

## CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT BOARD

### NATIONAL 4 – WAY FORWARD: UPDATE

#### Purpose

1. To provide an update on the outcome of stakeholder discussions on the perceived credibility issues associated with National 4; an overview of recent presentation approaches to National Qualifications; and to outline the next steps to improve the National 4's currency.

#### Background

2. At the Curriculum and Assessment Board's inaugural meeting in December 2017, a proposal<sup>1</sup> 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, specifically amongst employers, colleges and young people. It was agreed that this information be used to undertake a specific communications exercise to improve the perceptions of currency of National 4 among learners, teachers, parents and employers, and within the context of a wider range of pathways available to learners.

#### National 4 evidence gathering

3. Between March and the end of May, the Scottish Government has been working with Young Scot, Colleges Scotland, College Development Network, Scottish Council for Development and Industry, the Confederation of British Industry, the Federation of Small Businesses, Careers Ready and ADES to supplement existing evidence available on perceptions towards the National 4 qualification.
4. To supplement this evidence, SQA has assessed a range of National 4 and National 5 course assessments against the Education Scotland Benchmarks for Literacy and Numeracy. This work has concluded that the SQA course assessments are benchmarked against the appropriate CfE level and that there are no issues in terms of the required literacy and numeracy standards which might impact on the accessibility and subsequent success of learners. No further action is planned by SQA at this point.
5. The feedback from our discussions with young people, employers and colleges has been consistent with the themes emerging from our pre-existing evidence base. Further details can be found at **Annex A** but the themes emerging can be summarised as follows:
  - The extent to which learners, parents and teachers understand that National 4 is a progression route to other vocational pathways, and concerns as to the extent to which National 4 prepares learners for progression to National 5.

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<sup>1</sup> Paper 01(04) of Curriculum and Assessment Board which took place on 6 December 2017.

- The impact of multi-level and multi-course teaching.
- The current perceptions amongst *some* (e.g. teachers and parents) that external assessment is valued more than internal assessment, despite the latter being widely used and accepted in college and university.
- The absence of some type of formal differentiation (not necessarily via an exam) for National 4 learners.
- A perceived inconsistency and variability in learning and teaching experience for learners.
- The differing levels of knowledge, understanding and support to access different learner pathways at a local level.
- The presence of RPA leading National 4 to be perceived as a consolation award.

### **Presentation patterns for 2018 Exam Diet**

6. The interim arrangement<sup>2</sup> for recognising positive achievement (RPA) through 'fallback' to National 4 is inextricably linked with the issues relating to National 4 and its credibility amongst teachers, parents, learners and others.
7. Since late 2017, the Scottish Government, Education Scotland and SQA have been monitoring presentation approaches to National 4 and National 5 qualifications ahead of the 2018 exam diet following the revisions to the National 5 introduced in the 2018 diet.
8. SQA's entry data for the 2018 exam diet suggests progress towards the change in practice encouraged by the ANQ guidance, evidenced via the increase in National 4 entries and corresponding decrease in National 5 entries compared to last year's entry data<sup>3</sup>. However, 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.
9. The data has also identified practice within a small number of individual schools which causes concern, including, for example, instances where significant proportion of the cohort or whole classes appear to have been entered for both units and the course. Moreover, there are significantly more presentations for units at SCQF 5 than anticipated and in a small number of cases schools, or some subjects within schools, have submitted all their unit entries during March. 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. With final decisions on candidate entries bring left so late, questions arise about the teaching and learning experiences for young people. It also raises issues for SQA in that there is insufficient time to allow for quality assurance of these units.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0051/00516166.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> 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).

10. These presentation approaches were discussed at the Scottish Education Council on 2 May, where some members recognised that 12% of dual presentations (for National 5 and units) did not represent 'exceptional circumstances'. Furthermore, there was a view that many more National 5 candidates were still completing the units, regardless of whether they were being presented for them. There was also an acknowledgement that the data raises questions around teachers' confidence in their own judgement, assessment practices, and wider senior phase offering. The meeting concluded that:

- work was needed to build the status of National 4 as a valued component of the wider senior phase pathways;
- there was a need to address current presentation approaches for National 4 and ; and
- a decision was needed on the future availability of RPA.

### **Conclusions and Next Steps**

11. The additional evidence gathered reinforced much of the pre-existing evidence base with the key areas highlighted as:

- The relative 'value' placed on National 4 and National 5
- The lack of or variability of knowledge about National 4, National 5 and SCQF levels across stakeholders
- The quality of learning and teaching experience across National 4 and National 5 varying, with perceptions of more importance being placed on preparing learners for National 5
- The need for greater clarity about wider progression routes from National 4
- Different stakeholder groups raising questions about the perceived need for differentiation at National 4
- Some reservations about how well the current design of N4 and N5 aids bi and tri level teaching
- Parental pressures to present young people for N5 even though this does not seem to be in the best interest of the young person
- Little evidence to support perceptions that employers do not see National 4 as a credible qualification.

