

NATIONAL 4 – WAY FORWARD: A PROPOSAL PAPER

For consideration by the Curriculum and Assessment Board (CAB)

Purpose

1. At the final meeting of the Assessment and National Qualifications (ANQ) Group on 27 April, the Deputy First Minister (DFM) asked that a proposal paper be prepared on a possible approach to strengthening the National 4 qualification via some form of external course assessment and a mechanism for differentiating between candidates. This proposal would then form the basis for a wider consultation with the education sector on National 4.
2. This paper sets out a proposal for changes to the National 4 qualification, alongside a wider package of measures which aim to provide clarity around the role of National 4 within the range of qualifications and pathways available through the Senior Phase. The overall aim is to enhance the credibility of the National 4 qualification among learners, the teaching profession, parents, and employers.
3. In preparing this proposal paper, we have reflected on the ANQ group's past discussions on National 4, which until April 2017 resulted in members agreeing that the initial focus for the group should be on reviewing National 5 and Highers. We have also drawn from the evidence arising from the Scottish Qualifications Authority's (SQA) fieldwork exercises and recent discussions with a subset of the ANQ group¹. We have been mindful of the role of National 4 as a progression route to National 5, and also of its intended role in providing an alternative pathway to other qualifications.

Background

4. The National Qualifications were developed at the appropriate Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) level to:
 - Build upon the approaches to assessment within Broad General Education (BGE) by encouraging breadth, depth and application in learning.
 - Reflect a wider principle of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) that schools should encourage learners to focus on assessment for external certification at the highest level of qualification that they are able to achieve rather than "intermediate" level qualifications (i.e. encouraging greater by-passing of qualifications).
 - Be delivered and assessed in 160 hours provided that learners have reached the appropriate starting point.
 - Help learners achieve the most appropriate level of qualification at the right time for them.
5. National 4 was introduced in 2013-14 and was described as being the SCQF equivalent of both 'General' in a Standard Grade or an Intermediate 1

¹ A meeting was held between the Scottish Government, Education Scotland, SQA, EIS, SLS, SSTA and NASUWT on 25 October 2017 to discuss the review of National 4.

qualification. It does not involve formal exams at the end of the course, but rather unit assessment and an Added Value Unit, with teachers using SQA assessments and quality assurance processes to ensure maintenance of national standards. This approach to assessment was intended to draw upon the skills and knowledge developed across the course to provide challenging and motivating tasks for learners. Additionally, at the time, it was felt that an external exam would not be appropriate for all learners at this level.²

6. As with all aspects of CfE, the development was overseen by the Curriculum for Excellence Management Board. It established the Qualifications Governing Group in 2009 to develop the design principles of the qualifications that were subsequently agreed by Management Board, including the principle that National 4 would be internally assessed.

Aims of National 4

7. The National 4 qualification was originally intended to provide the following benefits:
 - Recognise the achievement of learners at SCQF level 4, providing a recognised progression pathway for learners who have achieved curriculum level 3 in the BGE and an intended approach to assessment appropriate for learners working at this level.
 - Ease the transition between the BGE and qualifications in the Senior Phase. This includes assisting learners to progress from CfE Third Level in BGE to National 4 in S4 and onwards to other qualifications at SCQF level 4 or 5, or using National 4 as a pathway to college, training and employment.
 - Increase flexibility as schools and local authorities need not be restricted to planning learning and course delivery for National 4 to meet the timing of SQA's exam diet.

Current known challenges

8. However, the credibility of National 4 has been questioned **by some** since its introduction. The concerns expressed include the following.
 - The current mechanism for recognising positive achievement ('fallback to National 4') leading to National 4 being perceived by some as 'second best' or a consolation award.
 - The absence of an externally marked component or grading scale. .
 - The extent to which the National 4 adequately prepares learners for further study, work or progression to National 5³.
 - The extent to which teachers, parents and employers place value on internal assessment.

