EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE

AGENDA

27th Meeting, 2000 (Session 1)

Wednesday 27th September 2000

The Committee will meet at 9.30 am in Committee Room 1

1. Item to be taken in private: The Convener will propose that item 2 be taken in private.

2. School Exams Inquiry: The Committee will consider lines of questioning to witnesses.

   at approximately 10.00 am

3. School Exams Inquiry: The Committee will take evidence from:

   The Scottish Executive Education Department:
   
   John Elvidge, Head of Department
   
   Douglas Osler, HM Chief Inspector of Schools
   
   Eleanor Emberson, Head of Curriculum, International and Information Technology Division
   
   Former SQA officials:
   
   David Elliot, former Director of Awards
   
   Jack Grieg, former Director of Operations
   
   Ron Tuck, former Chief Executive

4. Update of Committee business: The Committee will be updated on business in its current work programme.
The following papers are attached for this meeting—

Papers submitted to Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee by the Scottish Executive Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Department (for its meeting on 18 September).

Papers from the Scottish Executive Education Department (to follow).

Other submissions received in relation to the inquiry (to follow).
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A Submissions from Local Authorities

B Submissions from other bodies

D Memorandum from the Scottish Exutive Education Department
   1 Scottish Qualifications and Credit Framework
   2 Sample certificates
   3 Terms of reference of the Deloitte Touche Inquiry
   4 Handbook for Examiners and senior Moderators 2000
   5 Chart relating to administration of SQA
   6 Summary of Higher Still recommendations
   7 SQA booklet on "Qualifications for life"
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WRITTEN EVIDENCE SUBMITTED BY LOCAL AUTHORITIES

1. Angus Council
2. Argyll and Bute Council
3. Clackmannanshire Council
4. East Lothian Council
5. East Renfrewshire Council
6. Highland Council
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8. North Ayrshire Council
9. Renfrewshire Council
10. Shetland Islands Council
11. South Lanarkshire Council
12. West Lothian Council
18 September 2000

Mr I Cowan
Assistant Clerk
Education, Culture and Sport Committee
Room 2.7 – Committee Chambers
Scottish Parliament
George IV Bridge
EDINBURGH
EH99 1SP

Dear Mr Cowan,

SCHOOL EXAM RESULTS INQUIRY

I refer to a recently received undated letter from your colleague Mr Martin Verity addressed to the Chief Executive of this Council, Mr Sandy Watson. Mr Watson has asked me to respond to your letter on his behalf.

Like all Scottish Councils, Angus Council has been very concerned by the position in which its young people have been placed as a result of what appears to have been a comprehensive systems failure within SQA. The 8 secondary schools in Angus have all been affected by recent events, although it is important to highlight that – for no apparent reason – some schools have been affected considerably more than others.

I hope it is helpful if I provide you with some statistics, and in that context it might be useful for you to be aware that in our 8 Angus secondary schools there were in session 1999/2000 1030 pupils in S5 and 663 pupils in S6. Of these pupils:

- 386 pupils were informed by SQA in mid August that their certificates may have been affected by "data problems"
- by the end of the first week of the current school session (Friday 18 August 2000), our head teachers estimated that a further 448 results were inexplicably at variance with the results expected by schools
- in our return to ADES (for discussion with SQA) we estimated that there were likely to be 117 urgent appeals for Higher, Higher Still and CSYS subjects
- in that same return, we estimated there would be 642 other Appeals at these same levels
- in our most recent return to SQA, we estimated that there were 229 Appeals for Standard Grade in 1999, whereas there would appear to be likely to be 517 Standard Grade Appeals this year
18 September 2000

Mr I Cowan

It might also be helpful for your Committee to be aware that many of our Head Teachers expressed some concerns about the SQA's data gathering activities earlier this session and these concerns were drawn directly to the attention of the SQA.

It appears to be stating the obvious to say now that confidence in the SQA has been seriously undermined, but there is no doubt that is the case. Anecdotal evidence about less satisfactory arrangements for marking of papers than had previously been observed has been circulating for some time now, and although that evidence appears to have become more common-place since 10 August 2000, it was certainly available prior to that date.

The continuing uncertainty is causing real heartache for a number of pupils – principally those currently in S6, who are left wondering whether or not they should be re-sitting an examination which they appear to have failed, but which they had been confident of passing, or whether they should simply cut their losses. In the meantime, the situation must also be preying on the minds of pupils now in S5 in terms of having a stable environment in which to study and prepare for their own SQA examinations next May. I think all of us appreciate the challenge which your Committee faces in conducting its inquiry, and there would be considerable support available to ensure that inquiry is thorough, comprehensive and worthwhile. Unfortunately, time is now of the essence and the important curricular choices having to be made right now by young people in S5 and S6 cannot really wait much longer. Urgent action is required to ensure that arrangements for these young people can be put on as firm a footing as possible.

The timescale which you have set for responses to your request are understandably tight, and this brief response is all that it has been possible to prepare in the time available. If you do feel that this Council can offer any further assistance by way of information or comment, please do not hesitate to contact me directly.

Yours sincerely

Jim Anderson
Director of Education

cc  Sandy Watson, Chief Executive
    Catherine Coull, Director of Law & Administration
    Councillor Brian Milne, Convener of the Education Committee
    Councillor Sheena Welsh, Vice Convener of the Education Committee
    Senior Management Team – Education Department
Dear Mr Cowan

Invitation to Submit Evidence – School Exam Results Enquiry

The following information and observations are based upon a survey of school staff and education officials involved in the examination process.

The general view of education staff from Argyll and Bute Council is that the single most important issue is that doubts remain about the reliability of the results. This lack of confidence remains even after the first stage in the appeals process has been completed. The responses from schools show continuing doubts about the appeals process in many subjects which in turn have undermined the reliability of the examination process.

The following individual points reflect the concerns of Argyll and Bute Education Service.

1. The reliability of the examination results and one stage appeals.

There is continuing concern about the reliability of the marking of many examination papers and appeals. This concern was expressed by all schools and particular attention is drawn to subjects such as English and Biology. These concerns relate to the inconsistency in some marking and in particular the lack of the use of concordance tests both in the original marking and at the appeal stage. This lack of confidence in the grades awarded would appear to have several possible causes; these include the fact that the marking process appears to have been under resourced. In addition, too few markers were asked to undertake a larger number of scripts in too short a time. There are also concerns about the experience of some markers in undertaking this work.

If confidence is to be restored in the marking process it is vital that adequate resources are made available to provide experienced staff with sufficient time to complete the task. It is worth noting that in earlier years there was almost universal confidence in the tried and tested procedures used in the diets of examinations. Too many of these tested procedures would appear to have been abandoned or not properly implemented.

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2. **Data Handling Issues**

All schools reported difficulties with the collection and handling of data transferred from school to the SQA. In particular requests for the same piece of information were repeatedly made to schools and to the education authority. It was evident that information was not being handled effectively by the SQA. The data handling problems outside the SQA organisation itself may have had several causes. These include the general view that the formal recording and reporting of school assessment procedures were too numerous and too complicated. The use of school based assessment was felt to be very valuable; however the amount of time taken up by assessment and its recording and transmission to SQA was felt to be excessive. It may be possible to reduce or eliminate some of these data handling problems by decreasing the amount of formal assessment which requires to be recorded and processed. This in turn would reduce the overly complex certificate received by pupils which can be confusing and at times appears to contain contradictory information. The recording of core skills at a different level from that of the main examination is a cause for particular concern. It was also felt by a few schools that there were variations in the standards of the National Assessment Bank items.

These fundamental difficulties were to some extent exacerbated by the changing nature of advice provided during the course of last academic session particularly in relation to the use of national assessment items and their timing. Although this item was picked up during the course of the session and reported to senior HMI, the perception by teachers at the beginning of the academic session was that NABS were an important and formal part of the Higher Still Programme and should be implemented in full. Teachers have been left with the perception that the advice evolved and changed during the course of the year.

The later start of the examination diet this year would appear to have contributed to the time pressures experienced by both schools and the SQA itself. It may now be worth considering some amendment to the start time for the exam diet.

3. **Issues Outstanding for 2000/2001**

A small number of schools have reported that individual students have not been able to gain access to their first university of choice as a result of the incomplete and late arrival of results. The large volume of appeals and the lack of confidence in some of the results have led to concerns about current courses. A few pupils may have been placed incorrectly, in particular courses, but more importantly there are concerns about the introduction of Advance Higher Courses and Higher Still Courses, in particular Higher Still English. It is likely that a number of schools may not introduce Higher Still English this session as planned.

There is a continuing lack of confidence in SQA and indeed with other organisations associated with the management of education in Scotland, for example, the Higher Still Development Unit, HMI and the Executive itself. The stress experienced by staff in the last academic session does appear to be continuing in the current session. It is therefore felt vital that the Executive's relationship with SQA is clarified and the resultant relationship closely monitored. Opinions vary as to whether or not the SQA should remain at arms length from the Executive or whether direct ministerial control should be exercised. Whatever the ultimate shape of the structures and future it is essential that SQA adopts a customer focused attitude to its service delivery and that all procedures are transparent and clearly made known well in advance to all user groups. Close monitoring of these should be an essential element of the process during session 2000-2001 so that early action can be taken to avoid the difficulties experienced this year.
Finally, there are a large number of suggestions on the detailed handling procedures which have already been made to SQA. The above comments are designed to address the underlying concerns.

I hope the above information is of help.

Yours sincerely

[Signature]

JOSEPH MCGEER
Head of Revenue Resource and Secondary Education
Evidence from Clackmannanshire Council, Education and Community Services

The Scottish Parliament
Education, Culture and Sports Committee
Schools Exam Results Inquiry

The majority of this evidence relates to the implementation of Higher Still and to aspects of the management of the delivery of that programme. It should be seen as complementing evidence that is being submitted by the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES). We would subscribe to the positions described in ADES’s evidence.

In November 1996 the Head of Educational Development in Clackmannanshire wrote to the headteachers of its secondary schools in the following terms:

“ADES had a meeting recently with HMI and staff from the Higher Still Development Unit. The meeting provided an opportunity for ADES to give expression to its growing concerns about the logistic difficulties which associate with the development and implementation of the programme. The Council took the opportunity afforded by the meeting to give expression to some of its particular concerns. In essence, the Council indicated that it had growing concerns about much of the philosophy which appears to be underpinning the programme’s proposals in areas such as group awards and core skills as well as its concerns about a range of logistic considerations.”

The letter to headteachers went on to say that the Council was concerned that the programme’s agenda should be concentrated on:

“securing the implementation of those aspects of the programme which would be likely to be of greatest benefit to the greatest number of young people in the greatest number of schools” and on “securing the introduction of new units and courses and supporting necessary and well-founded changes in assessment practice.”.

In December 1996 the Council offered comments on Higher Still’s Curriculum Guidelines for Schools. The Council offered the following general comment on the guidelines:

“the document as it stands is shallow and unconvincing: it confuses curriculum design issues and issues relating to curriculum delivery and confuses both of these with the assessment of attainment. The current advice on the structure and management of the curriculum of secondary schools should have been reviewed at the start of the Higher Still Development Programme. Such a review should not be undertaken to provide a post-hoc justification for assessment-driven decisions.”.

Soon thereafter the Council offered this general comment on a consultative document from the Higher Still Development Unit on Scottish Group Awards:

“In summary, while we would be sympathetic to the principle of group awards we would conclude that the current proposals are insufficiently well-founded to justify their being moved forward to implementation at this time.”.
In March 1997, the Council felt constrained to comment on the then current state of development of the Higher Still Programme and plans for its implementation. The Council’s comments included the following observations:

“the development of the programme has been characterised by very high levels of consultation mainly on organisational rather than philosophical issues”;

“teachers, their representative associations, local authorities and other organisations continue to have significant concerns about the characteristics of the programme as a whole as well as the levels of support which it will be possible to assemble nationally and locally”;

“teachers are very concerned about the extent to which teaching and learning materials will be made available and the extent to which valid and reliable test items will be made available to support the internal assessment of units”;

“proposals relating to the core skills are less than fully developed”;

“proposals in relation to group awards are seriously flawed”;

“the programme as a whole is not based on a secure and fully articulated conception of what functions the post-16 curriculum should be expected to perform. The programme does not appear to have been informed in its development by a convincing curriculum philosophy”;

“the state of development currently of a number of proposed subject arrangements do not appear to have gained general acceptance within the teaching profession. This would be particularly true in relation to the performance criteria upon which it is proposed to mount a major programme of internal assessment. The probability of all subjects being able to deliver valid and reliable assessment is relatively low.”

Many other organisations were expressing concerns similar to these to the HSDU at around the same time. Concerns of this nature have continued to be expressed although their focus has turned increasingly to logistic and related considerations. The philosophical underpinning of the Higher Still Programme never received the iterative examination that was recognised as being necessary at that critical time, 1996/97, in the programme’s development. The failure to undertake such an examination created many of the core conditions which have led to a number of the major difficulties which have been observed over the last few months. They are as much a philosophical as they are an administrative and bureaucratic failure.

