



**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Education and Skills Committee

**Friday 1 May 2020**

**Session 5**



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**Friday 1 May 2020**

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**EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE**

**9<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2020, Session 5**

**CONVENER**

\*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

**DEPUTY CONVENER**

\*Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

\*Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)

\*Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab)

\*Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con)

\*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)

\*Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

\*Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)

\*Alex Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)

\*Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)

\*Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)

\*attended

**THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:**

Robert Quinn (Scottish Qualifications Authority)

Fiona Robertson (Scottish Qualifications Authority)

**CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

Roz Thomson

**LOCATION**

Virtual Meeting



## Scottish Parliament

### Education and Skills Committee

*Friday 1 May 2020*

*[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:30]*

### Decision on Taking Business in Private

**The Convener (Clare Adamson):** Good morning and welcome to the ninth meeting in 2020 of the Education and Skills Committee.

Under item 1, the committee is asked to decide whether to take in private item 3, which is a discussion on the evidence that we will take today. Do members agree to take item 3 in private?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

## Scottish Qualifications Authority: Covid-19

**The Convener:** Our main item of business is an evidence session with the Scottish Qualifications Authority on the response to the coronavirus outbreak. I put on record my thanks to the teachers and young people who took the time to participate in focus groups and feed views into written submissions.

I welcome, from the SQA, Fiona Robertson, the chief executive and chief examining officer, and Robert Quinn, the head of English, languages and business. I extend a warm welcome to you both. We thank you for your time today.

I invite Fiona Robertson to make an opening statement.

**Fiona Robertson (Scottish Qualifications Authority):** We welcome the opportunity to discuss our approach to certification following the cancellation of exams in 2020. As the Deputy First Minister said on 19 March, exams in Scotland have been held every spring since 1888. Our education system is therefore in an unprecedented and challenging situation.

I fully appreciate that this is a worrying time for the 138,000 young people who have worked hard and were due to start their exams this week, and for their families. As Scotland's chief examiner, I am absolutely committed to ensuring that learners' work is rightly and fairly recognised this year in a way that will allow them to progress to further learning or work. I want to ensure that the class of 2020 can hold their heads high now and in the future, with their qualifications fully recognised as they would be in any year.

The cancellation of exams required us to consider, review and adapt our processes in a short space of time. We consider contingency arrangements every year, including this year, but the scale and complexity of the changes that were required at this time of year were simply unprecedented.

I can assure the committee that a huge volume of work has been done at pace to deliver results on 4 August. While the focus of the committee and of my opening statement is on the 148 externally assessed national qualifications across national 5, higher and advanced higher, we have also needed to consider with stakeholders the full range of SQA qualifications—nationals 2, 3 and 4, national certificates, national progression awards, skills for work courses, freestanding units for national qualifications, higher national certificates and higher national diplomas—that are offered across a wide range of subjects in schools and colleges across Scotland.

Following the Deputy First Minister's statement and my subsequent statement on 19 March, I provided further advice on 24 March on the completion of coursework, and on 2 April, before the Easter break for most schools, I provided advice on the approach that we would take to certification. Further and more detailed guidance and advice were provided at the start of term on 20 April. We have also provided a timeline for further advice and support to colleges.

Our approach is based on three core principles: fairness to learners; safe and secure certification of our qualifications, while following the latest public health advice; and maintaining the integrity and credibility of our qualifications system, while ensuring that standards are maintained over time in the interests of learners.

Results will be based on estimated grades. Detailed guidance and an online course have been provided to schools and colleges to assist with the estimation process. Teachers and partners from across education helped to inform the approach and the guidance.

Estimated grades rely on the professional judgment of teachers and lecturers, who are best placed to have a strong understanding of how their learners have performed and, based on their experience and the evidence available, of what a learner would be expected to achieve in each course.

I clarify that an estimated grade is not just the result of one prelim exam or project—many young people have told us that they are worried about their prelim performance. An estimated grade is an overall judgment that is based on all activity across the year.

This year, I have asked for more detailed estimates and candidate rankings, which will give us more differentiated data to inform the awarding process. Schools and colleges are working hard to provide us with their estimates for each course by the extended deadline of 29 May, and I am very grateful for all the work that has been done collectively to deliver for learners. After 29 May, we will check and validate the information and moderate it if necessary, to ensure consistency across schools and colleges and with results from previous years.

The moderation process is a key part of the SQA's responsibilities every year, to ensure that standards are maintained across Scotland and, this year, in the absence of external assessment, across schools and colleges.

Teacher judgment is at the heart of Scottish education. Every year, effective professional judgments for assessment take place in schools and colleges and are supported, validated and enhanced through moderation. This year, we are

asking for internal moderation of teacher estimates, using a range of data and discussion in a school or college; we will also undertake a moderation exercise nationally, using a range of data, discussion and review. The purpose is to ensure, as far as possible, that the standard of an A in one school is the standard of an A in another school, and so on. There is no presumption that moderation is a one-way process. Grades could be moderated upwards or downwards.

The final details of the moderation process are being finalised and considered by our qualifications committee and advisory council next week, before going to our board alongside details of our proposed appeals service, which members will be pleased to hear is free. To advise us, we have extended the external membership of our qualifications committee. That includes getting advice from young people. I will be happy to follow that up with members, and will publish full details at the appropriate time.

We are working hard to deliver in this extraordinary year. We have had to take some difficult decisions as circumstances have changed, but we are engaging with a range of stakeholders both to inform our thinking and to ensure that concerns are understood and responded to in the right way.

I acknowledge the points that have been made by teachers and young people in the committee's focus groups. We have had some very positive feedback from teachers and lecturers. I also highlight that other exam regulators across the United Kingdom, with whom I am in close contact, are working through very similar issues.

With the support of the system, including members of the committee, we can provide the reassurance that learners need and, on 4 August, the results that they deserve.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee this morning, in its first full virtual meeting. We are happy to answer your questions.

**The Convener:** Thank you for those opening remarks. We now move to questions from committee members.

**Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP):** Good morning, Ms Robertson and Mr Quinn.

I took part with teachers in focus group 1, and I will start with a comment about what we heard about communication with the SQA. While teachers acknowledged that the current situation is unprecedented, the impression of the majority seemed to be that communication was slow and at times top down; there was at times an attitude of business as usual; and there was a lack of working with teachers at this very unusual time.

Will you comment on that point about slow communication and about the SQA being reactive rather than proactive?

**Fiona Robertson:** We have been working through a range of issues over a period of some weeks. We issued our first public statement in relation to coronavirus on 3 March, and we issued a further statement on 2 April. The first meeting of the Scottish Government's national qualifications contingency group was on 17 March; thereafter, there was a joint statement by the Scottish Government and the SQA on 18 March.

On 19 March, the Deputy First Minister announced the closure of schools and I provided a further statement. Over the following weekend, it became clear that, following public health advice, it would be difficult for considerable numbers of young people to go into school to complete coursework, and we provided a further statement on 24 March.

As I highlighted in my opening statement, I was able to outline our approach to certification in broad terms on 2 April, and we gave further details after the Easter break, on 20 April. This week, as part of our SQA academy service, we made available an online course to provide support to teachers and lecturers on the estimation process.

