

## **THE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTE OF SCOTLAND**

### **Submission to Education and Skills Committee's**

#### **Pre-budget Review of the Performance of the Scottish Qualifications Authority**

1. The Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), Scotland's largest education union, welcomes the opportunity to provide a written submission to inform the Committee's pre-budget review of the performance of the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA).
2. The EIS recognises the role of the SQA as a significant partner in the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence, and in particular, the new qualifications for the senior phase which were to be inclusive, with qualifications from National 1 upwards, ensuring that those with additional support needs had recognition within the qualification system and that they had the possibility of coherent pathways for progression. SQA has developed, also, courses and certification, relevant to the Developing the Young Workforce agenda, which offer opportunities for a wider range of learners to gain qualifications.
3. The EIS also acknowledges the importance to the SQA, and to the standing of qualifications it offers, of quality assurance. Over the past year, SQA has continued to engage with stakeholders, the EIS included, and formally and informally with teachers. For example, the EIS notes the completion in May of this year of the SQA's extensive review of new qualifications, covering 51 subjects and based on 3500 teacher survey responses in addition to focus groups drawn from NQ subject groups, and feedback from implementation managers, and quality assurance of internal and external assessment.
4. Indeed, many of the SQA's own findings were consistent with those of EIS members' views in several respects: overwhelmingly, the teachers surveyed had found unit assessments to have worked badly in their subjects; more than half identified significant duplication across internal and external assessment; and around 40% believed SQA unit assessment materials to have been unfit for purpose. In this regard the EIS is of the view that some of the quality assurance approaches adopted by the SQA, for example the overly extensive unit verification regime, have contributed significantly to the excessive workload burden carried by schools and teachers and have led to a significant deterioration in the relationship between the profession and the SQA.

5. The EIS, having repeatedly raised such matters over the course of the previous two years, welcomed some of the outcomes emergent from related discussions within the Assessment and National Qualifications Review Group, that were designed to alleviate the burden of assessment on both students and teachers for this session: the application of thresholds for unit passes thereby reducing the need for reassessment, and the suspension of random unit verification. While welcome, these changes announced in May of this year, did not go far enough in addressing the serious workload concerns of EIS members or their anxiety that the quality of the learning experience was being deeply compromised by over assessment of students in the senior phase.
6. The EIS would accept that other factors beyond the immediate locus of the SQA, senior school architecture and challenges around transition for the BGE to senior phase, for example, were contributory factors to the excessive assessment regime of the past few years, but we also have a clear view that SQA has been insufficiently sensitive to the pressures its qualification regime has placed on schools – pupils and teachers alike.
7. It is regrettable that it took industrial action by EIS members to secure a commitment from the Scottish Government that the SQA would address the nub of the issue with the elimination of mandatory unit assessments for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher, commencing on a 3 year phased basis from August 2017. It is the view of the EIS, therefore, that the SQA's quality assurance mechanisms as applied to the development and operational delivery of the new qualifications certainly require to be sharper in their sensitivity to the needs of its main 'customer'- the Scottish education system, its learners and teachers.
8. Finally, regarding cost reduction within the SQA which has already occurred, the EIS has significant concerns about the SQA's over-reliance on technology to deliver efficiencies. Already our members have expressed anger and frustration about this practice both as a means of distributing materials related to senior phase courses and assessment to centres, and for the purposes of marking candidate scripts. In effect, though paper, postal and human resource savings have been made by SQA, the significant financial and bureaucratic burden of printing and photocopying has been transferred directly to schools and colleges, teachers/ lecturers and even to students.
9. In terms of alternative means of revenue raising, whilst the EIS is not opposed in principle to the SQA's international activity, we would reiterate caution about over-expansion in this area. The SQA's submission indicates almost a 500% increase in certifications outside Scotland since 2010- a

critical period for the final development and implementation of new qualifications in Scotland. Given the many issues that have befallen the senior phase in the intervening years, the efficacy of such a business strategy to meet the needs of Scotland's qualifications system is questionable. As stated in the 2015 submission to the Education and Culture Committee of the Scottish Parliament, the EIS believes that Scotland's schools and colleges require the SQA to remain focused on meeting the needs of the qualifications system in Scotland rather than shifting the emphasis of its activities and courting further business internationally. In the event of such, there is a danger that the need to support Scottish education would become a mere afterthought within the SQA's overall business model to the detriment of Scotland's learners and teachers.

10. Regarding the SQA's performance with regards to Equality, the EIS welcomes its engagement with relevant partners through the Equality and Inclusion Key Partners Group, of which the EIS is a member. The EIS has raised on a number of occasions within the Group and in other fora, concerns about the revised additional assessment arrangements for candidates with additional support needs in literacy. These arrangements resulted in 2014, in the withdrawal of human readers and scribes for candidates with additional support needs of this kind who were being presented for Literacy and therefore English qualifications at Nationals 1-4. Instead of human support, as was an option at Standard Grade for learners with similar difficulties, and continues to be an option for candidates being presented for English qualifications at N5, Higher and Advanced Higher, support by technological means is the substitute provision. The EIS has highlighted repeatedly the lack of consistency of approach to assessment arrangements across the suite of English qualifications and the apparent injustice that candidates who face equal barriers to success are unequally supported to achieve. A further dimension is added in light of the high correlation between the likelihood of incidence of additional support needs and socio-economic disadvantage.
11. Finally, in relation to the governance of the SQA, it is the view of the EIS, again as previously stated, that whilst a degree of independence is important to the operational standing of the organisation and its professional reputation, there is a case to be examined as to how it can be more responsive to the main voices within Scottish education, including the professional associations. The current arrangement of a Board appointed by Scottish Government offers no conduit for representative voices to be heard and the EIS regards this as a fundamental weakness in the governance arrangements.