The most particular area in which this philosophical failure is evident relates to the Higher courses as established under the programme’s auspices. Higher courses have served a particular purpose over the years. Rightly or wrongly that purpose is strongly associated with the identification of both general and, to some extent, particular cognitive capacity. Performance at Higher has been taken as being a proxy measure of ‘general intelligence’ or a capacity close to that. To that extent, Higher courses have served the needs of constituencies external to the school, ie higher education and, to some extent, further education and industry and commerce. Within the overall certification structure established as part of the Higher Still programme they may be
seen as serving a purpose more closely related to the needs of individual learners. This latter purpose is more closely associated with the recent traditions of the further education sector and concerns, generally, that assessment and certification should become more criterion referenced. The Higher courses available under the auspices of the Higher Still Programme attempt to serve both these purposes – they are a hybrid. A number of consequences may be seen as flowing from this position.

The new Higher courses were set up on the basis of minimal change to existing content since they had to continue to serve their traditional selective purpose. This made the new Highers an attractive target for securing the phased implementation of the Higher Still programme when it became clear that logistic difficulties would make the wholesale implementation of the programme difficult to achieve. This is what happened. This, retrospectively, may be seen as having been a critical tactical error. A number of consequences followed from this decision. For example, the publication of results became tied to deadlines for the consideration of applications for university. This deadline became extended to all results due for publication in August 2000. Change in practice with an increased risk of error was being undertaken in the very area where the need to maintain validity and reliability was greatest. It was also being undertaken in the area where the public accountability of schools and individual teachers may be seen as being greatest.

The implementation of Higher Still courses was not restricted to Highers; many schools opted to introduce Intermediate 2 and 1 units and courses to address the needs of pupils ill served by Highers. Schools, in a sense, followed their instincts in seeking to address the areas of the curriculum most in need of immediate attention. The volume of change emerged as being rather greater than might have been anticipated, with concomitant increases in the logistic demands which would fall onto the SQA.

In addition, the Higher Still programme chose to proceed with a number of additional changes which could not be seen as being critical to the implementation of the changes which were most required to improve the experience of young people. For example, the introduction of a hugely over-complicated certificate containing much information which is unintelligible to most users and of little or no utility to them even if it were intelligible.

The decision to implement Higher Still from Higher down exposed the system in a way and to a degree that could not now be seen as having been well-grounded and which added to the logistic demands which fell on the SQA.

These logistic demands have been exacerbated by the demands arising from internal assessment applied in a standard way to all subjects irrespective of their character and needs. The data management issues have been well-rehearsed and will not be reiterated here. The introduction of internal assessment as a critical element of the certification process may have had other consequences. For example, the utilised structure of the new courses led to the establishment of learning outcomes for units, which have tended to focus on relatively lower order cognitive skills. The external assessment was set up to test performance in higher order cognitive skills. There is a degree to which Highers may have become redefined, inadvertently, in terms of the unit outcomes. To the extent that they have, pupils may have been relatively unprepared for the demands which will have been placed on them by the external
assessments. To that extent internal assessment as set up currently in Higher may be antithetical to the interests of many pupils sitting Highers. This may help to explain something of why the correlation between internal estimates and final performance appears to be so low. This low correlation is, of course, partly a product of what appears to be the absence this year of the application of the usual range of standardisation and concordance checks which lead to the modification of many awards prior to the publication of results. In a sense, these checks constituted pre-publication appeals. However, it may be interesting to note that even if one imagines that the SQA had performed to its usual standards in respect of data handling, it is quite likely that significant concerns would continue to exist about a body of results displaying low concordance.

The search for compromise between the traditional purposes of Highers and the purposes which they might be expected to perform in a notionally coherent structure of interlocking qualifications has led to the production of a hybrid which does not appear to be robust in addressing the former. This is the critical, unresolved philosophical issue that the Higher Still programme faces. Its resolution is central to the re-establishment of public and professional confidence in the certification system.

Regarding practical action that might be taken to begin that process some suggestions follow:

1. It is vitally important that the SQA operates a robust appeals process in which outcomes are transparent for pupils, parents and teachers.

2. It will be important that early, virtually immediate, action is taken to alter and simplify the internal assessment arrangements as they relate to Highers. For example, internal assessment should continue as part of Higher courses and the results should continue to be available to be submitted to SQA. The results of internal assessment in certain aspects of certain subjects should continue to form part of the final award, eg in practical subjects such as Art & Design. However, the focus on the use of such assessment should shift to the provision of educative feedback. Pupil awards should be made more on the basis of the external assessment component. The information derived from internal assessment could, of course, continue to be available to play a role in, for example, appeals and on going decisions about course levels to be followed by pupils. Course registration should be the focus for schools rather than unit and course registration.

3. The 2001 diet of examinations should be advanced by at least a week. Early attempts should be made to secure markers for the 2001 diet. Standardisation and concordance checks should be re-instituted.

4. Further developments of the Higher Still programme, eg the introduction of Group Awards, should be deferred. Their utility should be re-examined.

5. The overly complex certificate should be abandoned.

Education and Community Services
Clackmannanshire Council
22/9/00
Evidence from Clackmannanshire Council, Education and Community Services

The Scottish Parliament
Education, Culture and Sports Committee
Schools Exam Results Inquiry

On 27/8/00 Clackmannanshire Council approved a paper in which it was provided with information about the impact of the SQA's recent difficulties on young people in Clackmannanshire's secondary schools. The impact on these young people was similar in character and scale to that felt throughout the country. Part of that paper offered some general observations on how the SQA's difficulties may have come about. This part of the paper is reproduced below and is offered as evidence to the Committee.

1. The course and assessment arrangements, which relate to Higher, Still are very much more complex than those, which have obtained previously. For example, there has been an expansion in the number of courses and freestanding units available for pupils to include in their curricula. Each course is composed of two or more units. Courses are available at three levels, Higher, Intermediate 2 and Intermediate 1. Freestanding units are available at four main levels, Higher, Intermediate, Intermediate 1 and Access; Access units are available at 3 sub-levels.

Previously courses were available at one level, Higher, and pupils could also include in their curricula freestanding units.

Each course is subject to internal and external assessment. To receive a course award a pupil must pass all internal assessments, although not necessarily at the same time or within the same school session, and an external assessment. Pupils who fail an internal assessment on first assessment may be reassessed on at least one further occasion. Internal assessments and external assessments focus on different skills. In the main, internal assessments have a focus on lower order cognitive skills, eg recall of knowledge, description and comparison, while external assessments are intended to focus on higher order cognitive skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. In that sense, external assessments, particularly at Higher, are expected to perform more or less the same function that they have always performed.

2. These arrangements and the assessment system are complex, unreasonably so many would argue. There is a case for instituting an urgent review of course and assessment arrangements to identify subjects and levels where a simplification might be effected without compromising the overall principles of Higher Still. The need for such a review has been argued now for a number of years. In this context, it is worth remembering that the implementation of Higher Still is not yet complete. Advanced Higher courses have still to be introduced. The system's
Group Award structure, yet another layer of complexity, is also still to be introduced.

Within the context of such a review there is a need also to identify subjects whose character does not lend themselves to internal assessment on a unitised basis or indeed organisation on that basis. The current, unresolved debate about English reflects this. There is no substantial reason why different subjects should not be delivered and assessed in a variety of ways.

3. A complex system of the type that operates under Higher Still has very significant logistic consequences. These need to be re-examined in order to identify clearly their character and scale. There are questions which need to be asked about the extent to which such an analysis was ever conducted. To the extent that such a detailed systems analysis was not conducted, it is inevitable that the SQA and other agencies would have been unable to assess accurately its and their capacity to address the logistic consequences of Higher Still. It is inevitable that these capacities would have been assessed optimistically.

4. The SQA was formed by a merger of SEB and SCOTVEC. Mergers are always problematic. It takes time for a merged organisation to find its ‘mission’ and to find ways of effectively addressing that mission. For example, the merger required that SQA develop new internal procedures and new data processing systems and at a time when it was also required to implement the course and assessment arrangements for Higher. Was it wholly wise to expect SQA to effect this latter task when it was in its organisational infancy?

5. While SQA’s data management software appears to have performed reasonably robustly it needs to be remembered that this software was being developed while Higher Still was being implemented and the SEB and SCOTVEC were merging. The software was subject, quite predictably and quite reasonably, to frequent change during the course of the last school session. The consequence of this inevitable situation was that SQA’s information needs were constantly being redefined. This made it more difficult for the interface between schools and the SQA to be managed without the possibility of error. Was it wholly reasonable to expect the SQA to develop a data management system in such a context?

6. When the decision was taken to proceed with the implementation of Higher Still it was on the basis that it should be introduced, as it were, from the top down. That is, it was decided that the new Higher would be introduced first. This seems in retrospect to have been unwise. In the first place, it has meant that relatively large numbers of pupils have been presented for courses in the first year of the programme’s implementation adding to the logistic demands on the SQA. Secondly, this decision has led to imposition in an already demanding situation of a very firm timescale, the need to produce results to meet the demands of the university entrance system. The wisdom of such a decision must be called into
question. In this context it is worth noting that ADES and other organisations did advise that priority in the implementation programme should be given to Intermediate courses and units. These are, after all, the components of the Higher Still Programme, which most closely address the issues identified by the original analysis of the curriculum and other problems of S5 and 6.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that that the situation which obtains currently is the product of a general failure to develop a well-informed and detailed project plan for a well-grounded Higher Still Programme which took due account of the limiting factors which would control the pace and manner of its implementation.

Education and Community Services
Clackmannanshire Council
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Education and Community Services
Clackmannanshire Council
22/9/00
5. Causes of the difficulties: problems with SQA administration

5.1 There is clear evidence that SQA was not in adequate control of the receipt and handling of information from Centres. School staff were obliged to submit and resubmit data well into July. This undoubtedly caused increasing anxiety and uncertainty amongst staff – all the more so since they had made a huge effort to secure the teaching of the new courses and the production of the required assessment information. We cannot comment on the internal workings of SQA which led to such problems, but there is a common view that the amalgamation of the former SCOTVEC and SEB bodies has led to difficulties which must be overcome.

5.2 The interface of MIS systems in schools and the computer system in SQA proved problematic. We are not in a position to comment in detail since SCETWORKS (the system being introduced at that point in East Lothian) was different from PHOENIX (the system used in most other authorities). Other authorities should be able to provide evidence of the problems which were pointed out at national seminars to SQA officials.

5.3 The way in which events changed rapidly between 3 and 10 August illustrate either a remarkable unawareness of the explosive situation developing or a suppression of the reality of it. In a circular dated 3 August, SQA confidently stated:

Results for Standard Grade, SCE Highers, CSYS and the new National Courses... will be issued to candidates on Wednesday 9 August for delivery the following day.

In the same letter, outlining arrangements for candidates to seek information, SQA crucially stated:

In the majority of instances we anticipate referring candidates back to schools to resolve outstanding results issues. In this context it would be helpful if you could ensure that appropriate arrangements are in place from 10 August to deal with any enquiries candidates may refer to the school.

Schools obviously made such arrangements but in a letter dated 7 August (not received by this Department till 9 August) SQA advised that schools would not receive their statement of results till the following week. The wording seems to indicate a complete lack of awareness of the problem being caused. Moreover, the fact that such vital information was consigned to a circular letter by ordinary post rather than by fax to schools and e-mail to local authority contacts confirms an incredible lack of urgency:

As you know results for candidates completing National Course and Standard Grades will be issued on 9 August. A paper-based Statement of Results primus to schools indicating results on a candidate basis should be issued next week.

5.4 The immediate impact of the failure to deliver a statement of results to schools was that this authority, in common with all others, was unable to provide the service to its students and their parents which they were expecting. Staff on duty in schools were unable to help students, a situation made all the worse by the growing awareness of anomalies in some certificates.
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5.5 It may be relevant to note that the letter of 3 August shows a contact telephone number in Glasgow whereas the letter of 7 August shows a Dalkeith number. We have no way of determining this, but it is for SQA to examine the extent to which its split site contributed to its difficulties. For example it does not seem necessary for the best that schools’ liaison is based in Glasgow while the operations centre to which schools submit information is in Dalkeith.

5.6 Information from SQA was not entirely helpful. For instance, the Statement of Results received in electronic form showed results by candidate and subject number rather than by name of candidate and subject. The form issued with regard to appeals (Ex’71) was incomplete and inaccurate. SQA should review its processes to ensure that information is provided in a format that is immediately of use to Centres and does not create additional and unnecessary work for staff.

5.7 To go through the extremely confused events of the week following the first issue of certificates in detail will not serve a useful purpose. A general outline does, however, offer considerations for the future. In the period between 7 August and 15 August there was no communication from SQA to the local authority. A statement on 13 August by SQA, COSHEP and the Executive was posted on the SQA website and could be discovered by chance, but was not received by Centres and Authorities till 15 Aug (sent by normal post). The authority had considerable difficulties in getting clear and accurate information from SQA at this time: e-mail was not replied to, phone messages not followed through, and inaccurate information was issued as to what was to happen and when. During this period, staff in the authority and in schools were again engaged in a great effort to assist SQA in sorting out the anomalies. Despite the urgency of the matter, SQA continued to issue vital information by ordinary post — which took on occasion 3 or even 4 days to arrive. All in all, the impression was gained of an organisation lacking the administrative and managerial strength to deal with things once they had gone seriously wrong.

