



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 7 September 2022

Session 6



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EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE
21st Meeting 2022, Session 6

CONVENER

*Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)

*Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP)

*Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)

*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)

*Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP)

*Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab)

*Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con)

*Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Michael Baxter (Scottish Qualifications Authority)

Robert Quinn (Scottish Qualifications Authority)

Fiona Robertson (Scottish Qualifications Authority)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Pauline McIntyre

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 7 September 2022

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Scottish Qualifications Authority

The Convener (Sue Webber): Good morning, and welcome to the 21st meeting in 2022 of the Education, Children and Young People Committee. Our first item of business is an evidence session with the Scottish Qualifications Authority.

I welcome Fiona Robertson, chief executive; Michael Baxter, director of finance and corporate services; and Robert Quinn, head of English, languages and business.

I am sure that we will have a lot of ground to cover. I invite Fiona Robertson to make a short opening statement before we move on to questions. Over to you, Ms Robertson—you have up to two minutes.

Fiona Robertson (Scottish Qualifications Authority): Good morning. I thank the committee for the opportunity to reflect on national qualifications in 2022 and look ahead to 2023 and beyond.

I pay tribute to the 138,000 learners across Scotland who received their certificates on 9 August. They can feel proud of their achievements across a wide range of national and vocational qualifications and have full confidence in their results as they progress to their next stage of learning, training or employment. I think that the committee will agree that they have shown remarkable resilience and commitment during a period of disruption.

I am grateful to our partners across Scotland who, through the national qualifications and higher national and vocational qualifications groups, have helped to shape and agree the approach to assessment this year. Their voices, views and experience are incredibly important to us and inform the work that we do.

This is the first year since 2019 in which SQA exams have taken place, in addition to coursework and other assessments, but this year did not mark a return to normality. Learners faced further disruption to all aspects of their lives on the back of two years of previous disruption, and they have shown tremendous commitment and resilience.

To help to offset that disruption, the SQA and the wider education system put in place a wide-ranging package of support to limit the impact of the pandemic on learners and help them to perform to their best while maintaining the credibility of our qualifications. The package of support included course modifications to reduce the volume of assessment and ease learner and teacher workload through, for example, removing or reducing elements of an exam or coursework. An exceptional circumstances service ensured that learners who could not attend an exam for reasons such as bereavement or illness, including Covid-19, could have their alternative evidence considered and still receive a grade on results day. There was also online advice, revision support and learning support from across the sector, including from Education Scotland, schools, colleges and local authorities; a more generous approach to grading exams; and a free appeals service, which this year includes the consideration of alternative evidence and enables learners to appeal directly to the SQA or through their school, college or training provider.

That package of support from across the education community has delivered. Although the significantly different circumstances and awarding processes of the past four years do not allow conclusions to be drawn on changes in educational performance, I can say that this year's learners achieved a strong performance overall—and, indeed, one of the strongest to date in an exam year.

Our focus now is on delivering the appeals service, which opened on results day. A priority service was in place for appeals relating to a learner's place at university or college, training placement or employment. Our markers and assessors have already worked through the 1,419 priority appeals. The outcomes were communicated to centres on Monday and to the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service yesterday. We have received more than 55,000 standard appeals. The service closed on Friday, and we will report as normal on the overall outcomes of both priority and standard appeals at the end of the year.

I appreciate that there has been concern about the impact on the appeals process of potential industrial action at the SQA. I share that concern. I can confirm that, following agreement by the Scottish Government, a revised pay offer was put to SQA unions on Monday night, which I hope they will accept.

Finally, but importantly, results day also saw the celebration of learners with a tremendous breadth of achievement, with awards in areas including leadership, employability and personal finance as well as in a range of skills for work courses,

national certificate awards and national progression awards. It was also a day to reflect on the achievements of the many learners who received certificates throughout the year, including for higher national and Scottish vocational qualifications, and of those undertaking foundation apprenticeships. I fully appreciate the focus on national qualifications, but learners across Scotland achieved a wide range of awards. That wide range of SQA qualifications is supporting young people as they progress to college, university, apprenticeships, other learning, training or employment.

I will briefly say a word about awarding and reform, as I know that the committee is interested in awarding in 2023 and in reform.

I can confirm that we are currently considering our arrangements for awarding in 2023. We all recognise that the disruption to learning and teaching that was caused by Covid-19 will have an impact on learners for some time to come. Given that, we confirm that modifications to assessment will remain in place for 2022-23, which will provide certainty for learning and teaching. That has been welcomed by the profession.

Yesterday, I was pleased to chair the first meeting of the national qualifications 2023 group, which draws its membership from across the education community and also includes parent and learner representatives. The NQ group agreed that we need to work at pace but also consider arrangements carefully, drawing on the experience and evidence from this year.

Finally, on reform, we obviously continue to look to the future. We are playing our full part in taking forward the Scottish Government's wide-ranging reform of education, including Professor Louise Hayward's independent review of the future of qualifications and assessment in Scotland and the forthcoming national discussion on the future of education. We are committed to making a positive contribution to those important pieces of work, the results of which will help to inform the creation of the new qualifications body as well as the new national agency for Scottish education and an independent inspectorate. The SQA has a unique place in Scottish education, and our colleagues are sharing their expertise, knowledge and experience to inform future change and support a smooth transition to the new education bodies.

The global events of the past two years have brought significant uncertainty for learners and for everyone in education and training, with all of us, including the SQA, but also notably teachers, learners—

The Convener: Can you draw your remarks to a conclusion, please, Fiona?

Fiona Robertson: Absolutely. I have just 30 seconds more—if I may.

The Convener: It was to be for two minutes, and it has been nearly five.

Fiona Robertson: I will conclude by saying that I hope that everyone, including members of the committee, will get behind our work to deliver for learners and to invest in the future, including the future of the national qualifications body. I am very happy to answer any questions.

My apologies, convener—as you highlighted, there is quite a lot to cover. I hope that, in my opening remarks, I have been able to give an overview of the work that we have been doing.

The Convener: I am certain that your opening remarks, for which we are very grateful, will form a thread through some of the themes of the questions that we have lined up for today.

I will start off. You spoke at length about some of the modifications and changes that you have made. The chief examining officer's report stated that

"The education system has taken steps to ensure the continuity of learning and teaching"

and that the SQA has

"developed an assessment and awarding approach that has helped to address disruption to learning, but it has not been a normal year."

That reiterates what you have just outlined for us, but what are some of the details? You gave a broad overview of the methodology and approach that you have taken.

Fiona Robertson: I set out in my opening statement a package of measures that the SQA has taken—alongside a lot of support and guidance that has taken place across the education system—to ensure that there is continuity of learning and teaching and that learners have the best chance of success in achieving qualifications.

The modifications to assessment were first put in place in the academic year 2020-21, following a wide-ranging public consultation. We also confirmed arrangements in 2021-22, and we have now done so in 2022-23. We have made some adjustments to those modifications on the basis of feedback from practitioners, which have reflected a number of things. We have more than 120 courses across national 5, higher and advanced higher, and it was important that the modifications reflected the assessment approach that is in place for each of those courses. Therefore, they were made bespoke to those arrangements. For some courses, we removed coursework to free up time for learning and teaching; for others, we narrowed

some elements of the assessment. We also did a range of other things.

This year, we also introduced revision support, which, again, combined a variety of approaches to different courses. That support includes, for example, advance notification of which topics may or may not come up. We took a range of measures around modifications to assessments, such as giving learners advance notification of elements of their assessment that may come up in the exam.

I am sure that my colleague Robert Quinn would be happy to provide further detail on individual subjects, if that would be of interest to the committee.

The Convener: If he wants to give a couple of examples, that would be helpful.

Robert Quinn (Scottish Qualifications Authority): The key aim was to try, pragmatically, to reduce the requirements while still preserving performance standards and the credibility of qualifications. In a subject such as English, for example, the requirement to formally assess speaking and listening was removed, but with the key advice that those key skills should still be developed. We also reduced the writing requirement. Normally, learners would provide a folio of writing, with one piece broadly creative and one broadly discursive. We reduced that to one piece rather than two; the expectation was that learners would still develop the full range of writing styles, but they would have to formally submit only one piece.

In the context of revision support, in the run-up to the examination we provided learners with the specifics of the set texts in the Scottish set text section of the assessment. For example, if they had to study six poems, we gave them an indication of the poem that was coming up in the assessment. Of course, in the examination, learners have to reflect on their wider reading, so it was not as though we were reducing or narrowing their reading. We were providing a degree of certainty and potentially trying to de-stress the situation in the run-up to the examination.

In a subject such as mathematics, we provided some advance notice of key content that we would not be assessing. In both of those areas, we were pleased to see at the awarding process that that support had, to a degree, mitigated some of the real challenges that learners faced this year.

