



National review of local
authority approaches to quality
assurance as part of the
alternative certification model

Introduction

In October 2020, the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills announced a number of measures to support the awarding of National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications in August 2021. This included the removal of all external assessment requirements for National 5 qualifications. In December 2020, the Deputy First Minister announced further changes to the awarding of National Qualifications in 2020-21, by confirming the removal of external assessment requirements for both Higher and Advanced Higher courses. Therefore, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) 2021 National Qualifications external examination diet has been cancelled.

A National Qualifications Group 2021 (NQ 2021) was established with membership drawn from a broad range of stakeholders across Scottish education. This group, and its supporting working group, created the Alternative Certification Model (ACM) – NQ 2021, to be used to support the awarding of National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications in 2020-21. In this model, provisional grades will be determined by teachers' professional judgements of young people's demonstrated attainment.

In March 2021, the Deputy First Minister requested that HM Inspectors of Education (HMIE) undertake a national review of local authority approaches to quality assurance as part of the ACM. The review is intended to support further, the range of measures being undertaken to ensure that the approach to certification this year delivers for young people across Scotland. This report presents the findings of that national review.

Background

In carrying out the review HM Inspectors engaged with all 32 local authorities. They spoke with local authority officers, headteachers, SQA co-ordinators, teachers and representatives of professional associations in each local authority. The review looked at the role of local authorities as part of the ACM. This included how local authorities were supporting:

- 'Understanding Standards';
- school-level assessment approaches;
- school-level quality assurance;
- area-based subject quality assurance; and
- the use of teachers as SQA appointees.

This report presents the findings based on engagement between 12 April and 30 April 2021. Aspects of the ACM, outlined in stage 2 and stage 3, were due to take place from April 2021 onwards. HM Inspectors discussed with local authorities the arrangements that were under development for stage 2 and stage 3 of the ACM. HM Inspectors did not review approaches to quality assurance at individual school or departmental level. Nor did they review the quality assurance of assessment evidence gathered for determining individual learners' provisional grades.

Findings

Understanding standards

Local authorities are aware of the need to ensure that all staff delivering and assessing National Qualifications have a sound understanding of the required standards of assessment. Commendably, local authorities are building on existing practice to develop further teachers' knowledge, understanding and application of these standards across all subjects and schools. Local authorities have detailed arrangements in place to support their staff, for example through the use of 'Understanding Standards' resources and activities provided by the SQA. Local authorities are supporting headteachers to review their improvement priorities to allow teachers to prioritise time for taking forward quality assurance activities. At the time of the review, local authorities were directing teachers towards subject specific information provided by the SQA, supporting them to attend webinars and engage with other relevant materials.

Local authorities have provided opportunities for staff to collaborate in professional dialogue on 'Understanding Standards', for example, during dedicated in-service days, collegiate activities or departmental time. This is helping staff to develop a shared understanding of national standards and support their professional judgements. In most local authorities, robust procedures provide local authority officers with an assurance that staff have engaged in 'Understanding Standards' resources and activities. A few local authorities have evaluated the impact of teachers' engagement with 'Understanding Standards'. Those teachers report that their confidence in understanding and applying standards is now stronger.

Almost all local authorities have introduced, re-established or strengthened subject network groups over the course of the current academic session. They recognise the central role of these networks in promoting consistency in both assessment and moderation activities. Effective and well-established subject network groups are supporting staff to develop their understanding of standards. Subject networks are also helping to support single teacher departments, teachers presenting young people for

National Qualifications for the first time and subjects where there are a few young people presented.

As the education system moves through the next phases of the ACM, local authorities should continue to facilitate collaboration between teachers and schools; providing both support and challenge to ensure a shared understanding and shared expectations across subject areas and that national standards are applied consistently.