² These design principles were agreed by the Curriculum for Excellence Management Board in 2010, following recommendations of the Qualifications Governing Group whose membership included ADES, EIS, HMIE, SQA, SSTA, Scottish Government, SLS and Scotland's Colleges.

³ SQA data suggests that approximately 30% of National 4 candidates progress to National 5.

9. Conversely, SQA's own recent fieldwork⁴ shows a degree of support from learners themselves for the current assessment arrangements within National 4. This illustrates that whilst there is consensus on the need to review National 4, there is little agreement on either the specifics of any changes nor the timetable for introducing these.
10. Overall, it appears there are several misconceptions around National 4: in the main around whether it is principally a gateway award to a different qualification pathway to college or training, or a progression route to National 5, or indeed should serve both purposes.
11. SQA's field work studies in both 2016 and 2017 also indicated that learners felt that the pace of learning and level of challenge in the BGE may not be appropriate preparation for the Senior Phase where the challenge was seen to increase significantly.
12. It is, therefore, important that any discussion and consultation around National 4 is placed in a broader context. As previous discussions with education partners have made clear, there are broader issues that must be taken into consideration rather than simply altering the National 4 assessment approach. In particular:
- The need to strengthen the quality of assessment in the BGE, to improve the evidence of a learner's progress, on which teachers, learners and parents make choices for qualifications and pathways. This will improve learners' transition to, and progress through, the Senior Phase.
 - The support benefits that Benchmarks and new standardised assessments will have in terms of ensuring that pupils are presented at the appropriate level, based on the curriculum level achieved.
 - The awareness, and availability locally, of a broader range of pathways for learners.
 - The importance of the BGE and Senior Phase as a continuum of learning, taking into consideration differing approaches to curriculum delivery in schools.
 - The complexities of multi-level teaching in schools (i.e. by subject area, cohort size, prior learning)
13. Many of these wider issues were also raised during the 15-24 Learner Journey Review highlighting the need to:
- Ensure the senior phase curriculum meets the needs of a range of different learners, particularly statutory leavers;
 - Articulate a more coherent vision for the 15-24 learner journey in Scotland; and
 - Ensure that practitioners, parents and young people are both aware of and value the full range of options available to them.

⁴ SQA's fieldwork can be accessed at <http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/76667.html>.

14. The draft work programme and themes for discussion within the CAB includes a commitment to consider these issues further.

Proposal

15. It is important not to view the National 4 qualification in isolation, as this risks ignoring the wider curriculum support challenges which appear to be influencing the perceived value and use of the National 4.

16. With this in mind, the proposal being presented to the Curriculum and Assessment Board for discussion and agreement comprises:

- A package of measures currently available to the education sector to support curriculum design and to ensure that the learning experienced throughout the BGE, but especially in S1-S3, adequately prepares learners for the Senior Phase. More detail can be found at **Annex A**.
- A revised National 4 qualification which contains an *externally assessed* and *optional differentiated* element for learners to progress to National 5 which would retain its dual purpose as a gateway award at SCQF level 4 and preparatory pathway for learners progressing to National 5. More detail can be found at **Annex B**.
- A review of the units for National 4 to ensure appropriate progression to the revised National 5 and better supporting the delivery of multi-level teaching. This would include holistic unit assessments set at an appropriately challenging level and with valid levels of quality assurance.
- An overarching communications and marketing campaign to raise the credibility of the revised National 4 qualification and address current myths.

17. As previously agreed by the ANQ Group, the introduction of any revised arrangements for National 4 would signal the end of the current mechanism for Recognising Positive Achievement (RPA), commonly known as 'Fallback'. This was retained for an interim period alongside the introduction of the revisions to National 5. A strengthened National 4, combined with the experience of delivering the revised National 5, should remove the requirement for such a feature, whilst also addressing a factor – the "compensatory award" - which has arguably contributed to perceptions about the value of National 4.

