

ASSESSMENT AND NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS WORKING GROUP ASSESSMENT OVERLOAD

Purpose

1. *Delivering Excellence and Equity in Scottish Education: A Delivery Plan for Scotland* (June 2016) commits the Scottish Government to “work with the Assessment and National Qualifications Group to consult on the design of assessment within the qualifications system - involving teachers, parents, young people, employers, national partners and other stakeholders.”
2. This paper is intended to assist the Group’s contribution to that process and to inform discussion at the Group’s meeting on 12 September.

Introduction

3. The new National Qualifications, designed as part of Curriculum for Excellence, were phased in over a three year period from 2013-14. All former qualifications have now been replaced in accordance with the agreed timetable.
4. In 2014, the CfE Management Board established a ‘Reflections’ sub-group to consider any issues arising from the introduction of the new qualifications. This reported in 2014 and 2015. Subsequently, as the first phase of implementation drew to a close, Ministers established the Assessment and National Qualifications (ANQ) Group to consider and make recommendations (based on emerging evidence and experience) to Ministers and Management Board on (i) the policy framework (including design principles) within which qualifications are developed and operate, and (ii) on assessment policy and practice from age 3 to 18, and the best means of supporting improvements.
5. It has been clear from the work undertaken by these Groups, as well as from SQA’s evaluation of the new qualifications in schools, that there has been an unintended and unsustainable level of assessment-related work for learners and teachers. This appears to build up throughout S4, with a particularly acute focus between January and April, when there are cumulative demands for unit assessments, coursework and final exam preparation.
6. The first report on the work of the ANQ Group (May 2016) made clear that this workload has been a result of a variety of factors, including the design and operation of some unit assessments; preparation for qualifications in Broad General Education; curriculum pathways in the Senior Phase; schools’ policies on presentation for qualifications; the number of courses being taken by pupils in S4 and insufficient time available for learning and teaching and assessment of the Courses; and the operation of verification processes in the first years of the new qualifications.
7. Ministers have been clear that reducing workload and bureaucracy for teachers and young people is a priority (the establishment of the Reflections Group and the ANQ Group were in part a response to concerns expressed by professional associations on workload and over-assessment), and have already put in place a range of actions, many based on the work of the ANQ Group to date. Key to these are the actions already announced by SQA to streamline the qualifications in 2016-17 and beyond, SQA’s review of its approach to quality assurance, and the publication of clear guidance by the Chief Inspector of Schools in May 2016, on national expectations on qualifications and assessment to reduce

unnecessary workload on teachers. In particular, the guidance highlighted the following areas and has been specifically designed to help reduce the assessment burden:

- adequate preparation of candidates through the broad general education (BGE) for seamless transition into the senior phase
- presentation of candidates for courses at the appropriate level, based on reliable and robust judgements of curriculum level achieved
- the allocation of sufficient time for learning, teaching and assessment for the national courses (a notional 160 hours)
- the importance of following appropriate progression pathways
- effective assessment 3-18, aligned with the approaches being developed to support the National Improvement Framework.

8. The guidance recognises that, while schools and local authorities should make use of the flexibility they have under CfE in designing learning, teaching and assessment arrangements, great care needs to be taken to ensure that these local arrangements do not create unnecessary workload demands for teachers or learners. Schools and local authorities should be clear that applying this guidance will assist directly in reducing workload concerns.

The Design Principles of the new National Qualifications

9. In addition to the actions to be undertaken in response to the above guidance, the Education Delivery Plan makes clear the Scottish Government commitment to consult on the design of assessment within the qualifications system. The proposal scoped below provides a suggested approach to future qualifications design, for discussion by ANQ Group members.

10. The new national courses for SQA National Qualifications are based on Design Principles agreed by the Curriculum for Excellence Management Board in 2010, following a national consultation with a broad range of stakeholders across Scotland.

11. National Courses, and the Units within them, are designed to reflect the values, purposes and principles of Curriculum for Excellence, and to develop skills for learning, life and work. They have an increased emphasis on skills but still have appropriate knowledge and skills for that course area. They are less prescriptive than previous qualifications as they offer flexibility, provide time for learning and have scope for personalisation and choice, especially within the Coursework.

