

Our ref: TD/LD

13 February 2003

For the attention of:
all schools, colleges, Education Authorities,
ASC, SCIS, SFEU, Scottish Executive

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Dear Colleague

Note of guidance for centres on the use of commercially-produced examination papers

I am aware of a continuing debate in centres about the use of commercially-produced examination papers in:

- estimating candidates' likely performance in the final examination
- providing evidence to support assessment appeals where candidates fail to achieve their estimated grade.

I wish to start by confirming our position that a well designed commercially-produced examination paper can, as long as it is used in an appropriate manner, provide valid and reliable evidence on which to estimate a candidate's likely performance in an external examination. It can also provide full or partial evidence to support an assessment appeal.

Given the above, I would like to refer you to two SQA documents offering guidance on assessment appeals.

- i) "Guidance on generating evidence for National Course estimates and assessment appeals" issued in February 2001.
- ii) The letter from Hugh Gordon dated 15 February 2002 and containing "Notes of guidance for centres on the appeals process and on the preparation of evidence to support estimates and appeals". These notes are intended to be used in conjunction with the Guidance document referred to in i) above.

Between them, the two documents outline the process by which appeal teams evaluate each appeal. They also offer guidance and suggestions on appropriate evidence. Although the first document (i) refers specifically to National Courses, the general advice given is applicable to Standard Grade.

Item 1.11 on page 13 of the Guidance document reads: "*Where Course content has to be sampled, secure assessment instruments should be used – the authenticity of your candidates' evidence could be compromised if candidates have had prior sight of the questions or tasks.*" This underlines the need to ensure that candidates could not have seen the assessment instrument in advance of its use. Further guidance on the topic is given in Hugh Gordon's letter.

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Page three of Hugh's letter reads: "*Commercially-prepared prelim papers can be convenient for centres, but it should be noted that such commercial products are not accredited by SQA and can not be guaranteed to be acceptable as the basis of evidence for Appeals. Before being used, these products and associated marking schemes should be evaluated in terms of the validity, reliability and security in the same way as centre- or locally-prepared papers. Where candidates have had access to commercially-prepared papers, these papers should be regarded in the same way as past SQA papers. Such a paper in its entirety will not be accepted as evidence for appeal purposes if they have been accessible to candidates.*" Page one of the letter gives definitions of validity and reliability as used by SQA.

It is for individual centres to check that any commercially-produced examination paper they elect to use as a prelim is valid and reliable. The paper should also be capable of generating evidence to satisfy the criteria for awards at A, B and C grade. This applies equally to papers produced by individual centres.

Centres should also ensure that their candidates have not seen the examination paper in advance. In our view where only a single commercially-produced paper is available for use in a given diet there is a real risk that candidates could access that paper and gain unfair advantage in preparing for a prelim.

It is worth remembering that the appeals process is intended to provide a means to take account of **exceptional** cases. Appeals should only be lodged where a candidate has, for whatever reason, performed far below expectation and where there is solid evidence to support that expectation. We ask our appeal teams to look for cases where significant numbers of candidates in one centre perform below expectation in a subject and where the appeal evidence appears to be seriously at odds with examination performance. We recognize that there may be a number of reasons for such anomalies and we contact the centre concerned to seek an explanation.

Given the level of interest in this topic, I intend to set up a working group, comprising SQA officers and stakeholders, to conduct a review of the use of commercially-produced examination papers in generating evidence for assessment appeals. I hope to have the group in place by the end of April 2003 and to have a report with recommendations by the end of June. I will ensure that you are kept informed of the outcome of this work. In the meantime, please be assured that there will be no change to the appeals process for the current session.

Yours faithfully



Tom Drake
General Manager, National Qualifications