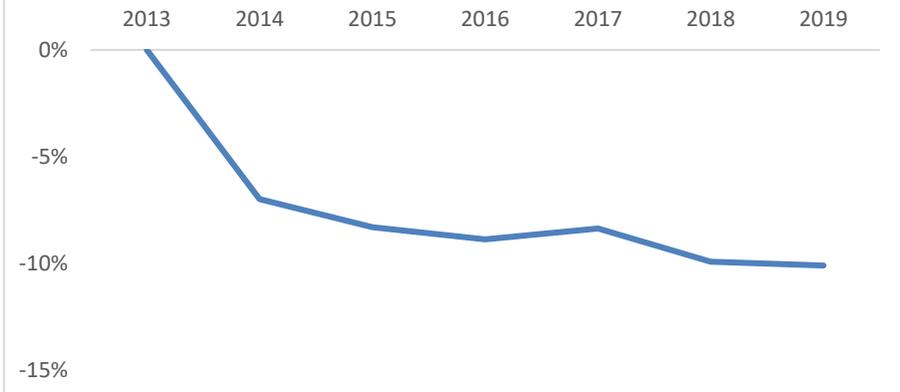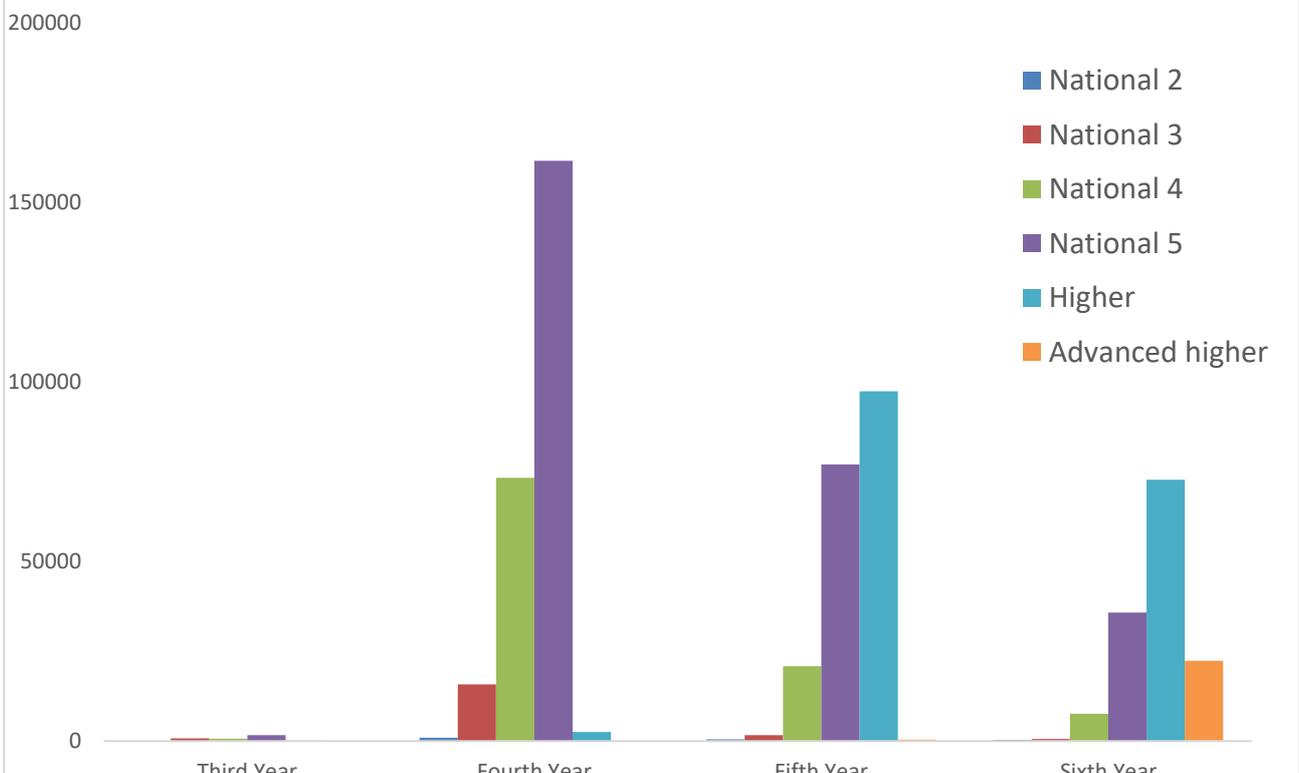

Sources: Pupil Census & SQA Attainment Statistics (August) 2019, press release

There was a 7% drop at the point that CfE qualifications were rolled out in S4. Since then, the trend has been of decreasing average numbers of entries to qualifications and the average in 2018/19 is 10% lower than in 2012/13.