At the same time, we have been engaging with the National Parent Forum of Scotland, and we have had a lot of engagement with Young Scot and young people's groups. We have also undertaken focus groups with teachers on the new systems that we have been setting up, as well as discussions with teachers to inform guidance on our approach. Robert Quinn would be happy to say a little more about that.

We have tried very hard to communicate through a variety of channels over the past six weeks or so, including recognised and established channels in schools and colleges. All the communications that I have mentioned have gone directly to every school and college across Scotland, and we have also used our website, social media channels and so on. I know that schools and colleges have been keen to ensure that those messages are considered and taken forward with their teams and, of course, with young people.

We have worked as quickly as we could, using a variety of communication channels, and we have been working very hard to provide the clarity that the system needs to relieve anxiety and reassure people about what we are doing.

As I highlighted in my opening statement, this has been a very challenging period. We have faced an unprecedented situation, and we have been working through it as quickly as possible. I hope that my answer outlines the speed at which

we have been able to respond to the circumstances and the communications that we have been putting out through the system since early March.

**The Convener:** Does Mr Quinn want to come in on that point?

**Robert Quinn (Scottish Qualifications Authority):** I will just repost what Fiona Robertson said about advice and guidance on the critical aspect of estimating, which is the bedrock of what we will use this year for certification. We adapted our current estimating guide and produced our revised guidance on 20 April. Then, over three or four days, we developed an online academy model. We tested that with about 50 teachers, including principal teachers, and some of our key appointees. After testing, we refined and launched the model.

We have had positive feedback. People have commented that they are comfortable with the level of advice and that the academy course answers the key questions. We keep checking in with teachers during the estimation process. Especially in large departments, where there is a lot of complexity in the work, we are getting feedback around some of the challenges that teachers are facing, and we are able to offer advice and support, in real time, through our subject implementation managers.

**Rona Mackay:** Teachers have many questions, naturally, and they want to be reassured that whatever questions they have will be answered quickly and without any bureaucracy getting in the way.

My final point relates to fairness for learners. There are concerns for pupils who have poor home environments for learning and who are disadvantaged technically or motivationally, some of whom might have gone to holiday study classes to get help. How much weight will the SQA, in conjunction with teachers, give to the factor that some pupils are in different circumstances and do not have ideal conditions?

10:45

**Fiona Robertson:** Before I answer that, I want to make one final point in answer to Ms Mackay's comment on communications. We have had lots of questions from teachers through our liaison team, our SQA co-ordinators and our contact centre, and from young people and their parents. We have been developing and evolving the frequently asked questions on our website and other channels to ensure that we do our best to answer all the questions that are coming through.

The question of fairness is absolutely critical. Following the Deputy First Minister's

announcement on 19 March that exams were cancelled, which of course followed the decision to close schools, we were hopeful that young people could continue to attend school in a limited sense to complete coursework. However, over the course of that first weekend, it became evident that that would not be feasible, given public health advice. That led us to issue on 24 March what I hope was clear guidance about the completion of coursework. Fairness was very much at the forefront of our minds in making that decision. We discussed that with some headteachers and directors of education, and it was absolutely the prevailing view that the decision was taken in the interests of fairness.

Robert Quinn might want to come in on the detail in the advice on estimates. We have taken quite a lot of care over the advice that we have provided for teachers and lecturers on the evidence that they should use in arriving at their estimates this year and on the need to apply care in relation to any work done subsequent to school closures on 20 March. We have been very conscious of the issue of fairness—indeed, it led to the decision on coursework.

**Robert Quinn:** We are clear that no candidate should be disadvantaged if they were unable to complete work after centres were closed. In our advice to teachers, we emphasise the fact that it is about the quality of the evidence that they are reviewing and what they know about the young person or candidate, and not so much about the quantity. The predictive value of evidence—what it tells you about the learner’s journey and where they lie in relation to agreed criteria—does not always come from having vast quantities of evidence; it is more about things such as the consistency of performance and how the learner dealt with some pre-discriminating aspects of the course. That can be successfully achieved using incomplete evidence. We have focused on that in our advice and guidance to teachers and in the follow-up online course.

**Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con):** I have a number of questions. I will try to get through them quickly. My first question is a general one about the decision to cancel exams in their entirety. Who took that decision? What consultation took place, and with whom, in coming to that conclusion? What other options were considered, and what gave the SQA confidence that cancelling the exams was the best course of action?

**Fiona Robertson:** On exams being cancelled, you might be aware that the Scottish Government and the SQA issued a joint statement on 18 March, following the first meeting of the qualifications contingency group. In that communication, we made it clear that significant risks to the exam diet had emerged and that we

were working through a range of scenarios, including significant disruption to the diet.

There was, at that point, still hope that exams could go ahead, even in the event of school closures, and that schools could operate as exam centres over the period from the end of April into May. However, it became clear in discussions with the Scottish Government that that would not be possible.

The decision to cancel exams was made by the Scottish Government and it was a decision that was taken by the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills. That decision was discussed with the SQA, and it might also have been discussed with others—the committee will want to follow that up with the Deputy First Minister next week. On that basis, I was, in the absence of exams, commissioned to develop an alternative certification model—

**Jamie Greene:** I am sorry. I appreciate that there is a short delay in the sound, so it is quite hard to interject in the normal way. I apologise for interrupting you.

You said that the decision was made by the Scottish Government. Input from you and your organisation must have informed that decision. Did you make recommendations or did you simply present possible options?

**Fiona Robertson:** I had regular discussions with Scottish Government officials and with ministers. As I have said—it is a matter of public record—we were working through a range of contingencies, as was right and proper. Those contingencies settled around, in particular, significant disruption to the exam diet, with the possibilities that there might be significant absences, or that exams could not be taken in the normal way for some subjects and some qualifications. We were starting to work through, for example, the possibility of having later contingency days, which would have necessitated additional papers—some qualifications might have had two or more papers. We also considered delaying the exam diet.

In all that, we needed to feed in assumptions about how this significant public health situation would play out. However, it became evident over the course of 18 and 19 March that schools were going to be closed—potentially, for a considerable time—in which case it would not be possible to have an exam diet in 2020. As I said, that decision was made by the Scottish Government.

**Jamie Greene:** We are where we are: the exams are not taking place this academic year. Other members might have questions about what will happen next year—there has already been talk about that—but I want you to comment on two vital things in relation to this year.

We have shifted the workload on to teachers. Normally, students would be taking exams, for which there would be due process, but now it will be down to teachers to come up with estimations that the SQA will then moderate. The key question that many people—pupils, teachers and parents—have is this: how will you ensure fairness and consistency? “Fairness” and “consistency” are the two words that jump out at me. How will you ensure that the qualifications that people get in this academic year are no more or less valid than those that were awarded in years gone by or that will be awarded in years to come? How will you ensure that estimation is fair and consistent across Scotland, given differing school environments and differing levels of ability? I appreciate that it is a tremendously difficult task, but how on earth will you achieve it?

