

Opening remarks

I welcome this opportunity to answer questions on the Higher History Review. The integrity of national qualifications, and the confidence of teachers, learners and the wider public, is of critical importance to us all.

I would like to make three brief but important points to the Committee before taking questions.

1. Firstly, there has been much discussion about why SQA carried out the Review. The simple answer is because it is our job to do so. There is no separate regulator for National Qualifications, so they are what is termed 'self-regulated.'

As I made clear to the Committee in September when I was asked to give evidence on the Education (Scotland) Bill, while I am confident that there is sufficient separation between SQA accreditation - which accredits and regulates some post-school qualifications - and awarding, where regulations sits and what it does in future is a choice for the Scottish Government and this Parliament. This is picked up in your Stage 1 report on the Bill, published yesterday.

As things stand, we are operating within our existing structures and responsibilities.

2. Secondly, and within those structures, the Head of Standards and the Director of Policy, Analysis and Standards – who is here with me today – were commissioned to carry out a thorough, evidence-led review independently within SQA. They did so without fear or favour.

To provide further assurance, we asked the WJEC (Welsh Joint Education Committee), the largest awarding body in Wales, to provide independent, external scrutiny of the review and, again, they could carry out that role as they saw fit.

I want to place on record my thanks to SQA colleagues - and to Richard Harry from WJEC for ensuring the review was carried out rigorously and with integrity.

As Chief Examiner, I accept the reviews conclusions, that there was no change to the marking standard for Higher History in 2024.

3. Thirdly, the SQA has an important role to fulfil, but the interests of learners must be at the heart of everything we do. We all want learners to do well, including the many teachers that devise our qualifications, set our questions papers and mark for us. The debate around Higher History has been a debate between teachers. However, we must award qualifications that reflect the performance of learners and that is what we have done.

Scrutiny is welcome – and SQA has certainly faced scrutiny and challenge in recent years - but debate must be tempered by the responsibility we all have to the 10,000 young people across Scotland who sat Higher History this year, and the many learners preparing for exams next spring.

I am very happy to answer questions.

Key messages – repeat ad nauseum

We operate within the system of self-regulation which we currently have for National Qualifications – if Parliament and Government wish to change that they have the opportunity to do so through the Education Bill.

The Higher History Review was evidence-led and was carried out independently within SQA and without fear or favour. Further external scrutiny was provided by WJEC.

Teacher are at the heart of awarding – they set, check, mark and grade assessments. The Higher History debate has been a debate between teachers.

Everyone is entitled to a view but learners' interests must come first – SQA's job is to fairly and accurately reflect learner performance in order to maintain the integrity of our qualifications.

If needed: I have been dismayed by some of the coverage and commentary of the Higher History Review – our Higher History Principal Assessor and Senior Team Leader (both serving teachers) have said that 'much of what they have heard and read is ill-informed at best and plain wrong at worst'.

If needed: The ongoing debate risks undermining confidence in our qualifications system is real and once the damage is done it is hard to repair.

Quotes from PA/Senior Team Leader article

"much of what we have heard and read is ill-informed at best and plain wrong at worst"

"we would encourage everyone to read the Higher History Review for themselves, cover to cover, rather than reaching conclusions based on social media noise or anonymous comments in newspapers"

"the SQA did not mark its own work...it used its expertise and experience to extensively stress test the evidence before drawing its evidence-based conclusions"

"ultimately the dispute over the Higher History marking standard boils down to a disagreement between teachers...it has been disappointing and unedifying to see the self-harm being done to our profession"

"what concerns us most of all is the damage this ongoing debate is doing to learners"

“feedback from teachers provides some pointers [on the fall in learner performance] – for example, falling standards of literacy, candidates being entered for Higher who are at National 5 level or below, teaching to the test, the ongoing Covid impacts...let’s explore and address those issues, however challenging they may be for us to face up to”

“if we don’t [move forward together] we risk fundamentally undermining not only the Higher History course but confidence in Scotland’s assessment and qualifications system more widely”