

Introduction

This communication provides further detail to local authorities, schools and teachers on the implications of the decision to remove unit assessments from the National Qualifications. 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.

It should be read in conjunction with guidance from the Chief Inspector of Schools issued in May and August 2016. Schools and local authorities should consider the recent changes to assessment within the qualifications in relation to the strengthening of the Broad General Education to ensure that young people experience the appropriate pace, breadth and depth of learning that will prepare them for the Senior Phase:



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Changes to 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 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. This reflected proposals by the teaching profession, whose judgement was 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 and was detracting from providing sufficient time for high quality learning and teaching.

Progression into the Senior Phase and presentation decisions

Schools need to make important judgments about the most appropriate National Qualifications pathway for each learner. These decisions must be informed by close 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.

During the Senior Phase, there must be sufficient time for learning, teaching and assessment to ensure that learners' breadth, depth and ability to apply learning maximises their attainment by the end of the Senior Phase. This means that the

DRAFT

level of attainment at the end of the Senior Phase becomes the main focus for all schools, rather than on individual year on year attainment that is currently prevalent. *Decisions about learning pathways will require a reliable assessment of whether a young person has achieved the third or fourth curriculum level by the end of S3 before embarking on a course leading to National 4 or National 5, respectively.* The benchmarks shortly to be published for each curriculum area by Education Scotland will provide teachers with the necessary information to inform this judgement.

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 onto National 4 (for those who have achieved third curriculum level)**
- **progression onto National 5 (for those who have achieved fourth curriculum level)**
- **progression onto 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, a young person may gain a better learning and teaching experience by undertaking a National 5 over two years, rather than being presented for a one-year National 5 for which they are not well prepared and potentially results 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 such as National Certificates, Foundation and Modern 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.

Units that were previously part of National 5

These national units will also remain available as free standing units at SCQF level 5. The units will no longer form part of the National 5 course. They are available as an alternative to presentation for the full National 5 course award. 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.

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Schools will, therefore, have to take a decision for any given National 5 course on whether a young person is presented either for units or for the full course award. They should not be presented for both.

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.

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**. SQA needs this information to plan, recruit and train markers and other appointees to undertake the necessary quality assurance processes and to ensure successful delivery of certification in August. Schools can make small adjustments to entry data for individual candidates by removing their unit entries or course entries. Any changes to entries must be submitted by **March**. However, any change to the numbers of candidates entered for units by a centre beyond November risk the prospect of these units not being certificated in time for August, due to insufficient time being available to undertake the necessary quality assurance processes.

Recognising Positive Achievement (RPA)

One of the most significant impacts of the removal of units and their assessments from National 5 is that the possibility of fall back to National 4 – under the current mechanism of recognising positive achievement - will no longer be available.

There will be candidates, aspiring to attain a National Course, who do not achieve an A-C Grade. In order to recognise their positive achievement, the achievement of Grade D attainment will be broadened from the current position (notional 45%-49%) to notional 40%-49%. This move is intended to ensure that young people who do not perform as well as predicted in the course assessment receive credit for their achievement at SCQF level of the qualification for which they were entered.

This will apply to National 5 from 2017-18, Higher from 2018-19 and Advanced Higher from 2019-20.

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.

Frequently Asked Questions

Why is fallback to National 4 no longer available?

The current RPA mechanism is founded on the hierarchical relationship between the units at National 4 and National 5. This meant that successful completion of the National 5 unit assessments in any given subject could be taken as suitable evidence of having achieved the requirements of the equivalent units at National 4. Since unit assessments will no longer form part of the National 5 course, it will no longer be possible to award National 4 qualifications through this mechanism.

It is also clear that the availability of RPA, whilst intended to support aspirational presentation, has contributed to inappropriate presentation patterns, with young people being presented for a course award which they have little realistic prospect of achieving. For example, of the 295,083 entries for National 5 in 2016, 41,214 (14%) candidates received no award. However, a National 4 Award was secured for 23,551 of those entries through RPA, which represented 20.5% of the 114,635 National 4 qualifications awarded in August 2016. These figures suggest an inappropriate balance in presentation for National 4 and National 5.

