

Bulletin number 23

Engaging with Candidates

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The publication of Research Bulletins allows us to disseminate the results of our research activity to practitioners, policy makers, parents, academics and anyone else who has an interest in the key role that qualifications play in economic growth and social inclusion in Scotland.

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Introduction

This Bulletin presents the results of SQAs' Candidate Engagement Survey, which was carried out over the summer of 2006. For the first time, the results of this work provide SQA with detailed information on candidates' views on the qualifications that they are undertaking.

The objectives of the survey were to establish exactly what candidates felt about the qualifications. SQA consults with a wide range of bodies on different issues, including with groups representing candidates, but very little work has been done on ascertaining the views of the broad mass of SQA candidates.

The survey will be repeated every two years, which will allow us to track changes in candidates' views over time. This will be particularly useful when changes to qualifications are made, such as those likely to emerge from *A Curriculum for Excellence*.

The survey itself is split into two sections. The first section, which is common to all candidates, is a range of general questions, covering issues such as motivations, satisfaction, use of technology, and attitudes to assessment. The second section is specific to the qualification type that a candidate is taking — candidates doing different qualifications would be asked different questions. Additionally, we took the opportunity to repeat a piece of work carried out in 2000, seeking NQ candidates' views on Unit assessment. There are full details of all the questions asked in the Appendix.

Note that SQA colleagues in relevant Business Areas were consulted on drawing up the questionnaire, and had the opportunity to suggest questions they would like asked, and to amend or remove the initially suggested questions. We then carried out trials of the questionnaire with candidates in each of the sample groups outlined below, to ensure that the questionnaire was meaningful and comprehensive, while remaining easily understood.

The sample for the candidate engagement survey is split into four groups. These are:

- ◆ SVQ candidates
- ◆ HNC/D candidates
- ◆ S4 NQ/Standard Grade Candidates
- ◆ S5/S6/FE NQ/Standard Grade Candidates

A sample of 1,520 candidates was drawn for each of the four groups, meaning that just over 6,000 questionnaires were sent out. Anticipating a response rate of 15–20%, this meant that the margins of error for each group of candidates would be no greater than +/- 6.5% (for a 15% response rate). Where a higher response rate is achieved, the margins of error will be smaller.

In each case, the response achieved was significantly higher than the 15% anticipated, indicating that candidates most probably welcomed the opportunity to

give their views on SQA and their qualifications. The exact response rates are shown in the table below.

Response Rate by Qualification Type, Candidate Engagement Survey			
Qualification Type	Number of Responses	Percentage Response	Margin of Error
SVQ	281	18.5%	+/- 5.8%
HNC/HND	295	19.5%	+/- 5.7%
S4 NQ/SG	458	30.1%	+/- 4.6%
S5-6/FE NQ/SG	380	25.0%	+/- 5.0%

For the common questions, it would be possible to put together weighted results which give an accurate picture of what candidates as a whole think. In many cases, there is little value in doing so, as the points of interest are generally in the divergences between different groups of candidates. However, in cases where the overall view of the whole candidate population was important, the margins of error would be smaller than any of those in the table above, due to the large number of candidates who responded.

Results

The main body of this Bulletin will be a discussion of the results of the survey. This will be split into the following sections.

- i. Common questions
- ii. HNC/D & SVQ questions
- iii. NQ/SG questions
- iv. Questions on Units in NQs

For each section, the key findings are summarised as briefly as possible, before additional detail and discussion of the results are provided.

Key findings

Common Questions

- ◆ Main motivating factors for NQ candidates are access to HE and further study. These are less of an issue for HNC/D candidates, and minimal factors for SVQ candidates.
- ◆ Many SVQ candidates are required to undertake their qualification for their employment.
- ◆ All groups stated that improving their employment prospects, personal development and interest were important motivating factors.
- ◆ Almost all candidates felt their qualifications would help them achieve their goals. Most also felt that they would get the skills and knowledge they would need, and would be able to play a significant part in society.

- ◆ Most NQ candidates and a significant proportion of SVQ and HNC/D candidates will go on to do other SQA qualifications in the future.
- ◆ In general candidates do not believe assessment is an excessive burden, although there are more concerns amongst NQ candidates than others.
- ◆ The amount of work in qualifications is about right.
- ◆ Some candidates are sceptical of increased use of technology in assessment and learning, but a majority are supportive of such a change.
- ◆ Most candidates enjoyed and were satisfied with their qualifications.

HNC/D & SVQ Questions

- ◆ SVQ and HNC/D candidates believe that their qualifications are well respected by employers.
- ◆ Both candidate groups felt that their qualifications prepared them well for work.
- ◆ Both candidate groups supported the unit structure, although some HNC/D candidates felt that they did not have enough flexibility to choose areas that interested them.
- ◆ Both groups felt it was important that candidates who could not complete the course got credit for the areas they were able to do.
- ◆ A small majority of candidates in both groups supported the introduction of grades in their qualification.
- ◆ Most HNC/D candidates intend to go on to further study, and the majority of those who intend to go on to degrees will receive credit for their HNC or HND.

NQ/SG Questions

- ◆ NQ candidates find exams to be stressful.
- ◆ Candidates are not necessarily convinced that exams are a fair way of measuring students' ability.
- ◆ A significant proportion of candidates, although not a clear majority, think that the time spent preparing for exams could be better spent on learning.
- ◆ In general, candidates felt that the system allowed them a wide degree of choice. They did not find that the system, and the choices that they were required to make within the system constrained them in what they wanted to do in later life.
- ◆ Candidates were split on whether S3 pupils should be doing Standard Grades, although a majority thought that S4 was the best time to begin SQA qualifications.

