

EIS submission to Mark Priestly led Rapid Review of the 2020 SQA Qualifications process

1. The EIS is Scotland's largest teaching union, with over 60,000 members across all sectors and all grades. We welcome the opportunity to submit a short position paper in relation to the Rapid Review of SQA procedures, following the cancellation of the 2020 Diet.
2. As well as both formal and informal consultation processes, the EIS was represented on the National Qualification Contingency Group, the Curriculum and Assessment Board, and the Covid Education Recovery Group, including the workstream looking at qualifications (although this focused mainly on the 2021 awarding diet). With regard to the NQ Contingency Group, however, it would need to be observed that this body tended to be convened after the SQA and/or Scottish Government had made decisions, rather than as part of a genuine consultation process. EIS FELA (Further Education Lecturers Association also engaged directly with the SQA in relation to college based awards.)
3. Following the introduction of lockdown and the subsequent cancellation of the 2020 diet, the EIS supported the decision to rely on teacher professional judgement, predicated on estimates based on classroom evidence, as the central tenet of an awarding process. We are strongly of the view that teachers approached this challenge with absolute integrity and professional commitment, exercising additional rigour around internal moderation and verification processes and utilising all available evidence.
4. The process was made more complicated, in our view, by the SQA's insistence on the sub-dividing of existing bandings and the creation of rank orderings. Whilst this latter process was once part of a more complex evidence-based appeals process, it had been dropped some years back and it is difficult to discern from the SQA's belatedly published methodology, exactly how it factored in to the algorithm. From the outset, the EIS expressed concern at the inability to place student performance equally within the rank ordering system and at the consequential 'downgrading' of some students' performance simply because their achievements were not able to be captured within the faulty model devised.
5. It was clear that SQA's thinking in this area was already being driven by an assumption that teacher estimates would have to be modified in some way, by some applied algorithm, in what the SQA perceived as a responsibility to uphold "standards". The EIS had no objection to looking at previous concordance between estimates and actual performance as a context for dialogue around estimate processes; indeed, some level of external moderation was potentially useful to public confidence in the outcomes. We did make it clear, however, that it would be disastrous for the awards if professional judgements were challenged or overturned on any significant scale. Repeated references to other UK awarding bodies left a distinct impression that this was an agreed synergy across the four jurisdictions, with the SQA seemingly resistant to doing anything differently from Ofqual.

6. SQA communication to teachers of the rationale for this changed approach was poor – it focused largely on explanation of the laboriously construction process without explanation of the rationale and, like many SQA communications, seemed arrogant and remote. The EIS received significant negative feedback from members around this theme – essentially many believed that SQA was being obliged to accept teacher judgement but was less than comfortable with and indeed somewhat resentful of the prospect.
7. Once the actual estimate process was complete, the discussion moved more firmly on to professional judgements potentially being overturned by the applied algorithm, , and the potential consequences of such a scenario. The repeated failure on the part of the SQA to publish its intended processes served to fuel such concerns and was, in the view of the EIS, completely unnecessary, indeed reprehensible for a publicly funded body.
8. Both privately and publicly, the EIS warned that any significant overturning of estimated awards by dint of statistical adjustments would cause an outcry, lead to a tsunami of appeals as those estimates were based on evidence, and run a clear risk of undermining the whole basis of the awards.
9. We advocated, repeatedly, that where anomalies appeared to have happened that the SQA should engage in a professional dialogue with the Centres concerned to ascertain the potential explanations and, where possible, agree remedies.
10. The SQA apparently gave this serious consideration but assessed that the scale of the dialogue concerned was beyond its capacity.
11. As an alternative the EIS suggested dialogue with the 32 Directors of Education, who had been directly involved in overseeing moderation procedure and who knew their schools well. The SQA again rejected such an approach as not practicable in the circumstances.
12. The SQA seemed more concerned with its oft repeated assertion about being the custodian of standards, than working with the Education system.
13. A stronger commitment to genuine partnership working may well have headed off the subsequent debacle. It would certainly have eliminated the bulk of individual discrepancies which arose where pupils performed outwith the pattern of their peers but were downgraded as part of a collective process.
14. Evidence based appeals could have coped with a limited number of such anomalies, but the scale of adjustments made by the use of the algorithm would have resulted in an appeal system being overwhelmed.
15. What became apparent from EIS member feedback was the lack of consistency in the outcomes of the SQA's algorithmic calculation e.g.

teachers having their professional judgements upheld completely at Higher but at National 5 seeing them overturned in large percentage.

