



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 11 September 2019

Session 5



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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Wednesday 11 September 2019

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EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

24th Meeting 2019, Session 5

CONVENER

*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
*Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
*Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab)
*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)
*Alison Harris (Central Scotland) (Con)
*Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
*Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
*Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
*Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
*Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

John McMorris (Scottish Qualifications Authority)
Robert Quinn (Scottish Qualifications Authority)
Fiona Robertson (Scottish Qualifications Authority)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Roz Thomson

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 11 September 2019

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Interests

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good morning and welcome to the 24th meeting of the Education and Skills Committee in 2019. I remind everyone present to turn their mobile phones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

Under agenda item 1, I invite declarations of interests from our new committee members. I thank Johann Lamont and Oliver Mundell, who have now left the committee, for their contributions to the committee's work over the past few years. Johann Lamont has been replaced by Mr Daniel Johnson; Oliver Mundell has been replaced by Ms Alison Harris; and Tavish Scott, whom I thanked last week, has been replaced by Ms Beatrice Wishart. I welcome Alison Harris, Beatrice Wishart and Daniel Johnson to the committee and invite them to declare any relevant interests.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I have no interests to declare.

Alison Harris (Central Scotland) (Con): I have no interests to declare.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I probably should declare that, up until this past Monday, I was a councillor at Shetland Islands Council, where I was a member of the education and families committee.

Deputy Convener

10:01

The Convener: Under agenda item 2, the committee will choose a deputy convener to replace Johann Lamont. The Parliament has agreed that only members of the Scottish Labour Party are eligible for nomination as deputy convener of the committee. I invite members of that party to nominate one of their number for the post.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): I nominate Daniel Johnson.

The Convener: Thank you. Does the committee agree to accept the nomination of Daniel Johnson as deputy convener?

Members indicated agreement.

Daniel Johnson was chosen as deputy convener.

The Convener: I congratulate our new deputy convener on his appointment.

Decision on Taking Business in Private

10:01

The Convener: Agenda item 3 is a decision on taking agenda items 5 and 6 in private. Are members content to take those items in private?

Members indicated agreement.

Scottish Qualifications Authority (Performance and role)

10:02

The Convener: Agenda item 4 is an evidence session with the Scottish Qualifications Authority on its performance and role. I welcome to the committee, for the first time since her appointment to the post, Fiona Robertson, the SQA's chief executive and Scotland's chief examining officer. I also welcome John McMorris, the SQA's director of business development; and Robert Quinn, the SQA's head of English, languages and business qualifications. I invite Fiona Robertson to make a few brief opening remarks.

Fiona Robertson (Scottish Qualifications Authority): Thank you very much, convener, and good morning. I thank the committee for the opportunity to discuss the SQA's role and performance and the 2019 SQA national qualifications results. We have submitted a paper in advance to inform the discussion.

It was a great privilege to have been appointed to the role of chief executive of the SQA and Scotland's chief examining officer at the end of July this year. As members know, the SQA is the national accreditation and awarding body in Scotland. The Education (Scotland) Act 1996 sets out the SQA's functions and the governance arrangements that oversee the SQA's regulatory and awarding responsibilities.

The SQA plays a key role in the education and skills system in Scotland and is committed to working with and across the system to help learners realise their potential and achieve their ambitions. On SQA results day this year, which came early in my tenure as chief executive, I was very conscious of the huge responsibility that the SQA has in relation to young people and their families across Scotland. We take that responsibility very seriously, ensuring that we deliver year on year for learners and assessing our performance against our nine strategic goals.

We have a distinct responsibility to uphold the reliability, accessibility and credibility of Scotland's qualifications system and maintain standards over time. We work closely with others right across the system—from schools, colleges, employers, training providers and universities to industry, professional bodies, national bodies, teaching unions and Government. We very much value those partnerships, working towards our shared goal of delivering a first-class education and training experience for our learners.

On 6 August, 133,000 learners across Scotland received their results across a wide range of

qualifications, from national 2 to advanced higher, awards for skills for work courses, national progression awards and national certificates. The results represent the culmination of learning by Scotland's young people, supported by educators, parents and carers. Those young people are to be congratulated on their achievements.

Some variation of attainment is to be expected between subjects and over time, and in 2019 there was an increase in the attainment rate at national 5 and a decrease in the attainment rate at higher and advanced higher.

High-quality learning and teaching remain a fundamental component of the successful delivery of qualifications to ensure that candidates are well prepared across all aspects of every course that they undertake. The SQA will continue to work with teachers and lecturers and with 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.

It is worth highlighting that we have started publishing the course reports for all national qualification subjects that were delivered in the 2018-19 session. Those 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 that were 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.

We also run a co-ordinated programme of support to help teachers and lecturers understand the requirements of the revised assessments at advanced higher.

I acknowledge that, in the past, the committee has criticised the SQA for its engagement with teachers and lecturers. Our submission provides some detail on how we have sought to respond to the committee's recommendations—in particular, around ensuring that our engagement and communication are effective and respond to the needs of teachers, parents and learners.

Of course, we need to keep our engagement under close review, particularly as we implement further changes. I am heartened by recent work and positive survey results, but there is always more that we can do to ensure that our communications and engagement are as effective as possible. As the new chief executive, I want to

ensure that the SQA is seen as a listening and open organisation.

I am proud to lead an organisation of dedicated and committed professionals who have led and delivered a very significant programme of reform of our qualifications system in recent years. We are committed to ensuring that we continue to deliver and work collaboratively with the system for the benefit of learners.

Thank you. I will try to answer all your questions.

The Convener: Thank you. I think there will be quite a few questions this morning. Mr Gray is first.

Iain Gray: Good morning, panel. In the past, the committee has expressed some concerns about the balance that is struck between the SQA's responsibilities to the exam system in Scotland and its international work. Ms Robertson, I would think that, as the new chief executive, you would be looking at that balance. What view have you come to?

Fiona Robertson: By far our greatest focus is on the work that we do in Scotland. The work that we do outside Scotland is focused largely on the vocational sector. We have some long-established international work. That does not dilute the work that we do in Scotland; it is quite separate. My colleague John McMorris can say a little bit more about the detail of that.

Our international work brings us some income, thereby reducing our reliance on the public purse, but there is a broader point about the role of education as a force for good internationally. We have been working with a number of countries over a number of years to promote Scottish education and to encourage knowledge transfer, which aligns with the Scottish Government's international framework. That is very much part of our work, but, as far as our function is concerned, the focus is and continues to be on Scotland.

Iain Gray: You mentioned income. One of the organisation's strategic goals is to raise income to reduce your dependence on the public purse. How much income does your international work achieve?

Fiona Robertson: Our international work brought in about £2.4 million in the last financial year, 2018-19.

Iain Gray: How does that compare to your turnover?

Fiona Robertson: Our turnover is around £90 million, so it is a small amount. There has been some variability over the past few years, as new contracts have come in and others have concluded, but it has been a small proportion of the total over time.

Iain Gray: In the press recently, there has been some criticism of the travel and accommodation involved in the international work—business-class flights, luxury hotels and all of that. Do you intend to change that?