Questions on Unit assessment in NQs

- ◆ Candidates welcomed many of the key features of the Unit assessment system, including re-assessments, and assessments as a motivating factor, and as helping them to understand the course as a whole.
- ◆ Candidates felt they were asked to sit too many assessments at the same time.
- ◆ Most candidates are not having to do many re-assessments, although some feel that they have to sit the assessments before they are ready.

- ◆ There were no significant changes in candidates' views on these questions since 2000.
- ◆ FE candidates appear to be more supportive of Unit assessment than school candidates.

Detailed Reporting

Common Questions

The first question we asked all candidates was to do with their motivations for choosing the qualifications that they are doing. Candidates were asked to choose as many of the motivating factors as they felt appropriate:

Motivating Factors for Candidates, By Qualification Blocks				
	HNC/D	SVQ	Other NQ	S4 Candidates
Because I need them to go on to Higher Education	22.7%	3.9%	57.6%	62.9%
Because I need them to go on to further study	21.6%	5.7%	36.6%	34.9%
Because they will give me improved employment opportunities	68.7%	62.7%	59.7%	66.0%
Because they are a legal requirement for the job I am doing or want to do	13.4%	54.8%	14.9%	26.1%
Because they will help me get promoted	12.0%	17.9%	4.2%	6.1%
To develop as a person	45.7%	46.6%	29.2%	26.5%
Because I am interested	53.6%	43.7%	51.5%	43.0%
Other (please specify)	7.2%	6.5%	4.2%	4.2%

As can be seen from the table, the reasons behind people's qualifications choices vary. Many more NQ candidates see going on to higher education or further study as being a motivating factor, compared to HNC/D candidates or SVQ candidates. More HNC/D candidates than SVQ candidates plan to use their qualifications for further study. In all four groups, the most frequently cited motivating factor was that the qualifications will provide the candidate with improved employment opportunities. This can be seen by SQA as a vote of confidence in our qualifications, as it suggests candidates feel that obtaining all types of qualifications will help them in employment.

It is also significant to note that a large proportion of candidates cited personal development or interest as reasons for doing their qualifications. Significantly more HN and SVQ candidates than NQ candidates said that one of the reasons they were doing their qualifications was to develop as a person. Interestingly, however, the numbers stating that they were interested in their qualifications were similar across qualification blocks.

A large proportion of SVQ candidates said that they were doing their qualification because it is a legal requirement for a job they are either doing or wanting to do.

This suggests that such requirements may be a significant driver in the SVQ market, and that SQA may wish to actively monitor what qualifications are required for people to be able to work in different jobs.

When we break down the results within qualification blocks, there are generally few significant differences in results. Because the numbers of candidates in each of these groups are smaller, greater care has to be taken in interpreting these results as margins of error are correspondingly larger. Amongst those results which may be of interest were:

- ◆ HND candidates are more likely to cite going on to higher education and/or further study than their HNC counterparts (27% and 26% as opposed to 20% and 19%).
- ◆ Advanced Higher candidates are particularly interested in their qualifications (70% cited this as a factor), but fewer cited improving their employment opportunities than for other qualifications (47% as opposed to 60% in the non-S4 NQ group as a whole).
- ◆ There were no differences of note in motivating factors for different SVQ levels.

χ -squared testing was then carried out on the results and this revealed, unsurprisingly, that there were statistically significant differences in the motivating factors of the different sample groups. Similar testing was then carried out on each individual suggested motivating factor. In each case the test considered whether the actual distribution of responses was statistically significantly different (at the 5% level) from an even distribution across the sample groups.

When this was carried out, we found that there were significant differences between the actual distribution, and an even distribution for each of the following factors:

- ◆ Because I need them to go on to higher education.
- ◆ Because I need them to go on to further study.
- ◆ Because they are a legal requirement for the job I am doing or want to do.
- ◆ Because they will help me get promoted.
- ◆ To develop as a person.

This means that there are significant differences in the proportions of candidates from each sample group citing each of the above motivating factors. For the other three factors (improved employment opportunities, interest, and other factors) there was not a significant difference between the actual distribution and an even distribution.

Candidates were then asked if they felt the qualifications they were doing would be useful to them in achieving their goals. The results were:

Do you believe that the qualifications you are currently taking will prove useful to you in achieving your goals?				
	Very Useful	Useful	Not Very Useful	Of Little Use
HNC/HND Candidates	61%	36.6%	1.4%	1%
SVQ Candidates	60.4%	36.8%	2.9%	0%
Other NQ/SG Candidates	49.9%	48.8%	0.5%	0.8%
S4 Candidates	43.3%	54.1%	2%	0.7%

In all cases, at least 97% of candidates thought that their qualifications would be useful or very useful in achieving their goals. Over 60% of HNC/D and SVQ candidates felt that their qualifications would prove very useful in achieving their goals, compared to 50% of other NQ candidates and 43% of S4 candidates. This difference may be a result of HN and SVQ candidates making more active choices to undertake their courses, and having to make greater personal sacrifices to achieve their qualifications, in terms of time and reduced earnings.

The next two questions asked candidates whether they felt that their qualifications would give them the skills and knowledge required, and how well their qualifications would enable them to play an active part in society (including in work). The results of these questions are presented in the table below. To make analysis easier, 4 points have been awarded for each candidate who chose the most positive choice (Very Much So/Very Well), with 3 points for each who chose the next most positive, down to 1 for each who chose the least positive (Not Much/Not Well at All). The total score is then divided by the number of respondents, to give an average score per respondent, which is shown in the table. If candidates gave an even range of answers, this would lead to a score of 2.5, while if all chose the most positive option, the score would be 4. Statistical testing suggests that any score in excess of 2.7 or below 2.3 is unlikely to be a random result, and indicates that it is an accurate reflection of whether candidates' opinions were generally positive or negative on a particular question.

