EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE

Wednesday 4 October 2000
(*Morning*)

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EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE
29th Meeting 2000, Session 1

CONVENER

*Mrs Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
*Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
*Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
*Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)
Fiona McLeod (West of Scotland) (SNP)
*Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
*Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP)
*Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
*Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP)

*attended

WITNESSES

Pat Cairns (Headteachers Association of Scotland)
David Eaglesham (Scottish Secondary Teachers Association)
Alex Easton (Headteachers Association of Scotland)
David Elliot (Former Director of Awards, Scottish Qualifications Authority)
John Kelly (National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers)
George MacBride (Educational Institute of Scotland)
Margaret Nicol (Educational Institute of Scotland)
Andrew Shanks (Educational Institute of Scotland)
Ron Tuck (Former Chief Executive, Scottish Qualifications Authority)

THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED:

Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Martin Verity

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

David McLaren

ASSISTANT CLERK

Ian Cowan

LOCATION

The Hub

Scottish Parliament

Education, Culture and Sport Committee

Wednesday 4 October 2000

(*Morning*)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting in private at 09:45*]

10:16

Meeting continued in public.

School Exams

The Convener (Mrs Mary Mulligan): Good morning, everybody. Welcome to this morning's meeting of the Education, Culture and Sport Committee. I extend a particular welcome to Irene McGugan, who is joining us for the first time. There will be more of this to come, Irene, so you must have been very wicked.

Our first set of witnesses this morning are members of the teaching trade unions. We are grateful for your attendance and for your written submissions, which we have had an opportunity to examine. I intend to open up the meeting to questions immediately. As ever, we will be pressed for time. I will first ask individual members of the committee to ask relevant questions. There may also be some follow-up questions. If members would like to intervene and I am not looking at them, they should wave at me—I will try to bring them in where possible. We will kick off with higher still development.

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): What were the effects of the rate of introduction of higher still? What are your thoughts on the advisability of the manner in which it was introduced? In previous meetings, the committee has touched on the issue of phasing. This is a key area for the committee, and I would be grateful to hear your comments.

George MacBride (Educational Institute of Scotland): All the teacher trade unions were deeply concerned about the initial timetable for the introduction of the higher still programme. We argued strongly for and welcomed the postponements that were implemented under the Conservative and Labour Governments that were responsible for the programme before the Scottish Parliament was set up. The Educational Institute of Scotland was deeply concerned that there was pressure on teachers in Scottish schools to implement the programme before they were ready. We were pleased by the decision to phase in the programme in those subjects where people felt that it could not readily be implemented during the first year of higher still. We welcomed the fact that teachers were not put under pressure to do that.

We felt that phasing in a more general sense—piloting or introducing higher still for one subject before it was introduced for another—was inappropriate for a number of reasons. If a programme is piloted in a particular subject, that means that more pressure is put on teachers of that subject than on their colleagues. If the higher still programme had been piloted in particular schools or establishments, that would have led to considerable difficulties, because higher still is aimed not solely at young people in school, but at colleges and people in adult and community education and other forms of lifelong learning. It would have been difficult to have had any meaningful form of piloting.

John Kelly (National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers): I do not disagree with anything that George MacBride has said. One of our concerns—and I am not sure whether this is political with a large or a small P, because it was the case under both Administrations—was that there seemed to be a reluctance to accept the professional judgment of teachers that the programme was not ready to be implemented. There was a political will that the timetable should be met. When Brian Wilson was minister of state at the Scottish Office, he was heard at one meeting to say, "Why am I hearing this for the first time?" There was a reluctance on the part of Her Majesty's inspectors of schools and, possibly, the higher still development unit to give ministers messages that they might not have wanted to hear.

David Eaglesham (Scottish Secondary Teachers Association): I echo what John Kelly and George MacBride have said. From our point of view, the key to this is the extent to which the advice—the virtually unanimous but separately arrived at advice—of the teaching unions, representing the whole profession, was ignored for what can only be regarded as a narrow political purpose. Like John Kelly, I will not say whether that was political with a capital P. Teacher unions were castigated for being luddite and for refusing change. We were seen as reactionaries who were holding up the process. However, all the time we were totally right, as we were reporting back what practitioners were saying in the classrooms—that there were fundamental problems.

There was no way in which we could know the detail of the difficulties that finally arose at the Scottish Qualifications Authority. Had we known that detail at any point, we would certainly have

said something—we would have been culpable had we not said something. We cannot pretend that this is all about one episode. It is quite clear that there was a political determination that higher still should go ahead, that it should go ahead in a particular way and in a particular time frame, and that nothing should stop it, least of all genuine reporting by the profession of serious problems of implementation. We made the point repeatedly that no teacher in Scotland would have benefited by a penny from delaying higher still. However, we were still told that we were putting our narrow interests ahead of the interests of the pupils. We said repeatedly and in public that the unions and the members whom we represent were putting the interests of the pupils first.

Mr Stone: Are you suggesting that there was what verged on a reckless haste in implementing higher still, despite warnings from the unions?

David Eaglesham: I do not know whether the haste was reckless or whether it was otherwise motivated. However, there was a determination to implement the programme within the agreed time scale, regardless of any objections.

Mr Stone: Do you agree that there was undue and possibly damaging haste?

David Eaglesham: There was haste that eventually proved to be damaging. It created problems for schools when they came to decide whether they should go ahead with higher still. It would have been far better if we had been able to proceed on a properly planned, fully resourced and fully ready basis. That was not the situation in which we found ourselves. Schools had to make difficult decisions about whether to present in higher still or in the traditional higher.

George MacBride: I would not use the adjective "reckless", but undue haste was an important factor. Many teachers in schools and members of all the teacher trade unions perceived a determination to push ahead with higher still. We associate that with the general culture in the management of Scottish education, which until now has operated on a top-down model where decisions are made without involving teachers in much of the detailed planning. That led to many of the practical difficulties, and we had to push extremely hard for the additional resourcing that finally underpinned the higher still programme. Even when Brian Wilson, as minister of state at the Scottish Office, was announcing the postponement by a year of the introduction of the higher still programme, leading members of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities clearly disagreed and argued that teachers, as employees, should implement it with undue haste. We would therefore not identify any political party, but we would identify a political culture in Scottish school education.

Mr Stone: I am anxious to get to the heart of what you think has or has not been going on with HMI. We heard that HMI was perhaps not carrying messages back to ministers, although it should have been. Can you expand on that and say why, if that is the case, that did not happen?

David Eaglesham: In our written evidence we have indicated that, at meetings with ministers, we were presenting our concerns. Certainly my organisation did so, and I imagine that other organisations did likewise. Initially, there was a clear trend to dismiss those concerns as unimportant and not time constrained. As time went on, it became clear that ministers were getting conflicting advice. They were getting advice from us saying one thing and advice from other sources—HMI and presumably others—saying very different things.

It became clear from casual conversations with ministers that they were puzzled about which advice was correct. They were convinced by what they heard from teacher trade unions, but they were also being given advice by their usual sources. We were very much at odds. I remember a particularly vitriolic meeting in Dover House, at which one of my colleagues was challenged about the accuracy of the points that he was putting across on the higher still developments. We vigorously reinforced those points, but it was clear that the minister had a real dilemma as to which line was tenable.

Margaret Nicol (Educational Institute of Scotland): During the first year of implementation, we found that HMI, quite rightly, picked up the positive view of what was happening in schools, but seemed to be failing to pick up the problems and the more negative aspects, particularly in relation to internal assessment. HMI's view did not reflect the reality that most of us found in schools. Although it has been picking up curricular issues in school inspections, it appears to have failed to pick up the administrative difficulties. To that extent, we certainly have concerns.

John Kelly: As a general observation, the problem is not with personalities in the inspectorate but with the role of the inspectorate as it has been constituted in the past 10 years. In our evidence on the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act 2000, we pointed out that the inspectorate is now both the generator of policy and the policeman of policy, which cannot be right. If the inspectorate is pushing higher still—and it could be something else tomorrow—is it the best-suited body to listen to and represent the problems that might occur in implementation?

Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): In the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association submission, one statement seems to sum up everything about the

implementation phase. It says:

"Principles dominated practicality throughout the process".

Can you give examples of that? I think that everyone accepts that the Scottish Vocational Education Council modules were not doing the job and that intermediate 1 and 2 would have been a new development with status, but there were practicalities involved in the unitisation and administration. How did principles dominate practice in those areas?

David Eaglesham: I was referring to something more general. There seemed to be a principled determination that this was some kind of flagship programme that had to go ahead. We were unclear why a programme that was devised under one Administration and taken up under another Administration should suddenly become that second Administration's flagship programme. It seems that there was multifaceted ownership of it. It was important—nobody was under any illusion about the fact that it was a vital programme that had to go ahead. However, the principle seemed to be that it had to go ahead in a certain time frame and on a certain basis and that, if it did not, the Administration might be seen to have failed. We did not think that the Labour Administration would be failing if higher still was suspended or postponed for a further period to enable it to be implemented properly. In that sense, our comment was not a political reflection. However, there seemed to be a political determination that it must go ahead; perhaps it became the educational millennium dome, which is unfortunate.

The practicalities at the time were that there were problems with the delivery of materials. At times we were being told things that were simply untrue. In the experience of classroom practitioners, the materials were not arriving in schools, but we were being told that they had arrived. That was a difficult situation. Our members were reporting that the materials were not there, which meant that we could not progress. However, the principle said that higher still was so vital that it must go ahead. We agreed that it was vital and that it had to go ahead, but not in that time frame.

10:30

George MacBride: To borrow the SSTA's phrase, we believe that the principles that underpin the higher still programme are important ones that should be realised in Scottish education. They build on the success of our comprehensive schools and seek to promote social inclusion by bringing in those who are socially disadvantaged. They seek to recognise progression, by building from standard grade through higher still and into higher level qualifications. They seek to ensure that adults have access to further education and they break down the traditional divide between academic and vocational education. All those principles are important and should be sustained, whatever the outcome of this and other inquiries into recent events.

We strongly agree with the SSTA about the issues that David Eaglesham has just described. Those principles were understood and promoted even when there was clear evidence on the ground that there were practical problems that were not being rapidly or efficiently addressed.

John Kelly: I do not dissent at all from the views of my fellow witnesses. Higher still has been seen as a significant advance in Scottish education in terms of social inclusion and recognising the worth of young people for whom the higher was not appropriate. However, if we are talking about principles dominating practicalities, we need look no further than the continuing failure to implement the new higher in English and communication. We all agree that there should be no bar between the academic and the vocational, but perhaps there should be two separate highers: higher English and higher communication. The profession has been saying that for six years, but it seems to go against the political mantra of equality of recognition. We have a political one-size-fits-all straitjacket, but one size does not fit all. However, when teachers have said that, we have been pooh-poohed.

Ian Jenkins: There seems to be an idea that all courses ought to look the same, with the same number of boxes and units. What are your views on that? People have mentioned the SCOTVEC culture, with units being done sequentially. Will you comment on the shifting of the sands when the higher still development unit eventually recognised that concerns were being expressed and changed the times at which units could be done? We might have thought such developments okay if they had been done before, but shifting in the middle of the year can cause difficulties.

George MacBride: Substantial changes in the middle of a course would have caused considerable difficulty. In my school, colleagues in different subject departments had already adopted different models for delivering higher still courses. Although most departments were doing it sequentially, some—for sound professional and educational reasons—were doing it on a parallel basis. They believed that the timing of assessments was, to a considerable extent, under their control, but the immediate issue was the number of internal assessments, which was in many subjects far more than the number of units, as there could be several assessments within one unit.

The pressures on young people to pass those

assessments, the need to reassess where a young person failed to achieve a cut-off score, and the knock-on effects on teaching and learning caused substantial difficulties, which must be addressed in reviewing higher still. Even within the programme, teachers had some freedom, but we clearly would not want courses to be totally rewritten once a teaching session had begun.

Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): I would like to pick up a number of points in the SSTA's submission; others will no doubt want to comment too. Mr Eaglesham, at one point in the submission, you refer to two specific meetings with HMI and ministers—one in January 1998 and one in May 1998. You say that, in January, HMI's reaction was "patronisingly dismissive" and that, in May, it was "aggressive and ill-judged". Will you expand on those comments? What points did you put at those meetings and what were the reactions?

David Eaglesham: At both meetings, we presented the same argument—that higher still was evidentially not ready. We pointed out episodes in which material should have been delivered and prepared but had not been. Our line did not change much between the two meetings, except that further evidence was available in May that had not been available in January.

In January, the attitude of the advisers was that there was not really a problem. That was not the attitude of Brian Wilson, the minister at the time, and it was interesting to watch the body language and the reactions. The advisers' attitude was that, if we stood back long enough, the problem would resolve itself. They had the confident attitude that says, "There is no problem, and what you are reporting is insubstantial tittle-tattle that will ultimately have no effect on the process."

By May, they came—I think that this was the expression that I used at the time—loaded for bear. We had scarcely got in the door when one of the inspectors was attacking my colleague and saying, "This is nonsense, this is ridiculous, this simply is not true." My colleague gave a very good account of himself, and I would like to pay tribute to him for being absolutely accurate. I am not currently a practising classroom teacher, and I confess that sometimes I have difficulty in knowing exactly what is happening. I bow to my colleagues here, who are practising teachers and therefore know what is happening on the ground on any day. My colleague at the May meeting was a practising teacher and knew exactly what was and was not happening. He had also been involved in all the higher still developments. He was directly controverted by HMI at that meeting, and one could see in the minister's face a genuine difficulty. My colleague came across plausibly and what he said seemed to be sound and accurate, yet the directly opposite view was being put by HMI. The minister had a real dilemma.

Nicola Sturgeon: You say that the minister had a dilemma, and you say in your submission that he was receiving conflicting advice at that stage, from HMI on one hand and from professionals on the other. Whose advice was he following?

David Eaglesham: That question is difficult to answer. I suppose that the person to ask would be the then minister. My view, from informal conversations, is that the minister had become convinced that there was a genuine problem that had not been fully addressed and that steps might have to be taken. Of course, at that point, a new minister came into post, who would receive the same advice as had been given to the outgoing minister. There was a transition period, which was unfortunate—although not because of the two people involved, for both of whom I have the greatest respect. The timing of the change between ministers made things more difficult. Had Brian Wilson continued in the post for the rest of the year, I imagine that there would have had to be some kind of reaction. However, it is understandable that the new minister with a new brief would take advice from the appropriate advisers.

It took a little time—I think until October—until we were back putting the same problems to Helen Liddell. By that stage, my colleagues will recall that we were into animated discussions over whether things would or would not go ahead, ballots on boycotts, potential lockouts from meetings and all sorts of other things. Everything was very public, and it was difficult to disentangle ourselves from those issues. There had been an opportunity in the summer, and it is unfortunate that that opportunity was lost. That happened not because of anyone's deliberate actions, but because of the reshuffle. I do not think that the reshuffle was connected in any way with these events; it was just a by-product.

Nicola Sturgeon: The common factor during the period was HMI and the officials who, I presume, continued to give advice that was at variance with the experience of classroom practitioners.

David Eaglesham: I know of no evidence that suggests that HMI's advice changed over that period. We detected no change.

