

## Response from Cumbernauld High School to A Consultation on the Next Generation of National Qualifications in Scotland

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.**

Agree for several reasons.

The current system of levels A-F at 5-14, followed by numbers 1-7 for Standard Grade, then back to A to E, but running in the opposite direction, for national qualifications, has long seemed unnecessarily confusing to everyone.

Curriculum for Excellence, among many other features, includes a change of philosophy in approach, and our exams should reflect this change in particular. On a very practical level, articulation and progression from level to level is at best patchy across subjects, and in some subjects non-existent. A greater consistency would be extremely welcome.

### Implications.

Strong belief this in itself to be a massive task. As stated above, progression just now is poor across a range of subjects, and this needs to be fixed. Given that this has not happened up until now, without the other major changes suggested within this consultation, then it seems reasonable to suggest that this will be a task requiring a considerable amount of time and resources. While timescale is commented on separately elsewhere, it is vitally important that we get this as right as we possibly can, and this seems impossible in the suggested timescale.

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?*

One of the really strong features of Standard Grade has been its capacity to enable students to aspire to a high level, while providing a safety net at the same time, by allowing presentation at two levels, eg Credit and General. This has been in place since the inception of Standard Grade, with no desire ever expressed to remove it. Therefore we are in favour of retaining this feature in the new qualification. It is important to add that whatever option is chosen later regarding a compensatory award does not come anywhere near the same as sitting exams at two levels.

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

**YES**

This is a qualified Yes. Units should be graded, as they will give a far better indication of progress than a basic pass as at present. However, a pass should remain a pass, and no resits should be permitted to improve grades from C to B or B to A. Otherwise, this could lead to pressure for lots of resits every time to allow all pupils to get the best possible grade before moving on to the next unit, leading to assessment becoming the main driver rather than learning and teaching.

In addition, consideration must be given to producing these new internal exams. This will require a lot of time, and will probably fall on teachers to produce these, leading to class teachers being out of school for greater lengths of time, with implications for the quality of learning and teaching.

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

**NO**

If these did count towards the final exam, the issue of resits would be a major consideration, with all pupils (and parents) wanting to upgrade at all possible opportunities. There are also the same implications that occur with all internally assessed exams – unfortunately, some teachers will be pressurised into producing results by teaching to the test to achieve outstanding results, while others will remain ethically and morally correct, possibly disadvantaging their pupils. In addition, these unit tests will inevitably end up in the public domain, or have to be continually updated and rewritten – more teacher time away from teaching. If in the public domain, it would be quite wrong to allow these to count towards a final award.

This proposal would also lead to assessment becoming more important than the actual learning.

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.*

If forced to choose, probably C, but not really in favour of any of these! We would refer back to response to another feature of Standard Grade. The two levels presentation has worked extremely well for the vast majority of pupils over a significant period of time, and it therefore seems ill considered to throw this away and to look for a means of compensation instead, none of which seem satisfactory.

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.*

**NO.**

To use the term General could be confusing given this term already exists. Advanced Higher works but Advanced General is a bit of an oxymoron.

While it may be a bit cold to just use SCQF 4 and SCQF 5, Scottish Level 4 and Scottish Level 5 may be preferable, or Scottish Award 4 and 5, and this could be extended to all other levels, including Higher and Advanced Higher, giving a consistent nomenclature that could stand the test of future changes. It has the further benefit of being already understood by other educational establishments, and may prove much easier to explain to employers.

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.*

Difficult to give a yes or no answer to a wide reaching proposal with very little detail.

There does seem merit in wanting to recognise the importance of the areas of Numeracy and Literacy. Whether or not some formal award will achieve this completely or in part is worthy of considerable debate, with perhaps other possibilities being considered. The phrasing of this question is particularly interesting, as it seems to imply that if you do not like what is on offer, give an alternative. Given the lack of detail of the proposal, and the fact that it is a completely new step, it seems very reasonable to not agree with the proposal while perfectly reasonable to not have an alternative.

It does seem to be a bit late to finally formally assess children in Numeracy and Literacy after at least ten years of education. Perhaps another marker, possibly at the end of the primary stage, would be worth considering. This would allow pupils demonstrating real ability in Numeracy or Literacy to be more fully extended in S1 to S3, while also giving a clear indication of those children who will need additional support. At the same time, we would want to avoid any possibility of the premature labelling of children, as can happen in the current system.

Beyond this, it is difficult to make considered comments – far greater detail is required.

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?*

**NO.**

No external exam at Access 3 has proved to be successful for those pupils following these courses. While internal assessment alone is always open to compromise and interpretation, it would be preferred at this level.

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.*

Large variety of opinions expressed here, but more towards equal weight or more weight to external assessment. Concerns probably contribute to favouring option C, these concerns being the validity of internal assessment, leading to possible variation from school to school, and the amount of time internal assessment – preparation and actual assessing – would take away from learning and teaching.

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.