Fiona Robertson: We employ a number of people who are focused on our international work. As part of that international work, they undertake overseas travel—that is part of their job. Individuals have worked within our existing international travel and subsistence guidance. A planned review of that guidance is going on at the moment, but it is important to highlight that individuals have worked within the existing guidance. All budgets and spending have been approved in the normal way—the way that you would expect a public body to operate—and expenditure has been audited in the normal way.

Iain Gray: Your description makes it sound as if those involved in international travel are a separate part of the organisation that works on international contracts, but that is not true. A lot of the examples that have been carried in the press recently have involved members of the SQA's senior management, who clearly do not have a particular responsibility for international contracts—their responsibility is across the whole organisation. It is not really true, is it?

Fiona Robertson: It is true. The income that we—

Iain Gray: Sorry—you said that staff working on the international contracts do that travel, but it has been senior management staff who have been involved in some of those examples, has it not?

Fiona Robertson: Some senior management have undertaken some travel as part of the work that the SQA does and continues to do, but the income that we generate pays for the work that we do under the SQA's international function. I guess that you what you are alluding to is that, as part of the work that we are able to do overseas, we are building on the expertise that we have and the work that we are doing elsewhere. That is true—absolutely—and there will be some senior management time that is devoted to our international work. However, my point remains: the work that we do internationally pays for itself and brings some additional money into the SQA, which offsets our reliance on the public purse.

Iain Gray: I appreciate that, but is it not the case that if the travel and accommodation that we are talking about were more economical, the profit on the international work would be greater, so the return to the public purse, or the reduction in your dependence on it, would be greater?

Fiona Robertson: You are right that the costs attached to our international travel are relevant to the net income that comes in, in terms of offsetting

our grant in aid. We have guidance that applies, and budgets are approved in the normal way. Every public body has guidance relating to both domestic and international travel, and so does the SQA. That guidance is currently under review and we will consider any changes to it in the normal way. However, as things stand, international travel has been undertaken within guidelines. That is the advice that I have had from the previous accountable officer and my colleagues.

Iain Gray: Are the guidelines under review internally in the SQA?

Fiona Robertson: Yes—it is a planned review.

Iain Gray: Do you expect the guidance to change?

Fiona Robertson: The guidance may change. It is subject to review and all parts of the guidance will be considered as part of that review. It would be wrong for me to draw any conclusions about the outcome of the review. As part of the review, we will be benchmarking our existing guidance against that used by other organisations, including the Scottish Parliament and other public bodies. In the meantime, for the purposes of international subsistence allowances, we work within Foreign and Commonwealth Office guidelines.

10:15

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Has that review started and what is the timescale for it? When are you expecting it to finish?

Fiona Robertson: The review has started and I expect it to be concluded by the end of October and implemented by the middle of November.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I put on the record that I had a meeting with Mr McMorris on Friday that was relevant to the issues that we are going to discuss this morning. It was useful and I am grateful for it.

Earlier this year, the SQA was asked under freedom of information law to provide details on the travel and accommodation expenditure that Mr Gray has mentioned. That expenditure in and of itself raised eyebrows but, as was covered in this weekend's *Sunday Mail*, the information that was provided was not complete. It did not include spending that had been incurred by senior managers on corporate credit cards. The journalist who requested that information, Gordon Blackstock, had to subsequently request the credit card spending under FOI again, and it was released only after an appeal, after he had narrowed the scope because the SQA argued that his initial request would have incurred too much expense.

I understand why some travel and accommodation costs are going to go on to corporate credit cards—for example, if a hotel has a policy that guests pay on departure. I understand that, but why was that information not released when it was first requested under freedom of information law? Why were you not aware that travel and accommodation had been paid for on your corporate credit cards?

Fiona Robertson: I will start and then turn to my colleague John McMorris to provide a bit more detail.

My understanding is there was an FOI request about travel and subsistence back in March or April, which predates my tenure in the organisation. That travel and subsistence information was taken off the travel booking system in the organisation, which relates to individuals. That information was provided in good faith in response to the request. A subsequent FOI request was raised in late June or early July, asking for credit card information. It is fair to say that we then realised that that information was not exactly the same as the information that had been provided through the travel booking service. There are a number of reasons for that, which we provided in full to the journalist concerned.

There are a couple of things to highlight. All the budgets and credit card spend are approved, as members would expect given our responsibilities as a public body, and are subject to audit in the normal way, but the management information system did not allow us to provide the complete information, and the booking system information was provided initially. I do not know whether John McMorris wants to add any further information for clarity.

John McMorris (Scottish Qualifications Authority): As I mentioned last week, all the flights have been booked through the procurement framework. There were some instances of booking hotels where the procurement framework did not suit, so staff, within policy, were allowed to book directly on a credit card, and that was fully trackable through our accounts ledger. It is not that we were trying to hide anything; it is just that the information was missing from the response to the original request, as Fiona Robertson said.

Ross Greer: What changes are you making in your process now to ensure that you are as transparent and open as is expected of a public body? This information was requested under freedom of information law and it was not provided in full. Some of the expenditure was going on credit cards and was simply not being tracked because it was not part of the booking system. I accept what you say about it being audited in the normal way, but information was requested on your international travel and accommodation that

was not provided in full. You have subsequently realised that and realised that it was because expenditure was going through credit cards and not the booking system. What changes are you making in your systems to ensure that that does not happen again and that you live up to the transparency expectations?

Fiona Robertson: The issue around transparency was in relation to individual spend and the way in which that is recorded in the management information system. As I said, we are undertaking a review of our travel and subsistence arrangements. I make no statement about whether the guidance will change, but we will consider it in the context of other public bodies. Our overall average spend overseas per night is £137, which is well within FCO limits across many countries.

Ross Greer: Forgive me, Ms Robertson. In this instance I am not asking about whether the travel and accommodation that was incurred was acceptable. That is a separate debate that we need to have. The point here is about accountability and the fact that you did not provide that information when it was requested under FOI law. How are you going to change your process to ensure that you do so in the future?

Fiona Robertson: The information that proved difficult to provide under the FOI request related to individual spend, and we are looking to see whether our management information system can ensure that that individual spend is provided. As I say, individual spend is approved in the normal way and is subject to audit requirements in the normal way, and total spend information is available. I understand the point about individual spend not being readily available. I consider that, in the context of our normal annual accounting and audit requirements, we are transparent, but we are happy to look at this for the reasons that you have highlighted.

Ross Greer: That would be helpful and it would be helpful for the committee to have a written explanation from you about how in the review that you are doing you are going to consider the questions that have been raised here about accountability.

Fiona Robertson: I am happy to provide that.

Ross Greer: The SQA operates commercially in a number of countries that have indisputably poor human rights records. Can you briefly confirm what checks and impact assessments you conduct before signing a contract in any of those various regimes?

Fiona Robertson: I will make a couple of initial points and then hand over to John McMorris, who will be able to talk about that in more detail.

When we are approving centres anywhere in the world, they go through the same process and procedures that we would expect in Scotland. That is very important. Any requirements that we have of a centre in Scotland we would expect more broadly. We also take into consideration any FCO guidelines relating to international trade across different jurisdictions. John McMorris will be able to take you through those processes in a little bit more detail.