12. The content/skills of each Course has been organised into units. Most of the national courses above level 4 comprise three units, plus an added value element - an additional unit at National 4, and course assessment (usually an exam plus other form of assessment, such as assignment, portfolio or performance) at National 5 or Higher. At present, National 4 to Higher qualifications are weighted at 24 SCQF points, six for each unit plus a further six for the course assessment or Added Value Unit. The SCQF Credit points are used to quantify learning outcomes and give them a value or currency. They are a way of showing how much time it takes, on average, to complete a qualification or learning programme.

13. Depending on the nature of the subject, sometimes units are skills-based, with appropriate knowledge and understanding, and sometimes they are topic-based, incorporating appropriate skills. Each unit has an SCQF credit value attached to it that reflects the amount of time required for the delivery and assessment of that unit for an average learner, assuming they are at the correct entry point for that Course. The unit

content of the National Courses has 18 SCQF credit points associated with it. In addition there are six SCQF points attached to the Course assessment for the time required to complete Coursework and prepare for the exam through integration and application of the skills and knowledge acquired in the units.

14. The current assessment strategy of the Courses combines unit assessment, to ensure the learner is secure in the learning covered in each of the units, and a Course assessment. The Course assessment normally combines an exam and a piece of Coursework (this could be a performance, a practical task, an assignment). The exam is shorter in this design of Course as the content of the units has been assessed at a minimum level through the unit assessments. The grading of the Course is based on the Course assessment. The achievement of the Course is based on achieving a pass in the assessments of the units and achieving a Grade A to D in the Course Assessment. Both the unit assessments and course assessments are subject to national quality assurance to maintain the credibility of the Courses and to ensure that national standards are being applied across Scotland. One of the new features of the National Courses was that the Course assessment would reflect a broader range of learning by combining exams with coursework. Coursework enables the candidates Grade to be based on the range of skills and knowledge covered in the learning of the Course. Coursework can allow learners to demonstrate evidence of depth of learning, application of learning, creativity and/or performance abilities. It also allows some degree of personalisation and choice within the subject.

15. The purpose of National Units is to set standards of learning for individual learners. Units provide learners with the opportunity to demonstrate their acquisition of skills in an organised way and to develop the required skills for learning, life and work. National Units can form part of National Courses or can be undertaken separately. National Units can currently be certificated as qualifications in their own right.

16. To gain the award of the Course at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher, the learner must pass all of the unit assessments as well as the Course assessment. To gain the award at National 3 and 4, the learner must pass all the units (plus the Added Value Unit at National 4). In addition, course assessment provides the basis for determining Grades at levels 5-7.

17. The National Course at SCQF levels 5 to 7 are currently graded A to D. In terms of pass rates, Grades A to C are considered passes and Grade D is a near miss but still recognises and certificates attainment. The score "norms" required to achieve each Grade are outlined below:

- Grade A - 70-100%
- Grade B - 60-69%
- Grade C - 50-59%
- Grade D - 45-49%

Assessment in the National Qualifications – a proposal for consideration by ANQ Group

18. In scoping this proposal, a range of options have been considered, from maintaining the current system as defined by the agreed design principles (with refinements to the model to address qualifications and broader issues), to moving to exam-only external course assessment as under previous assessment regimes. The proposed option has been tested

with key stakeholders in order to ensure that the Group can be confident that the proposal has general support, is based on evidence and is designed in the best interests of learners.

19. The Group will also wish to be assured that the proposal is in line with the ambitions and approaches to learning and teaching inherent within CfE. The original principles (of CfE in general, as well as for the qualifications) were system-driven and based on an original, broad consensus from teachers, academics and others.

20. Following on from the fieldwork and research findings, SQA worked with its National Qualifications Support Teams to identify issues and actions for 2016-17 and subsequent years to reduce workload for teachers and learners. These subject reports were published in May of this year. From the research it was clear that the bar for assessing a unit was too high, leading to candidates failing and requiring reassessment. This was also leading to complex recording within schools that was felt by many to be bureaucratic and time consuming. SQA has put in place approaches to address this issue for 2016/17, e.g. lowering the threshold required for passing units. Assuming that candidates are presented at the correct level, this should reduce the requirements for re-assessment. In a small number of cases SQA was able to remove duplication of assessment between units and Course assessment in the immediate term.