16. We even had the absurd situation of 7% of award changes being upgrades from the estimates i.e. upgraded without any evidence to support such a change.
17. Before the DFM made his political statement of reverting wholly to teacher estimates, the EIS again suggested to the SQA it should take a Centre by Centre approach to resolving perceived discrepancies rather than requiring individual appeals. The DFM statement clearly overtook this.
18. Whilst it is entirely appropriate for the Scottish Government to take ultimate responsibility in this matter, the EIS view is that the SQA is not blameless. It should be a repository of expertise in assessment; it should, as a public body, be well aware of the need to ensure the avoidance of inequities; and it should, as the awarding body for Scotland, be more committed to partnership working with the teaching profession.
19. Ultimately, SQA's guiding principles were not met, particularly "Principle 3: Maintaining the integrity and credibility of our qualifications system, ensuring that standards are maintained over time, in the interests of learners." In trying to maintain "integrity and credibility" the SQA actions created a secretive and flawed moderation process with an algorithm that ultimately lost credibility (and was totally disregarded) as it was seen as being unfair to learners.
20. As a final observation, we note that the SQA has at times cited the number of teacher estimates, historically, which were "wrong". That does of course depend on how 'wrong' is defined. Estimates may differ from the grade awarded but perhaps longer term we need to decide what is a fairer system – awards based on classroom evidence or awards based on external examinations where 'quotas' are effectively operated (the basis of the algorithm essentially).
21. The SQA statistical modelling this year, based on teacher estimates, included adjusting those estimates based on a school's previous performance and then essentially establishing the numbers which could be allocated to particular grades without stretching, in its eyes, the credibility of the results. It decided on how many As were allowed and then any As below the cut-off point (using bandings and rank order) then dropped into the B pool and the same process was applied with the remainder dropping down to C and so on.
22. The result of the first control was to disadvantage pupils performing above their school mean. In the second control, grades displaced downward had a cumulative effect of pushing more Cs into Ds and Ds into No Awards. Because of the impact of affluence / poverty on attainment, this

disproportionately impacted on pupils at schools serving poorer catchment areas – which led to the outcry around fairness and the call to uphold teacher estimates – all of which were based on evidence e.g. getting a Grade C in the prelim, sitting past papers under timed conditions in class and a range of classwork.

23. The key point is that the second control is in place every year, although it is founded on exam results rather than estimates i.e. decisions are made on grade boundaries with a view to ensuring broadly similar cohorts of the different grades are achieved. It is a sophisticated operation and includes meticulous evaluation of how well the question paper worked (i.e. did questions achieve the expected differentiation of responses? etc.).
24. However, the same golden rules around “credibility” and “integrity” are applied so nothing too out of the ordinary is allowed- grades allocation is relatively stable from one year to the next. A few years back when the Maths Higher paper was over loaded with complex questions which many students could not answer, the grade boundary for a C pass dropped down to the mid-30s .The notional grade boundaries are C 50-59; B60-69; A 70 plus.
25. Every year pupils on the cusp of passes at a certain grade are potentially pushed into a lower category by the application of what are deemed to be acceptable quotas.
26. Returning to the injustice aspect – if teachers have classroom evidence over the course of a year which indicates pupil ability and competence at a certain level, but a high stakes exam system routinely disregards that – is that equitable?
27. In terms of the continued threat of disruption to schooling and indeed the 2021 diet, a more regulated approach around continuous assessment should be explored urgently. We are already well into to the teaching term and schools and teachers have had little communication from either the Scottish Government or the SQA on any contingency planning for 2021 awards.
28. Clearly, there is a broad acceptance of the principle of teacher professional judgement, based on evidence, and significant investment should be made in building a fairer assessment system on this foundation.
29. The EIS is happy to expand on any of these issues.