

**Response from Elizabeth Smith MSP  
on behalf of the  
Scottish Conservatives**

**to the  
Scottish Government's document**

***“A consultation on the next generation of  
national qualifications in Scotland”***

**October 2008**

## **SQA response from Elizabeth Smith MSP**

### **Proposal 1**

**Q1** Yes, by definition the existence of the Curriculum for Excellence means that there would have to be some adjustments to the structure of qualifications.

I welcome the intention to streamline and simplify our qualifications structure especially at levels which precede Highers. At S4 there are too many different exams which causes confusion.

I am fully supportive of testing basic skills in literacy and numeracy but, as I mention in my answer to Q7, I would like to see these tests being incorporated into whatever exam replaces Standard Grade and Intermediate. I am not convinced of the need to have a stand alone exam in these areas. I have also made clear in the answer to Q7 that I think there should be compulsory testing of literacy and numeracy in P7.

Like many other people, I have few problems with Highers being retained as the so-called Gold Standard qualification but I believe that this position can be enhanced only if there is more rigorous academic testing within the Higher and a strengthening of Advanced Highers. The Advanced Higher exam, in most subjects, is, in my opinion a very good exam (often better than A Level), not only because of its demanding academic approach which stretches our brightest pupils, but also because of its methodology (eg a dissertation) which better prepares pupils for higher education. There is however, some concern within the teaching profession that there is too much of an intellectual jump for some pupils between Higher and Advanced Higher.

I remain concerned that our brightest pupils have not always been seen as a priority within recent educational reform and I think it is very important that the impending changes within SQA also reflect a new focus for them. Of course, this in turn would demand that our universities and colleges see the Advanced Higher as a more important exam; another issue which needs to be addressed (see conclusion).

In many Scottish schools there is the question of S6 being treated by some of the more able as a year out since they have already acquired their university entrance from results in S5. In some cases this does not help their motivation and calls into question the logic of these pupils staying on to complete S6.

On the question of Higher coursework, I think it would be helpful to re-examine the purpose of NABs. These are very time-consuming and shift the focus onto “teaching for exams” rather than “teaching to educate”.

## **Proposal 2**

**Q2** I think it is essential to streamline S4 exams as there are wide variations in subjects (in some cases Standard Grade is tougher than Intermediate and in other cases it is the other way round) and there is definitely concern that in some cases these exams do not articulate well with Higher which is one reason why some schools have moved away from Standard Grade.

It is also important for these exams to articulate with the principles which underpin Curriculum for Excellence. If the unit based approach is to continue then that should helpfully reflect the 4 key principles of Curriculum for Excellence, the *raison d'être* of which is to increase relevance within pupils' learning. Exams should reflect that too.

My own experience of teaching from 1983-2007 convinces me that the new S4 exam should incorporate a greater degree of knowledge based learning (similar to the old O' Grade, but without the emphasis on rote learning). For example it was possible in both Standard Grade and Intermediate 2 Modern Studies to study self contained topics like crime, equality in society, the USA or South Africa etc without having first acquired a detailed knowledge of how both the Scottish and British political system operate. This meant that these units sometimes appeared to be in a vacuum as far as pupils were concerned as they were left without any discernable means of knowing how the wider subject linked together. By using this approach we lost the ability to test knowledge so much and in English and Maths I think this meant losing the ability to test basic skills to the same rigorous degree.

**Q3** If the grading of units is to be done internally, adding A to C categories will inevitably mean more work for teachers and I suspect more questioning by parents about what the school's criteria have been. A simple pass/fail tells you all you need to know especially in a year group where the exam has less importance than it does at Higher and Advanced Higher Level.

However, there is perhaps a wider debate to be had about the value of units in the first place. We have seen extensive criticism of NABs at Higher because they force teachers to teach to exams and little else; they force pupils to "cram" for specific questions and they are also an administrative nightmare. All this detracts from the pursuit of education in its wider definition – something that employers are always telling us they think is lacking.

**Q4** The logic would be that if graded units were to be introduced they would have to count towards the final award, otherwise they would have little merit and it would be difficult to use them as a valid means of appeal.

**Q5** I believe there is no place for any form of compensatory award. Exams are there to pass or fail – otherwise we send out the wrong message to our pupils.

**Q6** I think the term used should avoid any use of the terms associated with current exams and those associated with the English system otherwise it will cause confusion (Grade 1, Grade 2?); the simpler the better.

### **Proposal 3**

**Q7** I am very much in favour of more testing of basic numeracy and literacy as that has been one of the undoubted failures of the current set-up and clearly one of the biggest concerns voiced by colleges, universities and employers. Personally, I believe numeracy and literacy should be more extensively tested at P7 level and, when it comes to S4 level, I think there would be far more benefit in ensuring that both elements are more extensively tested in the English and Maths papers (maybe there should be a separate arithmetic paper?).