(i) Do you think that the qualifications that you are doing will give you the skills and knowledge you will need, and (ii) How well do the qualifications prepare you for playing an active part in society (including in work)? (Average Score, by Qualification Block)				
	HNC/HND	SVQ	Other NQ	S4
(i) Skills and Knowledge	3.45	3.45	3.25	3.33
(ii) Active Part in Society	3.25	3.25	3.00	3.06

As can be seen, the results of both these questions were positive across all four groups of respondents. For each qualification type, the average score was higher for the question on skills and knowledge was higher than for playing an active part in society. The scores for both HNC/D and SVQ candidates were somewhat higher than for both groups of NQ candidates, which may reflect the fact that many NQ candidates will go on to further qualifications, while Higher National and Scottish Vocational Qualifications are, more frequently, the final qualification a candidate will undertake.

Candidates were then asked what SQA qualifications they intended to do in the future.

The table below shows the percentage of those who responded to these questions who intended to do each qualification.

Percentage of respondents indicating an intention to do each qualification type, by respondent types			
	SVQ	HNC/D	NQs
HNC/HND Candidates	11%	39%	5%
SVQ Candidates	48%	34%	9%
Other NQ/SG Candidates	21%	55%	47%
S4 Candidates	32%	57%	88%

While these figures must be treated with caution, as candidates may currently intend to do further qualifications, and subsequently change their plans, and that not all candidates will have a full understanding of all qualification types, the figures indicate that many candidates intend to go on to further study, frequently undertaking further SQA qualifications. The figures for the two NQ groups of candidates are higher because these groups are largely younger, and may have one or more years of school to go, and will have further plans after they leave school. It is interesting to note the relatively high percentages of HN and SVQ candidates (39% and 48% respectively) who intend to go on to do additional qualifications in the same qualifications families.

Candidates were also asked how well any additional support needs they may have were met in their qualification. It should be noted that the responses for this question may not be very reliable as there were relatively small numbers of candidates with additional support needs, and it is difficult for candidates to distinguish between SQA's handling of their additional support needs, and their centre's handling of those needs.

Between 26% and 31% of each of the groups reported having some form of additional support needs, with the exception of the non-S4 NQ candidate group, where 19% reported having additional support needs. In each case, those who said that their needs were met well or very well outnumbered those who said their needs were not met very well or not well at all by at least 3–1. In the S4 candidate group, those who said their needs were met well or very well constituted 91% of those who responded. This compared to 90%, 82% and 75% of those who responded substantively to this question in the SVQ, other NQ and HNC/D candidate groups respectively.

All candidates were then given a number of statements on assessment, which they could agree strongly, agree, disagree or disagree strongly with. Again, for ease of analysis, an average score is calculated for each candidate group for each statement, with 4 points being awarded for each candidate who strongly agrees, down to 1 for each candidate who strongly disagrees. The total score is then divided by the number of respondents to give an average score. For reference, a score of 2.5 suggests that a typical candidate neither agrees nor disagrees with a statement, while

a score of 3 means that the average candidate agrees with a statement. The results of the questions on assessment are summarised in the table below. Scores in excess of 2.7 or less than 2.3 are likely to be statistically significant in indicating whether candidates have a positive or negative view of an issue.

Responses to Questions on Assessment by Candidate Group, Average Score				
	HNC/D Candidates	SVQ Candidates	Other NQ Candidates	S4 Candidates
1. There are too many assessments in my qualifications.	2.28	2.15	2.39	2.49
2. Too much time is spent preparing for assessments, rather than learning.	2.26	2.13	2.50	2.53
3. Time spent preparing for assessments is a valuable part of learning.	3.16	3.22	3.00	3.01
4. There should be more technology such as computers used in learning and assessments.	2.62	2.55	2.70	2.86
5. The amount of work involved in my qualifications is about right.	3.01	3.01	2.95	3.02
6. The qualifications that I am doing are useful in different parts of life, as well as just teaching about the subject.	3.11	3.07	3.12	3.14
7. I have enjoyed doing my qualification.	3.35	3.20	3.12	3.01
8. I am satisfied with my qualification.	3.36	3.32	3.11	3.11

Few of the results in this section give SQA significant cause for concern. Most importantly, levels of satisfaction with qualifications are consistently high across all qualifications, with only small differences between different groups of candidates (HNC/D and SVQ candidates were more satisfied with their qualifications than the two groups of NQ candidates). A similar pattern was seen when candidates were asked whether they enjoyed doing their qualifications.

Candidates were also asked whether they felt their qualification would be useful in different parts of life, as well as in just learning about their subjects. Again, most candidates across all sample groups agreed with this statement.

Candidates were specifically asked about the role of technology such as computers in learning and assessments. In all groups, a considerable proportion of candidates were sceptical, although overall opinion was more positive than negative. The most positive group was the S4 NQ/SG candidates, who may have been the most comfortable with technology, especially compared to HNC/D and SVQ candidates. It should be noted that candidates who are not comfortable with technology may

answer negatively here, even although they may, in practice, find the technology used in learning and assessment easy to use. Additionally, candidates are unlikely to consider other issues such as benefits in reducing marking time and increasing reliability of assessments.

Candidates were also asked a range of questions about their overall workload, the assessment burden in their qualifications, and using assessment to help them learn. Candidates across all qualifications generally agreed that the amount of work in their qualifications was about right. There were no significant variations between the different sample groups.

In general, candidates did not think that there were too many assessments in their qualifications, or that these assessments took up time which could have been spent learning. However, the average scores for the two NQ sample groups for both these questions was higher than for the HNC/D and SVQ candidates, indicating that more of the NQ candidates had concerns about the amount of assessment they were asked to undergo, and the impact that this had on learning. A similar pattern was seen when candidates were asked about assessment helping them to learn. In general candidates agreed with this statement, but HNC/D and SVQ candidates agreed more than the two NQ groups. This may be due to NQ candidates generally having a less favourable view of assessment than their counterparts in other qualifications.

