

# Rapid Review of the 2020 award of National Qualifications



## SSTA Position Paper

### Events following cancellation of the exam diet

Many members of the SSTA expressed surprise that there appeared to be no contingency arrangements in place for a cancellation or curtailment. The spread of Covid19 was being tracked daily in the media with other countries putting restrictions in place before Scotland, yet there appeared to be an ongoing belief that the exam diet would somehow proceed as normal. This led to a last-minute scramble to gather evidence: something which could have been established in a better organised fashion with less blinkered foresight. It was little more than good fortune that many National Qualification courses were nearing completion at the point when education moved online. The tardy decision created inequity: whereas some schools still had access to coursework, those schools which had submitted coursework to the SQA for marking had no access to it for evidence.

A dilemma arose among teachers relating to whether courses should be completed as quickly as possible or better/more complete evidence gathered.

### Advice given by SQA and Local Authorities

Teachers followed the SQA advice closely and members seemed highly aware of the gravity of the situation. Many spent long hours ensuring their rankings were as accurate as possible, collaborating with colleagues in difficult circumstances online to ensure their approach was fair, equitable and accurate. Members reported no issues with data entry through the SQA Portal, however they reported that they struggled to rank pupils within the 19 bands. SQA did not share with teachers how banding would be used and we were concerned that this could have led to inconsistency.

### Approaches to the gathering of estimates

Following online training, teachers followed SQA evidence guidelines assiduously. The SSTA advised members not to share estimates with learners or their families because we were aware that there was the possibility that a small number of grades might change in circumstances where physical evidence did not support the estimate. Consultation and discussion of deadlines helped reduce the stress arising from remote working. However, some schools chose to bring forward their change of timetable which added competing priorities.

The extent to which teachers could access their records was a factor; many teachers were required to use their own IT equipment to remotely review their records. The SSTA advised teachers not to travel to school to collect or collate evidence and reminded them that it was not necessary to gather together large quantities of evidence for each learner. Teachers were unable to review hard evidence, e.g project work or work in students' exercise books, and relied on digital evidence.

## **Approach to moderation developed by SQA**

We asked for details relating to this in two informal meetings but none were forthcoming. We asserted that teacher judgement should be respected and, while we understood the need to maintain integrity and confidence in National Qualifications, we stressed the importance of avoiding large numbers of upgrades or downgrades in results. We also enquired whether schools would be consulted in situations where a significant percentage of estimated results were changed prior to certification but were assured that where schools had provided a narrative this would be taken into account.

We are concerned that the instructions issued to SQA by Government revealed a fundamental flaw in the final grading of this year's cohort of young people.

## **Impact on young people**

It is our understanding that the form of moderation carried out using an algorithmic process is not new. What made this year more novel was that schools knew what the SQA inputs were and were able to track changes in a way which a confidential exam process does not allow. It has led to questions such as whether real efforts to close the attainment gap have been held back by artificial means. One of the SSTA's stated aims is to advance education in Scotland; presenting large numbers of young people with results certificates which neither they nor their teachers can comprehend is bad for the integrity and confidence that should reside in the certification process, and reminded many longer-serving teachers of the confusion which arose in August 2000.

Young people do not make a distinction between the different components of the education system; they see the SQA and their teachers as being part of the whole. We are concerned that the impact on young people has not enhanced the profession's reputation or their confidence in the system.

Young people were not interested in a statistical averaging process, but they could easily see that the positive or negative impact of the algorithm on their grades depended very much on where they lived. Reports suggest that highly achieving pupils in poorer areas did less well in comparison with lower achieving pupils in more prosperous areas.

Any system of awards which truly reflects learners' aptitude and capability should be based on their level of attainment without recourse to statistical manipulation.

## **Related issues**

Teachers are proud of the results their pupils achieve. A large majority take time out of their annual leave each year to go in to school to find out how their pupils have performed. Results are analysed formally and informally, and there will be formal and informal discussions relating to improvement and teaching approaches. In some cases certain classes will be timetabled for certain teachers based on the teacher's track record.

The Senior Phase is when young people build up their portfolio of qualifications and continue to develop the knowledge, skills, attributes and capabilities of the four capacities of Curriculum for Excellence. Their teachers are in a strong position to judge their learning success, their confidence as individuals, their readiness to live responsibly, and how effectively they are able to contribute to wider society.

Teachers have designed learning experiences which provide the breadth and depth of education to develop flexible and adaptable young people with the knowledge and skills they need to thrive. Teachers are best placed to use their professional judgement to draw on demonstrated and inferred evidence to assess the extent to which young people have engaged in these learning experiences and their levels of attainment.

The SSTA supports the efforts of the SQA to continue to develop robust procedures for ensuring that teacher professional judgement informs certification of learners' achievements during the Senior Phase thus building up and rebuilding confidence in the system. The SSTA believes that, moving forward, greater emphasis should be placed on teacher judgement. Teachers must be offered appropriate support mechanisms, both within and outwith school. These should involve more specialised subject-based training, trust and time. This will enable them to arrive at strong defensible judgements, placing collegiality and consistency at the heart of the certification process.

**SSTA Education Committee**

**31 August 2020**