



Scottish Qualifications Authority
Ùghdarras Theisteanas Na H-Alba

7 March 2025

Mr Douglas Ross MSP
Convener Education, Children and Young people Committee
By email to: ECYP.committee@Parliament.Scot

Contact: John Booth
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Dear Mr Ross

I am writing on behalf of SQA's Chair, Shirley Rogers, following our appearance at the Committee on 19 February and in response to your emails of 28 February and 7 March.

You and other members of the Committee requested some further information on a few topics, which I am pleased to set out for you below.

Stakeholder research results

Our Key Audience Research focuses on the views of the employer/training provider, college and school sectors, and within each of those, on the views of practitioners (in both teaching and management roles), learners, parents/carers and employers.

The research focuses primarily on SQA's qualifications, wider perceptions of the organisation, and how effectively SQA communicates and engages.

The research is undertaken according to Market Research Society guidelines and carried out by an independent external consultant.

Reports are available on [our website](#) for the research that took place in the last quarter of 2023 and the first quarter of 2024.

Lessons learned from 2024 Higher History

The 2024 Higher History review report was published on 6 November. It contained a number of wider reflections, including around the key theme of how we gather and use feedback from

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markers. These were accepted by SQA and work to address them began immediately after publication.

Since then, our Standards team has led work to develop the wider reflections into an action plan to ensure we monitor progress in taking action on the points covered in the wider reflections. This was presented to our Qualifications Committee at its meeting on 22 January where its direction of travel was agreed.

Please find attached the latest version of the action plan, which provides progress against each action.

The Standards team has also reflected some of the lessons learned from the Higher History review in our 'Awarding and Grading for National Courses Policy 2025-2027', which was approved by our Qualifications Committee at its meeting on 22 January.

The policy includes an early warning process that will alert us to any potential issues emerging from learner assessments. This will be added to the many other checks and balances in place to ensure that assessments have performed as intended.

While this early warning has always been good practice, making it a formal part of our awarding policy will ensure consistent application, making it clearer and better understood.

The awarding policy will be published on Results Day, which is consistent with previous years when we've published a methodology report.

History email enquiry service

You told us about a teacher's disappointing experience with the dedicated Higher History enquiry point, that we set up last year to give teachers, lecturers, and school leaders the opportunity to directly raise any queries or questions they may have.

We were concerned to hear this as we are committed to doing more to support teachers and lecturers delivering SQA's Higher History course.

Please provide us with further details and we will be happy to go back to the teacher to address their concerns.

Relationship with the Scottish Association of the Teachers of History (SATH) and their 2020 survey

As we said at Committee, our understanding is that in 2020 there were two surveys that were being published at the same time with very similar themes relating to the impact of modifications to assessments. One was a national survey, and one was a survey by SATH. Our understanding is that a conversation took place about two surveys running at the same time and how they would align.

We are actively seeking a meeting with SATH to discuss their understanding of the circumstances around the 2020 survey. We can update the Committee after the meeting has taken place, if that would be helpful.

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I hope you find this further information useful. We would be happy to answer any further questions that the Committee may have and look forward to further appearances at the Committee in due course.

I would also like to take this opportunity to update you on the interim leadership arrangements that have been put in place at SQA following the resignation of Fiona Robertson on 17 February.

Interim leadership structure

I have been appointed Interim Chief Executive, with Donna Stewart, who has 20 years' experience as a classroom teacher and depute headteacher, stepping into the role of Chief Examining Officer – a responsibility previously held within the Chief Executive's portfolio.

Splitting these key roles reinforces SQA's commitment to maintaining high standards across assessment, awarding and qualifications, while transforming the organisation ahead of its replacement by Qualifications Scotland later this year. This new structure allows each leader to focus on their core responsibilities:

Interim Chief Executive: sets strategic direction, drives progress on the Prospectus for Change, leads engagement across Scotland's education and skills community, and serves as the Principal Accountable Officer to ensure the responsible management of public funds.

Chief Examining Officer: focuses on upholding and modernising the standards of SQA's qualifications while advising the Board on awarding and quality assurance.

In addition:

Director of Operations Jean Blair has accepted the new position of Chief Operations Officer, ensuring focused accountability for day-to-day awarding operations.

George Brown, Head of Accreditation since 2001, will assume the role of Interim Chief Regulator, independently managing all accreditation duties and maintaining high standards of quality and fairness.

The recruitment process for a permanent Chief Executive has now begun, to find the individual best placed to lead the successful establishment of Qualifications Scotland, which will replace SQA later this year.