The Convener: We will come to questions on that from other members later. First, we have a question from Oliver Mundell.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): This is the third time that the SQA has had a go at trying to help learners, but it feels to me that you have,

again, failed Scotland's young people. Again, we have seen that the system looks after the system rather than young people. All the measures that you outline do not really deliver, which is why we have seen a huge attainment gap. Surely you recognise that the attainment gap that we have seen this year is unacceptable?

Fiona Robertson: What we sought to do this year was take every step that we could to free up learning and teaching time and provide support for learners in so doing. In my opening statement, I highlighted in summary the measures that we took—

Oliver Mundell: It did not work though, did it? Otherwise, we would not have seen the attainment gap widening again.

You put in place significant mitigations to adjust grade boundaries, and that did not deliver the result that you expected. It delivered the status quo, going back to the pre-pandemic period. All the measures that you took were to make things easier for you to produce a result that was acceptable. That did not provide intensive support to young people to help them to catch up on their learning, did it?

Fiona Robertson: Every measure that we took was to provide support to learners, working—as I said—in parallel with others, including local support and support from other agencies and other parts of the education system, to do so.

As I said in my opening statement, we need to be careful about drawing conclusions about educational performance from this year's figures, because we have had two years of a different assessment approach and a different pattern of results, not just in Scotland but elsewhere. It is important to keep that context very much in mind.

Again, as I highlighted in my opening statement, this is a strong set of results. Robert Quinn and I sat in all the awarding meetings with teachers who set and marked the examinations and assessments this year. I think that we were all of the view that, although the pandemic meant that this was absolutely not a return to a normal year, we saw remarkable achievement and resilience from young people, and the results are testament to that. It is a strong set of results.

10:15

Oliver Mundell: You cannot hide behind the fact that young people with the greatest educational challenges have had the least support at the most difficult point. All the changes that you have made tidy up the statistics but do not help those young people to get the learning, teaching and support that they should have had.

In effect, you are helping to mask the scale of the attainment gap by making those types of changes, and the types of adjustments that you have made in helping people to prepare in advance for exams help the students who are doing well anyway—those who are most prepared and those in the schools with teachers who are able to provide that type of bespoke support—but there was nothing extra for the young people who face the greatest challenges. You have presided over an exams system that has accepted that unfairness. Do you think that that is wrong?

Fiona Robertson: I agree that learning and teaching come first; therefore, the learning and teaching experience that young people have received and the measures that have been put in place locally to address differential disruption to learning remain very important. As a national agency and a national qualifications body, we have sought to modify our approach as best we can to address disruption to learning.

Oliver Mundell: Does it make you angry that you are presiding over an exams system that is failing our young people who have the greatest educational challenges? Does that cause you to raise concern with the Scottish Government about the approach elsewhere in the system? You have come in at the end to help to tidy up and mask the fact that young people have been failed for the third year in a row.

Fiona Robertson: I do not think that this year's results represent failure. I have highlighted the outcomes of this year and the achievements of young people. We need to reflect on that strong performance.

A number of sources of evidence, such as the Government's equity audit and the curriculum for excellence-level data related to general education, have highlighted the challenges that young people have faced, and headteachers who work on the Scottish attainment challenge have highlighted some of the difficulties with impacting the gap that have been experienced during Covid.

My job is to ensure that we have fair and credible assessments and that we have played our part in addressing disruption to learning over the past couple of years, and we have done that. Issues in relation to differential disruption to learning and the different experiences that young people have faced are matters for the wider education system to consider, but we have worked closely with the education system, learners and parents' representatives to ensure that we have done all that we can. That is our responsibility, and we have sought to deliver on that responsibility.

Robert Quinn: I emphasise that the support that we provided this year was not only end loaded; it was not only about preparing learners to

sit their examinations. We provide a lot of support for a wide range of qualifications—for example, for national 4 qualifications, we provide support and flexibility around the added value unit. Other support includes our national progression awards, national certificates and the work that we do with the college sector. We also introduced a decision tree for teachers and lecturers, so that they could take a more holistic approach to assessment to mitigate the challenges that learners across the spectrum face.

I clarify the point that the whole support was not only end loaded and that it needed to reach across the full range of qualifications that we support.

Oliver Mundell: I am happy to end there, convener. I would just say that a fair education system is one in which everyone has an equal opportunity, but I am not clear that that has happened this year.

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): From a statistical point of view, it strikes me that 2019 and 2022 are comparable with regard to assessing performance, which indicates an improvement in closing the attainment gap, albeit not as much of an improvement as we might want.

Fiona Robertson, when you talk about a fair and credible assessment system, how do you explain the fluctuations in the numbers in the period between those two years?

Fiona Robertson: We see variations in attainment across individual subjects and levels every year—it is important to highlight that. That is not unexpected, and Scotland is not unique in that respect.

In the emergency years—the pandemic years—of 2020 and 2021, and with the move to teacher judgment, in Scotland, in common with other countries, we saw a very different pattern of results. We also saw similar trends in other parts of the United Kingdom.

It is important to take a step back and say that the qualification system and the courses that we have have been designed to support the assessment approach. We have core specifications and an approach to ensure that learning, knowledge, skills and understanding can be appropriately assessed, so that we fulfil our statutory function to ensure that qualifications can be awarded. That is an important and serious endeavour.

That is the qualifications system that we have had. Prior to 2020, we had more than 130 years of uninterrupted exam diets in Scotland. However, it is important to highlight that, as part of our assessment approach, we do not have just exams; we also have coursework and other forms of assessment, including internal assessment by

teachers. Therefore, teacher judgment forms an important part of our assessment approach in Scotland, even with formal external assessment.

In 2020, just weeks away from an exam diet, we moved quickly to working through some of the difficulties in awarding, and we worked with the system to do so. We did that again when exams were cancelled in 2021, which required teachers and lecturers to consider their own assessment requirements, with support from us, and to make those judgments, school by school and college by college. As a result, we saw a very different pattern of attainment, and Scotland was not alone in that.

Returning to exams that involve the development of assessments on a national basis, standardisation, markers working consistently and grade boundary meetings to determine the overall approach to ensure fairness across Scotland, such that an A in Arbroath is the same as an A in Aberdeen, is an important feature of an external national qualifications system. Due to a combination of factors, we have seen a different pattern of results.

As I have highlighted—it is important to repeat the point—due to that different assessment approach over the past couple of years, we need to treat changes and comparisons with some caution. Although you are absolutely right to highlight that the results in 2022 were higher than those in 2019, it is also important to highlight that 2022 was not a normal year and that there were differences in the way in which we awarded in 2022 compared with 2019.

In the context of the attainment gap, it is important to highlight that, in 2021, when teacher judgment was used, there was a slightly larger attainment gap than there was in 2020. Therefore, the attainment gap has reflected the broad pattern of results that we have seen over the past few years.

I realise that that was quite a long answer, but there are complexities that we need to consider quite carefully.

Graeme Dey: Perhaps the biggest complexity of all was the impact of Covid-19 on the learning experience of those young people—and, let's face it, the teaching environment for teachers.

This is perhaps a difficult question to answer, but, given that 2022 is not directly comparable with 2019 regarding the whole experience, when will we get back to a point at which we could reasonably compare a year with 2019 and reasonably measure progress or otherwise? Are we talking about next year or the year after? When might we be able to do that?

Fiona Robertson: As I highlighted, there are some decisions that we need to take in relation to 2023. Comparisons are not unimportant, but it is also important that we are cognisant of the circumstances that young people face and continue to face, and that we make the right judgments in fairness to them. Although I fully appreciate that the committee is interested in national comparisons, comparisons between years and making a determination on the performance, good or otherwise, of the Scottish education system, behind those results are individual learners who want to progress with their learning and go to university. I think that that is really important.

Graeme Dey: The committee has done a piece of work on the attainment gap. Given the vast sums of money that—rightly—have been directed towards tackling the issue, we must have some measure or indication of progress or otherwise. That is essential. Therefore, I repeat my question: are we talking about next year or the year after? When will we be reasonably able to say, "This is the progress that has been made over a four-year period," or whatever the period happens to be?

Robert Quinn: My sense is that it will probably take us a couple of years to recover. As Fiona Robertson said, we saw a lot of resilience and excellence. It is one of the privileges of my job to work with teachers and to see the output of what learners, young and old, produce.

However, it is clear that there were some areas of pandemic impact, such as listening in languages and some of the practical elements in sciences. Our view is that it will probably take a little while for that to fully recover. I cannot put an exact timeframe on it, but that is my sense.

Graeme Dey: Thank you. That is helpful.

Fiona Robertson: There is a distinction between performance and the method of assessment. Changes might be made to the way in which we award. The fact that changes have been made to assessment over the past few years makes that difficult. As Robert Quinn has said, we may see a couple of years more—

The Convener: Thank you, Fiona. Graeme Dey was looking for a date or a timeframe and he got one, so, if you do not mind, we will move on to questions from Michael Marra.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): My first question is a supplementary question. You have recognised, as we do, the impact that the pandemic has had on young people in recent years. That is also recognised in the methodology for the results that have just come out—we can all see that.

