

# **PERTH AND KINROSS COUNCIL**

## **Lifelong Learning Committee**

**4 November 2020**

### **SQA EXAMINATIONS UPDATE**

**Report by Executive Director (Education and Children's Services)  
(Report No. 20/209)**

#### **PURPOSE OF REPORT**

This report provides an update on the main milestones and outcomes of the 2019/20 Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) examination/assessment diet and details the planning taking place to address the challenges that remain for those forthcoming in the 2020/21 academic year.

#### **1. BACKGROUND/MAIN ISSUES**

##### **Timeline**

- 1.1 On 19 March 2020, it was announced that as a result of school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the SQA Examination Diet in 2020 would be cancelled, together with all folio and project-based assessment. On 2 April 2020, SQA gave the first official indication that teacher estimates would play a key role in determining candidates' eventual National Qualification results and on 20 April 2020, this was refined and definitive guidance was issued.
- 1.2 Schools were asked to provide pupil estimates electronically to SQA by 29 May 2020. Estimates were based upon demonstrated and inferred attainment courses to provide SQA with a realistic prediction of the candidate's final grade. Schools ensured integrity of the estimates through stringent quality assurance processes with all tiers of their management structure. Each grade (A, B, C, D or No Award) was sub-divided into 3 to 5 sub-bands and teachers provided a rank order for all pupils within each sub-band.
- 1.3 This was intended to facilitate the planned statistical intervention by SQA once they had received school estimates. In this exercise, estimates were "adjusted" in light of three main factors:
  - The school's historical performance in that subject;
  - The performance of individuals in previous SQA diets if applicable; and
  - The national estimate picture of individual subjects and levels compared to previous national performance.

- 1.4 SQA provided guidance and online learning modules for teachers and school leaders to complete this process. They advised that it was recognised that there would be incomplete evidence this year due to the circumstances and that this should not prejudice how candidates' estimates were produced. External moderation processes were suspended but schools were to continue to use their existing internal moderation processes and the "predictive value" of evidence generated earlier in a course was to be taken cognisance of.
- 1.5 Estimates were entered electronically by teachers on the SQA Connect system and were signed off by a Principal Teacher and finally by the Headteacher as Head of Centre. As part of the local validation process, Education and Children's Services (ECS) Officers asked schools to share Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to compare with the last three years' performance. Where there were significant variations, schools were asked to justify these.
- 1.6 On 4 August 2020, SQA results were issued based upon school estimates which were then adjusted by SQA as previously described.
- 1.7 Following the Deputy First Minister's Direction to SQA on Tuesday 11 August 2020, it was announced that the 2019/20 results would be based only upon the original teacher estimate or the statistically adjusted figure - whichever was higher. New certificates, where required, were issued to young people by SQA from 7 September 2020.

## **Results**

- 1.8 Detailed results are provided in Appendix 1. Initial results, after SQA adjustment, were published on 4 August 2020. These indicated a slight increase in pass rates seen typically in previous years, by around 2-5 percentage points. These figures were seen in both Perth & Kinross Council (PKC) results and nationally. As would be expected, there were also subsequent slight increases in the provisional breadth and depth of KPIs over recent years. These indicate the number of awards achieved at certain SCQF levels by young people.
- 1.9 Comparison of adjusted results with teacher estimates was undertaken. These are detailed in Appendix 1 section B and highlighted the following:
- In PKC, 74% of grade estimates were accepted in the adjustment process, compared to 74% nationally.
  - 87% of PKC results outcomes (ie A-C pass, D award, no award) were unchanged from the original estimate.
  - There were some significant differences in the degree of adjustment of changes across different subjects and levels.
  - Learners from deprived backgrounds were slightly more likely to have results downgraded from an A-C pass to a D or from D to no award.

1.10 After August 11 2020, and the reversion to teacher estimates, final analysis of results indicated the following:

- The reversion to estimates provided by teachers increased the PKC pass rates (A-C) for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher by 8, 10 and 8 percentage points respectively from the adjusted results provided originally by SQA.
- The new PKC pass rates are around 10-15 percentage points higher than recent years. This is line with Scotland-wide figures.
- Subsequent increases in Perth and Kinross KPIs are seen across the board, but especially for 5 or more passes at National 5, and 1 and 3 passes at level 6 (Highers).
- It should also be noted that for National 3 and National 4 qualifications, schools were asked to predict whether pupils would have completed the units to make up these awards. That predictive element would have looked at the best probable scenario for each young person. These predictions were not part of the SQA adjustment process.

1.11 The 2020 assessment results are derived from unique circumstances and a unique assessment approach. The attainment recorded may not be part of the longer term trend locally or nationally. Interpretation of the stretch aims for the Raising Attainment Strategy will need to consider this unique year, and the effects are likely to be seen over the next three years of school leavers attainment results (with which national benchmarking takes place) as this cohort continue their studies and then leave school.

### **Appeals**

1.12 Once SQA had changed the parameters of awarding qualifications, so too did the process for appeals, which subsequently had simplified grounds focused on processing or administrative error by SQA or the centre, or on equality grounds. In PKC, there have been seven appeals this session all relating to administrative error which are in the process of resolution.

### **Impact on Young People and Schools**

1.13 The abrupt ending to the school year brought significant challenges and a significant shift of approach for teachers and schools to assimilate in a short period of time. In essence, they were being asked to produce critical estimates based on less assessment evidence than they had ever had. Just over 12% of these estimates were moderated downwards by SQA prior to the removal of this process.

1.14 Teachers were asked to become the final arbiters of the grades that each young person would gain. They were asked to extrapolate a predictive element from the incomplete evidence that they held and assess what the learning and attainment picture for each young person would have been between March and June 2020. The validation process that each school undertook was important to ensure that estimated grades were moderated before submission to the SQA.