More entries are for pupils in S4 than other school years, although to some degree this reflects the size of cohorts. Taking only National Qualifications, the average number of entries in 2019 in S4 was around 5.0 per pupil and at S5 and S6 it was around 4.5 per pupil. Figure 5 shows the breakdown of levels of qualification taken in each school year.

Figure 5, 2019 National Qualification Entries by School Year

Source SQA Attainment statistics 2019

It is worth noting again that Figure 5 includes all schools, including independent schools. Independent schools teach around 4% of pupils in Scotland. In 2018, the SQA published attainment tables for each education authority and the independent sector for the first time. This showed that in 2018 attainment was higher in the independent sector than in the state sector (over 90% for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher) and that the independent sector accounted for a disproportionately high number of entries at National 5 (6.6% of total), Higher (7.7%) and Advanced Higher (16.5%).

Attainment

While entries measure qualifications young people were entered for, attainment date shows what grades those young people achieved.

Figure 6 below shows attainment rate for Nationals 2-5, Higher and Advanced Higher. In the case of Nationals 2-4, the data shows the pass-rate. Where there are graded passes, the figure represents the rate of A-C passes.

Figure 6: Attainment percentages

SCQF Level	Qualification	Attainment			
		2016	2017	2018	2019
2	National 2	78.0%	83.2%	79.7%	77.1%
3	National 3	90.8%	91.4%	91.5%	87.9%
4	National 4	94.2%	93.8%	91.1%	88.5%
	Skills for Work	86.0%	83.4%	79.3%	77.6%
5	National 5	79.5%	79.6%	77.4%	78.2%
	Skills for Work	89.4%	89.0%	86.0%	82.7%
6	Higher	77.6%	77.3%	76.8%	74.8%
	Skills for Work	84.9%	85.4%	81.4%	78.4%
7	Advanced Higher	82.0%	80.4%	80.5%	79.4%

Source: SQA Attainment Statistics (2019 & 2017)

The statistics above generally show a trend of reducing attainment between 2016 and 2019 across these types of qualifications. There are several possible reasons why this may be the case. For example, that: the qualifications have become harder; the qualifications specifications have changed making preparation difficult; the introduction of the D grade has led to more aspirational entries (in Nat5-Adv Higher); there has been a change in teaching and learning in schools and colleges; etc.

An aim of the SQA is that while qualifications will change, those qualifications are comparable over time. Its website explains—

> "For SQA, 'comparability over time' means that a Course or Unit has remained equally demanding over time, even if it has been reviewed or replaced. Candidates in one year must be set tasks that are just as demanding as in any other year. We also have to ensure that items of evidence that are similar receive the same judgement."

One way for this to be achieved is to set grade boundaries each year. That is decide for each appropriate qualification what mark would constitute what grade. Each year the SQA convenes around 140 *Awarding Meetings* to agree grade boundaries.

Specific subjects

The statistics above relate to the all the subjects for those types of qualifications. This section will examine subjects the Committee has expressed an interest. For brevity, the analysis is limited to National 4, National 5 and Higher. Members are welcome to contact SPICe for data on any other subjects or levels.

Figure 7a: English

	2018		2019	
	Entries	**Attainment***	**Entries**	**Attainment***
National 4	14,451	92.8%	13,914	91.8%
National 5	44,477	84.8%	45,593	86.3%
Higher	36,185	75.9%	35,461	73.2%

Figure 7b Mathematics

	2018		2019	
	Entries	**Attainment***	**Entries**	**Attainment***
National 4	23,841	89.8%	22,982	89.0%
National 5	41,590	64.7%	41,586	65.5%
Higher	18,753	74.5%	18,626	72.4%

Figure 7c: Sciences (Physics, Chemistry and Biology)

	2018		2019	
	Entries	**Attainment***	**Entries**	**Attainment***
National 4	15,073	93.7%	14,522	91.7%
National 5	50,557	74.8%	51,376	73.6%
Higher	25,575	75.4%	26,057	74.5%