John McMorris: We work within the Scottish Government policy on protecting human rights internationally and, as part of that, our international engagement is seen as an opportunity, through educational exchange, to share our experience and spread the promotion and respect of human rights values. A lot of the human rights considerations are embedded in our systems. As Fiona Robertson said, when we operate any centre anywhere in the world, good guidance from the United Nations for businesses operating in multiple jurisdictions is to ensure that we spread our human rights values across all our operations equally. That is something that we align with absolutely. Anytime that a centre comes forward to become an approved SQA centre, we have specific criteria that we look for, such as equal opportunities policies. We look for and insist on documented procedures to ensure that candidates have equal access to assessment and that no individual can be discriminated against for any protected characteristics.

In that way our policies absolutely line up to the expectations of the United Nations and our international human rights frameworks in Scotland. There is on-going monitoring of centres as part of our quality assurance and verification processes. We also build into any new centre that is approved a centre operating agreement, which reflects the latest in legislation. We have amended that over the years and do so frequently as legislation changes, incorporating things such as measures on modern slavery, the Equality Act 2010 and any good best practice that we expect of our centres in Scotland.

Ross Greer: It is useful to hear you bring up human rights in that level of detail. In the summer of 2017, it was announced that the SQA would partner with TeTec to provide information technology training for employees of the Saudi Arabian regime, including its defence ministry. That was two years after the Saudi Arabian bombing campaign of Yemen began. That is a campaign that has killed thousands of children and has left millions more to face starvation. Can you explain to the committee what checks and assessments you made before delivering training to the Saudi regime and its defence ministry?

John McMorris: I was involved in the early conversations in the specific example of TeTec. What we offer with TeTec is a range of entry-level IT qualifications, broadly equivalent to Scottish credit and qualifications framework level 2. The initial aims of those courses were to increase female participation in the labour market and to help with youth employment. We took the view that spreading female participation in the labour market is a positive thing, which fitted with what I mentioned earlier about the human rights framework to promote equal opportunity. We felt at that time that that was a positive thing.

Ross Greer: Just to confirm, it is a contract that you are providing to train employees of the Saudi Arabian Government.

John McMorris: It is an SQA centre. TeTec became an SQA centre. It is a centre of many awarding bodies in the United Kingdom and its customer base is various ministries and private organisations, for which it tries to teach entry-level skills.

Ross Greer: It is training that is provided to employees of the Saudi Arabian Government. On 9 August last year, Saudi warplanes bombed a school bus in Yemen, killing 42 boys from the ages of six to 11 and 11 adults. That was a war crime. Do you know whether the Scottish Qualifications Authority trained anyone involved in the department of the Saudi Arabian regime that was responsible for that war crime?

John McMorris: To date there have been no certifications from that particular programme. There have been registrations, two thirds of which have been female, but our course assurance processes are still reviewing the assessment criteria of the students. No one has been certificated as of today.

Ross Greer: My understanding is that around 44,000 employees of the Saudi Government are going through this training. In October 2016, before you signed that contract, the Saudi regime bombed a funeral in Sana'a and killed 155 people. The regime struck it once, waited a few minutes for rescuers to arrive and then bombed it again to kill as many people as it could—civilians, not a military target. Again, that was a war crime. It was committed before you entered into a contract with the Saudi Arabian Government. At any point since you entered into that contract have you re-evaluated your relationship with it?

John McMorris: TeTec is a private organisation in Saudi and we keep all our centres—

Ross Greer: It delivers training to the Saudi Arabian Government. The SQA qualification is being delivered to employees of the Saudi Government. Have you done any assessment of what those employees are doing?

John McMorris: No.

Ross Greer: Why not?

John McMorris: As I said, the candidate entries are very low and we have not as yet certificated any candidates, so the programme is going through a quality assurance process at the moment.

Ross Greer: You have been doing this for years. You started doing it after the Saudi regime started committing war crimes. You are doing it for the Saudi ministry of defence. You are training its employees. It is killing children. You are an education authority of the Scottish Government. Why have you not checked that?

John McMorris: For all the work that we do internationally we always seek the latest advice from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office as part of our assessment. We are committed to improving outcomes for learners. As I said, the aim of the project with the private organisation TeTec is to help female participation in the labour market.

Ross Greer: Female participation in the Saudi ministry of defence, which is committing war crimes. I do not consider it an adequate answer that you are focused on the outcome for the learner. You are providing training for employees of a Government. That means that there is a line of responsibility from that Government's actions to you, and you are saying that you have not checked what those employees are doing with the training that you provide. Why not?

John McMorris: As I said, these are very low-level entry qualifications to help encourage people who have been unemployed and females to participate in the labour market. Under the human rights framework from the Scottish Government, if there are human rights concerns, that does not necessarily mean that we would not engage in that particular country. It is only through positive engagement that we can expect to encourage change.

Ross Greer: Other Scottish Government departments have reviewed their relationship with the Saudis. After the murder of the journalist Mr Khashoggi, Scottish Development International reviewed its relationship and decided not to go ahead with the trade envoy that it had been planning. Other Scottish Government departments are reviewing their relationship with the Saudi regime. I consider it completely inadequate that the SQA is not. Given that clearly that is something that you have not planned to do up until now, I would expect a written explanation to be provided to the committee imminently on what you intend to do about that. It does not appear that you conduct anything like the appropriate human rights checks before entering into or during any of your

international contract work, and that is not acceptable for a Scottish public body.

10:30

Fiona Robertson: We would be happy to provide further information. It is important to highlight that the processes and procedures that we take forward are very much in line with other public bodies and we do as much due diligence as possible, but we are happy to provide further information. As John McMorris has said, this is a private provider and there are constraints as to how much we can do to provide further oversight, but I am happy to provide more information to the committee.

The Convener: That would be very welcome.

Daniel Johnson: I want to ask Fiona Robertson about a point that Mr McMorris has just made. He said that, if a human rights concern about a country was raised in the SQA's checking, you would not necessarily disengage from activity in that country. Is that the SQA's position? It would seem strange to me if it was.

John McMorris: It is direct guidance from—

Daniel Johnson: I am sorry, Mr McMorris, but I was asking Ms Robertson.

Fiona Robertson: Cultural and educational exchange is a force for good. There is a point about the role of Scottish education in being that force for good. I absolutely acknowledge the committee's concerns about human rights issues, and of course we share those concerns. Through our work, we seek to promote the excellence of Scottish education overseas. Obviously, we keep our contracts under review and they will continue to be under review, but that is the position that we have taken. The SQA has been doing work overseas for 30 years and that work is supported by the strategic goals that we have agreed with the Scottish Government. We feel that the international work is broadly aligned with the international framework that the Scottish Government has developed. We are happy to provide further information on that work, if that would be helpful to the committee.

The Convener: The next questions will be from Liz Smith.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Will you put on record for the committee what the difference is between marker appointments and markers?

Fiona Robertson: Robert Quinn will be able to go into greater detail than I can, but the distinction is that a number of individual markers may be responsible for more than one qualification. For the sake of argument, if we have a marker for

English at higher and advanced higher, that would count as two appointments.

Liz Smith: How many of your markers are doing two different qualifications?

Fiona Robertson: We have about 7,500 markers and just over 12,000 appointments, so a significant number of our markers undertake more than one appointment. That can be on a variety of qualifications and external assessment activity. Robert Quinn might want to say more about that.

