

Mr John Swinney MSP
Cabinet Secretary for Education & Skills
Education and Skills
Scottish Government
St. Andrews House
Regent Road
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG



My ref: GP/BD9054

6 August 2020

Dear Cabinet Secretary,

I write with a number of issues regarding the recent SQA exam results. In doing so, let me be clear that I absolutely agree that any exam system and consequent certification must be robust and credible. However it must also do all it can to be as fair to young people as it possibly can be, and, in these exceptional circumstances give the benefit of the doubt to students.

I have taken time to read the SQAs 'National Qualifications 2020 Awarding — Methodology Report' which runs to some 48 pages.

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

There has been much media attention as to how young people from lower SIMD areas have fared. I believe that two things can be evidently true at the same time, that is the awards published demonstrates a closing of the gap between the performance of young people between the poorer and more affluent areas, whilst at the same time holding concerns as to how the moderation process used by the SQA has altered some grade estimates for individual students and various subject departments within schools.

On that front let me make a number of observations I would wish the SQA to take account of and address within the appeals process which now becomes vital.

Where historic trend data has been used by the SQA to inform the moderation process within each subject, does this take into account the dramatic improvement

that can be secured within a department when new staff had been appointed and staff teams are more stable than in previous years?

Where historic trend data has been used by the SQA to inform the moderation process within each subject, does this take into account previous attainment within the pupil cohort? For instance if a department had impressive National 5 results last year, that is relating to young people securing certification in summer 2019, will that data be taken into account by the SQA for this year's Higher certification or will the SQA rely on trend data from previous Higher students?

Where historic trend data has been used by the SQA to inform the moderation process within each subject in the context of starting point distribution (SPD) for grades A-C, what consideration has been given to the 'waterfall' effect which often lowers the grades of several students and may impact most on students who may be most likely to secure a lower number of Highers as grades are adjusted accordingly?

Can I ask what dialogue the SQA has had with schools or local authorities during this process? Where the SQA had some concerns over departmental estimates based on the required methodology, did the SQA seek to request any localised or granular detail or an explanation which could have reassured the SQA? Will this now happen during the appeals process and will sufficient time be allowed for this to take place?

Has the SQA taken into account the extent to which schools and departments applied their own robust internal moderation processes before applying their own external moderation?

The SQA methodology report repeatedly refers to tolerance ranges within which estimates and ultimately grades must sit. I absolutely acknowledge the unique circumstances this year facing schools and the SQA. However the biggest challenge is for students who were (through no-one's fault) denied the opportunity to sit their exams. I have said already that the benefit of the doubt should be given to the pupil. Within the appeals process will the SQA give precedence to the individualised and contextualised circumstances of students and departments which may not have been captured first time round or which may have been unreasonably overlooked due to historical trend data?

I have also written in similar terms to the SQA and would ask that these matters are addressed as a matter of priority.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bob Doris". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Bob Doris MSP

Member of the Scottish Parliament for Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn (SNP)

