

# ASSESSMENT AND NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS GROUP

## CHANGES TO THE NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

### INTRODUCTION

This communication is issued on behalf of the Assessment and National Qualifications Group, the key body that advises the Deputy First Minister on assessment policy and practice in Scottish education. A list of the membership is included at Annex A.

The changes to the National Qualifications, announced in September 2016, will remove mandatory unit assessment, initially from National 5 qualifications and, subsequently, from Highers and Advanced Highers. The decision to remove unit assessments was agreed with the Assessment and National Qualifications Group and the Curriculum for Excellence Management Board.

This communication provides advice to local authorities, schools and teachers on the:

- implications of the removal of unit assessments from the National Qualifications
- importance of well informed and accurate presentation decisions
- extension of Grade D as the mechanism for recognising positive achievement
- plans to review assessment of the National 4 qualification.

It supplements the material released by the SQA on 31 January providing the headline details of the changes to the assessment framework for each National 5 course following the removal of unit assessments.

The Assessment and National Qualifications Group encourages all schools to communicate the changes to parents and learners as soon as possible.

### SENIOR PHASE

The Group is clear that the ambitions of the Senior Phase should guide schools and teachers in delivering education for young people. All learners are entitled to experience a senior phase where they can continue to develop the four capacities and achieve qualifications<sup>1</sup>. All young people in Scotland have an entitlement to a senior phase of education that:

- provides specialisation, depth and rigour
- prepares them well for achieving qualifications to the highest level of which they are capable
- continues to develop skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work

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<sup>1</sup> Scottish Government (2008), *Curriculum for Excellence. Building the Curriculum 3 – A Framework for Learning and Teaching*

- continues to provide a range of activities which develop the four capacities
- supports them to achieve a positive and sustained destination.

During the Senior Phase, there must be sufficient time for learning, teaching and assessment to ensure breadth and depth of learning, and the ability to apply learning. A key aim should be to maximise the richness of the learning experience within, and attainment by the end of the Senior Phase. The quality of learners' attainment at the end of the Senior Phase will depend on the quality of their learning experience. This means, that a learner's achievements (including attainment in National Qualifications) by the end of the Senior Phase should become the main focus for all schools, rather than on individual year on year attainment.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF THE REMOVAL OF UNIT ASSESSMENTS FROM THE NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS**

Whilst there are a range of factors that have contributed to over-assessment in schools, the main purpose of this note is to provide guidance to schools and local authorities to ensure that the workload benefits of removing unit assessments are achieved across the system.

**The removal of mandatory unit assessments has the distinct purpose of reducing the amount of assessment experienced by young people taking national qualifications and the teacher workload created as a result of administering the units. The course aims, content and rationale are not changing.**

The removal of mandatory unit assessment reflects proposals from some teachers' groups who felt that the cumulative impact of typically having to undertake three unit assessments, course assignments, prelims and a final exam for each course was too great. This was especially the case in the context of one year courses, which was a common approach, and was detracting from providing sufficient time for high quality learning and teaching.

It is critical that schools use this guidance to ensure that the resultant changes necessary to NQs have the desired effect on workload.

The Scottish Qualifications Authority has the responsibility to ensure that the credibility and standards of the qualifications are maintained. Therefore the removal of units and unit assessments means that the course assessments for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher need to be strengthened to maintain 24 SCQF credit points and protect the integrity, breadth and standards of the national qualifications.

For each National 5 course, the changes have resulted in one or more of the following:

- extension of the existing question paper
- extension/modification of the existing item of coursework
- a new question paper
- a new item of coursework.

High-level detail for each subject at National 5 was published by SQA in January 2017, with further detail to follow in revised course documentation by the end of April 2017. This will replace the current course documentation, which is covered in various documents, with one single document per subject.

### *Units that were previously part of National 5*

These national units will remain available as free standing units at SCQF level 5. The units will no longer form part of the National 5 course, which will continue to develop over time. The decision to retain units as free-standing qualifications is intended to support flexibility in meeting the different needs of individual learners. Some learners may for instance be presented for a number of full courses and additionally for a number of free-standing units in different subjects.

