



Executive summary of SQA initial evaluation of new National Courses

In July 2015, SQA's Qualifications Committee approved proposals to carry out an initial evaluation of the design, assessment and implementation of the new National Qualifications. This included a research exercise with a particular focus on internal Unit assessment and fieldwork visits to schools to speak to groups of young people, teachers, and senior managers. Both pieces of work make reference to the design model approved by the Curriculum for Excellence Management Board. A summary of the findings of this work is outlined below.

Research and Evidence Report: Internal Unit Assessment in National Courses

The report, referred to as the IUA Report hereafter, is based on an examination of policy and guidance documents, including the reasons for Unit-based courses, plus other product specification and support material used in the previous (eg Intermediate) and current (eg National 5) National Courses. It is informed by workshop discussions in 29 National Qualifications Support Team (NQST) meetings in the autumn of 2015 and by an online practitioner survey between October 2015 and January 2016.

The report outlines the Unit-based structure in National Courses (sections 3 and 4); the relationship between Unit assessment and Course assessment (section 5); identifies emergent themes for NQSTs (section 6) and develops a discussion (section 7).

The discussion at the NQST meetings was shaped by a series of questions around Unit assessment and its relationship with Course assessment. The same questions were also made available through an online survey which elicited over 3,000 responses.

While there is evidence to suggest that the Units in most current National Courses do have fewer Outcomes and Assessment Standards than their legacy National Courses, the requirement to achieve every single Assessment Standard was seen by many practitioners as being too challenging for many learners. This was seen to have led to assessment taking up more time than anticipated because of the need for re-assessment.

National Qualifications Support Team members and practitioners through the online survey were asked whether there is duplication of assessment across Unit and Course assessment in their subject. Although there were variations across and within subject groups, in general members felt that there was some duplication across Unit and Course assessment. While some members felt that this led to over-assessment many felt that this was necessary and inevitable as the Course is composed of Units and this assists learning. Many practitioners felt that it

would be possible to use evidence for Course assessment to cover some Unit Outcomes or to use evidence for Unit assessment as a starting point for the Course assessment.

The evidence from the IUA Report has influenced both the overall action plan intimated to the Working Party on Assessment and National Qualifications and the Subject Review Report action plans published in May 2016.

Fieldwork visits

At least one secondary school in each local authority was visited by SQA staff between November 2015 and January 2016. They spoke to S5/6 pupils, a sample of subject teachers and the senior management team in the school, using three common sets of questions. The questions used were similar to those used in the IUA work with NQSTs and the Teacher Survey. Staff were also offered the opportunity to reply individually to an online survey, with over 300 responses received.

Reports for each school were written and analysed and a collective report written for pupils, teachers and senior management. That data was then analysed and collated into a report for the Qualifications Committee in February 2016 and the report is included here. The report identifies both issues specific to the National Courses — which often echoed comments made at NQST meetings — but also more systemic 3–18 issues in Scottish education which impact on delivery and assessment of the National Courses. These broader issues also contribute to both teacher and candidate workload.

Section 1 outlines the methodology used by SQA staff, Section 2 is an Executive Summary of its findings and the appendices show the questions used and the survey questions. It was clear that candidates did not feel the broad general education was preparing them well for the senior phase; that many teachers felt the requirement to pass all Assessment Standards in each Unit was imbalancing the Course; that it was challenging to track pupil progress against the Assessment Standards in school recording systems; that in many instances insufficient time was being given for delivery of National Courses; that personalisation and choice was less extensive than expected and that most teachers would welcome a rationalisation of documents.

The evidence from the Fieldwork report has influenced both the overall action plan intimated to the Working Party on Assessment and National Qualifications and the Subject Review Report action plans published in May 2016.

The Subject Review Reports have used evidence to identify specific issues and actions to address these in the short and medium terms. These reports specifically outline actions for 2016/17 which will help to address workload associated with assessment.

There are also broader issues that need to be addressed by schools and local authorities associated with the pace of learning in the broad general education, ensuring that pupils are presented for the correct level of qualifications and ensuring that sufficient time is given for delivery and assessment of National Courses — 160 hours.