Robert Quinn (Scottish Qualifications Authority): Another point is that the process can be extended over the examination cycle, so someone might mark a piece of course work in April or May and then mark an examination script later in the year.

Liz Smith: Has there been growth in the number of markers who participate in different exams?

Robert Quinn: Not particularly. It has always been a tradition that people sometimes take the opportunity to mark at different levels and different papers, if the examination timetable allows that.

Liz Smith: In June, Jacqui Faulds sent a letter to the Local Government and Communities Committee that said that there were 14,153 marker appointments. A letter that I received yesterday from Fiona Robertson in response to a parliamentary question said that the number of marker appointments is now 12,450. That is quite a reduction in the number of marker appointments over a period of a year. Are those figures correct?

Fiona Robertson: I am sure that they are correct. May I come back to you on that? There have been some changes to the management information system that oversees marker appointments. I responded to your parliamentary question in a letter to you dated yesterday about the numbers that you asked for. A run of data was not possible because of changes to the management information system that governs the process. I would be happy to get back to you on the detail of that.

Liz Smith: Can you tell me the number? Ms Faulds's letter says that there were 6,208 teacher markers. What was the figure for this year?

Fiona Robertson: I think that it is about 7,000. If I may, I will come back to you on the detail of that, because I want to be absolutely correct.

Liz Smith: In your response to my parliamentary question, you said that 794 marker appointments were withdrawn during the course of the year.

Fiona Robertson: Yes.

Liz Smith: So, that is not the number of individuals.

Fiona Robertson: No—it is not individuals.

Liz Smith: It is the marker appointments. Why were 794 appointments withdrawn this year after those people had applied to take part in marking?

Fiona Robertson: My understanding is that withdrawals can be for a number of reasons. It can be because teachers withdraw or because the appointment is withdrawn by the SQA. It can be a combination of factors. Robert Quinn might be able to say a bit more, but there are a number of reasons underneath that number.

Robert Quinn: Marking is a moving feast and teachers' time and availability are a moving feast. A lot of teachers who sign up for marking then re-evaluate that, and there is often change as we move towards the point at which we finalise the marking team. A number of markers withdraw as part of that process.

Our marking approach has changed quite a bit over the past 10 years. In the main, question papers are now marked online and on screen, and there is on-going feedback from markers during the marking process. That is intended to ensure that we catch any issues with marking early in the process. That is about quality assurance, as opposed to the old approach, which was more about quality control. If we discovered issues with marking at the end of the cycle, that would require a full re-mark of the scripts, which could be challenging.

There is more on-going interaction now. If a marker cannot get on standard, despite the support that we give them, ultimately, we sometimes have to withdraw the marker to ensure that we are fair to candidates and that the scripts are marked accurately.

There is a combination of issues: teachers withdraw or switch, and the system withdraws markers as we go through the process.

Liz Smith: I am interested in the reduction over 2018-19. In Jacqui Faulds's letter to the Local Government Committee, she goes on to say that ensuring that there are sufficient markers in place is "particularly challenging". You say that, in some instances, markers decide to withdraw, which can be for a variety of reasons, but you also say that the SQA might no longer want their services. If the situation is "challenging" because we do not have enough markers, I am concerned about that, and I am sure that parents would be concerned about it. What are the main reasons for the decline?

Robert Quinn: It is not fair to say that the SQA does not want their services. However, in exceptional cases, we cannot get a marker on standard during the on-going marking process.

Every marker is assigned a team leader, who has about eight markers and who works with them through the process. The team leader has online access to the scripts that they are marking.

Liz Smith: Do you have enough markers to be on standard?

Robert Quinn: Yes. We want to do more to work with markers who do not quite get on standard, which I think is what Jacqui Faulds was alluding to. We are considering approaches that we might take in future to retrain or support markers who have not met the requirements, so that we can use them again. That would avoid the situation in which, when markers are not on standard, we cannot use them again. Traditionally, if a marker was graded as what we called a C marker—we were not happy with their marking—we did not use them again. When resources are scarce, that is obviously an issue, so we need to look at ways of maximising the expertise in our marking pool.

Liz Smith: I am confused about this, Mr Quinn. It is my understanding from listening to Ms Robertson's predecessor, Janet Brown, that there has been an increase in the number of qualifications that young people are undertaking. Surely there should therefore be more marker appointments.

Robert Quinn: Yes.

Liz Smith: However, my understanding is that we have fewer, when I compare the letter that Ms Robertson sent me with the one that Jacqui Faulds sent to the Local Government and Communities Committee. You are telling me that we have enough, Mr Quinn. Something does not add up here.

Robert Quinn: We have enough markers, in the sense that we have successfully delivered the examination diet, but we recognise that we need to continue to do what we can to maximise our marking pool and to support the teachers who want to take up marking opportunities. In the qualifications that we brought in to support the curriculum for excellence, there was a greater focus on course work and requirements for candidates to undertake that work early in the session. There is a greater incidence of people marking course work and then marking question papers.

Liz Smith: To be absolutely clear, what were the reasons for the withdrawal of 794 of the 12,450 marker appointments for 2019? As I understand it, those are appointments of people who agreed to be markers in the diet, but it did not happen. What is the reason behind that?

Robert Quinn: It is difficult for me to say what the exact reasons are for a teacher withdrawing. In

the main, it can be anything to do with their time constraints or a change in circumstances and suchlike.

The Convener: Could you provide further statistics on that to the committee? That would be helpful.

Robert Quinn: We certainly know about the markers that we withdraw, but we do not know why markers who we did not withdraw decided not to pursue it.

Liz Smith: I suggest that we should know, because it is a critical issue. The SQA cannot function unless it has the right number of markers or marker appointments for the number of qualifications that young people are taking. There have been issues about marking procedures for specific subjects in the past few years. It would be helpful if we could get those details.

Fiona Robertson: We can provide some further information. Year on year, we will see turnover in markers, for a range of reasons, including retirement. There can be a range of issues in the marker cohort. As Robert Quinn said, it is an on-going activity to recruit and provide professional development and training for our markers. In the conversations that I have had with teachers over the years—I am sure that Robert Quinn would agree with this—many teachers see working with us as a positive continuous professional development opportunity, but it involves a time commitment and it is not for everyone. We are keen to ensure that we have the markers that we need, and that is an on-going activity during the course of the year.

Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP): I should probably make members aware that I was formerly an SQA marker for standard grades and highers. Picking up on Liz Smith's line of questioning and markers who have fallen away, I suppose that I would be one of them.

Liz Smith: Not last year.

Jenny Gilruth: No. Is there a baseline for the experience that you expect from markers? When I started marking, in 2010-11, markers had to have been teaching for three years. Is that still the experience that you expect?

Fiona Robertson: It is two years.

Robert Quinn: Markers need to have been teaching the qualification for two years.

Jenny Gilruth: Okay. I presume that some of the people who are falling away are retired teachers. If someone has retired, are they not allowed to mark after a certain number of years because they have been out of the classroom for too long?

Fiona Robertson: Yes.

Robert Quinn: Yes. Normally, if someone had not been teaching for two or three years, we would withdraw them, so there is a process whereby the marking team is refreshed on an on-going basis.