One of the consequences is that young people have experienced a significant amount of lost learning. That is recognised in the curtailed assessment curriculum, which means that fewer things are being assessed. I know from speaking to colleges, universities and employers that they are seeing the impact of that in the young people who are coming to them. There are lab techniques that have not been learned and things that have not been assessed. Where do you think that that lost learning should be made up?

Fiona Robertson: What we have sought to do over the past few years is make sure that we have maintained the credibility of the qualifications. We have done that by focusing on the things that are most important in terms of assessment and freeing up as much learning and teaching time as we can.

I think that we would all acknowledge that learning and teaching have been impacted by the pandemic, but, in the arrangements that we have made, including with specific qualifications—for example, with some licence-to-practice qualifications, it is critical that that learning still takes place and is recognised to have taken place—we have made a judgment on what adjustments we can make. We have done that not on our own, but with teachers and the wider system. I want to highlight the key point that we recognise the reality of the disruption to learning that young people face, but we also recognise that, in fairness to them, we need to make appropriate judgments about those assessment arrangements that can be shifted.

Michael Marra: But—

Fiona Robertson: I promise that I will answer your question.

Michael Marra: Thank you.

10:30

Fiona Robertson: On catch-up, I have heard some pretty positive feedback from colleges and universities about the system-wide approach that takes cognisance of the fact that some learners will have faced challenges, and about the ability of the system to provide support where it is needed and to focus on the most important issues. As I have said—and as I will continue to say over the next couple of hours—we have seen remarkable resilience.

Michael Marra: You think that colleges and universities should make up the gap.

Fiona Robertson: No. I think that the education system has worked together to ensure that appropriate arrangements are in place to address any of the issues.

Michael Marra: With respect, the feedback that I have had shows that gaps definitely exist, and, as we have said, your methodology recognises that gaps exist, but I am not sure that I am hearing where you think those gaps should be made up. For example, should the college or the university make up for the lost learning of someone who has left school and gone somewhere else?

Fiona Robertson: I do not think that it is quite as simple as that. It would depend on the circumstances of the individual learner, their achievements and what they were going on to do. I have sought to set out that we have made a judgment about the adjustments that can be made to maintain the credibility of SQA qualifications, so that learners can move on with confidence, and the education system is working together to address any issues further down the line.

Michael Marra: I would genuinely like to know where that is happening. That is my question.

Fiona Robertson: In the context of our discussions with universities and colleges, we have taken a system-wide approach to ensuring that young people can make progress.

Michael Marra: They are being supported to do that.

Fiona Robertson: The qualifications that learners have got over the past three years remain credible and remain such that learners can move on with confidence. That is the key message.

Michael Marra: Okay.

Robert Quinn: As someone who used to work in a college, I think that colleges are well placed to work with learners. We see lots of examples of colleges supporting learners who are on different life journeys. That situation is not unique to the pandemic. That sector is critically important, and we work very closely with it. I feel strongly that it should be well placed to provide support.

The Convener: Bob Doris has a supplementary question on this thread.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I have a question that I want to ask later, but I will ask part of it now. We are talking about “lost learning”—learning that has been lost because of the disruption of Covid and because of a slimmed-down syllabus or a slimmed-down external examination diet, which will be the case again next year.

I want to be clear about the language that we use. Are we talking about “lost learning” because young people have gaps in their learning because schools were not open, or are we talking about it because of a slimmed-down syllabus in the classroom? Those are two different things, and I would like to be clear about the language.

I do not think that Michael Marra got an answer to his question about where lost learning is mapped and about its knock-on effects. For example, are active discussions taking place with universities about science, which is heavily content based and involves building blocks of learning? If a bit of the syllabus is taken out, that has to be picked up at first-year undergraduate level. Where is that mapped? Where is it reported?

Fiona Robertson: To be clear, the core specifications remain in place. The adjustments that we have made are to assessment. We have made that clear. For example, coursework takes up quite a lot of time both for learners and teachers, and we have sought to release additional learning and teaching time so that there is more time.

I do not use the term “lost learning”. We accept that some young people have had disruption to their learning, and we have sought to minimise the impact of that through the measures that we have taken.

A young person who got a higher this year, last year or the year before can have confidence in that qualification in order to progress to the next stage of learning. We have worked closely with all parts of the education system to ensure that that is the case. It is a really important message that the qualifications that young people have achieved through the Covid years remain credible and can be—

Bob Doris: It is simply a terminology question, so a yes or no answer would be great, if that is possible. I just want to understand the issue better. The syllabus and the content did not shrink, and they will not shrink in the coming year, either. It is what is externally assessed that will be narrowed, to allow more focus on teaching and learning. Is that a better way of putting it?

Fiona Robertson: Exactly.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Good morning, and thank you for being with us. I want to ask about equalities. Will you expand on the relationship between the improved figures on the attainment gap in terms of the grades awarded and the attainment gaps that are identified in the SQA’s equalities monitoring report, which we have in our papers?

Fiona Robertson: Since 2020, we have provided equalities analysis as part of our awarding. We have provided material across a range of protected characteristics—not just on the attainment gap but on other gaps that exist in Scottish education. That is part of our responsibility to ensure that we seek to explain what those gaps are. The material and analysis are included in the package of materials that we

produce on results day. Prior to the pandemic, that was done later in the process, because some of the data comes from the Scottish Government, so we do not hold it.

As part of our responsibilities to ensure fairness, during our awarding processes, we do not actually know the circumstances of the learner. When a teacher is marking an exam script or undertaking an assessment, they will not know the individual circumstances of that learner. That is an important part of the fairness and credibility of our approach. We recognise that our assessments need to be fair at the point that they are taken, reflecting the fact that young people may well have different learning experiences and face different circumstances during their education. However, we provide further information in relation to those gaps in the report.

Is there a specific issue in relation to that analysis that you are asking about?

Ruth Maguire: I am interested in how you use the information. I am thinking about the unfairness in assessment that is experienced by children in my constituency who live in more deprived areas according to the Scottish index of multiple deprivation. How does the SQA use its equalities data to ensure fairness? I do not know whether your colleagues have anything to add.

Fiona Robertson: Members will realise that we will see variability in the outcomes of awarding, and that is the case in all systems. Through equalities impact assessments and so on, we seek to ensure that the method of assessment is fair and credible. I think that we would all—

Ruth Maguire: It would be helpful to hear how you have used the data. What changes have you made, if any, based on the data that you have gathered that shows the disparity for children with additional support needs, or children and young people who live in SIMD areas?

Fiona Robertson: We have a range of assessment arrangements in place every year, and we provide data on results day on the assessment arrangements that have been requested and put in place by schools and colleges across the year. Those include a range of measures, from additional time for exams to special arrangements for scribing and other things.

It is important that the committee is aware that we play our part in making sure that the arrangements for assessment recognise that some young people may require additional support. In 2020 and 2021, schools were responsible for ensuring that those arrangements were in place. Through our assessment arrangements, we demonstrate that we consider and reflect on those issues in discussion with

schools, and that we ensure that such special arrangements are in place.

We look at equalities considerations as part of the development of qualifications—Robert Quinn will be able to say more about that—and, of course, modifications to assessment are subject to equalities analysis and so on. There is a distinction between the way in which we assess and the outcomes. We report on the outcomes, but we take every measure to ensure that our assessments are fair to every learner, irrespective of their circumstances, at the point at which those assessments are undertaken. We would all accept that the committee has had many discussions about the attainment gap and the measures that are being taken to address it, and a part of our role is to report on that.

Robert Quinn might want to say a bit about the development of qualifications.

Robert Quinn: I reassure the committee that we take a lot of care and attention when it comes to equalities reports and that we reflect on things such as context of assessment. We want to create a wide variety of assessment supports and approaches to ensure that a broader scope of learners can access them.

We also have a strong part to play in our qualifications portfolio. An example is the Scots language award, which has a big uptake across sectors and is pulling in a lot of learners who were previously quite disenfranchised. They recognise that they can engage positively in something like that, because they recognise the language and can progress with it and improve their performance across the curriculum on that basis. We support a range of initiatives that are reflective of what comes out of equality monitoring reports, and they help us to ensure that we play our part, along with our partners.

Ruth Maguire: The Scots language award sounds interesting, but could you tell me some more?

Robert Quinn: Since around 2015, we have had a new award to study Scots in Scottish schools—

Ruth Maguire: I am sorry—you have misunderstood. It was good to get that specific example of an initiative, but I wondered whether you could share some more examples with us.

Robert Quinn: Oh, right—sorry. Yes, I can.

We have put in a whole range of awards. We have a modern languages for life and work award, a religion and belief award and leadership awards. We are trying to recognise a broader range of skills in the senior phase. The idea of that is that it is important that we do not see the senior phase as being only about graded national courses but,

instead, see it as a mixed economy of provision that is all accredited against the Scottish credit and qualifications framework. A lot of those unitised, smaller chunks of learning that can be accredited and certificated are worth equal celebration to our traditional qualifications. The presence of such qualifications ensures that we bring more learners into play.

I said previously that my background is in the college sector. One of the privileges of working in that area was unearthing some diamonds and addressing the myth that education—or achievement and attainment in education—was not for them. Utilising a full catalogue of qualifications and collectively celebrating their importance has a part to play in the context of equalities.

Fiona Robertson: There is an important lesson there about the accessibility of our qualifications. We have a wide offer, as I have said. Although, understandably, there is a huge focus on national 5s, highers and advanced highers, we offer a wide range of awards and, in recent years, there has been more take-up of some of those other qualifications; they are now offered in schools, colleges and through school-college partnerships. An example is the development of foundation apprenticeships. There is diversity and choice in the offer. Those qualifications involve a range of assessment methods and include internally assessed awards, which can be taken when a learner is ready, rather than in the spring of each year. We offer a lot of choices.

Ruth Maguire: How do you ensure that assessment methods do not understate or overstate the attainment gaps?

10:45

Fiona Robertson: In the development of our qualifications, we work closely with teachers. We have national qualification subject teams and we have teachers setting and marking exams. It is really important that we ensure that the qualifications are accessible to all.

We reflect on the fact that the learning and teaching experience might be different before that point. Indeed, there might be variation in performance—we have seen that for many years in Scotland. However, we have a responsibility to ensure that our assessment approach is fair and we seek to do that.

The experience of the past few years and the move to teacher judgment have—despite what I said about the comparisons—raised the question on attainment gaps. It is important to highlight that the part that we play in assessing young people and reporting on the education system's performance is fair and that our systems, and the

checks and balances that we have in them, ensure that it is.

The question is difficult to answer on the basis that we report on the outcomes of learning and teaching and, although we need to demonstrate that our assessment processes are fair, the attainment gap might vary or change for other reasons.

Robert Quinn: It is a good question and a challenging one. For me, the key point is to ensure that the assessment is as valid as it can be—that it assesses the skills, knowledge and understanding for which it is designed. For example, if we are trying to assess a process, a reflective part of it and lessons learned, an examination-type assessment is clearly not the most appropriate and we need another type of assessment. That will be more internally focused, which is right and proper.

Once you have decided what the most valid way of assessing something is, the question is how you reliably assess it. Examinations can standardise assessment and help to provide a level playing field, but there are certain areas where that is not appropriate and we need elements such as coursework, personalisation and choice.

The key point is to give a bit of care and attention to the assessment approaches that we set up to ensure that they are as broad and accessible as possible and assess the skills that they are designed to assess. We then need to deal with the challenge of how we reliably ensure the fairness of that assessment. Whatever way you look at it, there are challenges and it is all about balance.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I was a wee bit surprised that you struggled to answer that last question. Ensuring that what you measure does not underestimate or overestimate the state of pupils' education is fundamental to what you do, but you admitted that it was difficult and I am puzzled by that. However, we will move on.

David Middleton, the chair of the SQA, rebutted some of the evidence that Ken Muir gave to the committee in March. He said that he was "surprised and disappointed" and that he played back Professor Muir's words to him. Did you agree with David Middleton's statement?

Fiona Robertson: You are right that the chair of the SQA replied to some of the commentary and subsequent reporting of—

Willie Rennie: It was more than a reply, though, was it not? It was a rebuttal. It was quite stinging and I was quite surprised by it. I wondered whether you agreed to it.

Fiona Robertson: In short, yes.

Willie Rennie: Does that reveal a tension in the reform debate? Do you disagree more broadly with Professor Muir's approach? We had not seen such a statement before then, so what does it reveal? Will you tell us what is going on?

Fiona Robertson: I do not think that it revealed a tension.

Willie Rennie: So, why was it necessary?

Fiona Robertson: I think that it revealed a response to what was said, which—it is fair to say—came as something of a surprise, because there was a lot of material in Ken's report that we agreed with. Along with the wider organisation, my senior team and I had the opportunity to discuss a number of issues with Professor Muir during the course of his review, and we were grateful to him for that. Therefore, we were surprised and disappointed by some of Ken's subsequent comments, because they did not align with the experience and discussion that we had had or, in some respects, the tenor of the report. The statement was from the chair of the SQA, and you are free to ask him about his thinking, but it reflects the broader feeling across the organisation after Ken's appearance before the committee.

Willie Rennie: Can you tell us a bit more about what you disagreed with in what Professor Muir said to the committee?

Fiona Robertson: The chair's statement highlights some of those areas around what Ken said at the committee meeting. I think that they agreed with—

Willie Rennie: You agreed to the statement, so you must know what was in it. I just want to know what you did not agree with.

Fiona Robertson: I do not have the statement in front of me.

Willie Rennie: It was a pretty big statement, so I would have thought that you would have it with you today.

Fiona Robertson: I absolutely recall the statement and the context in which it was made. The chair was reflecting on the issues that Ken had raised at the committee meeting. I do not think that there is anything more to say about that.

The Convener: That is fine, Fiona.

Can we move on, Mr Rennie?

Willie Rennie: Many people in the profession think that the process will result in no change and that, apart from a change of names, everything else will carry on as it was before. Perhaps that exchange between the chairman and the professor lifted a bit of a lid on that. Can you convince us that reforms will happen and that—

The Convener: Willie, can we move on from that, please?

Fiona Robertson: I do actually have the statement in front of me and I am happy to quote from it. It says:

“We agree with Professor Muir that education reform is needed, with learners at the centre. There is a real appetite for change within SQA”.

Therefore, I do not think that the exchange highlights what Mr Rennie has just said.

Willie Rennie: It said that the SQA was “surprised and disappointed”, but I will leave it there.

Can I ask a question on another area?

The Convener: It would be helpful if it was off that topic.

Willie Rennie: It is off that topic.

There has been a lot of comment about the stark contrast between broad general education and the senior phase, and many blame the SQA for that stark contrast. What is your assessment of that? Do you think that the SQA is responsible? If not, why not?

Fiona Robertson: I have been party to a lot of conversations over many years—in SQA and previous to that—around the transition between the broad general education and the senior phase. The curriculum for excellence was developed on the basis of a three-to-18 curriculum, and there was a smooth transition through the broad general education to the senior phase.

There has been a lot of focus on ensuring that transitions at all points in the education system are as smooth and effective as possible, from the early years into primary, as well as from primary into secondary. We also appreciate that there has been a full particular focus, as Mr Rennie said, on the move from BGE to the senior phase.

We seek to—and, as part of our responsibilities, have to—provide clarity on the expectations. Indeed, as Robert Quinn has said, the education system expects clarity on how we develop the qualifications and what skills, knowledge and understanding are expected in order to gain a qualification. There is a degree of formality about that. It is important that we do that, in the best way possible, drawing on the curriculum for excellence levels and the work that Education Scotland has done around ensuring that there is a clear understanding with the system of what the CFE levels are, through the broad general education, in order to ensure that smooth transition.

There is always room for improvement—

Willie Rennie: It is about more than room for improvement, though, is it not? There has been a

lot of criticism of the two-term dash to exams: we have been moving from a broad general education and the principles of curriculum for excellence straight into a mad dash for exams. That is your fault, is it not?

Fiona Robertson: No—I do not think it is, actually. To go back to the “Building the Curriculum” documents as part of the development of CFE—I know that Louise Hayward will look at some of those issues—there was an aspiration that we would move to ensure that there was a smoother transition into the senior phase and that there would be flexibility in the curriculum design and development to ensure that young people would have more choice about when they sat exams, whether some exams should be bypassed and so on.

Those issues continue to be discussed within Scottish education. In an empowered system, decisions about curriculum choices and curriculum design are taken at a local level. We have a very clear offer and clear requirements in terms of our qualifications, which were absolutely developed in concert with the system. We continue to discuss those to ensure that they work as well as they can.

I think that that is a legitimate issue for Louise Hayward to consider as part of her review of assessment and qualifications, because we all want to ensure that our learners have the best experience. Assessment does not start in the senior phase; good assessment is part and parcel of good learning and teaching. We all want to ensure the smoothest transition for our children from their experience in primary school and the early parts of secondary school into the senior phase.

Willie Rennie: Some have argued that we should be stripping back exams to quite a significant extent. Do you agree with that?

Fiona Robertson: I know that the committee took evidence from Gordon Stobart; his review, as part of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development work, highlighted the issue of whether we should have secondary 4, S5 and S6 exams. As I said, that is something for Louise Hayward to consider—

Willie Rennie: Do you have a view?