**Fiona Robertson:** I fully appreciate that we are asking a lot of the system this year. In discussions with teachers, we have been really struck by how they are working through the issues; teachers are doing the very best that they can do for their young people, in order to ensure that their hard work and achievements in what has been asked of them are recognised. Our focus has been on providing as much help and assistance as possible to teachers for that. That will continue over the coming weeks.

I fully agree with Jamie Greene—indeed, I highlighted in my opening statement that it is really important that the class of 2020 get qualifications that stand the test of the challenges of this year and—which is most important—that stand the test of time. That is the job that my team at SQA and I, along with the wider system, are seeking to do. We can do the job by working together.

Schools will go through a moderation process using a range of data that is specific to them. That data can include estimates that they have provided us with in the past and comparisons with the outturn—the results that were achieved. The data can also include the pattern of attainment within a school and class and department discussions about the process of estimation. I know that that is already happening. We have had some good feedback from schools in recent days about the work that is being done to ensure that estimation happens in the most credible and fair way possible.

It is also really important that we are allowed to look at that information. As I highlighted in my opening statement, quality assurance, or moderation, is a principal feature of our qualifications system. It is fully accepted that we go in and look—in particular, at qualifications that have a high level of internal assessment and are not exam based in the conventional sense.

It is really important that, as far as possible, we ensure fairness and consistency across Scotland. That is the job that we will seek to do when we look at the estimates. There is no presumption that we will change schools’ estimates, but we must have in place a mechanism to validate estimates and to provide reassurance. We have to reserve the right to make changes to estimated grades, if necessary. Fairness and consistency are central to what the SQA exists to do, and to what it does every year.

I fully acknowledge that this is a challenging year; we are all working through a very difficult situation that none of us could have anticipated. We are working very hard to get through the issues as best we can, and we will do that with the system, as far as that is possible.

11:00

**Jamie Greene:** There is still some trepidation. I hosted a focus group that a number of teachers attended. I have since read the notes from other focus groups, which all said the same thing, which was interesting. Teachers from all around the country—from different backgrounds and locations—have the same concern, which is that, in order to achieve consistency, fairness will be jeopardised because of measures that will be introduced to ensure that the national picture is appropriate. At a granular level, some students might not get the awards that their teachers think are due to them and some students will look at the qualifications that they have received and be tremendously unhappy with them, because of the national consistency measures that you have applied. There is still concern. I appreciate that you are coming at the issue in good faith, but what further reassurance can you give to parents and pupils that you will get it right? If you do not get it right, will there be new procedures to help people?

**Fiona Robertson:** You asked whether consistency will jeopardise fairness, but I think that consistency can assist with fairness. There is something important to say about the process that is under way. We are investing a huge amount of time in ensuring that we get the best possible estimates—by which I mean the most credible estimates. Teachers will see sets of local and national information that will be very similar to what we will see.

There is an important point to make about moderation. Robert Quinn might want to elaborate and give some examples from his subject areas. At present, when we go into schools to do quality assurance—for example, of internally assessed units—in many instances we judge that moderation should be upwards. There is symmetry in the approach that we take. We do not seek to

moderate teachers' estimates downwards; I do not approach the issue with any such presumption.

We need to look at the data that we hold, which includes a range of information at centre and national levels across 148 subjects. We will pause, reflect and consider whether that looks reasonable.

If, on 4 August, a young person gets a set of results that they and the school do not expect, we will offer an appeals service, which will be an important additional check. We are working through the details of that service. I anticipate that we will look at the evidence that underpins the estimate that has been provided by the school. It is important that when we do quality assurance in schools, it is done by teachers—teachers work with us, and their professional judgment is absolutely at the heart of the approach.

I will make a final point before Robert Quinn says a bit more about the quality assurance process. I am conscious that I have been in my post only for eight or nine months, so I have not yet gone through a standard year in my role. However, the SQA uses such data every year as part of our grade boundaries process. I acknowledge that this year is very different, so we will not have the exam performance data that we normally have. It is therefore very important that there are checks and balances in our qualifications system. The feedback that I regularly get from teachers, education professionals and education leaders is that the checks and balances approach serves Scotland really well, because it ensures an appropriate blend of evidence, data and judgment for making the right decisions for young people across Scotland every year.

**Robert Quinn:** Moderation is about validating teachers' professional judgment. It is an external credibility check and it provides support to exam centres. That should be no different in the current circumstances, and it should give confidence to the wider system.

Jamie Greene asked about further use of qualifications and the credibility of this year's qualifications for this year's cohort. In most cases, when we moderate, we see that teachers are on a standard with their judgments. However, it can work both ways. For example, adjustments to the results for oral assessments in modern languages are often made because teachers have been a little bit harsh. Moderation can work both ways and is a good safety net for candidates.

I will reinforce the final point that Fiona Robertson made about the course results review process by saying that it is important—particularly this year—that we have a safety valve, so that we can pick up on areas of concern that teachers and students might have, in order to ensure that we

are as fair as possible and that there is fairness and consistency once the process is complete.

**The Convener:** We are a little bit behind where we had hoped to be at this time. I ask, therefore, for succinct questions and answers, if possible.

**Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP):** I acknowledge that we are all living through an extreme scenario—perhaps one that nobody could have expected. However, out of curiosity, I wonder whether the SQA had any scenario plans in place to cope with any reason—natural or otherwise—why it would not be possible to hold an exam diet.

**Fiona Robertson:** Yes. I mentioned briefly in my opening statement that we have contingency arrangements in place, as you would expect of any public sector organisation. Where there is deemed to be a significant risk to the exam diet, there is a procedure in place for the Scottish Government to convene its qualifications contingency group. I had discussions about that with the Scottish Government in early March, and the first meeting of the group took place on March 17, to discuss these issues. In that meeting, I took a range of colleagues and stakeholders through the options that we were looking at. The short answer is yes, we have contingency arrangements in place.

However, as I highlighted in my opening statement, the scale, complexity, timing and fluidity of the position that we all found ourselves in in the first half of March were simply unprecedented. There was no off-the-shelf certification model waiting to be used. I also highlight that other exam regulators across the UK were in the same position. It is absolutely right that we have a range of contingencies in place, but the scale, complexity and challenge of what happened this year were unprecedented.

**Dr Allan:** I appreciate that the focus at the moment has to be on the current exam diet but—others have alluded to this—many teachers are already beginning to ask about next year's exam diet. The focus until now has been primarily on disruption to the exam diet rather than disruption to the learning experience. I will not try to second-guess what will happen over the next few weeks and months, but it is entirely possible that it will be into the autumn before people begin to get properly started on higher courses, for example. Has any thought been given to how the SQA will work with other agencies to try to plan for such contingencies and scenarios?

**Fiona Robertson:** That is a very important question. We are all very conscious of the potential impacts on learning and teaching and, from the perspective of qualifications, courses being covered in the normal way at this time. As

members would expect, we are starting to think about those issues in preparing for the 2020-21 exam diet.

The Scottish Government has convened the education recovery planning group, which now meets regularly. The work of that group will include looking at curriculum and assessment issues, including the 2020-21 diet.

I highlight the importance of the continuity of learning and teaching, the extent to which that can be achieved, the consequences for exams towards the end of the year, and the completion of coursework and of evidence about what young people have been able to do. I know that there is a big focus on that through work that Education Scotland is doing and in work across local authorities and across Scotland and, indeed, in the Scottish Government. That is very important.