4.8 While it is understandable to a degree that there was great confusion and a serious loss of stability in SQA at this point, important lessons should be learned - even for normal operations - about defining channels of communication for school coordinators, using local authority contacts effectively and making use of more immediate forms of communication than ordinary mail. A secure organisational base for normal circumstances is all the better able to cope with the unexpected.

6. Effect of the implementation of Higher Still

6.1 Clearly, the additional information handling demanded by Higher Still arrangements will have contributed to the problems of SQA but, if, as seems to be the case, the mishandling of data relates mainly to practical assessments, it has to be remembered that this is not a new requirement of the Higher Still development. These assessments are a necessary part of any practical subject and are not new to the system. What is new, is the recording of unit passes, but to input the information from Centres that candidates have passed unit assessments should hardly put the system under strain. It may be that the attempt at this early stage to identify and record Core Skills was premature.

6.2 It is vital that the SQA failure does not become the raison d’etre for hastily thought out changes to the Higher Still framework and processes. The reasons for any simplification should be founded in achieving what is best for learners not in the administration of the awards system. Essentially the Higher Still aims, principles and framework are sound although few would argue against a need to simplify the assessment procedures. Surveys suggest, however, that the unit assessments while possibly over-burdensome in their form usefully provide a focus to studying, offer short-term objectives and rewards and are a means of preventing last minute panic revision for prelims/SQA exams. Importantly too, unit assessments are recorded as certificated achievements as an element of
6.3 Schools and Colleges are successfully delivering Higher Still units and courses. This is in great measure due to the professional dedication of teachers and lecturers and to the support provided by the Higher Still Development Unit in the form of national staff development and of a huge range of support materials for all subjects. The principles of Higher Still – the right course at the right level with national certification – are generally supported throughout the profession. There is a considerable body of opinion (expressed widely at the time) that the political decision to prioritise the Higher Level rather than to concentrate on Intermediate was a mistake. It is a better tactic to start by introducing something new where nothing exists than to begin by altering that, which exists and works quite well. Developing Higher Still upwards might well have prevented the current situation by allowing for a more phased introduction of new elements of assessment and certification. It would also have meant that we were by now catering more extensively and more inclusively for learners for whom Higher is a step too far. This is but one example to support the view that there is a fundamental need to review the process of centralist decision making in Scottish education.

7. The role of the Executive

7.1 We are not able to comment on the role of the Scottish Executive in relation to current events. The question is whether present events dictate a future need for a continuing independent oversight of SQA. It is an old question in new surroundings: *quis custodies custodiet*. Given the level of confidence in SQA it is essential that the Executive arrange in the short-term that new management structures, administrative processes and staff development plans are made public and subject to constructive professional comment and rigorous scrutiny.

8. Recommendations

8.1 Effects on students

Restoring students' confidence is part of a much wider requirement to restore the public credibility of SQA.

- An action plan for the immediate restructuring and redirection of SQA and for securing the reliability of its processes should be made public.
- Provided the plan is seen to be sound, it should be endorsed by the Scottish Executive and bodies such as ADHES and COSHEP.
- Publicity should be prepared to inform business, industry, Further and Higher Education establishments and the general public of the action plan.

8.2 Marking

- There should be a review of the administration of marking to ensure timeous appointment of markers and application of the tried and tested procedures of the former Scottish Exam Board.
- The later scheduling of the examination diet should be reconsidered.
- The means of paying markers a realistic fee should be found.
8.4 SQA Administration
- Reliable electronic transmission of information between Presenting Centres and SQA should be secured.
- SQA should ensure that information to Centres is in a format that is immediately accessible without additional work by Centre staff.
- SQA should urgently carry out a review of its communication structures and methods.

8.5 Implementation of Higher Still
- Action to rectify SQA's problems should be based entirely on ensuring that it is able to meet the requirements of the system, while any review of Higher Still should be entirely based on teaching and learning considerations.
- There should therefore be no change to the Higher Still framework and processes simply as a result of SQA's failure to deal effectively with certification.
- The fundamental principle of an integrated system of progressive awards should not be broken by any short term changes that are based on a narrow view that Higher should be a separate qualification.

8.6 The role of the Executive
- The Executive should not be directly involved in the administration of the awards system.
- Short-term arrangements should be made for independent scrutiny of SQA as part of the process of restoring public confidence.
- The longer-term requirement for such scrutiny should be examined.

8.7 The management of educational reforms in Scotland
Fundamental issues about Scottish education are raised, not for the first time, but never previously as a result of a calamitous breakdown of a vital part of the system.

- There should be a major long-term review of the way in which curriculum reform in Scotland is initiated, developed and implemented.

9. Conclusion

We would be pleased to clarify or develop further any aspects of this report should the Committee wish.

Alan J Blackie
Director of Education and Community Services.
School Exam Results Inquiry

A Submission by East Renfrewshire Council

East Renfrewshire Council is pleased to be invited to submit evidence to the inquiry. The problems surrounding the 2000 schools examination results process impacted on pupils, parents and schools in this authority as follows:

1. Certificates issued to pupils were missing certain results / or had grades wrongly awarded / or pupils given 'no award'. In a number of schools, approximately 20% of students were affected initially. In many cases, this occurred because internal assessment elements had not been entered / taken into account by SQA.

2. Missing data - schools were asked to re-submit data on as many as 4 or 5 separate occasions. On each occasion the data which had been previously submitted appeared to have been lost in the system.

3. Students and parents found the new style examination certificate difficult to understand.

Schools did not have sufficient information from SQA to deal with initial student / parental enquiries when examination results were first issued. Summary information subsequently issued to schools was incomplete and inaccurate and in a number of cases was contrary to the information contained on pupil certificates.

5. A large number of results were not consistent with teacher estimates. The total number of Higher appeals for 2000 was 1197 compared with a total of 395 in 1999. The total number of S Grade and Intermediate appeals for 2000 was 1149 compared to 524 in 1999.

6. Marking problems seem to have occurred in a number of subject areas. There appeared to be widespread under marking of Higher and CSYS Physics. Very able students did not achieve the grades predicted. This resulted in 129 Physics appeals compared with 18 in 1999. In other subjects eg Maths, Information Studies, there were marked discrepancies in the results of alphabetical batches of 10 pupils in the same teaching group.

7. Although a number of results are being queried through the appeals process, the majority of students have embarked on 5th and 6th year levels of courses according to their teachers' estimates of their ability. There are nevertheless some concerns about apparent 'overachievement' in some Standard Grade subjects leading to unrealistic expectations and students embarking on inappropriate levels in National Qualifications.

8. A number of subject specialists are unclear about the relationship between the internal assessments and the final examination. History teachers claim there is no apparent relationship between the internally assessed elements and the final examination and that they are unable to use the evidence of internal assessment to support an appeal.

9. There is a view that part of the problem lies in the fact that the old Higher exam marks are spread over 14 bands while the new Higher marks are spread over only 8 bands. A band 3 mark would result in an A pass under the old system and would result in a B pass under the new system. It is possible that data inputters may have been confused by the two banding systems, or that a programming glitch occurred.

In terms of avoiding such difficulties in the future and restoring confidence in the examinations system, the following comments are offered.
10. It will be clear from an analysis of past patterns and trends, and of the concordance between predicted grades and actual results, that there are unusual batches of results which affect a substantial group of students. The first type is where very able students failed to achieve the grades predicted, in many cases by as much as two grades. This has occurred, for example, in English and Communication and in Physics. The second is where schools achieved a far greater number of band A passes than could possibly have been predicted on past performance. Anecdotal evidence from other councils suggests that this may have occurred in Modern Languages and in Geography. The difficulty is that these circumstances do not seem to apply universally across all schools in the authority.

11. During the course of the review, an effort should be made to identify particular batches of results fitting these circumstances and to track back through each of the processes which led to the end product. This would include an analysis of past trends and cut-offs, estimated marks, internal assessment and other data input, the marking and validation processes, and appeals evidence. To preserve the integrity of this process, it would be beneficial to employ the services of expert educational statisticians who have no formal links with the SQA.

12. It would seem that the newly created SQA systems - computer and organisational - were simply unable to cope with the complexity of Higher Still. While there continues to be widespread support for the principles underpinning the new national qualifications, there is also a view that simplification is required. Schools are calling for a reappraisal of the burden of internal assessment, in particular the complex recording and data transmission procedures. Parents, pupils and employers find the new style certificates difficult to understand, in particular, the grade levels attached to core skills. It could be argued that any new system takes some time to understand. However there is a distinct impression of information overload with the new certificates. In the longer term it will be necessary to look at the balance of internal and external assessments.

13. In order to address any doubts that there may be about the standards and quality of marking, a thorough review and re-statement of the SQA’s quality procedures is required. This should include the experience required of markers, sampling of markers’ work, attendance at markers’ meetings etc.

14. In order that public and professional confidence may be restored, the examinations authority requires to be more transparent in its dealings, particularly with schools, colleges and local authorities. The examinations authority also requires to be more accountable. It needs to open itself and its processes to proper disinterested scrutiny. It may be that accountability could be strengthened by the appointment of an ombudsman or equivalent or that the organisation could be subject to periodic external audit or evaluation to be reported formally through an appropriate committee of the Scottish Parliament.

Eleanor J Currie  
Director of Education  
19 September 2000
HIGHLAND COUNCIL EDUCATION AUTHORITY

SCHOOL EXAM RESULTS INQUIRY

SUBMISSION TO EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORTS COMMITTEE

1. The Highland Council welcomes this early opportunity to submit evidence to the Education, Culture and Sports Committee of the Scottish Parliament. The evidence detailed below is the outcome of discussions with Headteachers, teachers, teacher unions, parents and pupils. We would welcome the opportunity to give oral evidence to the Committee if invited.

2. The current constitution and working practice of SQA means that they are removed from schools and authorities who have felt powerless to intervene in the internal workings of an arms length body despite paying very large sums in fees. This has been made manifestly obvious in the debacle of the 2000 examination diet.

Impact on Schools and Pupils

3. It became evident during the early part of session 1999/2000 that there were problems at SQA. Schools sent all course and unit entries using their Phoenix software to SQA early in October. Confirmation of receipt was only given as late as February. This led to considerable uncertainty regarding whether the "system worked". When confirmation finally arrived, it contained errors.

4. The problems for schools over this period were compounded by:
   - Late delivery of software updates.
   - Tight deadlines due to earlier delays.
   - Time consuming collection and collation of internal assessment data.
   - School data amendments sent to SQA were not picked up by them.
   - SQA printouts to schools contained errors and required meticulous checking by school staff. This time consuming process was repeated several times in many schools. SQA seemed to "lose" data.
   - Schools were asked to have staff standing by during the holidays to continue such checks. Some staff returned from holidays early to do so.
   - Unusual procedures for re-entering missing pupil data which resulted in schools having to provide an endless series of updates.
   - Inadequate instructions to schools from SQA.

In other words there were very significant administrative, systems and IT blockages.

5. When the results were supposed to arrive on 10 August:
   - Certificates were too complex and many pupils/parents did not understand them.
   - Schools were inundated with queries about certificates.
   - Many pupils did not receive results.
   - Schools did not receive results for several days and so could not help the many pupils/parents who had no certificate or incomplete results.
• SQA helplines gave conflicting information to a significant number of pupils.
• We estimate that 10% of pupils had incomplete results, wrong results or no results. Most of these were due to incomplete data. As an example, one school with 270 pupils at S4/5/6 submitted 90 queries to SQA where missing data was the problem. Only 5 of these queries had been resolved by 19 September.

6. By the end of August:

• Approximately 300 pupils still had no certificate.
• A majority of schools reported that some “corrected” certificates that had been issued to pupils still had mistakes.
• The level of appeals from all schools is estimates at three times the normal level.

7. The impact of the uncertainty over results - lasting several weeks in many cases, until urgent appeals had been dealt with - has been a devastating experience for many pupils waiting to go on to higher education. The extent to which this has damaged their career aspirations is difficult to judge at this time. There are hundreds of accounts of personal disappointment, frustration and misery in our pupils. Many have been left empty of faith in a system that they see as having failed them so badly. Worse still is a cynicism which has set in in some quarters over the worth of the certificates they have and the point of working for the 2001 exam diet.

8. Our teachers have been working additional hours to address SQA matters with the school SQA co-ordinators in particular very badly hit. It has been the worst possible start to a new exam.

9. Do not underestimate the deep seated damage this has done to Scottish pupils, parents and teachers.

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**The Causes of Difficulties - Marking**

10. We accept that we have only a partial view of these issues, but enough experienced markers from within Highland have made these points, for us to have formed the opinions below.

• Marker recruitment was badly organised.
• There seems to have been little attempt to make an early and determined effort to maximise the recruitment of markers sufficient to deal with the additional volume of work.
• Markers were given papers to mark which they had not agreed to take, often working to impossible deadlines.
• Teachers who had little or no experience of presenting pupils at Higher were asked to mark Higher papers.

