

National Qualifications: Attitudes to Internal Assessment and Grading

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Executive summary

Context

Recent review and research findings have indicated the need for Qualifications Scotland to develop a greater understanding of learner and practitioner attitudes to internal assessment and grading in national qualifications.

A key recommendation from the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment (Hayward, 2023, p. 69) was the need to ‘broaden the range of assessment methods for National Qualifications in the Senior Phase including increased opportunities for classroom assessment.’

Findings from the SQA (now known as Qualifications Scotland) National Qualifications Surveys 2024 (SQA, 2025) and 2025 (Qualifications Scotland, 2026) highlighted markedly poorer perceptions of National 4 qualifications among practitioner and Qualifications Scotland staff respondents, when compared to their perceptions of other national qualifications. Qualifications Scotland has also seen increasing levels of entries for other qualifications in the senior phase, such as Awards and National Progression Awards, which are largely internally assessed.

These findings emphasise the importance of Qualifications Scotland understanding current perceptions of internal assessment and how they may impact on stakeholder views of the value and credibility of qualifications that are based in whole or part on internal assessment. Examining these issues in more detail through this research will play an important role in building an evidence base to inform the implementation of qualifications reform.

Definitions

The terms internal and external assessment describe who is responsible for marking and quality assurance, rather than the method of assessment used. Internal assessment is designed and marked within the centre, while external assessment is

marked by the awarding body, such as Qualifications Scotland. External assessment is not limited to exams: it can include coursework, projects or portfolios where marking is conducted or verified externally.

Assessment methods, such as exams, coursework, performances or practical tasks, can be used in either internal or external assessment contexts. For example, coursework may be internally assessed within a centre or externally assessed by an awarding body, depending on how the qualification is designed. It is therefore important to distinguish between the type of assessment and who is responsible for marking it.

Formative assessment refers to ongoing assessment used to support learning, where feedback helps learners understand their progress and next steps. Summative assessment refers to assessment used to evaluate learning at a particular point. Internal assessment can be either formative or summative, whereas external assessment is typically summative in nature and used for certification.

Note on findings

Despite being provided with definitions, participants' understanding of external assessment was often narrow, frequently equating it with exams rather than recognising the broader range of external assessment methods. This limitation should be considered when interpreting the findings.

More generally, there was evidence of limited assessment literacy among some participants. For example, internal assessment was at times conflated with ongoing assessment or understood solely as formative assessment. Conversely, some participants appeared to classify all non-exam assessment, such as coursework, as internal. These inconsistencies further qualify the reliability of participants' interpretations and should be borne in mind when drawing conclusions.

Methodology

The qualitative research was designed to explore experiences of and attitudes towards internal assessment and grading of national qualifications. The research participants included S5 and S6 learners, secondary school practitioners, school leaders (secondary head or depute head) and centre leaders (practitioners in a senior position in a college or higher education institution).

Participants took part in a semi-structured focus group or interview between September and November 2025, with nine focus groups and nine interviews being conducted in total. The data was analysed thematically using MaxQDA.

Experiences of internal assessment

Experiences of internal assessment were varied, though overall they tended to be more positive than negative across participant groups. Many learners reported that internal assessment felt less stressful than high-stakes examinations because it was distributed throughout the academic year. However, learners also identified concerns, including class time being used for assessments and the challenges certain assessments posed for those with additional support needs. Concerns were also raised about learners being assessed by their own practitioners, particularly in terms of fairness and potential practitioner bias.

Most participants regarded ongoing feedback as invaluable in supporting learners to understand their progress and identify areas for improvement. At the same time, practitioners, as well as school and centre leaders, emphasised the workload, time, and resource demands involved in designing, marking, and recording the results of internal assessments. Practitioners reported that it could be challenging to facilitate internal assessments and collect sufficient evidence for learners who were frequently absent from school.

Suitability of internal assessment

Centre leaders, practitioners and school leaders identified that internal assessment was particularly suitable for practical courses, such as Skills for Work and National Progression Awards, as it aligned with the needs, expectations and preferences of learners on these courses. However, some practitioners did raise concerns about learner progression, noting that internally assessed courses, such as National 4 courses, did not always prepare learners for the demands of higher-level externally assessed courses, such as National 5 courses.

There was general consensus among centre leaders, practitioners and school leaders that internal assessment was suitable for all learners, but particularly for those with additional support needs, as it offered greater flexibility and placed less pressure on learners than external assessment. However, centre and school leaders emphasised that suitability was ultimately learner-dependent: regardless of individual needs, some learners struggled with externally assessed exams, while others performed well in exams.

Centre leaders were in agreement that internal assessment was more effective than external assessment at assessing learners' knowledge and skills, highlighting benefits such as flexibility, continuous learning and assessment, progress tracking and timely feedback. They also noted that internal assessment enabled learners to demonstrate their abilities more accurately without the pressure of external assessments carried out under exam conditions.

However, learners, practitioners and school leaders expressed mixed opinions. They identified similar benefits to the centre leaders but also raised concerns about internal assessment including the potential for over assessment, increased practitioner workload and reduced consistency of standards. Learners valued the rigour and fairness associated with external assessment, particularly in terms of the marking process, and some practitioners thought that exams were a useful measure of learners' knowledge and skills, and necessary to help learners develop certain skills.

Advantages of internal and external assessment

All participant groups identified advantages of both internal and external assessment. Internal assessment was viewed as supporting ongoing learning, allowing regular feedback, and giving learners opportunities to demonstrate their progress. It was seen as particularly helpful in building confidence, recognising practical skills, and reducing pressure associated with the single high-stakes exams of external assessment.

External assessment was widely viewed as providing stronger assurance of national consistency, fairness, and comparability of results. Learners, practitioners, and both school and centre leaders suggested that externally set and marked assessments enhanced credibility and public confidence in grading, particularly in relation to progression to further study or employment.

Many participants supported a blended model combining both approaches. Internal assessment was believed to be effective for assessing coursework, applied skills, and developmental learning, while external assessment was valued for confirming standards and providing an independent benchmark.

Disadvantages of internal and external assessment

Practitioners, school leaders and centre leaders reported that internal assessment was very workload intensive due to the time required for marking, verification, administration, and supporting learners to generate evidence. Another challenge related to resources, including the availability of space, time and materials within centres.

All participant groups expressed concerns about variation in standards between different practitioners and centres when administering and marking internal assessments. Stakeholders recognised the importance of training for practitioners and quality assurance processes to maintain standards.

Learners were asked about external assessment and identified stress and anxiety as a key disadvantage. Participants noted that external assessment offers little or no feedback to support improvement and exams, in particular, can disadvantage those who

struggle under pressure and tend to test memory rather than knowledge and understanding.

Grading

Grading was widely valued by learners and practitioners for providing greater recognition of achievement and performance than a simple pass/fail outcome. Participants felt that grades more accurately reflected the range of learner attainment and offered more information to inform progression decisions, including entry to further education and employment.

Learners reported that grading motivates effort and improvement, as they provided a clearer sense of progress and targets. In contrast, pass/fail systems were often perceived as offering limited feedback on performance and less incentive for higher achievement once a pass had been achieved.

However, some participants noted that grading could increase pressure on learners and intensified concerns about fairness, particularly where internal assessment contributed significantly to final results. Ensuring transparency in marking criteria, moderation processes, and the communication of standards was therefore seen as essential.

Future considerations

Across all participant groups, there was broad support for the continued and, in many cases, expanded use of internal assessment in the future, although this was consistently framed with important caveats. Overall, while attitudes were broadly aligned in recognising the value of internal assessment, differences emerged in the degree of enthusiasm and the weight given to issues of standards, workload, and implementation.

A key theme for learners was a general preference for an increase in internal assessment, although views were mixed on the specific types of assessment that should be used. Learners also wanted better communication, improvements to the format of assessments and a shared understanding of the purpose of assessment.

For practitioners, a key finding was the view that internal assessment was useful in certain situations but that it needed to be carefully managed. Some practitioners opposed an increase in internal assessment for reasons related to standards and workload.

School leaders and centre leaders were largely positive about internal assessment but stressed that its use should be appropriate to subject context and balanced with final exams. Moreover, school leaders emphasised the importance of achieving parity of esteem across courses and centre leaders echoed the general preference for internal assessment while placing strong emphasis on maintaining national standards.

Overall, the report findings indicate limited assessment literacy among participants. For example, there was a narrow understanding of external assessment and, at times, internal assessment was conflated with ongoing assessment or understood solely as formative assessment. Therefore, developing a shared understanding of assessment terminology among stakeholders should be a key priority in strengthening assessment literacy moving forward.

Introduction

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the learners, practitioners, school leaders and centre leaders who participated in this research, as well as the schools that facilitated the learner focus groups.

We are also grateful to Qualifications Scotland colleagues who have supported this research.

Context

Recent research findings and data have indicated the need for Qualifications Scotland to develop a better understanding of learner and practitioner attitudes to internal assessment in national qualifications.

Findings from the NQ24 survey highlighted markedly poorer perceptions of National 4 qualifications among practitioner and Qualifications Scotland staff respondents, when compared to their perceptions of other national qualifications. Given the requirement to develop reformed SCQF level 4 and 5 qualifications as part of the national qualifications and assessment strand of educational reform, it was necessary to develop a fuller understanding of these issues.

Qualifications Scotland has also seen increasing levels of entries for other qualifications in the senior phase, such as Awards and National Progression Awards, which are largely internally assessed. It was therefore important to understand the reasons behind this growth and to explore views on these qualifications and their assessment.

Overall, this research will play an important role in building an evidence base to inform the implementation of qualifications reform. With the emphasis on parity of esteem in the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment and a specific recommendation to increase opportunities for internal assessment, it is important to

ensure that the reformed SCQF level 3-5 and subsequently level 6-7 qualifications offer appropriate qualifications to all learners.

Methodology

Research aim

The broad aim of this research was to explore learners' and practitioners' experiences of and attitudes towards internal assessment and grading of qualifications. Participants were asked questions that covered six key areas:

- Participants' experiences of internal assessment
- Suitability of internal assessment for different courses, different learners and for measuring knowledge and skills
- Advantages of internal and external assessment
- Disadvantages of internal and external assessment
- Grading of assessments
- Future assessment considerations

Ethics

While the risk of harm to participants was low, the research was designed to ensure that it was conducted safely and that participants were protected. This included aligning the research with the principles set out in Qualifications Scotland's Code of Research Practice.

To ensure the research was being conducted ethically, participants were given detailed information about the research prior to taking part so they could give informed consent. Their participation was entirely voluntary, and they were made aware that they could stop participating at any point during data collection. It was also emphasised to participants that their responses would be completely anonymous and that any

information, such as locations, centres, names, or anecdotes that could identify themselves or others would not be published in the research outputs.

Research design

The research was designed to ensure that learners and different parts of the practitioner population had the opportunity to share their views and experiences. Participants included S5 and S6 learners, secondary school practitioners, school leaders (secondary head or depute head) and centre leaders (practitioners in a senior position in a college or higher education institution).

The interviews and focus groups were semi-structured and the topic guides contained broad open questions and a number of prompts to allow the conversations to be co-constructed between the researcher and participants, while bearing in mind the outcomes of a brief literature review which sought to understand key issues relating to internal assessment. This enabled participants to lead the discussion into areas that were of particular concern to them, and for interviewers to explore these areas in more depth.

The researchers provided definitions¹ of the terms 'internal assessment' and 'external assessment' at the start of each interview and focus group to support participants'

1 Internal assessment means work done by you in class that is marked or assessed by your teacher. An example of this from National 5 and Higher English is the Spoken Language component. For this, your teacher assesses your talking and listening skills during discussions, presentations etc. in class. Spoken Language is assessed by your teacher as either 'achieved' or 'not achieved' and it is an important part of your National 5 or Higher English award.

It is important to understand the difference between internal and '**external**' assessment. External assessment is work done by you which is marked or assessed by SQA. A clear example is your National 5 or Higher English exam, but another example is your portfolio-writing, which you work on in class and at home, but is sent away to be externally marked by SQA.

understanding. Participants were then asked if they were aware of which parts of their courses were internally or externally assessed, with additional explanation provided where necessary.

Recruitment

The SQA National Qualifications Survey 2025 was disseminated in September 2025 and respondents were asked to provide their contact details and availability if they were willing to participate in an interview or focus group to discuss internal assessment and grading of qualifications. This enabled the research team to email interested learners, practitioners and school leaders with more information about the research project and an invite to participate. Those who chose to participate were subsequently issued with a consent form and a Microsoft Teams meeting invite for an interview or focus group.

Centre leaders were recruited by email via Qualifications Scotland Coordinators and additional school leaders were recruited by emailing local authorities directly.

Data collection

Data collection took place between September and November 2025, and all interviews and focus groups were carried out online via Microsoft Teams.

Nine focus groups (five with learners and four with practitioners) and nine interviews (five with school leaders and four with centre leaders) were conducted in total.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus groups were used to gather rich insights into participants' views and experiences of internal assessment and grading of qualifications. With participants' consent, the interviews and focus groups were recorded using Microsoft Teams. The recordings were saved securely in a drive that was only accessible by the research team.

Data analysis

Transcripts from the interviews and focus groups were generated using Microsoft Teams. The researchers subsequently cleaned and anonymised the transcripts before uploading them to MaxQDA for coding. The data analysis followed an inductive, thematic approach.

Limitations

Despite being provided with definitions, participants' understanding of external assessment was often narrow, frequently equating it with exams rather than recognising the broader range of external assessment methods. This limitation should be considered when interpreting the findings.

More generally, there was evidence of limited assessment literacy among some participants. For example, internal assessment was at times conflated with ongoing assessment or understood solely as formative assessment. Conversely, some participants appeared to classify all non-exam assessment, such as coursework, as internal. These inconsistencies further qualify the reliability of participants' interpretations and should be borne in mind when drawing conclusions.

The focus groups and interviews were intended to illustrate a range of perspectives and not to be representative of the wider population.

As with any approach to the analysis of qualitative data, the results were subject to researcher interpretation.

Literature review

As part of the process of developing the research questions and topic guides for this research, we carried out a brief literature review around issues relating to internal assessment in different contexts. The results of that literature review are presented below.

Key findings

Internal assessment, including practitioner-marked coursework, projects, and practical or performance tasks, is used in varying proportions across jurisdictions. This reflects different cultural attitudes toward practitioner autonomy, assessment purpose, and quality assurance. Advocates highlight its potential to capture a wider range of skills than traditional, 'high-stakes' examinations, and to reduce pressure on learners, while aligning assessment more closely with teaching and learning. Internal assessment may also make systems more resilient to disruption (eg during COVID-19). However, evidence indicates that these benefits depend on careful implementation. Without robust moderation, practitioner support, and cultural acceptance, internal assessment can exacerbate inconsistency, bias, and workload challenges. Overall, the effectiveness of internal assessment rests on how it is designed, supported, and embedded within a wider assessment system.