A number of colleagues met Education Scotland colleagues yesterday to discuss issues to do with continuity of learning and teaching in the senior phase and what that might look like. We are alive to those issues in thinking through next year.

**Dr Allan:** Finally, I return to this year's exams. The theme of how different types of learners respond to exams has been focused on in much of the evidence that we have received and in much of what has been talked about in the scenario that we are in. I suspect that very few alternatives were available to the SQA other than to do what it has done. However, I am sure that you would want to comment on the issue of different types of learners, which has been talked about a lot. I would certainly have fallen into the category of being—I hesitate to use this word—lazy when it came to prelims; the exams then put the fear of God into me. Evidence that we have received suggests that boys are more prone than girls are to falling into that category. How have you tried to take account of those issues?

**Fiona Robertson:** There are two parts to the answer to that question, one of which is about how schools are taking forward the work on their estimates and ensuring that they consider the evidence that is available, and what can be said about inferred attainment for this year, based on the evidence that the schools have. That could include late on in the year where there is evidence of improved performance in the lead-up to an exam—I do not know whether that would apply to Dr Allan. If that is the case, that can absolutely be taken into account in the estimated grade. Teachers see that happen and, using an evidence-based approach, we can take some account of it.

11:15

In terms of the information that we have about candidates, there is a broader issue about ensuring fairness and equity in certification. We are continuing to consider those issues. This afternoon, a conversation will take place with colleagues from the Scottish Human Rights Commission about the broader equity piece, so that we can consider how we think about different groups of young people in this year's awarding process.

During an exam process, scripts are taken at face value. Teachers who mark the scripts know very little about the young people and their marks, which is a very important part of ensuring that we do not have bias in the marking process.

I understand Dr Allan's point about the need to understand those issues, and we can put a lot of focus on ensuring that we do that. Teachers know young people best, and we have provided guidance on those issues.

**Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab):** I would like to return to the issue of moderation, because there has been quite a lot of confusion around it. For example, on 21 April, when talking about moderation, John Swinney said:

"It's not saying that how a school did in the past determines how it does today. That's not in any way what the SQA are doing. What they are looking at is the comparison of assessment of performance or estimation of performance with final performance".

However, the following day, in response to questions from *TES Scotland* about moderation, the SQA said:

"This will include analyses of centres' estimates and outcomes, prior attainment, progression statistics, and grade distributions."

For the avoidance of doubt—I will try to ask this question in a way that is clear to understand—does that mean that a pupil who is given a pass grade by their teacher could have that grade reduced on the basis of previous poor performance in school? Equally, could a pupil who is given a fail grade by their teacher have their grade raised on the basis of good performance in school in the past?

**Fiona Robertson:** I will start by making it clear what I said on 20 April, and then I will seek to answer Mr Gray's question. On 20 April, I took the system through the four-step process that we are taking this year, the second step of which is on awarding. We said:

"We will ... check and validate that information"

that is provided to us by schools.

"We will moderate it, if necessary, to ensure consistency across schools and colleges and with results from previous years.

We will use the information from these estimates, in addition to prior learner attainment, where this is available. For example, if learners achieved National 5 or Higher courses, in a previous year.

We will also look at schools' and colleges' previous history of estimating and attainment in each subject and level. We may moderate these estimates, up or down, if that is required.

This process will produce the results for learners, using our national grades for each subject and level.

Each year, we hold Awarding Meetings that bring together a range of people with subject expertise and people with experience of standard setting across different subjects and qualification levels. We will maintain this approach this year, as far as possible."

What I am seeking to do is use the range of evidence that is available to us on a school and the broader performance in a subject in order to reach what I consider to be the fairest set of results that we can reach.

I understand that Mr Gray was asking whether the SQA will fail a student who their teacher has estimated will gain a pass. I guess that, similarly, the question could be asked whether we will pass a young person who their teacher has estimated will fail. I go back to the point that I made in response to Mr Greene: we are putting in place a presumption of symmetry in any moderation process. Importantly, my focus has been on ensuring that we do everything that we can to make sure that teachers have all the evidence that they need to make credible decisions around estimates.

Today, I have outlined a validation process that will ensure that, when I look across schools across the country, an A grade in one school is, as far as possible, consistent with an A grade in another school, and so on. That is the foundation of the approach that we are taking to estimates. It is important that we are able to take that approach, which has fairness at its heart.

One of the issues that we will look at is the volume and mix of attainment in a given school. It is not unreasonable for us to do so; schools themselves will look at that—indeed, they have asked us for information on that. Every year, schools look at estimates and assess how accurate or otherwise they are; they also look at the pattern of attainment that is achieved each year.

I hope that that provides a bit of reassurance. The assertion that somehow we will fail a young person because of the school that they go to is an unfair one to make on the basis of what I have sought to say about the process that we are undertaking.

**Iain Gray:** I understand the reasons behind what you are doing, but there might be a specific reason for this year's cohort in a school to have

done better than their predecessors. If that is the case, will the SQA go to that school and ask it, "Why have you done better this year?", accept that explanation and not pull the pupils in that cohort down to the same kind of distribution that has been apparent in previous years?

**Fiona Robertson:** It might be helpful to say, by way of a response to that, that, in finalising the process, we are looking at whether, as part of the moderation process, we can enter into a professional dialogue with a school if the shape, distribution or volume of attainment at that school looks very different this year—in one direction or another—from how it has looked historically. I hope that that gives Mr Gray some reassurance about the approach that we are taking.

Teacher judgment is at the heart of Scottish education. It is also at the heart of our moderation process, more generally and, where possible, this year. There is not a presumption that we will overturn teacher estimates, but I have a responsibility to ensure that there is broad consistency across the country.

It is difficult to reach that level of assurance, because of the complexities this year, which include the information that we have and the information that we do not have. We do not have all the information that we would like to be in receipt of—we do not have all the coursework, for example. That has led us to take difficult decisions. However, we are looking at the feasibility of entering into that conversation with schools, particularly if there are big changes in the pattern of attainment.

**Iain Gray:** I have a straight yes or no question on that. In order to achieve that fairness across years and across the country, do you intend to use a statistical curve to moderate the results?

**Fiona Robertson:** I am conscious that you have asked for a straight yes or no answer; I am sorry, but there is not a nice and straight yes or no answer. It is appropriate for us to look at the distribution of attainment in a subject over time, but that will not be the only factor that we look at in reaching our judgment about grades this year. It is important that I say that—it is important that I am clear that there is no straightforward yes or no answer to that.

**Iain Gray:** My final question is also a direct one. You have talked a lot about the importance of the evidence that teachers will provide and the quality of it. There is anecdotal evidence that the secondary 3 Scottish national standardised assessments in literacy and numeracy are being used in some schools as part of the teacher assessment. Is that to be encouraged? Is that an acceptable part of the evidence?

**The Convener:** I ask Ms Robertson to be succinct, because we are running behind time and where I had hoped to be at this point in the meeting.

