

SQA RESULTS 2019

COMMISSION FROM DFM:

ADES FEEDBACK

The impact of changes to the SQA question papers

It is recognised that due to the removal of units and unit assessments, significant changes have taken place over the past few years, particularly last session.

In National 5 and Higher courses, the SQA advised schools and Local Authorities that assessments would be strengthened to ensure that candidates continued to be assessed on the full content of the course and to maintain the SCQF value of each course. This was done by making one or more of the following changes to each subject:

- Extending or revising the question paper (exam)
- Extending or revising the coursework assessment
- Introducing a new question paper (exam)
- Introducing a new item of coursework

In practice, this meant that for the 2019 exam diet there were thirty six out of thirty eight subjects with changes to Higher question papers. This followed changes in 2018 to forty one out of forty four question papers across subjects in National 5 courses.

For example, in geography, the Higher question paper was extended by 100 marks, split into two papers with durations of one hour and fifty minutes (paper 1) and one hour and ten minutes (paper 2).

Inevitably, these changes require a period of adjustment for teachers and schools and this was recognised in the SQA Chief Examining Officer's 2019 National Qualifications Report, where it states;

'Candidates tend to perform slightly better in course work than their final exam' and

'It is important that candidates are well prepared in the full range of course content, as the amount of course content that is sampled in the question papers, for some subjects, has increased due to the removal of units. Any gaps in knowledge and understanding will have an impact on individual attainment.'

This also means that any comparison between pass rates in the 2018 and 2019 SQA diets should be treated with caution.

The removal of units has also added some uncertainty for teachers. Previously, pupils not gaining a Higher A to D award would have had unit passes included within their certificate. While this did not compensate for a Higher pass, it did mean that some recognition of pupil success was evident.

N5 Admin, Dance, Hospitality, Practical Electronics Woodwork and Metalwork all now have externally assessed written papers. Some of the young people of lower ability and EAL find external examinations so will have been presented at N4 where previously N5 could have been achieved.

Some Higher subjects now have a written paper that they didn't previously have such as Fashion, Care and Photography. Photography was a very good alternative for artistic young people who found the written element of art and design challenging. This alternative now has a written paper.

Music now has an externally assessed composing assignment which was previously an internal pass fail unit which, again some young people found challenging but could pass the internal unit – this will now impact on their overall grade.

Now that Insight data is available some analysis can be carried out on the actual achievements of young people. At national level, the following tables show the pattern for performance for SCQF level 5 and SCQF level 6:

SCQF level 5 by the end of S5 (based on S4) National	2016	2017	2018	2019
1 or more awards	85.3%	85.8%	86.5%	86.2%
2 or more awards	78.1%	79.0%	79.9%	79.8%
3 or more awards	71.5%	72.7%	73.8%	73.9%
4 or more awards	64.5%	65.7%	67.0%	67.4%
5 or more awards	55.6%	57.2%	58.6%	59.6%

SCQF level 6 by the end of S5 (based on S4) National	2016	2017	2018	2019
1 or more awards	59.1%	59.7%	60.4%	61.6%
2 or more awards	48.1%	48.5%	49.5%	51.2%
3 or more awards	38.8%	39.5%	40.4%	42.5%
4 or more awards	29.2%	30.1%	30.7%	33.2%
5 or more awards	18.8%	19.4%	20.1%	22.1%

This data includes all awards at these levels and would include other qualifications such as, National Progression Awards.

The data would suggest that candidates who are lower attaining are not improving at the same rate as higher attaining young people. Insight also allows you to look at national qualifications only. This is shown in the tables below.

SCQF level 5 by the end of S5 (based on S4) NQs only National	2018	2019
1 or more awards	85.98%	85.51%
2 or more awards	79.31%	79.11%
3 or more awards	72.87%	72.90%
4 or more awards	65.76%	66.13%
5 or more awards	57.10%	58.05%

SCQF level 6 by the end of S5 (based on S4) NQs only National	2018	2019
1 or more awards	59.23%	60.53%
2 or more awards	48.49%	50.10%
3 or more awards	39.46%	41.38%
4 or more awards	29.84%	32.11%
5 or more awards	19.26%	20.98%

There is not substantive differences in the improvements across the two years. Further analysis could be carried out to consider the attainment of candidates from the most deprived postcodes to consider whether the changes have impacted more on them. The challenge in pulling out conclusions is that the exam changes impact on 2019 only and conclusions should not be drawn from one year of data.

Supporting schools and teachers

Ensuring effective professional learning opportunities for teachers is an essential element of managing any curriculum and assessment change. The SQA provide a variety of opportunities in relation to understanding standards, including organising events for subject teachers, offering webinars, school visits by examining team subject specialists and publishing exam papers with marking schemes.

Other support at national level includes the availability of SCHOLAR for students and teachers. Created by Heriot-Watt University, SCHOLAR provides computer-based learning materials to support teaching and learning in maths, sciences, languages and business subjects. The SCHOLAR programme is designed to encourage student independent learning supported by a teacher. Scholar offers thirty seven online courses for Scottish schools and colleges aligned to the SQA curriculum at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher level. These courses are built upon the knowledge and experience of teachers working in Scottish schools and colleges to develop course materials.

At Local Authority level a range of supports are available for teachers including subject networks, training delivered by senior examiners and verifiers, learning and teaching groups,

assessment and moderation events, school partnerships, moderation and verification activities, best practice and validated self-evaluation visits, data analysis discussions and many other opportunities.

Increasingly, Regional Improvement Collaboratives are adding value to existing support mechanisms. For example, the West Partnership workstream on Systems Leadership provides a number of activities where performance information is shared across the collaborative to help direct and support specific work.

Other issues

It is worth highlighting that pass rates are only part of the 'attainment story'. It is possible that an overly strong focus on increasing Higher pass rates could cause unintended consequences at school level that impact negatively on some young people. Pass rates can be improved by removing pupils who are on the border line of passing a Higher course. An overly cautious approach driven by a focus on pass rates may lower aspirations and limit the chance for some pupils to sit and potentially pass their Higher. The most effective schools monitor both pupil entry levels and pass rates and track pupil progress robustly during the course of the school year. The most effective local authorities and schools work together to analyse the data in a range of different ways to explore the learning which can be drawn from the data.

Next steps

There is an extensive offer of professional learning available for teachers but it is worthwhile reminding schools of the activities available. This could be through publicising the SQA learning offer not just courses but webinars, sign posting SCHOLAR and BBC Bitesize and Local Authorities, Regional Improvement Collaboratives and Education Scotland Regional teams highlighting the specific subject support offered to teachers for Higher.

In the short to medium term there could be a focus on subjects where conversion rates from National 5 (particularly B/C passes) to Higher are low and the boundary for a C pass in Higher is below 50%. This may help identify whether any specific content issues need to be re-visited.

There is also a need for SQA to re-visit their approaches to assessment as part of their own quality assurance to consider whether or not they are indeed meeting the needs of candidates. The removal of unit assessments to be replaced by more lengthy examinations was one solution to ensuring robust, reliable assessment of candidates' knowledge and skills. Other options should be fully explored to allow different learning styles to be accommodated.