### **Option A**

This was pretty much a unanimous view across the school.

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

**NO.**

While the possibility of greater flexibility is welcomed, the practical and logistic implications of this proposal far outweigh any possible gains in flexibility.

Constructing appropriate sections in S4/S5/S6 could prove impossible with the fragmentation of pupils into different courses and timelines. To highlight this, just two years in to such a set up, it would be possible to have, in any one subject, pupils:

- 1 Starting a one year Higher for the first time
- 2 Starting an 18 month Higher for the first time
- 3 Starting a 2 year Higher for the first time
- 4 All of the above, but choosing to go straight for Higher, missing out on the new Advanced General
- 5 Starting the second year of a two year Higher
- 6 Starting the next 12 months of an 18 month Higher
- 7 Starting the next six months of an 18 month Higher
- 8 As in number 4

With a winter diet of exams, which has to go along with this proposal, this could happen twice a year, at August and, presumably, January. (There is a flaw in suggesting that these courses will last 12, 18 or 24 months – in reality, these timescales do not exist in a school year.) Even where a large number of pupils choose a subject, this could prove very difficult to cope with. For subjects attracting fewer pupils, it would be impossible.

It is worth adding that while we currently have multi-level teaching in S5/S6 in a range of subjects, there should be no doubt that teachers would not choose to do this in preference to teaching one level at a time. The example given above, it should be noted, does not include multi-level; it merely includes pupils all at the same level, but at different points in the same level. Other levels may have exactly the same set up.

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

**NO.**

Largely for the reasons highlighted above, as these two proposals have to sit together. One further practical point, however. What happens to a pupil who sits all highers over 18 months, passes these exams in December/January, and intends starting university in September/October?

Further major practical difficulties in marking exams in December/January – we do not have the same time as we do in summer; who is going to mark these exams; will we need another set of prelims; will more staff need released for SQA duties/meetings than at present?

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

While we very strongly disagree with this proposal, if it does happen, it seems sensible to start with a subject or subjects which has the most candidates, and also to use a level that already exists, eg Higher, to minimise the number of new variables.

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?*

**NO**

Very large majority against this, with the phrase “safety net” often used. By-passing the lower level straight to Higher and then not succeeding – what happens then? Given the clear suggestion that pupils should not be examined until the end of S4, missing out and going straight on to Higher level would mean very little opportunity for exam experience to be built up. There will be rare occasions where this may be the best approach, but this can already happen anyway. It does not seem to be worth having a question devoted to this relatively small point compared to many of the major issues raised elsewhere.

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

It would be good to see further development of appropriate courses for those pupils who may not be aiming at a range of highers or university. There has always been a strong feeling that our education system is driven by catering for the needs of this relatively small cohort, and the proposals contained in this paper do not really do anything to change that. This perhaps could be achieved by exploring stronger partnerships with colleges and employers, and taking a longer look at the attempts already made at introducing vocational education into schools, and seeing how we could develop these across the country. A real push in this area could only improve links between schools, colleges and employers, and this could only produce real benefits for all concerned. Some years down the line this could lead to a very different, and much more beneficial, senior phase of education for a large number of pupils.

Some staff suggested looking at different configurations of the school day to see if this may provide greater flexibility.

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.*

**NO.**

Universally regarded as an over ambitious timescale. Previous major curricular changes have required longer and have not stayed on schedule. For such a major change at all levels, far more time is needed for structured, high quality planning and rigorous quality assurance. At a very practical level, there will be a need for new resources, new materials across a range of courses and year groups. This will require a great deal of development time for teachers. It is very important that pupils are not regarded as an experiment in any way, and that appropriate courses and resources are in place before such significant changes are actually made. It would be fair to say that almost all staff in this establishment already work far beyond their contracted hours, and largely do so willingly and in the best interests of their pupils. This is done to maintain a high quality service. Adding in such far reaching changes, with possibly brand new courses in all years, further work required to create appropriate interdisciplinary materials, getting familiar with new exams and so on, makes it clear there is a real need to have another look at the proposed timescales. This is further emphasised by the reality that finalised outcomes are still not available to teaching staff, and may not be until the end of February. To suggest that staff can then prepare senior pupils for their national exams while at the same time become familiar with these new outcomes and produce new courses from these, remembering that none of this would be included in school or department improvement plans is completely unrealistic.

It would also seem sensible to have much firmer ideas about what outcomes will be like for the senior phase to allow proper, considered and smooth progression from S1-S3 to S4-S6.

*Any Other Comments*

No mention anywhere about resources for these changes. Time has already been covered in previous answer, but there is no consideration given to additional staffing or any additional funding.



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AS/HB

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Dear Sir/Madam

***Response to Next Generation of National Qualifications Consultant Exercise***

I have enclosed a copy of the College response to the above exercise.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you wish to discuss the contents of this response further.

Yours faithfully

**Alan Sherry**  
**Assistant Principal**

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