

SCOTTISH EDUCATION COUNCIL

PRESENTATION PATTERNS FOLLOWING CHANGES TO THE NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

Purpose

1. This paper provides an update on presentation approaches to National 4 and National 5 qualifications ahead of the 2018 exam diet following the revisions to the National 5 introduced this year. The paper also sets out an approach to addressing perceptions over the value of National 4.

Background

2. In response to concerns about the burden of assessment for young people and teacher workload, it was announced in September 2016 that mandatory unit assessments would be removed from the National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications. The decision to remove unit assessments was agreed with the Assessment and National Qualifications (ANQ) Group and the Curriculum for Excellence Management Board. The changes would be introduced in Academic Year 2017/18 for National 5, with the changes for Higher and Advanced Higher being introduced in 2018/19 and 2019/20 respectively.
3. The ANQ Group issued further guidance on the changes to the National Qualifications in March 2017¹. The guidance specified that schools would be able to continue to present learners for both units that were formerly part of National 5 and the full revised National 5 course. However, the guidance also made clear that this 'dual presentation' approach should only be used in a very limited number of exceptional circumstances, when it was in the best interests of the learner. This approach to presentation is necessary to ensure that learning and teaching experiences, and the associated assessment, served the needs of young people and delivered the intended lightening of the assessment burden for both learners and teachers.
4. The long-term revised mechanism for recognising positive achievement (RPA) was the extension of Grade D to include candidates who achieve between 40-49% that was introduced for National 5 in session 2017/18, the guidance also set out the original mechanism of RPA, through 'fallback' to National 4, would also be available for an interim period only.

Presentation patterns for 2018 Exam Diet

5. SQA's entry data for the 2018 exam diet suggests progress towards the change in practice encouraged by the ANQ guidance. There has been an increase in National 4 entries and a corresponding decrease in National 5 entries compared

¹ <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0051/00516166.pdf>

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to last year's entry data², which may suggest less inappropriate presentation at National 5. In relation to the use of dual presentation, at a national level, 12% of all National 5 course entries have three associated unit entries; the required number to be eligible for a National 4 by fall back.

6. However, the data has identified practice within a small number of individual schools which causes concern, including, for example, instances where whole classes appear to have been entered for both units and the course. Moreover, there are more presentations for units than anticipated. In particular, there has been a doubling of unit presentation entries reported to SQA by centres between the end of February and the end of March which is of particular concern. This has raised issues for SQA in ensuring appropriate quality assurance of unit entries.
7. This recent sharp increase in unit presentations at SCQF 5 is problematic as candidates being assessed for units should have been entered into the system by November 2017. Minor changes were to be expected resulting from schools taking account of assessment evidence from recent 'prelim' examinations and indeed this was the case for most schools. In a small number of cases, however, schools, or some subjects within schools, submitted all their unit entries during March. With final decisions on candidate entries being left so late, questions arise about the teaching and learning experiences for young people.
8. Education Scotland has contacted local authorities to ask them about the extent to which their schools are following ANQ guidance. Responses indicate a mixed picture. All local authority responses, however, stated an intention to review presentations after the 2018 diet. This will provide an opportunity to consider appropriate presentation at National 4 and National 5.
9. However, a decision is required on when the interim arrangements set out in the ANQ guidance should come to an end. This decision is inextricably linked with issues relating to National 4.

National 4

10. National 4 was introduced in academic session 2013-14, at SCQF Level 4 – the same level as the previous Standard Grade General and Intermediate 1 qualifications. The assessment mechanism (unit assessments plus an added value unit to determine whether a learner has attained the course *rather than* a formal exam at the end of the course) was part of the Qualifications Design Principles, recommended by the Qualifications Governing Group, and accepted by the CfE Management Board.
11. It was agreed that, given the nature of National 4 as potentially the exit qualification for those learners who might go on to college courses, internal assessment was more appropriate. It would also provide those learners who

² The number of National 4 entries is 4.6% greater than this time last year (96,411 in 2017, 100,871 in 2018). The number of entries for the National 5 course is 4.5% lower than this time last year (300,415 in 2017, 287,010 in 2018).