12. The additional evidence has again raised questions about the perceived need for differentiation at National 4. However, it is important in considering differentiation that we remember that from historical data less than 25% of young people who achieve National 4 progress to National 5.

13. Differentiation was considered at the CAB inaugural meeting in December where there was no clear consensus on the proposal to introduce differentiation into National 4 and little appetite for further system change. This was reiterated at the May meeting of the Scottish Education Council which agreed the need for more focused efforts across partners to promote the value of National 4 as part of a considered learner pathway through the senior phase. As such, this work needs to be taken forward as part of the broad general education actions arising from

the CABs discussions to-date, and the senior phase aspects of the Learner Journey Review implementation.

14. It is suggested that as a first step we:

- Proceed with the strategic communication plan (**Annex B**) as means to start to address perceptions amongst different stakeholder groups around the credibility of National 4.
- Utilise this evidence and discussions amongst CAB and SEC members to inform Scottish Government policy advice to Ministers on the future of RPA.

### **Discussion**

15. Members are invited to:

- Note the themes emerging from the evidence gathering exercise and the recent approaches to presentation for the national qualifications.
- Note the Scottish Government's intention to present Ministers with advice on the future of RPA.
- Agree and commit to the strategic communication plan at **Annex B**.

## ANNEX A: SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE BASE

A variety of work already exists which provides evidence of opinions on the National 4 qualification. This includes:

- SQA's fieldwork visits to 40 centres, involving separate focus groups with young people, teachers and senior managers (conducted between 2016 and 2017)
- NPFS survey of 70 parents on the value of National 4 which was undertaken as part of the ANQ Group's previous considerations of the qualification (conducted between Nov 2016 and Jan 2017)
- SG-led evidence gathered from ANQ group members (including NPFS, EIS, SLS, ADES, GTCS, academics and others) in 2016.

The feedback from these exercises has been consistent in terms of the views being expressed. A short summary of the themes emerging from the discussions is attached below.

### SQA field work

- Centres continue to use National 4 Added Value unit in very different ways and at different times for candidates.
- A clear majority of teachers and senior managers expressed the opinion that National 4 learners needed an examination at the end of the course. Teachers commented about the need for an exam to motivate learners.
- The majority of S4 learners took a different view, and this view was echoed by many learners in S5 and S6. Learners judged that they were working hard or very hard and were motivated and did not require an external assessment at National 4.
- Both staff and learners felt that National 4 needed differentiation beyond a straightforward pass/fail.
- Some form of grading for National 4 was discussed in various centres and with many of the focus groups. It seemed incongruous to a number of staff that there was no differentiation between learners who put in considerable effort and achieved well and those who made minimum effort.
- It is evident that there is no consensus on the format of National 4 course assessment by stakeholders in the various focus groups included in the fieldwork visits and that further consideration of the purpose and philosophy of National 4 is required. The views on the approach to assessment varied across the country, within local authorities and also within individual centres.

### National Parent Forum Scotland survey

There was a general consensus that the National 4 qualification was perceived as not being valued by employers due to no external assessment. The survey also highlighted concerns that National 4 did not adequately prepare learners for progression to National 5. It was highlighted that National 4 is equivalent to Standard Grade General, but unlike SG General, it does not specify a grade and there was a feeling that this is a negative aspect of National 4.

### Recent Scottish Government led evidence gathering

**Young People** – Scottish Government held two sessions with Communic18 to gather young people's views, as summarised below:

- Learner experience was that there was more focus and value placed in National 5

- Learner experience pointed to the quality of learning and teaching experience being less beneficial in mixed classes, with the focus often being on National 5 learners.
- Progression route to National 5 not valid:
  - Lack of understating that National 4 is a progression route to other National Qualifications and other vocational awards
- Lack of knowledge amongst parents, young people, and employee about National 4.
- College/employers/school linkages not always available in schools, meaning young people don't always have access to the wider learner pathways in the Senior Phase.
- SCQF points for 'vocational' awards and National 4 not seen as valuable to employers/Universities.
- Perceived stigma attached to college and vocational awards
- Mixed views around the current assessment model for National 4 with some learners expressing a desire for some form of differentiation to acknowledge merit ,for example (bands of passes).
- Mixed views on the value of exams as an effective means of measuring a learners ability.

**Colleges** – Scottish Government met with Colleges Scotland and College Development Network, and subsequently agreed to seek their assistance in the distribution of an online survey. The following themes emerged.

- Concerns around the value of the National 4 qualification
- Perception that candidates weren't motivated due to current negative attitudes towards National 4.
- Concerns around the lack of differentiation for learners who were at the higher end of attaining a National 4.
- Almost all responses thought that work had to be done, with some proposing a graded final exam to enhance the credibility.
- The quality of learning and teaching in the Senior Phase of school and employer and parental understanding was also raised.

**Employers** – Scottish Government met with the Scottish Council for Development and Industry (SCDI), the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) and Careers Ready. Surveys were sent to wider employers to gather views; summarised below:

- Employers see National 4 as a credible qualification and value the skills
- Employers recognise qualifications are important. However their focus was more on the 'softer skills' - attitude and aptitude.
- Need for better clarity on where National 4 led to; further learning or work.
- Employers would like more information on the difference between National 4 and National 5 and a better understanding of the grading, structure and competence with those levels.

**Local Authorities** – the Scottish Government worked with ADES to gather LA's views:

- Mixed reaction on whether an exam would be helpful.
- Most schools value National 4 but recognise there is an issue with recognition in the wider community (employers/parents).
- Generally regarded by students as not being worth as much and they think that employers prefer National 5 qualifications

- Some students see it as a positive experience when doing a mixture of National 4 and National 5.
- The lack of an exam and the knock on effect that a number of pupils do not get exam leave alongside their peers can impact on their sense of purpose and self-esteem.
- There is concern that National 4 does not allow for progression through the Senior Phase. Needs to be more articulation between the levels for bi and tri level classes.
- There needs to be more communication from SQA around the SCQF framework for employers.
- Challenge with parents who are keen to insist on presentation of a young person at National 5 level even though this does not seem to be in the best interest of the young person.
- Schools have worked hard to communicate the value of National 4 qualifications to parents and employers but nationally there seems to be a lack of understanding or acceptance.

## ANNEX B: STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS PLAN OVERVIEW

From the evidence gathered (see Annex A), we have identified a series of priorities and goals to address these broader perceptions about National 4. A more detailed plan will be developed to address the specific needs of each stakeholder group.

PRIORITIES	GOALS	TOOLS	ASPIRATIONS/ OUTCOMES
<p><b>STRUCTURE</b></p>	<p>Address concerns about differentiation between learners in the N4 Award (e.g. around capacity for independent learning, attitude, enthusiasm).</p> <p>Address concerns about articulation between some courses and levels.</p> <p>Announcement on future availability of RPA</p>	<p>Continued and improved stakeholder engagement with HTs, practitioners, subject associations, etc.</p> <p>Factsheets / leaflets / social media</p> <p>CPD / training / in-service / webinars / workshops / understanding standards events / internal assessment champions.</p> <p>Work with parents' representatives and employers.</p> <p>Improved school / college / employer engagement and partnerships.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All young people have access to courses and pathways, including National 4, that best meet their needs and aspirations.</li> <li>National 4 is an effective and valued qualification serving learners at school and / or college.</li> <li>Those delivering and planning learning, in schools or colleges, are enabled to provide a consistent learning experience.</li> <li>Stakeholders have access to clear and concise information on senior phase options and pathways.</li> <li>Employers are aware of the skills, knowledge and attributes National 4 candidates acquire.</li> <li>Parents and carers are fully informed of, and about, the range of options available to young people through their senior phase.</li> <li>Young people have valid pathways to and from National 4, within the context of the wider senior phase experience.</li> </ol>
<p><b>DELIVERY</b></p>	<p>Address concerns about inconsistency and variability in learner experiences—specifically around levels of support provided to learners in multi-level teaching scenarios.</p> <p>Enable and emphasise effective presentation decisions at local level.</p> <p>Ensure meaningful pathways for learners progressing to and from National 4 and within the wider holistic context of the senior phase.</p> <p>Ensure effective articulation between courses to support flexibility for learners.</p>	<p><b>PARTNERS</b></p> <p>ADES, CoSLA, Education Scotland, LAs, RICs, SCQF, SDS, SG, SQA</p> <p>HTs, schools, teachers, teacher unions, subject associations</p> <p>NPFS, CONNECT, Parent Councils</p> <p>CBI, FSB, SCDI, Careers Ready, SCQF, DYW leads, local Chambers of Commerce Colleges Scotland, CDN</p> <p>Young people, Young Scot</p>	
<p><b>PERCEPTIONS</b></p>	<p>Promote National 4 as a credible internally assessed qualification.</p> <p>Appropriately challenge misconceptions.</p> <p>Promote understanding of National 4 as a positive learning experience.</p>		