CoPGG – 28 April 2020

Certification 2020

Context

The Resulting and Certification strand is seeking to finalise the 2020 Certification Plan, feed key dates into the 2020 Awarding programme and robustly test these arrangements.

SQA requires to consider the risk of paper certificates remaining the primary communication of awards to candidates, what contingencies are in place if that remains the objective, and similarly consider the risk if digital channels were instead to become the primary communication of awards.

Paper Certification

SQA has to consider the likelihood of logistical challenges involved in the printing and distribution of a certificate run involving circa 138K candidates covering the period late July into early August.

Assumptions

The following assumptions would have to be made.

- Royal Mail are fully up and running with distributions to all parts of the country eg Highlands and islands
- Full service and resources in place at SQA certificate printers, Adare.
- Designated SQA staff are back on site dealing with returned certificates etc or alternative arrangements in place backed up by the Candidate Advice Line.

All indications and feedback from our supplier managers are that both external service providers are currently working close to normal in terms of the provision of printing and distribution.

Additionally, based on the processes emerging from the Awarding Model it is assumed that these will have no downstream impacts on the capability of the current suite of programmes to handle these datasets.

Digital Awarding

SQA does have a level of contingency currently in respect of paper certificates.

A digital service for candidates, MySQA, offers text and e-mail results information on National 4, National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications on the same day as certificates are delivered. The service additionally provides candidates with access to a full view of current and previous years results and this becomes available the day following results day. SQA has not moved this to the same day as results day to avoid placing an undue stress on the service.

SQA currently has circa 50K MySQA registrations in respect of active candidates this year (138K), of which just under 18K have registered since the start of the year.

Risk Analysis

If SQA were to abandon paper certification for the main August run we would have to recognise that there is likely to still be a demand for paper in respect of requests for certificates, as proof of the awards gained for people going on to further education or jobs. Printing these is on an individual basis, we would not be able to cope with a high volume. Candidates going on to universities and colleges, which are processed through UCAS, require to provide the paper certificate in order to register.

Results on text, email and the Result View on MySQA are not intended as fully authenticated records of achievement for the purpose of 3rd party users.

There would be no time savings to SQA as other concurrent and required processes are running during the period of printing. All our downstream processes require the certificate print files to be generated even if they are not subsequently printed.

Were we for any reason to experience a late withdrawal of our key supplier services in respect of printing and distribution we would still require to take internal processing to this point, ie generate certificate print files, and our contingency would be a combination of MySQA and results intimation from the candidates' presenting centre.

To move the wholesale printing and distribution to a date later in the year such as after the outcome of any appeals, either planned or unplanned, would be a major system change at a time when SQA would be seeking to re-establish standard arrangements leading to the 2021 diet.

It should be noted that the evaluation and certification software on which paper certificates depend is highly complex and uses legacy code. Any change comes with high risk due to the lack of knowledge of historical aspects, the complexity and age of the software, and the limited number of people with the skills set required to implement and support any change.

Any changes would require to implemented alongside the introduction of other major developments for 2020 and the cumulative effect across SQA staff has to be factored in.

Full reliance on a digital service would raise questions around equity and access to and availability of technology across the cohort of candidates. Additionally registration for the digital service and set up of accounts and passwords may be more likely to be taken up in certain social groups then others.

The MySQA Results View service when it currently opens ie day after results day and after the texts and e-mails have been delivered has not been subject to high levels of concurrent traffic. If paper certificates were not provided we have to assume this would increase significantly and while SQA can load test this service it nonetheless would generate a risk with a very high dependence and a high profile should difficulties with access to the service be experienced.

A move to digital would also likely to increase the demand placed on centres by candidates who whatever reason have not registered for the digital service or experience issues with the digital service.

Recommendation

SQA should proceed on the basis of paper certification as the primary source of results information but in respect of contingency should immediately seek the full support of SCIS, ADES, centres and candidates to significantly increase the volume of registration for MySQA digital results service and begin required load testing commensurate with this increase.

Additionally, in order to provide greater resilience in future years, SQA should now commence work to link incoming Candidate registrations, generally this takes place in S3/S4, with default delivery of a MySQA account, with the provision to opt out.