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EIS Advice on N5 and Higher English Folio

This advice is relevant to Secondary members who are teachers, Faculty Heads and PTs of English, SQA Co-ordinators and Headteachers.

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The EIS is in favour of assessment models within SQA qualifications which are not wholly dependent on final examinations. Assessment models based solely on exams are known to be disadvantageous to students from poorer socio-economic backgrounds and are not the best means by which to assess the skills and knowledge learned in all cases.

With regards to the Folio of Writing at N5 and Higher, the EIS is of the view that, in principle, this approach is in the interests of social justice, providing students from poorer backgrounds the opportunity to demonstrate their learning, in part, outwith a formal exam-based context; and offers stronger assessment validity in that a portfolio approach more closely mirrors the process intrinsic to the art of writing, as opposed to the on-demand nature of writing under timed exam conditions.

That said, some EIS members with English subject specialism have raised concerns about workload, inequity and authenticity issues in relation to Folio writing and submission. This advice is intended to address these issues, with a view to supporting EIS members who are English subject specialists to control Folio-related **workload**, and to offer some guidance in relation to issues of **inequity** and **authenticity.**

Workload

The EIS recognises that there are aspects of the Folio which potentially create pressures on the workload of English teachers. We advise that this should be managed in the terms outlined below.

Drafting and teacher feedback

Members have highlighted concerns around workload incurred by the process of monitoring and providing feedback on multiple drafts of each of the two requisite Folio pieces.

SQA guidance indicates that only two drafts of each piece of portfolio writing is allowable – a first draft and a final draft.

> In the interests of workload control and compliance with the stipulated conditions of assessment, the EIS strongly recommends adherence to:
>
> - SQA guidelines around the number of drafts that can be submitted for feedback per writing piece
> - the extent of the feedback that can be provided.
>
> Members are advised also to make the SQA rules clear to their students and their parents/carers.

Accepting and responding to draft pieces of writing over and above that which is stipulated as being allowable by the SQA, or providing more than 'reasonable assistance', is in breach of the conditions of assessment and creates additional workload for teachers.

A summary extract from the SQA conditions of assessment for the Portfolio (referenced throughout this advice):

'**It is acceptable for a teacher or lecturer to provide:**

- an initial discussion with the candidate on the selection of a topic, theme, genre, leading to an outline plan
- written or oral feedback on one draft of writing

It is not acceptable for a teacher or lecturer to provide:

- model answers which are specific to candidate tasks
- specific advice on how to rephrase wording
- key ideas, or a specific structure or plan
- corrections of errors in spelling and punctuation
- feedback on more than **one draft** of writing.'[1]
- Should members experience undue pressure from parents/carers to deviate from this SQA direction, this should be raised in the first instance with the Principal Teacher/ Faculty Head. **Should such pressure be applied by the school management, the matter should be raised with the School Rep or the Local Association Secretary.**

SQA Folio templates

The SQA requirement for Folio pieces to be submitted using an electronic template has been identified as problematic by teachers of English. (Folio pieces can be either typed or handwritten onto the templates – there is no stipulation that they must be word-processed, though many schools encourage/demand this.)

EIS members report the downloading of the requisite SQA folio submission template to be an unwieldy, bureaucracy-heavy process.

Members are reminded that all SQA-related workload, including that associated with downloading of Folio templates where students are unable to manage this themselves, perhaps due to lack of access to ICT at home, should be factored into Working Time Agreements.

Where issues arise beyond this, the matter should be raised with line managers in the first instance and with the School Rep or the Local Association Secretary if it remains unresolved thereafter.

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[1] https://www.sqa.org.uk/files_ccc/HigherCourseSpecEnglish.pdf

Communication of Folio deadlines

The EIS is clear on the importance of transparency around the key dates supplied by the SQA to schools in relation to Folio submission, and the importance of adherence to the deadlines set by teachers and departments to enable timely submission of coursework to the SQA by the presenting centre.

Clear communication of and adherence to deadlines minimises the risk of workload bottlenecks forming, either where timing determined by the teacher or late submission by students, creates disproportionate pressure on the time immediately preceding the SQA Folio submission deadline.

While to a large extent this can occur as a result of establishment-based policy, it has become clear from recent discussions with the SQA, their reluctance to make formal deadlines known to all Secondary teachers, preferring to circulate these only to school SQA co-ordinators. The EIS has made clear that this is unacceptable and that formal deadlines should be shared with all teachers involved in the delivery of National Qualifications that contain coursework assessment, including N5 and Higher English.

Members are advised to seek accurate information about SQA deadlines from the school's SQA co-ordinator and to ensure that within departments, deadlines are shared with and known by all relevant staff, and with students and their parents/carers.

Variable levels of home support leading to inequity

While the EIS endorses the argument in favour of the Writing Folio as an assessment approach that enables students to demonstrate skills and knowledge in a context other than formal examination, and so benefits students from less affluent backgrounds, members have reported issues in terms of the varying levels of home support available to more and less affluent students.