Under the new arrangements, the broadening of the D grade range from 49-40% is intended to recognise the positive achievement of learners who do not perform as well as predicted in the course assessment.

Why is it not possible to present candidates for both units and the full course award?

The purpose of removing unit assessments was to reduce the burden of over-assessment, not just for teachers, but also for young people. Presenting young people for both units and the full course award would clearly do nothing to address this issue.

Furthermore, following the removal of unit assessments, it has been necessary to expand the final course assessment in order to ensure full course coverage. This would mean an *increase* in the amount of assessment for any candidate presented for both units and the full course award.

What approaches should schools take with borderline N4/N5 candidates under the new arrangements?

Choices about learning pathways leading to qualifications need to be informed by reliable assessment information. Schools need to monitor and track young people's progress carefully and have clear evidence of their current level of attainment. Based on this evidence, schools will make decisions about whether young people should be presented for N4 or N5. Schools need robust evidence from assessment on which to base decisions about borderline candidates. Such evidence will support schools in explaining their decisions about presentation to young people and their parents. The broadening of Grade D to a notional 40% to 49% reduces the risk of borderline candidates getting no award. Schools should be aware of the potentially detrimental

DRAFT

impact on young people's wellbeing if they are presented for qualifications clearly beyond their current level of attainment.

However, 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 N4 course award along with one or more units at N5 in that subject in S4, which will support their progression into N5 in S5. Alternatively, it may involve learners undertaking a N5 course over a 2 year period.

The point at which decisions are made about presentation level will be a matter for the school, cognisant of SQA data entry requirements, based on a range of evidence about the learner's progress.

Why has there been a need to expand the course assessment following the removal of unit assessments?

Overall assessment of National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher is currently based on a combination of unit and course assessment. Removal of the unit assessment means that the overall course assessment has to be strengthened to ensure appropriate course coverage. This will also ensure that courses maintain their current breadth and SCQF points.

The changes will allow SQA to remove duplication of assessment and to reduce the overall volume of assessment within each course, giving more space for learning and teaching. As a result, updated and condensed National 5 course documents will be available for teachers at the end of April 2017. The course aims, content and rationale are not changing. The skills and knowledge currently addressed through unit assessment will simply be incorporated in the course assessment.

The starting point for this process was to consider how to extend the course assessment to take account of the removal of units. Some activities had been placed into the units as they were more easily assessed within the classroom. Units were also used to ensure breadth of learning. As a result of their removal, SQA have had to ensure these activities and topics are captured in the overall course assessment through coursework and/or in the question paper.

An example of this is in Music where composing is currently assessed in the units and is a vital aspect of the course. The best way to assess this skill is by adding it to the course assessment.

In other cases, such as Practical Woodwork or Hospitality: Practical Cookery, the current course assessment comprised 100% coursework. However, assessment of the underpinning knowledge and understanding occurred through unit assessment. To sample that knowledge and understanding, it is logical to add a small question paper while ensuring that coursework still forms 70% of the final grade.

For other subject areas, the intention is to extend the existing question paper to sample more of the course content and maintain the breadth of learning of the

DRAFT

current course. For example in History, an extended question paper will require a sample from all four issues, instead of a sample of three from four.

Why do the changes tend to show an increase in weighting towards the final exam?

One of principles of Curriculum for Excellence is about ensuring breadth, depth and application of learning. This is carried through into the assessment approach for each course through the rationale for the course and the aims of learning for each course. The enhancements that SQA has announced to National 5 subjects took account of the skills and knowledge previously assessed within units and sought to preserve the integrity of the qualification in terms of validity, reliability, practicability and equity.

There was not an automatic expansion to the exam; each National Course was looked at separately. In several subjects, including high uptake subjects such as English, Modern Languages and Music, there has been no change to the exam and instead the enhancement is in the coursework.