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may have previously found an external exam to be overly-challenging an opportunity to demonstrate their attainment in National Qualifications at SCQF Level 4.

12. 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 CfE Third Level 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 5³, 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.

13. The National 4 qualification is currently interpreted in several ways:

- a gateway award to vocational learning
- a progression pathway to National 5
- a 'fallback' award (recognising positive achievement) for candidates who have not achieved National 5.

Concerns over National 4

14. The credibility of National 4 has been questioned *by some* since its introduction. It is important to explore whether these perceptions arise from attitudinal or cultural reasons or are to do with the qualification and its assessment. The Curriculum and Assessment Board (CAB) has taken forward the ANQ's Group commitment to review National 4. At the CAB's inaugural meeting in December 2017, a proposal⁴ for changes to the assessment model for National 4 was discussed. With no clear consensus on redesigning the qualification, the meeting concluded that there should not be a consultation on a possible alternative National 4 model. Instead a firm evidence base should be established on the perceived credibility issues associated with National 4, with this information used to undertake a specific communications exercise to improve the currency of National 4 among learners, teachers, parents and employers, and within the context of a wider range of pathways available to learners.

15. However, a recurring issue remains the use of National 4 as a 'fallback' award. For some, this method of recognising positive achievement serves an important function in supporting aspirational presentation, whereas for others it contributes to the negative perceptions of National 4 as a consolation award. The issue is

³ SQA data suggests that approximately 23% of National 4 candidates progress to National 5 (based on published data on progression between National 4 in 2015 and National 5 in 2016).

⁴ Paper 01(04) of Curriculum and Assessment Board which took place on 6 December 2017.

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complicated further by the revisions to National 5, where the continued availability of 'fallback' has contributed to the presentation issues set out earlier in this paper. A decision to bring the interim measure to an end *could* have the dual benefits of: delivering the intended benefits of removing unit assessments from National 5 by ensuring young people are not subjected to the burden of assessment associated with being presented for both units and the course; and improving the status of National 4 by ensuring this is a positive presentation choice, rather than an award received having failed to achieve a National 5. However, it would break with the principle of 'certification for all', which has been a significant feature of the Scottish qualifications landscape at SCQF levels 4-5.

Assessment Model

16. The evidence to-date⁵ indicates that the absence of an externally marked component or grading scale may also be affecting the credibility of National 4. Despite internal assessment being highly established and a credible feature of other qualifications provided in Further Education, Higher Education and in employment and training, there are questions as to the extent to which teachers, parents and employers place value on internal assessment.
17. The CfE Benchmarks and Scottish National Standardised Assessments (SNSAs) have been created to support teachers with assessment and moderation across the BGE. Education Scotland has been building capacity in assessment and moderation at national level through an extensive programme of professional learning for local authority nominated Quality Assurance and Moderation Support Officers (QAMSOs). Education Scotland has also delivered sessions on assessment and moderation at the request of local authorities and will continue to respond to further requests.

Increased pace in Broad General Education and transition to the Senior Phase

18. It is also 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 also broader issues that must be taken into consideration if we are to ensure that National 4 serves its original purpose in adequately preparing learners for further study, work or progression to National 5. These include:
- The need to strengthen the quality of assessment in the BGE, for example through the support identified in para 17 above, to improve the evidence of a learner's progress, on the basis of which teachers, learners and parents make choices for qualifications and pathways. This will improve learners' transition to, and progress through, the Senior Phase.
 - The awareness, and availability locally, of a broader range of pathways for learners.

⁵ SQA's fieldwork (<http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/76667.html>), National Parent Forum Scotland (NPFs) survey, and current engagement work with colleges, employers and young people on National 4.

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- 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. in some subjects more than in others; cohort size; prior learning)

19. These wider issues were discussed by the CAB at their March 2018 meeting and work is underway to review the narrative on CfE to ensure clarity of understanding across practitioners, learners, parents and others. Work is also underway to prepare a statement of ambition for the Senior Phase and to continue to support transitions in and out of Senior Phase.

Discussion

20. The Council is invited to:

- Discuss National 4 and National 5 presentation patterns for the 2018 exam diet
- Note the proposed approach to improving the status of National 4
- Consider the impact of RPA through 'fallback' to National 4