

Briefing for the Public Petitions Committee

Petition Number: [PE1861](#)

Main Petitioner: Oliver Smith

Subject: Use teacher assessed grades to award national qualifications in 2021

Calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to use teacher assessed grades rather than exam-like assessments in awarding national qualifications in 2021.

Introduction

In 2021, certification for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications will not require an externally moderated exam. For National 5 qualifications, this was announced by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, John Swinney MSP, on 7 October 2020 and a further announcement was made on [8 December 2020](#) in respect to Highers and Advanced Highers. There are other National Qualifications which do not require an exam and schools can offer a wide range of other courses leading to qualifications. The petitioner appears to be concerned with National 5s, Highers and Advanced Highers and this paper will reflect that.

Prior to these announcements, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (“SQA”) undertook [a consultation and announced changes to the coverage of qualifications](#), in many cases reducing content or requirements, to support certification in 2021. The aim was to “mitigate some of the current challenges faced by the teaching community in Scottish schools, while maintaining the validity, reliability and practicability of the qualifications.”

Alternative Certification Model

The approach to the Alternative Certification Model (ACM) this year is that “teachers and lecturers will be providing SQA with provisional results based on their professional judgement of learner assessment evidence measured

against the published requirements for each subject.”¹ The overall approach has been developed through the National Qualifications Group².

The process for the ACM is to have five stages:

Stage 1: ongoing until April 2021 - Teachers and lecturers access subject specific guidance, assessment resources and Understanding Standards materials and webinars from SQA.

Stage 2: April - May 2021 - School, college, training provider and local authority quality assurance continues. During May, SQA requests, reviews and provides feedback on assessment evidence from each school, college and training provider.

Stage 3: end May to 25 June 2021 - Schools, colleges, training providers, local authorities and SQA work through final stages of local and national quality assurance and feedback, to reach provisional results that are consistent, equitable and fair.

Stage 4: by 25 June 2021 - Schools, colleges and training providers submit quality assured provisional results to SQA.

Learners are expected to receive their SQA results on **10 August 2021**.

Stage 5: Appeals process for 2020-21 - to be advised following [consultation](#).

The [SQA has produced overall guidance](#) on the approach to gathering evidence and producing estimates for national courses. This guidance stated:

“An estimate is a holistic professional judgement based on evidence of a candidate’s attainment in all aspects of the course (ie all course components) and should reflect the candidate’s demonstrated attainment of the required skills, knowledge and understanding for the estimated grade and band. Reviewing a range of evidence will help to build up a picture of the candidate’s performance as a whole, which will then enable you to decide on an estimate.”

¹ [Joint letter from Education Scotland and the SQA, to the Education and Skills Committee 19 Feb 2021](#)

² * The National Qualifications 2021 Group is represented by the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES), Colleges Scotland, Education Scotland, the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), School Leaders Scotland (SLS), the Scottish Council of Independent Schools (SCIS), Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), the Scottish Government, National Parent Forum of Scotland, and the Scottish Youth Parliament.

The SQA has published subject and level specific guidance. Each course advice can be different. A common theme is that good evidence is likely to be similar to an exam, perhaps using SQA exam scripts.

Wellbeing

Exams can be a stressful time for young people in any given year, and guidance and support is available (e.g. [NHS Scotland](#)). The petitioner believes that mental health and wellbeing concerns would be exacerbated by sitting tests which would constitute evidence for the purposes of certification.

The impact of the pandemic on young people's wellbeing and particularly their mental health has been a concern across the UK. A number of organisations have undertaken surveys of young people. Young Minds (a UK-wide mental health charity) has undertaken several surveys. [Its most recent survey, at the time of writing, was undertaken in February 2021](#). It found "that the COVID-19 pandemic has continued to have a devastating impact on many young people with a history of mental health needs."

Wellbeing has been a key feature in planning in relation to the return to in-person schooling both in August 2020 and in 2021. The Cabinet Secretary's foreword to the [National Improvement Framework](#) published in December 2020 stated—

"Education recovery will be key in the year ahead, with a continued focus on health and wellbeing, as well as intensified support for reducing inequity and enabling the highest quality of learning and teaching."

Since January, [Education Scotland has undertaken and published weekly national overviews of practice in remote learning](#). This has included looking at support for the wellbeing of learners, their families, staff and the school community. This review stated—

"All local authorities highlight how they are prioritising support for health and wellbeing. They have strengthened their focus on supporting the emotional, social and physical needs of children, young people and their families. Headteachers describe how staff know children well and provide a wide range of support to help meet their individual wellbeing needs and circumstances. Through regular check-ins with children and young people, staff now have an increased focus on discussing emotional and mental wellbeing."

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Senior Researcher
24 March 2021

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