Scope and definitions

Internal assessment refers to assessment marked internally by centres (generally by practitioners themselves) rather than external examiners.

Across jurisdictions, assessment systems demonstrate diverse approaches to internal assessment. These approaches may include coursework, quizzes, portfolios, presentations, and ongoing (continuous) assessment of everyday performance (OECD, 2021a) maintained in varying balance with exam-based assessment. For example, while England has largely removed practitioner-assessed coursework from its examination system, internal assessment provides major mark contributions to

secondary school grades in New Zealand, Norway, and Queensland, Australia. See Table 1 for a summary of differing balances between internal and external assessment across jurisdictions.

Why use internal assessment?

Internal assessment is promoted on the basis of several theoretical benefits relating to validity, pedagogy, and system resilience. However, empirical evidence reveals important caveats that complicate this picture.

Construct coverage: Internal assessment captures skills exams cannot assess effectively via, for example, practicals, performance, or extended projects (Harlen, 2024, 2005, Ofqual, 2018). This may enable assessment of a broader range of learning outcomes, better aligned with curriculum goals.

Benefits to practitioners and learners: Internal assessment is often promoted because it is perceived to place less pressure on practitioners and learners compared with external examinations. It also allows practitioners greater freedom to pursue and evaluate their own instructional goals, and can be integrated into teaching in a way that provides formative feedback to learners, ultimately enhancing experience and outcomes (Harlen, 2005).

Resilience: Education systems with greater reliance on internal assessment were more resilient to COVID-19 disruptions when exams could not take place (Hayward, 2023). In Scotland, the shift to practitioner-generated grades as a consequence of the Alternative Certification Model was popular among some, but not all, learners but was a challenge for practitioners to adopt given tight timescales and the workload required. OECD reviews (2021) which followed recommended the development of a more resilient upper-secondary assessment system in Scotland and a move away from a reliance on exams as the main form of assessment.

Evidence and caveats: Despite these theoretical advantages, empirical evidence regarding internal assessment effectiveness presents a more complex picture. In 2009, India shifted its school-based assessment system from a reliance on high stakes exams

to a system of continuous and frequent internal assessment (the Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation programme). An evaluation of the CCE undertaken in 2018 found no detectable impact of the change on test scores (Berry et al. 2018). Authors concluded that increasing the frequency of assessment without changing teaching practice or providing support to practitioners had little impact on learner outcomes. Similarly, while some evidence suggests internal assessment widens opportunities to demonstrate learning and can benefit learners who struggle with traditional examination formats, it may simultaneously amplify inequalities where practitioner judgement, workload, or resources differ across schools (Topping et al., 2022; Playfoot et al., 2022). This dual potential—to both enhance and undermine equity—depends heavily on implementation quality and the mitigation of bias (see below for more on bias in internal assessment).

Overall, evidence suggests that the benefits of internal assessment depend critically on how it is integrated into teaching and learning.

Scotland

Scotland has a well-established history of using internal assessment, most notably through the former unit-based structure of National Courses. Under this model, each course was divided into units, with learners required to complete internally assessed unit assessments, which were set and marked by practitioners. These assessments were subject to quality assurance by the Scottish Qualifications Authority and remained a mandatory component of certification until they were phased out in 2017.

The removal of mandatory unit assessments was influenced by a number of factors. Key concerns included the significant assessment burden placed on both practitioners and learners, with frequent cycles of testing and marking contributing to increased workload. In addition, concerns were raised regarding the consistency and overall quality of assessment judgements across centres. These factors led to a move towards a more streamlined assessment model favouring end of year high-stakes summative assessments.

International comparisons

Internal assessment practices vary significantly across jurisdictions, reflecting different cultural contexts, levels of practitioner autonomy, and approaches to quality assurance.

Evidence suggests that there is no single model of internal assessment associated with high-performing jurisdictions. The effectiveness of internal assessment seems to depend more on contextual fit and implementation than on specific structural features.

Highly regulated models: Systems like England and Wales maintain predominantly examination-based approaches while incorporating controlled internal assessment for the testing of specific aspects, such as practical or performance skills. Where internal assessment is used, it generally operates as a tightly controlled process carried out under practitioner supervision (OECD, 2021, SQA, 2022).

Transitional models: During a major reform in 2021, France's Baccalauréat introduced a balanced approach to assessment where 40% of final grades were drawn from internal, practitioner and test-based assessment. This shift represented a significant departure from France's traditionally centralised assessment culture (SQA, 2022).

High-trust models: Finland represents a high-trust model in which assessment design and marking during lower and upper secondary education are the responsibility of practitioners at the local level, with only the national Matriculation Examination externally assessed. Even within that examination, marking is first carried out by the subject practitioner in the learner's own school and subsequently reviewed by the Finnish Matriculation Examination Board. This arrangement embeds practitioner autonomy and professional judgement at the heart of the assessment process, supported by moderation rather than replaced by it. (SQA, 2022)

Balanced models: New Zealand's National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) offers a well-developed model that combines internal and external assessment within a single national framework. Learner achievement is recognised through a series of units or achievement standards, with unit standards assessed internally and achievement standards assessed either internally or externally, depending on their design. Internal assessments may involve a wide variety of evidence types, including written assignments, performances, oral presentations, and practical activities,

demonstrating flexibility in capturing different forms of learning. Quality assurance is ensured through the New Zealand Qualifications Authority's (NZQA) moderation system, which uses a sampling approach in which roughly ten per cent of each school's internal assessments are reviewed by a national network of moderators (SQA, 2022).

Table 1: Summary of balance between external and internal assessment across different jurisdictions. From OECD (2021a).

Jurisdiction	Suite of national exams by age	External exam system	External Assessment formats	Contribution of school-based assessments
England	16, 18	National, terminal written exams – fixed dates Graded on total marks	Mainly written	None in main subjects
France	18	National, terminal, written exams – fixed dates Fixed pass marks (10/20)	Written, oral	40% (inc. tests based on item bank)
Ireland	16,18	National, terminal, written exams – fixed dates Credit based	Typically 7 subject examinations	None in main subjects
New Zealand	17-18	External module assessments – fixed dates	Exams Portfolios Reports Performances	50% practitioner assessment
Norway	15, 18 (only 1 or 2 exams)	National – only taken by a sample of learners	National and local exams (including	Mainly practitioner assessed – including

			practicals and orals)	continuous assessment
Ontario (Canada)	Not applicable	No province-wide subject exams. Credit based Provincial literacy and numeracy tests	No external subject exams	Practitioner assessed, inc. school tests (30%)
Queensland (Australia)	18 (practitioner assessed, locally moderated)	From 2020 – statewide exam – worth 25% of total marks	Written exams introduced (25%) in 2020	75% based on coursework – practitioners mark, practitioner moderated
Scotland	14-16; 15-17; 16-18 (learners' progression rates vary)	National, timed, written exams – flexible age of entry, fixed exam dates	Mainly written	Coursework tasks (varying by subject practitioner assessed, externally moderated)
Wales	16, 18	National, timed, written exams – fixed dates	Mainly written	Coursework tasks (around 20%)
International Baccalaureate	17-18	Timed, written exams – fixed dates	Written, oral, practicals, projects	20-50% in subjects; internal assessment of core elements

Risks and challenges

Reliability and consistency

Internal assessment depends on practitioners' professional judgement, which research shows can vary significantly between practitioners, schools, subjects, and over time (Harlen, 2005, Lee and Newton, 2021). This variability arises from differences in task design, interpretation of criteria, and susceptibility to bias related to factors such as gender, behaviour, and overall ability (see below). While acknowledging that some variation is inevitable, inconsistency in marking may threaten comparability and fairness in high-stakes contexts. Harlen (2005) also identifies conditions that can reduce variation and improve reliability. Reliability is strengthened when practitioners use shared, detailed criteria aligned with learning goals, engage in professional moderation, and receive training that addresses sources of bias and enhances assessment literacy.

Bias and equity

Substantial evidence demonstrates that internal assessment marking (that is, by practitioners) can be biased based on multiple protected characteristics. Research across multiple jurisdictions reveals systematic patterns of differential judgement that affect fairness and equity in assessment outcomes.

Gender bias has been documented extensively, with evidence of differential judgments by learner gender across multiple countries. Studies demonstrate that practitioners may assess identical work differently depending on whether they believe it was produced by male or female learners (Olczyk et al., 2023; Gil-Hernández et al., 2024). These patterns vary by subject area and can advantage or disadvantage either gender depending on context.

Socioeconomic status represents another significant source of bias in practitioner assessment. Research evidence demonstrates that learners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds receive systematically lower practitioner assessments even when controlling for actual performance on standardised tests. This suggests that practitioners' judgements may be influenced by factors such as learner presentation,

parental engagement, access to resources, or implicit assumptions about ability linked to social class (Murphy & Wyness, 2020; Gil-Hernández et al., 2024).

Ethnicity and migrant status also influence practitioner judgements and recommendations. Research has documented bias in practitioner assessments and pathway recommendations for learners from ethnic minority backgrounds or with migrant status, even when these learners demonstrate equivalent levels of achievement (Carlana et al., 2022; Gil-Hernández et al., 2024). Such biases can have long-term consequences for educational pathways and opportunities.

Special educational needs and neurodivergence present additional challenges. Research indicates that implicit bias affects assessment of neurodivergent learners, with practitioners potentially conflating behavioural characteristics with academic ability or allowing preconceptions about learning differences to influence their professional judgements (Robertshaw, 2025). This can result in systematic under-recognition of neurodivergent learners' capabilities and achievements.

Research shows that different assessment formats introduce specific bias patterns that interact with these demographic factors. Multiple-choice questions may disadvantage some genders in certain subjects, while written examinations place particular stress on English as an Additional Language learners who may possess strong subject knowledge but face linguistic barriers. Portfolios and peer assessments, while offering flexibility and authenticity, risk increased subjectivity and opportunities for bias to influence outcomes unless carefully structured with clear criteria and moderation processes (Wilson et al., 2025, unpublished)

Importantly, while practitioner training (eg Implicit Bias training) can raise awareness of these issues, research indicates it has limited impact on actual behaviour and assessment outcomes (Doyle et al., 2024; Atewologun et al., 2018). This suggests that structural and procedural interventions, rather than training alone, are necessary to mitigate bias in internal assessment.

Workload Implications

Frequent internal assessment tasks increase practitioner workload significantly, creating pressures that can have cascading effects on assessment quality and equity (Harlen, 2004, 2005). The burden of designing assessment tasks, marking learner work, providing meaningful feedback, and maintaining records accumulates rapidly when internal assessment becomes a substantial component of the qualification system. This increased workload can exacerbate bias, as practitioners working under time pressure may rely more heavily on implicit assumptions rather than careful evaluation of learner work. Furthermore, the quality of feedback provided to learners - one of the key benefits of internal assessment (Wilson et al., 2025 unpublished) may be compromised when practitioners are overwhelmed by assessment demands.

Workload concerns have been a major factor in stakeholder resistance to internal assessment expansion, particularly among practitioners, and demonstrates that even well-designed assessment reforms can falter without adequate consideration of practical demands on practitioners.

Stakeholder support

Ireland's experience with classroom-based assessment (CBA) demonstrates the importance of stakeholder engagement. A revised framework for Junior Cycle proposed in 2012 envisaged that CBAs (ie internal assessment) would constitute 40% of overall marks, substantially reducing the external examination weighting to 60%. This proposal faced considerable opposition from teaching unions, who raised concerns about practitioners assessing their own learners, increased workload burdens, and lack of clarity about moderation procedures. The industrial action that followed, including policies of non-cooperation with planning measures, led to the publication of a revised framework in 2015 in which the role of CBAs was greatly diminished (SQA, 2022)

This experience demonstrates that cultural factors and stakeholder buy-in are crucial for any jurisdiction seeking to implement internal assessment. Even assessment reforms that may offer educational benefits can fail or require substantial modification if they do not adequately address the practical concerns of practitioners who must implement

them, secure support from professional bodies and unions, or align with established cultural expectations about assessment.

Critical success factors

For education systems considering enhanced internal assessment, the evidence points to several critical factors:

1. Building stakeholder trust and buy-in: Cultural acceptance and professional confidence are essential, as demonstrated by contrasting experiences in Ireland and Finland
2. Robust quality assurance mechanisms: Systematic moderation and standardisation processes must be in place
3. Practitioner support and trust: High-trust models like Finland function effectively when practitioners are highly qualified and professionally respected
4. Integration with teaching: Increasing the proportion or frequency of internal assessment without changing the ways courses are delivered is counterproductive.
5. Cultural change: New assessment approaches may require fundamental shifts in professional culture and public understanding

Conclusions

Internal assessment can greatly enhance construct coverage and system resilience by enabling the evaluation of skills and knowledge beyond what external exams can capture, supporting learning through formative feedback, and maintaining assessment continuity during disruptions. However, these benefits depend on effectively managing risks through robust bias mitigation, careful moderation, and workload management and support for practitioners. Successful implementation also requires cultural change in order to build stakeholder and public trust. The challenge lies in designing and implementing internal assessment systems that deliver on their promise while maintaining fairness, quality, and trust.

Findings

Learners

Experiences of internal assessment

Learners were asked about their experiences of internal assessment and discussed their recent experiences of it in a variety of subjects, including Art, Biology, Communications, Drama, English, Geography, History, Languages, Travel & Tourism, PE and Practical Cookery. Learners shared their experiences of undertaking internal assessments, the different types of pressure internal assessment presented and the impact that internal assessment had on their workload, time and school resources.

Perceptions and stress

There was a perception among some learners that internal assessment was easier than external assessment as they were given more time to complete the assessments, and this was particularly helpful for learners with ASN².

If you do more internal assessments, then I think a lot more people pass. It'll be easier for a lot more people.

I think it's easier because I have dyslexia, so I work a bit slower and ... obviously I get extra time, but I feel as though having like a day and then another night to kind of think my thoughts over and like do it. If I do get another day to do such with internal examinations.

² There is a well-established Qualifications Scotland process for disabled learners and those with additional support needs to be provided with assessment arrangements or reasonable adjustments to give them an equal opportunity to demonstrate their attainment. However, it is recognised that for many learners, including those with ASN, external assessment is nevertheless perceived as more stressful than internal.

Some learners also felt that internal assessment was less stressful than external assessment. However, there were nuances to this view, as some learners expressed the pressure they felt of 'performing' for their practitioners who would be marking their assessment.

For German it's 30% of the mark and that is a lot of pressure. I spent a month on it and didn't do very well. I found it really stressful trying to talk to my teacher like it's normal but it's a very weird situation; the recording of the exercise is stressful, more stressful in German because if I made a mistake I couldn't change it.

There were some added stresses for learners with ASN and assessments that involved communication.