This may be particularly relevant for Colleges to consider, especially when enrolling students on full time courses with a number of other National 5 course awards and units which are required for progression purposes.

**Schools should, therefore, decide for any given National 5 course whether a young person is presented either for units or for the full course award.**

For some learners, schools should consider planning pupils' learning experience over two years.

At the end of each session, schools, local authorities and Education Scotland will review the unit and course entry data to understand how learners are being presented across the country.

## **PROGRESSION INTO THE SENIOR PHASE AND THE IMPORTANCE OF WELL INFORMED AND ACCURATE PRESENTATION DECISIONS**

Schools need to make important judgments about the most appropriate National Qualifications pathway for each learner. **These decisions, which should be reached during S3, must be informed by effective tracking and monitoring of learners' progress through the Broad General Education (BGE). A clear understanding of the curriculum level achieved in each subject area at the end of BGE is a critical piece of information to inform this decision** and to ensure a smooth progression in learning for all learners as they move into the Senior Phase. Decisions should also be informed by discussions with parents and learners about the range of pathways open to young people. Effective use of the new curriculum area benchmarks, published for each curriculum area by Education Scotland, should support these steps.

The Senior Phase for students stretches over three years and the learning journeys for young people should be planned over this period, irrespective of whether they remain in school or not. During this period, there must be sufficient time for learning, teaching and assessment, to ensure breadth and depth of learning. The

development of the ability to apply learning is also crucial. And there needs to be the opportunity to maximise the richness of the learning experience - learners' overall attainment will depend on the quality of this experience. As the vast majority of learners now stay on until at least S5, schools are encouraged to plan progression over at least a two-year period.

In terms of attainment, the main focus for all schools should be attainment for each learner at the end of the Senior Phase (exit qualifications), rather than on the individual year on year attainment pattern.

National Qualifications have been designed to be flexible. Decisions about learning pathways will require discussion with young people and their parents/carers about their longer-term aspirations. Reliable assessment information should be used to inform these discussions, for example on whether a young person has achieved the third or fourth curriculum level by the end of S3.

This will inform the decision on whether a learner should embark on a course leading to National 4, or National 5, or a Higher, whether that be a one year or a two-year pathway, or pursue other qualifications pathways. The benchmarks across the Broad General Education for each curriculum area are intended to support teacher judgement of CfE levels, with the necessary information to inform this judgement.

In order to support a genuinely aspirational approach to presentation, schools should consider alternative learner pathways through the Senior Phase. This may include candidates studying for and achieving a National 4 course award along with one or more units at SCQF level 5 in that subject in S4, which will support their progression into National 5 in S5.

There will be a small group of candidates nationally who will be presented for National 1 to National 3 courses. However, for the majority of candidates, schools have several presentation options for learners moving on to National Qualifications in the Senior Phase:

- progression to National 4 (for those who have achieved third curriculum level)**
- progression to National 5 (for those who have achieved fourth curriculum level in their subject)**
- progression to Higher, bypassing National 4 and 5 (for those who have achieved fourth curriculum level).**

A decision on the appropriate qualification level will also need to be supplemented by a decision on whether the qualification pathway should be undertaken over one or two years. *For example, if it is appropriate, a young person may gain a better learning and teaching experience by undertaking a National 5 over two years in the Senior Phase, rather than being presented for National 5 in one year for which they are not well prepared and potentially resulting in a negative learning experience.*

National 4 was designed to provide a clear progression pathway from the third curriculum level either into National 5 or into college or training and other qualifications at SCQF Level 5 and beyond, such as such as National Certificates,

National Progression Awards, Modern Apprenticeships and Foundation Apprenticeships. Schools will want to discuss these options with parents and young people to ensure the most appropriate pathway for each learner.

The learning and pathways within Curriculum for Excellence are designed to be centred around the individual learner. There should therefore be no occasion where a full year group is being presented for National 5 unless every learner has achieved Fourth curriculum level.