HNC/D & SVQ Questions

HNC/D and SVQ candidates were also asked a number of questions specific to their own qualifications. Their responses are analysed in this section, as there are a number of similar questions, and it is of interest to compare the responses made by candidates for the two qualifications.

As both Higher National and Scottish Vocational Qualifications are intended as vocational qualifications that prepare candidates for the workplace, it is important that the employers have faith in the qualifications. Both candidate groups were therefore asked whether they felt that the qualification type they were doing was well respected by employers. The results are shown in the table below

I think that HNCs and HNDs/SVQs (as appropriate) are well respected by employers.				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
HNC/HND Candidates	23.9%	59.3%	15.8%	1.1%
SVQ Candidates	28.8%	60.1%	10.8%	0.4%

As can be seen, a large majority of both HN and SVQ candidates felt that the qualifications they were doing are well respected by employers. SVQ candidates were slightly more positive about this than their HN counterparts.

There were also a number of questions to do with how effectively HNC/Ds and SVQs actually prepared candidates for work.

SVQ candidates were asked whether SVQs are practical work-based qualifications. 34.3% strongly agreed with this statement and a further 61.7% agreed. Only 3.6%

disagreed and 0.4% strongly disagreed. A similar picture emerged when candidates were asked for their views on the statement ‘SVQs provide clear evidence that you can do a job to nationally recognised standards’. 38.7% strongly agreed with this statement, and an additional 54.5% agreed. 6.5% and 0.4% of candidates respectively disagreed and strongly disagreed. It is encouraging that over 90% of SVQ candidates agreed with both these statements, suggesting that candidates see SVQs as meeting their purpose.

HNC/D candidates were also asked for their views on similar issues. When asked for their opinion on the statement ‘I believe that Higher National Qualifications prepare you for employment effectively’, 18.6% strongly agreed, and 64.8% agreed. 14.5% of candidates disagreed, with a further 2.1% of candidates strongly disagreeing. HNC/D candidates were also asked if they felt they had the general skills required for work, such as communication, IT and numeracy. Almost all candidates felt they had those skills, with 33.8% agreeing strongly, and an additional 61.1% agreeing. Only 4.1% disagreed and 1% strongly disagreed.

Overall, it appears from the evidence gathered here that HNC/D and SVQ candidates both feel that their qualifications prepare them effectively for employment.

Candidates in both groups were also asked about the unit structure of their qualifications. The table below presents some of the main results.

The Unit structure for HNC/Ds/SVQs (as appropriate) is good, as it allows you a lot of flexibility to choose areas that interest you.				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
HNC/HND Candidates	16.2%	52.8%	24.8%	6.2%
SVQ Candidates	20.3%	63.4%	15.2%	1.1%
The Unit structure is good, as you get credit for the areas you can do, even if you cannot complete the whole course*				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
HNC/HND Candidates	25.2%	59%	13.4%	2.4%
SVQ Candidates	26.6%	62.9%	9.4%	1.1%

* The wording for this question was not identical for the two candidate groups, and some care should therefore be taken in interpreting the results.

As can be seen, the majority of candidates feel that an advantage of the Unit structure is that it allows flexibility to choose areas that interest them. A considerable minority of HNC/D students disagree with this statement, however, suggesting that they feel that they do not have sufficient flexibility. SVQ candidates were, in general, more positive about the flexibility available in their qualifications. Candidates in both types of qualification were very much in favour of getting credit for those areas that a candidate can do, even if he or she is unable to complete the whole course.

SVQ candidates were also asked if they agreed with the statement that there should be a time limit to pass all the Units required to complete an SVQ. 14.4% strongly

agreed, and a further 43% agreed, making a small majority who supported some form of time limit. 34.3% disagreed with the statement, and 8.3% disagreed strongly.

SVQ candidates were also asked whether they thought that it was important that they were able to work through the SVQ units at their own pace. 30.9% strongly agreed, and 58.6% agreed with this statement. 10.1% disagreed and 0.4% strongly disagreed. These findings may be seen as contradicting those of the previous question, but it may well be that, because no specific time limit was posited in the previous question, that those who felt some limit should be imposed were merely suggesting that SVQ candidates should not be allowed to continue indefinitely. Candidates were also asked for their opinions on whether grades should be awarded for their qualifications. As can be seen from the table below, a small majority of candidates in both types of qualification supported the idea of grading, although a considerable proportion of candidates in both qualifications were opposed. This should not be taken as strong evidence supporting the introduction of grades for these qualifications, as there are other arguments as to why grades may or may not be appropriate, but it is an indication of candidates' views on the matter.

There should be grades (such as A/B/C) awarded in the qualification(s) I am doing.				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
HNC/HND Candidates	22.8%	40.5%	31.1%	5.5%
SVQ Candidates	15.9%	40.6%	39.3%	4.3%

There were also some questions specific to either Higher National Qualifications or Scottish Vocational Qualifications included in the survey. Details of the results of those questions are given below.

Higher National Qualifications

HNC/D candidates were asked whether they preferred continual course assessment to examinations. 56.1% strongly agreed that they preferred course assessment, with a further 32.4% agreeing with this statement. 10.8% disagreed, and 0.7% strongly disagreed. While there may be reasons for introducing more exam-based assessment, the responses to this question suggested unambiguously that candidates were not in favour of such a move.

Candidates were also asked whether they intended to go on to further study. 44.1% indicated that they would definitely undertake further study, with 31.4% stating that it was likely that they would continue studying. 15.6% said that it was unlikely, and 8.6% said they would not go on to further study.

Candidates who indicated that they would continue studying or were likely to do so were asked what course they intended to study. Details are provided in the table below.

