

burning issues

Assessment Arrangements Events June 2006

Burning Issues: A summary of delegates' issues/questions and SQA's response.

Summary of Burning Issues

At the end of the seminars, delegates were asked to submit their “burning issues”- issues which they felt very strongly about and wished to be communicated to SQA. We have taken all of these issues and passed them to the appropriate business areas for consideration.

We have also summarised and grouped the most common and frequently raised issues under broad headings for ease of reference and have attempted to provide a response to some of these issues.

If you have an issue which has not been addressed here, then, please do not hesitate to contact SQA.

Examination timetable/diet issues

- *“high uptake subjects like Higher English and Standard Grade Social and Vocational Studies on the same day. This caused huge problems for staff involved in providing enough readers/scribes, separate accommodation etc”*
- *“some visually impaired candidates who require 50% extra time often cannot complete examination in one day. Approval to take examination on the following day dependent upon centre taking responsibility for supervision of the candidate - taking candidates home not an option – child protection is a big issue!”*
- *“Popular examinations set on the same day mean that some candidates can have four exams on one day. Candidates who require extra time are severely disadvantaged by having to spend so long under exam conditions on the same day”*

Comment/Response

We fully appreciate your concerns but there are considerable challenges posed in compiling the timetable while trying to ensure the fairest possible spread of examination dates. Designing a timetable which allows us to conduct a large number of examinations across Scotland in a short period of time is a real challenge. Time is necessarily short because we wish to hold examinations as close to the end of term as possible to give students the maximum time for study. The first two weeks are given to Standard Grade examinations. This arrangement provides more study time for candidates taking National Course examinations which are held in weeks three to six. The sixth week is given to more specialised National Courses with candidates mainly from colleges. When compiling the timetable we do try to avoid timetabling courses with a large uptake on the same day. When allocating a morning or afternoon time slot to an examination we do have to take account of a number of factors before we decide the time slot we allocate. However, with any of the possible variations of the timetable there will be some candidates who will be faced with sitting two subjects on the same day, however there are review procedures in place to ensure that candidates are not disadvantaged by this situation.

I hope the above offers some explanation of our current processes and re-assures you that we are taking every reasonable step to minimise the issues associated with the timetable.

Candidates with Visual Impairment

- *“For a totally blind candidate can the scribe have a written transcript of pictorial questions to standardise? Alternate questions might be needed”*
- *Enlarging materials for V.I pupils – papers end up too large for pupils to see top of paper. Please enlarge to required print size but re-organise to keep A4 size papers.*
- *Papers copied on white spreadsheets (for visual difficulties) pupils disadvantaged in. E.g. Maths, Geog, where data maps not on some sheet or on opposite sheet, therefore need to flick backwards and forwards.*

Comment/response

In terms of adapted papers for candidates with visual impairment, we do try to provide the most appropriate version of the question paper which meets the individual needs of the candidate. All of the above requests could be met, we do produce standard A4 question paper with a specified print size, the question paper printed on a specified colour of paper, the question paper adapted to simplify visual complexity or a Braille version of the question paper.

What is essential is that you identify the necessary modification which meets your candidates' needs and that you let us know as soon as possible. If your requirements change (for example, a change in the grade or level for which the candidate is entered), please let us know as soon as possible.

Readers & Scribes

- *“Clarification on reader/scribe situations, what exactly is allowed re pupil needs”?*
- *In view of the DDA the need to look again at Core Communication relating to Assessment Arrangements – reading assessment no readers/ scribes allowed but yet ok for English.*
- *Appropriate arrangements for English courses! Reader/scribe/transcription with correction! Can this be justified in terms of equity for other pupils? Please review this in an objective manner which will be fair to all students...*
- *If a dyslexic pupil does not use a scribe in the English writing exam is there any allowance made for his/ her dyslexia*
- *“Pupils doing e.g. English exam, and perhaps 6 of them requiring readers & scribes do they all need separate accommodation and individual invigilators? We do this, but it is difficult to find accommodation and expensive. There are schools who would put all six pupils in a library, subdivided by shelves with 1 invigilator walking up and down the middle of the room”*

Comment/Response

Under our current policy, and in line with the Disability Discrimination Act, candidates with disabilities and/or additional support needs who are unable to access the assessment or to present written responses are entitled to reasonable adjustments to alleviate their substantial disadvantage. Reasonable adjustments, such as the use of assistive technologies or a reader and/or a scribe or transcription with correction are therefore permitted under this policy in all subjects, including English.

In allowing a reader in English, we accept that candidates, who have been appropriately identified as having a disability which means that they are unable to decode written language, should not be prevented from demonstrating their ability to understand, analyse and evaluate language texts. Similarly, in the case of writing, candidates who have a disability which means that they are unable to produce a written response without a scribe, should not be prevented from demonstrating their ability to compose a piece of writing which is appropriate for purpose and audience. We accept that technical accuracy is not being demonstrated by the candidate.

We are very aware of some of the concerns which you have expressed and certainly would wish to ensure that the provision of any assessment arrangement does not compromise the application of the standard of the award but also that individual candidates are provided with equal and fair opportunities to demonstrate their ability to achieve the set standard. Any review of current policy will be considered in this context and must not be seen as limiting rather than promoting access for a significant number of candidates with disabilities.

Under normal circumstances when a reader/scribe is being used, separate accommodation and invigilation will be necessary. However, if a centre is having difficulties in meeting this requirement, it may be possible to accommodate more than one candidate in one room provided the room is partitioned in such a way as to ensure that no candidate is distracted by another candidate or by hearing the interaction between another candidate and the reader/scribe. The invigilator must also be satisfied that he/she is able to carry out their required duties.

Extra time

- *“Extra time – diff subjects/ levels are difficult to judge. How much extra time is needed?”*
- *“Why does SQA need to know in advance how much extra time is being requested?”*
- *“Difficulty around evidence for extra time particularly when only issue”*
- *“If a candidate benefits from extra time, by definition this is a need. Does s/he therefore get extra time”*
- *“During this year’s diet of SG exams in 3 subject areas the main body of pupils sitting the papers (F&G) finished ½ an hour before scheduled finishing time. Candidates who had requested extra time were then recorded as not using extra time but they had used the ½ hour as their extra time. Timing for the exam must be questionable if an hour is allocated but the majority only require ½ an hour”*
- *“Monitoring of extra time used for AA candidates has to be linked to monitoring of all candidates for the same exam”*
- *How much of E.T is actually used?*

Comments/Responses

We accept that it is sometimes difficult to exactly calculate how much extra time a candidate will actually need. However, there must be evidence of the need for extra time to support a request and evidence that the amount of extra time being requested is reasonable and reflects the candidate’s needs. Evidence should also show that the candidate is placed at a substantial disadvantage if extra time is not provided.

We need to know in advance how much extra time is being requested because there may be extra invigilation requirements.

The amount of time allocated for different examinations is based on providing sufficient time for candidates from a broad range of abilities to demonstrate their skills and knowledge. However, it is recognised that the timing for different examinations should be reviewed to ensure that the system is fair and in accordance with practice elsewhere in the UK and beyond.

In order to monitor the use of extra time, we are currently conducting some research into both, how practice in Scotland compares with that of other countries in the UK and elsewhere, and into the actual use of extra time requested in the 2006 diet of examinations.

EAL

- *“Support for EAL pupils – candidates do not read well enough in English but oral language is better. Not allowed to read for them”*
- *“Exploring needs of pupils who present with EAL difficulties. Need to explore appropriate arrangements which circumvent the difficulties”*
- *“EAL candidates are disadvantaged – cannot demonstrate their knowledge of a subject i.e. Chemistry due to language barrier and are not entitled to a reader/scribe”*
- *“Bilingual candidates - refusal of a dictionary use of SG 2 in English”*
- *“Increasing number of older pupils for whom English is an additional language – re Scottish Executive policy to encourage immigration – the SQA might offer a translation service (as an AA) for ‘non-communication’ subjects (e.g. AH chemistry/ H Maths”.*
- *“More flexibility for granting ET and use of foreign dictionary for S5/6 pupils (who have passed English Level 3 in SG) in some subjects that are language specific i.e. Higher Chemistry”*
- *“EAL candidates post SG may have lang. processing difficulties – can extra time be considered?”*
- *“The unfair way EAL candidates are treated in the exam system. Other pupils are entitled to 10%, 25%, 50% extra time. EAL – 10 mins”*
- *“Assessment Arrangements for EAL pupils who cannot achieve their potential under existing arrangements”*

Comments/Responses

Over recent years we have been receiving more and more requests for assessment arrangements (mainly, but not exclusively, for extra time) in the external examination for some candidates who have additional support needs related to the fact that they have English as an additional language (EAL).

Currently, the only arrangement available to these candidates in the external examination is the use of a bilingual dictionary with an associated extra time allowance of ten minutes per hour. However, if the candidate has gained an award of Grade 3 or better in Standard Grade English Reading, or has Intermediate 2 English, or is being or has been entered for Higher English then this extra time allowance is not permitted.

EAL candidates are not eligible for any of the other assessment arrangements (eg 25% extra time, reader and/or scribe) which are available to candidates with disabilities and/or additional support needs. It has been powerfully argued that a needs-based flexible approach for those EAL candidates requiring assessment arrangements would enable them to be fairly assessed along with other candidates (ie those with a disability) identified as having additional support needs.

We are currently reviewing our policy in this area and considering the most appropriate way of developing /extending our policy (which is needs led but is based on principles which reflect the assessment needs of candidates with disabilities) to meet the needs of **all** candidates who have identified additional support needs and to ensure that there is consistent interpretation and application of the policy across all centres.

Transcription

- *“English – transcription with correction is becoming increasingly requested for pupils with spelling difficulties whose IT skills are not good. Is this fair? SOLUTION – no AA in any English exam”*
- *“If one no longer marks papers which have been transcribed how does examiner know which is original script and which is transcribed? How are they kept together? Can transcriber not mark the transcribed script? Does the whole paper need to be transcribed?”*
- *“Spelling – dyslexics are being penalised. Transcription would give added advantage”.*
- *“More precise guidance requested for transcription with correction currently ‘can correct, but not insert anything new’ is what we use. Transcription with Correction will therefore not be punctually correct.”*
- *“Time requirements for transcription at higher level especially. Pupils with much greater illegibility at H Levels due to time constraints”*
- *“Transcription – why since we no longer identify any support given (e.g. reader/scribe) are we required to send in original script with transcription?”*
- *“Transcription without correction – should not be subject specialist, but someone who is familiar with handwriting”.*

Under our current policy, and in line with the Disability Discrimination Act, candidates with disabilities and/or additional support needs who are unable to present written responses are entitled to reasonable adjustments such as the use of linguistic support (assistive technologies, readers, scribes or transcription with correction) in all subjects including English.

Over the years there has been much discussion and debate about the use of such linguistic support, including in English. Central to this debate has been the argument, that to allow linguistic support, such as transcription with correction, in English misleads the user of the Certificate about the candidates’ ability to write text, when in fact these skills have been done for them by a transcriber. It has also been argued that candidates who use linguistic support receive an unfair advantage in English. We would wish to ensure that the provision of any arrangement does not compromise the application of the standard of the award but also that individual candidates are provided with equal and fair opportunities to demonstrate their ability to achieve the set standard. We are currently undertaking a review of all assessment arrangements that may be perceived as either providing an unfair advantage or misleading the user of the Certificate. This review will be carefully considered in the light of the disability discrimination legislation.

Transcription with correction permits the transcriber to correct errors of spelling and punctuation only and must be familiar with the candidate’s handwriting.

Referral to Principal Assessor

- *“Role of referral to Principal Assessor, particularly for poor spelling. Is scribe/transcription a better option?”*
- *“Why is referral to PA allowed at all? Benefits? Rules?”*
- *“if spelling is still going to be penalised what is the point of this additional arrangement? Is it not to make sure that pupils are not perceived as being poorer, because of their spelling, are not penalised in any way. Clearer guidelines to centres about reason for referral and outcomes required”*
- *“More clarification please “Referral: PT English in discussion with PA is getting the impression that referral is not being looked at/ taken into account: a grey area!”*
- *PA referral –. Need to know ‘penalty’ subjects for spelling. e.g English and Biology.*

Comments/Responses

We are aware that this assessment arrangement, more than any other, is misunderstood and possibly misused. Referral to the Principle Assessor is an arrangement which provides a check that a marker has not **over-penalised** a candidate because of a significant spelling difficulty and is only available for certain subjects that require an extended written response. Our markers do not use ‘negative marking’ in subjects other than English, marks are not deducted for poor spelling. In English, technical accuracy, which includes spelling, syntax and punctuation, is assessed and marks can be deducted for poor spelling. The Principal Assessor simply checks that the marker has not **over-penalised** the candidate. Marks correctly deducted for poor spelling will not be put back.

Prompters

- *“We have an Asperger base. Could there be more flexibility for prompters during exams as it is very constrained at the moment – encouraging Asperger pupils can be very difficult -they can hide under seats and tables when stressed”.*
- *“Some Aspergers can get fixated on a question and need prompt to persuade them to move on and come back. Poor executive function means that they cannot plan their time therefore rush and give inadequate answers. Can a prompt give advice and guidance during the exam?”*

Comment/response

We have been working with a focus group of teachers involved with candidates with Autistic Spectrum Disorders, including those with Asperger’s Syndrome, to establish more flexible arrangements in the conduct of the external examination. New invigilator guidelines were written for Diet 2006 and we are currently considering the most effective use of cue cards by candidates. The focus group are working hard to try and establish ways of meeting the very complex needs that these candidates have in the context of national examinations. The challenge lies in making appropriate arrangements which meet candidates' needs but also which are feasible and practicable and do not compromise the integrity of the external examination where all candidates are expected to read and understand the questions.

Use of Calculators

- “Use of calculator in non calculator papers. Length of papers / allocated time e.g. craft and design and computing, very short time used by many makes for a difficult situation when trying to work out appropriate level of extra time.
- “Why in this day and age do we still have NON-CALCULATOR papers? Vast majority would improve performance using calculators.”

Comment/Response

This arrangement became available a number of years ago when a request was made on behalf of a very able, and mathematically capable, candidate who had significant specific learning difficulties.

Psychological assessment indicated that the candidate's difficulties included numeracy/arithmetic and language difficulties including: directional confusion; sequencing problems; visual perceptual problems; short- term (working) memory and long- term memory problems. These difficulties were clearly identified and reported as dyscalculic. Evidence also existed that the candidate always used and had access to a calculator for all of his classroom work in mathematics

It was obvious that the candidate would be seriously disadvantaged and would be unable to demonstrate his attainment in the more advanced aspects/concepts of higher mathematics if he was not allowed to use a calculator to bypass his dyscalculic difficulties in his examination in mathematics.

The Qualifications Manager and examining team for mathematics were consulted and a number of pertinent points were considered including:

- the non-calculator part of the external assessment (Paper 1) is not actually reported on the Certificate
- non-calculator assessment is not a major aspect of the assessment
- the paper also includes questions which are deemed to be calculator-neutral
- only a subset of the number of marks in Paper 1 are truly connected with non-calculator skills ie questions designed to assess some non-calculator skills (eg addition of fractions) would likely also assess interpretation, strategy or communication aspects

After careful consideration of the points above and of SQA's obligations under DDA to meet individual needs, a decision was taken that the use of a calculator in this particular question paper was a reasonable adjustment (one which does not compromise the application of the standard of the award) for a candidate identified as having such severe *dyscalculic* difficulties and should be allowed.

Concern has been raised in recent years about the increasing number of candidates for whom this arrangement is being requested and indeed about the evidence available in centres to support such a request.

To address these concerns, we now include centres' requests for assessment arrangements in our rigorous quality assurance procedures and we also are currently considering how best to ensure that it is clear to all concerned why any particular assessment arrangement is acceptable in terms of maintaining the credibility of the award.