

ANGUS COUNCIL

EDUCATION COMMITTEE - 20 NOVEMBER 2001

“SCOTTISH QUALIFICATIONS – DELIVERING SUCCESS” CONSULTATION ON THE SCOTTISH QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY BILL – RESPONSE TO SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE CONSULTATION DOCUMENT

REPORT BY THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

ABSTRACT

This report brings to the attention of the Education Committee Scottish Executive proposals for the reform of the Scottish Qualifications Authority and seeks the Committee's approval of the response to these proposals provided in Section 5 of the report.

1 RECOMMENDATIONS

1.1 It is recommended that the Education Committee:

- (a) notes the proposals for the reform of SQA outlined in “Scottish Qualifications – Delivering Success” (a copy of which is available for perusal in the Members' Lounge)
- (b) approves and authorises me to submit a response to those proposals to the Scottish Executive by the deadline of 23 November 2001 (the proposed response is provided in Section 5 of this report)

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 On 15 August 2001 the Minister for Education, Europe and External Affairs, announced that the Executive had begun an internal review of the options for the future status of the SQA. On 13 September 2001 the Executive published a paper which addressed a range of possible options and which detailed a series of legislative and other proposals.
- 2.2 The purpose of the review announced by the Minister was to identify appropriate future arrangements “that will enable the exam system to consolidate and to build on the acceptable standard of performance by SQA in relation to the 2001 Diet”.
- 2.3 In noting the relatively smooth operation of Diet 2001 the Minister recognised the extraordinary work of a wide range of stakeholders including schools, education authorities and teaching staff. He also recognised that significant additional resources were made available to ensure the delivery of a successful Diet.

3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The SQA was created by the Education (Scotland) Act 1996, which merged the functions of the former Scottish Examinations Board (SEB) and Scottish Vocational Education Council (SCOTVEC). The SQA assumed its functions in 1997 and is a Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB) responsible to Ministers for the development and management of assessment and certification of a wide range of qualifications in Scotland (specifically excluding degrees).
- 3.2 Members will be aware of the crisis which affected SQA's procedures in relation to Diet 2000. Deficiencies in the procedures for that diet resulted in 16,748 candidates not receiving accurate results on time.
- 3.3 As a result of these major shortcomings the Executive opted to bring forward the SQA's five yearly review which was not due to have taken place until 2002. Every Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB) is subject to a quinquennial review with the aim of improving service delivery.
- 3.4 Aside from its NDPB review the work of SQA was the subject of an independent review by Deloitte & Touche and of inquiries conducted by two Parliamentary Committees. The inquiry by the Education,

Culture and Sport Committee (ECSC) covered the causes of the difficulties in relation to Diet 2000 while the inquiry by the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee (ELLC) addressed the governance of SQA.

3.5 The ESCS's main recommendations were that:

- there should be a review of the SQA Board and its Committees
- the Executive should establish a robust system of control and monitoring of the SQA
- the Executive's powers to intervene in the operation of the SQA should be clarified

3.6 The ELLC's findings – which echoed the findings of the Deloitte & Touche review - were that the failings of SQA in relation to Diet 2000 were largely due to a failure of management. ELLC's main recommendations were that:

- the size of the SQA Board should be reduced and its work focus on the wider management of the organisation
- stakeholder interests be fed through an Advisory Council which should be independent of the Board
- the relationship between the Minister and SQA be strengthened and a more rigorous performance management framework be established
- the SQA should not become an Agency because of the need to retain independence from Ministers
- consideration should be given to dividing up SQA's current functions

3.7 While Diet 2000 suffered from management and organisational failure within SQA, some of the difficulties experienced in that diet resulted from the complex assessment system which SQA is expected to deliver. A National Qualifications Task Group is currently overseeing a major review of assessment within new national qualifications, the main outcome of which may well be a set of proposals to simplify the assessment arrangements introduced by the Higher Still reforms. The outcomes of that review which is being led by the National Exams Co-ordinator will clearly complement the proposals which have arisen from the review of options for the future status of SQA.

3.8 It is quite clear that the proposals of the review of the future status of SQA have taken close account of the Deloitte & Touche review and of the ECSC and ELLS parliamentary inquiries.

4 A REVIEW OF THE OPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE STATUS OF THE SCOTTISH QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY: KEY PROPOSALS

4.1 In considering proposals for the future operation of SQA, the Executive Review considered the following options which have been addressed in reviews of other NDPBs:

- abolition
- privatisation
- contracting out/market testing of separate functions
- agency status
- retention as an Executive NDPB

4.2 Conclusions reached in relation to these options were that:

- since SQA's key functions of awarding and accrediting qualifications are required, abolition is not an option
- while privatisation may offer a viable means of delivering SQA's functions, it would restrict the ability of Ministers to intervene directly in the event of future difficulties
- contracting out all the functions of the SQA is unlikely to be viable in the short term; however, regardless of the organisational status of SQA, contracting out of discrete services/functions – in addition to those already contracted out – may well be possible
- since there are no other Scottish NDPBs or agencies providing similar services to those of SQA, there is no scope for rationalising or merging the functions of SQA with another body
- while Agency status is seen to be a viable option for delivering SQA's functions, the principal drawback of such an option would be the public perception or fear of a possible loss of independence from political influence of an examination authority
- retaining SQA's NDPB status is equally seen as a viable option provided that this option is likely to be of greater benefit than other viable options; a significant advantage of SQA retaining NDPB status is that this option is most likely to prevent possible claims of political interference.