Nicola Sturgeon: It is one thing to identify, and to be proved right on, defects in the implementation of higher still; it is another thing to prove any causative effect on what happened during the summer. Others may want to comment, but to what extent did the problems that you flagged up on the implementation of higher still contribute to the chaos of the exam results and issuing process this summer?

David Eaglesham: It would be nice to be able to draw the audit trails together and say exactly what happened at each stage—that is clearly what this committee is trying to do with the evidence that it is taking. To be frank, I cannot answer your question. All I can say is that, had the advice that we and other unions were giving at the time been listened to, the problem would not have occurred as it did occur, because the development of higher still would have taken place in a different time frame. For example, the merging of the two computer systems would have gone ahead, but not in hot pursuit of higher still. It is also possible that some of the assessment issues would have been resolved, which would have lessened the burden on our colleagues in the SQA.

It is impossible to follow an audit trail directly and say that, if a specific something had happened in August 1998, the chaos of this summer would not have happened. As I said, we would have been culpable if we had had such knowledge but had failed to apply it to the benefit of young people in Scotland. Although people have been suggesting in the press that it was known all along that this was going to happen, I do not think that anyone in my association knew that. I would be very angry if people had known it but had not done anything about it.

Nicola Sturgeon: With the benefit of hindsight, do you feel that, if some of your concerns had been listened to and acted on, it is at least likely that the crisis this summer might have been averted?

David Eaglesham: The impact of the crisis might have been less had some our concerns—and those of other colleagues—been listened to.

Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Nicola Sturgeon's last question was on a point that I wanted to explore. We may take evidence from the previous ministers at some stage, but I understand that the transitions between Government and Government, and between minister and minister, were almost seamless as regards the advice that people were receiving, and that that advice has contradicted the advice that you, as union representatives, were giving on the introduction and implementation of higher still.

Now that we can look back, and given the consistency of your advice, do you feel that any of your warnings might have made a difference? We are aware that data processing at the SQA was a significant factor, and we are aware of problems—which have been consistently pointed out by you and others—with assessment, marking and the recruitment of markers. Would you like to take this opportunity to say that some of the points that you have raised during the past two or three years could have taken pressure off the SQA? What seems to come through—although we have still to establish this—is that all the contributory factors were adding to the core problem.

Before I am criticised for asking a four-minute question, let me just ask this: could any of the points that you raised have made a difference, if you had been listened to?

The Convener: If witnesses could keep their answers shorter than that question, we would be grateful.

George MacBride: We will try. As far as we understand them, the issues that arose this summer were largely operational. Like David Eaglesham, we could not, and did not, predict them. The EIS was aware of some continuing difficulties with data processing, but nothing more than that. I appreciate that I am speaking with the benefit of hindsight, but we would say that the clear difference between previous years—when the Scottish Examination Board, SCOTVEC and the successor body, the SQA, operated as efficiently and effectively as they had ever done—and this year was the additional volume of data that arose from internal assessment. Had some or all of our concerns about the burdens and pressures of internal assessment on young people, teachers, schools and, as it turned out, the SQA been listened to, we believe that that would have been a significant factor in preventing this year's difficulties.

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): You said that the SQA could not handle the volume of data that was generated by internal assessment—a point that has been made by many people. However, you say in your submission that teachers could handle it and that schools could handle it.

George MacBride: Teachers handled it, at some cost to themselves and possibly also to their on-going work. Senior staff in schools would input data in various formats, and teachers at all levels would have to input the data again, either for whole groups or individual youngsters. They would often then have to check with their colleagues and principal teachers, who then might have to check with class teachers on the exact status of the data.

10:45

There was considerable repetition of input and correction of data, which were then not carried through the SQA systems. Pressure was put on administrative staff in schools, who had to be diverted from other tasks to input data to computer systems. It would be wrong for me to speculate on the processes within SQA that caused the difficulties, but there is no doubt that they placed pressure on employees at all levels within schools.

Ian Jenkins: Mr Shanks, as a principal teacher, will you tell us how the administrative burden and assessment procedures of higher still impacted on the rest of your teaching and on the other classes that you taught? How did it bulk in your work load?

Andrew Shanks (Educational Institute of Scotland): It had a huge impact. I was one of the few enthusiasts who implemented higher still English and communication this year. I believed in it and thought that, as my colleagues have said, it was a good thing for the pupils of the school. It became clear very early on that the amount of assessment that was involved in internal unit assessments would be burdensome. Classes were large and we were dealing with a larger number of pupils because of the inclusion of intermediate 1 and intermediate 2. The marking took a great deal of time. The higher still assessments took a long time, sometimes an hour and a half, but critical listening took a great deal longer and individual presentation could take hours and hours. I had teachers who worked through their lunch hours and after 4 pm. I had pupils queuing up outside. First-year, second-year, third-year and fourth-year pupils were affected. Every aspect of teachers' work was affected by the burden of assessment for higher still. It has had an impact not just on the kids in fifth year and sixth year this year but on the quality and delivery of education by teachers throughout the education system.

Ian Jenkins: That is precisely what I expected that you would say. If the results had been okay this year, the assessment procedures would have become part of the programme, which would have had a major impact. Is that right?

Andrew Shanks: The burden of assessment needed to be examined. From early on we told the SQA that the amount of assessment was a burden. I think that all teachers, and in particular English teachers, would agree that the burden of assessment was almost too much and would have had to be reviewed to enable higher still to continue for another year. Many teachers were under a huge amount of pressure. Higher still could not have continued as it operated this year. There have been changes, which will reduce some of the burden of assessment. Certainly, there would have had to be a major review of assessment for higher still to run smoothly this year.

David Eaglesham: In response to Brian Monteith's question, I think that developments could have taken place outwith the hot pursuit of higher still. For example, the computer systems could have been brought together and there could have been trials of procedures. A number of changes occurred simultaneously, some of which could have taken place even with the previous diet of examinations. That would have allowed changes to take place and to be bedded in, which would make the introduction of higher still in the next year more straightforward. It was the overlap of a series of different things that led to some issues dropping through the gratings in the street.

John Kelly: David Eaglesham has largely covered the point that I had intended to make. The SQA got one thing wildly wrong. The introduction of higher still assessments at intermediate 1 and intermediate 2 resulted in far more candidates taking national exams, which required markers. I am not sanguine about what will happen in the current session when we get further into the implementation of higher still and more subjects come on stream.

The Convener: I am anxious to move on. Mr Kelly has now raised the question of markers.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): We are hearing a mixed message about higher still. To describe higher still as the millennium dome of Scottish education suggests that you thought that it was an expensive white elephant of the Scottish Executive rather than something to which you were committed. It was also described as a political mantra and a one-size-fits-all approach—presumably, the other side of the argument is that what we had before higher still was a one-size-fits-all approach from which many youngsters got no benefit.

Given that, from what David Eaglesham said, there is a suggestion that some people were less committed than others to the idea of higher still, would it have been reasonable for ministers who were hearing conflicting advice to think that some anxieties arose from issues of principle rather than practicality? If that were the case, ministers would have been more likely to take advice other than that of the unions.

George MacBride: That is a complicated question, to which there are several layers.

First—I hope that I will not misrepresent colleagues from other associations—I think that there is general support for the principles that underpin the higher still programme. Secondly, there are concerns about certain aspects of that programme, and in particular internal assessment. Thirdly, among all the teaching unions, considerable anxiety was caused by the perception that higher still was being imposed for political reasons and without adequate resourcing.

Fourthly—this is perhaps the most important aspect of the imposition—there was a strong feeling among many teachers that they were excluded from any real debate, either about the principles or the practicalities of implementation. The reasons for that feeling relate to the culture within which we operated in Scottish education for

much of the 1990s. The feeling led to the view that higher still was a political mantra to be pursued. That does not detract from the commitment of the EIS to the principles that underpin higher still. It might also lead to the situation that Johann Lamont described, in which mixed messages are sent to the Scottish Executive.

David Eaglesham: My association was committed to the principle of higher still from the very beginning, in 1994—indeed, there was a difference of opinion on higher still between it and other associations. Since then we have been committed to the principle that something like higher still should go ahead. It is important to articulate that the examination system at the end of secondary school should ensure that every pupil has equality of opportunity and access to every possible avenue for the development of their abilities.

However, that does not commit us to any particular model of delivery. We have criticised the model of delivery that was chosen, although we have never resiled from the position that higher still was for the benefit of young people and should go ahead. Ironically, we are debating the higher aspect of higher still, although in many ways the most important aspects are intermediate 1, intermediate 2 and access. It is the articulation of that process as part of the upper end of secondary education that is crucial.

We never moved from that view so there was never any mixed message to the Executive about the principle. We reported the practical difficulties that were involved. There seemed to be a political determination that the implementation of higher still should go ahead regardless. I likened it to the millennium dome because, regardless of the principle that celebrating the millennium was a good idea, there seemed to be a political determination that that celebration should take place in Greenwich, in a particular form. We endorsed the principle of higher still, but the practicalities were such that we had to be honest and report that it could not work in that form.

Johann Lamont: Is it reasonable to say that, despite the practical problems, the teaching unions and the teachers delivered? Of course, the fact that that was done at huge cost has to be examined with a view to modifying higher still. Despite the anxieties of the profession, it managed to deliver higher still. It was something that was not foreseeable that caused the problems in the end.

The Convener: Mr Kelly, do you wish to respond?

John Kelly: I will not respond to that, but will develop the point that David Eaglesham made. I emphasise again that the teaching profession has been committed to higher still. Higher still in its current form has had a fair input from teachers. If we had not had higher still, we would have had Howie, which we all said was not the best way forward for Scottish youngsters, particularly at lower ability levels. When there was talk of delay, teachers said that they would do intermediate 1 and intermediate 2 first, because the higher suits the market at which it has always been aimed. That advice was not taken. I do not think that it can be said that the teachers were not committed to the principles of higher still.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): Let us move on to marking. We have heard stories about timing issues and about unsolicited scripts being sent to teachers. I am interested in exploring the marking issues.

Margaret Nicol: Cathy Peattie will know that as well as being president of the EIS, I am a member of the board of the SQA, although I do not appear in that capacity today. It is fair to say that marking would have been an issue regardless of all the other operational problems that arose this year, partly because higher intermediate 1 and intermediate 2 had to be marked externally.

There is a growing need for markers. Should the winter diet be taken up, there will be an even greater need for them. Marking had been a problem that was raised outwith and within the SQA for some time. I think that the SQA recognised the problem. If the SQA wants markers and the Scottish Executive wants it to have markers, they must start to pay them properly.

The Convener: There have been several statements about how much people were paid and about markers being paid less this year. Can you clarify the position?

Andrew Shanks: I am a marker. My payment did not drop, but it increased only a little. The payment of marking is based on the time that it takes to mark a paper. There is disagreement about how the papers are paid for, and the system needs urgent review, particularly considering the stress under which markers were put.

I was chairman of the subject panel, and in September 1999 it examined the reappointment of markers and setters as part of its remit. It became clear that more markers would be needed for the new diet, because of intermediate 1 and intermediate 2. As teachers, we knew through resubmission and through receiving inaccurate presentation lists that the SQA held inaccurate lists and that the markers were allocated on the basis of those lists. As far as I could see, the SQA did not speculate as to how many markers it might need. It planned only for how many it could prove it needed. In reality, there were far more papers in some subjects than markers had been allocated

for.

I think that the quality of the markers was good. However, the number of markers whom the SQA had contracted did not match the number of papers, so the normal rolling programme through which papers came into the board and went straight out to markers could not be followed. Papers had to be reallocated to markers who had already marked many scripts. If those markers could not take the number that they had been allocated, the papers had to be reallocated. Therefore, the time scale slipped. Markers were offered double the normal fee to take extra papers, and many markers took that up.

Cathy Peattie: You talk about the quality of the markers. We have had mixed messages about that. You said that the quality was good; others have said that it was not good. Teachers and whole departments have stressed that candidates whom they had expected to achieve reasonable results did not achieve them. Does everyone agree that the quality was good, or is that simply your interpretation?

Andrew Shanks: I know from my dealings with the SQA that the quality of the markers was high and equal to the normal standard. However, the time scale within which the markers had to mark the papers was significantly shorter than normal.

George MacBride: There have been many stories suggesting that the marking was not of such a high quality. We want those stories to be investigated. If it turns out that the marking was not of such a high quality as a result of time pressure, the way in which markers were recruited or the fact that quality assurance checks could not be performed—it would be speculation to talk about that issue—that will be a serious issue that requires to be addressed. It may be that, to some extent, some of the stories have been fed by media accounts that have not been entirely accurate. At this stage, we think that it needs further investigation.

11:00

Cathy Peattie: Teachers that I have spoken to—I am sure that others say the same—say that they will never mark again. They talk about problems with timing and payment. How do we move forward? The current examinations diet started in June. How do we ensure that, this year and in future, there are markers to carry out the work?

George MacBride: To some extent, that is an issue for the Executive rather than the SQA. As Margaret Nicol has pointed out, the Executive must make a clear statement that funding will be available to ensure that markers will be adequately remunerated. The current pay levels are far too low to repay people for the stress and responsibility associated with the job. There must be a clear statement that the timing of the exam diet and the announcement of the results—matters within the control of the Scottish Executive rather than the SQA—will allow for marking and subsequent and accompanying quality assurance procedures to take place. That must include the more senior markers considering how markers have performed and the concordance procedures through computer programmes. Sufficient time for those checks and balances must be built into the time scale. That is a first and important step.

As one investigates the events of last summer, it is crucial that the on-going work of the SQA is not diverted and is maintained properly. I am including the vocational qualifications in that work.

John Kelly: There are a couple of points that I would like to expand on. In our submission we were questioning the need for Scottish children's results to be out before those of English children—they all go through the same Universities and Colleges Admissions Service system. We are still dominated by the timetable for entry to universities. We have examinations for the whole of our cohort, regardless of ability. Just because, for the past 100 years, we have done something in time for the universities, there is no need to continue to do that. We need to consider how our system reports and the purpose of our assessment—that is a big question.

On a minor practicality, it is obvious that people will not be attracted to giving up two and half weeks of their time—weeks of frenetic activity—for less than £8 per hour. That will be a big problem this year.

The Convener: Several members want to ask questions.

Nicola Sturgeon: I want to explore further the issue of quality. It is beyond doubt that, this year, there are question marks over pupil performance against predicted performance—there is a wealth of anecdotes about that. One of the explanations for that is quality of marking. Are there any other factors that might have contributed to that, such as the burden of assessment or the timing of the exams? Are there matters that are intrinsic to higher still that might explain in part why so many pupils appear to have underperformed in relation to their predicted results?

David Eaglesham: One of our great concerns has been the simplistic association of two elements—that performance is inevitably linked to poor marking standards. We refute that. We do not believe that to be the underlying cause. If there is a problem, its extent is not yet clear.

One of the major factors to have impinged on pupil performance is the truncation of the

examination diet. That presented young people with a series of examinations closely run together. Pupils might have sat two major examinations in one day and three examinations in four days. That was not the pattern in the past. The pattern tended to be a day of examinations followed by a day off. That is the practice that many of us have experienced in other contexts, such as further or higher education. There would have been a reasonable balance of time for pupils to prepare, sit exams, recover and then prepare again. That was not evident this year and has damaged the performance of some young people. They have been put under a huge amount of pressure and may have suffered because of that.