Jenny Gilruth: I would like to look a wee bit at changes to course specifications. When the committee met a group of teachers in Dunfermline—I think it was earlier this year, or it may have been last year—we had an informal conversation with some teachers in Fife about changes to course specifications throughout the year. One of the concerns that they flagged up was that changes had been communicated to them during the academic year. I think that some of them said that that had happened as late as November. It had impacted on what they were delivering if there were substantial changes to the course specification. Is that still happening?

10:45

Robert Quinn: No. We had to make changes as part of the revised national qualifications as a result of the removal of units and the changes to national qualifications, and our approach was that we published all the mandatory documents in April—the core documents and the specifications—to allow people to understand the standards. The course content, the aims and the skills and knowledge of the courses had not changed and were still relevant, but we published all the mandatory documents in April, and then between June and September we published the assessment support.

We prioritised the areas of greatest change. For example, if a new piece of coursework was added to a qualification, we prioritised the assessment support within that window for that piece of coursework and we deprioritised the areas where there was no change or little change, because the existing assessment support was still valid. We were working within the fairly challenging timelines that we were set in the context of the cabinet secretary's decision to remove units and the timeline that was agreed in order to do that. Our staff and the teachers that we work with did a great job in delivering that to time.

Moving forward—this is probably where Ms Gilruth's point is important—we would like to ensure that, when we have more control over our destiny in the context of timelines, we would like to ensure that, when we make substantive changes to a national course, we have all the documentation in place, including the assessment support, a full year before the first delivery. We have decided as a qualification development management team that we want to apply that.

For example, we are developing a new higher in the application of mathematics, which supports the

success story of the national 5 application of mathematics course given its uptake and the engagement with it, and that new national course will follow the revised guidelines. All the documentation will be in place a year before the first delivery, to allow teachers to have the appropriate professional learning and conversations that are associated with the delivery of the qualification.

Jenny Gilruth: On the point about the removal of outcome and assessment standards, given that that on-going assessment is not being monitored by the SQA—I would expect that it is monitored at the school level—have you noticed any changes in your presentation levels? Are they moving in the right direction? Are kids being presented for the wrong level of qualification because the outcome and assessment standards are not there any more?

Robert Quinn: I think that we are moving in the right direction in relation to appropriate presentation. A lot of effort has been made and there has been a lot of discussion about appropriate presentation, and in the main teachers are using formative approaches to judge the readiness of their candidates, as well as more formal approaches that they may take. There might be some areas where there is some concern over the number of no awards in a subject, but the statistics from the past couple of years' diet probably show an improving picture of appropriate presentation.

There are sometimes pressures on teachers in some subjects. For example, with some of the more specialised subjects, because they want the subject to be run in their school, they will run only the higher, whereas it might be better for the young people if they had been offered both the national 5 and the higher.

It is difficult to absolutely get a handle on that, but, from what I have observed in awarding meetings and suchlike, the level of appropriate presentation and the accuracy of teacher estimates are better.

Jenny Gilruth: The role of principal assessor is hugely important. Does the SQA require it to be held by somebody who is qualified as a subject specialist or can anyone do it?

Robert Quinn: The principal assessor must be qualified in the subject. They lead the examination team as someone who is a specialist in the subject area.

Jenny Gilruth: Must they be experienced in delivering the qualification?

Robert Quinn: Yes. They must have experience in delivering the qualification. They

must be a subject specialist, but they must also understand the delivery aspects.

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I want to ask you about the connection between the qualifications that you administer and what is taught in schools. Will you say a bit more about the SQA's role, and whether it is a changing role, in determining how—I nearly called them “the new qualifications”—the qualifications develop in future?

Fiona Robertson: There has been a period of significant change to our qualifications over a number of years. A lot of work has been done with the profession and with other organisations across the education system to develop the qualifications, and a lot of work has been done over a period of time in the context of the CFE management board and the implementation group to ensure that there is that alignment as part of the broader curriculum for excellence programme. We need to keep an eye on that as the qualifications evolve and as we undertake our regular quality assurance and on-going development process around them.

Over the past few years, we have seen significant changes with the introduction of the new qualifications and, more recently, the removal of unit assessments. Going forward, we need to keep an eye on the piece around the alignment, but we also have responsibilities to ensure that we maintain standards over time and that the qualifications remain on point in that respect. Robert, is there anything that you want to add?

Robert Quinn: On the SQA's offering to support the senior phase, we feel strongly—and I personally feel strongly—that we should be offering, celebrating and supporting a mixed economy of provision that includes not just the traditional national course provision but other provision that can celebrate and support the changing nature of the senior phase: things such as awards, skills for work and national progression awards.

We have 80 teachers at an event in Edinburgh today—I will be going to it after this meeting—to support our new Scottish studies and Scots language awards. That illustrates the changing nature of the senior phase. We are trying to develop and align our provision to support that.

Dr Allan: I have a question on something that has been characteristic of the evidence that we have taken from Education Scotland and others on subject choice, which has really turned into a discussion about the relationship between the broad general education and the senior phase. At the risk of oversimplifying things, I note that people have talked as if Education Scotland's sphere of influence is largely over the broad general education and the SQA's sphere of influence is

largely over the senior phase. I appreciate that that simplifies matters a bit, but do you recognise that there seems to be a perception that we have those two different spheres?

Fiona Robertson: I understand the point that you make. My experience is maybe a little different given the conversations that the SQA has been part of over a number of years with colleagues in Education Scotland and the Scottish Government and others about the development and implementation of the new qualifications. The SQA has distinct responsibilities for qualifications, but it also plays a part in broader conversations with our involvement in the curriculum assessment board, which is in effect the successor to the CFE management board, the Scottish Education Council and other for a. We have a joint responsibility to ensure that those conversations are taking place right across the three-to-18 curriculum.

Dr Allan: An example of what I am driving at is the debate about the notional hours for different courses. Without going into the debate about how many hours people should study for each course, do you recognise that there is a danger of a disconnect in the way that we talk about all these things? Does there need to be more co-operation between agencies if discussions about notional hours are going to be more than notional?

Fiona Robertson: I am certainly keen that there is co-operation between the different agencies in discussing those issues.

Robert Quinn: Our qualification managers manage a portfolio of qualifications within the SQA, and over the past few years we have been trying to actively engage more with our relevant colleagues in Education Scotland to tell the story of what we are observing, to get more intelligence on what is happening in schools and to try to tie the two together. That is about skills being developed in the broad general education that pupils can take into the senior phase, and it is about the overlap between the two.

There is a lot that we can provide to the education sector. What we observe and the stories that we can tell can help Education Scotland and others in relation to curriculum planning, teaching and learning support and suchlike.

Fiona Robertson: The course reports that we publish—a good number have already been published for the current session—provide a huge amount of intelligence and insight, given our observations on how qualifications have performed. As Robert Quinn said, that is supplemented by on-going conversations and collaboration across agencies about all of that. That informs the support that is provided to learning and teaching and, in particular, our

colleagues in Education Scotland, which is the improvement agency, for the work that they do. That includes the curriculum specialists that the agency now has in place to support that work.

Robert Quinn: There are now curriculum specialists within the regionalised process—within the collaboratives—so there is more support for teachers. We do not have just the teacher and then the SQA; there is support in the middle as well. Our primary responsibility is assessment support, but there is a washback from teaching and learning, and Education Scotland also needs to work with us in relation to that.