School-level assessment approaches

Local authorities have supported schools to implement assessment approaches flexibly to suit their local context whilst working within a national framework. This local flexibility has resulted inevitably in variation in approach across schools and local authorities. Individual schools value the autonomy afforded to them in setting their own assessment approaches. Local authorities need to ensure that local implementation supports young people to achieve valid and reliable provisional grades. This also includes having ongoing communication with parents and young people to explain fully their local approaches to assessment.

Local authority officers meet regularly with headteachers and SQA co-ordinators to discuss school-level assessment approaches. These forums allow local authorities to share national expectations and discuss with staff any areas of concern. Headteachers and SQA co-ordinators describe how these meetings have been important in developing approaches to assessment within and across schools.

Local authorities are aware that all assessments, even those held within class time, may be viewed as 'high-stakes scenarios'. Most have shared clear expectations with all staff not to replicate an 'exam-style' diet. They encourage the use of assessments within class time. Where local authority officers have carried out a full review of school-level assessment approaches, they have provided valuable feedback and challenge to schools. In a few local authorities there is a need to provide clearer guidance and expectations for all staff not to replicate an exam-style diet of assessments.

Commendably, there are strong examples of local authorities making effective use of wider stakeholder groups to gather views about their approaches to assessment. This includes local authority forums of young people and parents. This approach is providing local authority officers with valuable feedback of what is working well and enabling them to action what needs to improve. It is important during the period of the ACM that local authorities gather the views of stakeholders, particularly young people, and take action to alleviate concerns.

Looking towards planning for June, there is variation in local authority plans to change pupil timetables across their schools in preparation for young people moving to the next stage of their schooling. There are examples of local authority officers considering the implications of an early timetable change before the final date for submission of learners' provisional results. As a result, these local authorities have delayed changing timetables across their schools to allow greater flexibility and maximise the potential learning, teaching and assessment window.

While individual schools value autonomy in setting their own assessment approaches, it is important that local authorities keep school-level assessment approaches under review and take prompt action where assessment practice is not in line with expectations as set out by the NQ 2021 group.

School-level quality assurance

At the time of this review, most local authorities had already shared detailed arrangements to support school-level quality assurance with their staff. These include clear timelines and helpful documentation which outline roles and responsibilities of all staff through the different stages of the ACM. Appropriately, these have been developed in consultation with staff, including headteachers and SQA co-ordinators. These build on long established practices in many local authorities. A few local authorities were in the process of refining their arrangements for monitoring school-level quality assurance.

Local authority officers are supporting school staff to work together to quality assure assessment evidence through dedicated in-service days and collegiate time. The majority of local authorities have taken the approach to develop helpful templates which allow teachers to demonstrate the evidence of their school-level moderation activities. These templates provide a comprehensive overview of the steps expected to be taken from classroom teachers through to headteachers. Local authorities should continue to monitor and review approaches to school-level quality assurance.

Most local authorities have developed bespoke data analysis tools to support school-level quality assurance. These provide key attainment information in an easily accessible format that will allow staff to analyse provisional results against three-year or five-year trends from historical data. Local authority officers expect staff to use these tools to review concordance data, including young people's prior attainment, and identify and address any unexpected provisional grades. Local authority officers plan to analyse trends to discuss this year's provisional results with headteachers, with a particular focus on verifying the data and identifying and challenging results or attainment patterns which appear anomalous. This includes consideration of historic patterns and trends of attainment when compared to this academic session's provisional results, at individual, departmental and school-level. Positively, local authorities continue to provide professional learning for staff at all levels in data analysis and in the use of senior phase data from the national 'Insight' ¹ resource.

Area-based subject quality assurance

Staff in local authorities are working together to support area-based subject quality assurance, including through short life working groups, steering groups and subject network groups. They have welcomed the increasing use of digital platforms necessitated by Covid-19 restrictions. These provide a useful and time-efficient

¹ Insight is the professional benchmarking tool for analysing attainment data in the senior phase, accessible by secondary schools and local authorities. It is designed to support self-evaluation and provide schools with their attainment information in a format that makes it straightforward to identify possible areas for improvement for young people in S4 to S6.

method that enable groups to meet, particularly where staff are located over widespread geographical areas. Teachers report that they value being part of these networks, particularly in discussing and deepening their understanding of the ACM; information shared from SQA; and subject specific guidance. There are also examples of subject network groups developing guidance and providing support and assurance on assessment and moderation approaches. Approaches which are working well include local authority officers providing support and challenge by attending subject networks as participants, chairing meetings and reviewing minutes. Local authorities should continue to build on the contribution of subject network groups to area-based subject quality assurance.