What course do you intend to study? (HNC/D Candidates, Definitely or Likely to Continue Studying)	
Entering degree course in third year, after completing HND	27.9%
Entering degree course in second year, after completing HND	13.5%
Entering degree course in second year, after completing HNC	13%
Entering degree course in first year	12.6%
Starting HND after completing HNC	20.5%
Other (please specify)	12.6%

It is interesting, and encouraging, to note that most of those who are intending to go on to a degree anticipate that they will be able to transfer some or all of the credit from their HNC or HND, with only 12.6% of all those who responded envisaging starting a degree course in first year. Over 40% of all respondents (and 61% of those who intend to go on to a degree course) expect to gain full credit (two years for an HND or one year for an HNC).

Candidates who answered other gave a wide variety of options, including SVQs, other HNC/Ds, and post-graduate studies.

Candidates were asked if they were aware that Higher National Qualifications are based on national standards which reflect the skills and knowledge you need to work in the area you are studying. 78.9% answered Yes, and 21.1% said No.

Scottish Vocational Qualifications

Candidates were asked whether they thought that SVQs were too theoretical. 6.5% strongly agreed, and a further 27.2% agreed. 61.6% disagreed and 4.7% strongly disagreed. Overall, therefore, one third of SVQ candidates found the qualification too theoretical, while two thirds did not.

NQ/SG Questions

All NQ and Standard Grade candidates were asked some questions on examinations. The Other NQ group, which consists of S5-6 pupils, and candidates studying at further education colleges, were asked some further questions on the qualifications system, as, overall, they are likely to have more experience of the qualifications system than the S4 candidates.

The table below provides details of the questions on examinations, with the results split into the S4 sample group and the other NQ sample group. An average score was calculated for these responses, in the same way as elsewhere in this paper, for ease of analysis. As before, 4 points were awarded for a Strongly Agree response, down to 1 for a Strongly Disagree. Scores in excess of 2.7 or less than 2.3 are likely to be statistically significant in indicating whether candidates have a positive or negative view of an issue.

Standard Grade and NQ Candidates' Attitudes to Examinations (Average Score)		
	Other NQ/SG Candidates	S4 Candidates
I find exams to be very stressful.	2.92	2.95
Exams are a fair way of measuring students' ability.	2.49	2.74
Preparing for exams takes up too much time, which could be spent learning.	2.50	2.41

As can be seen, NQ candidates find examinations stressful. While this is not, in itself, a surprising result, and may be seen as an unavoidable consequence of high-stakes assessment, it would be appropriate for SQA to bear in mind the stresses that examinations cause for candidates.

An issue that may be of greater concern for SQA is that candidates do not appear to have a great deal of confidence that exams are a fair way of measuring students' ability. What is surprising, perhaps, is that the other NQ candidate group, which consists predominantly of S5 and S6 candidates, has less confidence in exams than their S4 counterparts. This difference is statistically significant to at least a 95% confidence interval, thus suggesting that other NQ candidates do indeed have less confidence in exams than S4 candidates.

The other NQ group was then broken down into subgroups of candidates taking different qualifications.

Exams are a fair way of measuring students' ability, Other NQ Group by Qualification, Average Score			
AH Candidates	Higher Candidates	Int 2 Candidates	Int 1 Candidates
2.28	2.46	2.41	2.62

It should be noted that candidates can fall into more than one group here. For example a student sitting an Intermediate 2, two Highers and an Advanced Higher would fall into three groups. Also, some of the groups are relatively small, so that the figures may not be totally reliable. It is interesting to note that Advanced Higher candidates actually appear to have the least confidence in exams as a fair means of assessment. Statistical testing revealed that this difference was not quite statistically significant, although this could be due to the small number of Advanced Higher candidates sampled, rather than there not being a difference in candidates' opinions.

Finally, candidates were almost evenly split on whether preparing for exams took up too much time, which could have been spent learning. Again, it can be argued that any high-stakes examinations will inevitably require a considerable amount of time spent on preparation, and that this time could be spent on learning instead. Nonetheless, there is a degree of concern amongst students about the impact of examinations of learning.

The other NQ candidates group, which consisted S5, S6 and FE candidates were also asked a number of other questions about the National Qualifications system. The results of these questions are presented in the table below.

Responses to Questions on the National Qualifications system, S5-S6, FE Candidates				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1 I was able to choose a wide variety of subjects.	20.7%	49.8%	25.1%	4.4%
2 I felt that my options were limited by the number of subjects I could study.	9.6%	30.8%	50.8%	8.8%
3 I found doing my qualifications to be stressful.	18.4%	47.2%	31.2%	3.2%
4 S4 is the right time to start sitting SQA examinations.	18.1%	54.8%	21.0%	6.0%
5 I think pupils should sit Standard Grades or Access and Intermediate qualifications in S3.	19.7%	29.7%	40.2%	10.4%

Candidates were asked whether they felt that the current system of qualifications was overly restrictive in terms of the number of subjects that they were able to study. Around two thirds of candidates said they were able to choose a wide variety of subjects, with 60% disagreeing with the statement that their options were limited by the number of subjects they could study. Nonetheless, a number of candidates did feel that the existing system was overly restrictive, and that they were not able to choose a wide variety of subjects. While this may be partly caused by centre-related issues, it is something that SQA should continue to be aware of in any plans to reform National Qualifications.

Candidates were asked whether they found their qualifications as a whole to be stressful. Around 65% of candidates either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement 'I found doing my qualifications to be stressful'. This is similar to the result when we asked the same group whether they found exams to be stressful, although more candidates strongly agreed with the statement on exams being stressful, and the overall numbers agreeing with the exam statement were slightly higher.