(Some markers are, incidentally, still waiting to be paid).

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**The Causes of Difficulty - SQA Administration**

11. These are more difficult to judge but apart from causes already covered, it seems that the following were significant:
• The failure to carry out concordance checks for Highers was a major cause of anomalous results.
• Lack of time and the consequent lack of rigour affected many procedures from checking scripts, markers attendance at meetings, recruiting markers etc.
• There is evidence that normal arrangements for assuring quality were not fully implemented.

The Causes of Difficulty - Higher Still

12. It is considered that internal assessment arrangements for Higher Still were a major factor.

• The volume of internal assessments, the updating of data, the complexities of recording, and the tight deadline must have contributed to SQA problems. It certainly created problems for schools.
• Internal assessment needs to be streamlined to ensure manageability.
• SQA data handling should only be a minor consideration in any review of Higher Still assessment. Time should be taken to draw on the experience of teachers who delivered the courses last year to work out an effective approach to assessment which is acceptable to schools and which is educationally sound.
• Until this review is completed the status quo should be maintained on CSYS and the Higher courses.
• We would like the opportunity to contribute detailed evidence to any such review.

13. It is difficult to comment on the role of the Executive in relation to the events surrounding this years exam results due to the fact that we are somewhat removed from this interface. By early summer it was clear that concerns had reached the Executive's civil servants who were in touch with myself as Director of Education. I formed the clear view that the Executive had been advised by SQA that matters were in hand and that the results would be available on time (which was the main concern then).

14. Events of this summer have demonstrated the unacceptability of an organisation with so much national responsibility being far too removed from the Scottish Executive as well as its customers. This must be radically changed as a consequence of the various inquiries ongoing at present.

The Future

15. Very serious consideration needs to be given to the future of SQA - some people are of the view that irreparable damage has been done.

16. All internal arrangements and procedures of SQA as far as they impinge on pupils and schools should be open, published and available to all stakeholders. The marking criteria for examinations should be available for teachers.

17. SQA should listen to its customers. School staff should have substantial representation at all levels on SQA to ensure proper feedback from schools and to help restore confidence. Schools should be informed on a regular basis of the changes being implemented by SQA to improve their arrangements.
18. Effective arrangements should be put in place to ensure continuous monitoring of SQA's operation by the major stakeholders. There should be clear contractual obligations placed on SQA with a service level agreement and penalty clauses part of this process.

19. There is concern that the present crisis will delay arrangements for the next round of examinations. The early publication of timelines for all aspects of administration should be published as soon as possible - eg setting of papers, submission of data, recruitment of markers.

20. As regards Higher Still internal assessment, irrespective of changes which may be made, the volume of internal assessment data reported to SQA should be radically reduced and reported by one or at the most two fixed dates. This should be a major priority in relation to the examination diet in 2001. Internal arrangements should only be moderated where discrepancies occur.

21. Clearer guidelines about data what and when to send must be issued by SQA. Software must be standardised procedures simplified and training made available for SQA co-ordinators.

22. There are large numbers of anomalous results - not due to data mishandling - reported by all our schools across a wide range of courses where the judgements of very experienced Principal Teachers are contradicted by exam grades. This is now seen as due to a major failure by SQA to implement its normal quality assurance procedures. Taken together with the data management problems has profoundly damaged teachers' trust in SQA. Even if all procedures run perfectly in future, it will take several years before this trust is regained.

Bruce Robertson
Director of Education
This submission is based on formal submissions from five secondary schools in Moray, along with views collected through discussion with teachers, markers and examiners in Moray.

Preamble

Prior to the creation of SQA, the Scottish Exam Board had been perceived as a body with high prestige and status, which managed the exam system with great precision. However, the SEB was an intensely secretive organisation. Teachers who were involved as markers, setters, examiners or members of subject panels knew a lot about the workings of SEB, but others did not. Despite this, SEB was responsive to concerns (as evidenced by the evolution of Standard Grade courses).

By contrast, SCOTVEC was seen by the school sector as having an administrative rigour, but not an educational one.

Our feelings are that the formation of a single body to unify the assessment system was "a good thing", but there is no doubt that the merging of these two institutions - SEB and SCOTVEC - was not a happy marriage:

- Many SEB staff did not go on to work for SQA. We believe that this loss of expertise contributed directly to many of this year's problems: the fact that the external exam system had run so well for so long may have led SQA to the mistaken belief that it was a simple process.

- During the Higher Still programme there was much tension between the SEB view of assessment (a holistic process, with cut-off scores for gradings) with SCOTVEC's competence-based, pass/fail approach. In some cases this tension was never fully resolved, and we wonder how closely these staff were able to work together.

- In terms of administrative arrangements, it is clear that the unfriendly, SCOTVEC-style numerical coding approach was implemented. Again, we feel that this led to an error-prone system.

The current year's difficulties have now led at least one of our head teacher to question this country's ability to implement a unified qualification structure with certification that reflects lifelong learning. As and Educational Service we have a commitment to lifelong learning, a broad curriculum that meets the needs of our citizens, and a single qualification structure, but the current year's problems makes it easy to argue against such concepts.

The remit and role of the SQA

Despite questions over SQA's ability to implement the unified certification structure, we still believe it is right. We also approve of the structure of assessment groups which use largely practising teachers to monitor the implementation of the vast range of assessments that SQA is responsible for. SQA must now demonstrate that it can actually manage this system.
SQA has done a good job in the past year of explaining its work, at meetings with school and EA representatives - we welcome this openness, and look forward to it developing even further (e.g. release of marking schemes, and even marked papers). However, given the weaknesses in the actual handling of the assessment and certification arrangements, some would question this work as being merely PR. The senior management in SQA must be more clearly focused on the primary tasks of that organisation.

The structure of the Board of SQA needs to be examined: is it truly representative? Has it any powers at all?

**Impact on pupils**

Pupils have no concept of over a century of SEB credibility. Many of them have simply had a very bad experience, and teachers are finding it difficult now to motivate pupils who are still waiting for their final 99-00 results. All pupils are picking up signals that all Year 2000 results are deemed worthless by some parents and employers, and this view will persist in some quarters for a very long time. (In reality school qualifications are always perceived by some members of the public to falling in value year on year, and to bear no relation to the actual skills needed in "the real world". This year's problems merely gives some evidence to this view.)

We are still not clear why so many certificates simply did not appear - and in most cases that caused more anguish than anything else. The fact that schools did not receive printouts removed their ability to help in this area, and erroneous results being given by SQA over the phone finally compounded the problems.

We would hope that the checking that has gone on, and the appeals process, along with the final analysis of performance, will reassure the nation that the year 2000 results are as valid as any other year. However, there may be a major effect in 2001 caused by lack of motivation in pupils - and staff. Tight quality assurance procedures in schools are now at risk simply because staff feel it is pointless being rigorous within schools if SQA itself is not.

**Causes of difficulties**

We have a large amount of information on the actual difficulties encountered, but identifying the causes is not easy.

**Aspects of the marking process.**

This was perhaps the most disappointing part of the whole affair, given SEB's track record over a large number of years with external assessment

The administration of the marking was poor. In some subjects, marking teams were not in place till very late, scripts were late in arriving - or came to the wrong people. Arrangements for markers' meetings were often very last-minute.

The quality of marking is difficult to judge. Evidence from one Principal Examiner in Moray suggests that standards were high, and that any rogue markers were identified as normal. However, the marking period was tight, and late appointment of markers made it tighter. The number of appeals is patchy, but one school has a large number of appeals in subjects which are normally concordant.
Payment of markers has always been a sore point: in the past most teachers did it to get a handle on national standards and to get a grasp of actual SEB marking instructions, so that they might better support their pupils; it was never for the money. Given the lateness of the exam diet, and the shorter timescale, it is worth radically re-examining the payment and arrangements for markers. (Certainly, the offer of double fees to late-appointed markers did not go down well with the other, first-choice markers.) Fees for setters and moderators also need to be reviewed.

We have mentioned the loss of experienced personnel before. One subject reports a very difficult markers meeting, where a new course was being discussed by new markers, and inexperienced setters and examiners. The quality of the actual exam is under question in Higher mathematics and SG Business Management and OIS.

Problems with the administration of the SQA

Data-handling errors are well documented: schools asked several times for the same data, Phoenix datafiles lost in the ether, some pages of paper submissions simply omitted. Other errors seem more bizarre: occasional pupils missed, or whose details were entered wrongly. Most worrying was that repeated attempts by schools to correct errors had no effect. (Even where an SQA member of staff was entering corrections as the school phoned.)

In addition, key materials for schools' use in assessment in Standard Grade Business Management Practical Abilities were very late in arriving.

While SQA has already begun to address some of these problems (e.g. acknowledging receipt of computer files), there seem to be a number of possible causes of the errors:

- Computer data validation checks: in many cases marks had not been entered into the system, but overall grades were calculated as if those marks had been entered as zero. This - if true - represents a very basic programming error.

- Management errors: schools report that the same data was requested by different SQA personnel on different occasions, sometimes only a few days apart. (The proposed system of having a single person with overall responsibility for a school's arrangements should solve this.) On occasion, contradictory instructions to schools were given by different people. One department has had feedback on urgent appeals for pupils for whom it did not appeal, which suggests that we are a long way from correcting the problems.

- Forms and codings: the widespread use of catalogue numbers without any confirming course/unit name makes data-handling very error prone. (While all eyes are on SQA's errors, there have doubtless been errors at school level, and these codings may have contributed to that.) Even the simple coding of P for pass and F for fail will inevitably lead to errors, since these letters can be confused even on clear printouts, never mind grubby faxes.

- School checking: it had been proposed that a secure part of the SQA website could be used to allow schools to check the information that SQA held (and perhaps alter it too). Schools were unable to check what SQA thought it knew about their entries last session.
While there is a mood to identify actual administrators who were at fault in this affair, we would urge an open examination of all the issues, with a brief to "fix the problem, not the blame".

The Implementation of Higher Still

We would wish internal assessment arrangements for Higher Still courses to be discussed within an educational context, rather than with regard to SQA’s data handling difficulties. Where internal assessment is over-elaborate, time-consuming, or detracts from progress on the course as a whole, then it must be re-examined by practising teachers and amended. These factors - along with the re-emergence of complaints about the pace of change - are essentially separate from the SQA debate.

However, the actual management of the unit assessment data could be looked at again. Unit assessments are administered and marked within schools, and this process is moderated (though not to any large extent in the session just passed). Instead of all of this information being passed to SQA, schools could simply inform SQA that a pupil had satisfied all the internal components of the course; this would imply that moderation would now involve the whole of that internal component, but would considerably simplify the administration. This would, though, have implications for certification.

The role of the Executive

We are all too aware of the possible difficulties attached to tight political control of SQA: it must be seen to be independent. This implies that a truly independent monitoring body be set up, with representatives of parents and teachers - and other stakeholders - figuring prominently.

Ultimate accountability of SQA must come through some form of inspection. Since HMI inspect schools, colleges and Education Authorities, perhaps they could complete the jigsaw by examining aspects of SQA. It may add a dimension to a Standards and Quality Report in a subject if the inspection of the assessment arrangements in that subject formed part of the report.

Essentially we need clarification of the roles and purposes of SEED, HMI, LTSScotland and SQA (and Educational Authorities and schools) so that teachers and parents are fully aware of where power and responsibility truly lie.

Recommendations

We have referred earlier to a number of measures that we believe could be taken, and would summarise them as follows:

1. Managers within SQA must have clear remits and responsibilities. The overall structure must be coherent, with clear monitoring by line-managers. As part of this, we welcome the concept of a named individual being attached to a particular school. We also look for an independent monitoring body, and rigorous inspection of operations. A mechanism for dealing with complaints and worries is also required.

2. The administrative procedures must be trimmed back and made more user-friendly and much less error-prone. This should be done all through from the big
issues - what data needs to be submitted by schools - to the small ones - attaching names to codes, using distinct letters for responses. Internal assessment entries, course entries, changes of levels, evidence from schools - all these procedures must be made as simple as possible.

3. The previous very high standard of the administration of marking must be restored. Clear timescales and responsibilities for Principal Examiners must be laid out, with strict monitoring of progress by Qualification Managers. There needs to be training for new examiners, and a close look at arrangements and payments for markers.

4. Schools (including Principal Teachers) need easy access to SQA's information on their pupils so that they can prevent and rectify errors.

5. If rigorous quality control methods cannot be put in place across all SQA's operations, then SQA would need to be broken up in some way. This would be regrettable, since it would be liable to take us back to a 2-tier education model on the basis of an administrative failure.

6. This situation must never happen again. In August 2001, schools must receive exam results the day before pupils begin to receive theirs. All certificates must be delivered when promised, and must be accurate. In short, trust must be restored.
Mr Ian Cowan  
Assistant Clerk, Education, Culture and Sport Committee  
Room 2.7, Committee Chambers  
Scottish Parliament  
George IV Bridge  
EDINBURGH  
EH99 1SP

Dear Mr Cowan

INVITATION TO SUBMIT EVIDENCE – SCHOOLS EXAM RESULTS INQUIRY

Thank you for your recent letter and for the opportunity to submit evidence to the Education, Culture and Sport Committee.

I attach a copy of a report to the Council’s Educational Services Committee. I would anticipate the report being approved at the Committee’s next meeting on 27 September 2000, but I am sending it to you at this time to meet the specified deadline for submissions. I will contact you without delay if our Educational Services Committee decides to amend the submission.

Yours sincerely

JOHN TRAVERS  
Corporate Director (Educational Services)

Enc
NORTH AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

Agenda Item 4

Educational Services Committee

27 September 2000

Subject: School Exam Results Inquiry

Purpose: To seek approval for a submission to the Scottish Parliament's Education, Culture and Sport Committee on the conduct of this year's school examinations.

Recommendation: It is recommended that the Committee approve this report as North Ayrshire Council's submission to the inquiry.

1. Background

1.1 The Educational Services Committee has received regular reports on the implementation of the Higher Still Programme in North Ayrshire secondary schools. At its meeting on 16 August 2000, the Committee was briefed on the difficulties which had arisen in relation to this year's examinations.

1.2 The Scottish Parliament's Education, Culture and Sport Committee decided at its meeting on 6 September 2000 to conduct an inquiry into this year's school exam results. North Ayrshire Council has received an invitation to submit evidence to this inquiry.

1.3 The terms of reference of the inquiry are:

- to gather information on the remit and role of the Scottish Qualifications Authority in relation to the issuing of schools qualifications certificates, to inform the inquiry;
to review the impact on school pupils of the reduced qualifications certificates issues.

To identify the causes of the difficulties encountered this year, including:

- aspects of the marking process,
- problems within the administration of the SQA, and
- the implementation of Higher Still.

To examine the role of the Executive, and its relationship with the SQA, in relation to the events around the school exam results; and

To make recommendations on how such difficulties may be avoided in future, and on how confidence in this year's results and next year's results can be restored.

1.4 This report considers the main areas in which difficulties have arisen and makes recommendations on future arrangements. Following consultation with the Chair and Vice Chairs of the Educational Services Committee, it has been submitted to meet the deadline of 22 September, subject to approval by the Committee.

2. North Ayrshire Council Submission to the Inquiry

2.1 In common with local authorities throughout Scotland, North Ayrshire schools have suffered major disruption following the examination result difficulties which have arisen this year. It is fair to say that these difficulties would have been much worse had it not been for the willingness of staff in schools to give up part of their summer holidays to resolve the problems which arose.

2.2 The administrative difficulties have already been well established and can be summarised as follows:

The late arrival of some course materials and assessment items.

The high level of internal assessment required, particularly for students taking 4 or 5 Highers.

The complex and time-consuming system for the collection of internal assessment.

Inconsistent advice about the timing of internal assessments and the acceptable frequency of re-assessments.

Reduction in the time allocated for marking scripts.

Inconsistent use of grading systems for Higher results.

Requests to schools from SQA for the re-submission of the same data, in some cases on several occasions.
Despite the reservations outlined above, the Council supports the continuation of the Higher Still Programme. The potential for students as well as reducing the time available for marking.

The feeling of the examination deck should be reconsidered. The reverse impression produced this year led to increased

The continuation of Higher Still courses should be viewed with a view to developing implementation of core skills

The volume of assessment required to prepare for learning and teaching, as well as marking the data to be

Where the combination of internal and external assessment provides the best method of assessing student achievement

Consideration should be given to simplifying and reducing the internal assessment required by Higher Still courses.

The results of assessment should be related to pupils' daily, but not into a computer system. This should be a thorough review of SQA's data management systems to ensure that information received from schools

That many recommendation we would make are as follows:

2.4 In addition, there has been an widespread loss of confidence in the ability and reliability of the marking of the years

2.3 All of these administrative difficulties have immediately been brought to the attention of the SQA in several occasions

2.2 The unhelpful variety of all students hoping to progress to higher or further education.

Dilemmas in setting up this year's S5 and S6 courses while the results of this year's appear in double

Late demand for additional markers.

Increased supervision required as a result of keeping on non-teaching days.
For further information please contact John Travens, on Ext 4411.
Reference: J19
19 September 2000

Corporate Director (Educational Services)

JOHN TRAVENS
AREAS OF CONCERN

1.1 Within Renfrewshire there have been a number of concerns expressed by school staff and council education advisers regarding the Higher Still development and SQA performance. It is important to group these concerns into 2 areas: those matters which relate to the development and implementation of the Higher Still Development Unit and separately those matters which are the responsibility of SQA.

The development and implementation of Higher Still has been the responsibility of the Higher Still Development Unit working to the direction of the Higher Still Strategy Group and latterly the Higher Still Implementation Group.

HSDU responsibilities include the structure of the courses being taught in schools and the provision of course materials and assessment items.

SQA responsibilities include setting and marking examinations, certification of examinations and the management of data associated with the process of examinations.

1.2 During the school year 1999/2000, meetings were organised within Renfrewshire for head teachers and 16+ coordinators with representatives from HSDU, SQA and HMI to allow Renfrewshire senior managers the opportunity to discuss areas of concern regarding both Higher Still issues and SQA issues.

1.3 Higher Still Development Unit

The following concerns have been raised about the Higher Still Development Unit. Concerns were expressed by staff about support materials and national assessment banks, usually relating to the timing of the delivery of these materials to schools and the quality of the materials. English and Art in particular caused concern.

Within the Higher Still framework, internal assessment caused many difficulties within Renfrewshire centres, for example, the timing of unit tests, arrangements for re sits and remediation. This was also a national concern. Subsequently clearer guidelines were issued in letters from senior officers of HSDU and SQA.
Areas of concern in terms of assessment were:

- the management of internal assessment
- the timing of arrival of national assessment banks
- in some cases the quality of national assessment banks
- the pressure the assessment requirements appeared to place on students

Scottish Qualifications Authority

There were a number of concerns arising from the operation of the SQA procedures.

Data Management

1.4 School managers experienced difficulties in transferring student information for standard grade and higher grade courses to the SQA. This followed a successful procedure in transferring the data onto the SEEMIS system, which is the Renfrewshire database used in common with the authorities within the former Strathclyde area. The problem seems to have been the management of this information by SQA.

Data management difficulties were experienced throughout the year and these were addressed by SEEMIS as the process progressed.

Despite the accurate electronic collection and transfer of data by schools and SEEMIS, school staff were then asked to resubmit information in paper form because of transfer difficulties between SEEMIS and the SQA.

A meeting was arranged with SEEMIS representatives and school SQA coordinators in March to review the position. Assurances were given by the SEEMIS representative that the data was collected and stored properly for access by SQA.

There were also problems with data which was submitted in paper form subsequently not being found at SQA headquarters.

1.5 Concerns were expressed about module procedures. Information, which took a long period of time to enter was lost in January 2000. Codes for entry of data were changed during the session, causing further administrative difficulty.
The SQA had identified candidates for whom information was missing from their computer databases. At the end of June, SQA contacted local authorities and schools to request that each school had a senior member of staff nominated as a contact person during the holidays to verify data held on individual students.

Examinations

1.7 Comment from teachers indicates a view that the content of some examinations was not appropriate to the course. Higher mathematics is an example. All concerns expressed to Renfrewshire staff were passed on to the appropriate qualification managers and/or senior staff at SQA for their consideration.

1.8 There has been an amount of speculation concerning the marking of examinations. To date, however, senior staff in Renfrewshire have received no hard evidence of views expressed on marking.

It is the case that in June, SQA officials approached education authorities to agree to the release of teachers from schools to assist in the marking process. Renfrewshire agreed to this request.

1.9 Also, there was a reduction in the examination diet from 3 weeks to 2 weeks. It is the case that SQA consulted on this change and generally received agreement from schools and authorities. As part of that consultation, it was agreed that a winter diet of examinations would be introduced in December 2001. This process would allow students to resit higher still courses at that time.

SQA CERTIFICATES AND RESULTS - AUGUST 2000

2.1 It has been difficult for the authority to ascertain the exact number of candidates who received late or incomplete certificates. However, there have been verbal reports of certificates being issued late, and over a month after the date for delivery of certificates 3 candidates have still not received any certification.

2.2 This year SQA provided to schools only a single copy of results, mostly some days after certificates had been provided to the students. It is usually done concurrently. These results were in the form of individual student results and by pupil SQA number. This meant that staff had to go through individual pupil records to obtain single subject results. In some cases the information received by the schools was not the same as that on the student's certificate.
2.3 In previous years schools have received paper copies of results on the same day as certificates were received by candidates. This was followed later by subject results and electronic copies of all results. This year schools were provided with electronic information from SEEMIS which had been provided to SEEMIS by SQA. This form of the data was in schools the next day. It was this data that provided the only record for schools of pupil attainment and it was used to support the interviews which were held with the pupils. This version of data still has to be updated and corrected from SQA to pass on to schools.

RENFREWSHIRE AUDIT

3.1 A survey of secondary schools in Renfrewshire was carried out by education services on 22 - 24 August. It must be stressed that the information provided by school staff was an initial estimate. The precise details will not be known until the schools have carried out the various processes associated with pupils’ results and the full extent of SQA revisions is known.

**Information Missing from Certificates Received by Students**

3.2 In past years it has been unusual for students to receive certificates with data missing. In August 2000 schools reported numbers of students who had data missing from their certificates issued by SQA. There was also data missing from the information received by schools.

The survey allowed estimates to be made of:-

- the number of Renfrewshire students who had reported missing data. (some pupils who left in June have not contacted schools and therefore cannot be included)
- the subjects and levels affected.

3.3 In terms of the numbers of students who had reported missing data to their schools, all 14 schools reported that there were students who had data missing. 4 schools were unable to give exact numbers at this time.

The survey information below was collated from the 10 schools which provided numbers of students reported as having information missing:

- 245 candidates from Higher results
- 143 candidates for Intermediate 1 results
- 47 candidates for Intermediate 2 results
- 273 candidates from module results
- 143 candidates from Standard Grade results.
These numbers may be higher as some candidates have not communicated with their schools since the issue of the results.

It is planned to hold further consultation with schools in October to update the survey information and the Renfrewshire Education and Leisure Committee has requested that this be provided to the Parliamentary inquiry.

3.4 The survey indicated that there is no pattern to the missing data in terms of subject or level, for example:

- Castlehead High reported 33 students with information missing from Intermediate 2 English and 34 students with information missing from Intermediate 1 Hospitality
- Park Mains High reported 26 students with information missing from Higher Geography
- St Andrew's Academy reported a variety of Standard Grade and module information missing
- St. Mirin's High reported all modules submitted on paper until December being missing and that 3 pupils were still awaiting certificates as of 24 August.

3.5 Within schools a great deal of staff time and effort has been dedicated to dealing with students and parents as a result of inaccurate certification.

3.6 The SQA process of correcting higher grade certificates has taken place and these figures may alter as a result of the outcome of those corrections.

Similarly, SQA have announced that they will be reviewing some 5000+ standard grade certificates and the Renfrewshire figures may alter as a result of that process.

**Awards Less than Predicted**

3.7 In past years it has been the case that some candidates have achieved grades lower than estimated by their schools.

In August 2000 schools reported much larger numbers of students than usual achieving grades lower than predicted by their teachers.

The survey allowed estimates to be made of:-

- the number of Renfrewshire students who had achieved lower grades than expected
- the subjects and levels most affected.
3.8 In terms of the numbers of students who achieved lower grades than expected, all 14 schools reported students falling into this category. 4 schools were unable to give exact numbers at this time.

The survey information below was collated from the 10 schools which provided numbers of students reported as having achieved lower grades than those estimated:

- 831 Higher results lower than predicted
- 233 Intermediate 2 results lower than predicted
- 9 Intermediate 1 results lower than predicted
- 10 module results lower than predicted
- 366 Standard Grade results lower than predicted.

This is higher than usual. SQA is in the process of correcting higher grade certificates and these figures may alter as a result of the outcome of those corrections.

3.9 The survey indicated that there is no clear pattern to the subjects/levels in which achieved grades were lower than predicted grades. However, some subjects seem to be more problematic than others, for example, biology, drama, English and modern studies at Higher grade.

4. APPEALS

4.1 Schools submit appeals for students whose examination results are lower than the expected results predicted by school staff. The process involves departments within schools putting forward for each student a package of previous work/exams carried out by the students. The school SQA coordinator then collates all the evidence for every student and sends this to SQA for consideration. In Renfrewshire these arrangements are set out in a school policy on appeals procedures.

4.2 Renfrewshire has a quality assurance policy for Higher Still arrangements which provides for a consistent approach across schools, and this has been adhered to in relation to this year's appeals procedures.

4.3 Since a number of students in Renfrewshire have received SQA results lower than predicted, schools have been required to submit appeals on behalf of those students in order that their performance in national exams can be reviewed.

4.4 A further audit was carried out on 5th September 2000 to ascertain the exact numbers of appeals being submitted by Renfrewshire schools for Higher and CSYS exams. 187 urgent appeals, appeals crucial for UCAS, have been submitted. Schools plan to submit a further 926 appeals at Higher and CSYS level.
At the moment it is difficult for schools to give information on the number of appeals which will be submitted for Intermediate 2, Intermediate 1 and Standard grades. It is planned to obtain this information in October and to update the Parliamentary inquiry with all supplementary information from Renfrewshire.