I did an internal assessment for English, which was a speaking assessment, but part of it was based on eye contact, which I think potentially wasn't very good for, you know, anxiety or autistic people who struggle with eye contact.

For English, I don't think I could have done a class presentation... I don't think that's fair, especially for people who have lots of stage fright. That is just not fair.

In contrast, some learners did prefer their work to be marked by an practitioner who knew them and how they worked as this allowed for feedback, improvement and understanding.

Teachers can obviously go back and say, listen, you've went wrong here or I need you to just work on this ... the teacher knows how you work, but the SQA marker doesn't.

A distinct positive of learners' experiences with internal assessment was the feedback they received and the timeliness of it.

It works well, and we get feedback. If we are not happy, we can discuss the result directly with the teacher. Sometimes we can see the paper and where we went wrong; this is very useful.

You get the results back quicker with internal. It helps you for when you're going to do your next one, because you can apply the feedback.

This emphasises that some learners found internal assessment useful for the development of their learning, using the feedback and reflecting on what they needed to improve on for the future.

Workload, time and resources

Some learners expressed frustration about the amount of class time and resources that were devoted to internal assessment, which had resulted in missed learning opportunities

Because there are so many learners in my class, it is a lot of work to prepare us for the assessment and can take up quite a lot of class time; for Higher English this year we spent three weeks on the talk.

They might have to shut down classrooms for full days to do speaking assessments. You're missing lessons because of that. And we did it February, March time, and that's like a high stress period for an exam diet, like, you cannot be missing class at that point.

Furthermore, one learner expressed frustration about the repetition of evidence gathering in certain subjects. This was also a view shared by a number of practitioners.

It can be very repetitive, where you have to do the same tests again and again. It gets boring a lot of the time, and I don't want to learn the same thing again and again.

In contrast, there were learners who welcomed the flexibility of internal assessment as it meant they were able to spend more time on assessments when necessary.

There is greater flexibility with internal assessment, which is better if you don't manage to get something handed in on time, teachers can give you more time.

Maybe if they [learners] don't really feel as confident, and then they go in and do the exam and they don't feel as if they've done their best, they worry about it. Whereas if you've got so many different things [opportunities for assessment] and longer to do it, it just makes you feel more confident within yourself.

Overall, learners' experiences of internal assessment were mixed. There were concerns over workload and the time taken to undertake internal assessments, as well as a different type of pressure to perform in front of, and for their classroom practitioners. Learners also shared positive experiences of internal assessment: they felt it was less stressful overall, liked the feedback they received, and found elements of internal assessment easier than external assessment.

Suitability of internal assessment

Learners were asked two questions about the suitability of internal assessment: whether it worked better for some courses than others, and whether it was a more or less effective method of assessing knowledge and skills than external assessment.

There was no clear consensus among learners on whether internal assessment worked better for some courses than others. Learners also reported mixed views regarding the most effective method of assessing knowledge and skills, recognising benefits associated with both internal and external assessment. Two key themes emerged from the responses, which reinforce findings presented elsewhere in the report: internal assessment was perceived as being more flexible and placing less pressure on learners, while external assessment was considered more rigorous and a fairer measure of knowledge and skills.

Course suitability

When learners were asked whether internal assessment worked better for some courses than others, there was no clear consensus. English was the only subject mentioned by several learners, although views varied. Some learners felt that internal assessment in English was advantageous because it helped them manage the volume

of material requiring memorisation and reduced the pressure associated with externally assessed presentations. In contrast, others suggested that external assessment was beneficial as it could be more motivating and was perceived as more rigorous due to the external marking process.

Assessing knowledge and skills

Learners held mixed views on the most effective method of assessing knowledge and skills, recognising benefits of both internal and external assessment. Some felt that internal assessment provided a better measure of knowledge and skills over the school year, with one learner noting that regular feedback supported preparation for externally assessed exams.

Internal assessments are showing us what you know, the knowledge we have to take in, what we have to study, what we have to revise ... so I personally feel like the internal assessments are more effective.

I feel like an ongoing assessment during the year would tell a lot more than just one day of the year.

Overall, the learner responses tended to fall into two themes: internal assessment was seen as less pressurised and more flexible, while external assessment was viewed as fairer and more rigorous.

Internal assessment: less pressure, more flexibility

A number of learners felt that internal assessment placed less pressure on them and was 'easier' than external assessment.

I just think it's better to do the internal because they can use their knowledge from the time and they don't have to be under the pressure of just the one exam day.

One learner emphasised the benefit of doing smaller, ongoing class tests rather than one externally assessed final exam.

When you're doing the little test, it's like the knowledge is all fresh to you.

Some also commented on the flexibility of internal assessment, noting the ability to use additional time, resubmit work and request extensions to deadlines when necessary. Additionally, one learner mentioned the perception of greater leniency in internal marking.

It's very difficult at times whereas internal, if you missed one word in the quote your teacher would still give you the mark because they know you would have forgot something like that. But external be very different.

External assessment: fairer, more rigorous

A number of learners reported a preference for external marking as it was thought to be more 'accurate' and 'specialised', and did not pose the same risk of teacher bias or subjectivity that was perceived by some to be a possibility with the marking of internal assessment.

Learners also highlighted other benefits of external assessment. They noted that it was more standardised, harder to cheat compared with internal assessment, and provided a useful measure of independence and the ability to cope under pressure.

I think external assessment is better for like judging independence and fairness. Everyone gets the same paper. As I said, the same timing and the same marking standards, which assesses your skills more and as far as internal assessment.

Advantages of internal and external assessment

Learners were asked to reflect on the perceived advantages of internal and external assessment. Overall, although learners noted a slight preference for internal assessment (highlighting its role in providing clarity around progress, reducing pressure, and enabling more meaningful feedback), there was clear support for the consistency of standards around external assessment.

Pressure and anxiety

A key theme across the focus groups was the reduced pressure associated with internal assessment. Learners described feeling more at ease when assessments were conducted by practitioners they knew and when performance was not concentrated into a single high-stakes assessment. While some learners noted a desire to do well for practitioners with whom they had built relationships, this was generally viewed as a more positive and motivating form of pressure.

I feel under less pressure during internal assessments as the teachers can provide us with a little bit of extra time. I don't go home and panic about internal assessments as much afterwards.

Internal is less stressful because we know who is assessing us, but at the same time, because we know they are assessing us and we have built up a relationship over two years we want to do well and feels like there is pressure to do better, we don't want to disappoint them if we don't do well.

In contrast, some learners viewed the pressure of external assessments as a positive as it demonstrated their ability to cope and perform under stress.

External assessment may have more integrity as it shows how much you can remember ... it shows how much you can handle the pressures and the stress, which is important.

It showed how much information you could memorise and how you perform under the pressure of an exam.

Flexibility within assessment processes

Learners described internal assessment as offering greater flexibility. Participants noted that internal assessments were often less constrained by strict time limits and could be completed over more than one session, which was perceived as more manageable. This flexibility was seen as particularly beneficial when learners required additional time or encountered difficulties meeting deadlines.

There is more flexibility with internal assessment, which means it's better if you don't manage to get something handed in on time ... teachers can sometimes give you more time.

Learners also highlighted the value of being able to engage directly with practitioners during the internal assessment process, which they felt contributed to a more supportive experience.

I can get more support with an internal assessment as we can speak with the teacher about it.

Reliability and fairness

Learners expressed mixed views on the fairness of internal and external assessments. While internal assessment was valued for the opportunity to access support and feedback from practitioners, some learners perceived external assessments as fairer and more objective, noting that standardised conditions and external marking reduced the potential for bias and ensured consistency across candidates.

External assessments are better for independence and fairness. Internal assessments can have bias in it. The SQA marking is a better process and, yeah, can avoid teacher bias if there is a bad relationship with you.

Feedback and timeliness of results

Learners strongly valued the quality and timeliness of feedback associated with internal assessment. Participants highlighted the importance of receiving feedback that could be discussed with practitioners and applied to subsequent assessments. The quicker turnaround of results was also viewed as beneficial, particularly when compared to the external marking processes where no feedback was offered.

It gets marked more quickly with internal, so, for example for Art, you get the results pretty quickly, rather than shipping it off to the SQA and waiting for hundreds of others to be marked as well.

The availability of meaningful feedback was seen as a key advantage in supporting learning and improvement.

It works well, and we get the feedback. If we are not happy, we can talk about the result with our teacher.

Sometimes we can see the paper and where we went wrong, yes this is useful and helpful. Feedback is important when we are trying to learn.

Confidence and self-belief

Learners associated internal assessment with increased confidence, particularly where assessments allowed sufficient time to demonstrate understanding. This was highlighted in subjects with significant content demands, where learners felt that internal assessment reduced reliance on memorisation and supported more thoughtful responses.

When we have more time to undertake the assessment it makes me feel more confident that I can do well.

Several learners perceived internal assessment as less strict in terms of marking, which further contributed to confidence in their performance.

Understanding progress and attainment

Participants reported that internal assessment provided clearer insight into their progress across the year. Some learners felt that assessments throughout the academic year helped them understand how they were performing and whether they were meeting expectations. Internal assessment was therefore seen as more effective in capturing learning over time compared with external assessment. This ongoing insight into progress was viewed as supporting both motivation and engagement.

Internal assessment gives us more information on where we are during the year. I think they are more effective and help to motivate us.

Confidence in marking

Learners were divided as to whether internal or external assessment offered greater confidence in the marking of assessments. Although some learners felt that practitioners were better placed to assess their attainment accurately, as they had a more holistic understanding of learners' abilities and progress across the course, others perceived externally marked assessments as fairer and had greater confidence in the ability and skills of external markers to maintain standards.

I take the SQA more seriously with their marking. A teacher will teach and mark and they may be biased in some way towards their pupils. SQA can be more objective, which is fairer.

Not all teachers have the same skills. For me, SQA are held in high esteem and trusted more. This means that standardisation can happen with external assessments.

Disadvantages of internal and external assessment

During the focus groups, learners were asked to consider the perceived disadvantages of both internal and external assessment. A broader range of disadvantages was identified in relation to internal assessment. Participants highlighted challenges around the standardisation of internally marked assessments, the potential for a lack of fairness, and the stressful elements of internal assessments. However, some learners also highlighted stress as a key disadvantage of external assessment, particularly with high stakes end of term assessments that are determined by performance on a single day. Other learners stated that external assessments felt like a test of a learner's ability to memorise information, rather than an examination of their knowledge and understanding.

Stress or pressure

Several learners believed internal assessment was more stressful compared with external assessment. In particular, they stated that the frequency of internal assessments could be overwhelming and that, if they performed poorly in an internal assessment, they experienced feelings of guilt as their practitioners were more aware of their performance. Some learners also believed internal assessment increased workload and pressure for practitioners.

I feel like if you do bad in that internal assessment, you feel guilty or ... it's a burden not doing well. So, sometimes, I feel like they [should] cut down the assessments [and] make it less stressful than it has to be.

Probably just a lot more stress on the teacher, since if they've got multiple classes like a National 5 and a Higher, they've then got to mark pretty much everybody's work.

In contrast, other learners felt that external assessments caused a great deal of stress and added pressure, and preferred internal assessments.

I think that the external assessments are good but just having one at the end of the year obviously you'd have more for all your subjects. It's a lot of pressure, especially for the things that you learn towards the start of the course and I think it would ... be better to maybe have a couple spread out.

We know it will be over within like two and a bit hours, which is fine. That is a lot of stress. It's so much of our grades based off of that. And our coursework is also externally assessed to an extent... it's not possible to do a good essay, memorise it and write up in under an hour. Most of my grades were done externally and that was so difficult because of the large percentages - most of it was 80% versus the 20% of your coursework, which wasn't even really coursework.

It is a lot more stressful than the internal ones because internal ones ... it's like you're gathering the knowledge and it's fresh, so that you can do the test

throughout the year, but then with exams at the end of the year, it is more stressful

...

Validity and fairness

Two closely related themes that emerged from learners' feedback were standards and fairness. Learners reported perceiving internal assessments as less credible than external assessments, partly due to a higher level of trust in markers from SQA. They suggested that some practitioners may not possess the same level of subject knowledge or assessment experience as external assessors.

In addition, learners raised concerns regarding the consistency of standardisation in internal assessments. In particular, the potential for bias in marking was highlighted as a factor that could affect the rigour and objectivity of the assessment process. Some learners also noted that internal assessment may present greater opportunities for cheating among peers.

SQA ... I feel like they're not being biased ... SQA they've not actually spoken to you. So they're doing it [marking] from an outsider's perspective ... you're judging it based on the actual work that they've provided and produced for you to mark.

I think in my opinion the external assessment felt much fairer and more professional in the sense [that] everyone across Scotland sat the same exam, so it was more professional in that sense, whereas when ... I was doing National 5 History, there were internal assessments, which were not much monitored, so people had more chances of cheating or other factors. So, that's why I kind of agree with the other statement that if there was more than one external assessment could be much better to test the real understanding of people's knowledge ...

To me in my head it feels less professional ... I don't trust the [internal assessment] results as much as SQA ... I just feel like I take the SQA more seriously with their marking because they're working specifically towards that ... I feel like they're not being biased.

Memorisation

Several participants stated that rather than testing a learner's knowledge and understanding, they believed that external assessments, in the form of end of term exams, were more a test of a learner's ability to memorise information.

It shows how much you truly can memorise and do in a certain period of time.

For Modern Studies, for example, we are memorising over 300 statistics that may come up in our exam. The only skill you need for any exam that I've noticed across all of my eight subjects last year is a good memory, and because it's externally done, we know we've got like one shot at it.

Grading

The learners interviewed said that they valued a grade because they felt they could better assess their own ability and how well they had performed in the qualification. Some learners explained that a grade also allowed them to track their learning and make improvements if necessary.

I think that the letters [grades] can help the signage between a really good understanding and maybe just like an OK understanding.

... if you pass, you don't know if you pass really well, you don't know if you worked hard enough or you were just on the edge and you need to work more for the next year. So I think it's always good to have more information on that.

For some learners, grading was not only useful for them to track their own ability but considered important for employers and universities to understand learners' competence in a subject. Some expressed that this made the qualification more valuable.

If you're applying for a job and they happen to see your grades, then they're going to look for the people with the higher - the more higher percentages, or the

more higher grades of passing, because then that means that they were better at that subject or they have more knowledge than the person of the standard pass.

... for things like university, they can see how well you understand that subject rather than just a simple, like, pass or fail because you could get 51% and pass, or 49% and fail, and it's a little bit more nuanced than just a pass or a fail.

As well as expressing the benefits of a graded system, participants also explained what they felt the drawbacks were of assessing learners on a pass/fail basis. Some participants suggested that a pass/fail assessment could demotivate learners by encouraging them to do the bare minimum needed to get a 'pass' result. One participant also expressed that a pass/fail result was unfair as they felt that it did not account for the range of ability in the 'pass' group.

