

University of Strathclyde, Faculty of Education response to Scottish Government's consultation on the next generation of national qualifications in Scotland

PROPOSAL 1

National Qualifications at Access, Higher and Advanced Higher will be retained as points of stability. Highers, in particular, will remain the 'gold standard' of the Scottish education system. The content of all National Qualifications will be updated to reflect the values, purposes and principles of *Curriculum for Excellence*. Some aspects of the structure of these qualifications will also be reviewed.

Question 1

Do you welcome the intention to update all qualifications at Access, Higher and Advanced Higher in line with *Curriculum for Excellence*? Please comment on any implications to be considered.

Yes ✓

No

Comment: While specialization and vocation-oriented subject choice should figure post-S3, there should be continuity and consistency in both curriculum and assessment in accord with the accepted principles and purposes of CfE. NQs should be modified to reflect the evolving curriculum and steps taken to ensure that the flexibilities achieved by schools in devising good pre-S3 CfE courses are not constrained.

PROPOSAL 2

A new qualification will replace the present Standard Grade General and Credit levels and Intermediate 1 and 2 (SCQF 4 and SCQF 5) qualifications. The new qualification will be available in a wide range of subjects, as at present. The new qualification will reflect the best features of Standard Grade and Intermediate. Standard Grade Foundation level will be removed and Access 3 will provide certification at SCQF level 3. (See Annex A Table 1 for illustration of new qualifications on SCQF framework.)

Question 2

Early consultation has identified the 'best' features of Standard Grade and Intermediate qualifications as:

- the 'inclusive' approach to certification contained in Standard Grade; and
- the 'unit based' structure of Intermediate qualifications

Are there **any other** features in the present Standard Grade and

Intermediate qualifications which should be included in the new qualification at SCQF levels 4 and 5?

Comment: Those features of particular subjects at Standard Grade which are valued by teachers but do not figure in Intermediate awards (such as the assessment of talking in English) should be retained for the replacement levels. Likewise, the more up-to-date content and methods introduced in many subjects for Intermediates must be retained. A subject-by-subject audit should be effected by subject specialists to achieve this. Consideration should be given to retaining some of the elements of continuous assessment which currently pertain to Standard Grade. That is, final awards should not be determined solely by final examinations (currently 3 hour written papers for most subjects). The fear that the relative immaturity of S3 and S4 pupils weakens the suitability of much Intermediate content has been exaggerated.

Question 3

One of the proposals is to grade units. Do you agree that units should be graded A - C rather than pass/fail?

Yes ✓

No

Explanation: A growing number of schools have introduced 'graded NABs' in addition to the existing, required (minimum competence) NABs and, together with pre-lim examinations, these all overload the upper years with formal assessment. By grading the Unit awards and relying upon teacher professionalism to do this well (with suitable, robust moderation arrangements put in place), this ought to help with the simplification of the system. The use of graded NABs should eliminate the perceived need for pre-lim examinations. However, moderation arrangements for graded NABs would have to go far beyond the simple random sample checks that are currently deployed. That is, rigorous checks would have to be done to ensure that national standards were being employed in schools by teachers.

In saying this, such graded assessments would require to be different in character and standards from those presently used; currently available NABs are not calibrated in relation to the final examinations and many teachers do not value them. This raises the question of the balance between internal assessment and external assessment. A move to grade Unit awards risks the disadvantages associated with early grading; pupils can infer from low grades that they are not capable of making progress. Thus, exactly how teachers can best introduce and use grades constructively, will require exploration and staff development. (See also our remarks under 'Any other comments'). With regard to this, the questions posed in this consultation exercise unhelpfully narrow and constrain the debate about assessment in the upper secondary school.

The grades applied to Unit awards would require to be recognized on a candidate's certificate of attainment in order that the more formative aspects of assessment applied,

particularly for candidates who fell short of the requirements of full course awards in a given year and required further study (in school or in FE) to achieve a course award.