Figure 7d: Modern Languages (French, German, Spanish)

	2018		2019	
	Entries	**Attainment***	**Entries**	**Attainment***
National 4	4,558	94.1%	4,514	94.7%
National 5	14,941	88.2%	14,799	86.0%
Higher	7,392	86.1%	7,258	85.9%

Figure 7e: Computing Science

	2018		2019	
	Entries	**Attainment***	**Entries**	**Attainment***
National 4	2,820	91.2%	2,650	88.0%
National 5	6,442	74.7%	6,344	74.7%
Higher	4,099	68.7%	3,228	63.9%

Source: SQA Attainment data
*Attainment the percentage of passes at National 4 and percentage of passes at grades A-C for National 5 and Higher.

In both Maths and English, between 2018 and 2019 there were improvements in attainment at National 5 level but falls in attainment at National 4 and Higher levels. Sciences saw an overall increase in entries and attainment was, on the whole, lower than last year. Modern languages saw a decrease in entries at these levels and while attainment improved at National 4 level, it fell at National 5 and Higher levels. There were

fewer entries in Computer Science and attainment also fell at National 4 and National 5 levels of study.

The Committee may wish to explore with the panel:

- **Whether there are any subjects where the level of entries or attainment is either a concern or indicates policy successes.**

- **The importance of the changing roll to the number of entries and whether the SQA has undertaken any analysis of the apparent falling numbers of qualifications per pupil across Senior Phase over the past 4 years and any associated conclusions.**

- **What challenges there are designing courses which may be taken by pupils at different stages in Senior Phase.**

- **What might explain a generally falling trend in attainment over the past four years noted in National and Skills for Work qualifications and what, if any, policy responses should the SQA and others take to address this.**

- **Whether the SQA will publish 2019 data that covers only publicly funded schools in more detail to support better scrutiny of the performance of the publicly funded education system.**

Ned Sharratt
SPICe Research
6 September 2019

Recommendations of *Performance and Role of Key Education and Skills Bodies* 2017

22. The evidence the Committee has received from teachers should give the SQA serious cause for concern. The Committee considers that the distinction in feedback between the Committee's survey and the SQA commissioned survey is perhaps indicative of the current relationship with teachers. There would appear to be a divergence between what teachers will express to the SQA and what they will express to this Committee. The SQA is invited to review its approach to engaging with teachers to enable candid communication from those with criticisms to make. The SQA also needs to be able to demonstrate how these views impact on the SQA's processes in order to improve trust.

23. The Committee will monitor the performance of the SQA throughout this session of Parliament. The Committee expects to see evidence of speedy improvements in the design, delivery, supporting documentation, and marking of national qualifications.

24. The SQA's position on the design of the new Curriculum for Excellence qualifications appears to be that they were given a brief and a timescale that has been met and that many of the problems experienced have been caused by a disconnect between the principles of Curriculum for Excellence and how education is delivered in some schools, with some possibly preferring an —off-the-shelfǁ curriculum.

25. The Committee has agreed to undertake more work on the accountability for the delivery of Curriculum for Excellence and in particular the senior phase. However, even if the SQA's position were hypothetically to be accepted, the Committee would still find it difficult to understand how the SQA has fulfilled its role to its core customers, the learners of Scotland, having produced qualifications that have led to an onerous workload, a breakdown in trust and threats of industrial action by teachers.

26. SQA is a member of the Curriculum for Excellence management Board and has a critical role to play in delivery and implementation of Curriculum for Excellence. SQA should be proactive at challenging and contributing constructively to the broader development of Curriculum for Excellence.

27. Accountability for the overall design brief of Curriculum for Excellence qualifications is unclear but the responsibility for communicating those changes lies squarely with the SQA. The delivery of the new qualifications was not a surprise and the SQA should have been prepared and had the capacity to communicate effectively from the beginning. The Committee accepts that the structure of Scottish Education is diffuse, however good planning and the ability to produce documents that are easy to use by the intended audience are capacities the Committee expects of every public body.

28. The SQA's core business is producing and marking exams. Errors in these areas are unacceptable. The Committee is concerned that Dr Brown suggests that errors occur because of excessive workload and has presented the solution as being more work on quality assurance. The Committee therefore urges the SQA to consider how to re-prioritise resources to address such issues and fulfil its core functions.