Dr Allan: You mentioned the regional improvement collaboratives. I believe that the one that covers my part of the country is roughly the size of Belgium. I think that that point has been made by somebody in the committee before. Is it possible to collaborate meaningfully between Campbelltown and Shetland?

Fiona Robertson: I think that colleagues in the northern alliance would say that it is, and there is evidence that that is going on. Our work will feed into some of the work of the regional improvement collaboratives. As the national qualifications body, we work right across the system, but we play into other structures and conversations that are taking place in the best way possible, and conversations about the possibilities to do that are on-going.

Liz Smith: Could I ask you about national 4, Ms Robertson? Your predecessor, Janet Brown, said on two occasions when she was here that she felt a discussion had to be had about national 4. I understand that some of that discussion is going on at the moment. The big concern is about whether there is sufficient balance between the important skills that young people learn within these qualifications and the lack of an accredited exam within national 4. As you know, teachers are raising the concern that too many young people are being pushed into national 5 as a result of that. What has to happen to national 4 to reform it?

Fiona Robertson: As you will know, there has been a lot of discussion about national 4 over a period of time. I know that the matter was discussed with my predecessor on a number of occasions when she appeared before the committee. The SQA has been involved in the wider discussions over a period of time, both through the assessment of national qualifications group and the curriculum and assessment board. The curriculum and assessment board had at least two, if not three, conversations about national 4 in thinking about the way forward.

The SQA did some work to assess a range of national 4 and 5 course assessments against the Education Scotland benchmarks for literacy and numeracy, just to ensure that there were no issues

with the required literacy and numeracy standards. We also did some fieldwork visits to 40 centres, which included focus groups with young people, teachers and senior managers in a couple of sessions over 2016-17. That work was supplemented by a range of activity by other partners including the National Parent Forum of Scotland, and there was Scottish Government activity as well.

11:00

I acknowledge that there is a variety of views about national 4. Some people feel strongly that there should be an external assessment; others feel strongly that there should be some differentiated award, not just a pass or a fail. I acknowledge that there is a range of views, but the decision has been taken by the Scottish Government that the assessment approach is not changing. With the removal of the interim measure of recognising positive achievement—RPA—and some adjustments to national 5, the conclusion of the discussion at the curriculum and assessment board was that all parts of the system should work collaboratively to ensure that national 4 is a credible qualification. It was developed as such, with a lot of discussion about the merits or otherwise of external versus internal assessment.

I acknowledge that that conversation has continued over a period of time, but the SQA is working on the basis of the decision that has been taken, which is that there will be no changes to the method of assessment and that we will play our part in ensuring that national 4 is a credible qualification. The qualification is five years old, and the SQA continues to consider qualifications over time. However, I think that the position in relation to the assessment method for national 4 is settled following the decision that the Deputy First Minister has made.

Liz Smith: The committee has been told twice that there is a curriculum and assessment board that the different stakeholders—Education Scotland, the SQA, the Scottish Government and various others—are involved in. Who took the decision to proceed with national 4 without any accredited assessments or exams within it? Who was responsible for that decision?

Fiona Robertson: That goes some years back. The discussions on that issue will have taken place in the context of the CFE management board considering advice from the qualifications group that supported the management board at the time and advice going to ministers. The SQA will have provided some of that advice, but that predates my involvement. The matter was considered, with much discussion around the table, but that is the decision that was taken a number of years ago in relation to national 4.

Liz Smith: Do you acknowledge that, in the interim period, we have heard concerns from employers, for example, who feel that, although the skills are extremely valuable, national 4 is missing some key components, particularly when it comes to literacy and numeracy accreditation? Do you also acknowledge that a number of youngsters who leave school at the end of their fourth year might not go on to study for national 5, highers or anything beyond that and that, therefore, they are, technically, leaving school without accredited assessments? Are you comfortable with that?

Fiona Robertson: Many young people with national 4 qualifications are progressing within school either to other national qualifications or other qualifications—we see that through the numbers. As part of the curriculum and assessment board's consideration, there were some discussions with employers, which were positive but revealed some quite mixed views. In the context of the discussion around national 4, a lot of views have been offered but there has been agreement that all parts of the system should work to ensure that national 4 has credibility, and there have been some changes to the fall-back arrangements between national 5 and national 4. We certainly see national 4 as a credible qualification that we need to work with the system to promote.

Liz Smith: My final point it is on an issue that has been raised in the committee several times. There is a group of young people who leave school at the end of national 4—perhaps not because it is their choice but because they are care experienced or whatever—who do not have the ability or the facility to go on to take other qualifications. Do you recognise that that group could feel a little bit let down by the system because there is no possibility for them to get an accredited qualification in basic literacy and numeracy?

Fiona Robertson: National 4 is an accredited qualification. The point that you are making is about the nature of assessment, and national 4 is an internally assessed qualification. Many qualifications in the college and higher education sector are internally assessed, so national 4 is, absolutely, a credible qualification with a credible assessment process and method.

As part of the work that we did in the context of the curriculum and assessment board, we assessed national 4 course assessment against the benchmarks for literacy and numeracy, and we concluded that the assessments are benchmarked against the appropriate CFE level. There are no issues in terms of the required literacy and numeracy standards that might impact on the accessibility and subsequent success of learners.

We have looked at those issues and we are working within the context of the decision that has been made on national 4.

Robert, is there anything that you want to add on national 4?

Robert Quinn: There is a big focus on personalisation and choice in national 4, but candidates still have to meet the evidence requirements. Skills and knowledge must be evidenced, and we quality assure the evidence requirements.

Liz Smith: But national 4 is based on teacher assessment, not external assessment.

Robert Quinn: Yes, but it is still an accredited qualification. We recognise and devolve the responsibility for assessment to teachers, as we do with the higher national certificate and the higher national diploma, and as a university might devolve that responsibility to its lecturers. The lack of externality allows more of a focus on personalisation and choice.

We see lots of good practice and young people benefiting from their experience of national 4 within the context of a wide range of experiences in the senior phase—not just national courses, but some of the other qualifications that I mentioned, such as national progression awards, skills for work, foundation apprenticeships and so on. National 4 is just one component of the senior phase, and I think it is a valuable component. I understand that the decision has been made that we must put our shoulder behind the wheel and encourage that view of its credibility.

The Convener: We will move to questions from Mr Johnson.

Daniel Johnson: It is an absolute pleasure to be back at the Education and Skills Committee. In some ways, returning to take evidence from the SQA almost makes it feel as though I never left.

I would like to pursue a line of questioning that I put to the SQA back in September 2016—to your predecessor, Dr Brown. I asked then about the deliverability of national 4 and national 5 within a single classroom—a topic that has come under scrutiny again in recent months. When I asked Dr Brown whether those qualifications were designed to be delivered in conjunction with one another, she told me that they were not. Indeed, she went on to say:

“If significant numbers of schools are delivering multilevel teaching, we have to start looking at content.”—*[Official Report, Education and Skills Committee, 13 September 2017; c 13.]*

Has the SQA undertaken that work to look at content and the structure of national 4 and national 5 in the context of their being delivered within a single classroom?

Fiona Robertson: As I have highlighted, we keep qualifications, although not the form of assessment, under review. Robert Quinn can provide a bit more detail on the process around that. We look at how the qualification is performing, and issues around learning and teaching are relevant in that context. However, we also need to ensure that we maintain standards over time.

