

The SSTA has received a considerable quantity of comment from members relating to exam support recently published by the SQA. Regrettably none of it has been positive, and worryingly it appears to have had the opposite effect of that which was intended. Some guides appear to have been included to serve the purpose of having an entry for every subject.

Summary of comments (some in written email, some verbal):

Inconsistency

- Inconsistency of support appears unfair
- Inconsistency of approach – some support notes stating what will be in exam, some saying what will not, some saying neither
- Variation in quantity of changes

Insufficient quality

- Unvetted materials containing errors
- Unwieldy documents
- Unapproachable SQA house style (not learner-centred)
- Nothing new in some study guides
- First iteration not adequately quality assured – more teacher workload
- Some guides appear to have been included only to serve the purpose of having an entry for every subject.

Insensitivity

- Rigidity of deadlines
- Insensitivity to continuing impact of pandemic
- Insufficient detail adding to, rather than reducing, pupil anxiety
- Teachers and learners feeling let down

Impact on teacher workload

- Undifferentiated materials
- Yet more reading for teachers
- Support arriving during a peak workload period with no time set aside
- Requirement to decode documents for pupils

Reputational damage

- SQA cast in a poor light – further impact on the SQA's reputation
- Young people feeling patronised
- Learners commenting that what has been published is of inferior quality
- Learners reporting feeling less sure of what should/should not be revised
- Too little, too late, not meeting expectations
- Parents aren't impressed

Unanswered questions

- Grade boundaries – how will they be established?
- Will more deadline flexibility be allowed?
- What about young people required to isolate on exam day?

A small selection of written comments by SSTA members:

I would like to express my concern over the woefully inadequate SQA Revision Support released this week for my subject Physics.

The support contains a 13-page document which is a reworking of the Marking Guidance not easy material for students to read and information already given to them over the years of teaching, there is also a list of videos which have not been vetted and having only watched 3 or 4 I have already found important information that is wrong.

A further concern is the inconsistency of these guides as some subjects seem to have been given a list of topics that will not be tested in the exam. This seems unfair to my students.

I feel completely let down by the SQA, yet again.

As a French teacher, I was shocked finding out that our “support” for languages was 4-5 bullet points with 1 word each!

1 word being the name of the context that would come up for each paper or section of paper.

Knowing that our writing paper at National 5 is a job application, reading from the SQA telling us that the context for that paper is employability was a little bit baffling... And nothing we didn't know...

In short, what this means for language learning pupils, is that they still have to learn and revise the full course contents... The SQA “support” is giving us NO support as it's not narrowing down the revisions for our youngsters... While other subjects are seeing their content drastically reduced... Languages still have their full course covered in the exam with no indication of more specific topics...

As per usual... SQA letting down staff but most importantly pupils...

I am writing to express my concern that the SQA is refusing to allow extensions for course work that is marked by the SQA. My pupils are completing a Course Assignment for Nat 5 Health and Food Technology and while the majority of pupils will complete the work, I have two pupils who will possibly not as one pupil has been absent from school this week as she has COVID and another has been absent due to mental health issues. Both pupils, under normal circumstances, would have been able to complete the coursework. The assignment is 50% of their overall grade so if I end up having to submit an incomplete assignment this will significantly lower their overall grade.

Here are the reasons for a later uplift request for N5 and H Art & Design which have been rejected:

- Teaching and learning has been disrupted due to Covid cases/isolation throughout this academic year – this has no way been a “normal year”
- There have been no further changes to our NQ course requirements
- This week there have been more senior students marked as CAA on the register
- Students are generally finding it difficult to meet departmental deadlines that have been set in preparation for the main SQA uplift
- There has been a high absence rate in the senior phase within the department (not always Covid related)
- Some students are really struggling with mental health issues and are really feeling under pressure due to everything that has happened over the past two years
- Staff are feeling under pressure as they are being used for cover across the school

I am responsible for delivering the following qualifications this year: N5 Engineering Science, Higher Engineering Science, N5 Graphic Communication.

The adaptations made across these qualifications have been ludicrous and the support provided a complete waste of time.