29. The Committee asks that the SQA ensures that it improves its data collection from chief invigilators so that it is in a position to categorically state that all of the people it appoints receive the living wage. Alternatively, the SQA should review standard terms and

conditions for employment of invigilators to create a system where invigilators receive a minimum wage as standard. The Committee requests an update from the SQA on this before the exam diet this May.

30. The SQA needs to develop updated Curriculum for Excellence qualifications and, importantly, communicate any changes to the teaching profession in the short timeframe available. This will require the SQA to improve in several areas while under considerable time pressure. The Committee urges the SQA, local authorities, Education Scotland and teaching representative bodies to have a clear focus on how teachers will be given the time and resource to understand what is expected from teachers and learners. The Committee would welcome regular updates on this work.

31. The Committee is aware that the SQA has a long term aim to make the SQA self-financing. It does not appear that this aim is likely to occur in the near future without significant costs being passed on to other parts of the public sector. The Committee seeks assurance and evidence from the SQA that its commercial work is not diluting its focus on its core business.

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) <u>Engagement with Teachers</u>

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.

<u>SQA response</u>

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) <u>Quality Improvements</u>

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

<u>SQA response</u>

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.

<u>Course documentation</u>

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 freestanding units at SCQF level 5, and will be externally quality assured by SQA.

<u>Setting and marking exams</u>

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.

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) <u>Self-financing Model</u>

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

<u>SQA response</u>

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

-ends-

Education and Skills Committee

24th Meeting, 2019 (Session 5), Wednesday, 11 September 2019

Scottish Qualifications Authority – role and performance

This paper has the submission from the Scottish Qualification Authority in Annexe A.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

ROLE & PERFORMANCE of SCOTTISH QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY

2019 NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS RESULTS

SUBMISSION FROM SCOTTISH QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY

1. Introduction

The Education and Skills Committee has asked the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) to discuss its role and performance, including reflections on the 2018-19 National Qualifications results. This brief paper provides some summary information in advance of the evidence session with SQA, to be held on 11 September 2019.

2. Scottish Qualifications Authority's role and performance

SQA is the national accreditation and awarding body in Scotland. It is an Executive Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB). The Education (Scotland) Act 1996 sets out its functions and the governance arrangements to oversee SQA's distinct accreditation, regulatory and awarding responsibilities. Our Board of Management is appointed by and accountable to Scottish Ministers.

SQA is proud to be at the heart of the education and skills system in Scotland, and is committed to working with partners to help learners realise their potential and achieve their ambitions.

We play a crucial role in ensuring that the skills, training, and education systems in Scotland are effective, and have a responsibility to uphold both the accessibility and the credibility of Scotland's qualifications system. In this way we support key public policy goals, such as widening participation, narrowing the attainment gap, and providing the people and businesses of Scotland with the skills that they need for the future.

SQA works with many sectors of Scottish society, from schools, colleges, employers, training providers, and universities, to industry, professional bodies, national bodies, teaching unions and government. We very much value these partnerships, working towards our shared goal of delivering a first-class education and training experience for our learners. Our Advisory Council is established under the Advisory Council (Establishment) (Scotland) Regulations 2002. Members are appointed by Scottish Ministers and represent our various stakeholders. The Council advises SQA on stakeholders' needs and views in relation to our qualifications and awards.

Our Corporate Plan sets out our strategic direction and how we will monitor our performance against our targets. The plan also outlines the context in which we operate. SQA has many strengths and we use these to deliver our objectives and meet our responsibilities in public service delivery in Scotland.

Our Annual Report and Accounts provides a review of the organisation as a whole, and of its activities during each financial year. SQA is supported mainly by the entry fees for its qualifications, supplemented by Scottish Government grant funding. We also work on contract and international projects that support the Scottish Government's international agenda and generates additional income.

Education is a positive force for change on wider society, as well as the lives and economic mobility of learners. SQA has a long history of working across the world, which has many benefits, such as supporting the development of qualifications and qualifications frameworks in emerging nations, reinforcing the value of Scottish education in the global arena, encouraging shared learning, and promoting Scottish values.

All of the associated costs of our international work are paid for by the revenue the work generates, with the remainder being re-invested into Scotland's education and skills system, and reducing our dependency on the public purse.

We are committed to providing an excellent service to our customers, and through our Customer Charter, we listen to and act on their feedback. We also welcome comments from our partners and stakeholders.