There is a balance to be struck between the practical realities of teaching in the classroom—there is no doubt that multilevel teaching has been a long-standing feature of Scottish education—and how we look at the qualifications over time. I mentioned, in the context of national 4 being five years old, our having a look at some elements of context, and we may, as part of that work, look at the hierarchical structure of qualifications.

I do not know whether Robert Quinn wants to say any more about that.

Robert Quinn: Every national course has a national qualification support team, which is made up of teachers who are delivering the programme and other associated stakeholders. For example, there might be university representation and suchlike. There will certainly be a health check on the qualification—primarily, that will be on the assessments and the application of assessment standards and what the results are telling people—but there will also be a review of how the skills, knowledge and content are playing out. If the content is considered to be so specific that it is perhaps precluding more creative delivery, there might be some consideration of that. Obviously, it is easier to have such an approach in the skills-based areas, where a course can be set up on a hierarchical basis and it is the responses from the students that really determine the appropriate level.

It is a bit more challenging in content-based subjects. Support teams will look at the issue, and if they consider that there is a case to create a slightly more hierarchical structure, that could be done in order to deal with the matter. We would not want young people doing one set of content for national 4 and the same content again for national 5.

Daniel Johnson: Forgive me, but that is very much the problem. Take physics, for example. My understanding is that waves are covered in both national 4 and national 5 content. At national 4, sound waves are dealt with; at national 5, the electromagnetic spectrum is dealt with. Those topics are completely incompatible.

More important, when I put that specific point to Dr Brown in an earlier evidence session—I acknowledged the point that multilevel teaching has always occurred, but, in the historical context,

standard grades were explicitly designed to be delivered in a single classroom—I asked whether national 4s and national 5s were designed in the same way, and she was explicit. She said:

“They were not designed along the lines of the standard grade.”—[*Official Report, Education and Skills Committee*, 13 September 2017; c 13.]

I understand what you are saying about the on-going processes to review the qualifications, but you acknowledge that that is primarily on standards. Specifically, what work has been carried out to look at how deliverable those two qualifications are in a single classroom 4? What reports do you have on your desk, Ms Robertson? I am not terribly interested in the on-going process.

Fiona Robertson: I am not aware of any reports that pertain specifically to that issue.

Daniel Johnson: Is that work that you might be interested in carrying out?

Fiona Robertson: I think that there is a balance to be struck between the distinct role that we have, as the qualifications authority, in delivering qualifications and our understanding of the learning and teaching practice that is going on, which is variable, as you have discussed at length in the context of the subject choice review. We are increasingly seeing innovation and diversification in curriculum pathways, and that is leading to different methods of learning and teaching. There is a balance to be struck in relation to what we can do in the context of the qualifications that we offer around all that.

I acknowledge the situation, but I cannot give an undertaking—for the reasons that Robert Quinn has outlined—that, subject by subject, some of the practicalities will be magically overcome by changes to the qualifications or, indeed, that changes to the qualifications are appropriate.

Daniel Johnson: I am not saying that I want any magic to be done; I would just like there to be a bit of review work on your on-going process of improvement.

Fiona Robertson: Yes, as part of our on-going processes.

Daniel Johnson: I completely accept the point that the SQA is not solely responsible for the curriculum and how it is delivered in the classroom. However, I take it that you would acknowledge the point that how qualifications are designed has an impact on teaching practice and on the breadth of subjects that are taught in schools. With that in mind, what conversations have you instigated at the Scottish education council and other bodies to look at the breadth of subjects taught in the senior phase from your

perspective of being in charge of how those qualifications are designed?

11:15

Fiona Robertson: I referred earlier to the conversations in the context of the formal for a that we have, including with the curriculum and assessment board, and the on-going conversations that we have with Education Scotland and the Scottish Government on those matters. I absolutely think that having a greater understanding of the curricular models that are in place across Scotland would be helpful.

SQA statistics reflect entries for particular qualifications, so we do not see those young people who are not taking our qualifications. I am making an obvious point, but it is quite an important one. We can observe only what we see coming through the qualifications system.

Of course, that is supplemented by the intelligence and insights that our subject implementation managers have and the work that we do with the system. As I have said, the SQA is part of the system—it does not sit apart from the system. I would welcome further insights into the various curricular models that are being developed. Anecdotally, in the context of the visits that I have undertaken to schools over a number of years in different roles, I have seen innovation, which is a feature of CFE, personalisation and choice around subjects and qualifications—not all of those are SQA qualifications. A greater understanding of those curriculum pathways is really helpful.

Daniel Johnson: I accept your description of your role in the system and that you are not fully responsible for all of those aspects. You said that the one thing that you will see is the number of entries, the number of subject areas and the number of qualifications. Given the picture that we have all seen—there are particular points to do with modern languages, for example—and the evidence that the SQA has and, indeed, is responsible for, have you tabled a formal agenda item at meetings with any of those bodies to discuss those matters and to flag those concerns?

Fiona Robertson: I have had some conversations on those issues in the context of my initial discussions in the six weeks that I have been in post.

Daniel Johnson: I urge you to take forward those matters with the bodies, because they are of real import.

Rona Mackay: I want to ask about the grading appeals process. A constituent of mine made an appeal on the grounds of extraordinary circumstances—I believe that that is one of the

criteria for revisiting a grade—and they were not successful. The response that I got was, frankly, incredibly confusing. Will you tell us a wee bit about the process? Perhaps you could give us figures for how many successful appeals are made after exam time.

Fiona Robertson: We have an exceptional circumstances service. If, on the day of an exam, a young person is ill, suffering because of a bereavement or as a result of personal circumstances, or facing family circumstances that are such that they may affect their performance, their school can make an exceptional circumstances request, which allows the SQA to look at a number of sources of evidence, including any prelims, coursework or on-going assessments that may have been undertaken in the school. We consider that request between the point of the exam day and results day. An exceptional circumstances request will be taken forward in the context of the normal exam timetable, so a young person in that circumstance would have got their results this year on 6 August in the normal way.

For other young people who may not get the result that they expected, and when the school is of a similar view, the school can put in a marking request. That does as described—it looks at the component marks and checks that everything has been done correctly. That is taken forward after results day.

For those young people who have a conditional offer, a marking review request is taken forward very quickly—indeed, the period for doing that has passed for this year. However, further reviews are undertaken. I think that the timeline for that is the end of this month.

Rona Mackay: Will you clarify whether the school has to make the appeal along with the student, their parents or whomever? Does the school have to be involved with that?

Fiona Robertson: We rely on the professional judgment of the school to make that request, so it does come through the school; it is not done by an individual young person or their parents.

Rona Mackay: Do you have any figures that you could supply to the committee?

Fiona Robertson: I do not have the figures to hand, but I am happy to—

The Convener: If you could provide those, that would be helpful.

Fiona Robertson: I can furnish you with them.

Rona Mackay: That is fine.

Fiona Robertson: We will not have the complete figures for this year, because we are still in the process. However, in the context of the overall number of qualifications—there are

790,000 exams—marking reviews make up small proportion of the exam volume that we look at every year. Nevertheless, it is very important that, on results day, where there is a genuine surprise about a mark, we have the responsibility to look at that, and there are well-established processes in that regard.