Finally, candidates were asked their opinions on when people should begin to do SQA qualifications. First, we asked whether S4 was the correct time for candidates to begin sitting qualifications. Just over 70% either agreed or strongly agreed. We then asked whether S3 pupils should be sitting either Standard Grades or alternative National Qualifications. 20% strongly agreed, with a further 30% agreeing, indicating that the candidate population is almost evenly split on whether Standard Grades or equivalent should be moved to S3. The reason for the contradiction between the results for the two questions is not immediately apparent, but the overall conclusion is that there is a significant proportion of candidates who think that pupils should begin sitting qualifications in S3, but that this group is unlikely to form a majority of candidates.

Questions on Unit assessment in NQs

All NQ candidates were asked their views on a number of issues to do with Units and Unit assessment in National Qualifications. The sample for this consisted of 218 S4 pupils who had sat one or more Access, Intermediate or Higher qualifications; 165 S5 pupils; 102 S6 pupils; 37 FE college students; and six candidates whose status was unknown or did not fall into these categories. A similar piece of work was carried out in 2000, when National Qualifications were introduced, and it was felt that it would be useful to look at candidates' attitudes to the Unit system again as part of the work on candidate engagement. Candidates were asked for their views on the following statements.

1. Knowing there will be assessments at the end of each Unit encourages me to work harder.
2. I find that the Unit assessments get in the way of class work.
3. Unit assessments help me find out my strengths and weaknesses before it is too late.
4. I've had a lot of re-assessments to do.
5. Unit assessments help me to understand better what the Course is about.
6. I am landed with too many assessments for different subjects at the same time.
7. It is good to know that you've already passed the Units before sitting the final exam.
8. It is good that you can get re-assessments if you need them.
9. I feel I'm being rushed through the assessments before I'm ready.
10. If you do the class work the Unit assessments are straightforward.
11. Re-assessments take up too much class time.
12. Having Unit assessments has helped me to spread out my revision.

In each case, candidates were asked to state whether they strongly agreed, agreed, were neutral on, disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. These statements, and the possible answers, were the same as those used in 2000, so that we could make legitimate comparisons. It should be noted that in 2000, only school pupils in S5 and S6 were sampled, whilst in 2006, relevant S4 candidates and FE candidates were also asked for their opinions. The group of eligible S4 candidates has grown significantly with the expansion of Intermediate qualifications in this part of the school population.

2006 Results

The overall results for each of the statements are given in the table. The average score awards are a way of analysing results more easily — 5 points were given for each respondent who strongly agreed, 4 for each who agreed, down to 1 for each who strongly disagreed. The average score was then calculated, giving an indication of the overall agreement or otherwise with the statements made.

Responses to Questions on Units/Unit Assessment, 2006 (All Candidates)						
	SA	A	N	D	SD	Average Score
1 Knowing there will be assessments at the end of each Unit encourages me to work harder.	19.7%	45.6%	25.0%	8.0%	1.7%	3.7
2 I find that the Unit assessments get in the way of class work.	7.5%	21.3%	33.7%	32.6%	5.0%	2.9
3 Unit assessments help me find out my strengths and weaknesses before it is too late.	37.3%	43.9%	10.9%	6.9%	1.1%	4.1
4 I've had a lot of re-assessments to do.	1.9%	8.3%	22.9%	34.8%	32.1%	2.1
5 Unit assessments help me to understand better what the Course is about.	11.8%	44.8%	26.7%	14.7%	1.9%	3.5
6 I am landed with too many assessments for different subjects at the same time.	29.0%	34.9%	19.4%	14.3%	2.5%	3.7
7 It is good to know that you've already passed the Units before sitting the final exam.	41.5%	43.8%	8.8%	4.6%	1.3%	4.2
8 It is good that you can get re-assessments if you need them.	44.0%	48.4%	6.1%	0.8%	0.8%	4.3
9 I feel I'm being rushed through the assessments before I'm ready.	7.3%	27.9%	30.9%	29.6%	4.4%	3.0
10 If you do the class work the Unit assessments are straightforward.	23.9%	41.4%	24.4%	9.5%	0.8%	3.8
11 Re-assessments take up too much class time.	6.9%	20.8%	38.3%	29.0%	5.1%	3.0
12 Having Unit assessments has helped me to spread out my revision.	11.2%	39.8%	30.7%	13.5%	4.8%	3.4

SA — Strongly Agree, A — Agree, N — Neutral, D — Disagree, SD — Strongly Disagree

Looking at the results as a whole, it seems that the majority of candidates find Unit assessments to be useful in terms of spreading out work, increasing understanding of the course, and as an incentive to work harder. Candidates also welcome the fact that they know they have passed all the Units before the final exam, and that they can sit re-assessments if they need to. These answers suggest that many of the important features of the Unit assessment system are supported by candidates.

A result which may cause SQA more concern is the fact that over 60% of candidates felt that they are landed with too many assessments at the same time, suggesting that candidates do feel that there is an issue with the burden of assessment caused by the Unit system. Candidates were generally ambivalent about questions which looked at whether Unit assessments and re-assessments interfere with class work and learning. This suggests that candidates' concerns are more to do with the amount of work required for Unit assessment, rather than that they miss out on learning time as a result of Unit assessments.

Also, a significant number (35%) of pupils felt that they were rushed through assessments before they were ready, although few candidates reported having to do a lot of re-assessments, suggesting that teachers are effectively judging when candidates should sit Unit assessments, even if candidates themselves are not sure that they are ready.