One of the Education and Skills Committee's recommendations for SQA in its 2017 report on the Performance and Role of Key Education and Skills Bodies, was 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". We have done much since then to improve our engagement and relationship with teachers and lecturers.

Examples of improvements include recruiting experienced teachers as Subject Implementation Managers, to work with schools and colleges on their understanding of each National Qualification subject; streamlining our communications into one weekly newsletter; and introducing a 'You said/we did' report, following the 2018 SQA Co-ordinator school conferences – providing transparency of feedback collated at the events as well as information on SQA's actions in response, which ranged from providing inductions for new SQA Co-ordinators, to making reports and resources more accessible.

We continue to carry out regular user testing with teachers and lecturers to ensure our website is designed to help users navigate their documents and information. Subject pages on our website are updated as a result of the feedback we receive. Course documentation has been streamlined to coincide with the changes to assessment at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher. Subject documents are now shorter – some by 60% – and information is easier to access.

We regularly seek feedback from our customers on what they think of our products and services, and we use the insight to help us make improvements. Some recent examples are:

- The average overall satisfaction score from our 2019 independently-run customer survey was 8.17 out of a possible 10, our highest yet, and an increase from 8.01 in the previous survey in 2017.
- The reasons most commonly given by respondents who gave a positive score were the quality of service provided by SQA and, thereafter, the quality of SQA's qualifications, the helpfulness and supportiveness of SQA, and SQA being a well-recognised awarding body.
- A recent survey of website users found that, of the 634 customers who responded, 89% rated their experience as positive, with more than 73% describing it as good, very good or outstanding.
- A recent survey of teachers, lecturers, SQA Co-ordinators and senior managers found that 94% of respondents said they were fairly or very confident in their understanding of assessment standards.
- An evaluation of a series of Understanding Standards events undertaken by SQA between September 2018 and March 2019, found that 96% of teachers and lecturers who

- participated in the evaluation, said that the events were fairly or very effective in developing their understanding of national standards.
- An evaluation of a series of Understanding Standards webinars held by SQA between April 2018 and March 2019, found that 88% of teachers and lecturers who participated in the evaluation said they were satisfied with the webinar they participated in, and 88% said that the webinar content was good.

SQA's Strategic Goals set out our aims and aspirations as an organisation, and align to our values – trusted, enabling and progressive. We aim to make a vital contribution to the wellbeing, progress, and development of Scottish society as a whole, and of the individuals who form part of it. These objectives cover all aspects of our work, and align with and support the Scottish Government's National Performance Framework. They are:

- Develop and deliver high-quality qualifications, products and services for the benefit of a broad range of learners and of Scotland.
- Provide leadership and expertise in a range of areas including assessment, qualification development and quality enhancement.
- Support the Scottish Government's internationalisation agenda to maximise the benefits of international engagement and co-operation.
- Ensure communication and engagement between SQA and our learners, customers and stakeholders is appropriate, clear and timely and tailored to their needs.
- Deliver high-quality, continually improving, efficient and responsive services to our customers.
- Ensure our culture and values support the engagement and wellbeing of our staff and foster their commitment to the success of SQA.
- Continue to develop SQA as a leading public body and key player in the skills, training and education landscape.
- Continue to pursue a longer-term business model that would enable SQA to reduce its dependency on the public purse, and invest in and improve the education and skills system.
- Independently accredit, quality assure and regulate approved awarding bodies and qualifications thereby safeguarding the interests of learners, employers, parents, funding bodies, providers and the Scottish Government.

Progress towards these goals is carefully monitored. SQA uses a range of performance indicators to monitor performance throughout the year. Our Performance Committee supports the Board of Management in monitoring progress towards, and successful delivery of, our corporate objectives; to monitor performance of all SQA's activities; to monitor the achievement of best value in the public services; and to review and support the continued development of key performance indicators in alignment with the Scottish Government's National Performance Framework.

We aspire to be a leading public body, by creating positive changes and making valuable contributions that support our staff, the people we support, our local communities, and the environment. We do this through a variety of activities, including volunteering, fundraising, our commitment to the Fair Work Framework, and reducing our carbon emissions.

We aim to continually improve in all our activities. We do this by listening to the people and organisations who use and are affected by our products and services. We are therefore open to feedback, and are very willing to respond to it.

