EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE

AGENDA

28th Meeting, 2000 (Session 1)

Monday 2 October 2000

The Committee will meet at 1.30 pm in Committee Room B, City Chambers, George Square, Glasgow.

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 2.00 pm

3. School Exams Inquiry: The Committee will take evidence from—
   
   Scottish Qualifications Authority:
   
   David Miller, Chair
   
   Mrs Ann Hill, Board Member
   
   Paul Thompson, Board Member
   
   Michael Leech, Board Member

4. School Exams Inquiry: The Committee will take evidence from—

   Scottish Parent Teacher Council:
   
   Judith Gillespie
   
   Eleanor Coner

5. School Exams Inquiry: The Committee will take evidence from—
6. **Update of Committee business:** The Committee will be updated on business in its current work programme.

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**The following papers are attached for this meeting—**

Scottish School Boards Association submission

ED/00/28/1
28 September 2000

Ian Cowan
Assistant Clerk
Education, Culture and Sport Committee
Room 2.7 Committee Chambers
Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

Dear Ian

SSBA SUBMISSION - 2 OCTOBER 2000
EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE
Inquiry into Schools Exam Results

May I firstly thank you for the invitation to provide evidence to the Convener and Members of the above committee on the subject of the Schools Exam Results.

I would also confirm the names submitted to you on Monday of this week when we met during the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee meeting. Members of SSBA who will be accompanying me are as follows:

- Alan Smith, President of SSBA - Renfrewshire
- Iain Findlay Vice President of SSBA - Aberdeenshire
- Jeff Taylor, Treasurer of SSBA - East Ayrshire
- Joe Scott, Secretary of SSBA - Inverclyde

I enclose SSBA’s evidence and would be grateful if you would send copies to the Committee members.

Yours sincerely

Ann Hill
Chief Executive
SSBA

The Scottish School Board Association is a private limited by guarantee company registered in Scotland.
Company Registration number - SC152749
SSBA Submission
Education, Culture and Sport Committee - 2 October 2000
Inquiry into Schools Exam Results

Terms of reference - SSBA evidence

• to gather information on the remit and role of the Scottish Qualifications Authority in relation to the issuing of schools qualifications certificates.

In a leaflet issued to parents in March 1997 (1) the Scottish Qualifications Authority states “One of the most important tasks the SQA carries out is making sure that its qualifications are of a high and consistent quality. This is crucial to the whole idea of qualifications - they need to be seen as reliable, relevant and trustworthy to ensure that people value them.

• to review the impact on school pupils, and on their future prospects, of performance of the SQA in issuing qualifications certificates this year.

There is real concern being expressed both in letters to SSBA (2) and in the press with regard to the effect of late certification on pupils. Students who are going to university this year have been given priority over all others. Students who are appealing against Standard Grade results are not expected to get their results until Christmas.

Some of the students who started Higher courses in the 2000/2001 term are uncertain whether or not they will be allowed to continue should their appeals be turned down. The stress on these pupils is devastating. Teachers are not only having to deal with the problems of last year’s exams, but are also having to implement this year’s exam diet along with coping with pupil and teacher stress.

School Boards are concerned that those pupils who do not get their Higher results in time for UCAS placement in a university of their choice may have to move to other cities to gain entry.

Legal advice sought by SSBA and quoted in the current edition of SSBA’s newsletter ‘Grapevine’ (3) argues that any pupil who has gone through the trauma and distress of awaiting delayed exam results is entitled to a nominal amount of compensation for the anxiety they have had to endure. Others may have a much more substantial claim if they can show that they missed out on a college or university place as a result of the negligence of SQA. Any claim may include payment of one year’s salary for any pupils who find themselves one year behind in their careers as a result of the mess.

• to identify the causes of the difficulties encountered this year, including -
• - aspects of the marking process -

Shortage of markers, teachers being asked to remain in school during the holidays in order to allow SQA to contact them for missing information and the reported use of probationer teachers as markers all give cause for concern.
- problems with the administration of the SQA -

The crisis which has developed at SQA only became fully apparent on 10 August, the day fixed for the issue of certificates to students who sat examinations in the May/June diet. However, it had already been evident for some time before that date that the SQA were experiencing considerable difficulties.

The following examples illustrate the nature and extent of the problems experienced before 10 August:

- Numerous changes made by SQA to deadlines by which schools were to complete assessments and submit information to SQA
- Repeated requests to schools for information already forwarded
- Repeated requests by SQA to schools to check information
- Recruitment of additional markers well after the normal recruitment stage
- Requests to Education Authorities that markers be freed from classroom duties to undertake the marking (marking is normally done in teachers' own time)
- Request that a senior member of staff be available in each school for the first three weeks of the summer holiday period

However, from October 1999 to March 2000 member Boards raised concerns with SSBA over the new computer system at SQA. The Phoenix system in particular was reportedly corrupting information which was being transferred from schools. Schools were concerned that pupil details which were being lost would result in pupils not being able to sit exams because they were not named on the list and that not enough papers would be available on the day of the exam.

In March 2000 SSBA received a copy of an email from Banchory Academy to SQA (4) along with details of problems being faced at the time. These were similar to problems which SSBA was being alerted to from other schools.

In March 2000 SSBA sent this correspondence to SQA and the Chief Executive of SSBA spoke to Ron Tuck, Chief Executive of SQA who directed the enquiry to David Elliott and Bill Arundel of SQA.

The problems faced by schools between October and March included candidates who were entered for one subject inexplicably appearing as entered for Gaelic despite the fact that the school didn’t offer Gaelic. Eventually this and other problems were corrected after many hours work by teachers and office staff in schools as well as numerous discs being sent to SQA by schools.

In February SQA responded to schools with a list of errors but these were minor dealing mainly with addresses and candidate numbers. By March the schools had received a printout of the information sent in December listing individual candidate entries. The important thing to note here is that according to the files held in one particular school every pupil was correctly entered for each subject. However, the school reported having found errors in almost every subject and most noticeably where 80 students were not accounted for in Maths and 25 were missing from the English list. It was further reported that random units were missing from individual entries.

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which meant that these pupils would not be eligible for the course award since it would appear that they had not successfully completed all the units.

As far back as March 2000 SQA had identified the possibility that there may be errors on certificates issued to candidates. Schools raised many other concerns at the time, e.g. Had UCAS and the universities been warned about this, would youngsters be rejected for entry because they may not have passed according to incomplete certificates and if there were errors how and when would they be corrected?

Following several telephone calls to SQA, SSBA wrote to SQA and to the Minister Education and Children on 3rd April. SSBA expressed concern to SQA at the level of enquiries SSBA was receiving with regard to the new Phoenix Computer System which SQA was using to transfer information between schools and the SQA computer centre. SSBA also wrote to the Minister with a copy of the correspondence asking for his comments.

The ‘Herald’ newspaper (front page) and the BBC also carried SSBA concerns at the beginning of April.

On the 5th April SSBA Chief Executive received a letter from the Chairman of SQA(6) inviting her to meet with Ron Tuck and David Elliott so that they could outline the situation with the new APS system. He also referred in the letter to “the introduction of a new computer system at any time in any organisation causes great stress and that is certainly so within SQA”. She was also reassured in the letter, as other Board members had been assured, that any problems had been identified and were being dealt with by an extremely dedicated and hard-working staff.

Mrs Hill’s response dated 24 May 2000 (7) accepted the invitation to go to SQA and discuss the problem of Phoenix but suggested that it would be better to wait until the current round of examinations were complete and certificates had been awarded. “This would allow us to see if the system had worked”.

SSBA concerns were raised at SQA Board level along with the concerns of other members with direct links to schools, colleges and universities.

Although concerns were continually discussed at SSBA Executive Board level between April and the end of the school term in June, SSBA were continually told that the problems were small and that ‘everything would be all right’. As an SQA Board member, the Chief Executive had no reason to believe that there was anything different to tell the Executive Board of SSBA.