I try my best, but then I think about it, like, if the boundary is 50% that means that I only have to do, like, two modules or half the module, and ... it also kind of discourages people from trying their best, because if they know they can pass without putting in too much effort, then what, kind of, pushes them to try and get that higher score?

Despite showing strong preferences for graded qualifications, learner participants also acknowledged that a pass/fail result may be more suitable for some subjects than others. Maths and English were repeatedly mentioned as subjects that learners felt should be graded. This was because they felt that they were important for most jobs, whereas they perceived other subjects to be less important for future work but did not specify what these were.

It depends what subject it is because - and it also depends what type of job you want to do when you're leaving - I feel like English is always a really important one to have because everybody says you need that for everything, whereas I feel the rest are less important, in my mind anyway.

Future considerations

Learners were asked whether they would like to see more or less internal assessment in the future and why, what types of assessment they thought should be used more than they currently are and why, and what they thought would be important for Qualifications Scotland to consider when making decisions about how courses are assessed.

The main theme that emerged here was a general preference for an increase in internal assessment, although there were mixed views on the specific types of assessment that should be used. Learners also expressed a desire for better communication, improvements to the format of assessments and a shared understanding of the purpose of assessment.

Internal assessment benefits

Some learners reported a preference for more internal assessment and cited various benefits, including the ability to receive feedback and to keep track of progress, which could be used to improve in future, unlike external assessment where no feedback is given.

You can figure out how well you're doing for your teachers, but you can just work on that. That's not necessarily your final mark.

It was also suggested by participants that internal assessment provided learners with a greater opportunity to achieve a qualification, as it was perceived to be less stressful than external assessment, whether in the form of an exam or a class test. As a result, learners were considered to experience lower levels of anxiety and to perform more effectively.

Learners felt that having marks secured from internal assessments reduced the pressure associated with external assessments. There was a view that one high-stakes exam should not define a learner's grade.

It's good to have stuff ... that's ... not all based on your final exam, like having a project in sciences so that you have ... a backup.

External assessment benefits

Although the majority view was a preference for more internal assessment, some learners recognised the advantages of external assessment, including the perception that it was more reliable. Linked to this, learners suggested that internal assessment being as rigorously monitored as external would be an improvement, due to the perception that external assessment is more robust.

Some learners recognised the benefits of exams, reporting that exams gave learners something to focus on and build towards across the year. English exams were cited as a good example, in terms of how marks were split into topic areas and this was something learners wanted to see more of in other subjects.

Types of assessment

Learners gave a range of examples of the types of assessment they felt should be used more than they currently are. Some wanted more group assessments, as they enjoyed working with others and felt these assessments improved their communication skills. Others preferred exams, with some specifically favouring written exams over speaking or listening exams. However, other learners wanted more open book assessments, as they felt these were less stressful.

Some learners thought that the type of assessment used should be subject dependent. For example, some felt creative subjects should be folio based, and others thought Science and Maths should have ongoing assessment throughout the year because, according to these learners, this would reduce the anxiety associated with a high-stakes final exam.

Some learners believed that essays should be internally assessed because exams were widely seen as memory tests, rather than a test of how to write a good essay. As one learner explained, the problem with externally assessing essays under exam conditions is that:

It's not really assessing ... it's how well we can remember an essay we already wrote, you know?

Format of assessments

Learners made several suggestions about how the format of assessments could be improved, including:

- Clearer wording of exam questions.
- Allowing more time for exams and including breaks.
- Introducing more variety in assessment to suit all learners, including ASN learners.
- Considering whether exams could be typed, rather than handwritten, as learners felt this would make assessments more focused on knowledge rather than writing speed.

There was also a view that assessment should focus more on allowing learners to show what they know and can do.

Communication

Communication was a common theme among learners, particularly in relation to clarity and timeliness.

Learners thought that any planned changes to assessment should be communicated as early as possible to avoid causing learners anxiety. Higher Geography was cited as an example, in that changes were made after course content had been learned, which learners found frustrating due to a perception that their time had been wasted.

Furthermore, learners felt that clearer communication about the appeals process, marking and grades would help to increase their understanding in these areas, particularly around expectations.

They change the grades every time, basically based on the marking scheme. And we find that really difficult because we can never truly know what the marking scheme is or what is expected from us when we walk into the exam.

Additionally, learners thought it would be helpful to provide information for parents and carers that explained the exam timetable, including statistics on the number of learners taking particular subjects.

Learners wanted clearer communication to promote and improve the recognition of Scottish qualifications outside of Scotland. There was a view that Scottish qualifications, such as Highers, were not as well recognised or understood in the rest of the UK and that communication was needed to address this.

For a lot of ... people, for lots of jobs ... in England and Wales, Highers aren't really seen as a real qualification ... because nobody knows what it is. So maybe just having any sort of communication across the country of what it is so we can get hired in the future, that would be really helpful.

Finally, it was thought that Qualifications Scotland should listen to feedback from learners on the types of issues discussed during the focus groups. Learners were also keen for Qualifications Scotland to consider practitioners and ask for their feedback.

Workload

Some learners thought that more consideration should be given to their own workload and work-life balance to help reduce pressure on them. Similarly, some learners reported that the exam timetable felt too compressed and should be more spaced out, particularly for subjects with large cohorts..

Practitioners

Experiences of internal assessment

Practitioners were able to provide a wide view over multiple years on how internal assessment impacts the progression and development of learners. Practitioners also commented on the workload that internal assessment creates for them, whilst still acknowledging that it can often be fairer for learners.

Management of assessment

Practitioners shared various positive elements of internal assessment, largely through the perceived benefits of their having more control over the planning of assessment and delivering of results to learners. They also felt that learners are more likely to receive the grades they deserve with internal assessment.

If it's marked internally, they're going to get what they deserve... I believe Art and Design, certainly, and I think a lot of practical subjects, probably benefit from being marked internally.

The planning becomes a lot easier when ... [you have] more of a better idea of what the assessment's going to look like at the end. And so when you're able to design that assessment yourself, you're able to just to make sure that everything kind of fits.

Workload

Practitioners raised the issue of delivering National 4 and National 5 qualifications in the same classroom, a logistical issue that creates more work for practitioners. There were some examples of practitioners and centres taking the decision to not run certain courses because they thought that the National 4 and National 5 courses are so different that they cannot be taught in the same class.

In Biology, the courses don't run the same. So you end up basically trying to run two courses in the same class. That becomes very divisive for the pupils because they're like, 'Oh, why am I doing something different from them? Am I thick? Are they smarter than me?' So that that's really difficult.

Admin and IT is a wee bit harder [than Business Management] – National 4's tricky to teach in one classroom with National 5s, especially with the exam.

Practitioners highlighted challenges associated with poor attendance and the effect this had on gathering evidence or material for internal assessment of National 4 learners. This in turn increased practitioner workload as assessment and evidence gathering had to take place in a truncated time period.

We have at least one National 4 Biology class each year and absence can be an issue for us. It can make it hard for pupils to achieve since they need to be in school for so many aspects of the assessment.

... many learners are non-attenders and that is tricky for the National courses.

In addition, practitioners raised concerns about outdated SQA resources, the limited number of exemplars available and the lack of detail provided within them. This resulted in practitioners having to write their own exemplars, narrow teaching content to suit the exemplars available or amend assessments to suit the current course content.

I would echo that across to RMPS as well because ... they give you six religions and they don't then give you what you're supposed to do for each of the questions, for each of the six religions, and so it really kind of narrows the actual topics that you're doing.

Although it's more time consuming, I have found that it is easier to write your own ... than trying to rely on what's available through SQA Secure.

An issue is the scarcity of sample materials. On SQA Secure there are one or two examples that have been there since day one. Handing out a paper that says '2007'; it's out of date. When you've got candidates who don't achieve it the first

time, there is maybe one example of each ... subtopic [so] if you're giving a candidate a second or third go at it, there aren't any other examples.

The assessments are not updated in line with the new course content, so they seem to have this lag. So we got new Advanced Higher Biology [assessments] and ... there's still content in them that we don't teach anymore. We've actually had to take two questions out because we don't teach it, so they're not actually out of 40 as they should be; they're out of 37 or 38. So you know, it looks terrible... there seems to be a big lag between all the externally provided resources being updated.

Progression

While practitioners suggested that internal assessment is useful and worthwhile in some courses and situations, they thought that there are instances where the step up to the next level, which relies more on external assessment, is too large for some learners to cope with, which can lead to learners dropping the subject.

... it [internal assessment] does help more pupils, but what we've all said is that the jump from internally assessed courses to externally assessed courses is too high; there needs to be something in the middle, we're missing something between the internal assessment and the very long external assessment.

The jump between the internally assessed National 4 courses to externally assessed National 5 courses is far too big.

In terms of Applications of Maths, what we teach does feature later on. So, in that sense that there is a nice progression. But what I would say is on the Maths side, the leap between that and that [Nat] 5, ... The leap is almost impossible. ... That gap just needs to be reduced a bit.

The other disadvantage is the progression from National 4 to National 5 Biology - they tend not to attain at National 5 if they come from National 4. Our school

have removed progression to National 5 Biology from National 4 Biology for this reason.

Practitioners were more positive about the use of internal assessment when talking about National Progression Awards (NPAs) and Skills for Work courses. Related to the point above about progression, participants also raised that, for some learners, it would be beneficial to have more internal assessment at higher levels of qualifications.

[The] Skills for Work course works well for internal assessment because it does what it's meant to do (interviews, roleplays, CVs); internal assessments that are suitable for the type of course.

We feel the exam is a no-go for a lot of our pupils; pupils hear 'external exam' and they 'clench up' so the internal assessments are beneficial, including NPAs which give us breadth and depth but does disadvantage those who want to and are ready to move up.

Maintaining standards

Whilst practitioners expressed that their experience of internal assessment had been positive and rigorous, there nevertheless remained some concerns around the standard of internal assessment. On the other hand, at the same time, there were also comments that internal assessment better reflected learner achievement.

It is still a lot of work because in English it's so subjective. So we have to work hard on verifying and making sure we're passing accurately.

We work hard to moderate in department. We also have markers. I think if it was all internal assessment that would be such a challenge for trying to make sure we're all consistent.

Concerns about the maintenance of standards were often couched in terms of perceptions of practice in other centres.

We ensure that we stick rigidly to the rules but have heard of others that do not.

I have heard first hand of other schools where assessments that are supposed to be set out and run a particular way are not getting run like that. So for some of us who are maybe doing everything by the book, there are some schools where they're just letting pupils away with things that they're maybe not supposed to. Like in terms of National 5 assignments [where learners] are allowed to bring in some notes, ... some schools are allowing them to bring in a full draft, and then they just copy [it] out. Or, you know, an awful lot more than what they're supposed to be bringing in. Whereas they're only really supposed to have a tiny amount of support.

Suitability of internal assessment

Practitioners were asked three questions about the suitability of internal assessment: whether it worked better for some courses than others, whether it suited some learners better than others, and whether it was a more or less effective method of assessing knowledge and skills than external assessment.

Practitioners held mixed opinions on whether internal assessment worked better for some courses than others, recognising its advantages for practical courses but raising concerns about workload and learner progression. Regarding its suitability for different learners, practitioners acknowledged the benefits of internal assessment for learners generally, and particularly for those in lower attainment groups and those with ASN.

Practitioners were uncertain whether internal assessment was the most effective method of assessing knowledge and skills, noting that this often depended on the course, subject or learner. They identified advantages such as the ability to track learner progress alongside disadvantages including the potential for reduced consistency of standards.

Course suitability

When practitioners were asked whether internal assessment worked better for some courses than others, they shared a range of views. Some practitioners highlighted the

benefits of internal assessment for practical courses, such as Art and Design, Skills for Work and National Progression Awards, noting that it provided clear outcomes, suited the learners on these courses, and allowed for a fairer marking process.

We run National 5 Health Sector and it works very well in that. It is also a standalone course and we normally use it as a progression from National 4 Biology. This suits the type of learner that comes from National 4.

We've started running the level 5 Laboratory Science ... and because that's a practical based course ... I think [it] works really well as an internally assessed one because the kids that we have or the candidates we have in it are ones who've generally struggled with National 5 in the discrete science.

So for Art and Design ... now all the folios are sent away to be marked externally and we have had so many problems with marking coming back completely different to what we've predicted for these kids. You don't know why that's happened, whereas if it's marked internally and then verified they're going to get what they deserve.

However, practitioners believed that internal assessment was less effective in some courses due to factors such as workload and learner progression.

I think if we're looking at English, the outcomes are very doable in National 4 ... my fear is that National 5 will become internally assessed because that would be an immense amount of workload.

I think it works better [in National 5 Health Sector] than how internal assessment works in relation to progression from National 4 Biology to National 5 Biology. The assessment in National 4 Biology doesn't prep pupils as well for progression to National 5 Biology.

Learner progression was a concern raised by several practitioners, particularly around the difference in expectations between courses, and the limited progression options for some learners.

I would agree the progression from National 4 to National 5 is almost impossible. The progression from National 5 to Higher for your borderline kids, there's nothing for them, they have to go sideways.

... the National Progression Award courses don't then link well to the Higher sciences again, so the pathway for the kids to get to the Highers is much more difficult now than what it once was.

... we now have a breadth of curriculum instead of stepping stones, so they're [learners] getting more at one level and not advancing.

One practitioner highlighted an inconsistency in course options across subjects, noting that National Progression Awards were available in some subjects but not others, therefore limiting options for learners in certain subject areas.

Some practitioners reflected on historical qualifications, such as Standard Grades, and on National 1 and 2 courses, which were perceived to offer better opportunities for learners to achieve success.

Suitability for learners

When practitioners were asked whether internal assessment suited some learners better than others, one suggested that it was particularly beneficial for learners who experienced 'performance anxiety', as it allowed them to complete their assessments in a 'comfortable environment' with a familiar practitioner.

More broadly, practitioners recognised the benefits of internal assessment for learners overall, and especially for those in lower attainment groups and those with ASN, as it made achievement more accessible. Some practitioners also noted that learners tended to prefer internal assessment and they believed learners would often choose courses based on the assessment method.

... 52% [of learners in the school] probably don't speak English as their first language at home so the idea that all of those young people would be able to access an external exam isn't realistic. Internal assessment does have a role for

those young people being able to access the same opportunities as everyone else and as a stepping stone in the progression.

... like everything, if it benefits a pupil with ASN, it will benefit any pupil.

... those smaller pieces of work where they're getting a genuine qualification and they are succeeding; I'm seeing increased confidence, I'm seeing increased engagement, I'm seeing an increased attendance across my classes.

School attendance was raised by a few practitioners, with one highlighting that achieving success through internal assessment was more difficult for learners who did not attend school regularly.