21. Additionally SQA identified other issues and has initiated work to address these in the medium term. These issues for review include some instances of duplication of assessment which are more complex to address, . A key element within this programme of work is to identify and remove any genuine duplication between unit assessments in external exams.

22. The first report on the ANQ Group's work was clear that any changes in the short term should not compromise the secure delivery and credibility of qualifications. This has meant that the work has not progressed as fast as some stakeholders would wish. Within the current design of National Courses SQA has introduced a number of modifications to assist with workload. However there is feedback that these modifications will be insufficient to address workload concerns. Hence a modified design for National Courses is proposed in this paper, which addresses the concerns raised but is still very much in keeping with the aims and principles of CfE.

Option for consideration:

Retain course structure and extend course assessment (including units for teaching & learning purposes only), but remove mandatory unit assessment at National 5 and Higher.

23. The central elements of this proposal:

- **SQA would remove the requirement to have units summatively assessed, quality assured and certificated as a requirement of the Course.** Instead SQA would base achievement of the Course on a modified Course assessment only. Given that SQA is removing unit assessment then the exam would be extended to increase the sampling of the Course content. There may be a requirement to modify Coursework but this is less likely.
- Candidates would be entered for the Course and would need to be successful in their Course assessment to attain it. Units would not be part of the Course award. However, freestanding units will be available for candidates who wish to be presented for units only.

- Units would remain as organisers of learning within the course architecture, but **formal assessment of candidates would take place at Course level (through exam and coursework), not at unit level, and candidates would be certificated for the Course at the grade achieved.** Under this approach, units would be retained for planning and organising learning, but there would be no requirement for any formal assessment of units in order to certificate the Course. National 5 units would not be certificated on a candidate's SQA certificate for those completing the Course assessment.
- SQA would also retain the units of the Courses **as free standing units for learners who wished to take these** . This would support flexibility and alternative pathways to meet the needs of a range of learners (SQA offers many other stand-alone units which could also be taken and certificated). In order to be certificated for free-standing units schools would have to enter candidates for the units, conduct summative assessment and be quality assured.

24. Teachers could undertake assessment of the Course content in a way in which they thought was appropriate throughout the year but this would be driven by their own professional judgments on supporting pupils and monitoring progress, rather than the summative unit assessment requirements of the SQA in delivering the qualification. The formal summative assessment of the Course would instead be undertaken by an expanded final exam and the existing coursework. Teacher judgement would be paramount and would be in line with the drive to empower classroom teachers which has been a key principle of CfE.

25. A key test for any refinement of the national qualifications must be adherence to the vision for Curriculum for Excellence, and to the ambitions for the learning and teaching that have been a key part of that. Under this approach, the Course syllabus – skills and knowledge and understanding would not change and would provide continuity for teachers that builds upon their three years of delivery experience with the existing National 5.

26. In order to secure recognition for candidates who might not achieve A-D (and for whom certificated units provide an opportunity to demonstrate attainment), the grade range could be expanded. This would enable a range of candidates to demonstrate attainment on graded certificate carrying the full 24 SCQF points.

27. There are two alternate ways of approaching the extension of grading –

- Alternative 1 – Redefine Grade D as 40-49% and then E as 30-39% - this is the most logical approach and from assessment perspective bands of 10% are more practicable and reliable.
- Alternative 2 – keep Grade D as near miss 45-49%, Grade E as 40-44%, Grade F as 35-39%, Grade G as 30- 34% - this keeps grade D consistent with existing practice but logic then says go down in bands of 5%

28. A crucial factor would be the importance of the non-exam element of the course assessment, e.g. assignment, portfolio or performance, as this would be key to ensuring that application of skills and knowledge and understanding can be demonstrated by the learner, and that there is no return to an “all-or-nothing” final exam.

29. SQA's fieldwork has identified learners' generally positive experiences of Coursework, as valuable and helpful in ensuring that not all emphasis is placed on a final exam. Conversely, a significant number of learners' experience of unit assessment is less positive, and seen as time-consuming and unhelpful in preparing for course assessment.