Comparison with 2000 Results

Responses to Questions on Units/Unit Assessment, 2000 & 2006 (All Candidates)			
	Average Score, 2000	Average Score, 2006 (S5-6 only)	Average Score, 2006
1 Knowing there will be assessments at the end of each Unit encourages me to work harder.	3.6	3.7	3.7
2 I find that the Unit assessments get in the way of class work.	3.1	2.9	2.9
3 Unit assessments help me find out my strengths and weaknesses before it is too late.	4.0	4.0	4.1
4 I've had a lot of re-assessments to do.	2.1	2.0	2.1
5 Unit assessments help me to understand better what the Course is about.	3.3	3.3	3.5
6 I am landed with too many assessments for different subjects at the same time.	3.8	3.8	3.7
7 It is good to know that you've already passed the Units before sitting the final exam.	3.9	4.0	4.2
8 It is good that you can get re-assessments if you need them.	4.3	4.3	4.3
9 I feel I'm being rushed through the assessments before I'm ready.	3.1	3.0	3.0
10 If you do the class work the Unit assessments are straightforward.	3.7	3.8	3.8
11 Re-assessments take up too much class time.	3.2	3.1	3.0
12 Having Unit assessments has helped me to spread out my revision.	3.1	3.3	3.4

This table shows there are few significant differences in the views expressed by candidates in 2000 and 2006, especially when we look at the most similar groups — the 2000 sample and the S5 & S6 members of the 2006 sample. None of the differences between the two samples show a statistically significant change in candidates' views on Units and Unit assessments.

The table below only looks at the results from 2006, and is split up according to the stage of the candidate.

Responses to Questions on Units/Unit Assessment, 2006 (All Candidates)				
	Average Score, S4	Average Score, S5	Average Score, S6	Average Score, FE
1 Knowing there will be assessments at the end of each Unit encourages me to work harder.	3.70	3.78	3.66	4.22
2 I find that the Unit assessments get in the way of class work.	3.01	2.97	2.77	2.54
3 Unit assessments help me find out my strengths and weaknesses before it is too late.	4.17	4.04	3.97	4.22
4 I've had a lot of re-assessments to do.	2.30	1.85	1.90	1.92
5 Unit assessments help me to understand better what the Course is about.	3.67	3.24	3.46	3.92
6 I am landed with too many assessments for different subjects at the same time.	3.81	3.80	3.81	3.10
7 It is good to know that you've already passed the Units before sitting the final exam.	4.38	4.04	3.97	4.37
8 It is good that you can get re-assessments if you need them.	4.38	4.35	4.23	4.43
9 I feel I'm being rushed through the assessments before I'm ready.	3.18	3.02	2.89	2.78
10 If you do the class work the Unit assessments are straightforward.	3.76	3.71	3.84	4.11
11 Re-assessments take up too much class time.	2.86	3.10	3.00	2.76
12 Having Unit assessments has helped me to spread out my revision.	3.48	3.22	3.36	3.62

The most interesting thing to emerge from this table is the more favourable attitude to Units and Unit assessment from FE candidates, compared to school candidates. In almost every question, FE candidates' attitudes were the most positive of the four sub-groups. Although it is difficult to analyse this in too much depth, given the small number of FE candidates taking National Qualifications who participated in this research, it may well be that this is an area which would merit follow-up work in the near future.

Other results worthy of comment include that more S4 candidates have had a large number of re-assessments to do compared to all the other groups, and more of that group feel that they are being rushed through assessments before they are ready. This group also share a similar view of some of the positives of Unit assessment to the FE candidates. S4 candidates were more positive than their colleagues in S5 and S6 in questions on Unit assessments showing candidates their strengths and weaknesses, unit assessments helping candidates to understand the course, and whether it is good to know you have passed the Unit assessments before sitting the final exam. It should be noted that in the other questions, S4 candidates' views were more closely aligned with those of their school colleagues than with those of FE candidates.

Some statistical analysis of the more anomalous results was undertaken. The hypothesis that the average score for the group in question was higher than the average score for the overall population was compared with a null hypothesis that the true average score for both groups was the same. A one-tailed Z test was used, with a 95% confidence interval. This means that, for any results which came back as significant, there is at least a 95% chance that the difference in results is caused by a genuine difference in opinion between groups, rather than being a statistical fluctuation. The results of these tests are given below:

- ◆ The average score for FE candidates on the statement 'Knowing there will be assessments at the end of each Unit encourages me to work harder' was **significantly higher** than for candidates as a whole.
- ◆ The average score for FE candidates on the statement 'I find that the Unit assessments get in the way of class work' was **significantly lower** than for candidates as a whole.
- ◆ The average score for S6 candidates on the same statement was **not significantly lower** than for candidates as a whole.
- ◆ The average score for S4 candidates on the statement 'I've had a lot of re-assessments to do' was **significantly higher** than for candidates as a whole.
- ◆ The average scores for S4 candidates and for FE candidates on the statement 'Unit assessments help me to understand better what the Course is about' were both **significantly higher** than for candidates as a whole. The average score for S5 candidates was **significantly lower** than for candidates as a whole.
- ◆ The average score for FE candidates on the statement 'I am landed with too many assessments for different subjects at the same time' was **significantly lower** than for candidates as a whole.
- ◆ The average score for S4 candidates on the statement 'It is good to know that you've already passed the Units before sitting the final exam' was **significantly higher** than for candidates as a whole. The average score for FE candidates was **not significantly higher** than for candidates as a whole.
- ◆ The average score for FE candidates on the statement 'I feel I'm being rushed through the assessments before I'm ready' was **not significantly higher** than for candidates as a whole.
- ◆ The average score for FE candidates on the statement 'If you do the class work the Unit assessments are straightforward' was **significantly higher** than for candidates as a whole.

- ◆ The average score for FE candidates on the statement ‘Re-assessments take up too much class time’ was **not significantly lower** than for candidates as a whole.
- ◆ The average score for FE candidates on the statement ‘Having Unit assessments has helped me to spread out my revision’ was **not significantly higher** than for candidates as a whole.