We have at least one National 4 Biology class each year and absence can be an issue for us. It can make it hard for pupils to achieve since they need to be in school for so many aspects of the assessment.

Assessing knowledge and skills

Practitioners had mixed views on whether internal assessment was the most effective method of assessing knowledge and skills, with some suggesting that it was dependent on the course, subject or learner.

I think it depends on the course and what the pupil is aiming for after school.

I think it actually might be quite subject dependent.

Some practitioners recognised that internal assessment helped track learner progress and identify next steps and reduced reliance on end of term, externally assessed exam performance. They also thought that internally assessed courses gave certain cohorts of learners something to aspire to.

However, a number of practitioners were concerned about the impact of internal assessment on their workload, due to additional marking and evidence generation, subjectivity in the marking process, and a potential reduction in the consistency of standards.

I think it [internal assessment] could be more effective if we didn't have to generate the amount of evidence that we have to generate.

So it's the concern when everyone's doing their own thing in their school and despite the verification process and everything, it's hard to have that [the standards] consistent.

I mean an external exam is always going to assess knowledge and skills better, especially across Scotland and comparatively across Scotland. Internal assessment is always more subjective and it always will be just because of the different ways that people will assess the kids.

Some practitioners thought that externally assessed exams were a more valued and comparative measure of learners' knowledge and skills, and necessary to help learners develop the exam skills required for future education and employment.

Advantages of internal and external assessment

Practitioner focus group participants were asked to consider the advantages of internal and external assessment. Across the focus groups, practitioners highlighted internal assessment as a more supportive, equitable, and informative approach than high-stakes externally assessed exams. Others believed that external assessments prepare learners for future work and ensures standards are maintained. Key themes related to reduced learner pressure, fairness, insight into progress, feedback, engagement, and confidence

Reduced pressure and performance anxiety

A dominant theme across the focus groups was the reduction in pressure associated with internal assessment. Practitioners perceived internal assessment as less intimidating for learners than final external exams.

We feel the exam is a no-go for a lot of our pupils; pupils hear 'external exam' and they 'clench up' so internal assessments are beneficial in reducing stress.

Performance anxiety is a huge thing, and we can't always get a young person to perform for the end of year exam, it is better for some people.

The high-stakes nature of external exams was seen by some practitioners as limiting learners' ability to demonstrate their knowledge as a result of anxiety, whereas internally assessed approaches allow achievement to be demonstrated more consistently over time.

Conversely some practitioners believed that the pressure of an external assessment is viewed positively by employers.

Having worked in the finance industry, knowing someone has passed an exam is 'worth its weight in gold' and it shows the candidate can deal with pressure and has achieved a certain standard.

Fairness and equity for learners

Internal assessment was perceived as a fairer method of assessing learner attainment by some participants, as it enables learners to demonstrate ongoing progress, rather than a one-day snapshot of a high-stakes, external assessment.

Internal is a fairer way of gauging pupil progress because it's intermittent, when they're ready as opposed to a big dump at the end of the year, it's fairer for them.

Participants felt that internal assessment provides some level of transparency around grades for learners, as practitioners can explain to learners why a mark has been awarded, and they believe it more accurately reflects their ability. This was contrasted with externally assessed exams, where both practitioners and learners may struggle to understand external marking scores.

However, a number of practitioners believed that external assessment is a fairer way to assess learner skills and knowledge, as there is less subjectivity and variance around marking.

External is always going to assess knowledge and skills better, and external is the only way across Scotland that you can say that A is the equivalent of that A.

Better understanding of learner progress

Practitioners frequently reported that internal assessment provided a clearer understanding of learner progress. Having internally assessed pieces of work across the year was seen as supporting practitioner planning and judgement.

When internal assessment is set up properly, it gauges pupils progress and informs your judgements.

You know what a pupil is going to get, far more appropriate to them and more pupils getting grades they deserve. It removes a lot of stress from staff and makes the whole teaching experience more enjoyable.

Internal assessment can be used formatively, providing useful insight into where learners are and what support is needed. Many practitioners felt that internal assessment provided more meaningful evidence of progress than externally assessed exams, where lack of feedback made it difficult to identify areas for improvement.

Timely feedback

The availability of timely and meaningful feedback was a key theme and identified as a significant advantage of internal assessment. Practitioners contrasted the almost immediate feedback associated with internal assessment with the absence of feedback from exams.

You can also feel more reassured that the kids get what they earn as opposed to those conversations in August when a kid has no idea why they got the result they got and you don't know what to tell them.

Practitioners noted issues with disengagement from a lack of feedback from external assessments, whereas internal assessment was perceived to support ongoing learning

by clarifying expectations and next steps. Feedback was viewed as central to improving attainment and engagement.

Engagement, confidence, and attainment

Participants believed internal assessment was associated with increased learner engagement, confidence, and attainment, particularly for lower-attaining learners. Some practitioners reported that small, discrete internally assessed units were more manageable for learners and improved motivation and self-belief.

For the lower sets, the small discrete units that are internally assessed are working well; the pupils are able to engage and attainment increased, there is also an increase in confidence because of the smaller units, pupils are able to see regular successes.

Internal assessment was also viewed as beneficial for learners who do not attend regularly or who struggle in external assessments, ensuring they can still leave school with meaningful certification.

Reflections from the pandemic context

Several practitioners referred to the pandemic period as an example of the potential benefits of reduced reliance on high-stakes assessments. Some participants suggested that the attainment gap narrowed as learners approached assessment in a more relaxed and supported way.

Disadvantages of internal assessment

Practitioner participants were asked to reflect on the disadvantages of internal assessment in their focus groups. From these discussions, several key themes emerged. Practitioners considered the challenges around the standardisation of internal assessment across the country, that the perceived value of the qualifications may diminish if the external assessment component of the course was removed, and potential issues with resourcing.

Standards

Practitioner participants identified the standardisation of marking as a key challenge associated with internal assessment. Some noted that additional resources may be required to support consistent marking practices across Scotland. Several participants also expressed the view that standards currently vary between centres. To address this, practitioners suggested that regular training opportunities, network events, and robust internal verification processes could help to improve consistency and strengthen standardisation.

I think the argument that could be... if we did do more internal assessments, that it would be fixing the standards. So, ensuring that an A in West Lothian is an A in Aberdeen, [and] that an A in Edinburgh, is an A in Glasgow, it's getting that that standard being set ...

Yeah, I think we work hard to moderate in [the] department. We also have markers. I've been very fortunate to have a consistent and strong department, but its new staff coming in ... thinking how we train new staff in the standards. So right now, we spend a lot of time moderating with the exam standards at National 5, but I think if it was all internal assessment that would be such a challenge for trying to make sure [that] we're all consistent ...

Credibility

Concerns were raised by several participants that reduction of external assessment in favour of internal assessment could have a detrimental impact on the real or perceived value of qualifications. One participant believed that without the external assessment component, the differentiation between levels of qualifications could be eroded.

I think from my perspective as well, National 4 and National 5 [Drama], you know if they do achieve their National 4 and they come back to the National 5, they're doing exactly the same thing again for the year. You know they're doing drama skills again, they're doing theatre production skills again, and then the only differences in terms of value added is they perform to an examiner and they don't perform to us.

The assessment standards [across centres], they simply are not consistent ... no consistency whatsoever and I think that thoroughly devalues the qualification, especially for those kids who are willing to go away, study, learn and prepare.

One practitioner also suggested that the externally assessed aspects of courses were important to learner development, and this would be lost should there be a move to internally assessed courses instead.

I think if you suddenly move to purely internal assessment, I think that a lot of ... the courses might lose a bit of value. I think they [learners] need to learn how to study. I think they need to learn how to sit an exam. I think all of that is really important.

Resources

Several practitioners reflected that a greater amount of internal assessment would put strain on resources. Participants expressed that Qualifications Scotland would need to consider the limited financial resources of many schools around Scotland. One practitioner expressed that they already struggle to afford necessities (eg jotters, pencils and photocopying).

A lot of the assessment that we have to do, you know, there's a lot of photocopying, there's equipment.... We often run out of acid towards the end of the year now. I think that, you know, whatever is coming up now new needs to consider that the money that we've got in our departments is so short that sometimes you know, we need to do things more economically and I think that the assessment board needs to understand that because there's going to become a point where we can't actually afford to print off prelim papers for all the pupils.

Additionally, practitioners noted challenges in terms of logistics with a proposed increase in internal assessment. They stated that they would likely be unable to schedule a three-hour exam during the school day and, likewise, that it may be difficult to schedule internal assessments after every unit.

There are also scheduling implications ... when you're looking at majority internal assessments. So, in terms of our level 5, level 6 college courses, the vast majority

its internal assessment and you cannot have everyone finishing after a 14-week unit and then do assessments. Mainly because the students are going to get overloaded, [and] staff marking gets overloaded. You also then have to factor in the remediation attempt ... then we have to internally verify our results, [which] are not official until internal verification has taken place.

Practitioners also stated that more internal assessments may be difficult to undertake in practice due to limited resources. They stated that the size of a school, the number of practitioners in a department, and the number of learners with ASN may make internal assessments a challenge.

One of the other things that that we're finding is the number of pupils that need additional support is going through the roof and we don't have support assistants ...And we are now being asked to put all of our assessments onto Loom Videos... So ... the workload is get going up and up because every time I do an assessment I have to give up time to do the Loom Video ...

Grading

When discussing grading, the main themes that emerged from the practitioner focus groups were largely similar to those of the learner focus groups, whereby practitioner participants displayed a preference for graded qualifications over a pass/fail result.

Like learner participants, many practitioners argued that a graded qualification allowed for the nuance of attainment to be exhibited. For practitioners, a pass mark could encompass learners who excelled in the course and had a deep understanding of the content, as well as those who had 'scraped a pass'. They explained that a pass/fail result meant that it was difficult to assess a learners' readiness to progress, and that putting a learner who had only just passed a National 4 course forward for a National 5 or Higher qualification could set them up for failure.

If it's simply a pass or fail, we don't really get to find out kids' strengths and weaknesses then. If a kid is sitting at 50%, that's way different from a kid sitting at 80/90% in a science exam or any exam ... and what we would then

recommend for them going forward. If every kid just gets a pass, the kids might be picking Highers, for example, that really are not suited to their skills ... so I think it needs to be graded.

Like the learners interviewed, practitioner participants said that awarding a pass or fail mark made it more difficult for universities to assess learners' ability during applications. One practitioner expressed that universities would struggle to differentiate one learner from another when offering places if qualifications were not graded.

If they're going to university and universities are trying to award places to people, how do they know whether to give someone their conditional or an unconditional? You know, if you take something like medicine, for example, where they're looking for top grades compared to, you know, something where it's not needing the same kind of level of qualification, if everybody's just getting a pass, there's no real difference between one person and another.

Related to this view, several practitioners thought that for learners and parents, graded qualifications were considered to be more valuable than a pass/fail qualification. Practitioners spoke about parents and learners themselves asking for a grade so that they could gauge learners' competence in the subject, even in qualifications that only offered a pass or fail result.

... when we talk pass or fail in school terms, even if we're doing Broad General Education for second/third years, the pupils still want a grade, the parents still want a grade. So I think the grade is still more important rather than just a direct pass or fail.

I think there's often a perception, certainly in my school anyway, that National 4 just means you're not clever, and I think if National 4 were to be graded in that sense of an A, B and C, then I think there would be more of a perception that it's a better qualification than what kids think it is, than what parents think it is just now ... they'd think better of the subject, the qualification and themselves.

Some practitioners also felt that grades were a useful motivating factor to encourage learners to do well. Moreover, they were also seen to be helpful in tracking learner progress throughout the year and highlighting what learners needed to do to improve. One practitioner explained that the pass/fail grade made it difficult for learners who were just passing to understand the limits of their own abilities, resulting in difficult conversations.

We talked about progress as well ... whereas if you were going actually, you know, you've got a score there or a percentage or a grade or something, you're evidencing what was better practice so that kid can go on and progress better.

This is a problem we have with internally progressing students moving from level 5, level 6 up to HNC [Higher National Certificate] as well, is that because they're passing, they think they're on track. They think they're doing well because there's no grading attached to level 5 and level 6. But when I turn around and say I'm really sorry you're not getting to progress onto HNC, despite the fact you've passed every credit on your level 6 course ... you're just not at that point of being capable of doing an HNC, they don't accept it.

Despite the majority of practitioners interviewed suggesting that they were in favour of graded qualifications, there was one practitioner who spoke about the benefits of using a pass/fail system. They explained that a pass/fail was helpful for some learners who may not be thinking about further education, but could still gain a sense of achievement from passing.

Future considerations

Practitioners were asked in what circumstances they would like to see wider use of internal assessment in senior phase qualifications, and what they thought would be important for Qualifications Scotland to consider when making decisions about how courses are assessed.

A common theme to emerge was that internal assessment was seen as useful in certain situations – for example in specific subjects, or for less able learners – but that it should

be carefully managed. By contrast, other practitioners opposed an increase in internal assessment, for reasons related to workload and standards. The issue of consistency – across subjects, centres, course content and grades – was also discussed.

Situations where internal assessment is useful

Practitioners considered that the use of internal assessment should be expanded in certain subject areas, as examinations requiring learners to memorise facts were viewed as unsuitable for assessing knowledge and skills in many subjects.

In real life ... you would never need to remember that ... we've got the Internet. Why we're still assessing kids on memorising facts. It's ridiculous.

Others mentioned specific subjects, including Art and Design and Business, where they thought it would be beneficial to have more internal assessment than is currently the case. For example, it was thought that the report in Business could be assessed internally.

Some practitioners felt that internal assessment was useful for less able learners and the correct approach for NPA or Skills for Work courses. However, they also felt that 'academic subjects' needed external assessment, particularly for progression to university courses. They also thought that, generally, an externally assessed qualification would carry more weight with employers.

Consistency

Some practitioners felt that an increase in internal assessment would have to be carried out consistently across subjects. There were concerns that an inconsistent approach, which saw some subjects using internal assessment more than others, could negatively affect the number of learners taking externally assessed courses.

I think it needs to be consistent across all subjects, so that you have that situation where children don't pick a subject because they think it's easy ... then you get the kids who don't want to do the work because they've turned up thinking "I heard there's no exam in here".

On the other hand, some practitioners believed that decisions on internal assessment should be subject dependent, with assessment methods based on what would be most appropriate for each subject, and that Qualifications Scotland should take practitioner feedback into account when making such decisions. An example given was that, after consultation, the exam has recently been removed for Practical Woodwork. Some practitioners also thought Qualifications Scotland should consider how feedback is gathered. There was a view that the organisation should listen to practitioner feedback in individual subjects, and that feedback should be gathered from a national survey, not just from small groups.

Consistency across centres (rather than subjects) was seen as a potential limitation of internal assessment. For example, there was a perception that some practitioners teach to the test and help learners too much or that practice was inconsistent across centres.

