

30 June 2020

Clare Adamson MSP  
Convenor  
Education and Skills Committee  
Scottish Parliament

## **SQA response to Education & Skills Committee letter of 15 June 2020**

Dear Ms Adamson

### **Replacement for exam diet**

Thank you for your letter of Monday 15 June requesting further information following SQA's response to your letter of Friday 8 May, and the evidence session you have since held with the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) and School Leaders Scotland (SLS).

I am happy to address each of the areas that you have raised with me. I would like to start by reiterating that our approach, developed as a result of the cancellation of exams this year, is based on three core principles:

- fairness to all learners
- safe and secure certification of our qualifications, while following the latest public health advice; and
- maintaining the integrity and credibility of our qualifications system, ensuring that standards are maintained over time, in the interests of learners

As the Committee is aware, the scale and complexity of the changes required, and at this time of year, are simply unprecedented. It is important to therefore highlight that some of our work is still in progress. As I write, we are in the midst of our 2020 awarding process across 142 subjects. I have sought to provide as much information on our work to the system, and across the breadth of our activities, as possible.

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## **Appeals – planning the service**

It is important that a free appeal (post-certification review) service is available in this exceptional year, to provide for further, evidence-based consideration of grades if schools and colleges do not think awarded grades fairly reflect their learners' performance.

On Friday 19 June, we published [further information](#) about this service for schools and colleges. The document provides details on the eligibility for submitting a review, the materials that schools and colleges need to support a request and the planned dates for the service, including uplift dates for the collection of evidence.

As we do every year, we will give priority to requests for those learners requiring a result to secure a conditional place at college or university.

We continue to work at pace on the detailed logistical arrangements for the service, including engagement with our senior subject specialist appointees and their employers. Like all other processes requiring academic decisions by subject experts, the appeals process is reliant on schools, colleges and local authorities playing a full part in making available subject experts to review the evidence of learners' performance. We are acutely aware of schools and colleges returning in August and we are working hard to minimise our request for senior subject specialist appointees at the start of the 2020-21 session.

We are also building an operating model that minimises physical meetings and includes online training for reviewers, with associated quality checks.

To help make the process as efficient as possible, our work also includes the development of a system user guide that will provide advice and guidance on how to use the system. We will also issue separate instructions on how to package materials for submission. Both of these will be published and issued to schools and colleges before the service opens on Tuesday 4 August 2020.

## **Appeals - inferred attainment**

As we said in our estimates [information document](#) and [SQA Academy course](#), an estimate is a holistic professional judgement based on a learner's attainment in all aspects of the course and should reflect the learner's demonstrated and inferred attainment of the required skills, knowledge and understanding for the predicted grade and band estimated. Each estimate is a school or college's realistic evidence-based prediction of a learner's final attainment in the course assessment. Estimates always rely on both demonstrated and inferred evidence, since it is not possible to assess all skills, knowledge and understanding exhaustively.

The [information document](#) we published on Friday 19 June, includes advice on the types of evidence that should be provided to support a review request. This includes the option for a

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school or college to include a short commentary relating to a learner's performance if evidence is sparse, or where evidence indicates improvement in performance over time.

## **Equalities Impact Assessment**

### Equalities Impact Assessment publication

I have given a public commitment to ensuring we meet our legal obligations through an equality impact assessment (EQIA) of our approach to certification this year, and we take this commitment very seriously. I highlighted our approach to the EQIA in my letter of 21 May. It is also, of course, our intention to publish the assessment and I will of course do so when our work is complete. If it is practical to publish before results day on Tuesday 4 August, we will do so. However, we are working to a very tight timescale on our alternative certification model and across all our activities - and bringing forward this date may not be possible.

### Awarding model methodology publication

Since we received estimates from schools and colleges across Scotland on Friday 29 May, our priority has been to concentrate on the significant task of considering the estimates so that we can meet the timescales to deliver results to learners on Tuesday 4 August. This remains our priority. In line with our approach every year, we will be clear about the awarding process on results day.

This year, this will of course include the detail underpinning our approach and the impact of any moderation that we have had to make to estimates.

## **Awarding model – dialogue with schools and colleges**

We understand the Committee's request that SQA enters a dialogue with every school and college where there is a difference between this year's estimates and historical attainment data. When I gave evidence to the Committee on Friday 1 May, we were actively looking at whether we could or should do this. We have considered the matter very carefully, including further discussions with our Board of Management and we have concluded that it will not be possible to include engagement with schools and colleges within the moderation process.

There are two reasons for this. Firstly, the difficulty of operating a dialogue which is fair and consistent in its treatment of all centres and candidates. Secondly, it is not possible to enter into a dialogue in the very tight timescales we are working to – reviewing 22,000 datasets across 142 subjects from almost 500 centres – between the receipt of estimates and finalisation of grades which, for awarding purposes, are required by 10 July.

Our appeals (post-certification review) process will provide for further, evidence-based consideration of grades if schools and colleges do not think awarded grades fairly reflect learner performance. As highlighted above, [further information](#) was provided to schools and colleges on Friday 19 June.

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## **2020-21 session**

A full timetable of SQA exams and coursework is planned at all levels in 2021. Discussions will continue to take place, with partners, in the Covid-19 Education Recovery Group to consider any further changes which might be helpful to schools and colleges. This will include looking at changes to the timetabling of exams to maximise learning and teaching time in the next session, in addition to any other flexibilities and contingencies which may need to be in place to accommodate prevailing public health advice.

The [Strategic Framework for Re-Opening School, Early Learning and Childcare Provision](#) set out the importance of collection and retention of evidence throughout the session. If as a result of public health advice, SQA must move to an alternative certification model for 2021, this evidence would be used for teacher and lecturer estimates.

We will continue to engage with both our Advisory Council and Qualifications Committee, which include a wide range of stakeholders including teachers, headteachers, professional associations, employer representatives, academic advisers, parents/carers and young people. We will also continue to engage with national bodies, such as the National Parent Forum of Scotland, Connect, Young Scot and the Scottish Youth Parliament.

I hope this provides helpful clarification on the additional issues you have raised. Please be assured that everyone here at SQA is working extremely hard over the summer to deliver for learners in this extraordinary year.

Yours sincerely

Fiona Robertson  
SQA Chief Executive and Scotland's Chief Examining Officer