Next Steps

18. Once the proposal has been agreed by the Curriculum and Assessment Board, this review should take into account a broad range of views – including those of young people, teachers, school leaders, parents, employers, colleges, national and local education bodies - to ensure that the suite of actions and any revisions to the qualification enhances its credibility and perceptions about its value. A proposed approach is set out at **Annex C**.

19. Once any changes are agreed, the timetable for implementation must recognise the need to balance the commitments made to deliver National 5 this academic year (2017/18), Higher in 2018/19 and Advanced Higher in 2019/20, and with SQA's capacity to deliver the annual exam diet safely and securely.

Discussion

20. The Curriculum and Assessment Board is asked to consider:

- a) the package of measures set out at **Annex A**
 - *Do these measures sufficiently address concerns about the extent to which the BGE is adequately preparing learners for the Senior Phase and the extent to which schools are offering learners a suitable range of pathways through the Senior Phase?*
 - *How should these measures be progressed in line with the reform agenda and the intended functions of Education Scotland, Regional Improvement Collaboratives and Schools/Head Teachers?*
- b) the proposed assessment arrangement for National 4 set out at **Annex B**
 - *Does this proposal address the current concerns about the National 4?*
 - *What are the potential unintended consequences?*
- c) the outline engagement plan at **Annex C** which describes how an agreed proposal might be tested with stakeholders before a recommendation is made to the Deputy First Minister.

ANNEX A

PACKAGE OF MEASURES

Challenges	Intervention/Measure
<p>BGE Experience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We need to ensure the BGE is appropriately challenging, with learning pathways which meet the differing needs of young people in schools. • Benchmarks now provide greater clarity for schools about the standards at Third and Fourth curriculum levels. This assists schools in reporting to parents and ensuring young people are knowledgeable, enabled and supported to make informed course choices for the Senior Phase. • We need to improve the assessment and profiling of learners in the BGE, encouraging schools to use valid and reliable assessment to plan learning and progression. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support schools to streamline and improve assessment practice through use of the Benchmarks, Standardised Assessments, NIF performance data and the Moderation Cycle. • Support schools to review BGE curriculum to ensure it provides an effective preparation for the Senior Phase. • Support schools and teachers to use benchmarks to ensure more accurate assessment of individual learners' achievement of CfE levels across curricular areas in S1-3. This data should then be used to design an appropriate pathway through the Senior Phase – e.g. secure at CfE level 3 = National 4; secure at CfE level 4 = National 5. • Ensure schools are using assessment data to shape conversations with parents about learners' progress and to set up expectations of progression to an appropriate suite of qualifications and awards in the Senior Phase. • Support schools and local authorities to interpret their achievement of CfE level data through the introduction of a BGE Improvement Tool that will encourage a better understanding of the approaches being taken by schools within and across local authorities to improve the educational outcomes for all children and young people.
<p>Senior Phase Experience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We need to ensure a richer Senior Phase experience with a wider range of learning pathways and greater collaboration (between schools, colleges, third sector and universities) to assist with positive sustained destinations, including the whole range of qualifications and work-based learning opportunities. • This must include considering offering qualifications over a two year timeframe, where this would be appropriate for the learners and result in a positive learning experience. • We need to ensure young people are presented for the correct levels of 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support schools to offer a wider range of learning pathways through the Senior Phase, encouraging greater exploitation of the flexibility offered by a 3 year approach. • Encourage greater collaborative working between schools, colleges, the third sector, universities and others to increase the choice of provision within the Senior Phase. • Support better understanding of SCQF levels and how they relate to other qualifications at SCQF Level 4, other awards and vocational qualifications, National 5s, Higher National Certificate, Highers, Foundation Apprenticeships etc.

qualifications or awards to give each young person a positive and valuable learning experience .	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Encourage use of IT and neighbourhood working to address issues around the range of courses available.
Insight Data <ul style="list-style-type: none">• We need to support schools to make more effective use of Insight as a tool for supporting continuous improvement of the design and delivery of a creative and inspiring Senior Phase for its young people.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Support schools to make better use of Insight as a school improvement tool, including evaluating curriculum pathways; and any changes to National 4 qualifications, once agreed, will be tested against the Insight Tariff principles.