4.5 At this time, some schools are unable to predict the exact number of appeals which will be submitted to SQA. However, the number of appeals is expected to be higher at all levels this year. As a result of the survey in Renfrewshire, it is estimated that some 850 appeals will be made at higher level, which represent some 10% of presentations and some 1000 for standard grade, which represent some 6% of presentations. Again, it is anticipated that the number of appeals will be reduced as certificates are corrected by SQA, and this is particularly the case for standard grade where data checks are still in process. Information from head teachers suggests that the level of Higher appeals may be around twice the normal number submitted in previous years. Initial estimates for standard grade have indicated broadly the same number of appeals are expected as normal.

4.6 SQA officials approached education authorities to agree release of additional teachers to support the appeals process this year. Renfrewshire agreed to this request where it was feasible to release the teachers from his/her teaching commitment.

5. CONCLUSION

It is evident in Renfrewshire that there have been serious problems in the management and administration of SQA procedures for the 2000 examination diet. The corrections to certificates and the appeals in process at present should ensure that the large majority of candidates are not disadvantaged. The difficulties experienced in SQA procedures throughout the process this year, particularly data management, have caused considerable additional workload for staff in schools, particularly SQA co-ordinators. Staff confidence in the examination process has been eroded over the year.

Concerning the Higher Still programme, it is the view of Renfrewshire Council that the opportunity should be taken to review the implementation of the programme to date. Specific matters which have raised concerns are the complexity of the assessment requirement and the content of particular subject teaching programmes, where English, physical education and art & design have been the main concern.

It is our view that these difficulties may arise from the tensions created where the programme has sought to reconcile the sometimes different requirements and expectations of the school sector with that of the further education sector.
This authority consulted with all secondaries on SQA failures as soon as problems began to emerge in August. The key areas of concern included:

1. **Frequency of submission of particular results data to SQA**

   The key concern here was how often schools were asked to send information again to the SQA about pupil grades, etc. in a particular course/element when this information had already been requested and subsequently given by the school, for at least one school, this information was requested *more than twice*.

   Up to 8 subjects required repeated submissions.

2. **The process of entering of school data**

   Here a chief concern was that, during original submissions to the SQA, *identical* data was required to be copied out in separate entries (i.e. more than once) by school/subject departments; this duplication clearly entailed extra workload for schools. Additional points raised were:

   - Each "S" grade required 2 return sheets (estimates and internal assessment) – as opposed to one in previous years – thus doubling risk of SQA error. This point about increased information to SQA leading to inevitable errors, however good the system in place, is repeated under *software issues*, section 7, in this submission.

   - The SQA Candidate Entry Form, with numbers and codes rather than a name, is more complex than in previous, pre-electronic days and means more of a burden on the school SQA co-ordinator; again, of course, it is more likely to be error-prone.

   - The process for schools to up-date/change presentations and advise SQA is problematic; the lack of a "record of presentation" for each pupil to allow schools to confirm their own records, as in the old system, was seen as contributing to this problem.

3. **SQA Requests re "missing" data**

   There was concern that schools had to process some results 3 weeks into the school holidays (Nautical Studies unit results, Music and IT short courses being examples). Requests for missing data were made as late as 11 August 2000.

   During the summer break, one school staff member was telephoned at home and asked to check mail for information "sent in error" and to ignore it – the item then did not arrive in the school after all.
4. Missing SQA results

All schools noted missing exam results, whether "S" grade or national units. Schools were variously missing results in "S" grade English; "S" grade science; "S" grade French; PE short course; Home Economics, Int. 2; Nautical Studies national units; "S" grade music; "S" physics; Health & Exercise national units.

5. Exceptional school action

Exceptional steps taken by schools this year included: time-consuming checks of data for both "S" grade and national units, involving innumerable phone-calls and faxes to SQA - even during school holidays.

The checking process was made more difficult because computerised data had no names, only numbers and subject codes.

SQA never returned confirmation about which pupils were entered for particular courses - unlike in previous years - thus resulting in school calls to the SQA for confirmation of certain cases. Schools, of course, were also required to field phone-calls from concerned parents and pupils.

6. Level of Appeals

Generally, appeals on a school-by-school basis were up as much as twice-fold on last year, although for one or two there was admittedly no appreciable rise.

7. Software Issues

One school, which does offer Higher courses, noted that whilst courses and units can be readily linked to subjects and classes on computer since all information is already in the system, where there are mixed levels and units this requires to be recorded manually from data capture sheets collected from departments.

The same school described a long and cumbersome process of computer entries being made by the SQA co-ordinator, followed by printouts to departments, then amended printouts from departments back to the co-ordinator for computer entry and so on and so forth.

The process of issuing (3) unit completion data sheets to departments to collate P/F/D/W (pass/fail/deferred/withdrawn) status for each candidate, for every unit, throughout the year, is a substantial burden on all staff, compared to previous practice when the process would happen once.

Software errors - always a possibility - just added to the above burden and, in some instances, resulted in missing courses and incorrect codes for some units.

SQA, by January 2000, began to "show signs" that it held "different" data from the school and when examination registration sheets arrived (Ex6's) many were incorrect, out of date or plainly wrong.
SQA changed the specification required of the software developers on more than one occasion during the past year and so developers (cf. Phoenix) were constantly having to catch up.

It is clear that, even if all departments are linked by computer to an SQA management information system, the whole process will remain cumbersome, time-consuming and, because of the sheer volume of data, inherently prone to error.

General Remarks

The impact for Shetland was arguably less wide-spread than for other authorities since only two of our schools offer Higher. That said, as will be clear from the above, all schools still suffered an increased burden of work because of communication failures. The impact and problems for our schools who do offer Higher was similar, proportionately, to schools in other authorities and we pride ourselves on having well-organised schools, with well-trained office staff and we have all the necessary top-specification hardware.

Schools have complained of poor communications with SQA since its inception.

Wrong information/papers being sent; unclear information; no return of presentation information for double-checking; the final results fiasco and, importantly, the sheer volume of work for school staff, in particular the school’s SQA Co-ordinator, all add up to an unacceptable situation.

Allan MacMillan, Education Adviser, General Secondary.
Mr Ian Cowan  
Assistant Clerk  
Education, Culture and Sport Committee  
Room 2.7 Committee Chambers  
Scottish Parliament  
George IV Bridge  
Edinburgh  
EH99 1SP

Dear Mr Cowan

SCHOOL EXAM RESULTS INQUIRY

Further to Martin Verity’s letter inviting comments on the above subject, I enclose a copy of the report prepared by Education Resources for consideration by the Education, Culture and Sport Committee.

Should you require any further information please do not hesitate to contact Maggi Allan, Executive Director, Education Resources on 01698 454379.

Yours sincerely

Michael Docherty  
Chief Executive
EDUCATION RESOURCES

SUBMISSION TO THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT'S EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO THIS YEAR'S SCHOOL EXAM RESULTS

BACKGROUND

Within South Lanarkshire Council there has been deep concern over the impact of the recent SQA crisis on individual students and schools. All secondary schools have experienced difficulties in their contacts with SQA and have now submitted returns to Education Resources detailing the extent of these. They have also been asked to provide estimates of the number of Appeals they would be submitting this year for Higher, Intermediate, Standard Grade and CSYS. This information has now been collated from all schools.

IMPACT ON SCHOOLS

- Initial difficulties experienced by centres came to light early in session 1999-2000 when SQA co-ordinators in schools drew attention to problems of registration of candidates. The apparent complexity of the new system of course levels within the National Certificate programme meant that school staff faced an additional workload in keying in, verifying and re-verifying such data. At the same time, the new system of unit assessment and submission of candidate performance was adding to this workload.

- During the session, schools were also faced with conflicting guidance from different SQA personnel on aspects of moderation, completion dates, re-assessment criteria etc. Despite frequent requests, it appears that SQA was not able to confirm any entries for units and courses until February 2000, and in April SQA requested a full data check to be carried out by schools.

- Late in June, schools were asked to ensure that a senior member of staff was available, initially for a short period during the summer holiday to confirm data as identified by SQA. Later this became a request for a senior member of staff for three weeks during the month of July. In many cases principal teachers had also to be contacted to confirm results information which had already been transferred.

- Schools in South Lanarkshire have reported requests for re-submission of data as often as 7 times, in some instances to different personnel within SQA. Handwritten copies of results were requested, earlier requests withdrawn and one school reported no fewer than 60 contacts with SQA in its attempts to clarify and verify information. Another school reported 14 separate requests; another cited a request for data for 505 separate presentations, initially referred to as "urgent", on the following day deemed "not essential". The majority of schools referred to 4, 5 or 6 re-submissions.

- The moderation process was almost wholly discredited: despite a strong sense of urgency about moderation deadlines early in the session, in the event little moderation was carried out and moderation results were often not intimated until much later, even after the course examination date.
From all the above, it is clear that there were already concerns about SQA’s capacity to handle what was now an extremely complex process. Schools and authority personnel became aware also that there was a significant lack of communication within the organisation itself, for example, in March the SQA school liaison officer assured Head Teachers that additional exam papers would be made available to schools to make up for any under-estimates in ordering of papers. The same assurance had been given to local authority representatives. In the event, additional papers were not provided and, when contacted, the head of distribution at SQA claimed no knowledge of such an arrangement.

**Impact on Students**

- A number of students did not receive certificates in August; instead these were delivered to their schools. For the majority of students, certificates which they received were correct in terms of the accuracy of the examination for which they were presented. All schools, however, had candidates who received certificates which were incomplete or contained inaccurate information. On the day in which examination results were issued to pupils, not all schools simultaneously received the results. Schools were therefore not able to respond to the many telephone enquiries from pupils seeking confirmation that information was missing or simply wrong. The help lines to SQA were less than helpful often referring the pupils back to the schools. This caused a great deal of distress amongst pupils. Of the 21 secondary schools within South Lanarkshire, the following figures show the total number of incomplete certificates:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher</td>
<td>450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSYS</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Grade</td>
<td>329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Standing Units</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the evidence of the same 21 schools, the number of certificates which were inaccurate for other reasons is:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Grade</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Standing Units</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Schools also noted that in particular subjects there were significant omissions of data. This occurred in 20 different subjects in all, but most notably in PE, Home Economics, Computing, Maths, History, Geography and Modern Studies.

- SQA, now aware of the problems affecting candidates’ certificates, arranged for dedicated help lines to be set up in order that in-school SQA co-ordinators (senior staff) could clarify anomalies. This was followed by an extensive data check for all incomplete certificates. Once again this required a substantial amount of input from school staff, both in liaising with SQA to clarify inaccuracies and in dealing with pupils and parents who had major concerns over the accuracy of information provided through the certification process. It is worrying to note that, while SQA staff dealt in the main courteously with enquiries, there were frequent reports of unhelpful, incorrect or ill-judged responses to student enquiries. Regrettably, some chose simply to advise students that the school had been at fault in ‘not sending the information’, rather than to admit that the essential data had gone astray at SQA.

**Appeals**

- Many schools expressed serious concerns over the level of awards gained by many of their students. Schools were reminded by Education Resources that they should only consider an appeal on behalf of a student where there is coursework evidence to support an appeal for an improved grade.
• Schools indicated the extent of appeals at Higher and CSYS across the complete range of subjects. This information was forwarded to ADES (Association of Directors of Education, Scotland) for the tripartite meeting with SQA and SEED representatives on Friday, 8 September to determine how the large number of appeals might be processed.

• There are, within South Lanarkshire Council as a whole, 2083 appeals at Higher approximately twice as many as last year. For example, in one of our largest schools there are 220 Higher appeals this year compared with 103 last year. Across South Lanarkshire, most schools have reported significant increases in the number of appeals in Maths (281), English (390), Physics (144), Biology (182) and Geography (126).

• The figures for Standard Grade appeals have also been gathered at the request of the Scottish Executive. In total there are 2207 appeals, an increase of 900 (70%) on last year.

OTHER AREAS OF CONCERN

Standards of Marking

• Schools have expressed some concerns over the overall levels of award in certain subjects. This has been noted most frequently in Biology, Mathematics, Chemistry and History. Other subjects noted by more than one school are English, Geography, Physics and Modern Studies. This has inevitably raised speculation over the quality of marking and schools are anxious that overall performance in some instances does not truly reflect the ability of that cohort. While the individual appeal process may go some way to addressing this concern, it is unlikely to remove the doubts about marking standards and lack of proper quality assurance procedures following the marking process.

The Implementation of Higher Still Programmes

• Schools in South Lanarkshire developed their own implementation plans for the introduction of the new Higher Still course and these were reviewed and approved by the Higher Still Steering Group within Education Resources. During the first year of implementation, a ‘phased’ introduction for certain subjects was agreed with the Higher Still Liaison Groups both locally and nationally. Schools participated fully in programmes of staff development, not only for courses at Higher level, but also for Intermediate courses, with the result that an encouraging number of Intermediate courses were offered this year, with the promise of even greater numbers of these for session 2000-2001. While schools expressed varying degrees of concern over the assessment requirements of certain subjects, to their credit they attempted to address these in a positive spirit and with frequent reassurances from staff in Education Resources and from SQA that no pupils would be disadvantaged during the first year of implementation.