On 6th July SSBA wrote to SQA (8) to ask if one of the officers would come to the Executive Board meeting on the 2nd September to tell SSBA Executive Board members about the exam system and Higher Still in particular. Ron Tuck accepted the invitation and informed SSBA that David Elliot would attend on behalf of SQA. (9)

Immediately following the results coming out in August 2000, parents, School Boards, teachers and pupils contacted SSBA for help and advice. One of their main frustrations was not being able to get reliable advice from SQA. The information coming from SQA changed on a daily basis.

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Company Registration number - SC151749
Dr Dennis Gunning, Development Director at SQA attended his first public seminar since the start of the exam fiasco when he presented a paper to the Executive Board of SSBA on the 2nd September. His presentation discussed the role of SQA, the range of qualifications offered by SQA and the management arrangements of SQA. Dr Gunning also expressed SQA’s appreciation of the SSBA’s Chief Executive in her role as an SQA Board member.

Dr Gunning accepted our invitation to submit an article for the current edition of ‘Grapevine’ which has now been circulated to all schools and interested parties including MSPs.

SQA failed to answer the concerns raised time and again by schools and SSBA with regard to the new computer system and its continuing late development. SSBA is concerned that SQA under estimated the demands of Higher Still and would urge that SQA talk with teachers at the chalk face with regard to this issue.

- The implementation of Higher Still

At the start of this year’s session schools embarked on many of the new courses available within the Higher Still programme. The first Higher Still examinations were set in May/June of this year.

It was anticipated that the SQA would be well placed to handle the certification this year due to its reputation for past years service. A new and sophisticated computer system was installed at SQA and it was believed that this would cope well with all new certification processes.

Several parents, pupils and teacher members of School Boards have expressed concern that the implementation of Higher Still may have had a direct impact on the situation created by the lack of data management at SQA. Headteachers have expressed their support for the new assessment processes although most people would welcome the opportunity of review.

- The role of the Executive, and its relationship with the SQA, in relation to the events around the school exam results

SSBA would see the role of the Scottish Executive being to ensure that a proper context is created within which the examination process can operate.

- 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.

In a television interview on Wednesday 27 September, a Headteacher in Dumfries and Galloway advised the public that he had written to parents alerting them to the fact that he would be prepared to consider asking his local education authority to use the English Examination Boards instead of going back to SQA next year. As the Headteacher is also a Director of the Scottish Parent Teacher Council this should raise real concern to both the Government and the SQA.

This whole fiasco has been a nightmare for teachers but nothing like the nightmare they are facing at the moment. SQA and the Government ignored the concerns of teachers this year. They must involve teachers in correcting and improving the system for next year.

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There is no evidence that the software problems identified by SSBA in March have been corrected. SQA need to ensure that software development can now cope with next year’s exam results and there must be a way of ensuring that this is externally validated on a regular basis.

Resources, both in human and financial terms must be sufficient to ensure that there are enough staff to deal with the problems being faced at the moment. There is a real concern that the registration of pupils for the 2001 diet will be affected by the data management problems of the present situation.

The many current enquiries going on at the moment will hopefully find out what went wrong, why, who was to blame and come up with recommendations for putting it right so that this situation never happens again.

It has become evident in the past week that regular meetings took place between the senior management of SQA and the Civil Servants at the Scottish Executive Education Department who we presume would have rehearsed their concerns with the Minister. There is perhaps a need for the appointment of independent assessors between the SQA and the Scottish Executive.

Members of HM Inspectorate were regular attendees at all Council meetings of the Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum. SSBA’s Chief Executive was a member of Council for five years until its amalgamation with SCET. Such attendance at SQA meetings would be informative for Board members and the Minister alike in the future.

The Minister has set up a task force which includes the Directors of Education, representatives of ADES, Scottish Colleges, the independent sector and representatives of teachers and headteachers. SSBA is disappointed that the Minister did not see the need to have School Boards represented. However, we welcome the setting up of this group to consider how best to take forward the appeals system for the 2000 diet of exams.

Our immediate concern must be for the young people who have suffered through no fault of their own and for their teachers who continue to support them through this difficult period in their lives. So many of them have been so badly let down.

Teachers and students alike have delivered their side of the ‘Higher Still’ bargain. The SQA failed to deliver their side.

SSBA
28 September 2000

List of letters, reports, etc., attached.
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   b) 26 June - Strathaven Academy School Board - data  
   c) 5 September - Forres Academy - legal rights of parents  
   d) 12 September - Dalziel High School - disgusted at SQA performance  
   e) 15 September - Dumfries High School - Headteacher comments |
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| 6.  | 5 April - letter from Chairman of SQA to Ann Hill, Board member of SQA and Chief Executive of SSBA. |
| 7.  | 24 May - letter from Ann Hill to Chairman of SQA - accepting invitation but suggesting that she wait to see if the system works first. |
| 8.  | 6 July - SSBA invitation to SQA - attendance at Executive Board meeting of SSBA on 2 September 2000. |
| 9.  | 13 July - acceptance of invitation by SQA. |
| 10. | 2 September - presentation by Dr Dennis Gunning of SQA to SSBA. |

List of attachments to SSBA presentation to Scottish Parliament Education, Culture and Sport Committee meeting on Monday 2 October 2000 in Glasgow City Chambers.
# Scottish School Board Association

## List of attachments

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List of attachments to SSBA presentation to Scottish Parliament Education, Culture and Sport Committee meeting on Monday 2 October 2000 in Glasgow City Chambers.
SPEYSIDE HIGH SCHOOL BOARD

Mary Avenue
ABERLOUR
Banffshire
AB38 9QN

31 May 2000

Mr Ron Tuck
Chief Executive
Scottish Qualifications Authority
Hanover House
24 Douglas Street
GLASGOW
G2 7NQ

Dear Mr Tuck

SQA Timetable

At our recent Board Meeting the present SQA timetable was discussed. Concern was expressed that on two occasions, two major Higher exams were timetabled for the same day. This also applied to some Standard Grade exams which were also timetabled for the same day.

Members of the Board consider that the extra stress placed on pupils sitting both Higher and Standard Grade subjects by having to sit two different papers on the same day were unacceptable. They are also concerned that the length of time involved - 6 hours 15 minutes on one occasion - was not conducive to producing the best results for a pupil. The onus on pupils to succeed is definitely not helped by this extra burden of sitting two entirely different subjects on the same day with a short turn around period between exams.

We feel that more careful planning of the timetable is imperative to allow both Standard Grade and Higher pupils to perform to the best of their ability. We would ask that this issue be given your attention and express the hope that a similar timetable anomaly will not happen in future years.

Yours sincerely

Anne C Johnston
Chairperson
Speyside High School Board

Cc Mrs M Ewing, MSP
Mr Donald Duncan, Director of Education
Mr Sam Galbraith, Minister for Education
Mrs Ann Hill, SSBA
26 June 2000

Mrs Ann Hill
Chief Executive
Scottish School Boards Association
Newall Terrace
DUMFRIES
DG1 1LW

Dear Mrs Hill

Following our last School Board meeting I have been asked to write to you regarding concerns with Higher Still during the last year. Higher Still has featured on a number of occasions, in our agenda, where we have tried to understand all aspects of the new curriculum for upper school. However after much debate it has become evident that there are problems, which have greatly affected pupils, teachers and parents.

There have been difficulties associated with data between Schools and the Scottish Qualifications Agency. This has resulted in additional burdens being placed on teaching staff. We also understand some of these issues are still unresolved. A Board member contacted SQA helpline regarding internal assessment standards between authorities/schools. Personnel were unable to assure us that all schools apply the same criteria to assessments.

Both pupils and parents have experienced increased stress levels where a number of Higher Still Courses are taken, requiring a large number of assessments to be passed before the final examination can be taken.

As a School Board we do not wish pupils, teachers and parents to experience these problems next session. We wish pupils to be given every opportunity to succeed.

Your comments and help would be greatly appreciated.

Yours sincerely

Hilary Shorter
Chair – Strathaven Academy School Board
Scottish School Board Association

From: Glyn Dodwell <glyn@doddy.co.uk>
To: ssba.turbin@virgin.net
Subject: SQA
Date: 09 September 2000 09:12

I am the Vice Chairman of The Forres Academy School Board and we have our first meeting of the new year this Thursday. Can you please advise me what action the SSBA is taking over the exam fiasco and more importantly what legal rights parents have to sue the Scottish Assembly or the SQA if they can prove that their child has been disadvantaged by the errors and inefficiencies of the SA & SQA.

