



Scottish Qualifications Authority
Ùghdarras Theisteanas Na H-Alba

13 October 2023

Sue Webber MSP
Convenor of the Education, Children and Young People Committee

Contact: Fiona Robertson

Dear Ms Webber

Follow up to SQA evidence session on 13 September 2023

Thank you for your letter of 21 September 2023, requesting further information on some of the matters that arose at SQA's evidence session. We are pleased to provide you with additional information.

Attainment gap, demographic data and equalities

As a general point on these issues, I highlighted to the Committee that we now publish an Equalities Analysis alongside attainment data published in August. This includes the use of information from SIMD data held by the Scottish Government. We are working with the Scottish Government to consider what further analysis may be possible. However, I should highlight that the Scottish Government measures the attainment gap on a national basis, using a range of data including from SQA. Our responsibility is to assess learners and award qualifications. The outcomes we report inform strategies by schools, local authorities and government, to address gaps in attainment.

SQA is working with the Scottish Government and Education Scotland to discuss data on attainment in National 5 Mathematics and National 5 Application of Mathematics. We will meet with representatives from the Association of Directors of Education for Scotland (ADES) to discuss national trends and to help them understand and consider local differences.

SQA's contribution to this work is to share data to help local authorities and schools understand how successful their approaches are. Some of the key questions to be discussed with local authorities include the following:

- What are the trends over time in attainment data?
- What are the differences in patterns of attainment by stage of schooling?
- What presentation approaches are being used within local authorities and how successful are these?
- How are local authorities using the different Mathematics courses to meet the needs of different learners?

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SQA has a [Gaelic Language Plan](#) and we work with the education sector to support Gaelic medium education by providing assessment in Gaelic as an option. SQA's role here is to provide assessment in the medium of Gaelic. It is the role of local authorities and schools to consider offering Gaelic medium education. We also offer Courses for Gaelic Learners and native Gaelic speakers.

SQA carries out an Equality Impact Assessment for any new policy or approach that is being considered or introduced. There has been some progress in diversification of the curriculum within many schools as they try to match learner needs with new qualifications that they offer. National information about the increasing use of vocational qualifications is [available on our website](#). Decisions about diversification of the curriculum are made at a school and local authority level and they will take into account a range of factors in deciding what to offer including the following:

- Aspirations of learners within their schools;
- Availability of practitioners with the skill, knowledge and understanding to offer new vocational qualifications;
- Availability of facilities to offer new vocational qualifications;
- Local employment opportunities;
- Availability of delivery partners (colleges, ETPs, employers); and
- Practical issues like timetabling.

I understand that Education Scotland is currently working with schools to produce resources to assist sharing good practice. SQA's role is to provide a wide range of vocational qualifications and to provide support for those delivering those qualifications.

Information on comparisons between teacher estimates and outcomes in 2022 was [published in November 2022](#). Further analysis is being undertaken for this year and will be published before the end of 2023. SQA has also published an evaluation of Awarding in 2021 and 2022 and these can be accessed through the following links: [2021 Evaluation](#) and [2022 Evaluation](#). We will shortly commence an evaluation of Awarding in 2023.

Appeals and outcomes

We expect appeals outcomes to be communicated to centres at the end of October 2023, and national data will be published before the end of the year. Our evaluation of Awarding in 2023 will include our approach to appeals this year and will be published in the early part of 2024.

Education reform and potential impact upon SQA's international work

The Muir Review recognised the value of SQA's commercial functions, including overseas activities, and recommended they continue. The Scottish Government accepted this recommendation.

Much of the value of SQA's overseas work comes from the strength of the SQA brand. In replacing SQA with a new qualifications body – with a new name and brand – care will need to be taken to ensure as much of this brand equity is not lost and to reassure the international centres that we work with about continuity of service.

Communication with the profession and young people

We gather feedback from stakeholders, including practitioners and learners, in a range of different ways. This includes:

- The National Qualifications Group, which include learner and practitioner representatives who help shape decisions on Awarding.
- The Advisory Council which brings together a wide range of stakeholder voices to advise SQA on policy and practice.
- The Learner Advisory Group and Learner Panel, which gathers a diverse range of learners to ensure the learner voice is heard and used to shape SQA's work.
- Our recent approach to evaluation of our approach to awarding of National Qualifications, which includes feedback from practitioners, our appointees, learners, parents and carers.
- Qualification development groups, which contain a range of practitioners, professional associations and end users as appropriate to the subject. These groups are formed when we are revising an existing qualification or developing a new qualification. Where we are revising a qualification, we also engage with learners who are currently undertaking the qualification or have completed the qualification.
- Evaluation of new qualifications – for example, we are piloting the next generation of HNCs and HNDs and we are engaging with learners and practitioners to understand what is working well and areas where more support is required. We also engaged extensively with learners and other stakeholders to inform the design of these qualifications.

We have also commenced a new programme of work to further strengthen engagement, which includes new user panel surveys and a series of visits to schools and colleges to hear first-hand from learners, teachers and lecturers. We have an ambition of giving every learner and every educator the opportunity to shape the work of SQA and the new qualifications body. If you or Committee members would like to suggest a school or college in their area to include in our visits programme, we would be happy to hear from them.

Given the range of stakeholders we engage with, there can be a broad spectrum of views expressed. Achieving consensus can sometimes be difficult and it is our role to consider a range of feedback, together with other insight, evidence and data, to inform decisions. This also includes our responsibility to fulfil our statutory duties. Providing feedback to those we have engaged with and explaining how and why we have reached decisions is as critical as the engagement itself.

Finally, in relation to your point about the “discursive and tangential” nature of the session, I would highlight that we are very much guided in what we say by the questions the Committee asks. Following receipt of your letter, SQA has met with members of the clerk team and offered to work with them to ensure the Committee get what it wants from these sessions, including helping the Committee understand our role and providing additional material outwith Committee sessions.

I hope this information is helpful to the Committee. I will ensure that the outstanding information that has been requested is provided when it becomes available.

Yours sincerely

Fiona Robertson
SQA Chief Executive