

EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE
SCOTTISH QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY
2021 NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS
SUBMISSION FROM SCOTTISH QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY

1. Introduction

The Education and Skills Committee has asked the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and Education Scotland to discuss learning and teaching in the Senior Phase in the exceptional circumstances of the 2020-21 session. This brief paper provides some summary information in advance of the evidence session with SQA and Education Scotland, to be held on 13 January 2021.

2. Assessing National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher in 2021

From the start of the 2020-21 session in August, the Scottish Government and the whole of the Scottish education system has been committed to ensuring that there is enough support for learners for their learning and wellbeing.

Given the fast-changing levels of disruption caused by the pandemic, it remains vital that the education system continues to work together to ensure an appropriate balance between learning, teaching, and assessment in National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses.

To recognise the anticipated significant disruption to learners, free up teaching and learning time and reduce teacher workload, while maintaining the validity, credibility, and standard of qualifications, SQA worked with stakeholders, including practicing teachers and lecturers, to propose modifications to course assessment for all subjects. The modifications have narrowed the focus of each course to minimise the evidence requirements and introduce additional flexibility for the gathering of the evidence.

These proposals were made available for national consultation in August. In total, we received a very significant volume of responses – over 23,000 – from learners, parents, carers, teachers, lecturers, and stakeholders – including professional associations. These modifications were published for each individual subject – 148 in total – in October. SQA has continued to monitor the situation in schools and colleges, and has introduced further modifications as appropriate, for example in Music and Drama.

SQA continued to have dialogue with stakeholders before the cancellation of the National 5 exams, for example, engaging with over 450 teaching professionals from schools and colleges and local authority representatives to understand the challenges they face and to explore possible contingency arrangements for session 2020-21.

This engagement was formalised with the establishment of the National Qualifications 2021 Group after the announcement, and the need for an alternative certification model. The group consists of a steering group and a working group and ensures that all parts of the system can co-create the model together.

The National Qualifications 2021 Group has been meeting weekly to consider qualifications arrangements in the 2020-21 session. The group is made up of representatives of the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES), Colleges Scotland, Education Scotland, the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), School Leaders Scotland (SLS), the Scottish Council of Independent Schools (SCIS), Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), the Scottish Government, National Parent Forum of Scotland, and the Scottish Youth Parliament.

With the cancellation of exams, the Deputy First Minister has stated that this year's National 5, Higher and Advanced Highers will be based on teacher and lecturer judgement supported by quality assurance.

Subsequently, the National Qualifications 2021 Group has co-created an [alternative certification model](#) that will support teachers and lecturers in providing provisional results for candidates in session 2020-21. Provisional results will be based on teacher and lecturer professional judgement of learner evidence.

Combined support from SQA, local authorities, colleges, independent schools, and Education Scotland aims to enhance teachers' and lecturers' understanding of the consistent application of the national standard and in making accurate judgements. Schools and colleges can also ask SQA for further support and advice regarding the national standard should they find it helpful.

This support together with the local, regional, and national quality assurance that will be carried out by schools, colleges, local authorities and SQA will be defined in roles and responsibilities for all key players. This should ensure trust and consistency across the country so that a qualification awarded in the north of Scotland is of the same standard as one which is awarded in the south of Scotland and everywhere in between.

For its part, SQA has provided schools and colleges with broad guidance on evidence gathering and estimation with a very clear focus on the quality of key critical evidence, not quantity. This is accompanied by an SQA Academy Course. To support the implementation of the alternative certification model, subject specific guidance for each National 5 subject along with SQA devised National 5 assessment materials and marking instructions have been published.

In addition, we are providing a significant programme of Understanding Standards materials and events across all subjects. These include guidance on making grading decisions, webinars, and audio presentations.

SQA will continue to publish Higher and Advanced Higher subject-specific guidance on gathering evidence, as well as assessment resources, including question papers and marking instructions, coursework assessment tasks, where appropriate and Understanding Standards support materials.

Given the latest restrictions announced by the First Minister on 4 January, SQA and the National Qualifications 2021 Groups continue to meet weekly and will develop and agree options for the co-created alternative certification model.

Full details can be found on SQA's website - www.sqa.org.uk/NQ2021

SQA is co-ordinating the development of an equality impact assessment as part of the alternative certification model which aims to ensure fair and credible results for all learners. Schools, colleges,

local authorities and SQA are committed to working together to support teachers and lecturers in providing their provisional results in 2020-21.

Working with the National Qualifications 2021 Group, SQA is considering what the most appropriate appeals process for the 2021 awarding model should be. In addition to co-creating the approach with the group, SQA is engaging with the Equality and Human Rights Commission, Scotland and the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, to ensure that the approach will be compliant with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. We will also undertake a short public consultation.

SQA remains committed to engaging with learners and their parents and carers. SQA has established a Learner Panel, that has met twice to date, to ensure the views of young people are fully heard and continue to engage and share messages with learner agencies, such as Young Scot, the Scottish Youth Parliament, and the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland. SQA continues to engage with the National Parent Forum Scotland (NPFs), Connect and the Scottish Government's parental engagement network to make sure information reaches parents and carers.

3. Conclusion

SQA remains committed to working with the National Qualifications 2021 Group to respond to the existing and emerging challenges of session 2020-21 and ensure that together we deliver for Scotland's learners.

Scottish Qualifications Authority
January 2021