Hopefully you can get a reply to me before Thursdays. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours

Glyn Dodwell
Vice Chairman
Forres Academy School Board
DALZIEL HIGH SCHOOL
SCHOOL BOARD
Crawford Street, Motherwell, ML1 3AG
Telephone (01698) 301012

PLEASE REPLY TO:
88 North Lodge Avenue
Motherwell  ML1 2DB
Tel: 01698 891400 or 01698 262976

12th September 2000

Ann Hill
Chief Executive
Scottish School Board Association
Newall Terrace
Dumfries
DG1 1 LW

Dear Ann

Withdrawal of Scottish Executive Support for SCRE

I refer to your letter dated 6 September 2000 relating to the above, enclosing a copy of the Minister’s letter.

I am copying exactly the same letter which I received earlier in June signed by Graeme B. Wilson.

The only difference between the letters is that at least Ms Gabriella Pieraccini had the presence of mind to insert the date!

While writing, may I enquire as to what the SSBA intend doing with regard to next year’s SQA Examination Procedure. Not only are myself and my colleagues on the Dalziel High School Board absolutely dismayed and disgusted by the SQA performance this year, but are certainly apprehensive that a similar debacle may occur next year.

I look forward to hearing from you with your comments.

Kind regards
Yours sincerely

Scott M. Dugaid
Chairman, Dalziel High School Board
EVIDENCE TO SCHOOL EXAM RESULTS INQUIRY

IMPACT

- 56 Student University Places this year for those with conditional places.
- Places and accommodation were in danger and sometimes lost.
- 55 students waiting for appeals to apply to university next year. UCAs
  process has started already particularly Oxford, Cambridge and Medical
  Degrees.
- 56 students still at school moving from Intermediate II to Higher. Some
  appeals required.
- Standard Grade appeals delay causing some uncertainty but we are assuming
  students will be successful and have placed them on the appropriate
  curriculum.
- General lack of confidence in SQA 2000 results.
- Massive input of time by office staff, senior staff and other teaching staff.

MARKING PROCESS

Early indications of problems with marker system. Many staff being asked to mark
extra scripts. I had written to SQA last year expressing my concerns.

ADMINISTRATION PROCESS

Staff (both teaching and on teaching) worked very hard to have assessment data
complete and sent to SQA on time. Data (often electronic dice) was often lost and
requested again. We always complied with these requests. We checked that data was on
discs.

This used up lots of time (mainly office) and was very stressful.

HIGHER STILL

I am fully in support of Higher Still and we should not “throw the baby out with the
bath water” now. Many students have gained from Higher Still. Internal assessment
should not be scrapped.

However, teaching and assessment materials did arrive late making planning for
classes very difficult. Often staff were working only a week ahead of pupils. Staff
did find assessment onerous but we should become “sleeker” with practice.

CONCLUSION

In my opinion the main problem is that it is one of data handling by SQA. There is an
obvious increase in volume of data and material to be transferred between different
computer systems. The marking problem also required to be solved possibly by
offering attractive rates of payment.

COLIN M MITCHELL
Head Teacher
WHAT CAN PARENTS DO IF THEY ARE NOT HAPPY WITH THE EXAM RESULTS PROCESS

Cameron S. Yule, Partner in Ross, Harper and Murphy, Solicitors writes:

"Many pupils and their parents probably wonder what rights they may have to compensation following the recent fiasco surrounding the Higher Still examination results.

In the first instance you would require to prove negligence on the part of the Scottish Qualifications Authority which should not be difficult.

It could be argued that any pupil who has gone through the trauma and distress of awaiting delayed exam results is entitled to a nominal amount of compensation for the anxiety they have had to endure.

Some however may have a much more substantial claim if they can show that they missed out on a college or university place as a result of the negligence of the SQA and in particular their delay in issuing accurate results.

I think the best plan therefore is for every pupil who has been a victim of this fiasco to await the outcome of the appeals process and then seek a place in the university of their choice. If they miss out on such a place because of the negligence of the SQA, they should consult their solicitor with a view to initiating a claim for compensation. The claim could include payment of one year salary for any pupils who found themselves one year behind in their careers as a result of this mess.

If the SQA refuse to pay compensation then the best course might be to proceed with a test case against them. If this test case was successful, it is likely that they would then consider settling most of the other claims."

Development Unit, deliver on the promise to set up the National Assessment Bank to underpin teachers' and lecturers' assessment of National Units - the Bank now contains 1700 assessments. We did deliver the examination papers in a far wider range of subjects and levels than ever before in order to ensure that the Higher Still aim of bringing academic and vocational qualifications into a single system was achieved. It was very encouraging to see schools and colleges taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the new National Qualifications. As well as entries for 116,000 new-style Highers (there were also 46,000 entries for old-style Highers, nearly 60% of which were for English), there was encouraging uptake of the new Intermediate levels - 8,000 for Intermediate 1 and 34,000 for Intermediate 2.

SQA will now, in 2000/1, need to get itself back on track to take the portfolio of Scottish qualifications forward. There are important developments to complete in the new National Qualifications, such as the launch of the Advanced Higher. There are also important developments in other parts of the portfolio, such as the implementation of revisions to HNC and HND qualifications and the further development of Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs). The ambition, in setting up SQA, was to create a body which could drive forward progress across the full range of national qualifications for Scotland. Following this summer's difficulties, we now have to rebuild our reputation with all our stakeholders so that they are again confident that this ambition is in good hands.

Dr. Dennis Gunning, SQA

Grapevine
Email from Sandy Riddell, Banchory Academy to Helen.aikens@sqa.org.uk

21 March 2000 4.31 pm

Subject - NQ2000 Entries Records

Banchory Academy (and code no which can't read)

The printout of individual candidate entries received this morning shows an unmanageable number of errors when compared against our paper copy taken from our Phoenix system at the time the disc was sent to SQA. For example around 80 (eighty) pupils are missing from Standard Grade Maths alone.

Since we close for Easter in 10 days time and the system seems to be corrupted on a continual basis we are neither able nor prepared to undertake the task of amending these entries and sending an electronic return which we know will be corrupted. We intend therefore to make final amendments to presentations and entry levels and send our return to you as a paper print out from Phoenix.

We assume that you would wish to receive this information on an individual candidate basis, but would ask you to indicate whether you would also require a print out of candidate entry by subject.

Given the immense amount of effort and time already spent on this and the continuing problems with Phoenix, we feel this is the only way that we can ensure that our pupils receive accurate results certificates in August.

We would ask whether or not we should supply estimate grades and unit assessment information electronically or on paper.

We would appreciate a prompt response to this memo.
The print out of individual candidate entries received this morning shows an unmanageable number of errors when compared against our paper copy taken from our Phoenix system at the time the disc was sent to SQA. For example around 80 (eighty) pupils are missing from Standard Grade Maths alone.

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We would ask whether or not we should supply estimates of grades and unit assessment information electronically or on paper.

We would appreciate a prompt response to this memo.

Attention: Bill Arundell
0131-656-6944
(faxed)

22 MAR 2000
3 April 2000

Sam Galbraith
Minister for Education and Children
SEED
Victoria Quay
Edinburgh

Dear Sam

SQA - Phoenix Computer System

Please find enclosed a copy of a letter to Ron Tuck today regarding the new Phoenix System being used to transfer data between schools and SQA.

I would be pleased to have your comments on the situation.

Kind regards

[Signature]

Ann Hill
Chief Executive
SSBA
3 April 2000

Ron Tuck
Chief Executive
SQA
24 Hanover Street
Glasgow

Dear Ron

Phoenix System

I am concerned at the level of enquiries SSBA is receiving from School Boards and schools with regard to
the new Phoenix Computer System which SQA is using to transfer information between schools and the
centre.

I enclose a copy of a letter received today which I have already discussed with you.
I understand the school in question may have already contacted the press.

I would be grateful for your comments and look forward to David Elliott telephoning me as you have
suggested.