Question 4

Do you want graded units to count towards the final award?

Yes ✓

No

Explanation: Yes, in principle, consistent with the explanation given above, the professionalism of teachers should be acknowledged. The question requires careful consideration to be given to the relative weighting of unit grades and final exam grades. As stated above, the moderation procedures would need to ensure that the criteria used for the unit grades were checked rigorously.

Question 5

Which option for introducing compensatory arrangements would you most support?

Option A - Extend the range of grading in course awards to grade E.

✓ Option B - Recognise unit passes only.

Option C - Compensatory award at the level of the course studied with no grade awarded.

Option D - Compensatory grade C award at the level of course below that studied.

Option E - Compensatory grade A award at the level of course below that studied.

Explanation / other suggestion: The new qualification system needs to be perceptibly simpler and more straightforward in the eyes of users. Consistent with this, complex compensatory awards should be avoided. Pupils should not be embroiled in safety nets and assumptions that value accrues to any performance less than a 'pass'. The system of qualifications should be positively constructed around the forward progress of individuals through the levels at which courses are set. Therefore compensatory arrangements should not be used. The use of graded NABs would require the appeals procedure to be adjusted.

Question 6

The proposed name for the new award is General (SCQF 4) and Advanced

General (SCQF 5). Please indicate if you are content with this suggestion. If not please offer an alternative and explain your choice.

Yes

No ✓

Explanation / other suggestion: The use of 'Advanced' in Advanced General will only confuse users (the general public, employers, HE and FE) because of the existing, accepted use of 'Advanced' in Advanced Higher. Given that the new levels will be replacements for Standard and Intermediate grades, the name for the SCQF 4 level should be General and the name for the SCQF 5 level should be Intermediate. Thus the ladder of names could be five distinct names: Access, General, Intermediate, Higher, Advanced. This choice of terms would draw one name from the 'old' system (General) and one from the 'new' (Intermediate) and should be seen as an advantage. Any anxieties that in the first few years that this might be confusing with existing practice would quickly dispel.

PROPOSAL 3

New awards in literacy and in numeracy will be available at SCQF levels 3 to 5. *Curriculum for Excellence* brings a sustained focus on developing literacy and numeracy skills in our young people. To help strengthen this focus, the Scottish Government is proposing new separate awards to accredit young people's literacy and numeracy skills – the Scottish Certificate for Literacy and the Scottish Certificate for Numeracy. The awards will be available at SCQF levels 3 to 5. The expectation is that all young people will be presented for these awards unless there are exceptional reasons for not doing so. The intention is also to ensure that the structure of these awards is flexible enough to make them available to adult learners.

Question 7

Do you agree with the proposal to offer literacy and numeracy awards at a range of SCQF levels (3 to 5)? If not please offer an alternative.

Yes

No ✓

Explanation / other suggestion: Literacy and numeracy are embedded in the curriculum and they should be embedded in the assessment of the whole curriculum. The raising of literacy and numeracy in the population will not be achieved by the introduction of separate national tests and awards. The focus for that must be on sustained and focused interventions at school and authority level to enable teachers to improve their efforts in these skill areas. This must be done across the curriculum and

attention should be paid to relevant assessment criteria, particularly were Unit awards to be graded. Thinking of the use of English language, for example, revisions may be required in a number of subjects to ensure that 'expression' standards are appropriately demanding amongst the criteria articulated for attainment.