All the science teachers in our school know other centres and other schools that will give varying degrees of assistance to pupils where it's right on borderline of what is and isn't allowed.

Consistency was also seen as important in terms of course content. For example, one science practitioner felt that there should be more consistency between National 4 and National 5 so that they could easily be taught in the same class, with some learners achieving National 5 level and some achieving National 4 level, similar to the previous Standard Grade system.

Additionally, practitioners wanted to see increased grade consistency across subjects in terms of making it equally attainable to achieve an 'A' grade in different subjects.

Standards

It was suggested by some practitioners that more internal assessment could negatively affect standards; there was a feeling that external assessments, particularly exams, were required to maintain a consistent and reliable standard across all centres.

The exam is the sort of gold standard we need to get to ... I think we've got to maintain that standard. The internal assessment has got its place absolutely ... but I think an external exam is required for a qualification to have weight for employers.

There was a view among some practitioners that external assessment was needed in the senior phase due to a perception that internal assessment makes a qualification easier.

So there is also this perception with NPAs where everything is internally assessed that everyone should pass it and that's not ... how it is.

Workload

Some practitioners were concerned that an increase in internal assessment would result in an increase in centre workload. One practitioner reflected on the increased workload when the Alternative Certification Model (ACM) was in place, which they felt was untenable. One practitioner highlighted that, in their view, an increase in internal assessment would result in them doing more assessing than teaching, especially since tracking assessments was also required. .

Furthermore, some practitioners felt that an increase in internal assessment would place more pressure on learners and add to their workload.

I wouldn't want to see more internal assessment. I think the levels of ... pressure ... these kids are under ... is horrific because external assessments are always living over them.

Fitness for purpose

One practitioner thought it would be beneficial to establish a system-wide agreement on the purpose of assessment as there was uncertainty about whether assessment currently measures learners' knowledge effectively.

I think you've got to be quite clear as to what you want any assessment to achieve. Are you wanting it to show what the learners have learned? ... To me, a lot of the time it's trying to find out what they haven't learned ... I think current ... assessment ... I don't think it's designed to show what the learners know a lot of the time ...

Additionally, it was felt that Qualifications Scotland should consider learner needs and wellbeing when making decisions about assessment, including how to assess different candidates to best suit their needs, and how to enable progression into further learning or employment.

School leaders

Experiences of internal assessment

School leaders were able to provide insight into how internal assessment has an impact at both a centre and strategic level, highlighting their expectations of practitioners and the resource constraints that their centres experienced when delivering internal assessment.

School leaders shared positive experiences and views of internal assessment, both from the point of view of the practitioner and the learner.

As long as internal assessment is carried out by experienced staff, then there are no issues with [it]. In fact, my view is that almost everything should be internally assessed with external verification or moderation. I am not a supporter of the big hall exam experience at all in the slightest.

The advantage for the practitioner is they have more time to teach their course rather than teach how to pass a test or multiple tests. And the kids benefit by that.

However, one school leader also raised the challenges of teaching National 4 and National 5 in one classroom, stating that this created problems for teaching.

... the requirements of achieving a National 4 qualification is so minimal that there is no separate course or separate or kind of purpose of having a separate class for it. But at the same time, you are preparing a whole class for examination, which is problematic in itself for teaching.

School leaders also mentioned encountering difficulties with internal assessment, such as internal verification, especially in niche subjects or in rural areas.

It's difficult for the internal verification. I'm also the only technical teacher here. I had to be internally verified before I sent off to do externally, so I phoned them up and said I can't go anywhere and there isn't anyone else, so it was the head teacher at the time that was basically told he was going to verify it and which he's a Chemistry teacher.

This was also linked to time and resources, which school leaders also raised as an issue they encounter when organising and arranging verification and moderation.

The internal verification and the marking of stuff, it happens 5/6/7 o'clock at night or at weekends because it's only time you're left alone for any length of time to do it.

In terms of the quality assurance, that can become an issue if you don't have anyone in the area. Particularly in rural areas, it's harder for us to get an external verifier or it's harder for us to get moderation ... because of the remoteness of our communities. But that doesn't make it impossible, it just makes it a wee bit more difficult.

Nonetheless, overall, school leaders were positive about internal assessment, whilst still being open and pragmatic about the impacts that the organisation of it had on their staff.

Suitability of internal assessment

School leaders were asked three questions about the suitability of internal assessment: whether it worked better for some courses than others, whether it suited some learners

better than others, and whether it was a more or less effective method of assessing knowledge and skills than external assessment.

School leaders indicated that internal assessment could work well across both practical and academic courses, particularly when delivered by practitioners who were suitably trained to do so. In terms of whether internal assessment suited some learners better than others, school leaders thought it was beneficial for most learners, but their responses suggested that its suitability ultimately depended on individual learners. School leaders had mixed views on whether internal assessment was the most effective method of assessing knowledge and skills. They identified advantages such as the ability to track learner progress and ensure learners received the results they deserved, alongside disadvantages including increased workload and the risk of over-assessment.

Course suitability

When school leaders were asked whether internal assessment worked better for some courses than others, one was particularly supportive of the use of internal assessment across all courses, with the proviso that practitioners were trained to deliver it effectively.

I think it's irrelevant [what course it is]: it can be in any course, provided that the teacher is suitably trained to deliver it.

Other school leaders suggested that internal assessment would work well for certain courses, but for different reasons: learners on more academic courses such as English may benefit from having more time to demonstrate their ability through internal assessment, while the support needs of learners on more practical courses, such as Practical Woodworking, may be better suited to an internally assessed approach.

... in my particular subject, a lot of the skills that we're looking at developing are skills that are better developed with time. So over the course of the year, giving them time to properly think about what they want to write, to construct a beautiful sentence, rather than to simply get their ideas down as fast as they possibly can.

Well, last year I put fourteen students through the exam for National 5. Only one of them sat in the hall because thirteen of them had an additional support need where they needed a reader or a scribe. So, yeah, for that kind of course internal assessment just makes sense.

Suitability for learners

When school leaders were asked whether internal assessment suited some learners better than others, they considered it to be beneficial for most learners, particularly those with ASN, as it reduced the pressures associated with external assessment.

We've got a number of pupils who suffer from anxiety and it's tough to even get them into a classroom, let alone an exam. And right away, they're not going to be able to do those exams, they just can't; the pressure is too much for them.

I think [internal assessment] does suit some children because it takes away that immediate time pressure.

The vast majority of youngsters would be better served by going through internal assessment, where they've got more time, there's less stress on them, it's not the be all and end all that two-hour window.

One school leader reported that the internal assessment process worked well for learners with ASN as it was divided into manageable 'chunks' and learners responded positively to the sense of 'routine' and 'progress'.

Assessing knowledge and skills

School leaders had mixed views on whether internal assessment was the most effective method of assessing knowledge and skills, with one being particularly supportive, while others were more measured.

I think it is mostly effective. Yeah, I would say, 85% effective.

I would say in moderation, in a few choice subjects, taking, again, careful consideration that we're not over assessing our pupils throughout a year to add undue pressure that they [internal assessments] can be very good and very

helpful to both the pupils and to the teachers in making sure that pupils get what they deserve. But with the proviso that there are a lot of negatives to it in terms of the parental kind of comeback and an increased workload in terms of marking.

Some school leaders recognised that internal assessment enabled learners' progress to be tracked throughout a course and one participant noted that internal assessment helped to ensure learners received the results they deserved, as they might not be able to demonstrate their full potential during an externally assessed exam.

I had, many years ago, a pupil who was a beautiful writer ... but he took ages to write because he did take the time to beautifully construct his sentences and his paragraphs. But he didn't do well in English because he could not recreate that, the amount of time that he took to do that, on an exam, and that, to me, was so wrong because he was definitely, exactly what an English pupil should be.

However, school leaders also identified potential disadvantages including the risk of over-assessment, increased practitioner workload and limited available time, negative parental reactions, and limited time for collaboration with other schools.

One school leader noted that, despite strongly supporting the use of internal assessment within their own practical subject, there may be resistance from practitioners in more 'traditional subjects', particularly given the perceived additional workload.

Advantages of internal and external assessment

School leaders were asked about the advantages of both internal and external assessment. While school leader participants recognised that external assessment has a place for some learners, particularly those who thrive under pressure or perform well in structured exam conditions, the overall pattern of responses strongly favoured internal assessment as a more inclusive, accurate and developmentally appropriate model for the majority of young people.

Across the interviews, internal assessment was consistently described as better aligned with learner wellbeing, skill development, fairness, and long-term progression. External

assessment was viewed as beneficial for a smaller group of learners who respond positively to formal exam conditions and structure, rather than a model that works well for most.

A clear distinction was made between internal assessment and external assessment by participants. Internal assessment was framed as supporting learning by creating a stronger link between assessment for learning (formative assessment), while external assessment was more often viewed as measuring performance at a fixed point and as an assessment of learning (summative assessment).

External assessment – advantages for some learners

Some school leaders acknowledged that external assessment can work well for a specific group of learners who thrive under pressure, respond positively to structure, and perform best in formal exam settings. This included some learners with ASN who demonstrate strong recall, focus, or performance under exam conditions. For these learners, the clarity and structure of exams were seen as supportive rather than restrictive.

I do also have this cohort of pupils that thrive in that exam situation, especially some of the pupils that have ADHD that it's phenomenal. They literally coast all year doing the bare minimum that they can humanly possible, and then they ... walk in and smash it. It's just how their brain works. It works best under pressure, so when that pressure is put on them, they smash it.

You could have youngsters, in particular ASN kids, where they have [an] almost photographic memory and there's an exam and they can do it. These kids are like one in a hundred or something. So, it's not fair to say that every kid with ASN would be better served with internal assessment because there are these unique circumstances that do exist.

However, school leaders were clear that this group represents a minority, and that external assessment should not be treated as a universal model for all learners.

Inclusivity

Participants viewed internal assessment as more inclusive, particularly for learners with ASN. School leaders believed it is better suited to diverse learning profiles, allowing learners to demonstrate understanding in ways that are not limited by exam conditions, timing, or pressure.

There was a strong view that many learners, including those with ASN, are better served by assessment models that are flexible, responsive, and embedded within everyday learning.

Almost every kid who has additional support needs would be better served by appropriately delivered internal assessment. Almost every single one.

The vast majority of youngsters would be better served by going through internal assessment, where they've got more time, there's less stress on them, it's not the be all and end all that two-hour window.

Reduced pressure and flexibility

School leaders frequently associated internal assessment with lower stress, reduced anxiety, and improved emotional wellbeing for learners when compared with external assessment. Spreading assessment over time, using familiar settings, and allowing opportunities for improvement were seen as reducing fear of failure and supporting confidence and motivation.

An internal assessment delivered in school, in their class, in familiar territory, done at an appropriate time to them, can best show how exactly they are learning. You take away the stress factor of unfamiliar timing, the unfamiliar place of assessment, the be all and end all part of it.

It's [internal assessment] more motivating to pupils and they can see it's worthwhile and it takes a little bit of pressure off that final exam.

This flexibility of spreading assessments over time, was seen as benefiting both learners and practitioners, helping manage workload and avoid assessment bottlenecks.

You're not all doing everything all at the one-time within a school because those internal assessments can happen as they finish the unit, for example, so that again is spread out so pupils aren't overworked at one particular time.

Better demonstration of knowledge and skills

School leaders strongly felt that internal assessment provides a more accurate picture of learners' knowledge and skills. Rather than measuring memory and speed, internal assessment was seen as capturing deeper understanding, thinking processes, and skill development over time.

This was particularly linked to the development of skills such as writing, analysis, communication, and problem-solving, which were seen as poorly measured through time-limited assessments taken under exam conditions.

By a country mile, it [internal assessment] is a more effective way, a more accurate way of determining the progress through a course of any youngster, if appropriately delivered.

We need much more internal assessment to assess how well their skills are developing, rather than whether they can remember stuff on a day.

A lot of the skills that we're looking at developing are skills that are better developed with time ... So over the course of the year, giving them time to properly think about what they want to write ... to construct a beautiful sentence, rather than to simply get their ideas down as fast as they possibly can.

Employment and real-world skills

School leaders believed strongly that employers generally prioritise skills, behaviours, and practical competence rather than exam performance. Internal assessment was viewed, by most participants, as better aligned with workforce needs, particularly in

sectors such as health and social care, hospitality and tourism, when compared with benefits of external assessment.

The main industry in the country ... health and social care. Most of that's practical ... Then it's tourism and hospitality as the second biggest employment sector. I'm not sure that there's any exams required in tourism and hospitality to any great extent.

Assessment models focused on skill development were seen as more relevant to the destinations of most learners, rather than being shaped primarily around university entry requirements.

They [employers] all have a requirement for skills to be employed and so we need much more internal assessment to assess how well their skills are developing, rather than whether they can remember stuff on a day in a window.

They [employers] want skills. ... they're not interested if that kid has their National 5 French, their National 5 History, their National 5 RE, or whatever. They want, and they're very clear in this, ... kids who are timeous or polite or respectful, can follow instructions.

Learner progress and understanding

Participants felt internal assessment supports ongoing understanding of learner progress better than external assessment. The timeliness of feedback was valued by school leaders, along with the ability to track development over time, identify gaps in learning, and adjust teaching appropriately.

This continuous insight was seen as benefiting both learners and practitioners, enabling earlier intervention and more targeted support.

I can see where they're going wrong, which then tells me ... I've not taught them well enough, or in the right order, or they've picked up what I've been meaning wrong and then you can make an adjustment.

It's useful to see what they're not understanding because if one of them is not understanding, it's usually something that you can then adjust in your teaching for the next year.

Disadvantages of internal assessment

School leaders provided insight into the disadvantages of internal assessment based on their experiences. Due to the small sample size of school leaders, no themes emerged from the interviews; however, each participant did provide their own insight as to the potential disadvantages of challenges that could be associated with internal assessment.

Workload

One school leader highlighted that an increase in the amount of internal assessment would likely have consequences in terms of workload. This included not only the additional marking of internal assessments but also the additional work associated with verification, both of which would add to existing workload pressures. This participant was also concerned that increasing internal assessment may lead to learners being over-assessed, which could be stressful for them.

It could be the workload for teachers ...and there's also that increased added pressure from parents and pupils that if it's a teacher who's marking it and making that decision, they can often argue with that decision. You know, which also then increases workload for other teachers because ... another person has to mark it to make sure that you can justify it back to the pupil and the parents ... The disadvantages for the pupils, and, again, it can also be an increased workload ... You have to be careful that they're not being continually assessed.

Malpractice

Another participant noted a key disadvantage of internal assessment was a greater opportunity for malpractice. However, they were confident that any risks could be

moderated by an enhanced system of verification, perhaps a significantly improved version of the current system of internal assessment.

Yeah, without suitable levels of scrutiny and effective external moderation, teachers can cheat. ... However, ...if we all moved to predominantly internal assessment, our effectiveness in external moderation of the internal assessment would be so much better. There would be a heightened awareness of the need for that and, in doing so, we would quickly establish a much more accurate and better internal assessment model, than perhaps we would imagine at the current time with internal assessment.

Resources

Issues were noted around online resources for internal assessment. One participant discussed challenges with SQA's online secure document site and that, consequently, practitioners in their centre had used out-of-date materials because they were unaware that documentation had been updated. They believed that these issues could be remedied through improved communication.

We also really struggled to get access to the SQA secure documents as well ... I also find that we are not necessarily reliably informed when assessments have changed and the criteria has changed. ... If you're using assessments, how are you meant to know? Are they still the right ones? Or do you just need to be going and checking SQA secure, like, every year? ... You just take it for granted that the assessments you've been given are going to stay.

Grading

Unlike other participant groups, school leaders did not emphasise the view that grades enable a more comprehensive assessment of learners' abilities.

A recurring theme among school leader participants was that having some qualifications as graded and some as a pass/fail created inequality and inconsistency, leading to what they perceived as feelings of inadequacy among learners who did not sit graded

courses. Moreover, one school leader explained that centres that offer more graded courses gain more tariff points, so that those who offer more pass/fail qualifications are disadvantaged.

If I had someone delivering an NPA in Engineering, for example, that would be ungraded. That Engineering or Construction or Hospitality or whatever the NPA is, that course would probably be more beneficial to youngsters to progress into the careers that I've just been talking about. But schools are reluctant, or many schools, not all schools, obviously, but many schools are reluctant to do too many NPAs because it disproportionately affects how they are benchmarked nationally because of the tariff points being awarded for graded courses.

When we had Standard Grade, we had the three levels in Standard Grade of Foundation, General, Credit ... everybody sat something. The Foundation made sure that everybody could get something and there was consistency, and there was that valuing everybody, and you all had to do that same kind of process. And I think that's important for pupils' self-worth that they get treated as fairly and as consistently as possible.

Conversely, one school leader participant expressed that pass/fail qualifications created more equity between learners as they felt that learners who were disadvantaged through their circumstances, for example through caring responsibilities or poverty, were placed on a more equal footing with their peers.

A grade does not tell the story of the young person who achieved, who passed. It doesn't tell the story of the young person who was a carer for their two siblings and their parents, it doesn't tell the challenges that they've overcome with their lifelong illnesses. It just tells what they were able to do or not. It doesn't also tell the story of the young person who had a tutor for every class and had their own desk with a light, heating and electricity, and parents who are supportive and on them, it doesn't tell those stories.

... by the time that they're writing a personal statement for college or university, any level, we've already lost them to the system where they've been demotivated and turned away by a system that's been pursuing As and Bs.

There were some similar themes among school leader participants and the other groups interviewed. Some school leader participants expressed that a pass/fail result devalued qualifications because they felt that without an externally assessed exam, or a grade, the qualification appeared not as worthy to learners, or employers.

National 4 is just kind of pass. I think it's important to treat each subject and each level as consistently as possible, because I think sometimes when you switch it, you devalue it like we've seen with National 4 ...

When you speak to employers, they're not really interested in National 4 and that's unfair because some of the students you've got, that's potentially the best that they're going to ever be able to get, and it feels like perhaps a bit of a raw deal for them ... because most of the employers want grades. So I think it probably has devalued that particular course unfairly.

Similar to the other participant groups, some spoke about grades being a motivational factor for learners to work towards a better grade to improve their skills and knowledge. There was also a sentiment that grades enabled learners to keep track of their progress throughout the year.

I think pass and fail would be fine for maybe internal assessment; something that helps them get through. But I think grades are more motivating because there's always something to aim for. A pass could just be a pass, but grades, you can say, well, you know, I got a 92 or something like that. And if you've only got a 62, then you can be pushing yourself a bit further.

Future considerations

In relation to future considerations, school leaders were asked in what circumstances they would like to see wider use of internal assessment in senior phase qualifications, and what they thought will be important for Qualifications Scotland to consider when making decisions about how courses are assessed.

The main themes that emerged were:

- Positivity around internal assessment
- A desire to rebalance assessment
- The purpose of assessment
- Parity of esteem across different qualifications

Positivity around internal assessment

School leaders mentioned situations where they favoured the use of internal assessment. Some were keen to see its use increased in the senior phase, suggesting that internal assessment better motivates learners. The view was that the current system limits learners' ability to pursue their own interests and ambitions because specific areas needed to be covered for exams. It was, however, acknowledged that whilst internal assessment would, in their view, give more freedom to explore different areas, this level of variety would be more challenging to assess reliably.

It was also suggested that internal assessment ensures that learners remain motivated throughout the year.

If you're constantly just having to learn ... and know that you're doing an exam at the end of the year ... Whereas internal assessment ... really helps ... that push towards ... little goals along the way.

Another reason some school leaders favoured internal assessment was the view that it could act as a safety net if, for example, a learner was not able to sit an externally assessed exam.

It should be noted that although views of internal assessment were largely positive, some school leaders qualified this by stating that it should only be used if appropriate for a subject, and that it would not necessarily be appropriate for all.

Rebalancing assessment

Some school leaders expressed a desire to find a better balance between a final exam and other types of assessment. It was suggested that learning from other countries could be useful here.

I ... find our system to be particularly skewed to the final exam ... I don't think that it's very helpful in terms of stress for pupils. I don't think it gives a lot of opportunity for people who don't particularly do well under exam conditions. There should be scope for ... the coursework. And I think if they looked at other systems they could ... see what elements of something else would work within our setting and for our pupils.

Others wanted Qualifications Scotland to consider the balance between courses that are graded and those that award a pass or fail. The preference was for less weight on grades and more on a pass/fail system.

Purpose of assessment

In thinking about the future, some school leaders wanted Qualifications Scotland to consider more the purpose of assessment. There was a view that the purpose should be to assess a learner's ability to apply knowledge, rather than just demonstrate it. These participants thought that learners should be able to contextualise and make connections between different subjects, and qualifications should allow for that.

You could link ... Hospitality with Home Economics and PE ... a young person could branch out into so many different ways if they were encouraged to draw the links between their areas of study. There should be something that allows for that interconnectedness.

There were contrasting views on how prescriptive future assessment approaches should be, with one school leader requesting clearer expectations through the use of examples and another stating, in contrast, that they value flexibility in delivery.

I don't want to be restricted by whatever the SQA produce and [be] tied down to that.

Parity of esteem

There was a view among school leaders that Qualifications Scotland should consider how to ensure parity of esteem across all courses. Firstly, it was seen as important to address the perceived problem of some courses being graded and others not; the solution offered was to either grade all courses or grade none, to address the perception – in one school leader's view – that non-graded qualifications are less valuable. The second way to address the issue would be, in one school leader's view, to give as much prominence to non-NQs as to NQs.

... that is the biggest single thing they could do to support young people across the board in terms of parity of esteem, in terms of promoting subjects through qualification acquisition that's relevant to every kid in the country and not just the uni kids.

Centre leaders

Experiences of internal assessment

Centre leaders were asked to detail their experiences of internal assessment and were able to provide insight into internal assessment in a college and HEI context, commenting positively on the adaptability of internal assessment and the ability to regularly give learner feedback. However, centre leaders also raised issues around resource constraints that their centres experienced when delivering internal assessment.

Delivery of internal assessment

Some centre leaders found the internal assessment support materials provided by SQA to be helpful in enabling the delivery of adaptable and well-structured internal assessments, and felt they had good systems in place to manage, verify and deliver internal assessments

We find the assessments very well structured. We use the ones which was obviously in the Assessment Support Packs from SQA. Yeah, we found that the Assessment Support Packs were useful with respect to the suggested answers at the back which we could use as a grounding point and find it very straightforward. We also like the fact that we could adapt, slightly, if we wished, as long as it met the needs of the outcome and obviously send it for prior verification to SQA should be needed.

Some participants felt that the ongoing nature of internal assessment was easier to manage and welcomed the opportunity to regularly measure learners' progress, which they found reassuring.

To know that they [learners] can get to the end of a module or unit and be assessed there and then and it's immediate, isn't it? You can tell them - you're absolutely meeting the standards. And we're not only giving you the feedback like a formative assessment, we are also telling you that you've absolutely met the criteria and it'll go on your record that you've met the criteria. So I think it probably just feels a little bit easier to manage. There's less anxiety around it in terms of you've got a more immediate measure of whether what you're doing is right and when the students are on the right track, you don't have to wait for the SQA to tell you that they're on the right track

Resources and workload

While generally being supportive of internal assessment, some centre leaders highlighted challenges associated with delivering internal assessment, including the

workload involved in marking and invigilating assessments, and the difficulty in finding enough staff to carry out invigilation.

In our centres, the hours are cut to the minimum, so to try and get somebody to invigilate is sometimes difficult. Same goes for lecturers as well; they're not always available to invigilate, so that is an issue.

From a quality assurance point of view, I mean, again, you know it's workload in general. I think everybody's stretched. I think the time it takes to mark, the time it takes to IV [internally verify] adds to the workload, but it's part of the job and people do it, you know, and do it well.

Some participants voiced frustration about the duplication of internal assessment in some courses, which had an impact on the workload of practitioners and learners.

I would say that there's a lot of assessments which seem to be duplicated and it's an area in which we are taking forward. So for example, we deliver a lot of knowing units, it's a PDA for our sports section has a huge amount of overlap, a massive amount of overlap, and we're looking at how we can capture the evidence, perhaps in just one area which would cover, you know, the requirements of others.

One centre leader reported that the increased workload for learners (and therefore practitioners) had resulted in a whole cohort of learners leaving a course.

Last year we lost an entire cohort and when contacting those individuals ... the reason given was the just the huge increase in workload.

One centre leader commented that having better online systems, especially for prelims, would reduce the workload in their centre as they had to run multiple papers for prelims to ensure rigour in their assessment process. This is because they are currently organising prelims over numerous sites, which creates timing and staffing issues.

The biggest problem that we have is we've obviously got [is] the prelims to do and with us taking students from one end of Scotland to the other, the issues that

we encounter tend to be with how we deal with prelims and the one gripe, if I've got a gripe about internal assessment, is we need to find a better way of doing prelims because we can get people into centres and we can get them done in centres with invigilators and so on and we've got online systems that work, but we need to find better ways of doing it online.

Suitability of internal assessment

Centre leaders were asked three questions about the suitability of internal assessment: whether it worked better for some courses than others, whether it suited some learners better than others, and whether it was a more or less effective method of assessing knowledge and skills than external assessment.

Participants suggested that internal assessment could work well across a range of courses, particularly practical courses. In terms of whether internal assessment suited some learners better than others, centre leaders generally felt that this depended on the learner and the type of assessment, but welcomed the flexibility of internal assessment in meeting learners' needs. Participants were in agreement that internal assessment was the most effective method of assessing knowledge and skills, recognising advantages such as opportunities for continuous learning and assessment, progress tracking, and timely feedback.

Course suitability

When centre leaders were asked whether internal assessment worked better for some courses than others, one indicated that it would be supported across a wide range of qualifications.

I think it's welcomed across every [SCQF] level from level 4 up to level 8.

Two centre leaders suggested that internal assessment worked better for practical courses as it was more suited to the expectations and preferences of the learners undertaking these courses.

I'd say for some of the practical courses they prefer a kind of continuous assessment approach, certainly open book assessments. They come to do a practical subject and they don't think they'll be doing a lot of theory work, so if they then have [a] closed book assessment, that can be something quite challenging for them because it's maybe just not what they're anticipating and not something that they're used to, not something that they kind of enjoy.

It works better in some courses because a lot of students don't like doing the final exam; they prefer continuous assessment ... especially the National Progression Award, for instance, a lot of that can be done over a period of time and it can be assessed over a period of time.

Another centre leader, when discussing Higher and National 5 Psychology and Sociology courses, expressed disappointment at the removal of unit assessments and indicated that a return to internal assessment would be welcomed. They highlighted that there was not the same opportunity to get to know learners in colleges as there might be in secondary schools, so internal assessments were particularly helpful for tracking learner progress.

... maybe if we could turn the course assignment into a series of summative assessments that combine to create a big project, that would give college staff maybe a little bit more reassurance that the students actually do know what they're talking about.

One participant raised concerns about the internal assessment process for online National 5 and Higher courses, suggesting that it could be streamlined to address internet connectivity and administrative challenges.

Look at the online materials again, it all depends where you are as to what connections you get, whether you can talk to lecturers etc. It works for us, but it could be better in terms of trying to streamline it. There's a lot of admin, a lot of phone calls, a lot of questions ... when we try to verify student work.

Suitability for learners

When centre leaders were asked whether internal assessment suited some learners better than others, they generally felt that this depended on the learner and the type of assessment.

Can I answer a mixture of both? I think it depends on what the assessment is and perhaps if it could be tailored to the needs of that individual or the needs of the group.

One centre leader highlighted that their experiences with learners varied: some learners struggled with exams, while others performed well in exams but underperformed in coursework.

There's not a winning formula, is there? Because up to 50% of the students in our experience go to pieces under exam conditions and don't perform to their optimal. We know they can do it, but they can't do exam conditions. We've also got students who are lazy and don't do what we need them to do across the year, but are quite happy to pull it out of the bag at the 11th hour and go and sit an exam and will ace it and take us by surprise.

Two centre leaders recognised the flexible nature of internal assessment and the benefits of being able to adapt it to suit learners' needs, particularly those requiring additional support.

Exams and external assessments don't work for all students. We can generally make internal assessments work for just about all students in one way or another, but exams don't work for all students.

I think definitely with open book assessments and that kind of continuous approach when you can break the assessment down throughout the year, I think that really suits a lot of our learners better ... a lot of our students are kind of more practical or just need that bit more support so need it sort of spread out and I think the internal assessment probably gives you a bit more flexibility that way.

One of these participants believed that access to appropriate support was the most important factor for learners with ASN, regardless of the assessment method. However, they also felt that internal assessment reduced pressure on learners with ASN and helped to alleviate anxiety.

I think for either internal or external, as long as they're getting the additional support that they need then I wouldn't say it's much different to the rest of our learners. I would say that, overall, a lot of our learners probably do have additional support needs and I think internal assessment does benefit because, whether it's from anxiety or it's maybe compounded by anxiety, I think that definitely helps take that away. With an external assessment, it feels as if it's kind of one chance only; it really adds pressure to them.

Assessing knowledge and skills

Centre leaders were in agreement that internal assessment was the most effective method of assessing knowledge and skills. They highlighted its advantages, including opportunities for continuous learning and assessment, progress tracking, and timely feedback, and believed that learners could produce work that more accurately reflected their abilities without the pressure of exam conditions. One participant also noted that, where appropriate, professional judgement could be applied during marking.

I think an internal summative assessment is more of an accurate reflection of what the student knows right now, because they feel there's less pressure and there's less anxiety potentially around them, and there's also the opportunity for immediate feedback so the student can see it as a learning opportunity.

I think it [internal assessment] just gives you that flexibility or takes a bit more pressure off. You're kind of learning continuously and it's not all based on this big exam at the end, so I think it's beneficial for the learners that we've got.

But with the internal units, you knew exactly where you were at. You knew what you were good at, what you were bad at, and so on.

I think actually with a bit of internal assessment, where they can spend a bit more time on it, they can actually go into things a lot deeper and probably produce a better bit of work than they might be able to in a short period on one particular day.

Advantages of internal and external assessment

Centre leaders were asked to discuss the perceived advantages of internal and external assessment. Participants discussed assessment in relation to learner progress, feedback, wellbeing, flexibility, fairness, and institutional delivery. While both internal and external assessments were recognised as having a role, internal assessment was more consistently associated with supporting learner development and inclusive practice in the HEI and college setting.

Learner progress and understanding

A key theme of internal assessment is its role in supporting a clear and continuous understanding of learner progress. Internal assessment was viewed as enabling practitioners to determine whether learners understand taught content and achieved learning outcomes at various points across the academic year.

This ongoing monitoring was seen as particularly valuable in identifying areas where teaching approaches may need to be adapted. This was viewed in contrast to external assessments, that primarily provide a snapshot at the end of a course.

With regard to the lecturer, it gives insight into areas whereby the need to adapt the teaching methods for that particular area, change your teaching style perhaps.

It allows you to sign post what's going on over the year, so you have a clear indication where students are at.

Feedback as a driver for learning

Assessment feedback was viewed as a key advantage of internal assessment. Centre leaders highlighted that internal assessment allows learners to receive timely, specific

feedback that can be used to improve their future performance. Participants felt that ongoing internal assessments were part of the learning process rather than a final memory test.

It allows the learner to see where their learning stands. You know, if they've understood what they've been taught. It is for their development.

They're getting the feedback there and then, so they're learning what they've got to work on, and they've got something to refer back to as well.

Reduced pressure and learner wellbeing

Centre leaders differentiated learner wellbeing from academic progress, with all identifying reduced pressure as a specific advantage of internal assessment. Participants noted that many learners do not perform to their full potential in high-stakes exam conditions, often due to anxiety or ASN.

Internal assessment was seen as reducing stress by distributing assessment across the year and avoiding reliance on fewer external assessments. Importantly, participants stressed that this reduction in pressure does not imply reduced academic challenge or lower standards.

Because up to 50% of the students in our experience go to pieces under exam conditions and don't perform to their optimal.

If you can spread that out throughout the year, I just think it makes it a better, less stressful experience.

Flexibility in assessment design and delivery

Flexibility was identified as a separate and practical advantage of internal assessment. Participants felt that internal assessment gives staff more scope to use their judgement, particularly when learners understand the content but struggle to express it clearly.

We can as much as we do, mark anonymously, but ... because we know our subject area ... we kind of know what they mean then we can give that bit of leniency, wee bit of discretion too or maybe we could remediate them.

This flexibility was also evident at a delivery level, where spreading assessments across the year was seen as reducing assessment fatigue and supporting sustained engagement with learning. Participants felt that internal assessments offer more flexibility than external assessments, supporting inclusion without lowering standards.

I think if you're able to spread things out more, it benefits everybody. You know, rather than students working towards one end point where they're going to do lots of assessments at the same time.

Fairness and equity of access

Participants believed that internal assessment offers learners a fairer opportunity to demonstrate their learning, particularly for those who may be disadvantaged by external assessment-based models.

I think internal assessments feel much fairer and more of a level access to knowledge.

While acknowledging that all assessment can generate anxiety, participants felt it was unfair for progression to depend largely on performance in a single, end of year assessment, particularly for younger learners or those unlikely to encounter similar assessment methods in the future.

And I think it's probably unfair of us to put those younger learners, through the stress ... you'll only progress if you sit this exam, when they're going to go to university and they might never sit an exam again.

Demonstration of skills, knowledge, and evidence of learning

Participants felt that internal assessment enables learners to demonstrate skills and knowledge in greater depth. By allowing time for reflection and development, internal assessment was seen as producing better evidence of learning competence.

While external assessments were recognised for providing comparability and benchmarking, internal assessment was viewed as better suited to capturing complex understanding and applied skills.

I think with ... internal assessment, where they can spend a bit more time on it, they can actually go into things a lot deeper and probably produce a better bit of work than ... they might be able to in a short period on one particular day with an external assessment.

Planning, administration, and quality assurance

From an institutional perspective, internal assessment was described as straightforward to administer and effective in supporting quality assurance standards. Participants felt that verification processes in place, both internally and externally, provide reassurance that learners are meeting standards and that assessment decisions are robust and valid. This clarity was seen as supporting planning, consistency, and accountability across all programmes.

I think the internal assessments are easy to administrate and they give us a really robust reassurance that the students are meeting the quality standards that have been set down.

However, another centre leader felt that external assessment reduces the administrative and organisational burden on centres by transferring responsibility for assessment processes to awarding bodies. This was viewed as supporting institutional efficiency and allowing centres to focus resources on teaching and learning, while maintaining confidence that assessment processes are being managed through established external systems.

Disadvantages of internal assessment

Centre leaders were asked to consider the disadvantages of internal assessment. From this, several key themes emerged. Participants discussed the increased workload associated with increased internal assessment and provided insight into how this could potentially be alleviated. Participants also discussed issues around the perception of internal assessment by learners and the public. Finally, they highlighted the potential issue of standardisation with internal assessments.

Standards

While centre leaders did not believe that qualifications standards would be threatened by the increased use of internal assessment, they did emphasise the importance of a robust quality assurance process.

I think as long as you're having the standardisation meetings, as long as you're using the up-to-date assessments. If we create our own assessments, as long as they're being verified, I think that keeps the standards up ... We've got paperwork that would be completed by the invigilator, to say that the procedures were followed ... so I think if these systems are in place, then, yeah, it ensures that standards are kept high and I'd be fairly confident that we do that.

Perception

Centre leaders indicated that a potential challenge linked to an increase in internal assessment would be managing stakeholder perceptions. In particular, they suggested that learners may view these assessments as easier or regard them as less significant.

I mean maybe people would see it as an easier option, you know, from the outside, but I think our students are quite comfortable with it now because they're used to coming in and doing that. I think maybe for new students, I think they maybe do think of it as going to be an easier option, but actually when they start doing the assessments, [they] realise that they're still having to produce, you know, big pieces of work or quality pieces of work and, you know, it's not necessarily easier, but it maybe just gives them some more flexibility. Yeah, I think probably there's a perception that it's an easier option.

I guess to some extent students think that the pressure is off for colleges because if it's not an external exam, it's less important ... We have a lot of students who have attendance issues, so if they don't turn up on the day the assessment was supposed to be sat, then we get all the confusion about "Was that a first assessment?" "Was there mitigating circumstances?" It's all very confusing and it's difficult to keep track of.

Duplication of assessment

One participant identified the extent of overlap and repetition between internal assessments as a disadvantage. They explained that learners are often required to complete additional tasks to demonstrate knowledge and understanding already shown in earlier assessments, which they noted can be challenging for students.

Just the overlap. If it's been captured somewhere in the course, I don't really see the need for them to do it three or four times after if they've demonstrated understanding and competence in an area. I just don't see the need to do it in numerous others thereafter ... There's too much overlap.

Workload

One centre leader noted that a major drawback of increasing internal assessment would be the increased workload.

I suppose one disadvantage is the time that it takes; the time to organise and invigilate and marking and all these things. Obviously, somebody has to do that work ...

Resources

A challenge that one centre leader mentioned was generating resources to meet the needs of all learners. They stated that once internal assessments had been developed, they needed to be modified for learners with ASN, which could be challenging as their ASN learners were not integrated into the mainstream learner population. However, they did not state that this was a disadvantage of internal assessment but rather something to be accounted for and managed.

I think those internal assessments need to be adapted for the needs of that individual and that's very challenging because we don't have the ASN students that are integrated through our mainstream.

Grading

As with learners and practitioners, centre leaders also expressed in interviews that they valued graded qualifications for their ability to assess learners' achievement in a subject. Centre leaders explained that awarding grades was important in recognising learners' achievement or ability and also gauging learners' suitability for progressing to higher-level qualifications.

I think it's important because I think within a pass or fail you can have somebody that's scraping a pass and have somebody that's absolutely flying throughout the year and really puts in a lot more work than others, so I think it's important to recognise that achievement.

I think that's why we're quite glad that they're bringing back an element of grading for the HNCs because we've got students who they scrape through, and then you've got other folks that are getting a first, and it's fantastic work and they're just both getting a pass. That feels a bit unfair.

But the pass/fail doesn't really say anything. The graded says, somebody's good at this subject or somebody's not good at this subject, you know. We have a lot of students who want to go on and do Highers from the National 5s, but when they're struggling to get C grades, Higher is going to be a waste of time.

Moreover, centre leaders agreed with the theme that emerged from the learner and practitioner focus groups that graded qualifications also provided universities and employers, and wider society, with more insight into a candidate's abilities for a course or job. One centre leader, however, spoke about how the usefulness of a grade or a pass/fail result was very much dependent on the pathway of the learner. This participant explained grading was important for qualifications like National 5s or Highers that would be used to progress onto HNs or degrees, but for qualifications like NPAs, where they said that candidates just needed to meet a certain threshold for industry standards, a grade was not as important.

I got asked a question a while back and they said, well, this person wants to go into agriculture; are they really good at it, or are they really bad at it, or mediocre? And it was only when I went back to look at their assessment marks, I was able to come to offer that advice ... It needs to be graded and it's because employers have no idea what the employees have.

So for National 5s and Highers definitely, people need to know how good they are at that particular subject. You know, especially if you're going on to do degrees or HNCs or HNDs, people need to know how good or bad you are at that particular subject. At the lower end, because most of the NPAs are level 4, level 5, it's maybe not so critical because the NPAs are industrial standards. So it's can you do this? Can you do this? Can you do this? It's not a case of can you do this very well, or can you not do this? So both have that place, but it all depends on where you're going with it next, so your progression route. If it's a straightforward progression route, then pass or fail works. If it's more complicated, then you need to know the grades.

It's so embedded in our understanding of qualifications. It's more meaningful to society and to employers, if you say I've got an NC [National Certificate] and a Higher with an A grade or something ... It's important at degree level because all your grades go towards your classification, don't they? And there'll be some courses and post grad things that are only open to people that have got a 2:2, 2:1 ...

Some centre leaders also spoke about grades being used by learners to track their progress or gauge their attainment. One participant said that grades give learners something to aspire to and that they motivate them to try harder to achieve.

We're not allowed to grade them on HNC, so they only get a grade for the graded unit, so everything else is a pass or a fail. I think grades are important because students need to know how well they're doing.

I've noticed more recently, the students ... saying, "OK, I passed but what did I get?" You know, "How well did I pass?" I think everything should be graded. Even

at level 4, maybe a bit harsh, I know, but it gives learners an understanding of well, how well did I pass? ... If somebody can get a 70% but somebody could get a 99%, and it's a huge difference, ... I think everything should be graded.

When asked whether a pass/fail result devalued qualifications, there was only one comment from a centre leader and they disagreed with this sentiment. This participant expressed that qualifications that were not graded still held value, but that the value related to what the proposed pathway of the learner was.

I'm even thinking about degrees and things that have got distinction or merit, you know, if you don't get one of those, then you've just got a standard qualification. I still think that's valuable, so I don't think that loses value. But just as what I said about if it's employers or if you're going on for further study, I think it's useful to be able to see those grades.

Future considerations

In relation to future considerations, centre leaders were asked in what circumstances they would like to see wider use of internal assessment in senior phase qualifications and what they thought will be important for Qualifications Scotland to consider when making decisions about how courses are assessed.

The main themes that emerged were:

- A general preference for internal assessment
- Communication
- Support materials
- Learner needs
- Standards
- Assessment approaches at different levels

A preference for internal assessment

Centre leaders were mostly in favour of increased internal assessment in the senior phase and mentioned a few circumstances in which they would like to see more of it.

Some wanted it to be used as an alternative to exams, especially for learners who struggle to cope with several exams simultaneously. Some centre leaders suggested a continuous assessment approach, with one mentioning that this should be similar to unit assessments of the past, but with learners achieving the overall award without a final exam. Units were seen as something to return to – even if this would impact on centre workload and resources – as, in one centre leader’s view, they provide a better indication of learner progress throughout the year.

Likewise, one participant thought that internal assessment helped learners to better consolidate their learning and prepare them for the type of independent study required in higher education.

... in the Higher exams, they're just learning what they need to do. They're learning a right answer and that's it ... [And when they move to university] we're expecting them to be able to just think freely, make arguments up, go and find the answers, go and be independent in [their] learning and [their] thinking, and they really struggle with that ...

Another participant suggested that courses that are externally assessed are generally assessed in this way for historic reasons, or to give learners some experience of this kind of assessment.

Although most centre leaders favoured internal assessment, one participant felt that learners are over-assessed, and the current assessment approach is therefore appropriate.

Communication

There was a desire for Qualifications Scotland to be seen to be taking feedback from those who deliver qualifications. It was felt that practitioners could provide valuable insight on what could be improved, what works and what does not.

Support materials

Some centre leaders felt more support materials should be provided by Qualifications Scotland. One participant suggested a bank of assessments that met required criteria.

Support around artificial intelligence (AI) was also discussed. In particular, centre leaders wanted support in being able to easily identify when AI is being used, especially as the technology develops.

AI ... I think that's a major issue ... I'm finding that it's quite easy to spot, but I think as AI improves then that might ... become more difficult. ... I'm hoping that there'd be some kind of software ... that will be able to help practitioners with that.

Learner needs

Centre leaders suggested that Qualifications Scotland consider fully learner needs, particularly in addressing the challenge of learner anxiety around assessment.

... I suppose thinking about what challenges learners face just now and taking that into account. So to me that would ... certainly be looking to reduce anxiety around assessment in whatever way possible.

Standards

In discussions around the benefits of an increase in internal assessment, there was nevertheless a view that Qualifications Scotland needed to ensure that national standards are maintained. Centre leaders thought that external verification processes should be retained.

... the quality standards ... they need to absolutely be maintained and their investment in external verification and round one or two verification processes ... absolutely needs to stay.

Assessment approaches at different levels

For the purposes of progression, some participants thought that different levels of the same subject should use consistent assessment methods. For example, one centre leader mentioned that National 4 is internally assessed, but National 5 and Higher are not. Their view was that if National 4 had an element of external assessment, this would better facilitate progression.

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