SQA Awarding
There are SQA qualifications for everyone:

- students in schools and colleges
- trainees and apprentices
- people who already have qualifications, and those who don't
- people who are in employment, and those who aren't
- those seeking academic or vocational qualifications

More than ever, qualifications are an essential part of learners' successful journey from education and training into further study and employment, as well as success in life, benefitting the whole of Scottish society.

SQA also plays an important role in supporting Foundation Apprenticeships and the wider Developing the Young Workforce policy, and our qualifications form part of the majority of Scotland's Modern Apprenticeships.

A more detailed overview of SQA's range of qualifications can be found in our Guide to Scottish Qualifications.

To maintain the quality, flexibility, and relevance of our qualifications, we are welcoming and responsive to feedback from all parts of the skills, training and education system, and we research the impact and effectiveness of our qualifications. We also welcome initiatives from businesses, professional bodies, and economic sectors which wish to establish new qualifications to support their activities; for example, to certificate and extend the existing skills of their workforce and sector.

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

SQA Accreditation performs a critical role within the Standards and Framework programme, where its remit is to quality assure National Occupational Standards (NOS), ensuring their fitness for purpose for inclusion in Scottish Vocational Qualifications.

The accreditation function is a discrete and autonomous part of SQA, and is accountable to the Accreditation Committee and then to Scottish Government. The Accreditation Committee is a statutory committee having been established by the Education (Scotland) 1996 Act. SQA Accreditation has ring-fenced funding from the Scottish Government.

3. National Qualifications – 2019 Results
As the Committee will be aware, SQA publishes statistics on the attainment of qualifications in Scotland, including National Qualifications, and a wide range of vocational courses and awards, which are certificated annually in August. These statistics are available here.

The Chief Examining Officer's Report, published on 6 August, is provided at Appendix 1, and provides observations on the 2018-19 session.

We have started publishing the Course Reports for all National Qualification subjects delivered in the 2018-19 session. These reports, which will be available on each subject's webpage, provide

qualitative information on the performance of the assessment components of the course with a focus on areas that candidates performed well in and areas that candidates found demanding.

The reports also include detailed advice and guidance on preparing candidates for future assessment. Information on the grade boundaries set for each course is also provided. The reports are intended to be constructive and informative, and to promote better understanding of the standards required for course assessments.

The removal of units and unit assessment from Advanced Higher courses is now complete, and the courses are being delivered in schools and colleges. As per the published timescales, we have been publishing Advanced Higher coursework assessment tasks, specimen question papers and course support notes since the end of May. This schedule of publications will be complete at the end of September 2019.

A list of the support materials published so far is available here.

We are also providing regular updates on Twitter, Facebook and in our weekly newsletter – Centre News – to advise teachers and lecturers of when support materials have been published.

We are running a co-ordinated programme of support to help teachers and lecturers understand the requirements of the revised assessments. This includes webinars, events and published support materials, which we have tailored to meet the needs of each subject and to reflect the feedback we have received from teachers and lecturers. We are also hosting events for National Courses at other levels, which will focus on course assessment. Full details of our Understanding Standards programme can be found here.

4. Conclusion

We welcome the opportunity to discuss our role and performance, and the national statistics further with the Committee. We remain committed to providing qualifications and awards that enable learners to develop the skills that they need to thrive in the future, whichever path they choose to take.

Scottish Qualifications Authority

September 2019

Appendix 1: 2019 Chief Examining Officer's report

✕SQA

2019 National Qualifications and Awards Results

On 6 August 2019, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) published the '*Attainment Statistics Report (August)*' of the National Courses and Awards, taken by candidates in schools and colleges across the country.

The '*Attainment Statistics Report (August)*' contains attainment information across the National Courses (National 2 to National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher, and the Scottish Baccalaureate), together with Awards, Skills for Work courses, National Progression Awards, and National Certificates.

This report reflects SQA's observations from all the processes and procedures involved in the delivery of National Qualifications and Awards, and underlines our commitment to the maintenance of national standards over time. I would like to thank my predecessor, Dr Janet Brown, for leading the successful delivery of the 2018-19 session, and for her input into this report.

Revisions to assessment and introduction of non-unitised courses
In September 2016, a decision was made to remove units and unit assessments from National 5 to Advanced Higher courses on a phased basis. Changes to National 5 took place in the 2017-18 session, and to Higher courses in the 2018-19 session. Changes to Advanced Higher will take place in 2019-20. These changes are intended to have a positive impact on both candidate and teacher workload associated with assessment.

As was the case at National 5, changes were made to the assessment approach at Higher, taking account of the nature of the subject and the previous approach to assessment. Changes made included the addition of a new question paper or coursework or revisions to an existing question paper or coursework. In some subjects coursework components are now being externally assessed by SQA. The standard of the qualifications has not changed and course content is also unchanged. Full details of changes to each Higher course are available on the SQA website (Higher Assessment Changes).

In addition, Grade D has been extended for all Higher courses, from a notional 45–49% to a notional 40–49%. The extension of Grade D is intended to bring it in line with the range available at Grades B and C, and to recognise the achievement of a wider group of candidates at SCQF level 6.

Free standing units at SCQF level 6 remained available.

Experience from Session 2018-19
Schools and colleges have greater flexibility to deliver curriculum models best suited to their local circumstances and the needs of individual candidates. These models provide the opportunity for learners to study a different mix of awards and courses at the most appropriate time for them during their senior phase. This has likely contributed to the changes in entries for National

Courses, vocational qualifications and wider achievement awards, over time.

This year, there has been a change in the volume of entries to qualifications, including reductions in the numbers undertaking qualifications at SCQF levels 4, 6 and 7, and increases in numbers undertaking qualifications at SCQF levels 2, 3 and 5.

A number of factors have an impact on the volume of entries. These include the curriculum model, the school roll, and a wider range of options and pathways being available to young people.

The entries and attainment for National 4 reported in the statistical tables include those awarded through the Recognising Positive Achievement (RPA) process. SQA treat National 4 attainment arising through course completion and through RPA attainment as being equivalent.

There has been an increase in National 4 course entries within schools and colleges (excluding entries arising through RPA) compared to those in 2018, by 751. National 4 awards achieved through RPA have decreased by 1,918. With the extension of Grade D in National 5 courses in 2017-18, there continues to be a higher number of candidates obtaining a Grade D result (19,104 in 2017, 34,926 in 2018 and 36,171 in 2019). These candidates are not eligible for the RPA National 4 course award.

It is important to note that 2018-19 is the last year that the RPA process is available. From the 2019-20 session, RPA will be removed. Candidates will only be certificated for the courses and any freestanding units that their school or college has entered and resulted them for, subject to quality assurance.

There has been an increase in the attainment of wider achievement and vocational qualifications at SCQF levels 2 to 6. SQA qualifications are also being taken as part of Foundation Apprenticeships in a range of subjects, including engineering, financial services, information technology, and social services.

Throughout the awarding process, we monitored the impact that the extension of question papers and changes to course assessment might have had on candidates. No significant impacts were identified. We will continue to monitor the impact of these changes.

Presentation patterns – National 5 courses and units at SCQF level 5
Scottish Government guidance to local authorities continues to advise that the dual presentation of candidates for both National 5 courses and free standing units at SCQF level 5 should only be used in exceptional circumstances.

In the 2017-18 session we received a significant number of late unit entries at SCQF level 5, which had a major impact on our ability to undertake quality assurance. Following this, we undertook a post certification review of a selection of the late entries to gain an understanding of the robustness of the evidence used for the assessment of these units.

As a result of the review findings, we have put in place a number of changes to enhance the way we quality assure National Qualifications. The changes are designed to support the continued implementation of the revisions to assessment in National Courses – ensuring standards are maintained across all our qualifications, including freestanding units at SCQF levels 5 and 6, and course units at all other SCQF levels.

The changes included a review of our information about submitting unit entries and results, including completing units and providing complete evidence for quality assurance. We provided additional understanding standards information for some subjects. We also introduced an additional deadline date (28 February 2019) for final changes to entries for freestanding units at SCQF levels 5 and 6.

These changes have allowed us to carry out sufficient levels of quality assurance of freestanding unit entries and results, and at a more appropriate stage and time in the assessment process, before August certification. Schools and colleges have, on the whole, adhered to the new guidelines, and as a result we have not received a significant number of late entries for freestanding units at SCQF level 5.

We will continue to review our approach to quality assurance to ensure the ongoing credibility of certification.

Assessments
Overall, the assessments have performed to standard.

National 5 and Higher courses have been assessed through a mix of externally assessed coursework, question papers, and internally assessed course assessments, as appropriate to each subject. Advanced Highers were assessed through units and externally and internally assessed course assessments.

