# 2019 SQA- CALL Digital Question Papers Focus Group Meeting

## Participants

The 2019 Focus Group was held on 30/10/19. The session was attended by approximately 90 staff from 80 centres, Alastair Black, Mike Gallagher, Lee Anne Quinn and Annette Foulcer from SQA and Paul Nisbet from CALL Scotland.

## Overview

Paul gave an overview of the requests for DQP for 2019 and previous years There was some discussion regarding why these requests are made and then withdrawn and the consensus seemed to be that staff find it challenging to make definitive decisions by the January 31$^{st}$ deadline.

## AAR system

At previous Focus Groups Paul presented figures on the total number of AA requests received, the number of candidates, a breakdown of the type of support requested, and a breakdown of the underlying additional support need leading to the requests. SQA is currently considering publishing these figures online and they were therefore unavailable for the focus group meeting. This prompted some discussion over the accuracy of the information collected through the AAR process and how it might be improved. For example, in discussion over when to request a 'Reader':

- one colleague requests a Reader as contingency in case of technical problems with a DQP and a computer reader;
- another selects Reader for requesting either a Human Reader or a Computer Reader;
- while another only requests Reader when wishing to use a Human Reader (but would still have Human Readers available when candidates were using Computer Readers, as contingency).

It was clear that there were widely varying understanding and interpretations around the meaning of the AAR categories.

SQA Response - The third bullet point is correct – SQA only expect centres to request 'Reader Required' on the AAR system when a human reader is being used – it is not required for contingency arrangements. Where text-to-speech software is being used, centres should specify the type of software they intend to use in the exam in the 'Other Arrangements' section on the Additional tab on the AAR system.

The Assessment Arrangements Explained: Information for Centres guidance document provides detailed information of each of the standard arrangements presented on the AAR system – any other arrangements required that aren't listed should be recorded by centres in the 'Other Arrangements' section as mentioned above.

## Survey feedback and discussion

The survey was advertised via SQA's Centre News and to the attendees at the 2018 Focus Group. 70 responses were received compared to 34 in 2018.

## SCN in Word Digital Answer Books (DABs)

Mike confirmed that the Word DABs would be upgraded to the .docx format.

SQA Action – all Word DABs for the 2020 exam diet to be provided in .docx format.

## DQP in Word format

Colleagues asked if DQPs could be produced in Word format, as this is felt to be more familiar to learners than PDF. There are at least two challenges with this proposal:

- SQA currently create all examination question papers, including DQPs, using InDesign; it is not clear whether it is technically possible to create satisfactory papers using Microsoft Word, since it is a word processor, not a publishing package.
- A DQP in Word would have to be 'protected' to ensure that the questions cannot be edited or deleted, which prevents most computer text readers from accessing the text – so questions cannot be read out.

SQA Action – we will review the provision of DQPs and evaluate whether it is feasible to produce them in Word format.

## DQP filename

There was a request for filenames to start with 'Spellcheck on/off' to make identification of files and distribution quicker.

## DQP spellcheck

Several centres reported problems with the Adobe Reader spellcheck working unacceptably slowly. Alistair advised that the spellcheck seemed to operate slowly when mis-spelled words are right-clicked, and that it seemed to operate more quickly when the checker was activated by pressing **F7** or selecting **Check Spelling** from the menu, as opposed to right-clicking on an individual word. This would be added to the guidance.

SQA Action – the DQP guidance will be updated to illustrate the check spelling menu option.

## DQP Auto-Save

Some colleagues reported that the Adobe Reader auto-save was unreliable or crashed.

SQA Response - this is outwith SQA's control.

## Candidate ID

Is it necessary to have the candidate's ID on every page? Colleagues said that invigilators say that this is required but Mike noted that it is advisable and good practice, but not required.

## Text size in PDF DQPs and DABs

Some colleagues commented again that the shrinking text size in PDF form fields was disconcerting for some candidates. There is no technical solution as long as completed scripts require to be printed and so colleagues re advised to ensure that candidates are practiced and familiar with the DQPs, and to consider use of DABs in Word format.