**Fiona Robertson:** As far as the evidence on completing a course is concerned, standardised assessments would not be included as part of that suite of evidence. If the school wants to look at a wider range of evidence, including the results of standardised assessments, it can consider that. However, it is not my role to make that judgment. We do not have access to any of the information that schools have on standardised assessments.

Schools across Scotland have a range of tracking and monitoring information. In some cases, that includes information on many years of standardised assessments. The advice that we have provided to schools is that that aspect is not considered.

**Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP):** What model will you use to moderate grades, and how does it differ from other years'?

**Fiona Robertson:** I have tried to outline our broad approach. Obviously, our approach to awarding this year will be quite different from that of previous years on the basis of the absence of externally assessed information, subject by subject.

I have highlighted that we will use the data that we hold, and I have highlighted what that data is. We are finalising the details—the decision rules—of the awarding process as we speak, and it will go to our qualifications committee, advisory council and board during the next week or so.

There are common issues in that we will be looking at a range of data and we anticipate involving our subject specialists in looking across the 148 qualifications that we will need to award across national 5, higher and advanced higher this year.

Robert, do you want to say any more about that element of the process?

11:30

**Robert Quinn:** Every year, we look at a range of qualitative and quantitative information, and two key things are the prior attainment of candidates and what the estimates tell us about the trend of these things. There is a qualitative sense check. As well as the statistical information that we get on student performance, both current and historical, there is a qualitative input to do with what we think the strength of the cohort is and whether there is a correlation between prior attainment and what the teachers tell us in estimates and suchlike. A group of key people—assessment specialists and subject specialists—then use their collective

wisdom to come to a decision about where to draw the line and finalise the awarding process.

**Gail Ross:** Let us move on to the ranking system. How will ranking individuals help the reliability and validity of the qualifications?

**Fiona Robertson:** It is, in effect, a three-stage process this year and, as you highlight, it includes ranking as the third stage. We have asked teachers to provide estimates on a nine-point scale, as they usually would, but the scales have been expanded to allow us a finer level of detail on the bands and the grades that young people might get. We are also asking for ranking information, which will help us, should we need it, to provide more granularity on the relative performance of young people in a given cohort.

We worked through some of those issues with teachers in developing the guidance. The grade estimate looks at absolute performance, if you like, although I accept that there is a degree of relativity in that regard across the grades. The ranking looks at the relative performances of young people across a cohort and it allows further differentiation between candidates, which is why we have asked for further estimated bands and rankings as well. It gives us a much finer level of detail than we would normally get.

For some of our bigger subjects, we need to consider what would happen if we just preserved the estimates on the nine-point scale. Robert Quinn has English as one of his subjects, which is the subject with the largest uptake. In English, we have thousands of young people in each band, with no differentiation between them. The ranking will help us to look at the relative performance of young people at a centre level.

Where there are larger cohorts or year groups and larger subjects—again, English is a good example—some schools have many classes of young people taking a qualification, and we have provided a bit of guidance about how they might provide the information, because I appreciate that in some instances it will be quite a challenging process. However, it is worth saying that, for a large percentage of our qualifications, there will be fewer than 25 young people in a centre, so it will perhaps be more straightforward. We have provided as much guidance and assistance on that as we can.

**Gail Ross:** You said that it can be a challenging process, but a written submission that we received from a teacher says that it is the teaching profession's main concern, and a focus group that we held at the start of the week said that the system of ranking students is abhorrent and repulsive and goes against the values of teaching. What do you say to those people?

**Fiona Robertson:** I have outlined the rationale for providing rankings. I acknowledge the comments that have been made by the teachers in your focus groups, but it is also important to acknowledge the feedback that we have had from teachers from a number of schools in the past week or so. They are working hard to deliver on that with the understanding of why we have asked them to do it. During the past week, Robert Quinn has had some discussions with schools about the work that they are doing.

Teachers who have been teaching for a number of years will know that ranking was a feature of the system previously. Ranking used to be a part of the appeals system a number of years ago; it is not new to Scottish education—I want to highlight that.

Robert Quinn might want to say a little bit more about the feedback that we have had. I am obviously concerned to hear that teachers feel very strongly about providing the ranking information. We have sought to explain why we need it and we have had some feedback that is, thankfully, more positive.

**Robert Quinn:** Ranking is something that teachers do a lot of through comparative judgment. In the past, we have done some work on using comparative judgment in subjective-based subjects to help people to mark more accurately—candidates' responses are judged in relation to the other responses that are received. We have had feedback that people in the smaller or medium-uptake subjects have found it to be relatively straightforward. It has helped them, first, to sort candidates into the estimated band and then to separate them via the ranking. We do not necessarily see it as putting a badge on someone; it is just to help teachers to make a comparative judgment.

It is more of a challenge in the higher-uptake subjects because of the multiple classes, the numbers and so on. We have done quite a bit of work in checking in with those subjects. They can use a limited number of ties and things like that to help them with the moderation process and to support the ranking.

**Gail Ross:** Mr Quinn, you say that it is easier, but teachers have said to me that it is more difficult, because they are pitting student against student and putting them into a list, and they really do not want to have to do that. You keep going back to fairness. How can it be fair to rank pupils if, when you are doing the moderation, you look back at cohorts from three years ago or, as I hear some schools are doing, five years ago? How will the process be evaluated once we have gone through it? Will we know how many pupils have been regraded because of your moderation? You said that the bands will mean that pupils' grades

will go up as well as down. Will we know what percentage of pupils got the grades that their teachers gave them?

**Robert Quinn:** On 4 August, teachers will know the grades that candidates have been given. We will also take cognisance of that when we go through the national awarding process.

If teachers get the estimates right in the first place, through their commendable efforts and those of the SQA staff in supporting teachers, we hope that not much adjustment will be required nationally to maintain the credibility of our qualifications this year and to ensure that the awards that are given this year are as valuable as those given in any other year.

On awards day, teachers will know that, and that is when they might consider whether they want to ask for a review. We can then start to look at individual cases and provide a safety net to ensure that we pick up anything that has fallen through the cracks.

**Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green):** I would like to go back to the point about the use of schools' historical attainment data as part of the moderation for the grades of individual pupils.

The Deputy First Minister suggested that that data would be used only to check the historical estimation of grades by teachers, to see where their estimation lined up with the final attainment. However, based on what the SQA has said today, that is not the case. You have said that that data will be used directly in the moderation of individual pupils' grades. Logic suggests, as Iain Gray indicated, that that will disproportionately disadvantage pupils who go to schools that are in less high-achieving areas—which directly correlates with deprivation.

Has an equality impact assessment been done on the decision to include schools' historical attainment data in the moderation of the grades of individual pupils?

**Fiona Robertson:** Yes. As I mentioned, we are in discussions with the Equality and Human Rights Commission about the work that we are doing, to assure ourselves that the approach that we are taking is fair. Those discussions will include our work on an equality impact assessment.

I reiterate the point that was made about the information that we will use to inform the moderation process, and I highlight the fact that schools themselves will be looking at that information alongside information about individual young people.

It is really important to give some reassurance that, by using the suite of information we have, we are looking to come to the fairest possible judgments about awarded grades. Some

representations infer that that will not be the case. However, in unprecedented circumstances, we are seeking to ensure that we make the best decisions.