Some members have raised concerns around advantageous tutor intervention and/ or other at-home assistance with Folio work, for students from more affluent backgrounds, leading to greater inequity of outcome.

Regarding the role of tutors and others at home who may seek to intervene in a students' folio work, the SQA is quite clear:

> 'The portfolio–writing is a final summative assessment and when a candidate begins the process of drafting their pieces of writing this must be under the direct supervision of their teacher or lecturer. At this point, no other person can be involved in the discussion or review of the candidate's work.'

Members are advised to make students and their parents/ carers aware of this SQA stipulation.

On the more general issue of variable home environments contributing to inequity of outcome with regards to Folio writing, the EIS view is that more time spent in class on writing the pieces, rather than this being set as homework, would be a better leveller.

Folio work undertaken during what should be 160 hours of class time allocated to a course would enable less affluent students the requisite access to the resources, research materials and conducive learning spaces, which tend to be in shorter supply for poorer students within the home environment.

The practice of one-year annual presentations for qualifications which continues to occur in the majority of schools places a squeeze on the number of hours that are available for classroom-based learning and teaching within senior phase courses. This results in much Folio work being done at home, giving schools less scope to mitigate socioeconomic disadvantage. A move to two-year qualifications could helpfully address this issue, among others.

Members should seek to raise such matters in the course of departmental discussion related to curriculum design and timetabling, and with the management of the school.

Authenticity

EIS members have also expressed some anxiety around ensuring the authenticity of portfolio writing, much of which is done outwith the classroom environment. In particular, some English teachers are uneasy about being asked to vouch for the authorship of all pieces and around incidences of plagiarism, especially of material that is available on the internet.

The SQA direction on this is clear. They state that it is

'unreasonable to expect teachers or lecturers to be able to identify all potential instances of plagiarism, and this is why the final responsibility rests with the candidates to confirm that the pieces are genuinely their own work.'

That said, the expectation is that the writing of both pieces must be conducted under some supervision and control. While students may work on their writing pieces beyond the classroom, teachers and lecturers need to establish processes to monitor progress and authenticity. The SQA states that such monitoring 'need not involve timed, and closely supervised conditions', but

'at all stages of preparation for and production of the piece there must be careful monitoring to ensure that it is entirely the candidate's own work'.

SQA advice on monitoring authenticity offers suggestions as to how this can be approached in schools and colleges through:

- regular checkpoint/progress meetings with candidates
- checklists which record activity/progress
- asking candidates to provide an annotated bibliography (writing a sentence or two about the usefulness of a source, for example, can remind candidates of where their information/ideas came from)

- making sure that candidates know exactly what is required for the portfolio, and that they are familiar with the SQA 'Your Coursework' guide.

The SQA directs teachers very clearly in relation to cases of plagiarism or cheating:

> 'Where there is doubt over the authenticity of a piece of writing, it must not be accepted for portfolio submission.'

In the event that members should face any undue pressure from parents/ carers to reverse such a decision, the matter should be raised with the Principal Teacher/ Faculty Head in the first instance; and with the School Rep or Local Association Secretary should the matter remain unresolved thereafter.

Schools should also seek to minimise the risk of students resorting to plagiarism or seeking input from others into their writing pieces due to being presented at a qualification level for which they do not have the requisite prior learning and attainment. When students are inappropriately placed and the level of demand is too great, there may be temptation by candidates to plagiarise the work of others or falsely present pieces that have been obtained from the internet as their own work.

Careful placement of students at the appropriate course level, as far as possible in discussion and agreement with students and their parents/carers, is a key means of minimising the temptation to plagiarise.

Summary of Advice:

Workload:

- Strict adherence to SQA guidance on the drafting process is a means of controlling Folio-related workload.

- Members should seek precise information relating to SQA Folio deadlines from School SQA Co-ordinators and plan departmental deadlines for students accordingly, ensuring that students and parents/carers are fully aware of them.

- All SQA-related workload should be factored into Working Time Agreements. Where workload demands exceed the time allocation within the WTA, members should raise the matter with their line manager or the management of the school in the first instance, and with the School Rep/ Local Association Secretary as necessary thereafter.

Inequity of home support:

- Students and parent/carers should be advised of the SQA rules surrounding the involvement of those other than students' class teachers in the drafting of Folio writing. Members should advocate for the timetabling of qualifications over two school sessions rather than annually, as per the design intentions of the senior phase, with the aim of increasing time in class for learning and teaching of course content, including Folio writing.

Authenticity:

- Members are reminded that the SQA view is that students themselves have the responsibility of confirming their authorship of each of the Folio pieces being submitted.

- Teachers are expected to take 'reasonable' steps to monitor authenticity – these should be factored into daily lesson planning or as an element of preparation and correction, in either case, covered by Working Time Arrangements.

- Where there is doubt on the part of teachers of the authenticity of a student's writing, the piece should not be accepted for submission. Should members require advice/ support in relation to such decisions, the matter should be raised with their line manager in the first instance and with the School Rep or Local Association Secretary thereafter as necessary.

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