

CURRICULUM FOR EXCELLENCE
MANAGEMENT BOARD

REPORT OF THE WORKING GROUP ON THE FIRST YEAR OF THE NEW NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS



ABOUT THE GROUP

Following a request from Michael Russell, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) Management Board established a short-life working group to reflect on the experiences of the first session of the new CfE qualifications. It was tasked with considering and developing high-level messages and suggesting actions to benefit all parts of the education system as we move into the second year of the new qualifications.

The working group was chaired by Kenneth Muir, Chief Executive of the General Teaching Council for Scotland, with representatives from several Management Board organisations. The group gathered evidence and feedback from their respective constituents, and feedback was also sought from other national bodies and professional associations.

CURRICULUM FOR EXCELLENCE AND THE NEW QUALIFICATIONS

The working group considered the experience of implementing the new qualifications in 2013-14 in the context of the long-term ambitions for CfE. CfE aims to achieve a transformation in education by providing a coherent, more flexible and enriched curriculum, assessment and qualifications system from 3 to 18. The introduction of new qualifications within the context of the Senior Phase is part of this, with the aim of reflecting the new style of learning, which places an emphasis on skills and knowledge and tests the understanding and application of knowledge as well as facts.

On 5 August, more than 146,000 learners across Scotland received their results from the SQA. These confirmed that Scotland's education

system has once again performed well. It is clear that the new National Qualifications have been successfully introduced, with 173,131 passes at National 5 (81.1%) and 114,173 passes at National 4 (93%), and learners and their teachers deserve praise for a strong set of results.

Teachers, schools, colleges and national agencies have taken on the task of introducing a new qualifications system at a time when a wider range of significant developments is also taking place across secondary education. All involved have worked very hard to make the introduction of the new qualifications as smooth as possible for Scotland's learners and to ensure they have a good opportunity to attain the new qualifications.

Reflections on the past year

Any successful system needs to learn and adapt as it moves forward, and to respond to change and feedback. The group discussed a wide range of experiences of the first year and, in line with its remit, sought to distil a set of key messages which would be useful to the system in moving forward.

The group heard of examples of good practice in assessment approaches, putting the learner at the centre, which have been developed in schools across Scotland. However, it is clear that in the past year there has been a significant and unsustainable level of over-assessment in many parts of the system. This increase in assessment was not intended, and requires to be addressed at both national and local level. This report therefore recommends actions for all partners to take forward to secure further improvement.

Based on their experiences, and feedback from other stakeholders, the group identified a number of contributory factors to the level of over-assessment. The very newness of the qualifications meant that all parts of the system were introducing new procedures and approaches. The level and operation of the verification procedures, intended to provide assurance that standards were being understood and applied appropriately, proved challenging for many in practice – although many also found the feedback from verification to be very helpful. Some teachers reported finding some of the materials difficult to access or not as useful as they had anticipated, while others welcomed the additional resources provided during the year.

These factors, combined with a genuine commitment on the part of all concerned to ensure no learner was disadvantaged, led in general to a higher level of assessment than was necessary or desirable.

Moving forward

The group was reassured to hear of work already in place to address some of these issues (Annex A). The report sets out the group's recommendations for further action for 2014-15 and beyond.

The Management Board asks the CfE Implementation Group to give effect to these recommendations, through an update to the CfE Implementation Plan. Local plans (including school improvement plans) should also be reviewed in the light of these recommendations. The Management Board also calls on all partners to continue to implement the recommendations of the Working Group on Tackling Bureaucracy, which address related issues.

The Management Board (including the Scottish Government) will maintain a close focus on the implementation of these recommendations, and on levels of assessment and associated workload.

ACTIONS REQUIRED FOR 2014/15

All involved in delivering CfE and the new Nationals should:

- ensure that the original aspirations of CfE and its distinctive features are realised in practice – in particular, the continuum of learning 3-18; the use of profiling; and the principle of the Senior Phase as a three-year programme
- enable and resource teachers to plan approaches to learning and teaching and assessment to ensure more streamlined approaches to assessment as a more natural part of the learning
- ensure the actions set out in this report are clearly communicated to teachers and parents.

Local authorities should:

- set out how they plan to support schools in making available appropriate time to address the issues set out in this report
- support schools and staff in developing effective assessment approaches and ensure these are reflected in, and supported by, school improvement plans and working time agreements
- facilitate better local and national sharing of resources, including approaches to assessment items, and good practice in planning of approaches to assessment and learning, to reduce workload for schools and improve learning and assessment experience for learners
- explore how subject network groups, SQA Nominees and staff involved in SQA procedures such as setting, marking and verifying, might lead local training in understanding standards
- review their approach to presenting N5 candidates for the National 4 added value unit, to prevent over-assessment
- support schools to further engage with parents and carers, including encouraging greater consultation and sharing of information on key decisions
- create further opportunities for appropriate CPD for supply teachers around the new qualifications.