Our new leadership structure is designed to provide stability, continuity, and focus while we seek the individual who can lead us on a permanent basis to establish Qualifications Scotland.

Further information is available on [our website](#).

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Yours sincerely

John Booth
Interim Chief Executive



Higher History Review 2024 – Wider Reflections: Proposed actions and timescales

Our Higher History Review 2024 report, published on 6 November, noted in its final section that: *‘While beyond the immediate scope of the review, some wider reflections have emerged during the review process. There are areas for continuous improvement which could strengthen the way the education community works together during the assessment and awarding process and which could also support learning and teaching.’*

The table below sets out these wider reflections and the actions that we are already taking and propose to take to address them.

	<i>Wider Reflection from report</i>	<i>Proposed action and timescale (January 2025)</i>	<i>February 2025 update</i>
1	SQA should review the way feedback is provided by markers, how this feedback is considered and used appropriately, effectively and consistently as part of the awarding process, and how markers are informed about the actions taken to address any concerns they have raised. This should help to mitigate concerns that issues markers have experienced during marking have not been addressed at later stages of the quality assurance process before final awards are made.	<p>Create a cross-Directorate working group to consider and agree what actions are appropriate and feasible in relation to this and the action below in the short (for 2025) and medium (2026 and beyond) term. The group will seek feedback from markers, Principal Assessors (PAs) and other appointees to inform its work.</p> <p>It is critical that any actions are clearly targeted at the origins of the concerns highlighted in this report and that they take account of the demands on the core examining team, and in particular the PA, during procedures. This period is already very intensive and pressurised. We therefore need to reflect this in consideration of further actions and minimise any additional demands on them.</p> <p>One key area for exploration will be the way in which feedback is gathered from markers to allow it to be</p>	<p>In the short term, this is being addressed through the Grade Boundary planning forum. The marker report form has been reviewed with the intent of making it streamlined and more focused for ease of answering questions. Free text has been retained to allow markers the opportunity to provide their feedback.</p> <p>Markers are provided with the link to the marker report form at the end of February so the reviewed form will be used by all markers undertaking coursework and question paper marking in 2025.</p>

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		<p>analysed and key themes identified more readily. As part of this the working group will be asked to explore how AI may be able to contribute to this and any risks associated with its use in this context.</p> <p>The working group will also need to take account of marker contracts and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and of the desire, expressed by markers for them to remain anonymous in submitting their reports.</p> <p>Timescale – initial report from working group by end of February</p>	<p>Markers (which include PAs and other senior appointees) will be given the opportunity to provide feedback on the 2025 revised marker form, which will help to inform further changes in 2026.</p> <p>Initial discussions are underway with SQA staff who are also looking at AI for collating and analysing data for research and informative purposes. This will help to inform longer term changes to analysing feedback from marker reports. There are risks involved in using AI where there is confidential information involved.</p>
2	<p>As part of the reflection above, SQA should consider seeking formal, written feedback from markers immediately following every markers’ meeting instead of waiting until the end of the marking period. This would allow the PA and their team to be clear about any issues that markers believe may impact the quality of marking and that may need to be addressed by further advice to markers or action during the quality assurance process. Consideration should be given to how information on any issues raised by this feedback and actions taken to address them is provided to the relevant awarding meeting.</p>	<p>To be addressed by the proposed action above. This action will be linked to Action 7 and focus on assessment components that are marked remotely by paper, seeking to ensure there is a mechanism for markers to communicate/feedback during the marking process. As highlighted in the Review report components that are marked from image or centrally already have an ongoing feedback loop established to allow any issues arising from understanding or application of the marks scheme to be addressed in real time.</p> <p>Timescale – as above</p>	<p>From a Higher History perspective, the Scottish History paper (Question Paper 2) approach to marking has been changed from the traditional way of marking (Marking from Paper (MFP)) to online marking (Marking from Image (MFI)) for diet 2025 and thereafter.</p> <p>When marking online, quality assurance is ongoing during the marking period, and there is an inbuilt escalation process for markers and team leaders. In the same way PAs can communicate with the marking team if there are to be any changes to the Marking Instructions (MIs). This means marking issues can be resolved before the end of the marking period.</p>
3	<p>SQA should ensure, when making changes to course specifications, that the intended consequences for teaching and learning and assessment of such changes are made clear to and clearly understood by teachers.</p>	<p>For any future changes to course specifications, we will ensure that the intended consequences for teaching, learning and assessment are spelled out clearly and explicitly in a specific section of the document setting out the changes. These intended</p>	<p>There has been discussion within the Qualifications Directorate (QD) to improve the current change request process/form which reinforces the importance of the impact summary and it will be added to the history of changes</p>