In order to allow candidates to demonstrate breadth, depth and application of skills and knowledge, the course assessment for the majority of National Courses include both final exams and coursework. Candidates tend to perform slightly better in coursework than in their final exams as this work enables them some personalisation and choice in what topic they focus on, and the work is carried out through the school year. The final course grade is a combination of both coursework and exam, which gives a true picture of candidates' ability to demonstrate their skills, knowledge and understanding.

Coursework is carried out within schools and colleges, normally under controlled conditions. The conditions of assessment are clearly set out in the course specification documents, and compliance with these is necessary to ensure the reliability of assessment decisions across the country. In the revised National 5 course documents for session 2017-18 and for Higher in 2018-19, SQA provided further clarity upon the conditions of assessment for coursework that must be applied.

Through the 2018-19 session, we recognise that there have been improvements in this area. We continue to analyse coursework and exam performance, and work with schools and colleges where there is a variation which is markedly different from the national pattern. This is to ensure equity and fairness across all candidates and all schools and colleges.

As a result of the changes to the assessment of Higher courses, some coursework components are now being externally assessed by SQA, having previously been assessed in schools and colleges. This change has ensured that the national standards are applied consistently and fairly across all schools and colleges.

It is important that candidates are well prepared in the full range of course content, as the amount

of course content that is sampled in the question papers, for some subjects, has increased due to the removal of units. Any gaps in knowledge and understanding will have an impact on individual attainment.

Ensuring fairness of assessment is fundamental to SQA's purpose and is the cornerstone of the qualifications system on which learners depend. Our approach includes preventing and addressing any malpractice in the design and delivery of SQA qualifications and assessments. We also follow up with centres where malpractice is found to support them and ensure that they are clear about the national conditions of assessment.

We communicate our *Malpractice: Information for Centres* guidance document widely with centres. We know that the vast majority of teachers follow the published guidance, to ensure that all students are given the same opportunities to succeed, but unfortunately malpractice does occasionally happen. When we recognise that it has happened, it is necessary to raise awareness of the processes in place to address it.

Internal assessment is still the most appropriate approach for many qualifications and for the learners that undertake them and they have high credibility in further and higher education and in the work environment. However, it is important that a robust national quality assurance approach is applied.

Attainment
Some variation of attainment is to be expected between subjects and over time.

In 2019, there has been an increase in attainment at National 5 (78.2%, an increase of 0.7 percentage points compared to 2018), and a decrease in attainment at Higher (74.8%, a decrease of 2.0 percentage points compared to 2018) and Advanced Higher (79.4%, a decrease of 1.1 percentage points compared to 2018).

During the course of the marking of each subject, feedback on the performance of candidates is collated and each year SQA publishes a course report on its website. These course reports provides commentary from the subject's principal assessor on how the candidates have performed in the assessments, what worked appropriately, and areas in which future candidates could improve. This allows teachers and lecturers to reflect on the approaches being taken in delivering the courses (see example of the 2018 course report of National 5 English – Course Report 2018 National 5 English). SQA offers a range of support for schools and colleges around understanding standards, which are well received by teachers and lecturers.

Final remarks
In 2018-19, there has been an increase in the numbers completing qualifications at SCQF levels 2, 3 and 5, and a decrease at SCQF levels 4, 6 and 7.

Vocational qualifications – Awards, Skills for Work courses, National Progression Awards and National Certificates – develop and provide evidence of specific skills that will help learners in the world of work and everyday life.

Examples which have shown an increase include Cyber Security, Social Services: Children and Young People, Make-up Skills, Digital Media, Scottish Studies, and Mental Health and Wellbeing.

The new assessment approach for National 5 and Higher courses has worked well, and continues to ensure that the credibility and standards of Scotland's qualifications remain high.

High quality learning and teaching remains a fundamental component for the successful delivery of qualifications, to ensure candidates are well prepared across all aspects of every course they undertake.

SQA will continue to work with teachers and lecturers, schools and colleges, to support them in the delivery of our qualifications for the benefit of young people across Scotland. We will identify any additions to our programme of continuous professional development for teachers and lecturers.

I hope this is a helpful summary of SQA's observations of the 2018-19 session, which will be of benefit to everyone involved in Scotland's education system.

Fiona Robertson

Scotland's Chief Examining Officer