Were separate awards to be made of literacy and numeracy, they would have damaging and retrograde effects upon cross-curricular efforts to tackle them. Furthermore, there would be widespread confusions about the relationship between assessments for them and those for English and Mathematics: pupils, parents, employers and FE/HE would see a duality that was incomprehensible. In principle, steps could be taken to ensure that assessments of literacy and numeracy did not overlap and duplicate aspects assessed in English and Mathematics for all those pupils who take these subjects at the levels in question. Perhaps, again in principle, modifications to existing assessment arrangements in these subjects might be made to enable other dimensions to be more fully assessed. However, considered judgement leads us to the conclusion that the benefits would be far outweighed by the damaging effects upon teaching. Separate awards in literacy and numeracy should not be considered. The focus for developments in numeracy, for example, one which would bring about a more coherent transition between primary and secondary schools, would be for primary teachers to devise and use a portfolio of numeracy and problem solving skills. This should incorporate a pupil's own self assessment and action points for development, thus enabling better progress to be made by secondary teachers in S1 and S2. The key issue is pupils' abilities to apply their knowledge of numerical skill in a variety of contexts, real life situations and across the curriculum. That will not be advanced by externally set, paper-and-pencil tests.

Question 8

National Qualifications at Access 3 (SCQF level 3) do not have an external examination. Do you agree that any new awards in literacy and numeracy at SCQF level 3 should have an external examination?

Yes

No ✓

Explanation: See 7 above. While external examinations can convey worth, they are not the only devices which can do so. What matters is that pupils/students working at this level feel valued and esteemed: their skills require to be improved, not labeled in effect as thus-far-inadequate.

Question 9

Should the weighting between the internal and external assessments for the literary and numeracy awards be equal? If not should more weight be attached to the internal or external assessment? Please explain.

Option A - Equal weight.

Option B - More weight to internal assessment.

Option C - More weight to external assessment.

Explanation: See 7 above.

Question 10

When should young people be assessed for literacy and numeracy awards?

Please select one option.

Option A - At the end of S3 as part of the summer diet of examinations.

Option B - In the December of S4 as part of a winter diet of examinations.

✓ Option C - At the end of S4 as part of the summer diet of examinations.

Explanation: Given our responses to questions 7–9, the assessment of literacy and numeracy should/will be reflected in subject awards at S4+ (SCQF levels 4 and 5).

PROPOSAL 4

Increased flexibility to better meet the needs of young people.

Suggestions include:

- studying National Qualifications over 18 months (or 2 years) as well as one year;
- introducing a winter diet of examinations; and
- encouraging the most able young people to bypass lower level qualifications and to study Highers from S4 onwards.

Question 11

Do you agree with the proposal to allow the study of Highers and Advanced Highers over 12 months, 18 months and 2 years?

Yes ✓ but see below

No

Explanation: The disadvantages of 'the two term dash' for Highers are well recognized and, were we to ignore the effects of universities, there is a strong argument to say that schools should be given the flexibility of choice of arranging longer courses where they can do so. Genuinely two year courses seem desirable. Eighteen month courses would present difficult timetable problems for schools (and their responses to this question will

obviously be more pertinent). The more variation that there is across schools, however, the greater will be the perceptions of unfairness and lack of inclusion within the system as a whole. So, there is a downside to maximizing flexibility (and see the answer to 12 below). However, given the very real downwards pressure from universities upon schools, it would be very likely that these institutions would continue to discriminate, unfairly, between candidates who achieve Highers, depending on whether they were on one or two year courses. If Medical or Law faculties, for example, demand five A Highers at one sitting for entry, then longer school courses would lose status.

Question 12

Do you agree with the proposal to introduce a winter diet of examinations?

Yes

No ✓

Explanation: As in the answer to 11 above, were this to occur, inequalities between schools would be increased (for schools with large numbers of more able pupils would manage to timetable things to suit, whereas schools with smaller numbers of such pupils would not, practical arrangements always being a numbers game). No particular advantage would accrue to HE from winter (middle of the academic year) diets. There might be a little vocational benefit to candidates and to FE. However, these would be far outweighed by the strain upon schools and the teachers who act as markers. Freeing practitioners from their regular duties to form examination teams for an additional diet of SQA duties would be an unrealistic price to pay.

Question 13

If you agree with the proposal to introduce a winter diet of examinations, what subjects and levels of qualifications might first be offered?