On the question of the P7 issue, it is largely within primary schools where the problem first emerges (backed up by the OECD report 2007 which suggests that one of the biggest challenges we face in primary education is to reduce the attainment gap that opens up considerably at P4 and P5 level). At present, pupils are allowed to proceed up each primary school year group even if they are failing to reach anything like acceptable standards in literacy and numeracy. This is doing them and the education system a great disservice. When they reach secondary school, they become more and more disillusioned because they cannot cope and, as we know, this often leads to behavioural difficulties.

It used to be the case that the old O' Grade in Scotland undertook much more testing of basic numeracy and literacy skills and I don't see why these elements cannot be reinstated in S4 exams. Both Standard Grade and Intermediate moved away to be much more focussed on expression rather than on content and personally I think this is the cause of a great deal of the current problems we face.

Making literacy and numeracy tests completely separate would add another layer of exams and, if I understand the Government correctly, one important intention of reforming the current structure is to streamline and simplify.

**Q8** I would have no objection to an external exam which tests pupils at SCQF access level 3 or to this containing units on literacy and numeracy.

**Q9** For the reasons set out in answers above I am not in favour of internal assessment in this area.

**Q10** To follow the logic of the argument I develop in the answer to Q7, literacy and numeracy would be tested in S4 in the summer diet. While I can see educational arguments for a winter diet (especially if the Government made a stronger commitment to fully fledged vocational training which might involve lowering the school leaving age), I think it would prove disruptive to the teaching year and inevitably it would lead to more re-sitting of exams.

## **Proposal 4**

**Q11** I think the reality is 1 year or 2 years. I am very much in favour of the brightest pupils being allowed to start Higher courses in S4 (“by-passing”) and sitting the exam in S5 and also the flexibility for pupils to sit a Higher over S5 and S6 if this sits well with their individual timetable. Flexibility is very important and allowing the 2 year approach would go some way to preventing the two term dash which is the bane of many teachers’ lives.

**Q12** In theory, I can see some argument for a winter diet especially for those pupils who wish to leave school as soon as they are 16. However, I think there are some very considerable administrative and teaching barriers which would make this difficult and, as mentioned in the answer to Q10, I think it would lead to far more re-sitting of exams and it would also increase the amount of testing in schools – something which I believe needs to be reduced.

**Q13** I do not see this being a practicable option just now. This could however, alter slightly if there were more formal vocational and apprenticeship options below the age of 16.

**Q14** Very definitely yes, as was confirmed in the answer to Q11. S4 exams are not important to those who will end up with strong Highers and Advanced Highers and are often an unnecessary waste of valuable teaching time in the summer term of S4.

**Q15** I believe flexibility is a key factor (as originally intended by the Howie Report but never implemented) so that the educational system at the top end of secondary school is better able to reflect the needs of a wide range of pupil ability. I think the issue of by-passing is related to increasing flexibility and I note within the consultation document that there is some suggestion that it might be possible to do some subjects in the middle school years over a different timescale from other subjects. May I respectfully suggest that section of the document headed “Proposal 4” needs further clarification, most especially whether the existing norm of studying 8 subjects in the middle school years and 5 subjects at Higher would be continued or whether this would be modified in some way.

**Q16** On balance this is probably the correct estimate. It is vital that changes are made to improve the education system and also vital that the changes to the qualifications structure properly reflects these changes and ensures there is pupil, parent and teacher confidence in both the changes and the timescale.

## Conclusion

In Holyrood debates on this matter I have warmly welcomed the intention to simplify and streamline the qualifications structure, providing the structure reflects rather than determines the content of the curriculum. I hope that intention will accompany a desire to ensure that there is also increased academic rigour when it comes to tests and exams.

Currently, there is far too much testing of pupils and this has diminished pupils' and teachers' ability to devote more time to the wider aspect of education rather than the limited syllabus which is tested in exams. Pupils spend the vast proportion of their school classroom work, especially in S4-S6, cramming for tests and exams and inevitably this has led to far too much spoon-feeding of course material which does not help the investigative process of pupils learning to think for themselves.

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I was also supportive in Holyrood debates of the Government's intention to place more emphasis on the 3Rs and my answers in this response document make it clear as to how I think that can be achieved.

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I also believe, however, that, prior to finalising exam reform, we need to devote considerable attention to addressing Advanced Higher issues; specifically, whether it can be made available to far more pupils than is currently the case and ensuring that colleges and universities put more emphasis on Advanced Higher when it comes to entry requirements. I note the Government's intention to introduce a Scottish Baccalaureate in Science and Modern Languages but I have not been persuaded of the merits of this because of the following 3 reasons:

1) If a Scottish Baccalaureate has genuine educational worth what will it provide that Advanced Higher will not? Are there additional skills to be taught which are not currently taught in school?

2) Where is the educational logic in offering a Scottish Baccalaureate in Science and Modern Languages but not in the Arts or in Social Sciences? I do not think this inconsistency is a helpful message to send out to pupils.

3) How will the Scottish Baccalaureate articulate with other qualifications? Will it have higher status than an Advanced Higher? How does it sit, as an additional qualification, with the Government's intention to simplify the system?