

Report

Report to:	Education Resources Committee
Date of Meeting:	31 August 2021
Report by:	Executive Director (Education Resources)

Subject:	SQA Awards 2021 - Alternative Certification Model (ACM)
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1. Purpose of Report

1.1. The purpose of the report is to:-

- ♦ provide an overview of the national Alternative Certification Model (ACM) in relation to the preparation of provisional awards for SQA candidates following the cancellation of the 2021 SQA examination diet.

2. Recommendation(s)

2.1. The Committee is asked to approve the following recommendation(s):-

- (1) that the Alternative Certification process for SQA awards for candidates presented in session 2020-2021 be noted.

3. Background

- 3.1. On 7 October 2020, it was announced that the planned diet of SQA National 5 examinations for session 2021-2021 would be cancelled. An SQA-led National Qualifications group, NQ21, was established to develop an alternative means of certification, known as the Alternative Certification Model or ACM, for National 5 qualifications.
- 3.2. An underpinning principle of the ACM was that awards would be based on demonstrated attainment supported by robust evidence.
- 3.3. It was subsequently announced on 9 December 2020 that the planned diet of SQA Higher and Advanced Higher examinations for session 2021-21 would also be cancelled and that the ACM would be adapted to accommodate these qualifications as well.
- 3.4. The NQ21 group developed a model providing support for school staff in relation to understanding SQA standards and the required quality assurance processes. A timeline was agreed which included an SQA sampling exercise for all presenting centres to ensure that the National Standards were consistently applied.
- 3.5. Prior to schools returning in January 2021, a further national lockdown was announced. As a result, prelim diets planned for January and February for Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications could not proceed.

- 3.6. This decision by the Scottish Government was compounded by uncertainty in relation to when pupils would be able to return to schools, and, indeed, whether it would be possible to complete any certification in 2021.
- 3.7. At this time SQA acted to reduce course content requirements, to remove some assessment elements and to extend the timescales for submitting awards. SQA also provided copies of the planned exams for schools to use to support their internal assessments. 2 additional in-service days were agreed by Scottish Government in order to support internal quality assurance and to address concerns in respect of the time available.
- 3.8. As pupils returned in a phased way prior to the Spring Break, schools were supported in planning for assessment and for quality assurance.

4. Provisional Awards Process

- 4.1. Weekly meetings took place throughout the session between central Education Resources staff and Secondary Head Teacher representatives to plan and agree guidance in respect of the ACM.
- 4.2. SLC guidance was developed and disseminated relating both to the assessment of young people and to the quality assurance processes to be applied. This provided an approach that not only ensured compliance with the SQA requirements but also provided reassurance and support for centres.
- 4.3. Subject networks were convened and supported to allow discussion, verification and moderation involving all centres and all subjects at N5, H and AH levels. For subjects with smaller uptake and smaller numbers of teachers, networks were established across the West Partnership.
- 4.4. Subject leaders, usually Faculty Heads or Principal Teachers, prepared the provisional results for courses in each centre, having developed a clear rationale/methodology for their judgements and having engaged in the appropriate moderation processes.
- 4.5. Individual provisional results were established using the teacher's professional judgement of pupil attainment based on assessment evidence undertaken in controlled exam conditions and moderated at school level, local authority level and at national level through the sampling exercise.
- 4.6. Schools undertook an internal 'sense checking' exercise to explore any unusual or unexpected results. Each school also reviewed results with senior Education Resources officers, again considering unusual or unexpected results.
- 4.7. It is worth stating explicitly that results were neither upgraded nor downgraded directly because of these checks. The checks resulted in some further scrutiny and review of the available evidence for some candidates in some subjects, however, all pupil awards were based solely on the evidence available.
- 4.8. Each Head Teacher was required to sign-off all provisional results submitted for his/her school SQA.

5. HMIE Review of Local Authority Alternative Certification Model

- 5.1. HMIE undertook a programme of scrutiny of Local Authority approaches to the SQA Alternative Certification Model. The outcome of the process included an individual

Local Authority feedback session and culminated in a high-level National report published in May 2021.