4.3 The main proposals arising from the September 2001 Executive Review are that:

- notwithstanding management difficulties experienced in merging SEB and SCOTVEC a **single** exam body, SQA, should be retained as the most effective means of delivering a coherent and integrated national qualifications framework
- SQA should be retained as an NDPB for the following reasons:
 - a NDPB meets the requirement for independence in delivering SQA's accrediting and awarding functions
 - a change of status to, for example, Agency Status, would not per se resolve the type of operational problems which were experienced in Diet 2000
 - setting up an agency might well lead to significant disruption among staff with the possibility of Diet 2002 being adversely affected
 - continuing action to remedy operational and management problems would appear to be successful in effecting improvements – as evidenced in part by a successful Diet 2001
- legislation should be introduced (i) to reduce the size of the SQA Board to between seven or nine members including a Chair, with all appointments being made by Scottish Ministers (ii) to provide a regulation making power to allow Ministers to specify other issues relating to the running of the Board (iii) to establish a committee to be known as the Advisory Council [**NB** these legislative proposals have been drawn together in a draft Scottish Qualifications Authority Bill included within the consultation document]
- Board members' responsibilities should focus on the running of SQA, with stakeholder interests being addressed through the Advisory Council
- the role of the Advisory Council should be to offer a strong mechanism for stakeholders to participate in and offer advice on relevant SQA and qualification issues
- SQA and the Advisory Council will have a statutory duty to consult each other on all relevant matters
- the Scottish Executive will continue to monitor carefully the SQA's performance and to work closely with SQA in improving its organisational effectiveness
- SQA will redraft its Management Statement and Financial Memorandum which inter alia will involve a requirement to provide Ministers with an Annual Plan setting out its plan to deliver each year's exams
- the new SQA Board should be tasked with reviewing along with the Scottish Executive the effectiveness of the functions of the organisation including the system of financial management and control

5 ANGUS COUNCIL – PROPOSED RESPONSE

- 5.1** It is reassuring to note that the proposals provided in the consultation paper to reform SQA as an organisation are being developed in tandem with proposals to review and simplify the National Qualifications assessment system.
- 5.2** It is also reassuring to note that the proposals draw significantly on the outcomes of the Deloitte & Touche review and of the two parliamentary inquiries.
- 5.3** The commitment of the Scottish Executive and SQA to wide ranging consultation exercises in relation to possible actions to overcome operational and organisational difficulties is welcome. So too is the quality of the consultation papers issued to stakeholders.
- 5.4** The arguments in the consultation paper for the retention of SQA as a NDPB are well made. In the current circumstances, it is accepted that this option is likely to address more effectively than any other the organisational requirements of SQA and the interests of its key stakeholders.
- 5.5** The proposal for a streamlined Board whose functions would be focussed on the running of the SQA as an organisation is welcome. So too is the proposal to set up an Advisory Council with a major commitment to reflect and represent the interests of stakeholders.
- 5.6** The power which a broad-based Advisory Council will have to advise Ministers as well as the SQA on qualification and assessment matters is crucial and the exercise of that power should assist the SQA to deliver a more efficient, manageable and responsive national assessment system than exists at present.
- 5.7** Proposals for the Executive to monitor the work of SQA are entirely appropriate. The culture of accountability which these proposals are designed to promote is likely to be enhanced by the opportunities for enhanced dialogue with SQA stakeholders which the establishment of an Advisory Council should bring about.

5.8 It is believed that the package of reforms proposed in the consultation paper will support SQA in its efforts to consolidate achievements in relation to Diet 2001.

6 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

7 HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS

There are no human rights implications arising directly from this report.

8 CONSULTATION

The Chief Executive, the Director of Law and Administration and the Director of Finance have been consulted in the preparation of this report.

9 CONCLUSION

The proposals for reform contained in “Scottish Qualifications – Delivering Success” are well considered and take account of continuing dialogue with education authorities as well as of the outcomes of other reviews set up in the wake of the Diet 2000 crisis. The proposals are likely to lead to sustainable improvement in the operation of SQA and in the delivery of an effective national qualifications framework and related assessment system. The Committee is asked to approve the response provided in Section 5 above and to authorise me to submit this to the Scottish Executive as Angus Council’s response to the consultation document.

JIM ANDERSON
DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

BACKGROUND PAPERS

No background papers, as defined by Section 50D of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (other than any containing confidential or exempt information) were relied on to any material extent in preparing the above report.

NL/AR

