



National Course design and assessment

**SQA fieldwork visits
Year 2 (2016–17)**

**Engagement and focus group
discussions with centres delivering
new National Qualifications**

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1 Background



In July 2015, SQA's Qualifications Committee approved proposals to carry out an initial evaluation of the design, assessment and implementation of the new National Qualifications (NQs). This included a research exercise with a particular focus on internal unit assessment and fieldwork visits to schools to speak to groups of learners, teachers, and senior managers. Both pieces of work were published in May 2016.

In the fieldwork study, SQA staff visited 42 schools between November 2015 and January 2016, speaking to S5/6 learners, teachers and Senior management teams. At least one school in each local authority was visited, along with a sample from the independent sector and special schools. Staff in these schools were also given the opportunity to complete a survey monkey questionnaire.

It was clear from the findings of the first fieldwork that learners did not feel the Broad General Education (BGE) was preparing them well for the Senior Phase; that many teachers felt the requirement to pass all assessment standards in each unit was creating an imbalance in the course; that it was challenging to track pupil progress against the assessment standards in school recording systems; that in many instances insufficient time was being given for delivery of NQs; that personalisation and choice was less extensive than expected, and that most teachers would welcome a rationalisation of documents.

SQA shared the findings of its research with the wider education community and undertook to address those issues for which it had responsibility, notably the issues associated with unit assessments.

The broader issues that were highlighted needed to be addressed by schools and local authorities and were associated with the pace of learning in the BGE, ensuring that pupils are presented for the correct level of qualifications and ensuring that sufficient time is given for delivery and assessment of NQs — 160 hours. In May 2016, SQA published Subject Review Reports for each subject and identified specific issues and actions to address the issues identified with unit assessment in the short and medium terms. These reports specifically outlined actions for session 2016–17 to help to address workload associated with assessment and these were implemented and have been in place during the current academic year.

In September 2016, the revisions planned were overtaken when the Deputy First Minister announced the decision to remove units from the National Qualifications. SQA has been revising the assessment approach for National 5 qualifications and these will be in place for session 2017–18. Similar revisions will be undertaken to remove unit assessments in Higher and Advanced Higher for future sessions.

1.1 Rationale

This second series of engagements with schools, colleges, local education authorities and other partners is part of a suite of ongoing SQA activities designed to evaluate the implementation of the new National Qualifications (NQs). Its purpose is to attempt to evaluate at first hand:

- ◆ the impact that the continuing implementation of the new NQs has had on centres in the period 2016–17
- ◆ what, if any, effects this implementation continues to have
- ◆ what impact recent changes to qualification structures have had on centres
- ◆ what impact recently published additional support documentation has had on centres

1.2 Research methodology

These centres were broadly the same selection as in the first year of the work in 2015–16, and this ensured a minimum of one centre per authority, although the number was extended in larger authorities. This selection was to try and ensure consistency of response from centres and extend the longitudinal nature of the research into a second year (in line with recommendations made in 2015–16 and in line with the first year of this engagement).

The centres had been originally chosen to reflect the wide variety of contexts in which they operate, with schools from across the local authority areas, the independent sector, Additional support needs (ASN) schools, and colleges. Those included in the research were a spectrum of rural and urban; large and small by roll; denominational and non-denominational; reflective of free-meal entitlement provision. A number of schools from last year's cohort had to withdraw from the fieldwork study for local

reasons, and one new school was added. This resulted in visits being made to 37 centres during November and December 2016 and January 2017.

Also added to the sample this year was an increased number of ASN schools and there was also an increase in the number of colleges consulted. The visits to ASN schools and colleges tried to capture the impact of the new NQs in those sectors. These visits took place in February and March 2017.

The two national parent groups (National Parent Forum of Scotland and Scottish Parent Teacher Council) were again consulted to ascertain the ongoing nature of their views on the new NQs.

The methodology used to collect the information throughout the field was similar to that used in the first year, 2015–16. Each team visiting a school or college consisted of a team leader who acted as moderator, and a scribe. This was to ensure validity and reliability in the process of recording the focus group responses. The questions for the four focus groups in schools were developed by SQA and were sent to the centres to allow the individuals and groups chosen to discuss and prepare any responses in advance, with the proviso that the moderators might probe deeper in conversations in individual centres where it was felt appropriate.

