

BOARD OF MANAGEMENT – 29 JANUARY 2025

Minutes of the meeting of the extraordinary Board of Management meeting held at 2.30pm on Thursday 31 October by video conference.

Members

- * Ms S Rogers (Chair)
- * Ms F Robertson (Chief Executive)
Ms A Davis
- * Mr S Hagney
Mr J Morton
- * Mr G Smith
- * Professor K Thomson
- * Ms M Wailes

Officers

- * Ms J Blair
- * Mr J Booth
Mr M Campbell
- * Mrs D Mahmoud
- * Mr J McMorris
- * Ms D Stewart
- * Mr M Ware

Qualifications Committee Members (virtual)

- * Mr P Bain
- * Prof J-A Baird
- * Ms J Davis
- * Mr S Hewitt
- * Mr S McKenna
- * Mr J Reid
- * Mr D Swinney
- * Ms Y Hussain

- * Indicates present

In attendance

Mr S Borley, Head of Chief Executive's Office, SQA
[REDACTED], SQA **Redacted - section 38(1)(b) personal data**

1 OPENING REMARKS

1.1 Welcome and apologies

SQA's Chair welcomed members and thanked them for convening at short notice.
The Chair also began by thanking SQA's Director of Policy, Analysis & Standards,

Mr Martyn Ware, and SQA's Head of Standards, Ms Margot McKerrell for the work they had done in creating the report.

2 HIGHER HISTORY SUMMARY

Mr Ware and Mr Booth co-presented a summary of the events to date including an overview of the work completed and the next steps that were required. The Chair confirmed that she, alongside SQA's Chief Executive & Chief Examiner and SQA's Director of Policy, Analysis & Standards, met with the Cabinet Secretary on 29 October 2024. It was noted that the Cabinet Secretary had not received a copy of the report at the time of the meeting, but a commitment was made to share the report with the Scottish Government when it was available.

Following publication of the outcomes of this year's National Qualifications on 6 August 2024, concerns were raised about the standards applied in the marking of examinations in Higher History. These concerns were raised initially on social media and print media and subsequently directly with SQA. Concerns raised directly with SQA came from teachers, parents, carers and from MSPs on behalf of their constituents.

The concerns centre on a perception that the standards applied in marking Higher History in 2024 were more demanding than in previous years, particularly in the 'Empire and Migration' section of Question Paper 2, Scottish History.

While assurance was provided by colleagues in Qualifications Development Directorate and the Principal Assessor, considering these concerns and the risks to public confidence in our qualifications system, SQA's Chief Examiner commissioned SQA's Head of Standards to review the marking of Higher History with a particular focus on Question Paper 2. Subsequently, the Director of Policy, Analysis and Standards (PAS) was asked to provide overview and further scrutiny.

The report's objective was to examine the available evidence pertaining to the standard applied in marking Higher History in 2024.

Board members received a copy of the report on 30 October 2024, which was simultaneously shared with Clare Hicks, Director of Education Reform at the Scottish Government. A Board meeting was promptly convened on the following day to discuss the report's findings.

The report presents a detailed analysis of the review, addresses specific questions outlined in the report, and provides a series of recommendations based on its findings and conclusions. The report's evidence and conclusions were subjected to external scrutiny by the Executive Director of Qualifications and Assessment at Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC), Wales's largest awarding body.

The report concludes that the standard set in the Higher History assessments, including Question Paper 2, Scottish History, was not more stringent than that set in previous years. The report details the supporting evidence for this conclusion and identifies several factors likely to have contributed to the outcomes observed in Higher History this year.

3 BOARD DISCUSSION AND DECISION

The Board meeting was convened to seek approval for the publication of the Review of Higher History 2024 report and to note the associated handling plan. As per standing orders for SQA's Board of Management, a quorum of six members is required to conduct business. Although six members were in attendance at one point during the meeting, a quorum was not achieved, therefore preventing the Chair asking the Board to grant approval.

In place of an approval, the Board were asked to provide their thoughts following the receipt of the report. Ms Wailes joined the meeting at this point of the meeting.

Board members in attendance thanked the Chair for confirming approval was not being sought at this stage due to quorate reasons but also wished it to be noted that even if quorate was met, it would still be difficult due to the short notice of the meeting being convened.

[REDACTED] Redacted - 30(b)(ii) (free and frank exchange of views)

The Chief Executive underscored the significance of the role played by SQA's Head of Standards in the successful delivery of the report, and the purpose of the role in the organisation. She also highlighted the decision to seek external advice from the WJEC.

[REDACTED] Redacted - 30(b)(ii) (free and frank exchange of views)

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Mr Hagney had to leave the meeting at this point due to a prior commitment.

The Chief Executive expressed her commitment to considering and addressing all comments provided by the Board. The Chair then summarised the discussion that took place and noted the Board's responsibility in supporting colleagues during this process.

The Chief Executive outlined the plan for the following days, including officers reviewing all comments from Board members.

The Board agreed the Scottish Government, via Ms Hicks, should be updated following the conclusion of their deliberations. This was to be arranged following the meeting taking place. Mr Booth proposed publishing the report the following week, to avoid release during a period when schools may be concluding for a week. He confirmed that no specific publication date had been committed to.

The Chair concluded that the report presents evidence-based conclusions and recommendations. Recognising the Board's feedback on the report presentation and the current lack of a quorum, she instructed the corporate governance function to determine the appropriate process for obtaining Board approval of the report.

Initially, it was proposed that the report be presented to the SQA's Qualifications Committee for additional scrutiny before returning to the Board. However, Prof Thomson suggested that, to expedite the publication of the report, this step could be omitted on this occasion. The potential for future involvement of the Qualifications Committee was acknowledged.

4 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next scheduled meeting of the Board will take place on Wednesday 27 November 2024.