SQA should:

- with Education Scotland, support local authorities and schools to develop effective assessment practice
- provide exemplification and further advice on how to build robust assessment evidence in all subject areas that meets national standards
- produce clear exemplification and good practice in the use of combined/holistic/continuous assessment to help reduce assessment demands on teachers and pupils and enhance the learning and assessment experience
- provide clear signalling to teachers of existing key documents and resources, together with clearer indications of latest versions and when and why critical changes are being made
- review its website to ensure users are clearly directed to the most up-to-date materials
- discuss with CfE Management Board how additional specimen papers and questions in each subject (with marking schemes) for Higher and Advanced Higher might be provided, to illustrate what is required across the full range of course options
- with Education Scotland, start to exemplify how prior attainment to end of S3 might be acknowledged, while still delivering a broad general education
- produce information for parents to explain the differences between the new and old Highers.

Schools and teachers should:

- consider how to make available appropriate time to address the issues set out in this report
- ensure that school improvement plans and working time agreements reflect and support effective assessment practice
- help parents and other stakeholders understand and appreciate the benefits of CfE, including the new qualifications, their assessment arrangements and the rationale for change
- encourage better sharing of good practice in assessment approaches, within and across departments, to reduce workload and to enhance learning
- continue to develop their overall approach to learning, teaching and assessment at school level, based on national advice. This could, for example, include preparing strategic assessment calendars to help even out the spread of assessment demands on pupils and teachers and reduce assessment “hot spots”
- collect appropriate and proportionate assessment evidence, to minimise pressures on candidates and ensure a good learning and assessment experience
- review local delivery and assessment approaches in light of how effective they have been
- provide support for learners to help them cope with change and avoid unnecessary stress.
- ensure that equal support and attention is given to learners at whatever level of qualification they are following, to ensure they can reach their maximum potential
- discuss this report with their Parent Council and consider how key messages can be shared with the wider Parent Forum.

Scottish Government and Education Scotland should:

- with SQA, support local authorities and schools to continue to develop effective assessment practice
- working with SQA and local authorities, use inspection teams to collate and publish examples of good practice in managing assessment for the new Nationals
- building on the Key Curriculum Support area of the Education Scotland website and to facilitate departmental/faculty planning, continue to publicise all stakeholder resources available to teachers and provide early details of the planned publication of resources
- continue to provide support and resources for schools and local authorities to support better parental engagement and understanding of Broad General Education (BGE), and how it supports a smooth transition to the Senior Phase
- working with SQA, start to exemplify how prior attainment to end of S3 can be acknowledged, while still delivering a broad general education
- review National 4 and 5 course materials already published, and make improvements where appropriate
- ensure the Curriculum Learning Teaching and Assessment (CLTA) National Forums consider any actions in this report which are relevant to their role.

NPFS should:

- support partners and teachers to understand and take account of parents' perspectives and concerns
- work with national bodies to help them develop material and information to support better understanding amongst learners and parents of the benefits of the new qualifications and the different assessment arrangements
- provide Parent Councils with information to help them engage with and support the headteacher and school management team.

LONGER TERM ACTIONS REQUIRED

All involved in delivering CfE and the new National Qualifications should:

- ensure that the original aspirations of CfE and its distinctive features are realised in practice – in particular, the continuum of learning 3-18; the use of profiling; and the principle of the Senior Phase as a three-year programme
- use all possible means to continue to increase the understanding of, and confidence in, the new Nationals in the context of CfE among users and stakeholders
- promote an increased use of “by-passing” Nationals 4 and 5 where it is clearly appropriate and of benefit to learners.

Local authorities should:

- consider how to establish “lead subject specialists” who can act as a local point of contact and expertise for other teachers, linking with the senior education officer for each subject area within Education Scotland
- ensure that their schools are developing curriculum models which provide sufficient flexibility and variation for all learners and ensure that full entitlement to a broad general education is being achieved.

SQA should:

- provide further exemplification of assessment items that can be used to support re-assessment
- review the demands of assessment on pupils in each subject
- review the administrative requirements on teachers and centres with a view to reducing any unnecessary paperwork and bureaucracy
- review the requirements for passing internal assessments with a view to streamlining the demands of reassessment where that is appropriate
- review and clarify the relationship between unit and course assessment to remove any unnecessary overlap
- through the CfE Management Board, consider extending the current scale for Grade D for Highers and other relevant qualifications
- through the CfE Management Board, consider the approach to course assessment at National 4 level.

Schools and teachers should:

- consider how they can encourage more flexible/mixed pathways through the Senior Phase which see a young person’s progression through the Senior Phase in its entirety, rather than just a year-on-year approach
- create an environment where parents, learners and teachers work in real partnership and in particular ensure that parents are properly involved in a timely fashion in decisions around the level of qualification for which their children are being presented
- consider what further support should be available for young people
- consult parents and learners on their arrangements for study leave and prelims.

