

24 January 2025

Private and Confidential

Jenny Gilruth MSP
Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills

By email: CabSecES2024@gov.scot

Contact: Jean Blair
e-mail – jean.blair@sqa.org.uk

Dear Cabinet Secretary

2025 Examination Timetable

Thank you for your letter of 17 December highlighting a number of concerns about the examination timetable for 2025, not least the number of concerns that you have received about the increase in coincident and consecutive exams. Given the significant volume of complaints SQA has received following the publication of the compressed timetable, I share your concerns.

You asked that as a matter of urgency we explore creative solutions to addressing these concerns, including the opportunity to extend beyond the current published end date. This response outlines a recommendation on a way forward.

You'll recall that SQA was on the verge of publishing a timetable for 2025 before the end of June 2024, after extensive consultation with external stakeholders through the timetable advisory group (including representatives from SLS and ADES). At that point, SQA was asked to consider a later start to the timetable by SLS and ADES who advised that learners required a full week back at school after the Easter holidays before the start of the exam diet. We listened to that advice and, in good faith, delayed the start of the timetable on the understanding that issues such as coincident exams could be resolved at a local level with schools.

The correspondence we have received would appear to suggest otherwise. The concerns we raised with stakeholders about a later start date have unfortunately been realised, with learners experiencing a sharp increase in coincident and consecutive exams. This creates exam workload pressures over a number of days, as well as causing logistical challenges with assessment arrangements, appointee recruitment, marking and quality assurance. Planning is now at advanced stage and the only mitigation we could take at this stage would be to add an additional day at the start of the timetable.

We have considered but discounted the possibility of using and extending beyond the contingency day of 2 June. As well as presenting risks to completing certification, we would fail to secure appointees as any extension of the timetable would push processes well into

school summer holidays when appointees (teachers) will be on leave. In short, there are only 14 working days between data closure and certification and any squeeze on this timeframe would risk a failure to certificate on the published date.

Under previous contingency discussion arrangements in response to the pandemic, we did explore with the NQ stakeholder groups the possibility of holding exams during weekends. This was not well received on the grounds of religious observance, workload and potential economic disadvantage to learners who work at weekends. We have therefore also discounted this option.

Given that we are now in January, I think using the bank holiday in May may be problematic for families who may have plans for that weekend and I have therefore discounted this day.

I should advise that we now have the bulk of 'live' entry data for 2025 from schools in our system. Though there will still be movement up until the end of March and the college entries are still outstanding (due 31 January), our modelling using the current session's data gives a more accurate picture of coincident exams.

This means the only option remaining is revisiting the start date of the exam timetable and we have provided a version of the timetable below – version 1.7 – drawing comparisons with version 1.3 - the current published timetable.

Version 1.7 has one additional day at the start of TT25 with exams beginning on **25 April 2025** – the number of coincident exams (CEs) can be reduced to approximately **156**. This draft retains the day at the end of the TT25 in case of contingency. In the published version CEs are sitting at **297**.

If this day is incorporated, it would allow for a number of changes to be made to the timetable to the benefit of learners and ease the coincident and consecutive exam issues across the entire TT25. This means that as well as addressing the concerns about English and Psychology, we have sought to address issues for a limited number of other subjects impacted by the compressed timetable. The changes may, however, carry the risk of some criticism of late changes if people have made plans around the previously published dates.

Some of the changes would include:

- Movement of the Psychology exams (addresses external complaints)
- Movement of the Computing Science exams (as above)
- Movement of ESOL exams (as above)
- Avoidance of the use of the Early May Bank Holiday
- Movement of French exams from the late local May Bank Holiday in the west of Scotland.

This review also allows for further analysis of consecutive exams over a 6-day period, resulting in the following improvements:




v1.7 (new draft)

- The number of occasions where candidates are timetabled for two subjects in a day is **4,743**.
- **One** day where three exams on the same day.
- **Nine** days where 100% of learners have one exam a day.

v1.3 (published version)

- The number of occasions where candidates are timetabled for two subjects in a day is **7,688**.
- **Five** days where three exams on the same day.
- **Eight** days where 100% of learners have one exam a day

Data on candidate workload is included below, but as an overview the new draft brings down consecutive exams from **0.051%** to **0.028%** across all exams.

Draft	Version	CEs	Candidate Workload Stats	Side by Side Comparison
v1.7 – Additional 1 day at start of TT	 20250116 Revised Timetable 2025 (27 D)	156	 20250116 Candidate Workload 2025 v1.7.x	 20250116 Comparison Table v1.

Amending the planned exam diet at this stage would require significant changes to plans that are already well underway. Extensive internal operational planning has taken place, including securing appointee numbers in line with the current schedule and their availability, as well as booking venues and accommodation. Question paper print is also impacted. Adjusting the timetable now would disrupt these arrangements and place additional pressure on teams with an already tight timeline for finalising marking procedures and potentially impacting our ability to meet key deadlines. As well as operational challenges for SQA, there would need to be concerted effort to communicate any changes to the education system. All of this creates risk so any decision to make alterations must be taken now to mitigate the impact as far as possible.

We have already discussed this version with ADES and SLS, who are supportive (SLS has already agreed to a similar approach in 2026 whereby the last two days of the first week back after the late Easter holiday will be used for the scheduling of exams next year).

On the basis of the above, we intend to communicate these changes to the exam timetable week commencing 27 January.

Yours sincerely,



Jean Blair
Director of Operations