**Ross Greer:** I am sorry to interrupt, Ms Robertson, but we are extremely short on time.

Can I get clarification that you have not conducted an equality impact assessment? Can you confirm that you are going to do so and that it will happen before the end of this month, when teachers will have to submit their estimations?

**Fiona Robertson:** Work has been done on an equality impact assessment—I assure you of that—

**Ross Greer:** Can you publish that?

**Fiona Robertson:** —and we are having discussions about it in the normal way, as you would expect.

There is no reason for us to be lacking in transparency about the approach that we are taking during this process. As I think I have acknowledged, we are working through a range of issues as things stand.

In the SQA academy course, we have included issues on potential bias in estimation to ensure that it is minimised at the point when the estimate is provided. That is an important part of the advice that we have provided to schools. It is an issue—

**Ross Greer:** You made a point about transparency. Based on that, I would expect the results of the impact assessment to be published as soon as it is completed.

On transparency overall, the 10-page document of detailed guidance that has been sent to schools and teachers—it has also been published—does not include your methodology or model. On the basis of what you have said this morning, I believe that that is because the methodology and model are not quite complete yet. That is fair enough, but can you confirm that, as soon as the final methodology has been confirmed and signed off, it will be put into the public domain?

11:45

**Fiona Robertson:** When the certification model is concluded, it will be important for us to consider carefully at what point the full details of the model and the decision rules around certification will be published. I am happy to provide as much information as I can to assist the system in delivering what it needs to do for us in order for us to certificate. However, there are elements of the process that need to be treated as though this were a normal year, by which I mean that we should consider carefully at what point we publish precise details about certification. The

qualifications committee and the advisory council will consider that issue. Obviously, the board, to which I am accountable and which, in turn, is accountable to ministers, will wish to consider it as well.

**Ross Greer:** I appreciate those considerations, but the issue at the moment is that there is not widespread confidence in the system among pupils and teachers. Transparency might increase that confidence, which is critical.

My final question goes back to Ms Ross's points about ranking. You might have seen the recent article in *TES Scotland* by a teacher highlighting issues with that process. The teacher makes the point that he might have three pupils that he needs to put in your new refined band 8, which is a notional range between 62 and 64 per cent. The odds are that those pupils will not sit neatly in order from 64 to 63 to 62 and that there will be ties. However, the SQA does not want ties. At that point, the teacher will have to split hairs and consider who he thinks might have been a 63.7 or a 63.2 and try to rank the pupils in that way. Does the SQA accept that that is false precision that has no statistical value?

**Fiona Robertson:** In the interests of brevity, I will just say that I have already set out my position on the rationale for asking for rankings and we have acknowledged that that will be challenging for some subjects. We have not said that ties are not allowed. We are trying to encourage teachers to provide us with as much differentiation as possible, which will help us in the awarding process.

**The Convener:** I remind everyone that four members still want to come in. We will move on swiftly to Ms Wishart.

**Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD):** Mr Greer has covered one of the questions that I was going to ask, which was about ranking, so I will not go over that again, as we are short of time.

I am concerned about behaviour bias in the assessment. If a teacher puts forward 15 pupils in the B9 bracket, which is between 60 and 61 per cent, ranking them within that already small bracket involves grading them by fractions of a per cent. Is it not the case that, in the absence of any other academic justification, other factors will inevitably come into play? Could pupils who are not as confident or as memorable or pupils who muck around get a lower ranking on that basis? On the flipside, would a pupil with a more engaged parent be elevated up the rankings? What else will teachers use to make those minute judgments?

**Fiona Robertson:** As I said, in our academy course, we have provided information to teachers on unintentional bias. I ask Robert Quinn to provide a bit more detail on notional percentages.

Those can at times be a bit of a distraction from the task in hand, because they are notional. The example that you have given involves a very small notional percentage difference. I hope that Robert Quinn can provide a little more helpful information on that to assist with the question.

**The Convener:** Before I bring in Mr Quinn, I will ask a quick supplementary question. Ms Wishart raised the issue of parental pressure. Obviously, the estimation process has changed and has become a high-stakes activity for teachers and schools. Will you also answer about pressure from parents, pressure from pupils whose expectations of entry to university are based on their results, and external pressure from management—which teachers and the unions will talk about—to inflate some of the estimates in some way?

**Robert Quinn:** I accept that the estimating process, with its extended bands and notional figures, looks very narrow in terms of numbers. We are encouraging teachers not to focus on the numbers but to take a holistic view of the candidate.

If the candidate is near the band above, they go into the top extended band within the original band; if they are solidly within the band, or if they are just ahead of the band below, they go into the lower one. We use that kind of holistic judgment quite a lot in our marking processes. For example, in marking essays, people look at the totality of everything, rather than at a specific number. That is one of the ways in which we are dealing with that process.

On parental and other pressures, the guidance focuses on the view of the teacher as a professional who has to try to eliminate any bias or undue process. In the moderation process, we are looking for the involvement in the estimating process of at least two teachers for each subject and a wider moderation from the departmental perspective. By the time the estimate gets to any other process—for example, to senior management—it has been through a very rigorous internal process at the departmental level. That will provide a measure of protection and professionalism. Senior management's role is just to confirm that that has happened rather than to unduly change things.

**Beatrice Wishart:** Taking into account the emphasis that is placed on the relationship between the student and the teacher, who knows that student's abilities, can you say what happens in a scenario in which a teacher or a pupil has recently moved school and that background knowledge is not there?

**Fiona Robertson:** During the estimation process, instances in which schools will want to look at the individual circumstances of the young

person might include their having moved school. In that situation, the thing to do would be to speak to the young person's previous school, if possible, making sure of that connection so that the best and most informed estimate could be provided in the context of the new school.

Under the Scottish approach of on-going internal assessment of coursework, a young person usually has a relationship with the school or college and with one or more teachers during the course of the year. That will be very helpful. In England, there has been some concern about private candidates, who may not have any relationship with a school or college. However, in Scotland, given the nature of the assessment framework, and the way in which entries for qualifications are submitted through schools and colleges, I think that that risk is quite significantly reduced.

**Beatrice Wishart:** In my final question, I will turn the issue on its head as to who the whole process benefits.

In one of the committee's focus groups, participants thought that ranking was unacceptable and that it went against the principles of curriculum for excellence. One might say that the whole system seems to be built in the interests of the SQA, not the learners or the teachers. Is it the case that the SQA knows what the results are going to be and is reverse engineering the system to get there?

**Fiona Robertson:** No, I do not accept that characterisation of what we are doing. My principal focus is on the interests of learners throughout the process.

In this morning's discussion, I think that we have all acknowledged that we are in a very difficult position. There is a lot of anxiety in the system, and our job is to provide reassurance to the system, to ensure that young people can have confidence in the work that teachers and the SQA are doing together to deliver for them.

I do not have a set of results waiting in the wings at all. We are waiting on the estimates that teachers will provide and we will make the best judgments in the circumstances. My absolute focus is on the learner.

**Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):** I would like to follow on from Ross Greer's line of questioning. Clearly, the moderation process cannot be a black box. Although I understand the sensitivity around releasing your methodology and the timing of that, there are two critical time points for the making the methodology available. One is when teachers submit their estimated grades and the other is when learners receive their grades. Will the methodology be published in full prior to the submission of the grades, or, at the very least,

will it be published prior to learners receiving their grades?

**Fiona Robertson:** I understand the characterisation [*Temporary loss of sound.*] there are phases to this work. In the period between now and the end of May, we are focused on assisting teachers with the estimation process and we are providing data. We are building new systems, as we speak, in order to do that. We will be taking forward the process of awarding from the end of May. In effect, it will be into the middle of July before certification takes place.

As I said, what further materials we publish will be discussed again next week. Absolutely, there should be a presumption of openness and transparency. I would expect, on results day this year, to be very clear about the process that we have undertaken and the resulting awards that we have provided to young people, including whether there are differences between the estimates that young people received from their school and their awards after any subsequent moderation by the SQA. Within schools, there will be absolute clarity at individual level. I want to give a bit of assurance on the presumption of transparency.

You are right in saying that this is not a black box. It will involve a range of processes and information to inform us. That is in common with our approach every year. This is quite a different year, but we need to take that kind of approach every year.

**Daniel Johnson:** I look forward to clarification on the timetable. I just provide the comment that, if a methodology is robust enough to use to award grades, it should be robust enough to publish.

I need to move on. People have rightly focused on estimated grades, in terms of potential differences between schools or even teachers. I would like to focus on the differences between subjects, and, more esoterically, what will be assessed.

On that second point, the guidance that you have issued describes the estimation process as a “holistic” assessment by teachers, but the focus group made the point that that is not what an exam does. An exam gives an assessment of someone at a specific point in time. Is there a sense that the estimation process is providing an assessment of something a bit different, which is performance through the year, or are you asking teachers to estimate what pupils’ performance would have been in an exam? If it is the latter, you are asking teachers to estimate a portion of learning that will not actually have taken place, because pupils would have had to continue to learn past the point of lockdown before sitting an exam. There is that esoteric question of what the

estimate is actually going to be estimating in order to give a grade.

Secondly, some subjects will have quite a lot of coursework because of their nature. More data might be available for more quantitative subjects, as opposed to subjects such as art. In addition, teaching practice might come into play. Some teachers might do weekly class tests, even though that more traditional practice might have been discouraged. What assessment is being made of those differences between subjects in terms of the coursework that is available and what would have been assessed in the exam, and of the differences in teaching practice that might exist between different subjects?

12:00

**The Convener:** I am reminded of the fact that one of the focus groups made the point that, in subjects such as tech and art, many teachers do not have access to coursework, because pupils take their work home. That was another challenge that was raised in the context of moderation.

**Fiona Robertson:** I will bring in Robert Quinn to provide a bit more detail. The fact that different assessment approaches are taken across different subjects to reflect the nature of the learning and the course is a good one to make. We have been working through some of those issues with subject specialists.

I will hand over to Robert Quinn to talk about the estimation process and the nature of holistic assessment. The only thing that I would say is that the guidance on the estimation process is founded on what teachers have done every year, which is to provide us with estimates. For this year’s estimates, we are asking for a further level of granularity, given the circumstances that we find ourselves in.

I absolutely take the point that, this year, we might not be talking about a completed course, because of the timing and the nature of the school closures. The holistic assessment must include a degree of inferred judgment that is based on the evidence that is available to the teacher from the young person.

Robert, would you like to pick up Mr Johnson’s more esoteric point?

**Robert Quinn:** Yes, I can do that. The first thing to say is that estimating is not just about determining what score somebody will get in an examination. As Daniel Johnson rightly said, the courses in Scotland—particularly in comparison with those in the rest of the UK—are very much built on a range of assessment methods, and coursework is at the heart of most of our national courses. Therefore, it is not simply a case of trying

to second-guess what somebody would have got in the examination; it is more a case of looking at the knowledge and skills that are assessed in the course and coming to a determination on where the young person should fit in the context of the grade criteria.

For me, estimating is a subjective process. It is not a one-size-fits-all; it depends very much on the particular subject, the nature of the assessment and, indeed, the teaching and learning associated with that subject. Essentially, there are three elements to the process, the most critical of which is the teacher's understanding of their candidates, as well as the teacher's professional background and the department's background as that relates to what the evidence represents with regard to previous candidates and candidates this year in terms of judging their performance in the course overall. The second element is the teacher's understanding of their subject, and the third is their understanding of the standards. It is our job to help teachers with their understanding of the standards and to illustrate those.

When it comes to estimating, there is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Teachers will look at the make-up of the course, the balance between coursework and examination, and the different types of formative and summative assessment approaches that will provide evidence to support the key knowledge and skills that are assessed in each subject. They will then bring that together to determine, holistically, where they think that a young person is going in terms of a grade. Teachers will also reflect on previous years' estimates compared with results, as well as on departmental discussions and discussions at local authority level or with the SQA on the understanding of standards, before coming to a decision on an overall grade.

**The Convener:** Mr Johnson has a final, quick question, which I hope will receive a very quick answer.

**Daniel Johnson:** I have a brief supplementary to Jamie Greene's questions. You said that the Scottish Government made the decision not to hold the exams this year. Did the Scottish Government also make the decision not to allow young people to sit an exam in the autumn? A small number of pupils in Scotland would have been able to sit A levels then. Was that decision made by the SQA or the Scottish Government?

**Fiona Robertson:** It was the Scottish Government's decision that there could not be an exam diet in 2020, given the public health concerns and the uncertainty around schools reopening. It is important to highlight that the decision was taken on that basis. I discussed the matter with the Deputy First Minister, and I

absolutely agreed with that decision. We have taken the work forward on that basis.

**Alex Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP):** I have questions for Fiona Robertson on appeals. At a focus group that was held earlier this week, several teachers indicated that they are very unclear about the appeals procedure, the criteria for appeals and so on. There was also particular concern about how appeals will be assessed. Can you give us a quick overview of the approach to appeals, and can you tell us when teachers will be told what the appeals process will be?

**Fiona Robertson:** I am happy to do that. I highlight again that the final detail of the appeals process is currently going through our internal governance, which includes the views of teachers and others. We anticipate that, if a school is unhappy with the grade that has been awarded by the SQA in August, there will be an opportunity to appeal and we will look at any evidence that the school has on the estimated grade. We are working through the final details of that process and will provide further guidance to the system on those final details as soon as we can.

It is right that, at the moment, we are focused on the estimation process rather than the safety net. Our key focus is on helping teachers and working with the system on the estimation process. I accept that, thereafter, clarity around the appeals process will be important not just for schools but for young people. We will seek to get that clarity as soon as we can.

**The Convener:** We cannot see you, Mr Neil, but we can hear you. Please continue.

**Alex Neil:** I can see myself. *[Laughter.]*

Several questions arise from that answer. First, as well as consulting teachers, are you consulting pupils and parents? Secondly, given the exceptional circumstances and the unusual processes that are in place this year, as well as schools being able to lodge appeals, would it not be logical to allow pupils or parents to lodge appeals?