Fiona Robertson: Looking back to a previous life, when I worked in the Government, I chaired the curriculum for excellence management board. At that time, as part of the development of curriculum for excellence, I was certainly party to questions as to whether young people would perhaps undertake a different pattern of qualifications over their senior phase. There was an aspiration for that. There have been some developments in that context, but that has not been—

Willie Rennie: I was just asking what you think. You have described what other people thought, but I want to know what you think.

The Convener: I think that Robert Quinn also wants to answer the question and say what he thinks on this one.

Fiona Robertson: The honest truth is that I want to ensure that young people have the best learning and teaching experience that they can have, that they take qualifications at the point at which that makes sense to them and that they have a choice and are able to exercise that choice through the work that their school or college does. You might—

Willie Rennie: That is a brilliant non-answer.

Fiona Robertson: You look as though that is not quite the answer that you wanted, but it is the answer that I am willing to provide.

The Convener: Perhaps Robert Quinn can come in.

Willie Rennie: Let us see if Robert can have a stab at it.

Robert Quinn: Okay—thanks for that. I want a full catalogue to be recognised, I want people to have a choice, I want there to be less of an absolute focus on national courses, I want us to celebrate all qualifications against the Scottish credit and qualifications framework, and I want to have the flexibility within the senior phase to celebrate the move through from the broad general education.

All types of qualifications have their place and are key and important, but we need to recognise the totality of what young people have. That is a mix of highers, national 5s and national progression awards. If music students do something in sound production at the local college or whatever as part of their senior phase, we should all collectively celebrate that.

11:00

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I will move things forward a wee bit and look at outcomes. I will start off with a positive point. On results day, an open letter from a range of Scotland's employer representative groups and others was published. They said:

"We want to reassure you that we recognise and value your qualifications as much as any other year and that the skills you have developed, and will continue to develop, will play a crucial role in ensuring a bright future for businesses in Scotland and our economy."

I am sure that our youngsters were very heartened to hear that.

However, we are acutely aware of the changing needs of the employment sector—I am talking about not just business but social care and the public sector. We know that there is changing need and that some jobs do not yet exist, which is a challenge with regard to the skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviours that are required. How does the SQA work with employers and further and higher education providers to ensure that the qualifications support candidates—our young people—to the next stage of their learning journey?

Fiona Robertson: I agree that it was really pleasing to see the open letter from Sandy Begbie and others on behalf of businesses on results day, because that was a really important message. The credibility of, and public confidence in, our qualifications are really important, including for learners.

Our work with employers is threaded through the work that we do to develop our qualifications, from the creation of new qualifications to the validation of group awards. There is lots of engagement with employers through the detailed process for individual qualifications. That includes the care sector and the construction sector, for example, and, of course, some employer organisations that are the convening space for businesses.

We work closely with employer organisations and sector skills councils for many of our qualifications. The Scottish Training Federation sits on our advisory council, and I think that the director of the Confederation of British Industry has been on our board in the past, for example. Employers have also played a really important role in the development of our next generation of higher national qualifications. A lot of that work is done in the detail of what we do. It is, of course, important to highlight that many employers offer and deliver our qualifications as well.

Our engagement with the college sector specifically and Skills Development Scotland is really important to our work to ensure that our qualifications and the assessment approach that supports our qualifications are right. That is key.

Kaukab Stewart: Is the SQA flexible enough? I am interested in the future. Obviously, skills and demands are changing, and I hear from employers that crafting a new diet will also require assessment at a robust level that is recognised. Is the SQA flexible and robust enough to be able to respond to that need?

What about the timescales? We know that there are skills shortages. It would be good to know how long it can take to develop a qualification and assess it before people start coming through.

Fiona Robertson: Robert Quinn can say a little more about the detailed development process. We are always taking forward work with a number of organisations, including employer representatives and employer organisations, to consider what further developments we need to take forward on our qualifications. As I mentioned, the next generation of HN qualifications is a key case in point.

There is always more that we would like to do. We have an extensive catalogue of qualifications, and it can be difficult to satisfy the needs of everyone in all of that. The catalogue needs to continue to develop and be updated and new qualifications need to be developed. That is an area that I would like to explore further in the context of reform and in the development of a new qualifications body. Certainly, there is no shortage of ambition, either from employers or within the SQA, to do that. It is fair to say that we always have to make some difficult choices about those issues as we have fixed capacity and so on.

Robert Quinn might want to say more about developments. For example, great work is being done on HN next generation.

Robert Quinn: Kaukab Stewart's point about timeliness is well made. Within HN next generation, which we have agreed to in partnership with the college sector and university partners, we can quickly develop and prototype approaches to assessment and qualifications and try those out. That space is probably less political or contentious, and there are more opportunities for us to do those types of things.

For example, we can look at things such as metaskills, attitude, resilience and sustainability—we require all next-generation HNs to demonstrate elements of sustainability within the teaching, learning and assessment process. The prototyping is something that we are doing differently. We are working on a few areas to create a minimum viable product. We take that to pilot colleges that have applied to us through a bidding process, and they are then prototyping. We have done that with radio and television, for example—we did one year of prototyping on television. At the heart of that process is an evaluation with the learners. The evaluation will inform further refinement, and we will then roll that out to the wider sets of centres. That type of model allows us to be a bit more fleet of foot than we were traditionally.

Kaukab Stewart: Thank you.

The Convener: Ross, are you ready to ask your questions?

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Yes.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Convener, could I ask a supplementary question?

The Convener: Okay—sorry.

Stephanie Callaghan: That is all right.

We know that wellbeing is absolutely central to young people's learning and performance. I was interested to hear Robert Quinn talk about the evaluation work. What are young people telling you about their learning experiences? What is happening with the idea of keeping wellbeing at the centre of reform, and what difference has that made?

Fiona Robertson: That is a very important point.

I have mentioned assessment arrangements. With schools and colleges, we are able to put in place arrangements for learners who may find it difficult to sit in an exam hall or undertake an exam in a particular set of circumstances. We have a lot of flexibility, building on a long-standing approach that has the support of the system, to make sure that we are playing our part in supporting young people with arrangements that suit them best.

Over the past couple of years, through the national qualifications group, we have also sought to ensure that we are providing support, and signals to sources of support, to young people, for whom it has undoubtedly been a tough couple of years. We are taking every step that we can to signal the support that is available and play our part in all that, as well as providing the clear additional support that we can provide through the assessment arrangements.

Stephanie Callaghan: You talked about assessment. We have heard views from care-experienced young people and some neurodiverse young people who felt that there were some positives from the Covid period. What sorts of things are happening on the ground? What kinds of things are now in place that were not there previously for such young people?

Fiona Robertson: The point about flexibility is really important. For example, we have certainly seen an increase in the number of young people who wish to undertake their assessments in separate accommodation or to have extra time to undertake assessments.

In our work to evaluate our approach, we have sought learners' views on their experiences in the past couple of years and we will continue doing that this year in a further approach to evaluation.

It is important that we listen. We do a lot of work with Who Cares? Scotland to both support and celebrate the success of care-experienced

learners. It is important that we listen to and are mindful of the experiences that young people have had and that we make every effort that we can to put appropriate arrangements in place for them. I think that we do that. On results day, we provided some data about assessment arrangements.

Robert Quinn made an important point about the accessibility and choice that our qualifications provide to suit the needs of a range of learners. As we have highlighted, there is a focus on national 5s, highers and advanced highers, but we have a wide range of qualifications that will suit the needs of many learners who may have a range of different experiences or who may wish to take a different set of qualifications.

Robert Quinn: To back that up, and in the interests of promoting our strong catalogue, we recently put in place a mental health awareness award. That has attracted an amazing level of interest, and thousands of people have taken it up. That is a critical example of our recognition that we have a part to play in supporting that awareness and providing people with practical and helpful techniques.

Fiona Robertson: Robert Quinn is right to highlight that particular award, which has had some fantastic engagement school-wide, outside the context of S4 to S6. Some learners are looking at that as part of their S3 learning, so it is not only in the senior phase. That is all great.

The Convener: We move to questions from Ross Greer, with apologies for what happened earlier.

Ross Greer: That is no problem. The mental health awareness award is excellent, so I am glad that that came up and is on the record.

The study guides that were produced this spring have been mentioned a number of times. I am sure that you are aware of young people's criticisms of many of those guides. They felt that the advice was patronising. For example, the guide to the advanced higher modern studies paper encouraged young people to make sure that they answered the question that was asked in the exam and the guides to the higher physics and chemistry papers reminded them that it is always a good idea to spell words correctly. The guide to higher geography told them to read the question. Do you accept that some of the content of those study guides was patronising and was not of particularly high value to a 17-year-old?

Fiona Robertson: The revision support was put in place because there was additional disruption to learning. We needed to provide revision support across more than 120 courses and we sought to provide as much support as we could while maintaining the credibility of the qualifications.

There were judgments to be made. I can speak a little about the subjects for which we provided only very brief study guides, as opposed to revision support. Those tips were well meant. Without wishing to trivialise this, I have sat through many grade boundary meetings, and I know that answering the question is actually quite important when taking exams, so that remains a credible piece of advice for all learners.

When we were considering what we could do with revision support, we looked to combine the modifications that had already been made to assessments with whatever more we could do that would be helpful to learners without undermining the credibility of the qualifications. It was for that reason that the revision support was different for different subjects, as you have highlighted. In some cases, we felt that we could go no further than we had already gone by making modifications to assessment.

Ross Greer: I accept that some courses were modified more than others or were modified in significantly different ways. In hindsight, would it have been better if the study materials that you published in the spring had re-emphasised the modifications that had already been made to some courses, rather than publishing some guides that seemed, on the face of it, much thinner than others?

11:15

Fiona Robertson: Absolutely. Actually, that is, in effect, what we did within a few days of the revision support being sent out.

I acknowledge that there was quite a lot of noise about revision support, but we also got some really positive feedback on it. Robert Quinn and I sat with markers and principal assessors during the marking process and the grade boundary process, and we saw that revision support had worked. For example, as I think Robert mentioned, for English, the ability to specify the texts that were being presented to learners provided assistance to them in focusing their study. Because we do not have that assessment approach for every subject, we could not do it for every subject. However, for maths, we provided information about what would not be assessed and, again, I think that we saw evidence that that helped learners.

I absolutely accept that there was some criticism, but overall the revision support helped learners who had faced disruption, and it absolutely needed to be taken in combination with assessment modifications. There is always learning from these things, and we had never provided revision support before. I absolutely understand the point that you make, but the revision support worked.

Ross Greer: I absolutely agree that some of the revision support was of really high quality. I think that it was the variation that caused a lot of frustration for young people who—

Fiona Robertson: The variation reflected the fact that we needed to look at the modifications—

Ross Greer: In that case, the issue here is an initial communication failure. Can I check how young people were involved in the development of the revision material? You have young people on the national qualifications group and you have a learner panel. How were they involved in the construction of the material? Did they at any point flag up that it was perhaps a bit patronising to say that it is a good idea to spell words correctly?

Fiona Robertson: Robert Quinn can comment, because he was closer to that process of engagement than I was, but we got good feedback. Obviously, some elements of the revision support were difficult to share in advance because of their nature. In particular, it was not clear whether scenario 2, which invoked revision support, would be put in place. I hope you understand that we had to be quite careful—

Ross Greer: I understand that, for example, the specifics of an exam paper obviously cannot be shared in advance, but there is nothing compromising about sharing in advance that the paper is going to encourage young people to spell words correctly.

Fiona Robertson: Indeed.

Ross Greer: If you had shared that with them in advance, some concerns might have been raised.

Fiona Robertson: We did that.

The Convener: Ross, can we perhaps let Robert Quinn comment on that?

Robert Quinn: Where we could, we trialled some of that support, and we actually got quite positive feedback. The points that you have referenced need to be taken in the context of the full guide, rather than our considering only those particular points. There were other elements of the guidance that, we could argue, would be more valuable in that context.

We did some work with young learners and I certainly saw some feedback that was positive. However, it is a good point for reflection, as such points always are. How we position the revision support in the context of the full modifications is certainly a learning point for me.

Ross Greer: I will pursue that point about reflection. I have sat on the education committee for six years, and, five years ago, the committee produced a major report on the SQA under Fiona Robertson's predecessor. A consistent point of criticism of the organisation has been that there is

a perceived defensiveness around external feedback, advice, criticism and so on. We went through that when Cameron Garrett, who was the first member of the Scottish Youth Parliament on the national qualifications group, was critical of how young people were treated through that process. Sophie Reid, who succeeded him, is now being critical of a lack of communication and a breakdown of trust.

I am going to pre-empt your answer somewhat and presume that you will say that there has been improvement over recent years. However, if we accept that premise, why do you think that nobody else sees that improvement?

Fiona Robertson: I do not think that it would be fair to say that no one else sees that improvement. We have worked tirelessly to ensure that there is effective communication about the changes. The context has been challenging for everyone who works in education, including the SQA. We have absolutely moved to engage with learners much more strongly than has been the case in the past.

I think that, at times, there have been differences of view and we have had to take some difficult decisions. For example, Cameron Garrett was particularly concerned about symmetric appeals—that grades could go up as well as down after an appeal. However, we have to work on the basis of the evidence in front of us, and symmetric appeals are a very good example of that: the central principle of demonstrated attainment is that we have a responsibility—including a statutory responsibility—to ensure that we award only on the basis of the evidence that is presented to us. That difference of view did not indicate lack of engagement; it indicated that we needed to take a difficult decision in relation to some of those issues.

There is always more to do. Over the past few years, the SQA and many other organisations have absolutely been on a journey around some of these issues. We have had to flex our approach in very demanding circumstances in which there has been very little time for reflection. We have had to move very quickly. However, we have sought, as far as possible, to take the wider education community—learners, parents and those who are delivering across education—with us. There is absolutely more that we can and will continue to do in that context.

Ross Greer: Just—

The Convener: I am afraid that we have to move on. We will come back to your question if there is time.

Ross Greer: It is just a yes-or-no question, so, if there is time at the end, that would be ideal.

The Convener: Thank you. Bob Doris has the next question.

Bob Doris: Earlier, we heard that the syllabus for students and the course requirements in terms of content did not shrink, but that the externally examined aspects of the curriculum narrowed. That clarity was helpful. We know that the situation will be the same for the exam results that will come out in August 2023. When does the SQA anticipate returning to the pre-pandemic breadth of content for external examination? It would be helpful to know that.

There is also the issue of consistency. Will the awards in August 2023 and August 2022 be comparable, by and large? Given that there are issues around comparability, it would be helpful to know that.

Due to time constraints, I will roll in a third aspect to my question—it would be really helpful if I could get answers on all three parts. Professor Louise Hayward is looking at what should be externally examined and at that balance more generally. Is it anticipated that the SQA will not return to the previous levels of external assessment because Professor Hayward might recommend something completely different? Why would we return to the old way of doing things when we are in a transition stage to a new way of doing things?

There are three aspects to that question, and I hope that you can pick up on all of them.

Fiona Robertson: I will try to be brief, but there are a number of points in that.

On the narrowing of external assessment, we have confirmed the position for this year. We will also consider, with the system, whether modifications should continue further into 2023-24. We have not yet made a decision on that, but we have made a decision in relation to the current academic year to continue the modifications to assessment.

Coursework is being taken out across a lot of courses, although that is not universal. I think that there is a lot of support for coursework and for ensuring that young people have the ability to undertake practical work. It remains part of the course specification, and I hope that that will be covered in the learning and teaching, but I would like to see a move back to coursework as soon as we can. However, we need to remain flexible to the circumstances that learners have faced. In a small number of subjects, we did move back in 2021-22.

In relation to comparability, as I highlighted in my opening statement, there are some issues that we will need to confirm with the system. We have confirmed modifications to assessment. We need

to reflect on the experience of 2022 in relation to generous awarding, and we need to consider that in the context of the wider education system. We will need to consider that issue further, bearing in mind the circumstances that were in place at the time.

We are playing a full part in Louise Hayward's review work. Louise will want to consider the balance of assessment—both the when and the how. My only note of caution around any change is that the feedback from the most recent round of reforms to qualifications was that we needed to ensure that implementation was considered very carefully, which included investment and capacity building in the system. Reforms to qualifications can take some time. We need to keep that in mind in the context of considering how we move forward.

Bob Doris: I know that Mr Quinn wants to come in, convener.

I am conscious that, rather than saying yes or no, Fiona Robertson has said that she is not sure whether it will be comparable. You have said that you might continue with the same method for the following academic year but that you might not, and that you would quite like to go back to some of the old ways of working. Much of the system is in flux at the moment, but stability would be really good for young people and schools. I am a wee bit disappointed that we do not have more clarity from the SQA in relation to this.

Fiona Robertson: We had a conversation with the system yesterday through the NQ group, and I think that the group was conscious that we have put in place certainty around the modifications. There is certainty around learning and teaching, which has been welcomed by the system. It is important that we work at pace, but we must also reflect with the system on the experience of the past year in order to make those decisions.

I do not want you to misunderstand the fact that I am not being unequivocal in my response. As we have done already, we must consider those issues further and be flexible in our thinking, because we do not know what the year will bring. That has been a really important part of our approach to date.

Robert Quinn: I want to make a quick point about reflections on Hayward, the modifications and so on. I agree with what Fiona Robertson has said about wanting to give certainty. We want to give certainty by the end of the year about how we are mapping it out. However, we have to continually reflect on things. For example, we have to give some reflection to aspects of the sampling that were introduced in the modifications and to exam size. In addition, I feel very strongly that, in certain areas, we need to put coursework back in,

because it is an important construct in what we are trying to assess.

Pointing towards Hayward, there are things that we can do. However, we need to get concrete information out to centres, teachers and learners in good time. We should always be reflecting.

Bob Doris: I will not come back in with a question, but I just wanted to say that I thought that coursework never left, because it was part of the syllabus. It could be internally assessed rather than returning to external examination. I will leave that thought there.

The Convener: Graeme Dey has a wee supplementary question on that topic. Witnesses might be able to wrap it into what they want to say and cover everything.

Graeme Dey: My question touches on to something that I want to ask about later on.

We are not just talking about the next year or two. We have a cohort of young people on whom there will be an impact from the pandemic; there will be a legacy impact for years to come. It is important that we—I hate to use this phrase—learn the lessons of the past three years. We surely need to do that in order to adapt our approach to assessment so that there is a level playing field for those young people.

You said there that you were feeding into Louise Hayward's work. What are you feeding in? What are the lessons that we have learned from the past three years? What have we learned that we could be doing better in our approaches to certification and about the impact of the distribution of grades on all young people's learner journeys? You talked earlier about modification arrangements being in place and alternative evidencing. What can you take away from the past three years that you think should be embedded in the approach?

11:30

Fiona Robertson: That is an important point. It is absolutely critical that we learn from the experience of not just the past three years, important though those have been, but the implementation of curriculum for excellence and our aspirations for it. We have done some work on that, which has been shared with Louise Hayward. We have also shared some work on how other systems have organised themselves to deliver assessments, because there are differences and different arrangements across the world.

We need to look at this as a system. We absolutely agree that it is not just about the qualifications body, but about the implications for those who are delivering qualifications, those who are in receipt of that learning and those who are receiving qualifications. We have also done some

evaluation work on the alternative certification approach in 2021, and that will be published soon. There is an evaluation plan for 2022, which involves discussions with learners, practitioners, school leaders, colleges and others to ensure that that experience is reflected.

Graeme Dey: Will you give us a sneak preview of the evaluation that you are about to publish? *[Laughter.]*

What have you been told about the approach that was taken?

Fiona Robertson: You will need to await the full detail in the evaluation, but we have shared some messages with the NQ group and others.

It is quite clear that, in 2021, with the alternative certification model, some learners had a very positive experience, but some did not. There was certainly variation in the experience. There was some reflection from practitioners about the role of teacher judgment in the process of delivery qualifications.

There is learning for the SQA from the work that we did in 2021, and there certainly will be learning in the work for 2022. There is also wider learning for the system. That learning will inform our consideration of what Scotland wants and will need going forward. That will be very important.

The SQA sits on a lot of evidence, and the staff have important skill and expertise. I have had discussions with Louise Hayward to ensure that the breadth of experience not just in the SQA but right across the system is brought to bear in considering the assessment and qualifications system that Scotland wants.

Graeme Dey: I know that Robert Quinn wants to come in. It is important that that evaluation is provided, because you should not be left to mark your own homework.

Fiona Robertson: Yes.

Graeme Dey: The committee will look forward to seeing that evaluation work.

The Convener: I will let Robert Quinn come in.

Robert Quinn: My answer is more on the broader question on lessons learned and reflections. The issue is not just pandemic related, although obviously it has been accelerated during the pandemic: we need time and space for innovation in assessment. That is critical. The mistake that we have made in the past is that we have tried to push through changes too quickly, without properly resourcing them. That is across the system—I do not just mean the SQA resource. We need time and space for people to get a handle on that.

It is a continued journey towards understanding standards. The SQA started amazing work in the pandemic on exemplifying and helping centres to understand standards. One of the few benefits of the pandemic is that young teachers are now much more attuned to assessment standards than ever before, because they had to get to grips with them. That rich understanding of standards—that front-end quality assurance—is really important.

Harnessing the role of technology in supporting teaching, learning and assessment is another critical thing that we need to do.

Those are just some of the reflections that come to mind.

Graeme Dey: Will all of that be fed into the review?

Robert Quinn: Yes.

The Convener: I have purposely been watching the clock, because I want to spend the last part of the question session on the reform agenda. With that, I will hand over to Michael Marra.

Michael Marra: The witnesses might have picked up on the session that we had with Education Scotland prior to the summer recess, in which senior officials told the committee that the organisation was not being scrapped. I think that it is fair to say that the Scottish Government has been very clear on that issue and on the SQA's status. What will be different about Scotland's qualifications agency after the process is completed?

Fiona Robertson: For the avoidance of doubt, the Government has confirmed that a new public body for developing and awarding qualifications will replace the SQA. We are clear, and I am clear, that the SQA is being replaced.

It is a Government education reform programme. As you would expect, we are engaging closely with the Government and others on, and participating in, that programme. I have highlighted the skills and expertise of staff across the SQA, and it is important that those are brought to bear in considering the new body.

There are a number of signals to indicate how the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills wishes to see change. She has already highlighted some potential changes to the governance structure. Of course, the Government currently sets the context for the governance structure of the SQA, as a public body, and some changes to that have been highlighted.

In the context of some of the reform work, there is an end-of-year deadline for the work on a target operating model for the new body, which will look in particular at a user-led and service-led approach to delivery. That will be important in

considering some of the changes that we might make.

The Hayward review has come up in the discussion today. It is important to highlight that, in considering the form of a new public body, we clearly need to consider function. If Louise Hayward's work concludes that we should have a different assessment and qualifications system in Scotland, that will have a bearing—as we have alluded to in the context of the developments around qualifications and the resource required—on what the new qualifications body will look like.

There is one broad element that is not yet clear, which is the accreditation function. The Government is considering further the accreditation function within the SQA, so that work has not yet been completed. That is still one element—

Michael Marra: On that point, Ken Muir's report was quite clear in recommending the separation of awarding functions from accreditation and regulation. Do you think that separation, which is a clear recommendation, will be taken forward?

Fiona Robertson: The recommendation in Ken Muir's report was clear. The Government was also pretty clear in its response to his report that it would wish to consider that recommendation further before making a final decision. That work is under way.

The SQA was also clear, in its response to the consultation on the Muir review, on its position in relation to that, and that position remains the same.

Michael Marra: You are saying that it is a Scottish Government process on which it is leading. I have been passed a list of the membership of the new qualifications delivery board. There are seven members of that board, six of whom are currently SQA managers.

Fiona Robertson: I have not seen the list that you have, but I do not think that that is quite correct. My colleague might want to comment on that.

Michael Baxter (Scottish Qualifications Authority): I am more than happy to come in. I chair the delivery board, which, I stress, reports to the Scottish Government through the strategic programme board, which the Government chairs.

A number of non-SQA members sit on the delivery board, representing the education sector across Scotland, including colleges and the skills and training sector. We have a director of education for whom we sought nomination from School Leaders Scotland, and we have a further external member, who has experience of awarding and regulation outwith Scotland, to provide independent and external challenge.

Michael Marra: There are currently four non-executive directors in addition to the board members, which makes a total of 11, the majority of whom—six—are employees of the SQA.

I suppose that where I am going with this is that members of the committee and external organisations have expressed concern that—just as happened with Education Scotland—we are looking at a rebrand rather than at a replacement or a substantive reform.

Michael Baxter: Through the reform programme, we are ambitious—as, I think, is everybody who is involved in it—to ensure that, as we move forward, we have a qualifications body that serves the needs of the people whom we serve in the best possible way. We have touched on some of the themes in the discussion this morning—

Michael Marra: But—if I may, please—in contrast with much of your submission to the committee and what we have heard, the Government has concluded that the organisation has failed in recent years, otherwise it would not be scrapping it.

The question now is what replaces the organisation. It strikes me that, if the system is driven by the management of the existing organisation—we are being told by some that their organisations are not even being scrapped—can we really have faith that this reform process is based on the needs of the future? Should external voices not be being heard? Should users not be represented in the process? Should such people not make the decisions, rather than the six SQA managers—including you, Mr Baxter—who are listed on my piece of paper?

Fiona Robertson: The composition of the delivery board is balanced across the skills, expertise, experience and knowledge of existing SQA staff. Crucially, it will involve a wider staff group—as it should do; I am sure that you support that—and, at the same time, some external voices and engagement.

However, the process does not stop and start with the delivery board. You might wish to have a conversation with Scottish Government ministers about the broader education reform programme and how that interacts with the national discussion, which will be broad, and with Louise Hayward's review of qualifications and assessment—that is about what we do, which has formed the basis of the discussion this morning, and quite rightly so. A broad conversation is going on, and there will be a lot of user engagement and consultation around the process.

Although it is important that you and the committee understand the strength of experience on the delivery board, it is important that you also

understand that it does not stop there, in the context of the wider reform programme. In relation to reform, there is a strategic board, which I sit on, that includes a wide range of stakeholders and is chaired by a Scottish Government civil servant. My understanding is that, as part of the work, the cabinet secretary is chairing a stakeholder group, which I think meets quite soon.

It is probably not for me to talk through the detail of the Government's education reform programme. I can give you an assurance that we have been working closely with the Government to agree the approach and that we are involved in that approach, to ensure that the experience and skills of staff are taken account of and that the process—

The Convener: I get that, but, given what Michael Marra has said about the membership, and given the comment about a rebrand, I am concerned about how different in function the national awards body will be if the system is being reviewed by people in the existing organisation. We need a seismic shift. Will the proposed change and reform be significant enough to do what we expect of it?

Michael Baxter: We need to be clear about what the role of the delivery board is and is not. It is there to fulfil a commission from the Government to come up with proposals, and, in doing so, the board will need to engage. The work that supports it also needs to include engagement. Engagement with a wide range of stakeholders, to form the proposals, is part of the commission; it is not simply about the SQA marking its own homework, as it has been characterised. It is important to say that.

To come back to your question about what will be different, there are a number of interdependencies. At the same time as reform is taking place, the SQA, as an organisation, will need to continue to deliver its existing functions. The awarding of qualifications will need to be done in a safe and secure way. The undertaking of a significant programme of reform at the same time as the organisation delivers its existing functions will be a challenge, and we need to be clear about the transition to the new organisation and the implications of Louise Hayward's work, the national conversation and the period of continued change for the new body, once it is in existence. That is the reality of where we are. However, we need to take a progressive look at the issue; it is simply not about the status quo—I can absolutely assure the committee of that.

11:45

Michael Marra: The committee would recognise the challenge of undertaking both functions at the

same time. My answer to that is to ask why things are taking quite so long, with a transition process taking years and a national conversation after the conclusion of a qualifications review. That exacerbates the problem. The—

Fiona Robertson: I think—

Michael Marra: If I may continue.

The conclusion of ministers is that the organisation has failed. You shake your head at that again, but the organisation is being closed and replaced because of decisions that it took. The cabinet secretary took the decisions to do that, I assume at Cabinet and with the imprimatur of the First Minister. That is a significant change, and that process is taking years. The problems that Mr Baxter describes around running a system while reforming that system are of the making of that reform process. My belief is that that could be happening an awful lot quicker than it is happening at the moment. Those problems are being created by a situation that has been pulled out over a period of years.

Fiona Robertson: I have a couple of things to say in response to that. First, I do not accept that that is what the cabinet secretary said in her rationale for change. Secondly, Mike Baxter's point is an important one in the context of the speed at which reform can take place: it is critical that we maintain continuity of delivery while also investing in reform. To create a new qualifications body, we will need new legislation, and legislation takes time. The committee will wish to scrutinise said draft legislation, and it will take its time, as it is absolutely appropriate to do. The programme for government that was published yesterday set out that there would be an education reform bill in this parliamentary year.

Michael Marra: It is up to Parliament to decide how quickly it scrutinises legislation and how long that takes, as well as the priority that it gives to it.

Fiona Robertson: Absolutely.

Michael Marra: It is the Government that is setting the terms of how long the review process will take. How quickly we prosecute the scrutiny of the draft legislation is up to us. It is not necessarily for comment by other people.

Fiona Robertson: No—I was not commenting on it.

Michael Marra: I think that we should do it more quickly. The problem is with the review process.

Fiona Robertson: I was just highlighting the fact that there are steps to go through in the transition and in the transformation that we want to take place. It is important that we understand that that needs to be done properly and well, and that it will take some time. As part of its education reform

programme, the Government has highlighted the expectation that a new body will be in place after the results in 2024, and its timeline reflects that broad commitment. My job, and our job, is to ensure that we are contributing to that work, drawing on the skills and experience of SQA staff. In any public sector reform programme, you would expect there to be engagement with those who are currently delivering the functions. Ken Muir has been clear about the broad continuity of functions, and the point that you made about functions, convener, came under Ken's review—although, as things stand, accreditation is an exception. The issue is: what further changes do we expect from our assessment and qualifications system, and what changes will the organisation need to reflect as part of that, beyond what the cabinet secretary has already said?

Detailed questions around the Scottish Government's education reform programme would probably best be dealt with by the Government. I am happy to comment on the elements of the programme that pertain to us, and we are working hard to deliver on them.

The Convener: Stephanie Callaghan and Graeme Dey have some supplementary questions.

Stephanie Callaghan: Mike Baxter spoke about the delivery board fulfilling its commission, and I appreciate the fact that experience, knowledge and skills are required on the board. The leadership teams from the Scottish Government, the SQA and Education Scotland are working together within the existing governance and accountability frameworks to establish a new organisation. Is that working well? What progress has been made on that?

Michael Baxter: The engagement between the various organisations has been extremely good. In relation to the announcement back in March, the outcome of Ken Muir's report and the Scottish Government's response to it, quite a lot of the detail around the implications of the report and how to take it forward still needed to be worked through at that point. We have been seeking to do that and have engaged positively on it.

As with any major programme of change or reform, it is important to set off on the right track. The commission that has been set for the delivery board by the Scottish Government sets out a programme of deliverables or work over the next 18 months or so that will help us to arrive at decisions about the nature of the new qualifications body. We are taking forward that work, and we are committed to engaging with stakeholders as we do so. There has been discussion this morning about some of the strengths and opportunities that committee members see for the new qualifications body. It is

important that we explore those fully in relation to what we are able to deliver against the challenging backdrop that has been set out.

The point has been made on a couple of occasions that, although the focus is on structural reform of the national agencies, we do not sit in a vacuum. It will therefore also be important to work through the implications of any change on the wider education system and the deliverability of that change. I do not say that from the point of view of trying to pad it out; it is about making sure that we get it right and that changes are implemented in a logical and deliverable way. That is where we need to get to.

Stephanie Callaghan: What are the biggest challenges that you come up against?

Michael Baxter: Speaking in a personal capacity as chair of the delivery board, I think that the biggest challenge is in recognising the SQA's on-going challenges around delivery in a challenging operating environment. It is about the successful delivery of awards and about confidence, which has been talked about today. It is important that we continue that work not only for learners but for the services that we provide through our contracts as they continue. Those are the big challenges that we need to recognise and work our way through, and resourcing becomes an important part of that.

The Convener: We will move to questions from Graeme Dey. I am keeping an eye on the time.

Graeme Dey: It is about not only how it is done but the appearance of how it is done. Mr Marra made the point that, at face value, having the SQA so dominant in the process could be questioned by those who fear a rebranding and nothing more. What real assurance can be given that this is a genuine process that will get us to where it is clear we need to be in relation to not only forming a new body but the ethos of that body? It is perfectly legitimate for the SQA's input over the past few years and in a broader sense to be taken on board, but we should also be looking at the issue afresh. How is the oversight organisation that you are running, Mr Baxter, actually operating in practice?

Michael Baxter: To be clear, the oversight organisation is a delivery board that is delivering against a commission from the Scottish Government. It has not been created as a separate organisation. The work that we are taking forward will need to be validated. The form and function of the new delivery body is therefore not a decision for the SQA. The delivery board will—with the expertise that has been alluded to—create proposals that will go to the Scottish Government and be reviewed, which will involve external stakeholders. The involvement of stakeholders at

an early stage of the work is really important, and the credibility of the work is also really important. I do not underestimate the amount of work that will be involved, but we have a real opportunity here, and it is important that we grasp it.

Graeme Dey: How many times has the oversight board met in practice? How does it operate? How are external stakeholders inputting into the process?

Michael Baxter: The delivery board met for the first time in August, with the confirmation of membership. It is an open discussion. We have the commission from the Scottish Government against which we are tracking performance and work, so the analysis that is undertaken is really about our delivery against that commission. The external members are bringing to the table different perspectives and a view on what they want the output of the work to be.

Graeme Dey: Are we operating in a way that involves looking to the end destination—what it is that we want to achieve—and working out how we best get there, as opposed to simply tweaking the existing practice and approach?

Michael Baxter: In part, that is the nub of the issue for me.

In Ken Muir's report and the response, there are general words about the ethos, better learner engagement and so on. The issue is how those things are articulated and then delivered. That is what we are working through at this point. The target operating model will establish that kind of mission vision and so on for the new organisation, from which will then flow some of the detailed organisational work that will be required thereafter.

The Convener: Those are the last questions that we have time for—I am keeping an eye on the clock. I thank everyone for their time today, and I thank the three members of the SQA for their participation.

The public part of today's meeting is now at an end. We will consider our final agenda item in private.

11:56

Meeting continued in private until 12:37.

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