The N5 Graphic Communication assignment requires students to become familiar with (and highly competent in) 3D modelling software - this has been a significant area of impact from COVID as the cohort missed the topic in both S2 & S3 due to lockdowns. The assignment remained and has made it extremely challenging to prepare students for both this and the question paper. The "adaptation" was the removal of 1 topic from the question paper, but this topic is still being assessed in the assignment so still needed to be taught.

The revision support document is mainly a copy of the course specification, but a few lines have been deleted (spot the difference because most of the headings are still there and it's often the fine detail that has been tweaked) to indicate which topics are in the QP.

However, for Engineering Science the assignment has been removed. This is typically the component pupils perform better in and, as a former engineer, is the best assessment of pupils' potential in the discipline. It is also pretty much impossible to teach Engineering without developing the practical skills that the assignment assesses.

Because the SQA have seen this as a "significant modification" (I agree it is significant but contrary to the SQA believe it is a significant disadvantage to the candidates) we have been given a pointless "study guide" that gives advice such as "show your working" and "write more for a higher question than you would for n5" (paraphrased).

The documents do serve the very useful purpose of confirming that the SQA are an inadequate and arrogant organisation. Their disbanding needs to be accelerated contrary to the Scottish Government statement about the Ken Muir report.

Unfortunately, I do not believe the SQA actually care enough about the young people to change anything - can you therefore please also take this matter up with the Scottish Government, surely they don't want the political ramifications of a third "SQA-gate"?

A quick look at the modern languages so-called 'support' at any level -it's half a page and pathetically useless- in comparison with eg AH English -several pages long- will highlight the unfair disparity between subjects. It's the same across languages and levels.

The subsequent explanation letter from SQA makes a mockery of everyone's concerns. I've had pupils missing weeks through COVID... Am I just supposed to give them that little table SQA provided to make up for it?

It attempts to 'explain' the difference between revision support and the need to 'maintain the credibility' of qualifications.

Perhaps it would be beneficial for SQA to be open and transparent about how it intends to maintain this credibility, including what this means in practice, particularly as there does not appear to be much commonality in assessment changes across subjects and they have no recent statistical data due to COVID to provide an evidence base for this.

Will the process and evidence used for establishing grade boundaries during awarding be the same process and evidence that is used in a 'normal' year

I think this should be published immediately as is the case in 'normal' years. Confidence in SQA is currently very low and publishing their approach during these exceptional times would reassure both learners and educators that there no one is being disadvantaged by the unsettling changes that SQA is currently undergoing.

I wish to share that the guidance issued for Modern Languages to a far from sufficient.

Advanced Higher has only had a small part of the talking exam removed. A part candidates could have prepared in advance as they still complete the folio. Having the listening context as Society for Advanced Higher Spanish - which is the context with most sub-topics, has not made preparing for this element any easier and involves pupils learning more vocabulary than necessary.

This is the same situation for N5 and H Spanish. This announcement has caused more stress to pupils as they still experience gaps in their learning due to absences relating to Covid. The SQA should advise which of the subtopics, such as healthy living, family relationships, etc will be in the listening exam so that pupils can prepare for this most unpredictable element.

My pupils are extremely concerned by the lack of support in many subjects and the fact there is no parity of support.

For example, Physics was patronising telling pupils to read the question etc while Business told the pupils which topics were NOT in exam which was helpful.

The changes yesterday were to correct mistakes NOT to add more help e.g. maths was to correct an error as they had given the wrong information regarding one topic.

As far as the pupils have told me the following advice is poor: History, Geography, and all Science subjects with varying support in the rest.

In my subject (physics) this amounts to little more than a re-hash of many of the general marking instructions: it is not study support or revision support at all. The SQA's standpoint is that, having already removed the investigation from the course assessment, they have cut things as far as can be done without unduly affecting the integrity of the course award.

However, many pupils have been absent from school due to having Covid and/or isolating as a close contact. Add to this a similar period of time that their teacher might have been absent for the same reasons, or out of class organising lessons for absent colleagues, and the level of disruption far exceeds the mitigations that the SQA have put in place.

I believe that the extra info for Biology will harm students' grades if they use it to focus their revision as all of the course is still to be assessed within the exam.