[National review: Local authorities | Supporting remote learning | National Improvement Hub \(education.gov.scot\)](#)

- 5.2. SLC approaches and processes were highly commended and aspects of these were referenced as good practice in the National report.

6. Learner/Parent Communication

- 6.1. It was recognised that learners and parents would be keen to find out the grades being submitted to SQA. Learners were engaged in dialogue around their evidence and provisional awards as early as was possible on a course-by-course basis.
- 6.2. Ongoing dialogue between teachers and learners helped to ensure understanding of what the assessment evidence reflected regarding provisional award at any point in time.
- 6.3. Schools confirmed provisional results with all candidates prior to the summer closure.
- 6.4. It is worth noting that there were relatively few complaints or concerns raised by candidates and/or their parents in relation to the results that schools presented.
- 6.5. SQA reports the early indication that the level of appeals is lower than had been anticipated.

7. Outcomes

- 7.1. Data trends and patterns reflect a positive year of certification. A further update will be provided once SQA statistical data is available. However, an initial analysis would indicate that candidates have performed better, or as well as, in previous years. Overall pass rates have increased at Nat 5, Higher, and Advanced Higher and are in line with, or above, previous sessions in most subjects. The proportion of 'A' grade awards achieved by pupils has risen in most subjects.
- 7.2. Overall Improvements could be attributed to:
- SQA adjustments to course content and assessment requirements for a range of qualifications.
 - Removal of one off high stakes final exams.
 - Assessments developed to reflect individual school and learner context.
 - Positive learner engagement with the assessment and moderation process.
 - Robust and high-quality teacher engagement with the assessment and moderation process.

8. Appeals

- 8.1. Learners can appeal their results directly with SQA – the process for doing so opened on 25 June 2021 and closes on 12 August 2021.
- 8.2. Learners have been advised to discuss any intent to appeal with their school. However, the final decision on whether to appeal, or not, lies with the candidate.
- 8.3. Learners can appeal on 3 grounds:
- an appeal against the academic judgement
 - an appeal against an unresolved administrative error

- an appeal on grounds of discrimination where there has been a breach of the Equality Act 2010 (which must have been either acknowledged by the school, college or training provider or established by a court or the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman), or the school, college or training provider failed to provide agreed Assessment Arrangements.

9. Next Steps

- 9.1. SQA has confirmed details of changes/amendments to National Qualifications for 2021-22.
- 9.2. Further details regarding the approach to certification for 2021-2022 will be provided by SQA early in the new term.
- 9.3. Education Resources will continue work with Head Teachers to support learners and teachers in the delivery of National Qualifications in 2021-22.
- 9.4. The subject networks which supported the 2021 awards process will continue to provide the opportunity for cooperation and collaboration.

10. Employee Implications

- 10.1. There are no employee implications arising from the recommendations in this report.

11. Financial Implications

- 11.1. There are no financial implications arising from the recommendations in this report

12. Climate Change, Sustainability and Environmental Implications

- 12.1. There are no implications for climate change, sustainability and environmental associated with this report.

13. Other Implications

- 13.1. There are no risk implications in terms of the information contained within this report.

14. Equality Impact Assessment and Consultation Arrangements

- 14.1. This report does not introduce a new policy, function or strategy or recommend a change to existing policy, function or strategy and, therefore, no impact assessment is required.
- 14.2. Consultation and engagement with schools, staff, learners, the Scottish Government, SQA, Education Scotland and the professional associations along with other stakeholders has been a core element of the alternative certification model.

Tony McDaid

Executive Director (Education Resources Resources)

4 August 2021

Link(s) to Council Values/Ambitions/Objectives

- Improve achievement, raise educational attainment and support lifelong learning
- Ensure schools and other places of learning are inspirational

Previous References

None

List of Background Papers

[National review: Local authorities](#) | [Supporting remote learning](#) | [National Improvement Hub \(education.gov.scot\)](#)

Contact for Further Information

If you would like to inspect the background papers or want further information, please contact:-

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