30. This approach would provide continuity with the design principles as agreed, and provide further stability as the qualifications continue to be in.

31. In order to ensure success, the system will also need to address the other issues associated with workload as identified in the first report on the ANQ Group's work and subsequent guidance issued by Education Scotland and SQA.

Potential challenges

32. The first ANQ Report made clear that any changes to assessment or qualifications should be based on several key principles (below), and the ANQ will wish to be confident that the proposed refinements are in line with these principles:

- adherence to the guiding principles of Curriculum for Excellence
- adherence to the aims of the Senior Phase, including the maintenance of breadth of learning, deeper learning, and appropriate uses of assessment to support learning and teaching
- based on evidence of the experience of the introduction of the new qualifications to date
- assurance of the on-going integrity and high standing of qualifications in Scotland
- assurance that any changes in the short term do not compromise the secure delivery and credibility of qualifications
- recognition that assessment-related issues are multi-dimensional, and must be addressed across the whole 3-18 curriculum
- all parts of the education community has a part to play in ensuring a high quality, effective and efficient assessment and qualifications system
- most importantly, assurance that learners will not be disadvantaged in any way.

33. In particular, the ANQ Group will wish to explore any risks or potential unintended consequences arising from the proposed refinements. These include the potential ways in which this proposal may be interpreted by different schools and teachers, and any implications for Assessment 3-18.

34. The approach outlined above could be portrayed as a departure from the original design principles agreed after national consultation. National Courses have been designed on the assumption that Course assessment has been lessened as assurance is gained about the skills and knowledge and understanding of the candidate through unit assessment.

35. In addition, centres must be clear that candidates presented for the Course Award should not also be presented for individual units, as this would fail to address the workload issues for learners or teachers. Schools would be able to use the freestanding units for assessment and certification purposes if that is seen as helpful for specific learner(s) – but it is not anticipated that this would be a widespread practice. These units would be assessed according to the current arrangements.

36. Were this option to be adopted, consideration would also need to be given as to whether this model would over time be rolled out to Advanced Higher. There would be a logic in changing the design at National 5 and above in terms of coherence of approach. Consideration may also need to be given to the implications for the current assessment arrangements for National 4.

Timetable

37. Initial scoping work by SQA suggests that this approach could be delivered for National 5 for session 2017/18, although detailed planning still needs to be undertaken (there has been no time for consultation outwith SQA). The intent would be to put in place the new approach at National 5 for 2017/18 and then introduce the changes to Higher in 2018/19. This would ensure that learners who undertake the revised National 5 then progress into the revised Higher and spreads the change out over two years for teachers. This would require significant additional work for the SQA and some of the work and support planned for 2016/17 published in the delivery plan could not be undertaken.

Communication

38. A clear communication plan would require to be developed to ensure that teachers, learners, parents, employers, HE and FE, and other partners understood the changes (and the continuities) stemming from the proposal. Subject to the views of the ANQ Group, we would share the proposal with representatives of the Teacher Panel, prior to presenting it to the Curriculum for Excellence Management Board at its next meeting on 29 September.

Conclusion

39. The Assessment and National Qualifications Group is invited to discuss this proposal, in particular testing it against the key principles as set out in paragraph 32.

**Assessment and National Qualifications Group Secretariat
September 2016**

CURRENT DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR NATIONAL COURSES

Design Principles for National Courses

Course design

- 1 Every National Course must have a clear rationale that:
 - ◆ justifies the need for the Course and its uniqueness
 - ◆ provides evidence of demand for it
 - ◆ explains how the National Course fits with other qualifications
 - ◆ identifies the progression opportunities into and from the Course
 - ◆ outlines the aims, purposes and intended learning outcomes of the Course and explains how the award structure meets these purposes

- 2 National Courses will have the following SCQF credit points:
 - ◆ Courses at National 2 and 3 will have Units totalling 18 SCQF credit points.
 - ◆ Courses at National 4 will have Units totalling 24 SCQF credit points. One of the Units (six SCQF credit points) will assess added value, ie it will require the learner to demonstrate depth of understanding and/or application of skills.
 - ◆ Courses at National 5 and Higher will have Units totalling 18 SCQF credit points, with an additional six SCQF credit points to allow the use of an extended range of learning and teaching approaches, remediation, consolidation of learning, integration, and preparation for external assessment. This will give a total of 24 SCQF credit points for Courses at National 5 and Courses at Higher.
 - ◆ Courses at Advanced Higher will have Units totalling 24 SCQF credit points, with an additional eight SCQF credit points to allow the use of an extended range of learning and teaching approaches, remediation, consolidation of learning, integration and preparation for external assessment. This will give a total of 32 SCQF credit points for the Course.