Kind regards

Ann Hill
Chief Executive
SSBA
(Retyped from faxes which were poor copies)

Letter to SSBA from Sandy Riddell, Banchory Academy dated 21 March 2000

What follows will be more a catalogue of random thoughts on the vagaries of the system rather than a balanced well thought out critique but I hope you can make sense of it all.

To begin with Phoenix -

Phoenix is the admin system purchased by a number of authorities in Scotland. By and large the admin side of things runs fairly well barring a few glitches here and there so that you might expect from any new software. The SQA2000 module however has been an unmitigated disaster. Whether this is due to Phoenix alone or whether SQA must bear some responsibility remains a moot point. Both have written to Aberdeenshire authority in terms which seek to minimise the size of the problem. So much so that one is forced to ask if they realise the seriousness of it.

From the start of this session we have experienced enormous difficulties with the system. We were not able to meet the normal October deadline for submission of entries because Phoenix continually corrupted the information fed into it. I will give you but one example of many. Candidates were entered for Art and Design inexplicably appeared as entered for Gaelic. This was amended but at another point when different information was being entered these candidates appeared back in Gaelic despite the fact that Gaelic as a subject had been “switched off” ie it was not a subject that was entered in Phoenix at all. We do not offer Gaelic. Eventually this and other problems were corrected after many many hours work and a disc was sent to SQA in December.

In February SQA responded with a list of errors. These were minor, dealing mainly with addresses and candidate numbers. I amended these and sent another disc to SQA on 3 February. There has been no response to this.

I sent another disc to SQA on 16 February listing amendments to candidate entries, candidate registration and entry withdrawals. There has been no response to this.

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First thing this morning an e mail came from Phoenix explaining how to overcome the errors identified after the print out had been checked (Incidentally do they realise how long it would take to check 150 pupils doing 8 Standard Grades each with 3 elements to be checked and nearly 300 pupils taken 4 or 5 Highers or similar qualifications with 3 or more units attached to each – we do like to teach now and again.

Leaving the checking aside for the moment the “solution” offered was to amend such errors manually - Fine if there are a handful but we are talking three figures here. Call me a cynic if you
like but I could almost guarantee that even if the time could be found to do this, the information would be corrupted by Phoenix and we would be back to square one.

Almost finished gurning
Part of the difficulty has been with SQA itself. Any contacts I have had with individuals within SQA have been very positive and helpful and they are clearly working very hard under extreme pressure but the organisation cannot escape criticism. The turn around of information has been very slow (see above) and they obviously have not been able to sort out problems with Phoenix especially around Music.

The issue of materials has been extremely late and even now some of it has not arrived (even for some subjects with a deadline of 25 March). Some of my Principal Teachers were informed today that they would be subject to central moderation again with a deadline of 28 March. This mind you on inaccurate lists. How are they supposed to gather together the required information by then as well as cope with the myriad other duties confronting them at this time of year AND facing cuts in staffing and funding next year. But that is another story.

The registration of candidate entries appears to be in such a mess that I have fears that we will not even have the correct number of papers for the candidates to sit in June. SQA say they will send extra papers but they do not appear to be aware of the size of the problem.

We have heard today that SQA have said that they still hope to get results out by 9 August as promised but that there may be errors in the certificates issued to candidates. This has major implications. Have UCAS and the universities been warned about this? Will young people be rejected for entry because they apparently have not passed? If there are errors how and when will these be corrected? Could this delay result in offers being given to A level candidates?

I hate to use cliches but we appear to be approaching meltdown. SQA and Phoenix are making soothing noises and no doubt will assure the Scottish Executive and the press and anyone else who asks that everything is in hand. It is not, and I have very real concerns, nay fears, as a teacher and as a parent about what faces our youngsters.

Sadly I have no solution to offer to the problem except to suggest that Phoenix should fall back into the ashes. Our own personal solution is contained in the copy of the email I sent to SQA this afternoon.

I hope all this makes sense to you and I hope that you can provoke some reaction through your organisation. For myself I intend to see my MSP on Monday.

Thanks for your interest.

Sandy Riddell
SQA and Phoenix

What follows will be more a catalogue of random thoughts on the vagaries of the system rather than a balanced well thought out critique but I hope you can make sense of it all.

To begin with Phoenix.

Phoenix is the main system purchased by a number of authorities in Scotland. By and large the admin side of things runs fairly well barring a few glitches here and there that you might expect from any new software. The SQA2000 module, however, has been an unmitigated disaster. Whether this is due to Phoenix alone or whether SQA must bear some responsibility remains a moot point. Both have written to Aberdeenshire authority in terms which seek to minimise the size of the problem. So much so that one is forced ton ask if they realise the seriousness of it.

From the start of this session we have experienced enormous difficulties with the system. We were not able to meet the normal October deadline for submission of entries because Phoenix continually corrupted the information fed into it. I will give you but one example of many. Candidates were entered for Art and Design inexplicably appeared as entered for Gaelic. This was amended but at another point when different information was being entered these candidates appeared back in Gaelic despite the fact that Gaelic as a subject had been "switched off" i.e. it was not a subject that was entered in Phoenix at all. We do not offer Gaelic. Eventually this and other problems were corrected after many many hours work and a disc was sent to SQA in December.

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Thanks for your interest
Sandy Riddell
5 April 2000

Ms Ann Hill
Mouswald House
Mouswald
DUMFRIES DG1 4LT

Contact Name – Diane McNeil at Glasgow
Direct Line – 0141 242 2052
E-mail address: diane.mcnell@sqa.org.uk

Dear Mrs Hill

I was a bit taken aback by the comments that you gave to The Herald and made later on television. I write to invite you to come into SQA and meet with Ron Tuck and David Elliot so that they can outline to you the current situation and our new APS system.

Because of your other commitments, I know that you have been unable to attend a Board meeting since a year ago but it is at these Board meetings where detailed explanations have been given of the current situation and the actions being taken to ensure that SQA meets all its obligations. I am sure you will understand that the introduction of a new computer system at any time in any organisation causes great stress and that is certainly so within SQA.

I believe you were quoted as commenting that you thought the SQA was in ‘meltdown’ and that is certainly not the case. It is for that reason that I believe an early meeting with SQA to update you on the situation is important for you because I can’t imagine that you wish to be associated, as a Board member, with an organisation which can thus be described in this way.

We would seek to reassure you, as other Board members were assured, that any problems have been identified and are being dealt with by an extremely dedicated and hard-working staff. I suppose that I am concerned that the fact that you are a Board member gave added credence to some quite untrue press claims particularly about students being denied the opportunity to sit exams.

On another occasion, if you have concerns, I hope you would feel free to contact SQA about them so that we can give you the SQA background in advance of such press coverage occurring. Please take up the invitation to come in and I look forward to seeing you at the next Board meeting.

I enclose a copy of a letter from Ron Tuck to other Board members for your information.

Yours sincerely

David Miller
Chairman

Approval Certificate
No. 923554
24 May 2000

David Miller
Chairman
SQA
Hanover House
24 Douglas Street
Glasgow
G2 7NQ

Dear David

Thank you for your recent letter regarding comments I had made to the ‘Herald’ with regard to the new phoenix system.

I will be happy to come and talk with the relevant department about the problems perceived in schools with the new phoenix system.

I am sure you will agree that you cannot believe everything you read in the press. However, I am still getting feedback from schools that they are concerned about the system and whether or not pupils will get the proper certification, if there will be enough exam papers, etc.

As you are also aware, I have indeed missed most of the Board meetings this year because of the problems being faced at SSBA. However, I have indicated to Ron Tuck that I would be willing to tender my resignation and have indeed offered to do so. At that time Ron asked me to reconsider on the understanding that I would be able to devote more time to SQA in the coming year. I would be happy to stand down should you feel it would benefit SQA. I would not take any offence at the suggestion.

I will of course take up your kind invitation to come in and discuss the problem of phoenix with you but I suggest that we wait until the current round of examinations are complete and certificates have been awarded. This would allow us to see if the system has worked.

I assure you of my best intentions and apologise to SQA if I have caused any embarrassment.