- 1.15 For some young people, the question of the validity of the value of their qualification in a landscape without official examination remains. Schools are very aware of this and ensuring that the learning pathways that young people follow are appropriate and successful, working in partnership with other stakeholders such as Perth College UHI and Skills Development Scotland (SDS).

## **2. PROPOSALS**

### **Arrangements for 2020/21**

- 2.1 In August 2020, SQA undertook a technical consultation with all stakeholders for the current year's arrangements. SQA has agreed high level principles to support modifications to National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher course assessments, where practicable, that will aim to support:
- The delivery and assessment of subjects that are constrained by current social distancing measures, for example, in practical and performance-based components;
  - Increased learning and teaching opportunities, where possible; and
  - A more flexible approach to the assessment of learners, while retaining the validity of the qualifications.
- 2.2 The outcome from this consultation process will inform the assessment diet for the current session. The planned 2021 exam timetable will start on Monday 26 April 2021 and finish on Thursday 3 June 2021.
- 2.3 Another consultation exercise is currently ongoing around contingency arrangements for this year's diet with the SQA Examination Timetable Advisory Group, which is made up of a range of stakeholders, including representatives from schools, colleges, teaching unions, local authorities and parent groups.
- 2.4 An independent review, commissioned by the Scottish Government, will consider this year's results, including the advice provided by the SQA and local authorities, the approach developed in relation to estimating learners' grades, the methodology used by the SQA and the proposed appeals process. It will also study the impact on pupils and their families as well as the role of scrutiny in the process. PKC has contributed to this review..
- 2.5 The Scottish Government announced plans for the 2020/21 national qualifications diet on 7 October 2020, drawing on the independent review of the SQA certification process in 2019/20. There will be no external assessment of National 5 courses this academic year – either by an exam or by coursework. These will be awarded based on teacher judgement supported by assessment evidence and robust moderation by schools and local authorities, supported by the SQA. Higher and Advanced Higher externally assessed exams, including the completion of coursework where appropriate and possible, will remain as planned. Exams will start slightly

later than normal on 13 May 2021 and contingency plans will be in place to take account of public health advice throughout the year.

### 3. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

3.1 The intention of the Scottish Government is that the SQA Examination Diet for 2021 will take place as planned. Some clear adaptations are being made to course work and assessment processes throughout this session to take into account the health and safety measures in place in schools which affect certain subjects and activities. However, should it be necessary to make further changes to the SQA process this year, teachers and school management teams are ensuring a consistent and robust process for providing estimated grades.

3.2 It is recommended that the Committee:

- (i) Notes the content of this report and arrangements expected for 2020/21 examinations.

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## 1. IMPLICATIONS, ASSESSMENTS, CONSULTATION AND COMMUNICATION

Strategic Implications	Yes/None
Community Plan/Single Outcome Agreement	
Corporate Plan	
Resource Implications	
Financial	
Workforce	
Asset Management (land, property, IST)	
Assessments	
Equality Impact Assessment	
Strategic Environmental Assessment	
Sustainability (community, economic, environmental)	
Legal and Governance	
Risk	
Consultation	
Internal	
External	
Communication	
Communications Plan	

### 1. Strategic Implications

#### Community Plan/Single Outcome Agreement

1.1 This section sets out how the proposals relate to the delivery of the Perth and Kinross Community Plan/Single Outcome Agreement in terms of the following priorities:

- (i) Giving every child the best start in life;
- (ii) Developing educated, responsible and informed citizens;
- (iii) Promoting a prosperous, inclusive and sustainable economy;
- (iv) Supporting people to lead independent, healthy and active lives; and
- (v) Creating a safe and sustainable place for future generations.

This report relates to Objective No. (ii)

#### Corporate Plan

1.2 This section sets out how the proposals relate to the achievement of the Council's Corporate Plan Objectives.

- (i) Giving every child the best start in life;
- (ii) Developing educated, responsible and informed citizens;
- (iii) Promoting a prosperous, inclusive and sustainable economy;
- (iv) Supporting people to lead independent, healthy and active lives; and
- (v) Creating a safe and sustainable place for future generations.

This report relates to Objective No. (ii).

- 1.3 The report also links to the Education & Children's Services Policy Framework in respect of the following key policy area:

- Learning: Realising Potential

## 2. Resource Implications

### Financial

- 2.1 N/A

### Workforce

- 2.2 N/A

### Asset Management (land, property, IT)

- 2.3 N/A.

## 3. Assessments

### Equality Impact Assessment

- 3.1 Under the Equality Act 2010, the Council is required to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations between equality groups. Carrying out Equality Impact Assessments for plans and policies allows the Council to demonstrate that it is meeting these duties.

This section reflects that the proposals have been considered under the Corporate Equalities Impact Assessment process (EqIA) with the following outcome:

- (i) Assessed as **not relevant** for the purposes of EqIA

### Strategic Environmental Assessment

- 3.2 The Environmental Assessment (Scotland) Act 2005 places a duty on the Council to identify and assess the environmental consequences of its proposals.

This section reflect that the proposals have been considered under the Act. However, no action is required as the Act does not apply to the matters presented in this report. This is because the Committee are requested to note the contents of the report only and the Committee are not being requested to approve, adopt or agree to an action or to set the framework for future decisions.

### Sustainability

- 3.3 N/A

## Legal and Governance

3.4 N/A

3.5 N/A

## Risk

3.6 N/A

## **4. Consultation**

### Internal

4.1 N/A

### External

4.2 N/A

## **5. Communication**

5.1 Schools will inform young people and their parents of arrangements as they are established.

## **2. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

2.1 N/A

## **3. APPENDICES**

3.1 Appendix 1: 2020 SQA Performance