

Our Ref LF/CR
Your Ref

Please ask for Caran Richardson
Direct Dial 01467 533305
Email caran.richardson@aberdeenshire.gov.uk

Laurence Findlay
Education & Children's Services
Woodhill House
Westburn Road
Aberdeen
AB16 5GB
Tel: 01467 538579

1 April 2021

laurence.findlay@aberdeenshire.gov.uk
www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk

Dear Parent/Carer

NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS 2021

As you will be aware, the Scottish Government cancelled the 2021 SQA exam diet for National 5, Higher and Advanced Highers due to the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am aware that a number of schools have already begun engaging with you directly on the process through Teams calls and parent forums. I hope this letter compliments what you have already been told. If you have further questions about the way in which your school will be implementing the new qualification process please speak to the Head Teacher directly. The important role of the Education Service remains to ensure that the process is fair for our young people, and that will be a priority.

As a result, an Alternative Certification Model (ACM-21) has been put in place to determine results for candidates at these levels. The ACM for 2021 differs from the 2020 ACM in some significant aspects and this letter aims to provide you with an understanding of the process of how candidate grades are awarded within our schools.

Three key features of the ACM-21 which differ from ACM-20 are:

1. Provisional Results in ACM-21 can only be based on demonstrated attainment judged against the national standards. In ACM-20, a level of inferred attainment was permitted, meaning teachers could predict a grade based on what they thought a candidate may have achieved in an exam. In ACM-21, only evidence-based judgements of candidate work are permitted and there is no use of inferred attainment.
2. In 2020, teacher grades were submitted, then adjusted by SQA, and subsequently reinstated on the instructions of the Deputy First Minister. In ACM-21, no data-based algorithms will be used by SQA to adjust the grades submitted by schools.
3. The Appeals system in place under ACM-21 will differ. The SQA have just completed gathering responses to a consultation on the model for 2021 and are due to publish details of the system to be used in May.

Robust quality assurance processes collaboratively developed over recent months underpin the teacher judgments of candidate's provisional results. These will ensure that results awarded to our candidates are evidence-based and fair, being judged against the national standards as they apply to each course and level.

The extended period of remote learning this year resulted in a restricted period for evidence gathering in schools where the focus has been on learning and teaching rather than assessment. SQA have adjusted course arrangements to provide flexibility on the types of evidence gathered whilst ensuring that national standards are maintained, stressing the need for quality of evidence over quantity. There is flexibility regarding what, when and how evidence is gathered and a range of assessment gathering timetables have been developed to suit local circumstances, educational delivery plans and resources. Individual schools will share specific arrangements with their pupils and parents. Within these plans, our schools have considered the health and wellbeing of our young people in developing assessment timetables, whilst ensuring that the standard of evidence gathered satisfies the requirements of ACM-21.

In Aberdeenshire schools, the final date for collection of evidence has been set as 28th May. This is to allow sufficient time for the various stages of quality assurance both within and across schools to take place. Two additional In-Service Days were granted by the Scottish Government to support this work and our Aberdeenshire secondary schools will be closed to pupils on Thursday 3rd and Friday 4th June. (Primary and Special Schools are not affected).

All teachers involved in assessment decisions are engaging with the most recently updated course information and Understanding Standards materials provided by the SQA. In addition to this, our Professional Subject Group (PSG) networks provide further support to ensuring consistency of judgment of evidence against national standards as they apply to each subject and level.

Within subject teams, in school, across our PSGs, and in partner school groups, work is ongoing in regard to agreed instruments of assessment, standardised marking schemes, cross/peer-marking and sampling, to ensure that the process through which final grades are determined is robust, collaborative, and grades are not determined only by a single teacher. Where subjects are delivered in a small number of schools, we have engaged with other local authorities to support our quality assurance and we retain channels of communication with subject teams at SQA for further assistance.

As a final check, consideration will be given at school and authority level regarding attainment comparison from years prior to 2020, however this will be for the purpose of establishing reasons for any significant difference from prior performance of teams and will not result in any adjustment to grades.

National level quality assurance will be undertaken by the SQA during May and June as a further check that national standards are being appropriately applied and Education Scotland have been asked to carry out scrutiny activity on local authority processes in April to provide further reassurance.

Throughout the remaining weeks of this session, schools will take a 'no surprises' approach to sharing information with candidates regarding their progress and assessments through learning

conversations. Provisional grades based on demonstrated attainment however remain subject to the completion of the relevant quality assurance processes which are ongoing.

The SQA information booklet titled “What you need to know for 2021 – National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher” was posted directly to candidates in March and as well as outlining the basis of ACM-21 it confirms that candidates receive formal notification of their results on 10th August.

Overall, I am satisfied that the processes put in place by our teams to support learners, teachers and schools will ensure that the grades awarded to candidates across Aberdeenshire will be evidence-based, fair, and underpinned by strong quality assurance processes and I trust the foregoing provides you as learners and parents with the reassurance required at this most challenging of times. Aberdeenshire staff have worked exceptionally hard over the past few months and I know they will continue to do so on behalf of all our learners and I thank them all for their efforts and wish our young people the best of luck as assessment work progresses in our schools.

Yours sincerely



Laurence Findlay
Director of Education & Children’s Services