Scottish Government and Education Scotland should:

- through the 3-18 CLTA National Forums being established, consider emerging subject-specific issues, and flag to SQA those that may require further consideration
- ensure that ES guidance, briefings and inspections highlight the importance of effective engagement with parents.

NPFS should:

- continue to explain and promote the value of Nationals 1-4 with parents
- continue to support national bodies and schools to explain the value of Nationals 1-4 and the full range of Qualifications and Awards to parents
- continue to monitor parental experience of the new qualifications and assessment experiences
- support parents with information which helps them engage with their child’s school to understand the arrangements that are being put in place.

What is already being done?

The group recognised that a number of activities are already underway:

- a number of establishments and local authorities acknowledge that they have learned much from the first year of introducing the new Nationals. Schools which had the greatest success in managing assessment were those who had the capacity to enable professional dialogue, and where a strategic, whole-school approach was adopted. Many have put in place, or plan to put in place, changes to the delivery of units and courses, including approaches to assessment, to make 2014/2015 a significantly more manageable year for staff and pupils – for example, using combined and portfolio approaches to assessment
- enhanced collaboration between national and local partners
- the National Parent Forum of Scotland has produced materials for parents as part of their “Nutshell” series to help parents understand different assessment approaches and methods, including information by subject for Nationals 4 and 5 and Higher
- on 21 February, the Scottish Government put in place £5 million of additional funding and a further in-service day for secondary teachers in 2014-15.

Actions already taken or planned by SQA on assessment and quality assurance

In line with its ongoing review of the implementation of the new Nationals, and in response to representations made to it, SQA has announced changes to its assessment and quality assurance arrangements based on the experience of the first year of the new Nationals. These are designed to reduce the demands on pupils, teachers and centres, strengthen teachers’ understanding and application of national standards and ensure the ongoing credibility of the new Nationals.

- SQA will use the intelligence gathered from ‘year one’ verification to take a more targeted, risk-based approach to verification, whilst still ensuring that national standards are being applied locally
- there will be a reduction in the number of rounds of verification from three to two, with the first round being replaced with CPD on understanding standards for National 3 to Higher
- centres will normally only be selected for verification of a unit or course assessment in a subject – not both in the same session
- subjects currently split across two qualification groups will be placed into a single qualification group, and will therefore be subject to selection for verification only once in any year
- there will be more visiting verification to centres where the need for enhanced support is identified.
- amendments to some unit assessment support packs and course arrangements for 2014/15 will be made to clarify anomalies and reduce the volume of assessment
- SQA is planning a comprehensive three-year Understanding Standards Programme for National 1 to Advanced Higher. This programme will cover unit and course assessment, using exemplars of candidate work with expert commentaries
- further information about SQA’s changes for each subject are available at:
www.sqa.org.uk/cfesubjectchanges

Actions already taken or planned by Education Scotland

Education Scotland is:

- undertaking a review of its online service to enable teachers to access the information they need as quickly as possible. A new 'key curriculum support' website has been launched, and is available at:
www.educationscotland.gov.uk/keycfesupport/index.asp
- working with partners to provide 'route maps through learning, teaching and assessment' for National 4, National 5 and Higher courses. These short files outline a sequential list of the key documents that teachers need to consult when assessing young people
- publishing National 3 course materials in time for the start of session 2014/2015, and working with partners to publish National 1 and National 2 course materials by January 2015
- increasing guidance and exemplification on assessing progress and achievement (both generic and for individual curriculum areas) and developing exemplification to demonstrate learners' achievement at each level
- publishing 'toolkits' to support evaluation and improvement of primary and secondary schools' curriculums, focussing on the BGE. The toolkits will include advice on monitoring and tracking progress (secondary toolkit was published in June 2014 and primary in September 2014)
- continuing to develop course materials, in conjunction with the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES)
- Education Scotland will increasingly share good practice as identified through inspection. The inspection advice note for 2014/15 highlights the need to develop an overall approach to assessment at school level, and the need to continue to tackle unnecessary bureaucracy.

Actions already taken by the National Parent Forum of Scotland

NPFS has produced the following resources in partnership with Scottish Government, Education Scotland and SQA to help parents and learners understand the assessment requirements in the new Qualifications:

- explaining the differences between Unit Assessment, Added Value Unit Assessment and Course Assessment within the National 1-5 Qualifications
- 'Subject by Subject' Guides for Nationals 4 and 5 explaining the skills being assessed in each course
- essential Information for parents and learners in 'Pointers for Parents' signposting to revision resources and support for assessment and examination preparation
- information on progression routes through the national qualifications
- 'Highers in a Nutshell' for the 30 most popular Higher subjects will be shared with parents and schools when they go back to school in August which set out the Unit and Course assessment requirements. Assessment in a Nutshell and Pointers for Revision will be updated to include Higher information.