It should be noted that, where testing shows that a result was not significant, it does not mean that there is no difference of opinion between the appropriate group and the candidate population as a whole, but that the sample used in this work was not large enough to conclusively demonstrate that there was a difference. In areas where the sample was small, such as in FE candidates doing NQs, this may be worthy of further investigation in the future.

Appendix: Candidate Attitude Survey Questions

Candidates were asked to provide some personal data to allow for more in-depth analysis of the results of the questionnaire. This data varied depending on the qualifications a candidate undertook.

General Questions — answered by all candidates

1. What are your main reasons for taking the qualification or qualifications that you are doing? Please choose all the options that apply to you.

Because I need them to go on to Higher Education

Because I need them to go on to Further Study

Because they will give me improved employment opportunities

Because they are a legal requirement for the job I am doing or want to do

Because they will help me get promoted

To develop as a person

Because I am interested

Other (please specify) _____

2. Do you believe that the qualifications you are currently taking will prove useful to you in achieving your goals?

Very Useful Useful Not Very Useful Of Little Use

3. Do you think that the qualifications you are doing will give you the skills and knowledge you will need?

Very Much So Generally Significant Gaps Not Much

4. How well do the qualifications that you are doing prepare you for playing an active part in society (including in work)?

Very Well Well Not Very Well Not Well at All

5. Do you intend to do any of the SQA qualifications below once you have completed your current qualifications?

Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs are work-based qualifications
Included in all Modern Apprenticeships) Yes No

Higher National Qualifications (HNCs & HNDs) Yes No

National Qualifications (e.g. Highers, Intermediates
& Standard Grades) Yes No

6. If you have additional support needs, how well have those needs been met while you are doing your qualification?

Very Well Well Not Very Well Not Well at All Not applicable

For the following questions, please tick the box that most closely matches your opinion. Throughout this section the word ‘assessments’ means any process designed to check up on your progress. These can include exams, portfolios, observation, oral exams, dissertations and many others.

7. There are too many assessments in my qualifications.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

8. Too much time is spent preparing for assessments, rather than learning.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

9. Time spent preparing for assessments is a valuable part of learning.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

10. There should be more technology such as computers used in learning and assessments.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

11. The amount of work involved in my qualifications is about right.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

12. The qualifications that I am doing are useful in different parts of life, as well just teaching about the subject.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

13. I have enjoyed doing my qualification.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

14. I am satisfied with my qualification.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

NQ Unit Questions — All NQ candidates (not exclusively SG candidates)

For the following questions, please tick the box that most closely matches your opinion

1. Knowing there will be assessments at the end of each Unit encourages me to work harder.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

2. I find the Unit assessments get in the way of class work.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

3. Unit assessments help me find out my strengths and weaknesses before it is too late.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

4. I've had a lot of re-assessments to do.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

5. Unit assessments help me to understand better what the Course is about.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

6. I am landed with too many assessments for different subjects at the same time.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

7. It is good to know that you've already passed the Units before sitting the final exam.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

8. It is good that you can get re-assessments if you need them.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

9. I feel I'm being rushed through the assessments before I'm ready.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

10. If you do the class work the Unit assessments are straightforward.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

11. Re-assessments take up too much class time.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

12. Having Unit assessments has helped me to spread out my revision.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

All NQ & SG Candidates

1. I find exams to be very stressful.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

2. Exams are a fair way of measuring students' ability.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

3. Preparing for exams takes up too much time, which could be spent learning.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

S5, S6 and FE NQ Candidates

For the following questions, please tick the box that most closely matches your opinion

1. I was able to choose a wide variety of subjects.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

2. I felt that my options were limited by the number of subjects I could study.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

3. I found doing my qualifications to be stressful.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

4. S4 is the right time to start sitting SQA examinations.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

5. I think pupils should sit Standard Grades or Access and Intermediate qualifications in S3.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

6. I find exams to be very stressful.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

7. Exams are a fair way of measuring students' ability.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

8. Preparing for exams takes up too much time, which could be spent learning.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

HNC/D Candidates Only

For the following questions, please tick the box that most closely matches your opinion

1. I believe that Higher National Qualifications prepare you for employment effectively.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

2. I have the general skills required for work, such as communication, IT and numeracy.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

3. I think that HNCs and HNDs are well respected by employers.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

4. The Unit structure is good for HNCs and HNDs, as you get credit for the areas you can do, even if you cannot complete the whole course.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

5. The Unit structure for HNCs and HNDs is good, as it allows you a lot of flexibility to choose areas that interest you.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

6. There should be grades (such as A/B/C) awarded in the qualification(s) I am doing.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

7. I prefer continual course assessment to examinations.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

8. Do you intend to go on to further study after completing your Higher National Qualification?

Definitely Likely Not Very Likely No

9. If yes, what course do you intend to study?

- Entering degree course in third year, after completing HND
- Entering degree course in second year after completing HND
- Entering degree course in second year after completing HNC
- Entering degree course in first year
- Starting HND after completing HNC
- Other : Please Specify _____

10. Are you aware that Higher National Qualifications are based on national standards which reflect the skills and knowledge you need to work in the area you are studying?

Yes No

SVQ Candidates Only

For the following questions, please tick the box that most closely matches your opinion

1. SVQs are practical, work-based qualifications.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

2. I think that SVQs are well respected by employers.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

3. SVQs provide clear evidence that you can do a job to nationally recognised standards.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

4. There is too much theory involved in SVQs.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

5. It is important that you are able to work through the units for your SVQ at your own pace.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

6. You should gain credit for the Units you successfully complete even if you are unable to get the full SVQ.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

7. The Unit structure for SVQs is good, as it allows you a lot of flexibility to choose areas that interest you.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

8. There should be grades (such as A/B/C) awarded in the qualification(s) I am doing.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

9. There should be a time limit to pass all the Units required to complete an SVQ.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree