

Index of enclosures – FOI 202000084793

Request:

- Any correspondence (including emails, letters, text messages, typed or hand written notes, phone calls or otherwise) between the Cabinet Secretary for Education & Skills, John Swinney MSP, and the SQA. I would like this information from 02 August to 06 August.

| Enclosure No | Description | Date | Explanation of redactions | Exemption |
|--------------|--|----------------------|--------------------------------|-----------|
| 1. | Email from SQA to Deputy First Minister | 03 August 2020 12:23 | Personal information | 38(1)(b) |
| 2. | Email from SQA to Deputy First Minister | 04 August 2020 09:48 | Personal information | 38(1)(b) |
| 2.1. | Letter from SQA Chief Executive to Deputy First Minister | 04 August 2020 | | |
| 2.2. | SQA Methodology Report | 04 August 2020 | Publicly available information | 25(1) |

Enclosure 1 – Email from SQA to Deputy First Minister

From: [Redact 38(1)(b)]@sqa.org.uk>

Sent: 03 August 2020 12:23

To: Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills
<DFMCSE@gov.scot>

Subject: RE: 14:00 4th August - Deputy First Minister Meeting with Fiona Robertson

Hi [Redact 38(1)(b)]

Could we please go for conference call? This will be much easier for Fiona tomorrow.

Many thanks

[Redact 38(1)(b)]

From: [Redact 38(1)(b)]@gov.scot **On Behalf Of** DFMCSE@gov.scot

Sent: 03 August 2020 12:18

To: [Redact 38(1)(b)]; DFMCSE@gov.scot

Subject: RE: 14:00 4th August - Deputy First Minister Meeting with Fiona Robertson

Hi [Redact 38(1)(b)]

That's great, is a conference call ok or would Fiona prefer to use zoom again?

Thanks

[Redact 38(1)(b)]

[Redact 38(1)(b)] | [Redact 38(1)(b)] | Deputy First Minister of Scotland and Cabinet Secretary for Education & Skills | Scottish Government | St Andrew's House | Edinburgh | EH1 3DG | Tel: [Redact 38(1)(b)] E: DFMCSE@gov.scot

From: [Redact 38(1)(b)]@sqa.org.uk>

Sent: 03 August 2020 12:16

To: Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills
<DFMCSE@gov.scot>

Subject: RE: 14:00 4th August - Deputy First Minister Meeting with Fiona Robertson

Hi [Redact 38(1)(b)]

That's no problem. Fiona can be available to speak at 1400.

Kind regards

[Redact 38(1)(b)]

[Redact 38(1)(b)]

[Redact 38(1)(b)]

Scottish Qualifications Authority

m: [Redact 38(1)(b)] w: <http://www.sqa.org.uk>

[Redact 38(1)(b)]

From: [Redact 38(1)(b)]@gov.scot> **On Behalf Of** DFMCSE@gov.scot

Sent: 03 August 2020 11:33

To: [Redact 38(1)(b)]@sqa.org.uk>

Cc: DFMCSE@gov.scot

Subject: 14:00 4th August - Deputy First Minister Meeting with Fiona Robertson

Hi [Redact 38(1)(b)],

Deputy First Minister would like to take a call with Fiona tomorrow around 14:00 to reflect on the results day etc. Can you let me know if she has availability at this time?

Thanks

[Redact 38(1)(b)]

[Redact 38(1)(b)] | [Redact 38(1)(b)] | Deputy First Minister of Scotland and Cabinet Secretary for Education & Skills | Scottish Government | St Andrew's House | Edinburgh | EH1 3DG | Tel: [Redact 38(1)(b)] | E: DFMCSE@gov.scot

Enclosure 2 – Email from SQA to Deputy First Minister

From: [Redact 38(1)(b)]@sqa.org.uk> **On Behalf Of** Fiona Robertson
Sent: 04 August 2020 09:48
To: Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills
<DFMCSE@gov.scot>
Cc: Director of Learning <DirectorofLearning@gov.scot>
Subject: Letter from Fiona Robertson, SQA Chief Executive and Scotland's Chief Examining Officer
Importance: High

PS/DFM

Please find attached letter and methodology report from Fiona Robertson, for the attention of the Deputy First Minister.

Kind regards,
[Redact 38(1)(b)]

[Redact 38(1)(b)]
[Redact 38(1)(b)]
Scottish Qualifications Authority

Enclosure 2.1 – Letter from SQA Chief Executive to Deputy First Minister

4 August 2020

John Swinney MSP
Deputy First Minister /
Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills
The Scottish Government
Saint Andrews House
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

By email: DFMCSE@gov.scot

Contact: Fiona.Robertson@sqa.org.uk

Dear Deputy First Minister

On 18 March you asked me, as Chief Examining Officer, to develop an alternative approach to certification this year following the closure of schools and the cancellation of exams.

I am writing today to set out the approach we have taken, drawing on my report as Chief Examining Officer. This report, together with a suite of supporting documentation, is being published in full at 09:30 this morning.

Since the outset, our approach has been based on three core principles, which reflect both how we work and the circumstances of 2020:

- Fairness to all learners.

- Safe and secure certification of our qualifications, while following the latest public health advice.
- Maintaining the integrity and credibility of our qualifications system, ensuring that standards are maintained over time, in the interests of learners.

On 20 April, I set out the four key stages to our approach: estimates; awarding; results and certification; and appeals.

The key input to our alternative certification model has been based on estimated grades. We receive estimates every year from schools and colleges. We asked for more detailed estimates — 19 refined bands — and candidate rank order within these refined bands, to provide more differentiated data to inform the awarding process. Teachers, lecturers and partners from across education helped inform the approach and the guidance.

The estimates we received were significantly above previous A to C attainment at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher: A to C attainment rates were 10.4 percentage points higher at National 5, 14.0 percentage points higher at Higher and 13.4 percentage points higher at Advanced Higher than results in 2019. As the national awarding body, with responsibility for maintaining the integrity and credibility of our qualifications system, and ensuring that standards are maintained over time, the estimates highlighted a clear case for moderation. Overall, there was variation, but not uniform variation, between historic attainment and 2020 estimates across subjects, levels and centres.

The moderation process was undertaken at centre level, per course, and by grade using historic attainment data. Starting Point Distributions, with tolerances, set out the expected parameters for each grade and A to C attainment nationally in 2020, drawing on historic attainment, prior attainment data (where available), and feedback from SQA Qualifications teams and Principal Assessors.

For centres which had no historic attainment data for a course, estimates were accepted without moderation as there was no fair or evidential basis on which they could be adjusted.

As you know, we considered very carefully whether to conduct a professional dialogue with schools and colleges as part of the moderation process. It was concluded that it would not be possible to include engagement with centres. The reasons for this are twofold:

- The difficulty of operating a dialogue that was fair and consistent in its treatment of all centres and candidates.
- The time that would be required in what was already a very tight schedule for certification.

Of 511,070 entries across National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher, we accepted 377,308 (73.8%) estimated grades and 133,762 (26.2%) estimated grades were adjusted.

Given the profile of estimates, most of the adjustments — 124,564 or 93.1% — were moderated down, and 9,198 entries (6.9%) were moderated up. Of the total 133,762 adjustments, 128,508 or 96.1% were adjusted by one grade. 45,454 entries (8.9%) were adjusted down from grades A–C to grade D or to No Award. Of these, 43,423 (95.5%) were originally estimated to be grade C.

Full details of our methodology is provided in the SQA National Qualifications 2020 Awarding – Methodology Report, attached. Further information on the moderation outcomes for each of the 129 courses across National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher is also being published today.

Our post-certification review (appeals) process will provide for further, evidence-based consideration of grades if schools and colleges do not think awarded grades fairly reflect candidate performance. The new system goes live today.

Looking at outcomes, A to C attainment in 2020 at National 5 is 243,572 or 81.1% (225,594 or 78.2% in 2019). At Higher it is 146,643 or 78.9% (138,972 or 74.8% in 2019). At Advanced Higher it is 20,010 or 84.9% (18,627 and 79.4% in 2019).

Some variation of attainment is to be expected between courses and over time. This year, the absence of external assessment information and the moderation process has led to more significant movements in attainment than we would see in a normal year.

Throughout the development of the model we have had equalities at the heart of our thinking, and have developed and refined an Equality Impact Assessment and a Child Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment to inform our approaches and decisions, as well as to demonstrate our compliance with our statutory obligations. In developing these assessments, we have had due regard to the potential equalities impacts of our processes and have sought to ensure that our guidance to centres on equalities in the estimation process assisted them in fulfilling their equalities' responsibilities. Whilst the moderation process involved the use of pseudonymised data, we have ensured that the arrangements we have in place for post-certification review and exceptional consideration arrangements are also designed to address any cases of discrimination in original estimation by centres.

Our statistical analysis of available data (contained in the Equality Impact Assessment) from 2016 onwards demonstrates that, after moderation, learners in the most deprived SIMD bandings saw attainment levels for grades A to C higher than both 2019 results and the average result for 2016-2019 as well as a narrowing of the attainment gap between those in the most deprived and least deprived SIMD bandings over the same periods. We have also engaged with the Scottish Government to undertake further statistical analysis on protected characteristics, the data for which is held by them.

To conclude, this has been a very challenging year for everyone involved in Scottish education. I am very grateful to schools and colleges across Scotland who have worked with us in the most difficult circumstances to deliver for learners. Without teacher and lecturer estimates, we would not have been able to certificate this year.

I am also grateful for the patience of Scotland's learners who, together with their families, have been worried about what the cancellation of exams might mean. The results young people across Scotland receive today should reflect their achievements and allow them to progress to further study or employment.

Finally, I must thank SQA staff who have worked so hard to deliver. I believe we have:

- Delivered fairness to learners, through a consistent, evidence-based approach to awarding, supported by an Equalities Impact Assessment and a Child Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment.
- Ensured safe and secure certification of our qualifications, taking difficult decisions when needed, following public health advice.
- Maintained the integrity and credibility of our qualifications system, ensuring that standards are maintained over time, in the interests of learners, through judicious moderation of grades.

Yours sincerely

Fiona Robertson

Chief Executive and Scotland's Chief Examining Officer

Enclosure 2.2 – SQA Methodology Report

Redacted 25(1) - this information is publicly available on the SQA website:

https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files_ccc/SQAAwardingMethodology2020Report.pdf