Thirdly, going back to the issue of the quality assessment, evidence from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills in London shows that, for some reason, the marking for black and minority ethnic groups tends to be more inaccurate than the marking for other groups that are being assessed. Given that information, is there a need to consider black and minority ethnic communities, in particular, as well as other socioeconomic groups that are generally disadvantaged, and to provide an analysis of that?

**Fiona Robertson:** On your first question, about seeking the views of young people and their parents, I can confirm that young people and

parents are represented on the two groups that I mentioned—the advisory council and the qualifications committee—so they are formally represented in our governance infrastructure. That supplements other discussions that—as you would expect—we are having with a range of stakeholders as part of our work.

I am familiar with BIS's research, which relates to predicted grades for the purposes of university entry. UCAS-predicted grades tend to be provided much earlier in the academic year, but, to be frank, they are also provided for a different purpose.

Our difficulty, which we are looking at, is that the entries that we presently get from schools do not provide us with other information about the characteristics of the young person. For the purposes of a year in which an exam is taken, the exam script is taken on its own.

I understand Mr Neil's point about the need to consider those issues as far as we can, and the Sutton Trust has responded to an Ofcom consultation in similar terms. We will want to consider and discuss further the extent to which we can look at those issues.

However, I say again that we have been providing advice to schools as part of an online course about bias. I also highlight Robert Quinn's point about having checks and balances in schools that seek to ensure that any issues are considered and, if need be, challenged.

**Alex Neil:** I have a final question. I fully appreciate your having to prioritise the work programme, given the tight timetable to which you are working. Can you give an indication of when you will publish the methodology that is being used and the arrangements for appeals?

**Fiona Robertson:** The arrangements for appeals should be provided reasonably quickly. As I have said, the focus of our work is on the estimation process, and quite a lot of work goes underneath that in terms of our systems and processes. For example, we had to build software on the estimation process and consider how that information is processed by the SQA.

I anticipate that the details of the appeals process will be provided quite soon. As I said, the full details of the model need to be considered further for the reasons that I have outlined—purely in the context of the principle of awarding in the normal way despite the fact that this is not a normal year. Therefore, I am not able to give you a final, definitive answer. However, I understand the point that is being made and I give an assurance that the presumption of transparency is front and centre.

**The Convener:** Before I bring in the final member, Jamie Greene has a brief supplementary question.

**Jamie Greene:** In the feedback that we got on what issues the SQA should take away, one of the responses was, for me, quite stark. That response asks for three simple things:

“Clear and open communication ... a simple timeline of the”

processes involved and

“Clear information on the appeals process for”

teachers, parents and pupils. Will the SQA commit to meeting those three requests from the sector?

12:15

**Fiona Robertson:** I do not think that that is an unreasonable request, Mr Greene. I hope that the detail that I have provided today gives some reassurance that the work that we have done to date, albeit in challenging circumstances, to regularly and fully communicate with teachers and others has fulfilled as much as possible what you have outlined. In the communication that I sent to schools on 20 April, I gave a broad timeline for further information that we will provide to schools over the next few weeks.

I absolutely take the point about the appeals process. I thought that it was important to prioritise the work that schools need to progress now. On that basis, I thought that the guidance on estimates was the priority, to give schools the maximum amount of time. In our original timeline, estimates were due to be in on 24 April. Obviously, we have—absolutely reasonably—extended the deadline to 29 May. We also have a timetable thereafter to 4 August.

We have been prioritising. However, I think that I can give the commitment that Mr Greene has requested as much as possible.

**Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** Good afternoon. My question is similar in some ways to Daniel Johnson's question, but it is to do with the college sector and HNCs and HNDs. When will the SQA will be able to complete its review of subjects for which alternative approaches to assessment are not suitable? When will you be able to provide the necessary initial guidance to colleges?

**Fiona Robertson:** I am glad that the college sector has been highlighted, because it has been a significant part of the work that we are doing. National qualifications are taught in colleges—obviously, they have a range of qualifications on offer.

We have been working really closely with Colleges Scotland and staff of colleges throughout

Scotland, and we provided a joint statement on higher national qualifications on 26 March. Further guidance on HNCs, in particular, was issued on 2 April.

There has been quite a lot detailed guidance. That is being followed up by subject-specific guidance, particularly for courses in which there are practical components to the learning.

In the past weeks, I have spoken to a number of college principals, and I think that they have been very happy with the work that we have been doing to progress some quite complex issues in what we call the HN and VQ space over this period. However, we will be looking to provide further subject-specific support very shortly. That work is at an advanced stage.

**Jamie Halcro Johnston:** Thanks very much for that update.

Is that subject-specific guidance already being rolled out? Is it being rolled out as it becomes available, or are you looking to put it out in one specific bubble, for clarity? How is it being rolled out? What subjects has there been most concern about, or have there been most complications with, in providing assessments?

**Fiona Robertson:** I can follow up details of the forward programme for that with the committee. However, as I have said, we are working through the subjects, and we are giving guidance as and when it is ready.

There are particular challenges in subjects in which there are practical components that it may be difficult to complete at the present time. Robert Quinn might want to say a little more about that in the context of some of the subjects that he is responsible for.

**Robert Quinn:** Most subjects are covered by the generic guidance, which gives colleges and their quality departments the freedom to adapt on the basis of the decision-making process, or the decision-making tree, that we have created. For some subjects, there are regulatory aspects such as licence-to-practise or health and safety considerations, which mean that people would see significant issues if the assessment evidence was not in place. For particular subjects, such as childcare, we need further consideration and adaptation in specific areas.

I understand that we are working hand in glove with Scottish colleges and lecturers in the college sector on that roll-out. We can come back to you with more specific details. The work will be rolled out in conjunction with Scottish colleges rather than independently by the SQA. It will be a joint workstream.

**Jamie Halcro Johnston:** We do not know how long the current situation will continue. We do not

yet know the full impact and when things will get back to near normal, never mind normal. I take it that part of the SQA's work will be looking to the future and at what will happen next year, particularly with courses and subjects for which it is more difficult to do standard assessments. Will some resilience or system be built in? Are you doing that at the moment, or are you planning to do it?

**Fiona Robertson:** We are working through those issues across the whole suite of qualifications. We are very mindful of the position that we are in and that it might continue. As I mentioned earlier, an education recovery planning group is in place, which is considering those issues in the round, because it is not just about qualifications, although they are important; it is about the whole system. The issues relating to continuity of learning and teaching and fairness are key. The short answer is that, yes, we are working through those issues just now.

For some qualifications, it might be very difficult not to pause. Robert Quinn highlighted licence-to-practise qualifications, and I think that there would be quite a lot of concern about some aspects of such qualifications if we did anything other than pause. However, adaptation is possible for other qualifications, and we are working through those issues. A huge amount of collaborative work is going on right across Scotland's colleges, and we have been getting very positive feedback about the approach that we have been taking, which has been very heartening.

**The Convener:** That concludes questions from the committee. I thank our witnesses from the SQA for their attendance.

Our next meeting will be on Wednesday morning, when we will take evidence from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, John Swinney, on the response to the coronavirus outbreak. I thank everyone for their attendance at today's meeting.

12:23

*Meeting continued in private until 12:47.*

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