## **RECOGNISING POSITIVE ACHIEVEMENT (RPA)**

**The mechanism agreed by the Assessment and Qualifications Group for RPA going forward will be the extension of Grade D to include candidates who achieve between 40–49%.** Currently, a candidate who achieves a notional 45% or above in a national course would receive an award (candidates above a notional 50% receive an A-C award; candidates achieving a notional 45%-49% at present receive a D award). Grade D attainment will therefore be broadened from the current position to notional 40%-49%. This ten per cent range brings a Grade D award into line with the ranges for Grades B and C.

This move is intended to ensure that young people who do not achieve at the level predicted in the course assessment receive credit for their achievement at the SCQF level of the qualification for which they were entered.

Further details on options for RPA agreed by the Deputy First Minister are included at Annex B.

## **SQA DATA ENTRY REQUIREMENTS**

As under current arrangements, centres will need to provide SQA with an accurate indication of their presentation patterns for the upcoming exam diet by **November**, as is currently the case. SQA needs this information to ensure that the correct assessments and necessary assessment arrangements are in place for candidates, and to recruit and train markers and other appointees to undertake the necessary quality assurance processes and to ensure successful delivery of certification in August.

## **NATIONAL 4**

In recommending changes to the assessment of the National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications, the Assessment and National Qualifications Group also recognises the need to consider the approach to assessment of the National 4 qualification. This consideration will reflect the need to retain the dual function of the National 4, serving as both a **gateway award** into college or training and as a **progression route** to National 5. Discussions will be taken forward in the context of the different pathways that might be taken by a candidate who achieves a National 4.

Feedback from schools about the lack of articulation between a threshold pass at National 4 and the demands of an National 5 course are recognised by the Group as requiring attention, as is concern expressed about the varied perceptions around the “value” or credibility of National 4.

The Assessment and National Qualifications Group is considering National 4, with an initial focus on the value of a form of externality in assessment, and on the ability to differentiate candidate performance. It is important that these discussions are taken forward in the context of the different pathways that might be taken by a candidate who achieves a National 4.

## **CONCLUSION**

Schools should now consider the implications of the changes on potential presentation decisions for candidates. Decisions about progression pathways and curriculum models for learners through the Senior Phase remain a matter for local authorities and schools in order to ensure they best meet the needs of young people.

**MEMBERSHIP OF ASSESSMENT AND NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS GROUP**

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Dr Bill Maxwell	Education Scotland
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Ken Muir	General Teaching Council of Scotland
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Seamus Searson	Scottish Secondary Teachers' Association

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### RECOGNISING POSITIVE ACHIEVEMENT

The move to recognise positive achievement through the extension of Grade D represents a significant change. However, in response to feedback from key stakeholders, the Deputy First Minister has taken the decision that the current mechanism of recognising positive achievement, through fallback to National 4, will remain available **for an interim period only**. This means that schools will be able to continue to present candidates for both units that were formerly part of National 5 and the full revised National 5 course. Equally, should a candidate, having completed the units that were previously part of the National 5, achieve less than 40%, they could receive the National 4 award on completion of the Added Value Unit. Appropriate quality assurance processes, including the reintroduction of random sampling for verification of units, will need to be in place to ensure the integrity of unit and course certification, and entries must be received by SQA by November, as is currently the case.

**Given the agreed need to reduce assessment-related workload, this pathway should only be used in a very limited number of exceptional circumstances, where the view of the teacher and head teacher, in discussion with parents and young people, is that it is in the interests of specific individual learners. This pathway will be available as an interim measure only, until any changes to the assessment of National 4 have been introduced.**

This is in keeping with the Scottish Government's commitment to empowering schools, and school leaders will play an important role in ensuring that this interim measure is deployed appropriately. The Deputy First Minister has written to School Leaders Scotland and the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland making clear his expectations around this.

At the end of each session, schools, local authorities and Education Scotland will review the unit and course entry data to understand how learners are being presented across the country.