• The impact of the recent problems on staff has therefore been considerable. Confidence in the system has been severely dented and arrangements which were in place for moderation, assessment and verification for the first year are now the subject of serious questioning. Where individual subjects have noted wide discrepancies between their own estimates and final awards, self-doubt has become a factor. In short, the problems which have centred on SQA have had a damaging impact on the progress to implement the wide range of Higher Still courses.

• Students and parents have also expressed major misgivings about the value of the new courses, often coupled with requests that the school revert to the ‘old’ Higher.
Evidence to the Enquiry Committee

This report is based on:
- written reports by schools to Education Services
- visits by Education Services SMT to all secondary schools at the height of the results crisis
- meetings with Higher Still co-ordinators, school SQA co-ordinators, all secondary headteachers.
- Contacts from parents to elected members and Education Services

Areas of concern

The areas outlined in the invitation to submit evidence reflect the concerns expressed within West Lothian. The late issue of the certificates, although it had distressing effects on individuals is of less concern than issues relating to the reliability of results and the quality of markers which call the whole examination system into question.

Causes of Difficulties

1. Problems within the Administration of SQA

1.1 Aspects of the marking process

- Recruitment of Markers
  This authority was contacted about release of staff to act as markers and to carry out other SQA duties for the 2000 examinations diet in February 2000. This is approximately the same relative date as for the 1999 diet although the number of markers required and associated administrative time required were necessarily increased. It may be worth noting that for the 1998 diet the process was underway in November 97.

1.2 Collection of data

- Concerns about information transfer are noted in the minutes of West Lothian’s Higher Still Steering Group in October 99. Information transfer thereafter became a standing item on the agenda for each monthly meeting. A member of the authority’s IT staff attended these meetings and reported continuous contact with SQA regarding this.

- The two schools which were used as pilots in the information transfer process were also those who reported fewest problems when results were issued. Since their information was submitted early this would support the view that problems were due to overload as the main volume of information arrived from schools.
1.3 Timing of Communications

- The Corporate Manager wrote in July to Mr Ron Tuck expressing his concerns about the late communication of SQA's need for support from schools throughout the summer period. This need must have been clear some time in advance of contact with schools. An earlier request would have allowed schools to prepare information so that requests from SQA could be dealt with at the first contact.

1.4 Transfer of results to schools

We noted the following difficulties

- Delay in sending out results information to schools.
- Inability of schools to access information because of software problems.
- The format of the information supplied to schools made it difficult for schools to assist even when the information became available and to obtain an overview of where particular problems were.
- Inadequacy of SQA helpline support to both schools and parents.
- SQA's continued assurances to parents that schools could and should resolve the problems.

2. Impact on West Lothian Pupils

2.1 Immediate Impact

Nature of Inaccuracies in Certificates

The most significant problem was, as SQA had indicated, incomplete certificates due to SQA failing to process internal assessment data from schools. The extent to which this affected West Lothian pupils varied from school to school with some schools reporting 20 - 30 affected candidates while other schools had few problems. Across the authority we initially estimated that approximately 200 pupils were affected in this way. Following more detailed discussion with schools it has become clear that:

- as an estimate of the number of errors / omissions this is fairly accurate but the fact is that SQA have sent out a small number (<20 across authority) of pupils whose certificates contain errors which do not relate to the above causes.
- The inclusion of Intermediate 2 awards for candidates who narrowly failed at Higher level to pupils thinking they have received awards for exams they did not sit:
- The different banding systems applied by SQA to "old" SCE and "new" Highers caused confusion in the verbal reports given by the SQA helpline.

2.2 Future Impact

Impact on pupils in the 00 diet

The extent of future impact on pupils who received results in this diet depends almost entirely on whether the credibility of the examinations can be retrieved. This aspect is receiving due attention. The steps being taken to ensure the integrity of the appeals process must be widely publicised.

Impact on pupils in the session 00/01

Pupils who are currently studying in our secondary schools at any level must be adversely affected by the additional demands which have been made on school staff.

Impact on school staff (teaching and administration)

- Staff, both admin and teaching, are starting the session already under stress and distressed by the fact that their efforts to ensure a smooth introduction to Higher Still have been wasted.
- Schools are behind with normal school and departmental matters because of the time which has had to be spent by senior staff sorting out problems with grades and certificates.
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WRITTEN EVIDENCE SUBMITTED BY OTHER BODIES

1. Association of Directors of Education (ADES)
2. Committee of Scottish Higher Education Principals (COSHEP)
3. Scottish Parent Teacher Council (SPTC)
4. Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS)
THE EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORTS COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO
THE SCOTTISH QUALIFICATION AUTHORITY

RESPONSE OF THE ASSOCIATION OF DIRECTORS OF EDUCATION IN
SCOTLAND

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Scottish Qualification Authority’s administration of this year’s national examination system has given rise to widespread expressions of professional and public concern, robust questioning of the integrity and credibility of Scotland’s single examination and accreditation authority, the departure of senior members of staff from the SQA and open interrogation of the nature of the accountability of the SQA to the Scottish Executive and its stakeholders. It is entirely appropriate that this crisis in the affairs of an educational public body, unparalleled in modern times, should be the subject of an inquiry by the Education, Culture and Sports Committee and ADIES welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the inquiry.

1.2 In submitting the following observations, ADIES is conscious that the best interests of the present and future cohorts of our young people will be best served by taking action that will restore the reputation and credibility of the national examination system. This will involve careful examination of the context in which the SQA adopted responsibility for the delivery of the Higher Still Programme.

2. RESPONSIBILITY & ACCOUNTABILITY

2.1 Central to the current crisis are issues of responsibility and accountability both within the SQA, where management information systems, monitoring and reporting arrangements and the role of the SQA Board have been called into question, and between the SQA and the Scottish Executive. These issues will no doubt be touched upon in the SQA’s own internal review of the situation and in the inquiry to be carried out by Deloitte and Touche on behalf of the Scottish Executive. We will return to these issues later in this paper. It is equally important however that attention is given in the review of this year’s events to issues of responsibility and accountability for the Higher Still Programme itself. It will not be possible to assess SQA’s contribution to its own problems without examining the fuller content of decision-making within the Higher still programme.

3. THE HIGHER STILL PROGRAMME

3.1 The Higher Still programme has been beset with difficulties since its very inception. Early in 1997 ADIES presented a position paper on Higher Still to the Minister for Education. Whilst strongly endorsing the general principles underlying the Higher Still proposals, it highlighted a number of significant concerns about the planned programme, including:

- the highly centralized nature of the development programme
- the pace of implementation and the workload demands on the profession

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• the availability of suitable classroom materials to support the new courses
• whether effective management information systems to support curriculum, assessment and guidance provision would be established in good time and whether steps were being taken to address concerns about their extensiveness, updating and resourcing.
• the major logistical problems posed by the planning for the introduction of group awards

3.2 Most relevantly in the area of assessment, recording and reporting a number of concerns were articulated:

• Internal and External Assessment

A major concern among staff in the schools sector was that the developing Higher Still assessment model was SCOTVEC/FE driven with an increased emphasis on internal assessment leading to possible dilution of standards and increase in workload. The specific concerns include:

- loss of learning and teaching time to assessment activity
- increase in workload due to the demands of internal assessment
- reliability and validity of internal assessment
- inadequacy of grade descriptors
- relationship between internal and external assessment
- reduction in length of final exam with potential change in weighting given to the skills and knowledge being tested.

• National Assessment Bank

The creation of a National Assessment Bank raised issues such as the extensiveness, replenishment and security of assessment items.

• Moderation

The moderation issue was surrounded by a series of questions concerning not only the extent, validation and reliability of moderation but the source and resourcing of the moderator pool and the time demands on schools.

• Recording and Reporting

Insufficient attention had been given to the practical implications of recording and reporting achievement and attainment and the relationship between Higher Still and the National Record of Achievement.

• Management

Problems were anticipated in the management of the increased volume of assessment data arising from Higher Still. Resource issues were flagged up in relation to the storing and dissemination of information.
• Teacher and Student Workload

There was considerable concern regarding the cumulative nature of the demands of internal assessment on both students and staff.

3.3 It is strongly held that the philosophical underpinning of the Higher Still Programme never received the iterative examination that was recognised as being necessary at the formative stage of the programme’s development in 1996. The failure to undertake such an examination created many of the core conditions which have led to a number of the major difficulties which have been observed over the last few months. It can be argued that they represent as much a philosophical as they are an administrative and bureaucratic failure.

3.4 In particular the decision to create a unified academic and vocational qualification system produced many fundamentally conflicting views and interests which could only be reconciled through consultation on issues of philosophy, purpose and overall design. Consultation focused instead on mechanistic, instrumental issues relating to implementation.

3.5 One of the reasons for the extended expression of disquiet in the area of assessment (above) was the absence of opportunity during the initial consultation period on Higher Still to open the assessment proposals to extended professional scrutiny. Despite representation from education authorities no consultation paper was issued on assessment and reporting, the details being embedded in the proposals for individual subjects and courses. In consequence the major debate which should have taken place not merely on the principles of the new assessment regime but on its practical operation failed to materialise. Those who continued to flag concerns in these areas had to be satisfied with assurances from the HSDU and later from the SQA that their concerns would be addressed in the process of implementation. With hindsight it is clear to see that this was a trust too far.

3.6 Even with two postponements the tightness of the implementation timescale left little scope for error and insufficient opportunity to fully respond to concerns being raised. Implementation pressures on the HSDU and SQA appeared to create an beleaguered mentality in which concession and change almost required to be wrung from the programme planners at the centre. The debate over Core Skills illustrates this point. It was only when the original Core Skills proposals were almost universally rejected by the teaching profession and authorities as being cumbersome, bureaucratic, work intensive and impractical that it was decided to revert to a model proposed earlier in the consultative process, that of embedding core skill requirements in teaching programmes.

3.7 Continuing difficulties led to the establishment of the Higher Still Liaison Group in December 1998, chaired by the Scottish Executive, to address ongoing problems. Liaison groups were established at local level in order to ensure devolved responsibility for implementation priorities. This led to individual schools entering the implementation programme in a manner which reflected their state of readiness and not in lock-step manner across the country. Once again this concession was obtained only after extensive pressure exerted on the centre from schools and authorities.
Running repairs continued to be made to the programme in the approach to its launch in August 1999, the acrimonious debate over the conditions and arrangement at Higher Still English Language and Communication highlighting the ongoing dissatisfaction with the programme planners. It has to be recorded however, that a number of the key concerns highlighted by ADES in 1997 remained unresolved when the first phase of the programme was implemented and these have surfaced among the difficulties and problems which have been identified in the 1st year of implementation.

4. THE YEAR 2000 EXPERIENCE

4.1 The difficulties encountered by education authorities and schools this year may be classified under 3 headings:

(i) Internal Assessment
(ii) Data Capture and Management
(iii) Marking and Moderation Procedures

4.2 Internal Assessment

The whole system of internal assessment has been perceived as being problematic and onerous as a result of the experiences of the first year of implementation. The existence of internal assessment has been seen as helpful to teachers in proving enhanced opportunity for monitoring progress. However, many of the unanticipated consequences of the introduction of the Higher Still internal assessment structure have had a serious and detrimental impact on the operation of the system. There is seen to be a need for an increased degree of preparation in order to guarantee first time success at summative assessment. Teachers are frequently reluctant to ask pupils to attempt summative assessment too soon, leading to a potential log-jam situation. The volume of assessment has led to concerns about consistency in the approach to reassessment.

4.3 Because successful performance in unit assessment has been embedded within the examination procedures as a prerequisite for course presentation, and because reassessment opportunities are limited, staff and pupils have felt pressurised. The volume of assessment has led to concerns about consistency in the approach to reassessment.

4.4 In many cases schools reported that pupils were assessed in some aspect of the curriculum virtually every week and expressed their concern that this has resulted in assessment fatigue and excessive pressure. The argument that regular testing represents a constant focus to ensure that students pace their work was not lost on schools and there was acceptance of the principle that internal assessment procedures may be good for pupil motivation. However, the sheer scale and frequency of assessment events was such that it is now widely held to be the case that teaching and learning have suffered as a result. Many schools have felt under pressure to complete coursework due to a sufficiency of testing. This issue continues to cause concern.

4.5 The issue of 'controlled conditions' was felt to be a cause of further problems in maintaining continuity in the teaching environment. Many staff were concerned that this interferes seriously with teaching and leads to a loss of actual teaching time putting even more pressure on an already tight time scale for teaching and assessing. Where students fail internal assessments the tight time scale provides little time for remediation. There
continues to be a significant fear that the demands of re-testing could mean fragmentation of teaching and learning.