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		<p>consequences will also feature prominently in all communications to practitioners and learners of the changes to the course specification.</p> <p>Timescale – immediate for new changes to course specifications</p>	<p>section. This will have the added benefit of helping with external communications.</p> <p>This change will be approved by the NQ Programme Board.</p>
4	<p>SQA should undertake a review of the layout and presentation of marking instructions to ensure clarity. It should also ensure clear alignment between examples used for exemplification of the standard at markers’ meeting and the associated marking instructions.</p>	<p>This work will need to be informed by engagement with a range of our stakeholders who use marking instructions (MIs) including PAs, markers, practitioners and learners. The key objective of this work will be to ensure there is a clear distinction between suggested examples of learner responses to illustrate where marks are awarded, and any mandatory requirements in such responses. The work will build on existing good practice with the aim of ensuring a consistency across all MIs.</p> <p>Timescale – Current guidance and exemplification to be reviewed and revised as required by April 2025</p>	<p>The current guidance on development of marking instructions, contained within the "Guidance for producing and quality assuring items and question paper marking instructions" has been shared with Heads of Service for discussion with the senior examining teams.</p>
5	<p>SQA should review the process for creating and approving Assessment Performance Forms (APF) as a key input to awarding meetings in order to ensure a consistently high standard.</p>	<p>Create a cross-Directorate working group to review and recommend ways on which the current process by which Principal Assessors create and approve Assessment Performance Forms can be strengthened, to include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A review of the APF template and the information requested in it • A review of the guidance and training provided to PAs for completion of the template • A review of the availability and use of exemplification to help PAs understand the standard expected of APFs • Feedback provided to PAs on their APFs to help ensure ongoing improvements in their quality 	<p>This is being progressed through the grade boundary planning forum to improve the quality of the APFs submitted by PAs.</p> <p>The template is being updated to make it clearer, including improving the instructions which accompany it. There is an ongoing timing challenge with the marking period closing (so marker reports being submitted) near to the grade boundary meetings.</p> <p>Consideration has been given to alert the Qualifications Manager (QM) of the number of marker forms available so the PA can begin to</p>

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		<p>As with Action 1 it is critical that any actions are clearly targeted at the origins of the concerns highlighted in this report and that they take account of the demands on the core examining team, and in particular the PA, during procedures. This period is already very intensive and pressurised. We therefore need to reflect this in consideration of further actions and minimise any additional demands on them.</p> <p>Timescale – working group to report by end February 2025</p>	<p>complete their APF. New for 2025, QMs can access a dashboard through the ShinyApp to track return rate for their markers.</p> <p>As noted in 1 above, there is consideration ongoing on the use of AI to help collate and analyse feedback from markers which will be part of the longer term improvements.</p>
6	<p>SQA should supplement the current agenda for awarding meetings with a further checklist to ensure that all key sources of evidence have been discussed at the meeting and any implications are considered before a final decision is made.</p>	<p>A new checklist for use in awarding meetings has been created as part of the new Awarding Policy for 2025 – 27 that Qualifications Committee (QC) is being asked to approve in a separate paper.</p> <p>Timescale – complete, subject to QC’s approval</p>	<p>The grading and awarding policy spanning years 2025-2027 was approved by Qualifications Committee on 22 January 2025.</p> <p>Policy will be published on Tuesday 5 August as part of wider official publication of results.</p>
7	<p>SQA should continue and accelerate, where possible, its ongoing work to ensure all marking of paper exam scripts for NQs is migrated to Marking From Image (MFI). As highlighted in this report, this offers a number of practical and technical benefits, including the quality assurance of marking, which is critical given the focus of this report.</p>	<p>Work is continuing against an existing plan to continue with migration of remaining paper- based marking to MFI where this is feasible. As part of this process it was already intended that Higher History Paper 2 would be MFI from the 2025 diet. This change will take place as planned.</p> <p>Excluding Internally Assessed Course Components (IACCAs) and Performance components, in 2024 72% of externally assessed component entries were marked using MFI (circa 910k from a total of 1.3m). In 2025 this figure is anticipated to increase to 75% (circa 980k from a total of 1.3m).</p> <p>Collaborative work is underway across directorates to facilitate the shift of components identified as potentially suitable for MFI in 2026. It is anticipated this would result in 82% of component entries (circa 1.07m from a total of 1.3m) utilising MFI.</p> <p>The remaining 18% have been identified as being unlikely to be suitable for MFI without changes to the</p>	<p>As noted in point 2 above, Higher History Question Paper 2 has moved to online marking from diet 2025.</p> <p>Scottish Government has provided monies for financial year 25/26 to lay the groundwork to digitally transform our core activities. This will be a long-term project.</p> <p>There is a separate internal business proposal to look at content production for NQ, eassessment and emarking in the round, recommendations from which may facilitate more subjects/levels moving to online marking. This is a long-term activity.</p>