Yours sincerely

Ann Hill
Chief Executive
SSBA
6 July 2000

Ron Tuck
Chief Executive
SQA
Hanover House
24 Douglas Street
Glasgow
G2 7NQ

Dear Ron

HIGHER STILL

The Executive Board of SSBA would be delighted if you would consider coming to the next meeting of the Board which is on Saturday 2 September 2000 at 9.30 am. The Board meeting will be held in the Quality Hotel Central, Glasgow.

Member Boards are becoming increasingly concerned over the various newspaper articles on this year’s round of Higher Still. They are also being approached by parents who are concerned over the quality of Highers for this year.

Executive Board members are keen to help allay the fears of parents and also help in any way we can by working together for the benefit of our students. A presentation lasting no more than 30 minutes on the Higher Still exams for this year would be most appreciated.

I look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Kind Regards.

Yours sincerely

Alan Smith
President
Our ref. RT/1H/HLT36

13 July 2000

Mr A Smith
President
Scottish School Board Association
Newall Terrace
DUMFRIES
DG1 1LW

SCOTTISH QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY

31 JUL 2000

Dear Alan

HIGHER STILL

Thanks for your letter of 6 July. Unfortunately, I will be on holiday on 2 September. However, David Elliot, Director of SQA’s Awards Division is available and would be happy to talk to your Executive Board.

If this is acceptable, David’s PA, Marjorie Robb, will be in touch to confirm arrangements.

Yours sincerely

Ron Tuck
Chief Executive
SSBA – 2 September 2000 – Glasgow

SQA in 2000 – Sheet 1

SQA’s role:

- advising the Scottish Executive on matters relating to qualifications
- developing qualifications and their support material and assessment
- approving, moderating and auditing centres
- quality assuring assessment and determining awards
- processing entry and results data and issuing certificates
- accrediting Scottish Vocational Qualifications
- supporting and liaising with stakeholders
- undertaking commercial activities

Range of qualifications

- Scottish Vocational Qualifications at levels 1 (operative) to 5 (executive)
- Higher National Certificates and Diplomas and other higher education awards
- National Qualifications (Units, Courses and Scottish Group Awards) at levels from
  Access to Advanced Higher. Also includes Standard Grade
- “legacy” qualifications such as SCE, CSYS, GSVQs, Short Courses and National
  Certificate modules
- Customised Qualifications

Management Arrangements

- Interim Chief Executive – Bill Morton

- Development Division – headed by Dennis Gunning – responsible for strategy and policy
  for the SQA’s qualifications portfolio, for interaction with other sectors (such as in the
  development of SCQF), develops qualifications, assessment and support material;
  manages stakeholder groups such as Advisory Groups and Assessment Panels.
  International work. (all based in Glasgow)

- Awards Division – vacancy for Director – deals with quality assurance of centres and
  assessment and assessment research and development and the IT system (all based in
  Glasgow and Dalkeith) and with the processing of data from centres, certification and
  printing and despatch of examination papers (both based in Dalkeith).

- External Relations and Customer Services Division – headed by Don Giles – deals with a
  range of support functions such as finance, corporate planning, HRM (all based in
  Glasgow and Dalkeith), marketing, publications, liaison strategy, accreditation of SVQs
  (based in Glasgow) and appointment of markers and committee services (based in
  Dalkeith)
SSBA – 2 September 2000 – Glasgow

SQA in 2000 – Sheet 2

Candidate Numbers

By qualification family –

- Scottish Vocational Qualifications – around 50,000 candidates annually
- Higher National qualifications – around 60,000 candidates annually
- National Qualifications – around 200,000 candidates annually
- Customised Qualifications – around 10,000 candidates annually

By sector –

- schools – 125,000 candidates
- FE – 145,000 candidates
- private sector – 50,000 candidates

Key strategic issues

- Full implementation of National Qualifications
- Implementation of revised design rules for HNC and HND
- Review of flexible group awards, including expansion of Scottish Progression Awards
- Supporting stakeholder initiatives – eg SURE, BBC, New Deal
- With stakeholder partners, developing and implementing SCQF
- ICT-based assessment project
- Monitoring standards over time

2000 – achievements

- 5-year strategy for development of the qualifications portfolio agreed
- Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework launched
- ICT-based assessment project launched
- Advisory Groups launched and Assessment Panels ready to meet.
- New National Qualifications implemented, including publication of 1700 National Assessment Bank packs and printing and distribution of 680 question papers (an increase of 70%).
- Range of subjects expanded – now Highers (and candidates) in areas such as Psychology, Care, Media Studies and Electronics – as well as in traditional areas.
- Candidate numbers for non-Higher encouraging (8,000 entries for courses at Int 1 and 34,000 for Int 2); 800 entries for Scottish Group Awards
- Scottish Qualifications Certificate and new group award commemorative certificate introduced
- Standard Grades in modern languages and technological studies reviewed.
- All “legacy” units and modules being brought into new framework.
- Work begun on pilots of new design rules for HNC and HND in Computing, in Social Science and in Communication.
SSBA – 2 September 2000 – Glasgow

SQA in 2000 – Sheet 3

2000 certification

- Problems identified with certification, due largely to incomplete data on candidate entries and results.
- Affected 5000 candidates at Higher/CSYS and 4000 candidates at Standard Grade – 10,000 awards required to be re-checked.
- Where data was missing, its supply led to awards being made or confirmed or to grades being improved, depending on the nature of the data. Priority given to candidates identified by UCAS for higher education entry.
- Candidates and centres affected have been contacted and the aim is to have all incomplete data in place and awards confirmed by the start of next week.
- Health-checks have been or are about to be run on all aspects of candidate entry/results database.
- Vocational qualifications certification (which does not centre on 9 August) is continuing to be run regularly.

Remedial action

- Results and schools/colleges technical helplines set up
- Full staff deployment on resolution of problems
- Staffing issues
- Internal review has begun – will report to the Board on 21 September
- External reviews also being arranged
- Appeals system expanded to deal with expected increase in numbers of appeals
- Re-certification in the autumn
### Effect of incomplete data – examples

**Missing Unit Results**

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**Missing assessment data**

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<td>Int2</td>
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</tr>
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*Those marked * were not entered on the database*
The Scottish Parliament Education Committee

Schools Exam Results Inquiry

Confidentiality
We note that the Committee intends to place all submissions in the Parliament's Information Centre for Inspection. We would welcome our submission being made available for public scrutiny. However, we are aware that there are people who work within various organisations who have a lot of knowledge about what went wrong but who may fear that their jobs are at risk if they provide evidence publicly. We therefore urge the Committee to offer potential witnesses the option of confidentiality/anonymity.

Introduction
In providing evidence to this Inquiry, we are clearly not competent to discuss the internal workings of SQA whilst individual experiences are best provided directly by the parents and pupils who suffered them. Therefore, our main focus is on the wider context and the reasons why the warnings, which many now say they clearly gave, appeared to have had no impact. In doing this we draw on our continuous involvement in the Higher Still development programme since its inception in 1994. However, as an illustration of the problems faced by schools, we start by detailing the specific but typical complaints from one of our member schools.

Specific but typical complaints from a school
1) There were indications in advance of this year that SQA was not working well. In 1998-99 the school in question had massive problems with one subject. Pupils with excellent results from Standard Grade in the subject and A and B results in their other Highers were getting Cs or failing in this subject. The school had no confidence in the examining team.

2) The school had a catalogue of problems with HSDU and SQA
   - Various course materials were not delivered on time by HSDU
   - There were late changes to the marking schemes for some unit assessments with consequential changes to students' unit outcomes
   - Unit tests were not available on time
   - Amendments were made to final exam exemplars (see also the results of SPTC's survey)
   - The internal assessments did not reflect the requirements for the external assessments (see also the results of SPTC's survey)
   - There were unnecessary demands made on departments for moderation. Materials were requested by SQA, prepared and sent away by the school and then returned unmoderated
Forms for putting in returns arrived late and had inaccuracies on them
- There was a shortage of examiners for practical elements such as music
- Teachers who had not agreed to be markers were repeatedly sent scripts to mark
- SQA required the school to be manned from 3rd to 21st July and the school found itself sending the same information over and over again
- Results did not reflect school estimates in a range of subjects
- Results in a range of subjects were incomplete because of missing unit data
- For the current year, some material, due in June, has yet to arrive

Our correspondent concludes with the following comment:
"Personally, I have no faith in SQA and believe that the re-shuffling of existing personnel, especially those with a ScotVEC background, will not solve the problems. ScotVEC personnel presided over a system of certification which was riddled with inconsistencies and which had very little credibility among secondary schools. This lack of rigour and consistency has now infected SQA."

**Complexity of Higher Still**

In considering the problems with the Exam Results, it is necessary to reflect on how much the sheer complexity of Higher Still was a contributory factor.

Higher Still was developed to serve the following main objectives. It was designed to:
- provide meaningful courses to youngsters who were staying on at school beyond S4 but who could not take the Higher in one year
- provide a route for all youngsters to reach the Higher by making the different levels compatible
- end the divide between academic and non-academic courses by bringing both onto a common framework
- offer a single programme which was suitable for FE and schools.

Reflecting on these objectives, we would suggest that the first three could be and were accommodated reasonably easily. The development of courses at different levels but with a common framework both provided the necessary courses for youngsters who could not do Higher in one year and offered the chance for progression. Treating academic and non-academic subjects the same required that the final external assessment should be varied according to the nature of the subject. However, this approach was already in use vide "performance" as an element in music, or "painting/drawing" as an element in art. There was no difficulty in extending this principle to other subjects. The real difficulties arose in accommodating the needs of FE and schools. Schools have a captive audience of students who do courses in a single year. FE colleges have variable groups of students who start and stop courses at different times, who may be full-time or part-time. In many respects it was trying to accommodate the diverse needs of these different groups which caused the complexity because it was this which led to the development of units as well as courses, of unit assessments as well as external final assessments and which introduced the second diet of exams.

There were two further consequences of this change.

1. The first was the massive increase in formal assessment and the recording of such assessment - on a crude analysis it went up by a factor of four for each pupil. We would suggest that the sheer volume of assessment which had to be recorded contributed to the
problems with the exam results and that whilst this quantity of assessment remains, then the risk of problems in the future will remain.

2. Secondly, it meant that both the school and FE sector were operating in ways that they were not totally familiar with. Although schools had, in the past, some experience of SCOTVEC modules and internal assessments, the unit assessments on this scale took them into unfamiliar territory whilst, for the FE colleges, the external assessments for all students similarly posed new challenges. This is an issue which could be overcome in time, as the two sectors become more familiar with the changes in approach, but we would suggest that it could remain a source of problems in the current year.

Surveys of pupils, parents and teachers, undertaken before the examination results were issued and clouded peoples' views, showed liking for the units but reservations about the assessment burden. The units were seen as helpful in keeping youngsters working steadily all year and avoiding the last minute cram. However, criticisms of the assessments were that there were too many, those for different subjects all came together, they took away from teaching time and they were not good predictors or indicators of the final exam. We attach a copy of our survey results to support this evidence.

"Refusal to listen" attitude.

A significant problem in the development of Higher Still was the way the voices and views of those outside an inner core group were largely ignored, even when they were persistent in what they said, when everyone said the same thing or they were right.

Higher Still was a product of the HMI. It was written by an Inspector and it was steered through by the Inspectorate. To the extent that it was their initiative, HMI had a vested interest in seeing it implemented. We would suggest that this meant they tended to disregard difficulties and we offer a number of concrete illustrations of this.

Higher English

Whilst the developments in many subjects were accepted by those working in the subject, English teachers objected from the very beginning to the changes to Higher English. It is worth mentioning that the English panel was deliberately put under the chairmanship of a non-English specialist - George Smuga whose background was in Modern Studies. Here, one of the problems was the attempt to marry the SCOTVEC courses in communication with the old Higher English. School English teachers felt so strongly that what was being proposed was wrong that they set up an organisation, Scottish Association of Teachers of Language and Literature (SATOLL), to campaign against it. They kept to their line despite considerable vilification. Eventually, it was conceded that there had been so many changes to Higher English that it was agreed both to allow a year's delay in the implementation of the new course and to make modifications. Then, at the end of last session, it was agreed that there could be a further year's delay to the implementation of Higher Still English although many teachers complained that by the time the announcement was made (23rd June 2000) it was too late to be helpful, as many schools had already embarked on their courses for the 2001 diet of exams.

Burden of Assessment

As with English, teachers raised objections from the beginning about the burden of assessment in schools. This was a permanent theme which was never really addressed. However, as the course was implemented, evidence emerged to support their case.
• Students were not at the right level to sit the unit assessments at the end of each unit and so there was more re-sitting than anticipated.
• In some subjects the solution was to deliver all the unit assessments together, at the end of the course, immediately before the diet of external exams.
• Students were asked to do unit assessments in several subjects in the same week.

Computer provision in schools
During the development of Higher Still it became increasingly evident that ITC was going to be very important for how schools managed the courses, for delivering the core skill in ITC and as an element of various subjects. However, schools were increasingly nervous as many had very poor computer provision. Aware of this, in 1996 SPTC undertook a survey of computer provision in secondary schools. Of the 405 secondary and primary/secondary schools that we sent the survey to, 213 replied - a response rate of 53% which is good for an organisation such as ours. Perhaps the most significant finding was that of the computers for use by pupils, 25% were "old" BBCs and 60% were more than 4 years old. Our then convener, Judith Gillespie, presented the findings to the Higher Still Development Strategy Group. She recalls the experience as similar to being torn limb from limb by rotweilers. The information was dismissed and published with such memorable comments as "a computer is a computer and it does not matter what machine you use". Interestingly, following the General Election in 1997, the Government itself undertook a survey of computer provision in schools and came up with remarkably similar results. At that point huge amounts of money were poured in through the National Grid for Learning to rectify the situation. So, when computer provision was not Government policy, any problems were denied. Once it became Government policy, action was taken and checking computer provision became a feature of school inspections. It would seem that those at the centre will only listen to that information which coincides with their agenda rather than assessing it objectively.

Implementation
In 1998 it became apparent that there were going to be considerable difficulties in introducing Higher Still. SPTC recognised that Higher Still was urgently needed for those youngsters who could not take the Higher in fifth year and we were concerned that the whole programme would be lost with the effect that the needs of these youngsters would not be met for some considerable time. We therefore proposed that one solution was to introduce Higher Still in the order in which it was most needed, i.e. starting with the lower level courses and working up to the Higher as there were no actual problems with the Higher itself. We put our proposal to two different groups. Alison Kirby, SPTC's then convener, wrote to Douglas Osler asking for the point to be considered by the Higher Still Implementation Group of which she was a member. The minutes show that her letter was merely read, but not in any way discussed. Judith Gillespie, then our Development Manager, wrote to officials within the SORID. This correspondence shows that we were concerned that the whole Higher Still programme was in danger of failing and we made the following point:

"The sub-Higher levels are the ones which are most desperately needed - the ones where the current provision in schools is very weak. Moreover, teachers are right to point to improving Higher's results and to ask what is wrong with the current Higher."

We identified a number of other benefits from introducing the programme in this way, including the following.
"It will allow for any problems that may exist in the system to emerge and be corrected before the Higher level courses are introduced."

The response we got was that the decision had already been taken and that it would be too hard to reverse the development process. When we pursued this to ask when and why the decision had been taken, we were told that it had been announced by Brian Wilson at a COSLA conference in June 1998. We were also told that the reason for introducing it this way was that, because the change to the curriculum content of the Highers was minimal, teachers would only have to concern themselves with the changes in procedure, and not with course content. However, the weakness of this argument was revealed when the implementation was finally undertaken. It was determined that eight subjects, including two of the five most commonly taken Highers - Chemistry and English - had had such significant curriculum changes that schools were allowed to delay their introduction for a further year. Perhaps true reason was the concern of one official, expressed to us and recorded in our correspondence, that if Higher Still were introduced this way round, then the Higher would never be implemented.

Awareness of problems
There are a great number of people who, with the wisdom of hindsight are saying that they knew, back in April, that the exams would lead to this kind of fiasco. We have tried to pin these people down to ask whom they told of their concerns. It would seem that they were widely voiced at meetings attended by SQA, HMI and local authority education officials. The question has to be asked why HMI did not act on this information. Indeed, a serious question has to be asked about the HMI report presented to the Higher Still Liaison Group on 15th February which gave a very positive view of the introduction of Higher Still. If there was such chaos in the schools either why did the HMI not notice it or why did the schools not make it clear during their inspections? It has been suggested to us that people at every level were afraid to say anything negative. Staff were "constrained in their complaining" and the "machine is geared to keep people in their place". This brings us full circle back to the original point we made about allowing people to give evidence in confidence. However, it is worrying if the system is not open enough to allow teachers to report legitimate concerns for fear that this will somehow have repercussions on their employment.

It is worth pointing out that even on 15th February, when the HMI report was presented, reservations were expressed about the findings. Item 12 of the minutes of the meeting of the Higher Still Liaison Group (15.02.00), reads as follows:

Some members queried the finding of lack of stress from over assessment. A survey carried out by ADES had showed (sic) the opposite, and this was also supported by information available to the teaching unions.

Attitude of HMI
One reason why pronouncements of problems are not heard is because there is a tendency in HMI to regard any problems as arising from flawed practice on the part of teachers rather than as the result of flaws in the system. For example, in the Standards and Quality report on Modern Studies in Secondary Schools (1995-1999) the quality of courses in S1 and S2 is deemed to have important weaknesses or be unsatisfactory in 60% of the schools inspected. When such a large proportion of schools are judged to be failing, it would be reasonable to consider that what was being asked of schools was at fault rather than that schools were at fault for the delivery. The same attitude was revealed over a survey of the implementation of
Higher Still English in those schools that went ahead with the course in 1999-2000. Questions were raised about how these schools had responded to assessment and whether class size affected their response. Douglas Osler replied (23rd July) that "a number of departments with both large and small class sizes commented that they found the requirements of assessment and re-assessment, including assessment of the oral presentation, to be time consuming". But he went on to add "where national advice had been implemented on integrating oral work with other work, such as literature, assessment time was not "lost" but contributed well to progress in other aspects of the course"

Again the approach seems to be that it is the schools which are failing to deliver what they are being asked to deliver and no consideration is given to the possibility that the demands on them might be unreasonable.

Role of politicians
The first meeting of the Higher Still Development Programme was in August 1994 when Lord James Douglas Hamilton was the Minister with responsibility for education. He was succeeded by Raymond Robertson, Brian Wilson, Helen Liddell and now Sam Galbraith. The Westminster Ministers all had other major responsibilities such as Health or Housing. Only Helen Liddell had a relatively light load in terms of departmental responsibilities, but she had Labour Party responsibility for spearheading the election for the Scottish Parliament. On top of these diverse responsibilities, Westminster Ministers also had to be in Westminster several days of the week. There was never any ministerial presence at any of the Higher Still Development, Implementation and Liaison Committees attended by SPTC representatives until the Liaison meeting on 13th September 2000. (A further meeting also to be chaired by the Minister has now been set for 29th September 2000). Despite this, references were periodically made that "this is a decision for the Minister to take". On one occasion the simple statement was expanded to include the comment "and he's not minded to take it" suggesting either that mind-reading is a job requirement for HMI or that Ministers were given very strong advice as to what decision they should take.

It is clear that, given the other commitments on Ministers' time, the many changes in personnel and the complexity of the development, it would be very hard for any Minister to be fully aware and informed about Higher Still.

Changes in Personnel
Over and above the many changes in Minister during the development and implementation of Higher Still, there were a lot of other changes in key personnel.

♦ The Senior Chief HMI changed although Douglas Osler, the new Senior Chief Inspector had, as Depute, been a member of the Curriculum and Assessment Committee which, in many respects, was the key committee in the development programme.

♦ Most, if not all, officials in the relevant departments of the variously named SOED, SOEID, SEED changed. Whilst this is common practice within the civil service and officials argue that incomers are well briefed, new people inevitably deal with the situation as they find it and have no real knowledge of all the arguments involved in reaching that current situation.

♦ Local Government underwent reorganisation resulting in changes to authorities and directors of education.

♦ The heads of SEB, SCOTVEC and SCCC all changed.
This high changeover in personnel is common to all developments, but the sheer complexity of the Higher Still programme meant that it resulted in very few people having a full grasp of everything that is involved. In so far as this Inquiry intends making recommendations, it is a process which might be looked at for the future.

**Multiplicity of committees**

Another aspect of the programme which is probably a feature of all such developments but which helps explain why messages from the grass roots seemed not to reach the decision-makers, is that the programme moved along through a multiplicity of committees. The initial development had been undertaken by four massive committees supported by a series of subject panels. Once the programme reached implementation stage, the original idea was to replace the development committees by one implementation committee. However, this proved ineffective and so there grew up a proliferation of committees, working parties and focus groups, some set up by SQA and some by HMI. Remits and personnel overlapped with Ron Tuck and the same union representatives often serving on more than one committee. However, the complexity of the arrangements meant it would not have been very clear to anyone not directly involved where information could be placed most usefully. Moreover, this complexity of committees was compounded by the multiplicity of organisations - SQA, HMI and the Higher Still Development Unit. All of these bodies had different responsibilities and sent materials to schools which were then left confused as to which body they should approach with complaints. For their part, it was extremely easy for the different bodies to say a problem was not their responsibility and then take it no further.

**Resources - problems of the bid system**

An ongoing argument from schools was the lack of resources for implementing Higher Still - the lack of materials, money and time for staff development etc. At the end of 1998, Helen Liddell announced that considerably extra resources would be available. However, despite her reassurances, headteachers continued to complain that it was not reaching schools. An early meeting of the Higher Still Liaison Group established that one problem was the bid system now used to distribute resources to local authorities. It has become common practice for central Government to require local authorities to put in bids detailing how they propose to spend new money earmarked for special projects. This system was used to distribute the extra money for Higher Still and at an early meeting of the Higher Still Liaison Group it was established that bureaucracy had taken over - that rather than money being paid out as quickly as possible, local authority bids were being returned to them for refinement. One of the successful actions of the Liaison Group was to speed up this process.

Scottish Parent Teacher Council
September 2000
SPTC - Survey, August 2000

HIGHER STILL PARENTS' SURVEY - REPORT

Distribution and Response

1200 copies of the attached questionnaire were sent to 150 secondary schools in June for distribution to the parents of youngsters who had sat SQA exams this year. The schools were the 134 secondaries who are members of SPTC plus 15 secondary schools in Glasgow and one in Clackmannanshire. (SPTC has no secondary school members in these two authorities). Schools were sent 1 questionnaire per 100 pupils on the school roll, rounded to the nearest hundred. Each questionnaire (plus a free post reply envelope) was in a stamped envelope ready for addressing and posting. Headteachers were sent a covering letter asking for their co-operation. In order to ensure a random distribution, we asked headteachers to send the questionnaires out to parents, starting at a specific letter and treating the alphabet as a continuous loop if necessary.

Clearly this is a busy time of year for school offices and some schools found the instructions unclear, some sent the questionnaires out after the return date and some did not select out the relevant year group. Despite all the difficulties we received 284 responses from parents at 97 secondary schools, 173 came from the parents of girls, 104 from the parents of boys and 7 who did not say. We would like to thank all schools who distributed the questionnaire and all parents who responded.

Subjects and Levels

Overall, the survey pupils did 34 different subjects ranging from 246 who took English at various levels down to one pupil who took Travel and Tourism at Intermediate level. There were 739 new Higher Still higherers, 293 old Higherers, 138 intermediate levels (both one and two), and 63 other, including some CSYS presentations.