Centres were asked to form groups in the following way where possible, taking account of local circumstances:

- ◆ 8–10 learners from S5–S6, ie those learners who had a fuller experience of the new NQs
- ◆ 8–10 learners from S4, whose experience was focused on National 4/National 5 qualifications. This was an additional group added to the research this year, to ascertain how they were getting on in their first year of taking qualifications.
- ◆ 6–8 promoted and un-promoted staff from various subject areas in the school
- ◆ As many of the SMT as could be available on the day for the discussions at school management level

The timing of the focus groups was agreed in advance with the centres to fit with their own timetabling structures which meant the group discussion could vary from 40 minutes to one hour. The learner and teacher groups completed a background questionnaire to provide information about specific aspects of their experience of the new NQs (eg number of subjects being taken, which subjects, and at what level), and

any specific issues that had emerged for them through their experience of the qualifications phase. This was designed to add additional experiential depth to the data being gathered in the focus groups and help to develop a picture across curriculum areas and subjects. The focus group data for each group was individually scrutinised by two members of the fieldwork teams, and then a collective view was arrived at in consideration of the data for each group.

The design of the questions was intended to elicit and identify any generic issues across centres and areas of the country. Some of the questions were common to those posed in the first year to allow for comparative responses. Other questions were new for two reasons: they reflected emerging issues as the qualifications continued to be embedded; or sought responses to the earlier actions SQA had taken following continued engagement with stakeholders. It was accepted that some of the opinions expressed would be derived from specific subject-based experiences. This was likely to be particularly the case for at least two of the groups (learners and teachers). Some of the questions incorporated a specific set of prompts and potential responses to help the scribes record the information. This did not limit the breadth of responses.

The approach was piloted in two centres in order to address any issues with either the questions or the timing of the focus groups.

The discussion points noted for the school focus groups were coded to enable any common themes to be identified. Any comment associated with a school may have been made by an individual member of the focus group: it should not be assumed that all members of the focus group shared the same view. Our analysis of the individual questions led us to identify emerging themes. We have accordingly chosen to structure our findings by theme rather than by a question-by-question structure. The responses have been collated to reflect the collective view — notably ‘all’, ‘three-quarters’, ‘half’, ‘one-quarter’ and ‘a few’ — and are occasionally modified by phrases like ‘more than’ or ‘less than’.

All contributions were anonymised and were not shared between focus groups. There are no specific references to schools, colleges or individuals in this document.

The report uses the term ‘learner’ throughout for both schools and colleges in preference to the terms ‘pupil’ or ‘candidate’. We have retained the terms ‘pupil’ or

'candidate' in the annexes in line with the wording of the questions we asked in centres.

1.3 Curriculum structures and option choices

SQA gathered information about curriculum structure and option choices of each centre to set the context for the discussion. As last year, the spread of centres visited as part of the research covered a variety of local authority areas and independent schools. The learner questionnaires and core data from the schools indicated a variety of curriculum models and differing presentation patterns for S4 learners. School models and patterns of presentation were still evolving.

The learner questionnaires indicate that the subject choices being made for the Senior Phase vary within a range of five to nine subjects taken in S4, most usually transitioning to five subjects in S5, with a variety of Higher and Advanced Higher in S6. There is some evidence that some centres are reflecting on presentation patterns. SQA indicated in early documentation such as *The Design of Courses and Units* and in early presentations to centres that courses at National 5 and above were nominally 160 hours in length to allow for learning, teaching and assessment. That figure was recently reiterated in the Assessment and National Qualifications (ANQ) Group document in March 2017. SQA has taken the opportunity of including this information in the new National 5 course specification for each subject published in April/ May 2017. There were indications that the time allocated for courses on occasion fell short of this requirement. The Chief Inspector wrote to all schools in May 2016 setting out clear national expectations around qualifications and assessment and how best to organise the BGE as a better fit for the Senior Phase curriculum. The fieldwork indicates that the majority of learners undertake National 5 in S4. Most learners appear to be undertaking up to five Highers during the course of S5 — the traditional 'two-term dash'.