- 3 The level of a National Course should be consistent with the appropriate SCQF level descriptor. The extent of coverage of a National Course should be comparable to appropriate existing or previous qualifications at the same level, and should be consistent with the rationale and the aims, purposes and intended learning outcomes of the Course. Units in a National Course must all be at the SCQF level of the Course.

- 4 Every National Course should provide appropriate opportunities for skills for learning, life and work to be developed.

- 5 National Courses should take into consideration practical aspects of delivery and should be able to be delivered in a range of centres. The requirements for practitioner expertise and resources should not be restrictive and should be appropriate for general qualifications.

- 6 National Courses should take into consideration the needs of all learners, and should be designed to be as accessible as possible to learners who will achieve in different ways and at a different pace.

Course structure

- 7 A National Course can be made up of mandatory and/or optional Units. However, at least six SCQF credit points (eight at Advanced Higher) must be from mandatory Units, and these must reflect the title of the Course. There will be no alternatives within this mandatory section. In some Courses, all component Units will be mandatory.

- 8 Optional Units can account for up to 12 SCQF credit points (16 at Advanced Higher). Where optional Units are used, these should reflect identified needs of the specialist area and the rationale, aims, purposes and intended learning outcomes for the Course.

- 9 Where appropriate, a suite of Courses with the same title at different levels should have a Course structure which is consistent across levels.

Units

- 10 Each Unit in a National Course should be coherent and worthy of recognition in its own right.
- 11 Units in National Courses will be internally assessed on a pass/fail basis, and will be ungraded. Unit assessment should be fit for purpose and proportionate. Units can be assessed individually. In some subjects, it will be possible to gather evidence of achievement of Units in an integrated way, combining assessments across Units.
- 12 Units in a National Course can be of different SCQF credit values but they must all be at the same SCQF level of the Course.

Assessment

- 13 Assessment methodologies for National Courses should support the *Strategic Vision and Key Principles for Assessment 3–18*. They should promote best practice and enable learners to achieve the highest standards they are capable of. They should support greater breadth and depth of learning and a greater focus on skills development.
- 14 Assessment approaches for National Courses should support learning by engaging learners. Assessment has to be fair and inclusive, and must allow learners to show what they have achieved.
- 15 Assessment approaches should be proportionate and fit for purpose: different forms of assessment are appropriate in different areas of learning, and this should be reflected in the assessment approaches for National Courses.
- 16 Assessment for National Courses will be as follows:
- ◆ To achieve the award of a Course at any level, the candidate must provide evidence of achievement of the Units of that Course. Units can be assessed individually. In some subjects, it will be possible to gather evidence of achievement of Units in an integrated way, combining assessments across Units.
 - ◆ The award of a Course at National 2 and 3 and National 4 will require achievement of Units.
 - ◆ The award of a Course at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher will require achievement of Units and an external assessment, which will be graded. The external assessment will confirm attainment in the Course — sampling the skills, knowledge and understanding in the Course Units as well as integration and application of these as appropriate. The external assessment will take a form that is fit for purpose and proportionate. It might involve an examination, performance, project, practical activity or other form of assessment (or combination of two of these) as appropriate to the subject area. 17 Courses at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher will be graded A–D. The grade awarded will be based on the grade achieved in the external assessment.
- 17 Courses at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher will be graded A–D. The grade awarded will be based on the grade achieved in the external assessment.

Award of Course

- 18 For the award of a National Course at National 2, National 3 and National 4, candidates must pass all the Units in the Course. For the award of a Course at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher, candidates must pass all the Units and achieve an overall pass grade in the external assessment.