The Education, Culture and Sport Committee must consider carefully the overall impact on pupils. Higher still has been a political football all the way through. Young people do not live in a vacuum—they live in the real world. I am sure that all of us have been lobbied by young people about higher still. Throughout the process, young people were acutely aware that there was something different and unusual about the situation. They knew that it was a problem because it was in the newspapers and on the television. As they saw it, they were the guinea pigs for higher still. They were not. The teachers and the professionals made sure that pupils were not treated in that way. However, the pupils' perception was that they were being treated in that way.

The examination period was narrowed down and that put even more pressure on young people. It is to their credit that they have done as well as they have in the circumstances. The committee should bear that in mind, because its responsibility is to ensure that the best interests of young people are served.

Margaret Nicol: If one looks at the results overall, a major factor has been the number of appeals. There has been a huge increase in the number of appeals, although the percentage of successful appeals is not so different. That can be explained by the fact that the SQA did not run its usual concurrence checks. In effect, in schools with a proven good track record of estimates, the SQA carries out a sort of appeals procedure before the results are issued, so that pupils are much more likely to have a grade that is consistent with their estimated grade. That was not done this year, which would have had a major influence on the difference between estimates and performances.

John Kelly: Margaret Nicol has touched on an important point: the holy grail of concordance. For many years, schools have been told that they must be accurate in their estimates, for the very good reason that if the child underperforms on the day, they can be accorded the performance of which they were thought to be capable. In the past few years, schools have been told only once how concordant they were. That is information that they need to get every year. The information that comes back from the SQA must be more transparent. If I, as the man in charge of a certain subject, am consistently wrong in my estimates without knowing it, I am doing a disservice to the young people in my charge. We need that information.

George MacBride: I have a slightly different point. One of the things that we must bear in mind is the fact that the procedures of the SQA and its predecessors have resulted in a highly sophisticated and ambitious system that requires only a few things to go wrong for the whole thing to crumble, because of the knock-on effects. The standards of the SQA—I am referring to the way in which it is organised rather than its exam standards—make it one of the most sophisticated examining bodies in Europe.

There is an issue in the higher still programme about the relationship between internal and external assessment. Internal assessment is on a pass-fail basis—a candidate either achieves a unit or does not. External examination is designed to grade youngsters in terms of an A, B or C pass. That level of demand and sophistication needs further consideration.

Johann Lamont: I want to explore a different element of the marking issue. Every time I carried out marking I said that I would never do it again, so I am entirely sympathetic with people who feel that way. The pressures that markers were under this year were phenomenal.

I am interested in the inability to react to the concerns that people were raising. That has been a feature of other evidence that we have taken. It is clear that your subject panels have been expressing concerns about practical issues, such as the need for more markers. As it became evident that there were problems with the markers, what efforts did the unions make to be heard on that matter? You have said that the board only meets four times a year. Were there efforts to push your concerns about this at board level? Or was the pattern repeated that we have heard elsewhere, which was that people raised questions, received reassurances and nothing changed?

Margaret Nicol: Yes. The EIS raised those issues in several forums. First, we had meetings with the SQA. It was clear that we were raising the markers issue—there is a minute from 27 March. We contacted the SQA because of our serious concerns about estimates, grades, non-transmission of materials, marking and moderation, which was also a problem last year.

We also raised those issues within the higher national liaison committee and the assessment focus group, which the SQA set up to address those issues. It is not fair to say that nothing happened. Questions were asked, solutions for this year were given and ways ahead for next year were identified. We accepted that some of the problems existed because this year there was a changeover to the awards processing system. Some of those problems existed because the system was new, and they would not continue when the process was bedded in.

We also addressed problems that were not going to go away, such as the need for markers and more moderators. Those problems will not go away. Those were all raised and the SQA took away a commitment to address them. Questions about the need for markers and the transmission of information turned out not to have been addressed.

Johann Lamont: Would that minute have appeared before the board of the SQA? At what level were those alarm bells being rung? It seems to be a simple, practical point. There were three times more exams to be marked, but the appropriate number of markers are not being taken on and they are being taken on late. I can understand that different groups discussed it and received reassurances, but did somebody go to the SQA board and mention, or have in front of them, evidence of the unions' strong concerns that this was going to be undeliverable if there were not enough markers?

Margaret Nicol: The alarm bells would have been rung through the assessment focus group. They were being rung in the national qualifications committee and they were being rung at the board. In the minute of the board meeting on 27 June there is reference to the difficulties that there had been in marking, the fact that new markers had been identified and the statement that the remaining papers that needed to be marked were to be marked shortly. The board was being given reassurances. That is specific; it is in the minute. It can be checked easily.

Nicola Sturgeon: If those concerns were being raised over several months, were you, as a board member, raising those matters consistently at board meetings? The minutes do not reflect that.

If you were being given reassurances such as those that appear in the minute of 22 June, were you reassured by what you were being told? It must have been at variance with the concerns that teaching colleagues expressed to you.

Margaret Nicol: It was not at variance—the reasons were at variance. The information that we were getting from schools was that information was being submitted and not being recognised by the SQA. From the SQA's point of view, the problem was perceived to be that schools had not submitted the information. We were being reassured—as late as 22 June, which was the last time that the board met before all this took place—that the entries were coming in, steps had been taken to identify people who would be in touch with the SQA during the holidays and it was confident that the information would be in in time for the completion date of 10 August.

Nicola Sturgeon: What I am trying to get at—it is the same point that I pursued with Ann Hill at the meeting of this committee on Monday—is how vigorously those concerns were being pursued at the level of the SQA board. We have heard that reassurances were being given, yet we have heard from your union and other unions that teachers were continuing to raise concerns. Were those reassurances being accepted at face value? Was there vigorous discussion of those matters at board meetings? It came out at our previous meeting that the minutes of the board meetings do not reflect that those issues were being pursued vigorously.

Margaret Nicol: How vigorously can you pursue a question of what is happening to the results—

Nicola Sturgeon: Issues such as that are not mentioned. Apart from marking being mentioned on 22 June, other concerns that were being raised do not feature in the board minutes.

We were told by David Miller that that was simply a fault of the minutes. Do you agree with that?

Margaret Nicol: I would have to agree with that. The reports that were given were often oral. The problems were often identified by the SQA officers. They said, "We have had this problem and this is how we are going to resolve it." Board members did not always have to ask the question. I am satisfied that no question that I could think of that could have been asked was not asked. I am also satisfied that no answer was not pursued that I could have pursued. I am confident that it was not just me—other members of the board felt the same way.

11:15

Mr Macintosh: I will ask David Eaglesham this question, which is not on markers, but on a similar subject.

In your submission, you say that the SSTA met the SQA—Margaret Nicol said that the EIS also met the SQA—and that there were follow-up meetings. The chapter in your submission on administrative problems says that the SSTA met the SQA in April to air concerns and that

"At a subsequent meeting in June, we became aware that

further problems had arisen".

Did the SQA assure the SSTA that the concerns that it had voiced at the April meeting had been resolved by June? That seems to be the pattern. Were you happy with the reassurances? When the SSTA met the SQA in June, were those concerns repeated or was it accepted that the problem had been resolved?

David Eaglesham: There is a problem with the audit trail of each issue that members raise. When we met the SQA in April, we reported a series of SSTA members' concerns about data transmission. We met the SQA to explore the problems surrounding that. The SQA informed us of the procedures that it was following to deal with those problems. We were satisfied that those measures seemed to be right. We agreed separate releases timed to be at the same stage. People did not tell us subsequently that measures had been ineffective in specific ways.

It would have been good to be able to follow each concern that was raised in early April to find out whether the problem had occurred by late April. However, it is not physically possible to do that and there was no climate of suspicion in which we would have been led to do that. In the normal course of events, matters are raised with the appropriate authority, which then takes the necessary steps. We did not repeat the same questions and we were not returning to the SQA to say that problems had not been sorted. Each time that a set of issues came up, we were able to address them. We were as reassured as we could have been that the matter was in hand and that concerns were being dealt with.

In June we were aware that there was a problem, but that it was reducing in size and would be minimised. Although there was still a problem, it was not of such magnitude that it would lead us to require that anything further be done. The problem was with data entry and the matching of two bits of data. We cannot follow the audit trail for each individual member's inquiry.

Mr Macintosh: David Eaglesham is saying that there were a series of different problems, which were difficult to trace.

I will go back to questions to the EIS. Everybody agrees that the problem with markers was raised in September 1999—or earlier—and that it was raised continuously. It seems to have been a problem throughout the period. I understand that a series of individual problems were being resolved, but that the problem with markers was continuous. Why did you accept the reassurances that you were given every time that you raised the matter, when your members told you that the problem had not been resolved? I do not understand that.

George MacBride: Clearly, the recruitment of markers was an on-going issue, but it is important to bear in mind that that would not impact on many teachers in schools, because they would not be aware of difficulties. A person who had been recruited in the past as a marker, but who had not been recruited again, might have asked why that had happened in their case, but that would not necessarily impact on any other teacher in the school who was teaching a higher still course.

From the viewpoint of most of our members, that issue was in a different category from the difficulty of transmission of data, which was rightly seen as a concern that was being raised by a number of individuals. When a trade union raises an issue with a body and is assured that the problem has been addressed and dealt with, it is difficult for the union to say, "You are totally wrong. It is necessary to go back and check data and figures."

Mr Macintosh: You raised the issue in September and you raised it continuously until April, but did you accept the reassurances every time they were given?

George MacBride: One does not merely accept the reassurances—one assumes that people are doing their best to resolve an issue when they say that they are.

Margaret Nicol: Our members' experience essentially backed up what we were hearing from the SQA, which was resolving the issue by asking our members to mark double the amount of papers. The members who got in touch with us were those who were displeased because they were not being asked to do that.

The Convener: I want to move on.

Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP): I want to return to what has happened in the past 12 months. George MacBride said a few moments ago that the SQA examination system was so sophisticated that it required only a few things to go wrong for it to be in trouble. I am paraphrasing, but that is what was said. All three organisations' evidence identified the same problems: late vetting of papers during the year; difficulties with candidate entries in the autumn; difficulties with updating lists in January and February; inability to confirm entries; difficulties with unit results, which were asked for as many as four times without a response from the SQA; deadlines which took no account of holiday periods; a breakdown in communication between schools' and the SQA's computer systems; insufficient or wrong exam papers being provided; and all the difficulties with markers that we have discussed.

That is a range of problems that were identified by individual teachers and schools. I presume that all the witnesses have experienced one or all of those problems. As individuals and as associations, do you think with hindsight that there

were many signs of the impending crash—which we compared to the Titanic the other day—but that nobody joined up the signs sufficiently to realise what was happening in the SQA?

John Kelly: It is fair to observe that no one was there to put together the pieces of the jigsaw, but you must remember that we are teachers first and trade union associates second and that we do not have the time to get the bigger picture.

Michael Russell: It was a genuine observation and I would like you to comment on it from your practical experience.

John Kelly: I am the SQA co-ordinator in my school and everything that Mike Russell enumerated is correct. It all goes back to last September and the failure of the SQA to capture properly the original data entries. The reason for that—whether it was a software problem or a management problem—did not concern me at the time, but all the subsequent problems came from it. It is a garbage-in-garbage-out situation. If one's initial information is not correct, one cannot judge properly what will happen further down the line.

George MacBride: Many of the examples that have been given are aspects of the same problem, which is not the setting of exams—we will leave that to one side because it is a different issue—but the input of data. As John Kelly said, we are not clear whether the problem was due to a failure of systems, of hardware or of management. However, many of the problems resulted from data not being input once they had left schools, data being input inaccurately and—most important—corrections not being made to incorrect data. That was extremely time-consuming for SQA co-ordinators such as John Kelly, but the knock-on effects—schools being given the wrong number of papers on the day of an exam, for example—could not have been reasonably predicted by people in schools.

The problems with the recruitment of markers and the appropriate numbers of markers were, as Andrew Shanks said, a consequence of the data failure and could not be predicted in individual schools. I stick by what I said, which Mike Russell paraphrased; we have a sophisticated system, but when it began to break down and data entry began to break down, there was a series of major knock-on consequences.

David Eaglesham: In theory, one could put all the information together, decipher the pattern and produce a construct. In fairness, the unions operated together fairly closely on higher still, and we operated fairly closely with the SQA and other groups. No combination of any of those organisations was able to come up with such a construct. It would be difficult for that to happen, even if it was not for want of trying to find a construct. If, by a process of fusion of some sort, we had identified that we were on to something, we would have pursued it vigorously. There is no doubt about that. In theory, it would have been possible to produce the construct, but in practice—and with the best will in the world and the co-operation of colleagues in other unions and the SQA—that did not happen.

Michael Russell: When I asked that question of head teachers and teachers in my area, I heard two interesting responses, which I will put to the witnesses. One response was that the SQA was in effect saying—albeit politely—that the problem was the schools' fault, because they did not know how the system worked and they did not use it properly. There was a tendency to blame the schools and teachers for weaknesses in the SQA system. I am not saying that it was done maliciously, but the SQA tended to think that it knew its systems so well that the problem could not possibly be with the SQA.

The second interesting response was that it was felt that because the system had always worked, it would always work, no matter what difficulties were experienced. It was therefore considered impossible that a disaster such as that which took place would take place, because that was not what had happened before.

There have been other explanations for the problems. One such explanation was that when people, especially in the Scottish Executive, learned of the situation, they were inclined to trust the SQA and not the teachers and the education profession. That has been a symptom for some time. Could you comment on those responses and suggest other reasons?

George MacBride: On the view that the SQA blamed teachers, head teachers or schools, although a few EIS members have said that such comments were made to members or to schools by representatives of the SQA, that is not our general perception. That attitude is not what we perceive from SQA management or SQA employees who were in communication with schools. Although there might be some evidence to support the view that Mike Russell expressed, there is little evidence to sustain the view that the SQA blamed schools and teachers for failures.

The second view is one that carries considerable weight, because the Scottish exams systems operated efficiently and effectively for a considerable number of years—more than 100 years in the case of higher exams. People expected that efficiency, and it is possible that they were inclined to say, "Something has gone wrong in my school with input of data"—as the year went on, bigger and bigger things went wrong—"but those are blips that we hope will be adjusted." As we went through the session, it

became clear that the blips were not going to be adjusted, but many people probably started out having faith in the system.

Mike Russell's last point, that Scottish Executive senior civil servants, HMI, ministers and so on trusted the SQA more than they trusted teachers, is important. That view arises partly from the positive view that the SQA and its predecessor bodies had always worked effectively and that it was therefore reasonable to trust the SQA and have faith that it would continue to work effectively this year. However, as we have discussed, that led to the opinion that the views of teachers could be neglected and discounted as anecdotal—a word that has been used frequently—although such anecdotal evidence was sustained often by dozens, if not hundreds, of members. The fact that teachers' views were neglected is an important issue.

John Kelly: Like George MacBride, I have the greatest respect for colleagues at the SQA. They have been unfailingly helpful and courteous during the nine or 10 years that I have been doing this job. Even with the pressures that they were under—particularly from March to June when there were constant phone calls and faxes between us—they were tremendously supportive. We should put up our hands and say that there were only minor changes to the way that data were sent to SQA; the major difference was the volume of data. I pressed the same buttons, only a hell of a lot more often.

11:30

As I have said, there seems to have been a failure to capture and implement data properly. The SEB and SCOTVEC always provided a fine service in the past and the problems at the SQA must be laid at the door of either the administration or the Executive, which lumbered the SQA with a dual system. When we were given a year's deferment for certain subjects, teachers' unions asked for the same deferment for all subjects, which would have allowed the awards processing system and some other processes to bed in properly. I do not know how much training SQA operatives had—that is a matter for the SQA—but it is little wonder that mistakes were made in a system in which a number 7 means a B pass for a Scottish Examination Board higher, a fail in a new higher and course completed in standard grade.

For example, an operative in the morning might input data for a higher still subject where W means withdraw, and might in the afternoon input data for craft and design, where each youngster has had to compile a project in either wood or plastic. The "W" or "P" for wood and plastic that the school enters might be mistaken for "withdraw" and "pass". I know of a school where all the youngsters doing craft and design were reckoned to have failed because they had all worked in wood. Although that problem was very easily solved, it meant that the operative in the school had to go in to school during the summer holidays.

Michael Russell: I have a final question for each of the union representatives. The word "reassurance" has been overused throughout the piece; indeed, Margaret Nicol used the word again today. Have people in Scottish education been inclined to be too easily reassured by the SQA and other bodies? Could the unions learn the lesson of being less easily reassured and asking harder questions?

George MacBride: That is an important lesson for us all to learn. However, those who run the system should also learn the important lesson that there must be considerably greater transparency, openness and opportunities for dialogue, which is the conclusion that we reach in our written evidence. We must investigate the culture of non-departmental public bodies and how they relate to the stakeholders with whom they work. Furthermore, we need to explore the culture in the Scottish Executive at Victoria Quay—not the Scottish ministers themselves—which has tended to be modelled on the Westminster culture and which decrees that "We know best because we are the senior people in the system."

When people make statements about the system that are based on considerable evidence—as HMI does—that evidence must be up-front and subject to opportunities to question it. That would prevent over-easy reassurance or its reverse, which is a suspicion of every statement that is made by somebody in public life.

Michael Russell: The lesson to learn is that there should be greater transparency.

George MacBride: Yes.

Mr Monteith: There has been much anecdotal evidence of concerns about marking. Now that appeals are under way, we are still receiving anecdotal evidence about dissatisfaction with the marking of appeals. Do your members have any experience or knowledge of whether appeals have worked well? Furthermore, do you support the idea that scripts from appeals—not all exams—should be returned to schools as a means of determining whether the initial marking of papers and appeals scripts, or the contributory factors of sitting higher still, have led to so many students' dissatisfaction with their marks?

Andrew Shanks: Although I do not have a union role, I can say as a teacher that there is dissatisfaction with some of the results, and a sense that the results in English and communication, and other subjects this year are

depressed—as are the pupils and teachers. We feel that the results do not represent the candidates' potential fairly. This year, most departments submitted far in excess of the usual number of appeals in the hope that, on re-examination of the papers, some justice would be done to candidates. Although we have not received the results of the bulk of the appeals, the emergency appeals that relate to university and college entrants have been returned, but to some disappointment. It remains to be seen whether the results of the bulk of appeals answer the prevalent pessimism.

At the moment, teachers want scripts to be returned, because they are frustrated and angry and want some evidence to prove either that their expectations for candidates were not met in the exam, or that they were right. However, I can see the SQA's problem. If every teacher disputes every mark in every exam, we could end up with quite a debacle. Although returning scripts seems like a great idea, it might turn out to provide less clarity and transparency than we suppose. I would not choose that option.

The Convener: Mr Eaglesham, in your submission, you say that the suggestion that papers be returned is unacceptable. Can you comment on Brian Monteith's point?

David Eaglesham: The return of papers poses technical and practical difficulties. When scripts are marked for the SQA, the principal assessor must be satisfied that they have been marked to the appropriate standard. That is an entirely different exercise from a teacher returning prelim scripts to their own class, when they need to explain to pupils where they have gone wrong and how to improve their performance. There is no point in sending back final examination scripts to candidates, saying, "If you do this or that next time, you will get a better mark."

A requirement to return the scripts would also require a full explanation of why a particular mark was given to a particular section, to allow the pupil and teacher to understand the marking. That would increase considerably both the pay and the time that was required for marking, the former of which is scandalous. For example, I recall an occasion when I was marking in one room and the carpet fitter in the next room was being paid three times what I was being paid for the same period of time. The diet of marking would also need to be extended considerably to achieve that. In the majority of cases, it is probably not necessary for scripts to be returned and it would be unhelpful to prioritise a need to make marking of papers readable for candidates, parents, class teachers and lawyers. Some trust must be placed in that process.

Mr Monteith: You are free to give your opinion on the matter. However, my point is that there is a large degree of mistrust of the marking and the appeals process. However, it seems that in England, papers can be returned. Mr Kelly, given that the NASUWT crosses the border, do you have any anecdotal evidence on the experience of returning papers in England?

John Kelly: Although I have no observation to make on that matter—I have not had much to do with it—I would probably endorse David Eaglesham's views.

We must consider the problem that returning the scripts to schools this year will create in relation to the time scale of the work that we are doing with the current crop of candidates. We must recognise that we are into the next generation of candidates and that the problem is historic.

I do not think that it would be a good idea to return the scripts, for the reasons that David Eaglesham gave. We use youngsters' prelim scripts for formative purposes. As David said, we would say to them, "You have gone wrong on this aspect and you have not fully covered that one." It would serve no purpose to return the scripts to us.

We must take the same approach that we have always taken: if we were dissatisfied with the results in for example, biology, we can ask for an examiner's report, for which a school would pay £100. That report gives us a full breakdown of where our candidates or our teaching went wrong—it gives us the source of the problem. That is the best way forward for our concerns. Because we have such concerns—especially in relation to this year's higher grade human biology—that is the approach that we will take.

Margaret Nicol: I do not object to commenting on the situation south of the border, where scripts were returned in a planned way. The decision was taken to return exam scripts and the marking process took account of that decision.

Although we have had a crisis, it is important to ensure that we do not arrive at knee-jerk solutions in response to it. The Scottish Executive is undertaking a full review of the first year of the implementation of higher still. That review was sought and granted through the trade unions and the national liaison committee and its impact will be increased by a much stronger review of internal assessment. There are major problems with internal assessment in particular, and with issues such as transparency and the return of candidates' papers.

The reviews must address those issues—we expect them to be addressed properly. We also expect teachers and teachers' organisations to input into that work. We should seek major changes through the review process rather than through an immediate response to a crisis.

Mr Monteith: I understand the practical differences between prelim papers, exam papers and the English example of the planned introduction of returning candidates' scripts. You made those points well. I raised my point in order to establish what might be done to achieve credibility if exam scripts were to be returned. My point was to suggest that we limit the return of scripts to those candidates who are dissatisfied with their appeals. If that approach would not work, what more might be done—other than for every school to ask for examiners' reports—to try to re-establish the credibility of the SQA and the exam system?

Margaret Nicol: Get it right next year.

The Convener: That sounded like a good answer to me.

Nicola Sturgeon: No—that was not a good answer.

I do not necessarily agree with Brian Monteith's solutions. We should ask how we will restore credibility to the results of last year's cohort. That crucial question is part of the committee's remit.

The Convener: That was a slightly different question.

Mr Monteith: Many of those students are still at school.

George MacBride: I stress Mr Monteith's point: many of those students are still at school and it is important that they realise that what will happen this year will be credible. To echo Margaret Nicol's point, we must get it right next year. That means that we must put in resources—not only money or more pay for markers, but resources of time, hardware and software at the SQA—to ensure that data processing and operational management systems work effectively this year. Young people and their parents must get that message, which must come from all levels of the Scottish education system.

As far as the young people whose results were disappointing, their parents and their teachers are concerned, and regardless of whether they have left school, a number of processes are under way to try to ensure that a quality guarantee is built into their results. For example, the SQA is answering to a group of four members of the directorate who are seeking to pursue audit trails and to ensure that quality procedures are being used in the appeals process.

The SQA has also committed itself to a detailed statistical examination of the appeals, subject by subject and geographical area by geographical area. That should help to identify any points of difficulty and restore credibility.

The Convener: I am keen to move on. Are there any more questions?

Johann Lamont: I was not here when you discussed the line of questioning.

The Convener: I would like to round up this part of the meeting.

Johann Lamont: People have looked for various reasons why it all happened. One argument that was put to us forcibly was that the difficulty lay in bringing together the SEB and SCOTVEC. There is a view that SCOTVEC's bad practice infected the new organisation. We were told that that view was commonly held in Scottish schools. Do you believe that view to be commonly held and do you give it any credence?

11:45

Margaret Nicol: It would be fair to say that in schools, as opposed to colleges, the SEB was the major provider of the highers and standard grade systems. Among Scottish teachers, there is very strong loyalty to the SEB and a feeling of its quality, stretching back in time. The same feelings do not exist for SCOTVEC, because teachers had much more limited involvement in the more than 700 modules that SCOTVEC provided. There are some teachers who do not think as much of the quality of the SCOTVEC modules as they do of the new intermediate 1 and 2. However, to extrapolate that view, as Johann Lamont has done, is perhaps not true of the majority of Scottish schools.

Johann Lamont: I did not extrapolate. I presented a case and asked for your view.

David Eaglesham: In our evidence on the proposals to merge the SEB and SCOTVEC, we indicated that we hoped the prevailing culture of the new organisation would be that of the SEB, in which we had more confidence. The culture and mores of the SEB were much more conducive to teachers and schools. We would not be overtly critical of SCOTVEC or say that it was wrong, but the preferred culture was that of the SEB. There have been difficulties in bringing together those two cultures.

George MacBride: I understand that Johann Lamont was referring to someone else's view. However, whatever our views, we do not think that the use of emotive language is helpful to the debate.

John Kelly: A concern that has been around since the beginning of the higher still programme is that of parity of esteem. Many schools were not comfortable with the concept of internal assessment under the SCOTVEC model. Nationally, that was recognised from the beginning, which is why there is a hybrid system of internal unit assessment and the stamp of external

examination. Like George MacBride, I would prefer not to use emotive language. The people at SCOTVEC were always fine and professional in their dealings with schools. We should not allow aspersions to be cast on them. However, schools have been more comfortable with the SEB tradition. Perhaps they will have to learn to change, too.

Ian Jenkins: The verification procedures for SCOTVEC did not seem to be as rigorous as those for the SEB.

The Convener: Please ask a question.

Ian Jenkins: I was coming to that. There is the problem this year, and there is the review of higher still that Margaret Nicol mentioned. What can we do this year? Is there something that we should do in the short term and should we take a wee bit longer to do the things that Margaret Nicol talked about? I wonder whether we have time to make the changes that you are suggesting in the current year.

George MacBride: Although we believe that there is a need for radical review of and change in the assessment procedures—especially the internal assessment procedures—and for a drastic reduction in the amount of internal assessment, it would be totally inappropriate to start that on a major scale during a session that has already begun. At all levels of higher still, young people are now several weeks into their courses. Making radical changes this year would disadvantage them and cause confusion to them and their teachers. However, we must be ready to act quickly on the conclusions of inquiries such as this and of the Executive-sponsored review of the implementation of higher still, so that changes can be made not in the far distant future, but in the session after this one.

Ian Jenkins: Would it be possible, even at this stage, to shift the exam timetable, or would that be a step too far?

George MacBride: Bringing the exam diet forward considerably would pose problems, because people are planning on the basis of 160 hours. John Kelly has already indicated the more flexible date—the date on which young people are told the results of exams.

David Eaglesham: When the examination diet is being composed, regard must be had for the pressure that young people are under at that point. That can be done without dealing with the problem of less teaching time.

The Convener: Are you content with that, Mr Kelly?

John Kelly: Yes.

The Convener: Good. I thank our witnesses for their attendance and for their answers to our questions. We will be taking evidence from other witnesses, and you are welcome to stay to hear that.

George MacBride: I thank members of the committee for their questions, which have been thought provoking.

The Convener: There has been a delay, for which I apologise, in starting the next evidence-taking session. We are time constrained. I thank Pat Cairns and Alex Easton for their patience. We will proceed immediately with questions from members. I will stop taking questions at about a quarter past 12.

Mr Monteith: I intended to ask a general question, but I have decided to change tack.

The Convener: Please make questions specific.

Mr Monteith: Section 2 of your written submission relates to concerns about marking; in it, you give a full explanation of one school's results and describe how they were

"corrected to 13 band 1 passes and then further corrected".

Presumably you are talking about the fact that results had been issued and people were phoning up or approaching the SQA for clarification because they were not happy. This was a period during which people were finding that marks were changing constantly, depending on whom they spoke to.

Alex Easton (Headteachers Association of Scotland): Those were marks that were sent to the school in response to inquiries. The school in question was one in which the marks would be expected to be high; it was in the independent sector and had a very good track record. When it received the results, it discovered that virtually the whole cohort had failed, when normally they would get A and B highers. That suggested that something was awry. The second return gave all the pupils a band 1 pass. Now the school has received final results, but it is still asking how certain it can be about those. I chose that school from a range of examples as one of two extreme cases, just to make my point.

Mr Monteith: In the last paragraph on page 1 of your submission, you say that:

"The SQA's decision to allow centres to amend estimates at the time of appeals is to be regretted."

Could you expand on why you think that?

Your submission also says that:

"'Pushy, articulate parents' who have demanded that an appeal be submitted, even when their son/daughter performed in line with the estimate, have advantaged their children".

Why do you think that?

Alex Easton: That quotation was taken from SQA documentation that was sent out. I passionately believe in equity, and that has been one of the great things about the Scottish system. To put it bluntly, opportunistic parents have latched on to that. Parents' appeals were accompanied by a lawyer's letter giving a lawyer's interpretation of the statement and telling the school that, in an appeal, the school would have no choice.

There were examples of youngsters who were predicted to fail by a narrow margin and who did fail by such a margin. However, in cases where there could be no appeal, parents wrote demanding a re-mark and enclosing a lawyer's letter. Phone calls to Dalkeith said, "Put them in through the normal appeals system." We are concerned about that, because a single parent on income support with four youngsters has not been able to use the system to the same extent as some of those other parents.

12:00

Mr Monteith: Your submission also mentions with regret

"the decision to allow centres to amend estimates at the time of appeals".

How much of a problem do you think that was?

Alex Easton: Once the possibility that estimates could be amended got into the public domain, pressure was put on schools to do that. That was not helpful.

Mr Macintosh: I do not quite understand that point. Were those instructions issued to centres by the SQA in August?

Alex Easton: We were asked to resubmit estimates. On a few occasions, we were told that estimates could be revisited, as some estimates had been lost somewhere. That was interpreted by some parents as—

Mr Macintosh: Was it done in response to some parents? Were parents pushing for that? Do you think that the instruction came from the SQA in response to parents pushing for it?

Alex Easton: The SQA would have to speak for itself about that, but I suspect that the answer is almost certainly yes.

The Convener: The paragraph of your submission that deals with the effects on pupils and parents says that one of the difficulties for pupils was that they were unable to seek reassurance from their teachers. That takes us back to the failure to provide schools with copies of the results. What was the effect of that and what action did you take in response to it, knowing that you would not be in a position to reassure pupils?

Pat Cairns (Headteachers Association of Scotland): We all felt completely foolish, because there had been no communication to schools that we would not receive that information. I am sure that every school in the land had its board of management in place, together with secretarial support, to deal with the usual rush of phone calls. Also, because we were all interested in knowing what the results were, we were all there. People come back from holiday specifically for the exam results date. We were there, but there were no results. We were informed only on that day, when we started telephoning, that the results would not be made available to us.

The Convener: When you were told that the results would not be made available, were you also told that, at the end of that week, the pupils would not get their results either?

Pat Cairns: On the day that the results were due to come out, we were told that neither we nor the students would get the information.

The Convener: In the past, did you get the information prior to the day when the students got their results?

Pat Cairns: No. The students and the schools usually got the results on the same day. Occasionally, the schools got them the day before, but usually we got them for sure in the first post on the same day.

Michael Russell: You would be in a good position to tell us what is happening now and what your fears are for the future. I have evidence from two places in Scotland that some students are still waiting for written confirmation of results today—10 higher biology students in Greenock and five history and geography students in Newton Stewart. Do you have evidence of students who are still waiting for final confirmation of their results?

Alex Easton: Yes. I think that that is still the case. There has been talk of suggested action. The suggested short-term solution is to get the data-handling and administrative procedures really tight. I think that that can be done. The other suggested solution concerns quality assurance management. I am sure that that will be done. Because of the good reputation of the Scottish Examination Board, perhaps too much faith was put in the system.

This year's youngsters are 25 per cent of the way into their courses, but already there is slippage in the procedures for the registration of candidates and notification of entries for SQA certification. I hope that what has been suggested will happen, but I would not want to bet my pension on it, when there is already slippage in the established time scales for the 2001 diet of exams.

Michael Russell: You have gone a step ahead of me. I will stop you on that first point. You are telling us that you believe, from your experience or from what your members have told you, that some pupils are still waiting for final confirmation of results.

Alex Easton: The final appeals are being mopped up.

The Convener: Do you mean appeals or results?

Alex Easton: I am talking about appeal results.

Michael Russell: I asked about results. Is anybody awaiting final confirmation of results?

Alex Easton: There are still people who have not received their standard grade results. I do not know of anybody who has not received their higher results, but there are still youngsters who have not received confirmation of their standard grade results.

Michael Russell: Are you aware that that is contrary to the expectation that the minister expressed in his statement of 6 September?

Alex Easton: Yes.

Michael Russell: Let us move on to the second point, on the future. Your submission proposes several actions, including a review of the SQA administration, the removal of stress points by the higher still liaison unit, and the expansion of the role and responsibility of principal assessors. The suggested actions on which I will focus are, first, the proposals to second some school SQA co-ordinators to assist with data management and, secondly, to

"have earlier exam diet, to finish by 1 June."

Alex Easton: School SQA co-ordinators and, in particular, principal assessors know that side of the system inside out. It is important to involve such knowledgeable people in the review to ensure that the systems are in place.

I think that the idea of having an earlier exam diet, which would finish by 1 May, is a non-starter for this session for the reasons that were given earlier. However, it may be worth considering in the longer-term review. The problems were made worse by the very short time that was available between the exam diet and the end of June and the start of the holidays.

Pat Cairns: It should be remembered that any reduction in the teaching year would have an impact on the course content, and would therefore require a review of courses. The time lines will have been set for this year, as youngsters have already embarked on courses.

Michael Russell: But you are in favour of that proposal for future years.

Alex Easton: It is worthy of consideration within a review of other matters, such as course content.

Cathy Peattie: You say, rightly, in your paper that pupils have been the hardest hit and that many are disillusioned. Given that we know that some of our pupils have not yet received their standard grade results, how do we encourage young folks and give them confidence in the examination process? A senior teacher at a school in my area told me that some kids whom he was assessing for standard grade maths asked him whether they would receive marks for the assessments.

Alex Easton: Probably the people whom pupils and parents trust most are—God bless them—head teachers. Parents know us, have worked with us and will accept reassurance from us that they would not accept from other people. They know that they can knock on our door and meet us in person.

Our only strategy has been to tell pupils to assume the most optimistic standard grade result in choosing their courses. It is now too late to change to a higher if they discover that they have done better than they thought they had. It will be December before standard grade appeal data are available.

Cathy Peattie: Will that strategy help to give pupils confidence? There is still a feeling among pupils that, if teachers are unhappy with the situation, pupils cannot be happy with it either.

Pat Cairns: I think that teachers are confident in their estimation of pupils' abilities and that pupils trust those estimations. We can give pupils only our view of how they are performing, and the reasons for that view, and tell them to carry on with what they are doing. It is a matter of trust.

Mr Monteith: In a previous answer, you expressed concern about slippage in processing pupils for entrance to the 2001 diet. Did such slippage occur for the 2000 diet? Are you saying that we are already repeating some of the mistakes that were made last year?

Alex Easton: As far as I can judge, a different mistake is being made. Schools submitted data timeously last year, but the data were lost and not processed.

Mr Monteith: For entering?

Alex Easton: For entering. We did not get the feedback that we had called for that the data had been entered.

Mr Monteith: Are you concerned that something similar is happening?

Alex Easton: I hope that everything will be made as bomb-proof as it can be in the short term. That is what is being done at Dalkeith and through

our internal quality assurance. There may well be sound reasons in an action plan—which I hope exists—to explain that it helps to delay the request for the initial data. The fact is that that request is later than we had anticipated.

Pat Cairns: It is important to note that a key change was made to the approach to the delivery of higher still. We had started on the premise that children would begin a unit, be assessed, and move on to the next unit. It emerged that too many youngsters were failing, so the critical change to testing pupils when they were ready was made. Of course, that led to a huge slippage in data input and pushed the bulk of data input to the end of the year.

Earlier in the year, at meetings with parents, we had told them that they would receive three reports, term by term. It is critical that we ensure that information is entered earlier. We are concerned that, if it is not, information will again become backed up.

Alex Easton: Obviously, if a strategic decision is taken to carry out all the unit assessments at the end, an enormous amount of data will arrive late in the year.

Mr Monteith: Is there any theory as to why so many pupils failed assessments after completing units?

Pat Cairns: You will appreciate that the difference between standard grade and higher is huge. In the traditional higher, youngsters had the opportunity to do assessments, be regraded and benefit from that, but this time youngsters had to pass the assessments. Youngsters are unable to produce a top-quality essay first time around, three or four weeks into their fifth year. The steps that were taken were sensible, but they meant that we were not operating under the original premise.

Mr Macintosh: In paragraph 7 of your submission, on suggested action, you say:

"We support the recent suggestions by Scottish Parent Teacher Council in particular in relation to the status of unit assessments."

Could you explain exactly what that means?

Alex Easton: Yes. The simplistic view had been that there was a mixture of internal and external assessment and that, therefore, the external assessment was shortened. As has been said, there is a lot of pain in administering the internal assessment. Assessments have served the purpose of motivating youngsters and teachers, but it has transpired that internal assessments have operated a bit like a class ticket. The mark that a pupil received was decided entirely by the final exam. As long as a pupil had completed the unit assessments, their final mark seems to have been determined entirely by whether they had passed or failed the exam. The question is raised of the balance between internal and external assessments.

Questions are also raised about validity and reliability. It is obvious that, if the exams are shortened, one rogue question can have a bigger pendulum effect—a good or bad question that is worth 10 marks out of 100 will have a greater effect than one that is worth 10 out of 200. Although it is too late for this year, that needs careful consideration.

Mr Macintosh: Can you clarify that the mark for a pupil who does three unit assessments in a term does not count toward the final exam?

Pat Cairns: The exam is a separate entity, but one must pass all the internal assessments as well as the external exam.

Mr Macintosh: A pupil must pass the internal assessments, but the mark that they get for them does not count toward the final grade.

Pat Cairns: The final grade is decided entirely by the external exam. In some cases, there are practical components that count towards the final grade.

Alex Easton: The final exam was the be-all and end-all. It had not been understood that the final grade was not really a balance of internal and external assessments.

Mr Macintosh: So the system is not continuous assessment. The internal assessments are just a hurdle to clear.

I am still unclear about the Scottish Parent Teacher Council suggestion about unit assessments, with which you agree.

Alex Easton: I think that the SPTC is suggesting that internal assessments should not be mandatory this year. They may serve another purpose, which is to motivate and check, but we should step back from them this year.

Mr Stone: Your submission makes no clear suggestion about the SQA. What are your thoughts about it? The EIS and other bodies from which we have heard have made suggestions, such as that the SQA should have closer links with the Executive.

Alex Easton: I covered that in points a) and b) of paragraph 7 of my submission. The SQA was starting up a new system of administering exams with 100 years of excellent experience behind it. To start from scratch would be crazy. People made the mistake of thinking that there was a new computerised system. There was not—the SQA had faxes and bits of paper flying in from all over Scotland. As soon as possible we want to move to an e-mail system. I signed the papers for the current census in my school and took accountable

responsibility for that. I am comfortable with that, as it is what I am paid for. Eventually we should reach a situation in which schools input data and they are e-mailed to the SQA. That would avoid the danger of wrong buttons being pressed, as has happened at the SQA. Not all schools are on e-mail yet, so what I am suggesting may be a year or two down the line. In the short term, there should be rigorous scrutiny of what the SQA is doing. I imagine that the Scottish Executive will adopt a much more inspectorial role regarding the quality assurance procedures.

12:15

Mr Stone: Do you see no case for reconsidering how the board operates with the executive of SQA, for example?

Alex Easton: To dismantle or to change radically the SQA at this time would not be helpful. That is a personal opinion.

Pat Cairns: In my view, a failure to manage and a failure to manage data were at the root of this problem. Apart from the schools, everybody failed to understand the huge complexity of the task and how much information was going to descend at the very last minute. The problem was flagged up regularly, but schools were not listened to as they should have been. Whether the SQA was able to implement in one year all that was being asked of it is a question that I could not possibly answer. We cannot allow these failures to happen again.

Mr Stone: Do you think that the SQA was unable to deliver all that was being asked of it?

Pat Cairns: Probably. There were three changes. Two boards had been amalgamated, there was a totally different structure of course delivery and there were new information technology systems, which in the first instance rarely function as they should. The combination of those three things made it very difficult to have success first time round.

Mr Stone: Does blame lie with the SQA's political masters?

Pat Cairns: There was pressure on schools to comply, which they did. The only success story is that schools delivered for young people. I am very happy about that.

Alex Easton: There was an overambitious—I use that word rather than reckless—push on schools from the higher still development unit and HMI. We were perceived as conservative if we tried to suggest that we move forward at a reasonable pace, as happened with standard grade. If at public meetings we said that we ought to ca cannie and think things through, the response was often very sarcastic.

The Convener: Three members have indicated that they wish to speak and there are only two minutes for questions, so I ask members to keep their questions brief.

Johann Lamont: I am interested in the impact of the way in which the SQA responded to the crisis. You say in your submission:

"Several press statements were misleading."

Was it obvious to you at the time that they were misleading, or do you think that people believed genuinely that what they were reporting was the case, although it turned out to be wrong? Either way, it is quite damaging.

Alex Easton: We are referring to statements that were made very late on, when it was like Saigon in the last days of the Vietnam war. People were under pressure and close to panic, and it would be inappropriate to criticise them. Nevertheless, some of the statements that appeared in the press late on suggesting that schools had been contacted were misleading. These were mistakes made by individuals. I am not pillorying anybody, as people were under tremendous pressure. There was an element of panic at times.

Mr Monteith: I would like to put the same question in a different way. Would it be possible for you to comment on particular statements when submitting fresh written evidence to the committee? Could you identify statements that you thought were misleading and tell us why, so that we could consider that?

Alex Easton: I have statements from schools about e-mails being sent to parents to say that the school did not send any information. We chose to submit a succinct report based on the considerable amount of material that we have received.

The Convener: We are grateful to you for that.

Ian Jenkins: I want to return to the issue of complexity. Are we still trying to do too much? Does the complexity of the information that appears on the certificates that youngsters receive reflect the impractical manner in which higher still has been implemented, and does it need to be simplified and clarified?

Alex Easton: With the wisdom of hindsight, I would accept that. There are even worse things in the pipeline, to do with core skills and working with others. I hope that there will be a review that will consider what is practical. The higher still development unit does not yet have all the material that it needs. There are youngsters in my school doing an access 3 Spanish course without materials, even though those were due in August 2000. We are still short of teaching materials.

The Convener: It has been stated that in England pupils do not receive certificates as such. Instead, notification is sent to the schools. Would you consider that?

Alex Easton: The current system has been very successful over the years. An SEB certificate was someone's lifelong record of achievement. It has been so successful over the years that I would not want to step back from it.

Ian Jenkins: It would be possible for schools to produce the unit assessment certificates and for the SQA to produce the core certificates.

Alex Easton: That is one option in the debate about the purpose and function of internal assessments.

Pat Cairns: It should be acknowledged that amendments have already been made to some courses to reduce the amount of internal assessment. That is hugely appreciated by the staff concerned. Some of our comments have been listened to.

The Convener: I apologise for the frantic questioning, but that meant that we asked more direct questions and got the information that we wanted much more quickly. Thank you for attending this morning and for answering our questions. Thank you also for your succinct submission.

Alex Easton: Thank you. I am sorry that we were a bit like a Gatling gun with our answers, but we were aware of time pressures.

The Convener: We will proceed straight to our next set of witnesses. I believe that Mr Elliot will join us first.

Good afternoon, Mr Elliot. Thank you for returning so promptly to give evidence to the committee. It is often difficult to pick up where one left off, but we will try to continue from the point that we reached last week. Since then we have taken evidence from other groups, and it may be that some questions will relate to the evidence that we have now received.

Mr Stone: I would like to ask about the board of the financial, planning and general purposes committee. Do you think that it gave proper consideration to the issues that were raised regarding the 2000 diet and that its meetings were minuted appropriately?

David Elliot (Former Director of Awards, Scottish Qualifications Authority): I cannot help the committee there, because I did not attend meetings of the finance, planning and general purposes committee of the SQA. I have not been in the SQA's offices since 11 August.

Mr Stone: What was your impression of how the board operated apropos the executive of the SQA? Do you think that the board was fully informed, aware and in control of what was happening?

David Elliot: It was my responsibility to report to the board from June 1999 until March 2000. At each board meeting I reported on the progress of work on the software. The board had a good discussion after I made my report and asked the officers of the SQA some penetrating questions about how we were progressing.

Mr Stone: Were you never copied minutes of such meetings?

David Elliot: I had access to the minutes.

Mr Stone: Were they a fair reflection of what was said and done?

David Elliot: Of the board meetings?

Mr Stone: Were they a fair reflection of your contact with the board? Or were your reports made informally?

David Elliot: No, I reported formally to the board. Inevitably, the minutes of board meetings are a summary. They do not contain all the discussion that took place, but they are a reasonable summary of what was discussed. I cannot speak for the finance, planning and general purposes committee, because I did not attend its meetings regularly.

Mr Macintosh: I want to ask you about the operations unit. How many people work in the operations unit?

David Elliot: The blueprint was for approximately 30 people, but additional staff were drafted in quite early to assist with the testing of software.

Mr Macintosh: Roughly 500 people work for the SQA.

David Elliot: The SQA has more than 500 members of staff, who are divided among three divisions and 21 units. I was responsible for seven units in my division. One of those units was the operations unit. As far as I recall, the number of staff was in the 30s, but we had built it up a little to cope with software testing.

As I became more familiar with the operations unit's work, I came to understand that the unit was not structured or staffed to cope with the work that it faced.

Mr Macintosh: Does the operations unit handle the data that come into and go out of the SQA?

David Elliot: That is correct.

Mr Macintosh: Is it also the unit that was using the new software?

David Elliot: Responsibility for developing the

new software lay with the information technology unit, but the operations unit was probably the biggest user of it—the whole organisation uses IT.

Mr Macintosh: Mr Tuck's submission says—I do not have it to hand—that 200 of the 500 members of staff had to reapply for their own jobs or for other posts. Were there many people in the operations unit who were not used to working there, or was there continuity of staff?

David Elliot: There was great continuity of staff, but the job changed radically.

Mr Macintosh: How did the job change radically?

David Elliot: The staff of the operations unit were primarily former SEB staff, who were very skilled and had an excellent track record in running the SEB's examinations. However, they were now working in the SQA and were responsible for running more than a million national certificate modules, Scottish vocational qualifications, higher national certificates, higher national diplomas, as well as all the examinations that had existed before and the higher still examinations.

Mr Macintosh: Did the SCOTVEC people who were responsible for handling the data for that part of the operation merge with the SEB people to become the operations unit?

David Elliot: Not exactly. One of the difficulties was that the SCOTVEC staff were based in Glasgow and the SEB staff were based in Dalkeith. This year there were probably four or five former SCOTVEC staff in the operations unit, as we had been keen to ensure that that expertise was present in the unit.

Mr Macintosh: Is it right to say that all the data handling that had been done by SCOTVEC was now done by the operations unit, which was in effect a continuing SEB unit?

David Elliot: By and large, that is the case.

Mr Macintosh: There was continuity within the unit. Before the new computerised system was introduced, did you use a paper system or did you use a different computer for the entering of data?

David Elliot: The SEB used the examination processing system—EPS—which was new in the early 1990s and had bedded in nicely by 1999. Last year's exam worked very smoothly. SCOTVEC used a system that was based on an IBM AS400 computer. Both of those systems were then replaced by the new SQA computer system.

Mr Macintosh: How were the data handled? Was there a brand-new system for the paper that came into the building?

David Elliot: The system for handling data that came in by paper was a continuation of what had happened before. Electronic data were coming in using new software and were loaded on to new software.

Mr Macintosh: Is there an electronic data transmission service as well as a back-up paper system?

David Elliot: The paper system is not a back-up. There are certain data that are by and large received electronically, such as registration and entries. In the past, standard grade internal assessment grades have come in on paper and that was also the case this year. The method that was used depended on the qualification and the choice of centre. We tried to accommodate those centres that were very keen to use electronic methods as well as those that wished to rely more on paper methods.

Mr Macintosh: Did the people in the operations unit who handled the data work with the IT people to design the system, or did the IT people design the system and then tell them how to use it?

12:30

David Elliot: The users, the operations unit, had to tell IT what they wanted. We used industry-standard techniques in developing the software. Some people were allocated the role of senior business user. Those people had to tell IT what data processes they wished to be supported by IT. IT then had to produce the software. The development was very much user driven.

Mr Macintosh: Can you describe the system of checks that is in place to ensure that the information that is received is acknowledged and is verified with those who have sent it?

David Elliot: When a file containing candidate entries comes in, it goes through validation checks to ensure that, as far as we can determine, the data are in good order. A report is then sent back to the sender if any problems are identified with the data that have been submitted.

Mr Macintosh: There have been problems with the system continuously since it was first used in October last year.

David Elliot: We had a demanding year right from the start. However, we had the software facility in good time to receive entries—it was available in September. Entries came in pretty slowly, and my recollection is that by November we had received only about 10 per cent of the total that we expected. The rest of the entries came in eventually, and by March we were able to run the various first procedures of the examinations.

Mr Macintosh: There were various critical points before then. For example, at Christmas,

there was intensive dialogue with schools about the data that were coming in and the fact that deadlines might be slipping. Is that right?

David Elliot: When I took over responsibility for the IT project in April last year, it was already running a little late and had been reconfigured to ensure that it would deliver on time. It was decided that, instead of planning the whole system before starting to write the software, we would write the software to enable us to register candidates, as that was the first thing that we needed to do, and then move on to results software. Such decisions were being taken all the time, and we were constantly monitoring, managing and prioritising to try to meet the date of the examination, which, of course, was not negotiable.

Mr Macintosh: But the dates for the registration of candidates, for example, were slipping even at the beginning.

David Elliot: It is true that our recommendation was that candidates should try to get their entries in by 31 October and not many entries were received by then, but that was not crucial. We could allow slippage at that stage. We were falling over backwards to be helpful to the centres because, of course, they too needed to bed in new software. Entries were coming in more slowly than usual, but we tried to be understanding and did not push the centres too hard.

Mr Macintosh: That date slipped, and a series of other dates slipped. Did the alarm bells not start ringing? Did you not realise that that would jeopardise the final programme?

David Elliot: Those dates were not hard deadlines. We were prepared to accept entries until January or February of this year. We realised that entries were coming in more slowly than usual, but we assumed that that was because schools were experiencing difficulties with their software. We were not alarmed at that stage. It was not until later that the flow of data caused us very great concern.

Mr Macintosh: The operations unit was staffed mostly by former SEB employees. Although the system was new, they were used to working to operational deadlines. Did they not report their alarm to you or to the head of their unit?

David Elliot: The sense of alarm was not transmitted to me at the time that we are discussing. I began to be alarmed in March, when I noticed the amount of overtime that was already being worked. I could see that the staff were getting tired then, and I was conscious that there was a long way to go until the end of July. I thought in March that the operations unit was not coping with its full range of responsibilities. We took action on that, and one of the first, most drastic, courses of action was to move all the employer and training-provider work back through to Glasgow to give operations staff a clearer run at the higher still and standard grade exams, as they affected schools and colleges.

Mr Macintosh: Were there ways for the staff to report their anxieties to you? Were you aware that they were anxious that things were not working? Did they report that to you or to their line managers?

David Elliot: I could not say what staff reported to their managers, but, in my discussions with them, they said that they felt strongly that we were up against a great challenge in the year ahead. I shared that feeling utterly. I would rather that the staff had shouted louder and sooner. The tradition in the operations unit was that staff would perhaps be reluctant to say that they were not coping as soon as I would have liked them to have done so.

Mr Macintosh: You say that you are reluctant to hire more people to operate that unit, or at least to rejig or restructure the unit. Did you not think at that stage that you could have hired more people to work in the unit to help it along?

David Elliot: This is a very important point. From last summer, I realised that I would like to restructure the unit. As the year wore on, I increasingly took the view that the unit not only needed restructuring, but needed considerably more staff. I thought, however, that it would be fatal to start restructuring the unit, going through all the SQA processes of advertising posts and interviewing, when staff were already working a massive amount of overtime every week. It would have been very disruptive and would have placed us in greater jeopardy.

That did not stop us drafting in more staff. We constantly asked the managers in the operations unit to tell us if they needed more people. We brought in a lot of temporary staff and people from other units. The trouble was that it was a core of operations staff who had the necessary expertise to sort out the problems. They could not be cloned overnight. It was like the old Irish phrase—I came to the conclusion that, if I wanted to go where I wanted to go, I would not be starting from here.

It was already too late to do the job that needed to be done, which was to expand the unit, to duplicate the expertise and to be set up to cope, not with the SEB's business but with the SQA's business, which was considerably more diverse and demanding.

Michael Russell: I wish to ask you two points, and see whether our rally—in tennis terms—can be shorter than the one that you have just been through.

Mr Macintosh: Sorry.

Michael Russell: It is normal practice with such

a huge project for there to be a contingency plan should the software for a new computer system not be delivered or should it not deliver what you wanted. For example, air traffic control software could not be introduced until it was entirely failsafe. What was your contingency plan?

David Elliot: That is a very interesting analogy. The air traffic continues, but what people are trying to produce a computer system to cope with is not changing, apart from an increase in its volume. We were not in such a situation; we were trying to produce qualifications that were only being introduced. Neither the SCOTVEC software nor the exam board software could support higher still. The software did not exist anywhere in the world. We did have contingencies round the edges of the system, but the contingency for the failure of the new software to operate on time was that we could not get higher still. There was no other way to do it than by producing new IT.

Michael Russell: So there was not a fallback position if the software did not deliver, if the computer system did not deliver or if, as we now know, the data management system did not deliver.

David Elliot: The fallback would have had to have been quite drastic. We based results simply on the examination, and processed them using the old SEB software. We could not process higher still that way, as it required software to collate unit and exam results.

Michael Russell: The system was therefore coming together at a crucial point where, if the software or data management system failed, there was no alternative. Is that correct?

David Elliot: That is the pressure of running a public examination system—it was not possible to delay the examination by a month or two. We were constrained by all the requirements that were placed upon us.

Michael Russell: I am not sure if you have seen the evidence that David Miller gave us on Monday—

David Elliot: I have not.

Michael Russell: Let me read a paragraph of it:

"In early July, a member of the Scottish Executive told me that he was very concerned that the SQA had not covered some of the points to ensure that a resident teacher would be available in school to provide information during the holidays. Furthermore, he said that David Elliot's attitude to the issue had been extremely laid back. I asked him whether he wanted that to be an official or unofficial comment. He said that it was an unofficial comment . . . As a result, I went to Dalkeith and spent some time with all the department heads, one of whom told me of his concern that they were not going to get much more than 80 per cent right."—[*Official Report*, *Education, Culture and Sport Committee*, 2 October 2000; c 1477-78.]

Had you spoken to any member of the Scottish Executive—to a minister—at any stage in June or July?

David Elliot: I had not spoken to the minister, but I was speaking frequently with members of the Scottish Executive. I am quite surprised by the comments that Mike Russell has just read out. I think that I had a fair share of responsibilities to execute at the time. Managing the contact with the centres was not my responsibility at directorate level. I am not sure about what that conversation was, about who it was with or about why my views on it were deemed to be particularly significant.

Michael Russell: Did the chairman raise that with you subsequently?

David Elliot: No.

Michael Russell: So Mr Miller went to the centre and spoke to an individual who said that not much more than 80 per cent of the results would be right. He said that he was "knocked sideways" by that comment. He later identified that staff member as Bill Arundel. Does Bill Arundel work in your division?

David Elliot: Yes. Bill Arundel was head of data processing, and was promoted to acting head of the operations unit.

Michael Russell: Bill Arundel told the chairman that not much more than 80 per cent would be got right. Did Bill Arundel tell you that at any stage?

David Elliot: Bill Arundel and I were in constant discussion. Bill must have arrived at that figure on the basis that nothing would happen between that date and the date of issue of results. At one point, we were missing a substantial amount of results, for whatever reason. We made the situation good, which is why the certificates that we issued were in a much better state than a 20 per cent deficit. There is no doubt that there was a lot of anxiety among the staff. I was extremely anxious myself.

However, we had to proceed, keep calm, not be open to despondency and work very hard to try to retrieve the situation. We did retrieve it to a significant degree; it is a matter of immense regret to me not to have gone the whole way there. Between the end of June and the end of July, we covered an immense amount of ground.

Michael Russell: I want to concentrate on the fact that Bill Arundel told David Miller

"that they were not going to get much more than 80 per cent right."

Bill Arundel did not add, "unless something else happens."

Mr Miller went on to tell us that there was a videoconferencing meeting, that Ron Tuck had been told about that conversation—we will ask him

later—and that the organisation decided that it could get it right,

"that the SQA was a can-do organisation, that the members had their heads up and knew that they could do it."—[*Official Report*, *Education, Culture and Sport Committee*, 2 October 2000; c 1478.]

Does that equate with what you think happened?

David Elliot: It does not. I was extremely anxious about the situation from March until August. We felt that the situation was retrievable and worked extremely hard to retrieve it. However, the airy self-confidence that Mike Russell referred to in no way reflects what I experienced during the 12-hour and 14-hour days that we were working in Dalkeith.

Michael Russell: This is the key point. We have constantly heard the word reassurance. We have an example of such reassurance. The chairman believes that he has been reassured when, after being given a piece of very bad news, he is told at a videoconference that the SQA is a can-do organisation and that the members have their heads up. However, you do not consider that to be reassuring the chairman that everything is fine.

12:45

David Elliot: This is a very difficult issue on which to comment; it is a matter of how the words are used. Officers came to the videoconference meetings that we held every morning from the beginning of July and were encouraged by Ron Tuck and me to be utterly frank about the situation. I am sorry to hear about that comment to the chairman, because I felt that officers were being totally frank at the meetings. None of them would suggest that Ron Tuck and I are intimidating people and we really encouraged them to tell it how it was. We tried to tell officers that we could not afford to get very despondent and start panicking—we could not cancel the examination. We continued to work very hard to keep a rational perspective on the situation and to keep solving problems, and we were successful in doing so. The situation improved significantly from the end of June to the end of July.

Michael Russell: Was Bill Arundel right to make that comment to the chairman? Furthermore, from the evidence, do you think that Mr Arundel and others might have been preparing themselves for the worst case scenario—that they were not going to get it right—whereas you appear to have been doing something else?

David Elliot: The staff were very concerned, which caused me to dwell quite a lot on what constitutes leadership. Indeed, wartime analogies were quite common. Despite the fact that the situation looks very difficult, staff need to be reassured that things can be done to get to where we want to go. There were things that we could do. We were taking quite drastic action such as taking staff off other very important work and putting them into operations to try and bolster the unit. We felt that the staff were taking the perfectly sensible view that this was not a typical year and that the situation was very worrying. The late access to marks data was causing operations particularly grave concerns and we just had to keep reassuring them that we were being very active in remedying the situation and that doing nothing would make things very difficult. Although staff felt very despondent, we took the bigger picture and put in more resources to make the situation better than they thought it was. We were successful in doing so, but not nearly as successful as we would have liked.

Cathy Peattie: The SQA staff have clearly been under a great deal of pressure. Have you been asking too much from them? For example, last April, your operations line manager took on the role of IT line manager. That seems like a lot of ground to cover. Might not some reasonable strategic management at the start of the situation have alleviated the stress suffered by members of staff?

David Elliot: The operations unit was not constructed to cope with the SQA's business. I took over the unit in April last year with no background in data processing. However, as the 1999 exams worked very smoothly, there was no immediate sign of any problems. My greatest anxiety was the development of the new software, without which no one would have received a certificate this year. As a result, I began to realise over the winter and into the early part of this year that the operations unit could not cope with the SQA's business but, by that time, we were already into a firefighting situation.

Cathy Peattie: Yes, but planning and strategic management can take into account the fact that a certain year might be difficult due to new IT systems and structures. Did any such planning take place or was there a real failure on the part of management to plan for the situation that the SQA was facing?

David Elliot: There was a failure to plan the structure of the operations unit to cope with the SQA's business. However, other factors that put pressures on the unit could not be so readily foreseen. Although we succeeded in getting the software in place to do the core processing, a lot of pressure was put on the operations unit by the late delivery of the tools to manage data. Furthermore, the system was sometimes slow to respond, which delayed the work and put more pressure on the unit. Finally, insufficient markers were appointed, which was probably one of the most nightmarish situations for the unit as it did

not have the markers to send scripts to for marking.

Cathy Peattie: Could you not have planned for that? Would not planning have at least been helpful in the situation?

David Elliot: Of course the situation could have been planned better. I was informed quite late about the problems with marking, which were causing grave problems for the operations unit and for many of our procedures. However, I do not know whether I could have been expected to foresee that particular problem.

Cathy Peattie: I am not suggesting that your planning was at fault. It seems that, instead of one person being to blame, the problem stems from communication between different departments and the whole organisation's strategic planning for dealing with the situation.

David Elliot: Although it sounds awful to say this, given this summer's dreadful problems, the organisation did pretty well within the allocated time scale. In 1997, not only did we not have any software, we did not have an organisation. There were two separate organisations. We had to create the SQA first and then plan the data processing. Although an awful lot of very good strategic planning was undertaken, we had so much to do that we did not have enough time to get it all right.

Cathy Peattie: At any time, did you say to HMI that you had too much to do this year and that you needed to wait?

David Elliot: I took over the operations unit and IT two months before the courses started in schools. It was just not an option to ask the Government to tell the schools to take another year.

Cathy Peattie: So when you took over two months before the courses started, it was too late to do anything. Do you think someone should have said something earlier on?

David Elliot: There was probably a reaction to the fact that it took 20 years to implement standard grade and there was a feeling that we should get higher still up and running. Because the higher still programme had been running for six years, the schools were more or less in place. However, the SQA had not been running for the same time; it came into existence only in April 1997. A lot of people have been saying that it was doable. It was, but any major change to the public examination system comes with risks, and the bigger the change and the quicker it is introduced the bigger the risks. With higher still, the implementation of changes at intermediate 1 and 2 and higher within the time scale put too much pressure on us and did not allow us to be resilient when things went wrong.

Mr Monteith: You mentioned the lack of markers. Which unit head was responsible for appointing the markers?

David Elliot: My colleague Don Giles was directly responsible for that, with the appointments and committee unit responsible for making the appointments.

Mr Monteith: What is the name of that unit again?

David Elliot: Committee and appointments, I think.

Mr Monteith: We heard earlier that Mr Miller, the chairman of the board, had received an indication that 20,000 results might not have been completed. On Monday, he explained how that figure began to decrease over a period of time to about 1,400 on the weekend before the certificates were issued. Even then, as he drove down to Dalkeith to congratulate the staff on their good work, he was called to be told that that figure had further been reduced to about 400 candidates.

Were you at any stage in direct contact with the chairman of the board to relay information to him on the scale of the problem and how it was being coped with and reduced?

David Elliot: The way in which we were managing the organisation was to have daily videoconference meetings. On Fridays, we met the Scottish Executive. The chairman attended some of those meetings—I cannot recall how many. When he visited Dalkeith, where I was spending most of my time, I would discuss with him the general situation on the data. It was certainly not me who made the phone call to him on his way to Dalkeith.

Mr Monteith: Would the job of collating the information on the number of outstanding certificates be that of Jack Greig or Bill Arundel, depending on who was in situ at the time?

David Elliot: Given the number of developments in the time scale in which we were working, the reports that we were getting out of the system were not as user-friendly as I am sure they will be next year. We discussed the situation at the daily videoconference meetings. Various people were using different tools to get an insight into where we stood on the data and they brought those insights to the meeting. More than one person was involved in bringing the data together.

Mr Monteith: I am trying to establish how the reduction in estimates came about. David Miller tells us that on the day he went to Dalkeith, he turned up to find what he called thousands of certificates still waiting to go out. There seems to be some conflict in the evidence that we have

received. A number of people who have given evidence have said that that they felt misled. They seemed to point to Jack Greig as the person responsible, but from his evidence—you may want to dispute this—it would appear that he was not in his post after June and that he had been on sick leave for part of June. The chairman is telling us that the numbers are coming down, but it cannot be Jack Greig who is supplying that information; it is Bill Arundel or other people. Can you shed any light on that?

David Elliot: Jack Greig was responsible for the management of the unit until he took sick leave in June, but we were not working in a hierarchy. I have no evidence that anyone was deliberately misleading anyone else. The problem was that we were dealing with a complex system out of which we were trying to get management information. We had different ways of doing that—people were doing their best. We identified that a lot of data that should have been on the system were not; we took a cut of the data almost nightly, to see how we were getting on with reducing the outstanding data. That was being done by a range of people, such as Colin Urie, David Falconer, Bill Arundel and others.

There were different types of software and different people working in different areas. It was a diffuse situation, but I am sure that the chairman is reporting accurately his conversations with Jack Greig. The chairman was free to go about the office on his own, without a minder, so he could well have had those conversations.

Mr Monteith: Given that Jack Greig had been relieved of that post from the end of June, it would be unlikely that the chairman would be taking information from Jack Greig. He would be getting it from other people in the organisation.

David Elliot: By that time, yes.

Michael Russell: I want to clarify something. You said that you had videoconferences every morning. We have a note of management meetings that were held regularly in July. Is that what you are talking about?

David Elliot: Yes.

Michael Russell: You said that you met the Scottish Executive on Fridays—was that every Friday during July? Was it earlier?

David Elliot: It was not earlier. We met on 4 August and, I think, the two weeks prior to that. That will be in the public domain.

Michael Russell: There are notes of the management meetings, so would there be notes of those meetings?

David Elliot: I cannot recall. They were very much working meetings—papers were presented at those meetings, which gave the latest information on outstanding data, as we saw it.

13:00

Michael Russell: We have not been provided with working papers from or notes of those meetings. We should request them, because they are germane to the inquiry. I am surprised that we have not had them.

David Elliot: The meetings were to update the Executive. I have my own papers here. We went over all the outstanding issues, the time scales and how many unit results, component scores and standard grade assessment grades we seemed to be lacking, as well as the various other jobs that were having to be done to ensure that we—

Michael Russell: Who attended those meetings from the Scottish Executive?

David Eliot: It was not always the same, but Eleanor Emberson, Mike Ewing and Philip Banks attended some of them.

Michael Russell: From the information technology section?

David Elliot: Philip Banks was from Her Majesty's inspectorate of schools.

Michael Russell: Was anybody from the IT section there?

David Elliot: Not that I recall.

The Convener: I am happy to ask for that information, but we will have the chance to ask Mr Tuck for further details.

Johann Lamont: I want to focus on something slightly different. You agreed that there was no contingency plan. The Scottish Executive representative we had here said that there was no substitute SQA. What risk assessment would have been done? Would you have been involved at an early stage, when it was proposed to go forward with a system for which there was no contingency plan and no one who could bail the SQA out if the system crashed? Would you have been involved in assessing whether it was too risky to go ahead at an earlier stage?

David Elliot: I was not involved—nor did I expect to be—in the important decision about when the SQA should be created and when higher still should be implemented.

Johann Lamont: That is not quite what I was asking. You were involved in facilitating the process of bringing the APS on stream. I am asking whether it was your—or someone's—professional judgment that it was hugely risky to go into the dark, with no contingency plan in case the system crashed. We have already heard from the Scottish Executive that it had no contingency

plan, because it could not substitute for your organisation's expertise. As far as you are aware, was there at any stage a pros and cons discussion about the risks of that? If there was not, do you think that there should have been?

David Elliot: We accepted as a given that higher still would be implemented in 1999-2000. At the regular meetings of the APS project board, there was a standing item on risk assessment in relation to delivery of the software. We were very conscious of that and we were always monitoring what the risks were.

On the risk, the point I was making about higher still was that there is a continuum in changing the exam system from low to high risk. There is no doubt that higher still was more towards the high-risk end. We had a contingency plan for those matters, where such a plan was possible. That was reasonably successful and the bulk of the software was there on target.

Mr Monteith: Were the videoconferences digitally recorded?

David Elliot: No, they were not recorded. The SQA instituted a video link between the Dalkeith and Glasgow sites, which proved extremely helpful. The meetings were held daily throughout July. They were minuted, but there is no electronic recording of them.

The Convener: If there are no further questions, I thank Mr Elliot, especially for having come back for a second week. Thank you for your answers.

Good afternoon, Mr Tuck. I also thank you for returning to the committee so promptly. We will pick up where we left off last week.

Michael Russell: I will ask you about a set of minutes of the chairman's committee, which have been provided to this committee. Mr Miller said that the role of the chairman's committee was to consider issues between meetings of the board. The minutes of the chairman's committee appear to discuss only SQA fellowships at some length. If that committee's role was to discuss matters between meetings of the board, should it not have been more active between April and August? Were you responsible for drawing up the agenda for that meeting? What did you tell the chairman at that meeting and other meetings about what was happening?

Ron Tuck (Former Chief Executive, Scottish Qualifications Authority): All I can say in response to that is that the chairman's committee was not used in that way. It was the chairman's prerogative to decide how he used it. It tended not to be used to discuss those matters.

Michael Russell: He told us that it was used to deal with urgent matters between meetings of the board, yet all it discussed was fellowships, which although interesting are not urgent. Why did the chairman not use the committee to deal with urgent matters? Did you suggest to him that he should?

Ron Tuck: The chairman and I had regular discussions. His favoured route between meetings was to send letters to members of the board, which he did from time to time. He may also have occasionally phoned board members. He tended not to use the chairman's committee in that way.

Michael Russell: There seem to be problems with the minutes of several committees. One of the recurrent themes of the evidence that we took on Monday was that the chairman and others claimed that there had been lots of discussions about the difficulties that the SQA was experiencing with higher still implementation, such as the problems with data handling and centres, yet the minutes do not reflect that. The minutes are anodyne and do not give much detail of those discussions. Do you recall the board meetings discussing in great detail the matters to which I am referring?

Ron Tuck: Absolutely.

The board minutes were not written with a view to informing a parliamentary inquiry. They were written to remind those who had attended the meetings and who had seen the board papers what was discussed. Sometimes the discussions were based on quite full reports. I do not know whether you have also had access to those.

The minutes record key matters of concern that were discussed by the board. In all honesty, I thought that the board's probing of APS and higher still during the past year was thorough. As an officer it is unsatisfying to go to the length of preparing papers on an important matter for the board to slide over it. As the year went on, the board became increasingly tough and probing. We felt that we had been worked over by the end of a board meeting, if I can put it that way.

Michael Russell: Why would the chairman describe himself as being "knocked sideways" by Bill Arundel's comment, in his conversation with him at the beginning of July, that they were not going to get much more than 80 per cent right. If the chairman was that well briefed, he presumably knew that those were huge concerns, as Mr Elliot told us, across the organisation.

Ron Tuck: As I made clear in my submission and in my evidence last week, there were different concerns at different stages. The concerns that proved fatal emerged only in middle to late June. I would support everything that David Elliot said about events leading up to that. When we gave reassurances it was not in the sense of being sanguine. At no point during the year were we calm or getting a full night's sleep. It was a difficult year. However, when faced with that situation,

what are your options? Either you are so concerned that you say, "This definitely cannot happen" or you set about addressing the problem, which is what we did.

At every stage in our briefing of the chairman, the board and the Scottish Executive until mid-June, we were saying, "Those are the difficulties and this is what we are doing about it. We believe that it is doable."

Michael Russell: But you said that in July as well. David Miller said:

"I had a conversation with Ron Tuck, who then had his own conversations."

Presumably you remember that. Did you go back and talk to Bill Arundel?

Ron Tuck: I do not recall Bill Arundel making the 80 per cent comment to the chairman. That does not mean that it did not happen. A lot was happening then. I remember that Bill made that comment to another member of staff, the head of human resources, who relayed it to me. We had a discussion with Bill about it.

Michael Russell: What did you say to Bill?

Ron Tuck: I said, "We have heard your estimate that we will get it 80 per cent right. Tell us about that." We had been in a meeting earlier, when he had not conveyed that point of view. Understandably, what we got from Bill Arundel was a general anxiety. We wanted to pin it down. We wanted to know why he was saying that, what the key problems were that gave rise to his estimate and what we could do about it. We did not get that information. A lot of the staff expressed general anxiety. A manager cannot act on general anxiety; you need to know specifics.

Michael Russell: But you took a specific action. I presume you would speak to your chairman from time to time. According to the chairman:

"I received a reassurance from them"—

from you and others—

"that things were doable and that it would be right for us to go on the day . . . He told me that the SQA was a can-do organisation, that the members had their heads up and knew that they could do it."

We have heard Mr Elliot's comment on that. What is your comment? Is that what you did?

Ron Tuck: I agree with David Elliot's comment that the duty of the leadership of an organisation is not to get bogged down in despondency. You must lift your staff. You must project an image of confidence—but not undue confidence because the staff are well informed. Our tone through that period was, "Yes, we understand the concerns. There are real difficulties. This is what we are doing about it. Let us get ahead and do it."

In relation to my conversations with David Miller, at some point in July—I cannot recall when—my advice shifted from, "Yes, I think we can do it absolutely" to, "Yes, I think that 9 August certification is on, but there is a risk of data gaps." As July progressed, the issue became the extent of those data gaps. The position that we adopted—and discussed with the Scottish Executive—was that if the data gaps were small enough and we knew where they were, it was sensible to go ahead with 9 August certification rather than disadvantage the great majority.

Michael Russell: You were wrong. The gaps were not small enough.

Ron Tuck: That is right. We were mistaken in our belief. I was explaining the basis of the advice that I gave the chairman and the nature of the decision-making process during July.

Michael Russell: According to the chairman, the advice you gave him at the beginning of July was

"that the SQA was a can-do organisation, that the members had their heads up and knew that they could do it."—[*Official Report, Education, Culture and Sport Committee,* 2 October 2000; c 1478]

Mr Elliott was dismissive of that. Was that the advice that you gave to the chairman?

Ron Tuck: I cannot remember using those exact words. I certainly could not tell you the exact occasion. At a certain stage in July, the tenor of the advice changed.

Michael Russell: The second piece of advice to which you referred was that if the data gap was small enough you would go ahead on 9 August. That also turned out to be wrong. With hindsight, did you give the wrong advice to the chairman on both those occasions? Heads were not up. Among others, Bill Arundel was saying that things were pretty dreadful. Your advice that the data gap was small enough turned out to be untrue. Who told you that the data gap was small enough?