I am very happy to look into the particular issue with your constituent, if that would be helpful, but essentially—

Rona Mackay: The situation happened last year, not recently.

Fiona Robertson: Did it? Okay. It sounds as though that was an exceptional circumstance rather than a—

Rona Mackay: Yes, there were extraordinary circumstances, but the request was still turned down. The school appealed the decision, too.

Fiona Robertson: It was not appealed?

Rona Mackay: Yes, it was. Is there any recourse to that appeal? Once the SQA makes a decision, is that as far as it goes?

Fiona Robertson: Yes, that is as far as it goes, I am afraid.

Rona Mackay: The decision was not transparent.

Fiona Robertson: I am happy to have a conversation about that particular instance.

Rona Mackay: Thank you.

The Convener: Mr Gray has a quick supplementary question.

Iain Gray: You will know that, a few years ago, the system changed and the cost of unsuccessful appeals was pushed on to the schools. The result has been a significant drop in the level of appeals from the state sector and a smaller drop in the number of appeals from the private sector. Do you consider that fair and equitable?

Fiona Robertson: I know that that has been a subject of discussion with my predecessor at this committee on a number of occasions. There are two points to consider. The role of the school is important here. Certainly, the Educational Institute of Scotland, the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland and others have been keen to stress that financial issues have not been a consideration in cases in which a marking review has not been taken forward. Obviously, the previous system was an appeal system that was very heavily used and was unique to Scotland. The change was taken forward with quite a lot of consultation, and comprehensive ADES guidance was provided to schools to ensure that the right decisions around a post-results service were taken

by schools. Indeed, that conversation was taken forward with the Scottish Council of Independent Schools as well, which was keen to adopt that guidance, in broad terms. The issue relies on the professional judgment of the school, fundamentally—that is the system.

Iain Gray: But all the evidence is that that judgment means that a student in the state sector is far less likely to have their result looked at again than a student in the private sector is. My question to you is very simple: do you think that that is fair?

Fiona Robertson: In the system that we have evolved, including the guidance that has been provided, we have seen no evidence that post-results services are not being used because of issues relating to financial considerations.

Iain Gray: I can give you casework that says that financial considerations are contributing to post-results services not being used. Do you think that that is fair?

Fiona Robertson: I would be concerned to hear that. I would be happy to have a further conversation about that.

Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): I want to explore your communication and engagement with teachers. The response to the committee's report—I appreciate that Fiona Robertson was not in post at the time, because that was in 2017—talked about engagement with teachers and said that there had been a review. Did anything change as a result of that review, or do you plan to make any changes now that you are in post?

Fiona Robertson: There have been quite a lot of developments there. One significant development has been around the recruitment of subject implementation managers, who function as the liaison point between the SQA and schools and colleges. A number of teachers have highlighted to me that that has been working well in terms of the engagement that the SQA needs to take forward with schools and colleges.

That is supplemented by a number of other elements such as issuing newsletters, streamlining course documentation so that any changes to assessment are as simple and as straightforward as they can be and initiating regular user testing around our website. A lot of our materials are provided through our website, which means that we need to make sure that things can be easily found and easily navigated. We have subject-by-subject pages because, of course, subject teachers are looking at their subject on our website.

In addition to that, as Robert Quinn alluded, we have organised a huge number of events and interactions with teachers to support the work that

we do and the work that they do in their schools and colleges. That is really important. The paper that we provided to the committee provides further information about some of the feedback and customer survey information that we have had.

My only addition would be to say that communication is something that you have to continue to work at. We are never going to be perfect; we are always going to get feedback that makes us reflect and review. However, as I said at the start, I want the SQA to be seen as an open, engaging and transparent organisation in how it works and how it engages with the profession more widely. We will keep on that task and make sure that we deliver on that.

Robert Quinn: I think that how we engage is important. Last week, for example, I had subject implementation managers talking to 50 principal teachers of modern languages in Glasgow, offering them some support in terms of the most recent observations from the examination diet, but also setting them up for the forthcoming advanced higher and washing back into the changes that were made to national 5 and higher. Those teacher-to-teacher conversations have been a real success since 2017. Yes, we have to maintain standards and ensure that the qualifications are credible, but we also have to listen to and engage with colleagues—not just teachers, but other colleagues around the education sector, as we discussed earlier in the meeting. The issue of how we engage is important, and the SIMs are an example of where we are trying to get a bit closer.

Gail Ross: Dr Allan touched on the issue of the geographical spread. I was interested to note that, of the two events that you have talked about this morning, one was in Edinburgh and one was in Glasgow. How do you approach the teachers in the Highlands and Islands? I represent the far north of Scotland, and, for most of the CPD or in-service training days, teachers have to travel either to Dingwall or to Inverness. How do you reach out to those remote rural areas?

Robert Quinn: That is a good point. Our subject implementation managers have been up there. That is the first thing that we have done. We have physically got on the bus or the plane—

Fiona Robertson: Or the train.

11:30

Robert Quinn: Or the train. We have gone up there in economy class, of course. There has been direct engagement and I have been involved in the process of discussing the work of the subject implementation managers, their schedule and what they do.

Obviously, we try to harness technology as well. In a lot of subjects, the webinars and audio presentations that we do are as powerful as physical events. At physical events you get networking opportunities and the face-to-face aspect, but webinars and audio presentations can be recorded and kept. As well as the 89 events that we are delivering between now and Christmas, we have a similar amount of webinars and audio presentations. However, I am happy to authorise SIMs to physically go and meet teachers in more remote areas if we can.

Alison Harris: I would like to speak to you about the senior phase and the fall in the qualification numbers. At a previous meeting, when I was a substitute member of the committee, we looked at subject choice. The one thing that Government ministers and advocates kept telling us was that we were focusing too much on secondary 4 and that, instead, we should look at the entire senior phase. I noticed, from the submissions, that the average number of qualifications for children in their senior phase has fallen by about 10 per cent. What do you think has caused that, and should we be concerned?

Fiona Robertson: As I said previously, what we see through the SQA data are largely young people who have been entered for SQA qualifications. The results-day data will not provide qualifications that are gained through other means, including qualifications that are not from the SQA. We have seen quite a lot of innovation in curriculum pathways, with young people moving into a college course in S5 and S6, for example, and they will not appear in the results-day data. It is important to put the decline in the overall number of qualifications in that broader context.

The SQA does not hold the full system data, but we provide all the data on SQA qualifications to the Scottish Government. Part of the work that it is doing involves putting that on the Insight tool—the senior phase benchmarking tool—along with a range of other qualifications. That provides the leaver data—that is, the qualifications gained at the point of leaving school—which gives a wider picture. I think that it is important to put the decline in a bit of context, but I cannot be definitive about the numbers, because the SQA only has data relating to its own qualifications.

Alison Harris: Thank you for that response.

The Convener: I think that that exhausts questions from the committee this morning. This has been a really long session. I appreciate it is only a very short six weeks that you have been in post, so we really appreciate your attendance at committee this morning.

Next week, we will hear from the Minister for Children and Young People on funded childcare for two-year-olds, and we will then take evidence from a panel of witnesses on the impact of Brexit on higher education.

11:34

Meeting continued in private until 11:56.

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Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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