The Focus Group were reminded that if the text size in answer boxes is reducing in size, then the candidate is typing too much in the box.

Where text is reducing on a page of a PDF DAB, then the candidate needs to click onto the next page.

If text is reducing before the box or page is filled, it is likely that the candidate has accidentally hit the Return key and added blank lines. These can be deleted to free up the space.

Printing blank pages in PDF/

# Printing blank pages in PDF

Centres find that considerable paper is wasted when using DABs in PDF because many of the pages of the booklet are blank. It is possible to avoid printing blank pages by specifying to print only pages where answers have been inserted (see Fig. 1 below) together with the back page for Marker's Use, but this raises the possibility that pages with answers may not be printed, and so SQA guidance suggests that the whole booklet is printed.

Figure 1: The page range for printing can be specified
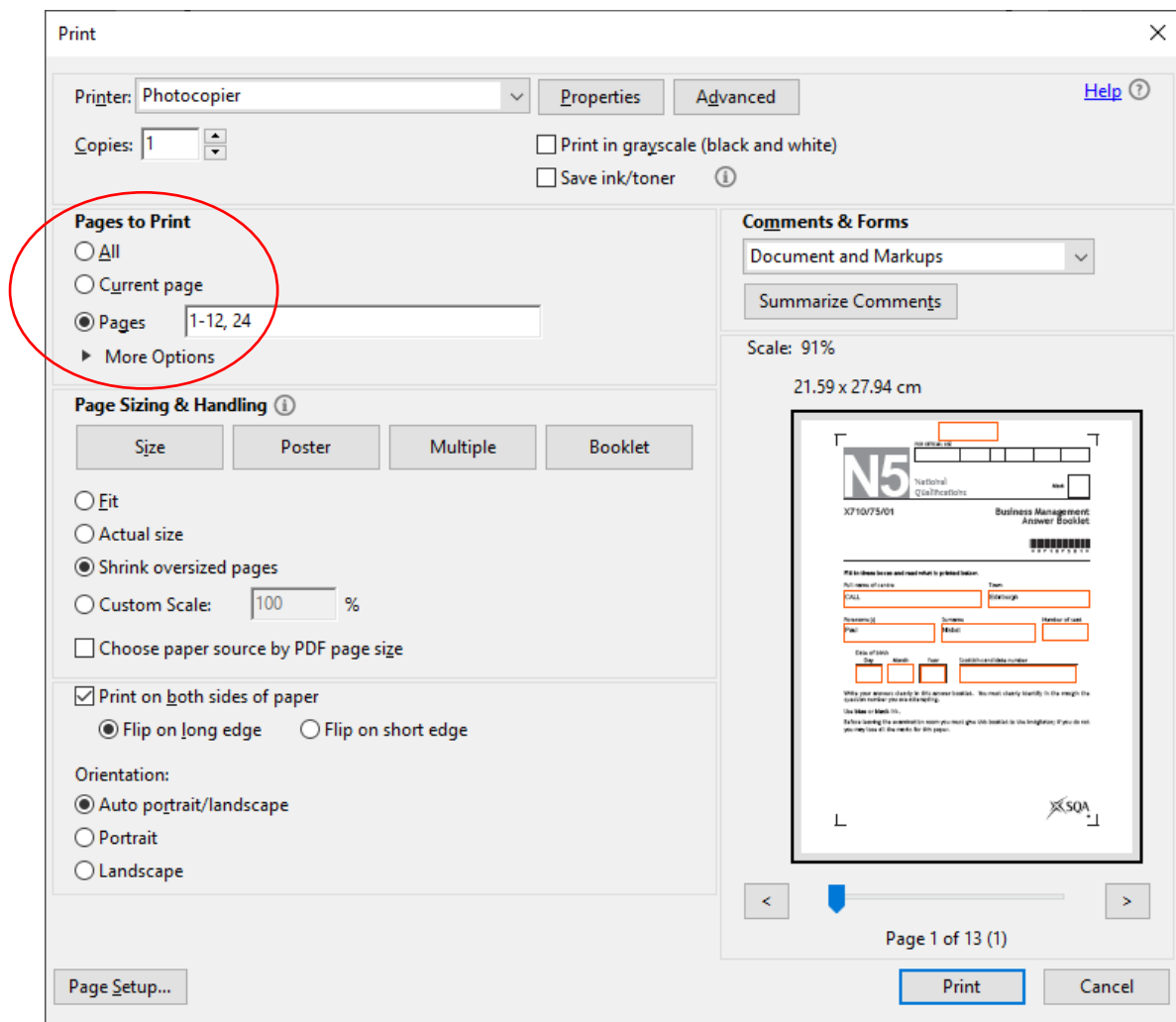
One advantage of Word DABs compared to PDF is that only the pages used are printed so paper is not wasted.

# Printing double sided

Mike advised that scripts can be printed double sided provided thicker paper is used to avoid 'bleed through'. This is in the guidance.

## Course assessments and prelims

Colleagues reported some challenges with creating course assessments and prelim papers with answer boxes due to costs of purchasing authoring software such as Adobe Acrobat Pro, and staff expertise and time. There was discussion of alternatives including:

- Providing assessment papers in e.g. Word – the candidate experience is different and as discussed above, the papers are not secure.
- Providing papers with text boxes for answers, created with the free Adobe Reader, rather than form fields. Colleagues felt this could be helpful although it was noted that it was not possible to disable the spellcheck in these text boxes.

Paul has added information about this option to the Digital Assessments web site.

## Spellcheck and technical security

The group noted that while Word DABs have some advantages over DABs in PDF, disabling spellcheck in order to comply with SQA security policies can be a challenge. In most centres, technical teams create 'exam profiles' that disable forbidden features such as spellcheck. However:

- Some colleagues have advised that it is not possible to enable the spellcheck in Word 2016 while disabling the thesaurus, and access to thesaurus is not permitted.
- In some local authorities, Word Online is being promoted for learners but colleagues reported that it is not possible to disable the spellcheck (or thesaurus). Note that Word Online by definition requires internet access.
- Paul noted that it was not possible, as far as he was aware, to enable spellcheck in Google Docs on Chromebooks while disabling functions that are not permitted such as Explore/Define.

Given that these word processors are becoming 'the normal way of working', there is a need to investigate whether and how technical security requirements can be addressed while also allowing candidates to use the supports that they require in the examination. It was agreed that it would be helpful to discuss and if possible share good practice from centres where technical solutions have been found (e.g. Harris Academy in Dundee). Paul noted that the DQP guidance is appropriate to Windows OS; it is not known whether any local authorities have created policies and procedures for Chromebooks or iPads.

A colleague asked if a hand held spellchecker could be used in place of a computer spellchecker: this is acceptable (providing the use of the technology follows the published AA guidance).

## School management software

Colleagues from one high school reported problems with Nightwatchman software which automatically shuts down PCs at night so that the machines were not powered up on the morning of the examination. In another school it appeared that Deep Freeze software impacted upon the speed of operation of the Adobe Reader spellcheck function which seemed to prevent or delay the spellcheck dictionary from loading when the computers were started.

Centres are advised to check with their local authority if such software is being used on their equipment and make special arrangements to deal with this for the Diet eg disable the software or know how to manage the impact of such software in setting up DQP exams.

## DQP delivery

Alistair advised that DQPs would be available for online delivery using the SQA Secure site. This has been used for some time for Admin & IT papers and has proved reliable. This was welcomed by colleagues from centres.

Alastair advised that a trial of delivering DQPs online using a secure site is planned to run alongside the current delivery method on CD. The SQA Secure site has been used for some time for Admin & IT electronic files and has proved reliable so this is one potential option. This was welcomed by colleagues from centres and a number stated that they would be willing to take part in the trial. If any other centres are interested please email question.papers@sqa.org.uk.