The Executive Summary of themes and issues emerging from the work is set out below under the following headings:

- ◆ Transition from Broad General Education to the Senior Phase
- ◆ National 4 course structure and assessment
- ◆ Presentations for National Qualifications
- ◆ Progression through National Qualifications

- ◆ Assessment: general points
- ◆ Changes to course structures and assessment: National 5–Advanced Higher
- ◆ Personalisation and choice
- ◆ Developing the Young Workforce (DYW)

2 Executive Summary of themes and issues emerging from Year 2 fieldwork



This Executive Summary is intended to present a number of specific themes and issues emerging both from the focus groups and centres surveyed.

More detail from the focus groups and advance questionnaires is available in the accompanying annexes. The key messages in the Executive Summary have been extracted to inform short- to medium-term discussions on those issues only. The fieldwork will inform the work of SQA, and be shared with Education Scotland and the Working Group on Assessment and National Qualifications (ANQ). The questions and responses from the various focus groups were very wide-ranging and their concerns often reflected their particular circumstances. Accordingly, while the Executive Summary identifies a set of main themes and issues, the summary reports in the annexes from parents and carers, colleges, and Additional support needs schools provide very valuable supplementary information about education in Scotland. The Fieldwork Report will thus be of interest to many stakeholders in the Scottish education system. Some of the issues emerging can be addressed by SQA, while others require action by other national and local partners.

Transition from Broad General Education to the Senior Phase

- ◆ Centres recognise the importance of a smooth transition throughout BGE and then into the Senior Phase with an understanding of the importance of building skills and knowledge in S1–S3. There was evidence of some improvements compared to the findings from last year.
- ◆ A number of departments were in the process of mapping across skills and knowledge between the two phases, but this is not yet complete. There was uncertainty in a number of centres on how the S3 year should be used to best effect.
- ◆ Many learners expressed the view that they did not feel that S1–3 was a good preparation for the Senior Phase — both in the pace of work they had experienced and in the depth and breadth of the skills and knowledge they had developed to prepare them for the requirements of the Senior Phase. If the intention is to have an even gradient of learning from S1–6, from the learner perspective this is not happening as well as it could in all curriculum areas.

- ◆ Many learners were unclear about their Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) attainment level at the end of S3. The release of the CfE Curriculum Level 3 and 4 benchmarks should help both learners and staff be clear on levels of prior achievement before entry to the Senior Phase.
- ◆ Over half of the parental responses reported that they did not have a clear sense of their child's progress and the curriculum levels achieved as they moved into the Senior Phase and many expressed concerns about the subject choice process.

National 4 unit and course assessment

- ◆ Centres continue to use the National 4 added value unit in very different ways and at different times for candidates. For example, it can be taken by all pupils in a cohort in S3; only by those candidates designated as National 4; or by a proportion of candidates being presented for National 5 for Recognition of Previous Attainment (RPA) purposes. Schools offered a variety of reasons to explain their practice.
- ◆ A clear majority of teachers and members of SMTs expressed the opinion that National 4 learners needed an examination at the end of their course. Teachers commented about the need for an examination to motivate learners.
- ◆ The majority of S4 learners took a very different view, and this view was echoed by many learners in S5 and S6. Learners judged that they were working hard or very hard and were motivated.
- ◆ Both staff and learners felt that the National 4 course needed differentiation beyond a straightforward pass/fail.
- ◆ Some form of grading for the National 4 course was discussed in various centres and with many of the focus groups. It seemed incongruous to a number of staff that learners who put in considerable effort and achieved well and those who make the minimum effort both received a pass for the same National 4 qualification.
- ◆ It is evident that there is no consensus on the format of the National 4 course assessment by stakeholders in the various focus groups included in the fieldwork visits and that further consideration of the purpose and philosophy of the National 4 qualification is required. The views on the approach to assessment varied across the country, within local authorities and also within individual centres.

Presentations for National Qualifications

- ◆ There was clear staff unease in many schools about pressure often from parents and carers or from SMT or local authorities, to present learners at National 5 rather than National 4.
- ◆ The decision to remove units from course assessment was perceived by teachers and SMTs as likely to lead to centres reviewing their presentation policies and advice to learners. Centres were looking for central guidance on some of the operational aspects of this.
- ◆ Centres also indicated that they would need to consider what evidence they would generate now to assess learner progress through the course for tracking and monitoring, reporting purposes and presentation decisions.