In mainly content-based subjects, such as business subjects, social subjects, Sciences and Maths, the units provided an assurance of breadth of coverage of content and skills. For example, in Economics the units ensured coverage of content around micro-economic issues, macro-economic issues and global/international aspects. The coursework (assignment) in these areas is more about personalisation and choice (in Economics, the candidate selects a specific economic topic/issue of interest, researches it, analyses key features, and presents their findings). In these cases, following the removal of units, there is a need to sample more breadth of content overall in the course assessment. The obvious way to do that is to extend the question paper.

In general, exams are often used to assess breadth, some aspects of depth, ability to integrate learning across the course and the ability to apply learning, knowledge, understanding and skills to new problems - for example, to look at a range of data generated from an experiment, interpret the data, do calculations, and draw conclusions. Within the current model of courses, breadth was often supplemented by the units of the course. Once the units are removed, the question paper needs to be extended to ensure that breadth of learning is retained and to guard against any narrowing of learning.

Within some subjects the weightings of exam to coursework have remained unchanged – for example, the Sciences have retained current weightings of 80:20 (exam:assignment). In other subject areas there has been some small adjustments to the weightings – for example, within the social subjects the weightings have moved from 75:25 to 80:20 (exam:assignment).

Why not increase the coursework rather than the exam?

In several subjects, including high uptake subjects such as English, Modern Languages and Music, there has been no change to the exam and instead the enhancement is in the coursework. This is because some specific skills were

DRAFT

previously assessed only in the units – for example, talk in English, discursive writing in Modern Languages and composing in Music. The review process confirmed that the development of these skills is still essential to meeting the aims of the National Course and they therefore needed to become part of the course assessment. As these skills often involve drafting, testing, reflection, presentation and other process-based classroom activities, they are not suitable to be assessed in an exam. They were, therefore, included in the coursework requirements of the subject and the exam arrangements were left unchanged.

In many subjects coursework is used to allow candidates to study something of their own choice in depth - for example, in Sciences or social subjects. Extending the coursework in these areas becomes a much bigger task and one that would lead to increased workload for candidates and teachers.

Who was involved in discussions about the changes?

The Deputy First Minister (DFM) announced in September 2016 the decision to reduce workload for young people and teachers by removing units and unit assessment from the National Courses. This was a result of concerns being raised by teachers and young people about the workload associated with the units in courses. These issues were also highlighted in SQA's research into how the new qualifications were performing, which identified concerns with the units, as well as other factors across the education system contributing to workload for teachers and young people.

The decision to remove unit assessments was agreed with both the Assessment and National Qualifications Group and the Curriculum for Excellence Management Board. The Assessment and National Qualifications Group was established by the Scottish Government in January 2016 to consider and make recommendations on: the policy framework within which national qualifications are developed and operate; and assessment policy and practice from 3 to 18, and the best means of supporting improvements. The group is made up of representatives from organisations involved in Scottish education: Scottish Government, Education Scotland, SQA, COSLA, ADES, GTCS, NPFS, SLS, AHDS, EIS, SSTA, NASUWT, Further and Higher Education representatives and other education experts.

How did the SQA decide on the changes that had to be made?

Since the DFM's announcement, SQA has been planning the necessary structural changes to the courses and course assessment. The common goal is to reduce workload for candidates and staff, while maintaining the standards and integrity of the qualifications.

The advice of the professional associations and other stakeholders on the Ministerial Assessment and National Qualifications Group was that the changes to National 5 needed to be made quickly to address workload concerns. The timescales within which SQA is being asked to make these changes are challenging. Broad consultation with the profession about the changes to subjects was simply not possible against the timescales. SQA has therefore used its National Qualifications Support Teams for each subject. These teams are made up of subject teachers,

lecturers, professional associations and Higher Education representatives. SQA has used these groups to help explore options and decide on the best way forward. SQA has also informally engaged with a range of subject teachers on the proposals and in some cases modified proposals based on their feedback.

How will these changes be reflected in Insight?

The Insight Project Board is aware of these changes, including the extension of grade D. The project team will consider what modifications may be necessary to ensure the Insight tool is able to present an accurate and consistent picture of young peoples' attainment.

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