4.6 An ongoing concern expressed by schools is that unit assessments mean that, in many cases, students see the part but not the whole. In subjects where assessments are set at minimum competence there remains a significant gap between success at the level and competence at the level of the external examination, particularly grades A and B. This has had a significant bearing on generating evidence for appeals. Worries have persisted about a student’s ability to pass the internal assessments but still be unprepared for the external examination. This situation has meant that many departments had been required to supply information about passes in unit assessments plus evidence of attainment in questions beyond minimum competence which many have felt could only be achieved in a prelim examination. In addition the fear has persisted that an over-emphasis on ‘competence’ is likely to produce a consequent threat to excellence. These problems derive from a failure to establish clearly the respective purposes of internal assessment and external examination and are a consequence of the absence of consultation on fundamental as opposed to implementation issues referred to in paragraphs 3.3 to 3.5 above.

4.7 The issue of maturation is one which many schools encountered last session. The demand that pupils pass all unit assessments to achieve the final course award does not allow for maturation throughout the session. However, it is clearly impossible to skew the application of testing to meet the varied requirements of the maturation of the student group. The experience of many schools is that units tackled early in the course are less well done than those tackled later.

4.8 Early in session 1999-2000, anxiety was expressed about the interface between Intermediate 2 and Higher and the consequence of wrong placement of students on inappropriate levels. The experiences of implementation in 1999 – 2000 have in no way allayed those fears. In some cases there seemed to be serious misalignment of difficulty levels. This matter clearly has implications for quality assurance procedures.

Data Capture and Management

4.9 Data processing problems have been experienced across all levels of Higher Still provision and at Standard Grade. This points to unacceptable standards of data management within SQA.

4.10 Early in session 1999-2000 schools began to inform the authorities of major problems being encountered in terms of data entry for pupils. This procedure is at the heart of the SQA procedures for course and unit awards. Schools were concerned at (i) the vastly increased amount of data which had to be entered on the system as a result of the expansion of the examination structure (ii) the cumbersome and complex forms issued by SQA and (iii) the number of errors which appeared on the printed information sent by SQA. Issues were raised with SQA by authorities on an ongoing basis. In all cases, SQA offered its assurance that the examination diet and the consequent publication of results would proceed smoothly and accurately. In the early months of 2000 a number of education authorities made representation to the SQA criticising the over bureaucratic nature of data capture procedures. The difficulties persisted.

4.11 It should be emphasised that a significant part of the excessive demand for information resulted from the over-complexity of the certification arrangements. The system became
overloaded because of the requirement imposed by the design of Higher Still to generate information for which there is no demonstrable need or demand.

4.12 In June and July 2000, schools were receiving large quantities of data for checking. In many cases, the data contained serious inaccuracies and school SQA co-ordinators committed significant amounts of time during the holiday period to amending, correcting and resubmitting data.

4.13 On August 10, the publication date for results, a large number of pupils were awarded grades significantly different to expectations and many did not receive their certificates. In a number of cases certificates were sent to the school, not the pupil’s home address. More worrying, several certificates were sent to the wrong school.

4.14 The failure by SQA to supply schools timeously with the printout of results which they would normally use for checking meant that schools were unable to assist parents and pupils with areas of confusion, uncertainty or error arising from the results. In the event it took several weeks before schools were provided with the data. The situation also created difficulties for schools in terms of making preparations for appeals.

4.15 A common problem was the failure of SQA’s data capture procedures to incorporate internal assessment data provided by schools. In many cases schools supplied this data on 3 or more occasions and still found that SQA failed to include it, leading to many of the errors which subsequently occurred. Coding errors and SQA treatment of raw marks (internal assessment) helped to compound problems. Even at this point in September an unacceptable number of young people still do not have complete grades in subjects in spite of repeated school requests to SQA to clarify the position. The focus of resolving these situations has been transferred to the Appeals Process, which is asked to address a task for which it was not designed.

4.16 Significant overload was experienced by staff at all levels in schools. In particular, senior staff were involved in a very complex and time consuming data management task throughout the session. From initial data entry of candidates in September/October 1999 to the several requests for checking of very large lists at Easter and all of the duplication of effort involved in supporting SQA throughout the summer months, members of senior management teams have spent a disproportionate amount of time on this task. The large volume of incorrect and incomplete data and the complexity of the procedures for exchanging student data, created a serious workload problem for senior managers. Schools expressed a high degree of anxiety about the late transfer of information from SQA. Even experienced and expert senior staff found the operation of the system enormously complex and time consuming and staff in general found the application of assessment procedures and the administrative requirements of the system excessive.

Marking and Moderation Procedures

4.17 Concerns about the implications of the examination diet itself were expressed at an early point. In order to accommodate the additional number of examinations, the examination diet was longer than in previous years. In 2000 this was achieved by accommodating many of the new examinations in June. The decision to make 10 August the intended publication date for results, matching the pattern of previous years, created pressure on marking – more marking was required in a significantly reduced timescale. This created a major challenge, not simply for the marking, but for the process of quality assurance.
4.18 The level of requests by SQA for the release of teaching staff to carry out marking and moderation duties in terms of the 1999 – 2000 diet showed a dramatic increase on previous years. SQA was advised that this level of demand could not be met by schools, without adverse effect on the teaching and learning process within schools. Nevertheless in the interests of pupils authorities complied with most of the requests that were made. In short, no cost-benefit analysis was ever undertaken by HSDU of the implications of complex assessment arrangements for the length and timing of the examination diet or the degree of interruption of learning and teaching in schools.

4.19 This year appears to have witnessed significant levels of deviation in some subjects between the grades achieved and school predictions raising questions about (a) the recruitment, experience and training of markers (b) the quality assurance process applied to the markers’ work, and (c) the application of accurate cut off scores for grade awards.

4.20 AESGS is not aware of evidence of short comings in the process of marking itself. There is, however, anecdotal evidence to suggest that SQA procedures surrounding the management of marking, from the appointment of markers to the actual markers’ meetings lacked its normal rigour. The extent of the problem appears to have varied from subject to subject, but in many cases markers appear to have been appointed late, briefing/training of markers appears open to question and it is reported that materials for markers meetings were inadequately prepared or incomplete. Despite these difficulties, many examining teams did manage to complete their tasks and agree grade cut-offs by mid-July. SQA was advised of the need for a training process and exemplars to be sure of accuracy in grading as was the case with the implementation of Standard Grade. In the event this issue was not addressed. Nor did SQA respond to the need to remedy the significant lack of exemplars of levels of performance to enable teachers to benchmark standards.

4.21 The moderation process in some subjects gave cause for concern. From the outset, the position regarding moderation was very confused. The new system generated a heavy demand for moderation and this impacted on schools in various ways. Teachers were worried about the frequency of moderation events and the disruptive aspect which they could encompass. Moreover, head teachers and the authorities were concerned about the significantly increased amount of staff release requested by SQA in 1999-2000. This was seen to be on an unacceptably high level, with requests for release targeting key staff for up to 15 days in one session. The demand associated with this was established as excessive and unacceptable and outstriped the experienced supply available, giving rise to the problem; in its eagerness to recruit moderators, did the SQA’s normal quality assurance procedures apply? In terms of subjects where performance or practical competence required to be moderated the timescale was very tight, and the overall quality of the moderation itself has been called into question, in some cases. The quality of reporting back on moderation was unsatisfactory.

4.22 The SQA normally operates a pre-appeals procedure where the actual performance of pupils in the various elements of a subject are compared with the school’s own predictions. This normally allows SQA to take into account and to adjust clearly discordant grades ahead of publication. This seems not to have taken place. This alone may account for a significant proportion of the anomalous results which candidates received.
5. THE WAY FORWARD

5.1 It is critically important that all appropriate steps are taken to reassure the pupils, parents and the teaching profession and that the facts are established in respect of this year’s events. In the context of the latter it is anticipated that the SQA’s own internal review and the inquiry carried out on behalf of the Scottish Executive by Deloitte Touche will illuminate the workings of this year’s national examination procedures. Lessons must be learned and action taken to ensure there is no repetition of this year’s events for any future cohort of young Sots.

5.2 The welfare of those young people currently embarked upon Higher Still programmes are the paramount concern. ADES believe that their best interests would be served by implementing a range of actions:

- Work should immediately cease on any planned aspects of Higher Still which are likely to further complicate existing assessment and reporting arrangements e.g. Group Awards, Core Skills, Second Examination Diet. Furthermore no work in these areas should resume until confident assurances are given that the associated assessment and certification arrangements can be comfortably delivered within the national framework.

- Where course registration is required, unit registration should be dispensed with. This has proven to be over-bureaucratic and problematic in terms of data transfer and capture. Unit registration will continue to have a value for part-time students and for FE colleagues but its benefits are overstated for the clear majority of school pupils.

- Immediate action should be taken to alter and simplify the internal assessment arrangements as they relate to Highers. For example, internal assessment should continue as part of Higher courses and the results should continue to be submitted to SQA. The results of internal assessment in certain aspects of certain subjects should continue to form part of the final award, e.g. in practical subjects such as Art & Design. However, the focus on the use of such assessment should shift to the provision of educative feedback. Pupil awards should be made more on the basis of the external assessment component. The information derived from internal assessment would continue to be available to support the generation of estimates, appeals, and on-going decisions about course levels to be followed by pupils.

- Standardisation and concordance checks should be re-instituted.

- Much of the responsibility for the maladministration of the system has been attributed to new ICT systems. No matter what software is used the accuracy of the data held in the SQA system is paramount. Centres can only check the exchange of data if files are acknowledged promptly and rejection errors clearly and promptly communicated to schools. SQA must address this as a matter of urgency.

- Every effort should be made to extend the marking window for next year, whether this means as an exceptional measure and until such times as a rigorous review of marking and moderation procedures is carried out, compressing the examination schedule, with appropriate attention to the needs of pupils, and/or delaying the issue of pupil results.
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- The overly complex certificate should be abandoned.

- ADiES members raised concerns at intervals about the operation of this year’s national examination procedure, to be met with reassurances that these concerns were being addressed and that progress with implementation of the programme was being maintained. It is vitally important that future SQA future operation is characterised by greater humility, transparency and responsiveness to its clients and stakeholders.

- SQA requires to make immediate and sustained efforts to build bridges with key stakeholders and personnel without whose support the system is unable to operate. Many of these individuals feel not simply that their efforts to help the SQA salvage some pride from this year’s situation remain unacknowledged, but that they have been misled and poorly treated by the SQA. With an expanded programme of assessment and certification to be countered in 2000-2001 it is crucial that SQA is able to call upon the commitment and experience of teachers, and that they create the conditions which minimise both the stress levels markers and examiners were required to endure this year and the adverse impact on classroom teaching occasioned by their extended withdrawal from class.

5.3 Beyond the immediate term, there are at least 2 issues which merit attention:

(i) The Scottish Qualification Authority

Resolution of the present crisis of confidence in the work of the SQA will not be achieved through interim measures such as those proposed above. An extended debate will require to take place on the future operation of the national examination and accreditation system. This year’s events have no doubt compromised the integrity and the credibility of the SQA, and may in some quarters call into question the value of a single, unified, national qualifications authority. If we are to continue with the present model further thought requires to be given to defining the arrangements and relationships which will secure the essential desirable characteristics of such a body, that is should be:

- Independent
- Accountable
- Transparent
- Reliable
- Responsive

In particular answers must be found to the question of the nature of the accountability of the SQA and its Board to its various constituencies:

- the Scottish Executive
- its paymasters, (COSLA, local authorities and FE colleges)
- its clients, (young people and adult students)
- its partners, (the teachers, examiners and markers)

ADES does not believe these answers lie in making the qualifications authority, in effect, a branch of the Executive, as has been suggested in some quarters. Indeed, as indicated above, many of the problems giving rise to the current crisis resulted from over-
centralisation, lack of customer focus and an over-emphasis on political as opposed to other forms of accountability. If these difficulties are to be overcome, the operation of SQA requires to be made more transparent and its senior management needs to be more accountable to a range of stakeholders. It may be that strengthening the role of the Board will suffice. If not, consideration should legitimately be given to the possibility of external regulation or of outsourcing key elements of SQA’s work under franchising arrangements.

The accountability of non-departmental public bodies such as the SQA has been the source of considerable debate over the years. Council departments are required to operate under the Best Value regulatory framework with its focus on the 4 C’s of customer focus, challenge, competition and continuous improvement. This year’s SQA experience should represent a challenge to any establishment resistance to apply Best Value principles and practice to the work of non-departmental public bodies.

(ii) The Higher Still Programme

The focus on the failings of the SQA should not conceal the fact that there remains widespread dissatisfaction with certain aspects of the Higher Still Programme. ADES would be happy to collaborate with the Scottish Executive and with the teaching profession in reviewing and refining the programme in a manner which will ensure an effective balance between curricular integrity and effective classroom delivery.

5.4 Most fundamentally, the failings in the examination system this year and the events which lead up to them demonstrate clearly the shortcomings of current mechanisms for promoting change in Scottish Education. The overcomplexity of the Higher Still Programme (which was not designed by the SQA but by the HSDU), the lack of proper initial consultation on fundamentals and the reluctance to respond flexibly to concerns expressed during consultations over implementation result from over-centralisation and a lack of accountability to the majority of legitimate stakeholders. If the new constitutional dispensation in Scotland is to bring higher quality and more responsive public services, these issues need to be tackled urgently.