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		<p>learner assessment evidence or new technology, for example, Science coursework and Art and Design. SQA has submitted a business case to Scottish Government seeking investment to transform and digitise the systems supporting assessment and quality assurance. This will transform how assessment is delivered, including how it is quality assured.</p> <p>Timescale – as set out in current plan and outlined above. Timescales for further work to transform and digitise the systems supporting assessment and quality assurance are dependent on Scottish Government’s response to our business case.</p>	
8	<p>SQA should consider its approach to the assessment of Higher History and potentially of other humanities subjects. The optional nature of the question papers for Higher History is a contributory factor to some of the challenges set out in this review. While, given the nature of the subject, retaining some form of optionality is probably inevitable and desirable, consideration should be given to reducing the number of options in consultation with teachers, learners and other stakeholders in a way that minimises any impact on the choices available to learners while strengthening the operation of our assessments.</p>	<p>This is a longer-term objective and one which will require careful planning to deliver effectively. Amongst the factors we need to consider in our plans are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The strengths and weaknesses of our current approach to the assessment of Higher History, including the perceived predictability of some question papers, and its impact on teaching and learning, the sampling strategies used in compiling question papers and the clarity over the distinction between A- and C-type questions and marks. • The relationship between assessment of Higher History and to other levels of History and of other humanities subjects to ensure we take account of any knock-on implications for them of changes to Higher History and/or that we actively plan for changes in other levels of History and other humanities subjects where we believe this is desirable in the interests of consistency across subjects • How we engage with stakeholders and in particular learners and practitioners throughout the review to ensure it is effectively informed by their views and experiences. The seconded Head Teacher should 	<p>In the medium term Higher History assessment may be considered through the "balance of assessment of national courses" activity which is monitored by the Qualifications Directorate Leadership Team and the NQ Programme Board. In the longer term Higher History will be reviewed through the reform of national courses, in conjunction with the curriculum improvement cycles.</p>

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		<p>have a key role in shaping and supporting this engagement which could be used as an example to illustrate our new approach to engagement as Qualifications Scotland</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential alignment between this work and the Education Scotland-led work on the Curriculum Improvement Cycle (CIC). Ideally our work on assessment of Higher History would align closely with work on the curriculum as part of the CIC. We are currently in discussion with Education Scotland and Scottish Government on the timing and phasing of this • The time and support needed by the profession to prepare for and implement revised approaches to assessment and related impacts on teaching and learning • Approaches to the assessment of History in other jurisdictions and in other parts of the system in Scotland, in particular Higher Education, to inform our future approaches <p>Timescale – to be confirmed based on further consideration of the factors listed above</p>	
9	<p>As part of its ongoing improvement of communications and engagement with teachers and learners, as it prepares to transition to Qualifications Scotland, SQA should help build a stronger understanding across the education community of the end-to-end operation of the national examinations system and of the roles and processes that underpin it.</p>	<p>Building on work already undertaken in support of NQ results in 2023 and 2024, and delivering on the commitments to collaboration and transparency outlined in our <i>Prospectus for Change</i>, we will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance understanding across the education community by developing and sharing clear, accessible, and inclusive resources that explain the end-to-end operation of the national examinations system. These resources will address the roles and 	<p>Work is underway to review and build on the activities from 2023 and 2024, to inform our plans for 2025, including discussions with our partner communication teams.</p>

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		<p>processes involved and be tailored to teachers, learners, and other key stakeholder groups.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use a variety of formats and platforms - such as written guides, videos, social media assets and stakeholder toolkits - to ensure the information is engaging and widely accessible. • Learn from and, where appropriate, adopt or adapt best practices from other awarding organisations that support transparency and trust in the system. • Work closely with partner organisations to help amplify key messages to their members, ensuring consistent and wide-reaching communication. • Build on the groundwork laid in 2023 and 2024, embedding these improvements into the communications and engagement strategy for Qualifications Scotland. <p>Timescale – immediate: to be embedded in communications and engagement plan for SQA and Qualifications Scotland aligned to our commitments in our <i>Prospectus for Change</i>.</p>	