ANNEX B**NATIONAL 4 PROPOSAL****Introduction**

It is important that any revisions to National 4 form part of a series of measures to strengthen its value and credibility. This proposal outlines the actions that might be taken to revise the qualification and the way in which it is assessed, quality assured and certificated.

Important considerations

Any revisions of National 4 will require a review of the course content and the unit assessments, including the Added Value assessments. This review will need to be undertaken to ensure stronger progression from National 4 to National 5 and to facilitate bi-level teaching.

The review of unit assessments will ensure that they are set at an appropriate standard and are holistic in nature to ensure they give:

- Teachers a confident assessment of pupils learning.
- Learners, parents and employers confidence in the credibility and value of the qualification.

The credibility of any qualification is also impacted by the quality assurance that is in place and it will be important that SQA clearly:

- Specify the conditions under which assessment should take place, and
- Clarify the criteria and reasoning behind the number of re-assessments that should be applied.

The Proposed Model

The proposed model for National 4 would retain the current unit based structure with the **addition of an optional, external assessment** that would allow for differentiation of ability. This would retain its dual purpose of National 4 as a gateway award at SCQF level 4 and preparatory pathway for learners progressing to National 5.

The **existing model for National 4 would remain**, i.e.:

- **Learners would undertake 3 units which would be internally assessed and externally verified by SQA.**
- Learners would also undertake a **holistic added value unit** that would also be internally assessed and externally verified by SQA.
- Achievement of these components (i.e. 50% +) would result in an award of a National 4 qualifications at pass. If a learner does not achieve a pass, they would receive certification for 3 units only.

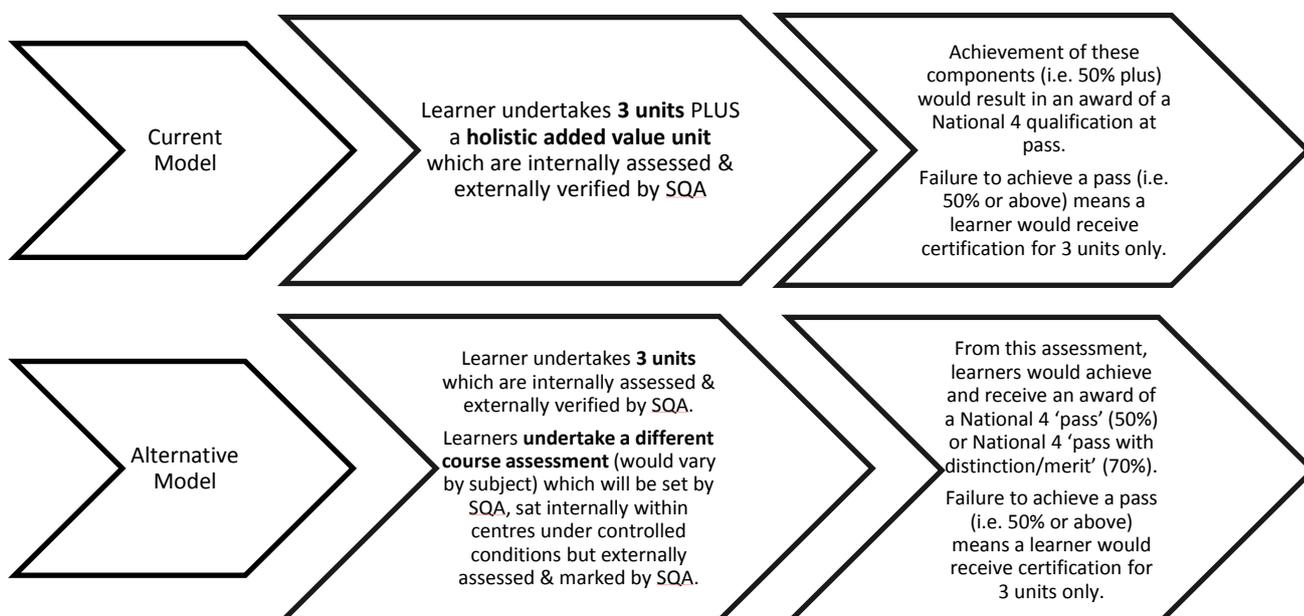
Alternatively, learners could choose to:

- **Undertake 3 units which would be internally assessed and externally verified by SQA.**
- **Undertake an alternative, different course assessment (which would replace the added value unit).** This would be set by SQA, sat internally within centres under controlled conditions, but **externally assessed** and marked by SQA.
- From this assessment learners would achieve and receive an award of a National 4 at 'pass' (50%), or pass with 'distinction/merit' (70%).
- If a learner does not achieve a pass, they would receive certification for 3 units only.

There are risks associated with this alternative approach, namely:

- There remains a possibility that a young person does not achieve a National 4 (i.e. 50% or over). However, it should be noted that this is the case with the current model too.
- There remains a possibility that teachers will encourage learners to undertake the 3 units, added value unit PLUS the different course assessment in order to 'bank' a National 4 for that young person. This will lead to additional workload for teachers and learners alike.

The following illustration demonstrates the two routes available to learners:



Optional Course Assessment

The optional and different 'Course assessment' (in the alternative model) will allow for a better understanding of how an individual may progress to National 5 in a given subject. The optional assessment would be assessed at pass (50%) and merit/distinction (70%).

The purpose of this optional assessment differs from a complete course assessment which assesses all of the key aspect of learning within a course. Its purpose is to identify progression to the next level and would be a good indicator of expected performance at National 5.

The introduction of the optional assessment may require some changes to the Added Value Unit. SQA will bring examples of this to the CAB meeting on 6 December to facilitate the discussion.

Implications

The model described above means that SQA will need to:

- Review the units and unit assessments to ensure appropriate progression to the revised National 5 and better supporting the delivery of multi-level teaching
- Specify clearly and audit the required conditions of assessment for internally assessed components
- Apply robust quality assurance, including random sampling, to all internally assessed components.
- Consider carefully the timing of introduction of any changes to National 4 alongside current commitments to remove units from Higher and Advanced Higher.

PROPOSED ENGAGEMENT PLAN

Purpose

The purpose of this plan is to outline approaches for consulting and seeking views on proposals for a revised National 4 qualification.

Stakeholders

The review of National 4 should engage with a number of education stakeholders, including teachers, parents, pupils, employers and others. Members of the Curriculum and Assessment Board will play a vital role in engaging and testing the proposals with partners.

Phase 1 - Gathering initial CAB member views

6 December 2017	First meeting of the Curriculum and Assessment Board (CAB). <i>Proposal paper and engagement plan tabled at meeting.</i>
End January 2018	Comments from CAB to be sent by email.
8 March 2018	Agree proposal/consultation document at CAB meeting.

Phase 2 – Testing and wider consultation

Mid March to mid June 2018	Programme of engagement and consultation, seeking views from stakeholders through existing forums/groups, and exploring the potential for an online survey/consultation. CAB members will have an important role in helping to cascade appropriate messages to stakeholders and ensure they are appropriately engaged in any consultation.
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Late June – Mid July 2018 Consider views and feedback

Phase 3 – Prepare recommendation for Deputy First Minister

Late July 2018 Recommendations to Deputy First Minister for approval.

Phase 4 – Announcement of changes

Beginning August 2018 Announcement of any changes

Phase 5 - Preparing for implementation

September onwards Communicating and preparing stakeholders for the changes ahead of implementation.