## Chromebooks and iPads

Paul reported that a report investigating the application of Chromebooks in Assessment Arrangements had been submitted to SQA in August and he hoped that permission would be given to make it available from the CALL Digital Assessments web site. He felt the next steps would be to work with schools to explore how the methods and approaches might work in practice, and liaise with Google and software developers to address some of the shortcomings identified in the report. The main challenges are managing security while enabling accessibility; and difficulties with accessing the DQP in question and answer format.

Paul asked whether colleagues present were intending to use Chromebooks in the 2020 examination diet; two colleagues indicated they were. When asked who would wish to use Chromebooks if workable, practical could be specified, around 20 colleagues responded.

Paul noted that 52,000 iPads are being rolled out to staff and all learners from P6 to S6 in Glasgow, and Scottish Borders are planning the same. As the technology becomes the 'normal way of working', learners will wish to use iPads in examinations and centres will be considering and addressing issues of security, accessibility and technical administration.

## Computer Dictation

Free computer dictation tools are now built into Windows OS, Chrome and iOS. Colleagues at the meeting reported that learners are using these dictation systems with some success and therefore there is interest in using them as Assessment Arrangements.

## Assessment arrangements for candidates with handwriting difficulties

There was discussion around whether Assessment Arrangements and DQPs were appropriate for candidates with poor handwriting and whether candidates required a diagnosis of, for example, dysgraphia.

SQA guidance regarding use of ICT does not specifically address or exemplify handwriting difficulties but examples of appropriate arrangements are provided ([1] p. 16). The candidates both have difficulties with handwriting although the examples suggest that they also experience other barriers.

"Example 1

A centre requests the use of ICT for Atif, who has dyslexia and has significant writing difficulties. He is allowed to use word processing with spellchecking software for all his external examinations.

Example 2

Gill experiences severe anxiety difficulties and finds it difficult to hand-write her responses in her assessments. Her college allows her to produce her answers on her laptop for all her internal assessments."

SQA guidance notes that transcription with correction can be requested for "candidates who have been identified as having substantial difficulties with writing. In particular, where candidates' written work is effectively illegible due to the very high frequency of spelling and/or punctuation errors, and where a marker would have difficulty in deciphering the candidate's script."[2] while transcription with correction can be requested for candidates who "have illegible handwriting and who are unable to use appropriate ICT" (p. 33). The implication of this latter statement is that ICT should be considered first, before transcription.

There is no mention in SQA guidance of the need for candidates to have a diagnosis of dygraphia or other physical difficulty or disability.

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[1] SQA (2019) Assessment Arrangements Explained: Information for centres
[2] SQA (2019) Assessment Arrangements Explained: Information for centres

## Lynne Roberston, Harris Academy, Dundee

Lynne Robertson, SfL teacher at Harris Academy in Dundee, gave a very helpful presentation on the experiences and procedures for technology and DQPs as Assessment Arrangements (attached). In 2009, staff made 20 requests for DQP and this rose to over 200 by 2013. Lynne described the use of 'exam profiles' for security and administration, and the processes followed by staff to ensure smooth running of the diet.

## Post it Notes

Mike asked colleagues to make comments and questions using post-it notes, and the main points raised were:

- "How many schools have dedicated IT technicians? We don't have one!"
- "Can SQA issue guidance on digital/Reader & Scribe choices on AA to avoid inconsistency?"

SQA Response – see response provided in AAR system section

- "Can SQA clarify the difference between Digital & ICT for AA
  - o Digital – Computer Reader: candidate types/writes answers
  - o ICT – no reader: candidate types answers"

SQA Response - Digital QPs are not purely used with computer readers, the majority of users do not use computer readers. DQPs used for a variety of needs ranging from dyslexia to poor eyesight. They enable independent working which is the main benefit cited by users. Digital Question Papers (DQPs) are for disabled candidates and/or those with additional support needs who have reading and/or writing difficulties. For further information please refer to Assessment Arrangements Explained: Information for centres