The main Old Higher subjects were English, Art, Computing, Chemistry and Secretarial Studies. Intermediate level was most commonly done in Maths, English, the Sciences, French and PE. The following table gives the details of subjects taken by more than 20 of our survey sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>HS/H</th>
<th>OH/H</th>
<th>HS/INT</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physics</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computing</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern Studies</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Table 2 Top subjects by gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>%Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>%Boys</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>88.0%</td>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>90.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>74.3%</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>82.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>32.6%</td>
<td>Physics</td>
<td>66.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>30.1%</td>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>40.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>23.4%</td>
<td>Computing</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physics</td>
<td>22.3%</td>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>22.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>Modern Studies</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A review of the subjects taken by boys and girls showed quite different patterns. Boys' choices were more concentrated and science focused, whereas girls' choices were more evenly spread. Also, although there were more girls than boys in our survey and Physics was only the sixth most popular subject for the girls, boys took Physics in such numbers that it was the third most commonly taken subject overall.

Course content

Parents were asked to assess course content as being excellent, satisfactory or poor. The majority rated it satisfactory with more saying it was excellent than said it was poor. Girls' parents were 50% more likely than boys' parents to give an "excellent" rating.

Table 3 Percentage ratings for course content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comment</th>
<th>All</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfactory</td>
<td>76.6</td>
<td>74.9</td>
<td>80.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Course Work

Parents were asked whether they felt that the amount of hand-in work required was reasonable, excessive or unknown. Most people regard it as reasonable although girls' parents were almost twice as likely as boys' parents to regard it as excessive.

Table 4 Percentage ratings for amount of course work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comment</th>
<th>All</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reasonable</td>
<td>79.7</td>
<td>77.7</td>
<td>83.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excessive</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Internal Assessments

Parents were given a range of comments on internal assessments and asked to tick all that applied. They were also asked to indicate if a specific comment applied only to one subject.
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Table 5 Percentage ratings on Internal Assessments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comment</th>
<th>All</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>generally helpful</td>
<td>49.3</td>
<td>49.1</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kept your son/daughter focused on work</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>51.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a poor indicator of what the final exam would be like</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>40.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>there was too much internal assessment</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>36.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>well spaced</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>29.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>there were too many assessments close together</td>
<td>46.5</td>
<td>48.6</td>
<td>42.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it was very stressful</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>26.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most commonly cited comment was that the internal assessments were generally helpful. Overall, five parents made this comment for every three who rated them as "stressful", although girls' parents were slightly more likely than boys' parents to rate internal assessments as stressful. In contrast, boys' parents were more enthusiastic than girls' parents on the value of internal assessment for keeping youngsters focused on work. Despite this enthusiasm, boys' parents were also more likely than girls' parents to say that the internal assessments were a poor indicator of the final exam. However, just over a third of all groups of parents said that there was too much internal assessment whilst nearly half said that there were too many assessments too close together, although here the parents of girls were more likely to say this than the parents of boys. It is reasonable to assume that some of the differences in the responses from the parents of boys and girls was due to the different subject choices made by boys and girls.

External Exams

Table 6 Percentage ratings on External Exams

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comment</th>
<th>All</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Easy</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>44.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>22.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>well spaced</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>too close together</td>
<td>35.2</td>
<td>38.7</td>
<td>29.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>similar to school tests</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quite different from school tests</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>40.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Only 3 respondents said that the external exam was easy and only one of these took five subjects.

The most common comment for all groups was that the external exams were fair, followed by the observations that they were quite different from school tests and they were too close together. Girls' parents were more likely than boys' parents to rate the external exams as "hard" and were considerably less likely to rate them as well spaced - again, these differences are possibly the product of different subject choices. This section attracted the most individual subject comments. 154 respondents observed that the exam in one particularly subject had been hard. Of these, by far and away the most were about Maths. There were 228 students taking the subject, and 109 respondents commented that the final exam was hard. English was the next most commonly cited as "hard", but attracted only 13 such comments, 11 of these from pupils taking the Old Higher. Biology attracted 8 "hard" comments, and Physics and Chemistry four each. The second most common subject specific
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comment, made by 71 respondents, was that the external exams were quite different from school tests. 58 of such comments were made about Maths.

However, parents were able to identify the things they liked whilst also recognising that there had been some problems in these areas. So, of the 110 people who said that the external exam was quite different to the school exam, 45.5% also said that the internal assessments had been generally helpful and 47.3% said that they had helped keep the pupil focused on work. There was a core group of 32.7% who said "yes" to both positive comments on internal assessment.

New Aspects of Higher Still

Table 7 Percentage ratings of Awareness of New Aspects of Higher Still

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Very aware</th>
<th>Aware</th>
<th>Vaguely aware</th>
<th>Not a clue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Five new levels of qualification Access - Advanced Higher</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core Skill</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>36.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scottish Group Awards</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>49.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational and Academic courses available</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>38.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Parents were asked how aware they were of various new aspects of Higher Still. In general people were fairly well aware of the different levels, but were fairly ignorant of core skills, Scottish Group Awards and that there were vocational and academic courses available. Overall, the highest level of ignorance was of Scottish Group Awards. It is fair to say this level of awareness is entirely rational as, this year, parents only needed to understand the different levels and then only in those schools which were offering different levels. However, this general lack of awareness of the new aspects of Higher Still clearly increased confusion amongst parents once the certificates were issued making reference to Group Awards and Core Skills.

Previous Child Sat Highers

Respondents were asked whether they had had a previous child sitting Highers and, if so, how the present system compared. 114 respondents fell into this category and their comparative views were "better" 21.0%, "about the same" 38.6% and "worse" 32.4%.

Comments

We asked respondents to comment on two aspects: firstly, to give comments on their youngster's experience of the programme and, secondly, for those with an older child, to highlight any differences from the old higher which seemed significant. It was often not clear which points respondents were commenting on, so we have treated them all as 'comments' and percentages are of the total number. In all, 149 respondents supplemented their replies with comments. Of these, 57% were from the parents of girls, 41% from the parents of boys and in 2% of cases we did not know the gender of the child. Some people made more than on point. Unless otherwise stated, all subsequent percentages in this section refer to the 149 people who made comments.
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Maths attracted the most comments (23% of the sample) with most making reference to how hard Paper 1 had been. One respondent called it "sadistic", one reported their son as being "shell-shocked" and one said it was so difficult "the teacher couldn't do one question". Many respondents identified differences between the final exam and unit assessments as a problem, others claimed the final paper did not relate to the course and one commonly repeated complaint was that the final exam was different from the specimen paper.

The next most commonly made remark (21% of the sample) was to comment negatively on internal assessment. Here the most common types of concern were the stress caused, the time taken up and the disparity in level between the unit assessments and the final exam. However, these actual comments should be set against the more positive rating given to internal assessment in the earlier section of the questionnaire. Some 11% of all respondents made actual comments which were negative about internal assessment compared to the 49.3% who indicated that the internal assessments had been generally helpful.

General confusion or administrative chaos was the next most common comment (20% of the sample). The most common types of concern were that teachers seemed uncertain about the new programme, there was a lack of material and resources, and a lack of information for parents. Two questioned the design feature that pupils could fail a unit, pass the final exam and not get the award, and one respondent felt that a fail at Higher should result in an Intermediate 2 award. General criticism of the programme is most colourfully encapsulated in the observation "I am angry that my child is being used as an experimental rat!"

However, there were also a number of positive remarks about internal assessment with most people emphasising the benefits of spreading the workload throughout the year and keeping youngsters focused. One respondent commented "I like the fact that a child can obtain credit for the tests passed".

Once again parents were able to separate out their reaction to different aspects of the programme. One parent, who raged about Maths Paper 1 asking different types of questions from the internal assessment and also complained that the level C pass gave a false sense of security, still observed that "School tests helped revision over the whole year although there were problems fitting in with prelims". Another parent, who similarly complained that Maths Paper 1 was unfair and that "my son was well prepared the nature of the paper unsettled him", also observed that "my son was better prepared through the experience of internal assessment."

There were also some positive comments about the overall design of Higher Still, with some observing that the different levels offered a better staging between Standard grade and Higher. However one parent did criticise the number of levels and said three would be sufficient, whilst another was concerned that not all levels were offered in all subjects.

In general it is fair to say parents were discriminating in their responses and this is best summarised in the following comments:

- "On the whole pleased. Higher Still Maths seemed extremely hard and sometimes the questions were oddly worded".
- "Internal assessment makes you study throughout the year which is good. They all come together which is bad".

Scottish Parent Teacher Council August 2000