Ron Tuck: The remark that heads were up was a comment that I deliberately made to David Miller in context. David Miller knew perfectly well—and I was not trying to pretend otherwise—that the staff were not all singing, dancing and happy with life; they were working very hard and were under a great deal of stress. Heads were not up in that sense, but what was impressive—and this is the point that I was making—was that staff were volunteering to come in. Sometimes we had to persuade staff to take a day off. That happened because of their commitment to getting things right for the candidates. Heads were up in that sense. Staff wanted to get it right and were working extraordinarily hard to do that. That is the context in which that remark was made.

The information about the data gap was based on the fact that, towards the end of June, we got reports that were based on a cut of the data that were missing. We tracked the data that were coming in and subtracted them from the original figure. That gave us the basis for the management information that led me to believe on 9 August, in all good faith, that we were missing results for about 1,400 candidates. That proved to be wrong. As I have not been back in the office since, I am not in a position to tell you why. All I can say is that that advice was given in good faith.

13:15

The Convener: Mr Tuck, you said that you felt that everybody was working hard and that people were putting in extra hours as everyone in the organisation was gearing up to ensure that the results were produced. Would you say that those who were managing and who should have had an overview of what was going on were so busy with the immediate difficulties that they were not able to get that overview and that that was why you were not able to see what was coming?

Ron Tuck: I think that that is a plausible part of the explanation.

Mr Monteith: In your answer to Michael Russell's question, you explained that you had a figure that you wanted to reduce and that you were confident that you were managing to reduce that figure because of the amount of data coming in but that, because you left the post on 10 August, you were unable to give a definitive answer as to why the discrepancy arose. Could it be that, while those data were coming in and you were at liberty to reduce your estimates, the problems that were inherent prior to that point—poor entering of data and so on—were continuing and that some of the data that were coming in were not being applied properly? That would explain why, even though you thought the number of certificates that would be wrong had decreased, it had not.

Ron Tuck: It is possible. As you say, it is difficult for me to speculate as to why that information gap appeared.

Mr Monteith: I want to talk about Jack Greig. He had his request for early retirement approved in May or June, I understand.

Ron Tuck: I believe that it was in April.

Mr Monteith: Thank you. At the end of June, it was decided that Bill Arundel should take up the task that Jack Greig had previously been in charge of. What were the factors behind the decision to approve his request for early retirement and what weight did you give them? Was his state of health a factor, given that he had been absent for some time in June? Were the concerns that were being raised by people such as Bill Arundel about the state of play in the operations unit another factor?

Ron Tuck: Both were factors. When Jack Greig went off sick, we had no idea when he would return from sick leave and we had growing doubts about his ability to manage the situation.

Mr Monteith: Had he been sick prior to June?

Ron Tuck: He had had a back problem. I am sure that David Elliot could inform you of when that occurred.

Mr Monteith: Was the problem stress related?

Ron Tuck: No. He was off with stress following the death of his wife. The subsequent health problem was to do with his back and I cannot recall what the final health problem was.

Mr Monteith: Back problems can be related to stress, but I will not go into that.

The Convener: Thank you, Dr Monteith.

Mr Monteith: Indeed.

On Monday, the chairman of the SQA, David Miller, said that he was aware of regular updates to the effect that the number of certificates that might not be complete was being reduced. We have heard from David Elliot about videoconferencing. In what way would the chairman have been briefed about the number reducing? From you or from participation in meetings?

Ron Tuck: Both. He took part in videoconferencing meetings on two or three occasions and, by July, we were in daily contact by telephone. The chairman obviously wanted to know what the state of play was in relation to the issues that we were pursuing.

Mr Monteith: He explained to us how he travelled down to Dalkeith to congratulate the staff on the work that they had done and on getting as far as they had on higher still. He told us that, on the way, he was telephoned with the information that the number had come down to about 400 candidates. Are you aware of that phone call? Did you make it?

Ron Tuck: What date are we talking about?

Mr Monteith: I suspect that it would be 9 August—the date on which certificates were due to go out.

Ron Tuck: The figure of 400 candidates would relate to only one component. As I recall, there were reported to be 400 missing internal course assessments and 400 missing standard grade assessments.

Mr Monteith: The chairman explained to us

that, when he arrived at Dalkeith, he was gobsmacked—to paraphrase—to find a large number of certificates in a state of unpreparedness and unlikely to go out. That genuinely seemed to shock him, given all the estimates that he had heard.

Ron Tuck: I think that you must be talking about 10 August, the day on which candidates should have received their certificates.

There are two separate issues. There is the issue of missing data—on 9 August, I reported that I believed that missing data affected 1,500 candidates. I found out about the other issue in between giving two radio interviews on 10 August. It concerns the fact that 2,000 certificates had not been issued. I understand—although I am going by hearsay—that that issue was to do with a problem with file transfer from the APS into the Dalkeith print system. It eventually transpired that there were more than 2,000 certificates missing, but that is a wholly separate issue. I believed, on the night of 9 August, that all the certificates had been issued.

Mr Monteith: In that case, what David Miller was explaining to us on Monday was about two separate things. He discovered certificates that had not gone out for the reasons that you explained, as opposed to certificates that had gone out with missing data.

Ron Tuck: Yes.

Mr Macintosh: Was it the SQA's decision not to carry out concordancy checks on the new national courses?

Ron Tuck: Our decision was to carry on with concordancy checks for standard grade and the revised higher examinations.

The Convener: But not to carry them out for higher still examinations?

Ron Tuck: That is correct.

Mr Macintosh: Why was that?

Ron Tuck: There was a combination of reasons. We did not have all the estimates—a situation for which we accept responsibility—and that would make it difficult to conduct concordancy checks.

Also, we had been discussing throughout the year whether the concordancy check would have been much help in the first year of the implementation of a new set of courses. The checks depend on schools' estimates being accurate. Schools' estimates for standard grade examinations are exceedingly accurate. We rely on them strongly because teachers have become excellent at estimating accurately. For the revised highers, teachers' estimates are not as good. That is perhaps because the revised highers are newer than the standard grades or because teachers are under pressure to estimate upwards. We do not know why, but estimates for highers have never proved to be as reliable as those for standard grades. Therefore, we surmised that, in the first year of the higher still system, it was unlikely that there would be a great degree of concordancy anyway.

The third reason was that we anticipated—even then—that people would be appealing on everything relating to higher still. Therefore, as the purpose of concordancy checks is to cut down the number of appeals, there was nothing much to be gained from using them.

Mr Macintosh: Another issue was raised by the representatives of the HAS. They said that they regretted your decision to allow centres to amend estimates at the time of appeal. They implied that, at the point when you realised that there would be difficulties, you gave in to pressure and allowed a situation to arise in which pushy, articulate, middle-class parents could advantage their children.

Ron Tuck: The decision that we made was to relax a normal rule. The normal rule is that centres can submit an appeal on behalf of a candidate only on the basis of a previously submitted estimate and that they cannot suddenly change their estimates and appeal for something higher.

In an attempt to be flexible in what had been a difficult year for everyone and to be fair to candidates, we decided to review that requirement and allow centres to appeal for the grades that they thought candidates were generally capable of attaining. We were under no pressure to do that—we were not caving in to anyone. We were simply trying to be helpful and fair to candidates.

Mr Macintosh: Do you accept that some parents and children were more likely to take advantage of that than others were? Some schools would be more able to take advantage of the ability to change the estimates than other schools.

Ron Tuck: Perhaps. Would not that apply to appeals in general? Parents from affluent backgrounds might put more pressure on schools to submit appeals in the first place. I am not sure whether that is a particularly new factor. However, I have not given the matter much thought.

Mr Macintosh: Your submission makes it clear that the key problem was data management. Mr Elliot said earlier that he thought that the markers were a significant and disruptive factor in the data management.

Ron Tuck: In my submission, I said that the fatal problem turned out to be data management, rather than the software or the markers. However, the late development of software and the late

recruitment of markers added to the pressures on data management. That is what David Elliot is saying, too. The fact that some scripts were being marked late meant that the normally strict sequence of events on which good administration depends broke down. David and I are saying that we have no evidence to suggest that the quality assurance of marking was any different from normal.

Mr Macintosh: Many people have raised the issue of marking and it has emerged that concerns about marking were present from last October. However, at the last minute, there were still not enough markers. How can you explain that?

Ron Tuck: There is a difference between a general concern and a specific concern. We had a general concern about markers, which is why we talked about it with the Association of the Directors of Education in Scotland and the Headteachers Association of Scotland. We thought that the problem was a time bomb—that each year it was getting more difficult and that if we did not do something soon, a problem would emerge. In September, no one said to us that they thought that we would fail to recruit enough markers for the summer and we did not believe that to be the case.

Part of our submission to the McCrone committee—about the only thing that we said to that committee—was that serious consideration should be given to making marking part of a teacher's contract. Scotland's national examination depends on voluntary professional labour. The SQA cannot mark the scripts; we have to bring in thousands of professionals from schools who choose whether to do the marking. We also have one hand tied behind our back in relation to remuneration. That is included in my submission.

To give markers a fair return for their professional labour, we should probably double the current rate of pay. That would cost £2.8 million per annum. As that could not be added to the cost of all qualifications, it would result in a 20 per cent increase in the entry charges for highers, standard grades and so on. That is not a problem for us—it would make our life easier. We would love to raise entry charges and have happy and contented markers. However, before we can raise entry charges, we must ask for the views of COSLA, the Association of Scottish Colleges, the Confederation of British Industry and sundry others, and then we must gain the approval of the Scottish Executive. The phrase "turkeys voting for Christmas" springs to mind.

This year, when we raised entry charges slightly above inflation—a 2.9 per cent increase—there were distinct rumbles of disapproval. The culture in which we operate is one in which people are expected to hold real costs steady or to reduce them. Without an evident crisis, we would not get support for raising entry charges to pay markers more. However, we did not think that the problem would affect us as quickly as it did.

The second factor was the shortening of the examination diet, and with hindsight, we should not have reduced the marking period to two weeks—that turned out to be a mistake.

Ian Jenkins: Can you tell us about your relationship with the higher still development unit? We have talked about overload—your organisation must produce national assessment bank material—and at some point there was a shift of responsibility from the HSDU to the SQA. Was that an easy shift, or did it put on so much extra pressure that it became a reason for the overload?

13:30

Ron Tuck: I do not think so. The national assessment bank was a huge enterprise, which we shared with the HSDU. It was fraught with all sorts of difficulties, not just because of the scale, but because we had to rely on people who were not under our direct control, we had to recruit teachers, and there were copyright issues and all sorts of things. It was a huge, complex statistical exercise. There were no particular handover issues that added to the difficulty.

Ian Jenkins: I am surprised.

Ron Tuck: Do you have an example of something specific?

Ian Jenkins: We were talking about markers being appointed late and so on, and from the teachers' point of view, assessment bank materials were being requested at a volume that was not what they expected. The whole thing exploded. I am surprised that you say that the NAB did not give you extra problems.

Ron Tuck: You asked me about the relationship with the HSDU, which, on the whole, was a good and effective partnership. Most of the national assessment bank materials were produced on time, although often later than when teachers wanted them. However, there is another issue about when teachers wanted the material in relation to the published schedule—most of the material was published on time.

Ian Jenkins: And some of the material was better than others.

Ron Tuck: That will always be the case.

Mr Monteith: I hope that this point does not relate to the time after you left the SQA. Usually, when results are prepared for the certificate run, they are prepared for schools and a tape is provided for the Universities and Colleges

Admissions Service. Was that done this time, and if not, why not?

Ron Tuck: The computer run to produce the statement of results took much longer than anticipated. It was a bolt out of the blue—to me—that the statement of results was going to be quite as late as it was. However, as I recall, we produced the electronic version by the evening of Wednesday 9 August, only to discover that there was a subsequent problem in the ability of the software suppliers to receive that information. Again, that is so close to the end of my period of tenure that I am not really able to shed any more light than that.

Mr Monteith: When you say that it was a bolt out of the blue, do you mean that it was not foreseen that the printing would take so long or was the delay in printing a result of the earlier problems?

Ron Tuck: The statement of results can be produced only when the certification run is complete. The problem was that the time that it took to process the statement of results was much longer than I had been advised it would be.

Mr Stone: I have taken a close interest in the reporting control mechanisms between the SQA and the board. You will have heard the evidence that has been given by the board members and others. Given that the members of the board are there in their own right, was it your impression that those members were making representations at the board to suggest that there was something wrong? I am interested in your impressions.

Ron Tuck: Board members, particularly those from the education sector, brought their direct experience to bear and raised issues. However, many of the issues related to the implementation of higher still. With hindsight, it appears that we should have spent the whole year thinking about data management. However, we did not because our eyes were focused on the new things: higher still implementation, getting feedback from schools on higher still and developing the new software system. I accept the criticism that we should also have been examining the old things, which has worked in the past. However, we did not and people did not see it coming. Board discussions were about higher still implementation, unit assessment, delivery of the national assessment bank and the progress of the APS. People were raising issues and we were addressing them.

Michael Russell: We have been provided with the minute of the SQA and Scottish Executive education department liaison committee. There is a curious item in the main minute in which you are quoted as saying that you are reorganising the SQA conference to allow Mr Galbraith to arrive later than anticipated, which would have the benefit of ensuring that Mr Galbraith did not attend the question-and-answer session and be asked awkward questions. What awkward questions did you expect the minister to be asked at your conference?

Ron Tuck: Mr Russell, you would have to ask that of the person who wrote the minute.

Michael Russell: The minute quotes you as saying that.

Ron Tuck: I am quoted as saying what?

Michael Russell: The minute quotes you as saying that you had rescheduled a session and that the advantage of that would be that Mr Galbraith would not be at the question-and-answer session to be asked awkward questions. What awkward questions did you expect?

Ron Tuck: I would have to dispute the accuracy of that minute. It is not any part of my job to defend the minister from awkward questions. We issue an invitation to the minister to speak at our conference. It is up to the Scottish Executive to determine when the minister attends and whether he will take questions.

Michael Russell: So the minute is plain wrong?

Ron Tuck: The minute is plain wrong.

Mr Macintosh: A small issue was raised by Judith Gillespie of the Scottish Parent Teacher Council. She pointed to the February meeting of the liaison group when it took a decision that effectively allowed unit assessments to take place at the end of the courses. She said that at the time she did not realise the significance of that decision, which meant that all the unit assessments would be delayed. Did you realise that that had implications for the SQA?

Ron Tuck: We are in the area of advice to schools on implementation, rather than SQA regulations. It has always been up to the centres to decide when they want to conduct unit assessments. They could do it sequentially or they could save them all up to the end. However, if that were to become widespread practice, we would have to step in with regulation because it would cause us administrative difficulties. The discussion that you are talking about might reflect a change in the tenor of the advice that HMI or the HSDU were giving to schools about implementation. That was not a matter for the SQA.

The Convener: Thank you, Mr Tuck, for returning to the committee and giving us your answers this morning.

Ron Tuck: Thank you.

The Convener: Does the committee agree to begin Monday's meeting in Hamilton with a private item?

Michael Russell: At what time?

The Convener: At 9.30 am.

Michael Russell: Some members may have difficulty getting to Hamilton for 9.30 am.

The Convener: Members will have to make an effort, given the fact that we have overrun this morning. Is it agreed that we open that meeting in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Meeting closed at 13:38.

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