Local authorities provide additional support for newly qualified teachers, or teachers delivering qualifications for the first time, to ensure that they are not working in isolation. They have created quality assurance partnerships between two or three teachers across schools to quality assure assessments and moderate pupil evidence. In moving forward, local authorities should consider the composition and effectiveness of these groups and take prompt action where a need is identified. This includes ensuring that each small group includes staff with a range of experience in presenting young people for National Qualifications.

A few teachers expressed concerns about quality assuring evidence for subjects with a practical assessment requirement. To address this, local authorities have provided a secure shared digital platform where teachers are able to upload assessment evidence. This allows teachers across schools to moderate young people's assessment evidence.

Local authority officers, in partnership with teachers and headteachers, have quickly identified where it is challenging to provide subject-level quality assurance within the local authority. They have been proactive, with other local authority officers across Regional Improvement Collaboratives to link subject specialist staff. This has been well received and valued by staff in these subject areas.

All local authorities continue to develop and refine their plans to quality assure the later stages of the ACM. This includes the use of forthcoming in-service days to support school-level and local authority-level quality assurance approaches, building in relevant feedback received as part of the SQA checking exercise and taking appropriate action as required.

Use of local SQA appointees

Local authority officers and headteachers value the contribution of SQA appointees in supporting teachers' confidence levels and contributing to the quality assurance process. Where appointees are used well, they are sharing their experience and providing valuable help and support to colleagues. For example, appointees are leading subject network groups, providing professional learning on in-service days and contributing to developing quality assurance support documentation.

All local authorities are committed to releasing SQA appointees to support the national quality assurance exercise. They recognise the benefits of using SQA appointees to support the system-wide effort to accreditation this year. Local authorities are mindful of the implications of the release of appointees, particularly over staffing of small or single subject departments. As part of an on-going review of arrangements, local authorities should consider further how they make best use of their SQA appointees to support local and national quality assurance.

Conclusion

Since the announcement of the cancellation of the 2021 National Qualifications examination diet, local authority officers, headteachers, SQA co-ordinators, and teachers have collaborated to ensure that the efforts of young people are appropriately recognised.

Encouragingly, local authorities are continuing to review and refine their arrangements to ensure that young people achieve fair and credible results. Staff at all levels are reflecting on what is working well and what needs to improve as part of developing approaches to quality assurance.

Local authorities have supported schools to implement the ACM to reflect their own local context whilst working within a national framework. There is an ongoing need for local authorities to ensure that local flexibility, about how and when to carry out assessments, supports young people to achieve. They should take prompt action where assessment practice is not in line with expectations as set out by the NQ 2021 group.

Recommendations

Local authorities ought to:

- **build on the positive steps taken already to strengthen teachers' understanding of the standards of assessment. This includes ensuring standards are applied consistently in all of their schools;**
- **sustain their efforts to ensure that school-level assessment approaches are valid, reliable, equitable, practicable, and fair;**
- **continue to develop rigorous and robust approaches to quality assuring school arrangements for implementing the ACM. This includes gathering the views of stakeholders, particularly young people; and**
- **continue to review their plans to quality assure the later stages of the ACM, drawing on the skills of all staff to ensure provisional grades are based on demonstrated attainment.**

The National Qualifications Group 2021 should consider the findings of this national review as a matter of priority.

The following standard Education Scotland terms of quantity are used in this report:

Almost all	91%-99%
Most	75%-90%
Majority	50%-74%
Minority/less than half	15%-49%
A few	less than 15%

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