Suggestions: see above

Question 14

Would you agree with changes to the system which allowed the most able students to bypass qualifications at lower levels and begin study for Highers from S4 onwards?

Yes ✓

No

Explanation: Again, the differences between schools would be increased, for the 'safety net' argument would be deployed variably. Schools in the most advantaged of

circumstances would be more willing to take the risks of no safety net and reap the benefits of more intensive, focused study for Highers. However, the steady increase in attainments and the increases in proportions of pupils gaining them at the different levels evident in SQA statistics indicate that more and more pupils ought to bypass lower level qualifications. Individual, large secondary schools might choose to encourage some pupils to bypass and insist that others do not. Perhaps the only realistic way forward is to permit/encourage schools to decide for themselves and to let future evidence play its part in encouraging others. The bottom line is that Government should promote deep rather than surface learning in young people and therefore be sensitive to the deleterious impact that much high stakes examining has upon in-school practices.

Question 15

Do you have any other ideas for increasing flexibility within the senior phase (S4 to S6)?

Suggestions: The downside of increasing flexibility in the form of encouragement to schools to diverge significantly from each other is that it tends to work against inclusiveness across the system. On the other hand, flexibility accrues to schemes whereby schools and FE colleges collaborate, sometimes in consortium arrangements, or as in the new Skills for Work courses. That flexibility is to be encouraged.

However, in general, Government should engage employers and universities in a discussion about their attitudes to the academic/vocational challenge and to recognizing wider achievement. Flexibility will be anti-inclusive if certain types of qualifications are valued more than others by the end-users in the system.

TIMELINE

Question 16

It is intended that planning for the new curriculum should commence in 2008/09, with approaches based on the new curriculum introduced from school year 2009/10. This suggests that the new and revised qualifications and any increased flexibilities would be required from 2012/13 onwards to ensure smooth progression between the curriculum and qualifications. Is this indicative timeline realistic? Please comment on any implications to be considered.

Yes

No ✓

Comment: As argued in response to Question 2 above, individual subjects should be given the time necessary to devise what they judge to be suitable compromises in combining the best of their Standard Grade and Intermediate subjects. How realistic the

proposed timescale is therefore rather depends on the variations between subjects. Judging by some of the reactions to early CfE developments within subjects, the timescale is extremely demanding (though from a system perspective it might not seem unreasonable). On balance, we judge the timeline to be unrealistic.

ANY OTHER COMMENTS

Comment

The weakest dimension to the Consultation exercise is the absence of detailed consideration of the relationship between Assessment *is for Learning* (AifL), with all its concomitant benefits and tangible achievements to date in many schools, and the proposals for the new Qualifications framework.

The Consultation documents states that

‘Assessment will be an integral part of learning and teaching... [and that] up to the end of S3, assessment by teachers will be the main means of assessing each young person’s achievements. ... (page 5),

and that

‘... stakeholders commented that assessment must be closely integrated with learning and teaching approaches’ (page 19).

Both of these are properly important statements but, in the absence of any commentary from Government about AifL, one might interpret the first of these paragraphs to imply that AifL will continue to be advocated as applicable up to the end of S3 - it certainly should be, but it is relevant beyond that. However, the tensions between good formative assessment (AifL) and early grading for Qualification purposes are not recognized in the Consultation document. Furthermore, the second quotation is also ambiguous as to whether it is referring to the assessment *of* learning or assessment *for* learning, or *both*. The implications of AifL are that assessment for grading should be delayed as much as possible and this relates to how, in operational terms, teachers and schools should be advised. Government should clarify this matter urgently and provide explicit support for the continuation of AifL.

[A recently published discussion of these issues appears in Chapter 70 (Assessment in Scottish Schools) of *Scottish Education. Third Edition: Beyond Devolution*. Edited by T.G.K. Bryce and W.M. Humes, EUP, 2008, a copy of chapter 70 being appended to this response.]