Progression through National Qualifications

- ◆ A significant number of teachers felt there was a large gap in demand between National 4 and National 5.
- ◆ The majority of parents and carers in the focus group felt there was a large gap in demand between National 4 and National 5.
- ◆ Many learners spoke of the challenge of moving from National 5 to Higher. This included dealing with the increased complexity of concepts in many subjects as well as the extent of subject vocabularies. Subjects like Chemistry, Physics and Mathematics were specifically mentioned.
- ◆ A number of subject teachers expressed a view that attainment in their subject was being affected by weaker literacy or numeracy skills.
- ◆ A number of college staff said that they felt learners coming to them demonstrated less secure literacy and numeracy skills than in previous years.

Changes to qualifications structure: National 5 — Advanced Higher

- ◆ When the various focus groups were interviewed, staff and SMT were not yet clear on whether the changes announced in the Subject Review Reports of May 2016 were having an impact beyond mathematics and science subjects.
- ◆ While initially welcoming the Deputy First Minister's announcement in September 2016 that units were no longer to be part of course assessment, and that this would reduce workload for staff and learners, centres were now uncertain on how that change would impact on their practice.

Developing the Young Workforce (DYW)

- ◆ Teaching staff were not asked about DYW, with the focus for this group being on subject issues.
- ◆ SMTs were very clear that they felt it was important to have alternative pathways in place for sections of their learner cohort. It is clear there are many long-standing and developing contacts between schools, colleges and employers. Some challenges were identified in sustaining and progressing such links.
- ◆ College staff expressed the view that school learners entering college were more passive learners than they had expected by this stage of CfE.
- ◆ Young learners in college spoke very positively about their enjoyment of college, sometimes after having had some difficult experiences in school. A number of learners in school who had experienced shared placements felt their college experience had given them a strong step forward in their learning and a clear sense of their learning journey.
- ◆ All senior managers in all colleges identified activities planned between colleges and local partner schools.

3 Themes and issues



3.1 Transition from Broad General Education to the Senior Phase

In accordance with the findings in 2015–16, it was found that in a high number of centres, the initial structure and content of the Broad General Education (BGE) in S1–S3 had not prepared candidates well enough for the demands of the Senior Phase, including qualifications. However, it was stated by both staff and learners that this pattern varied across subject areas. This picture continued to vary across centres that were surveyed, and a number of subjects and centres had reviewed their arrangements for the BGE.

There was still some confusion being expressed about advice issued from Education Scotland in May 2016 at the point of conducting our fieldwork on progression from BGE to the Senior Phase. This advice (<https://education.gov.scot/Documents/progression-from-bge-to-the-senior-phase.pdf>) was not yet fully understood at all levels within centres to allow them to re-adjust content in the BGE to reflect the teaching, learning and assessment needs of the Senior Phase and the new qualifications.

- ◆ Some teachers and SMT continued to express concerns about the perceived levels of numeracy and literacy of learners arriving from the primary stages of the BGE, noting it was making it difficult for these learners to access fully other areas of the curriculum.
- ◆ In 2015–6, the increase in demand from the end of S3 into S4 presented major challenges for many learners. In 2016–17, learners continued to express the view that the pace of learning and assessment had picked up too dramatically in S4. Others, however, expressed a view that they felt well enough prepared in S1–S3. This was also reflected in the responses about the move from National 4 to National 5 for some learners who felt this to be a significant challenge, and from National 5 to Higher in many subjects.
- ◆ Advanced Higher was introduced in 2016–17. While the transition from Higher to Advanced Higher seemed to present less of a challenge, teachers in some subject areas continued to express concerns. It was noted by some learners that the skills developed at National 5 and Higher suited this transition more appropriately, although some learners were still finding the shift to higher levels of more independent working challenging.
- ◆ As a result of all of the above, some centres have re-evaluated or are re-evaluating the structures of the BGE, particularly in S3 to reflect the needs of candidates

moving into the Senior Phase. In particular, centres have looked at the CfE Level 3 experiences and outcomes to map content from National 4 and National 5 onto these, in order to help deliver the content for qualifications over a longer timeframe. Subjects with high levels of content, notably sciences, had done this. Some centres noted that this process of review could be interrupted by the decision to remove unit assessments at National 5 and above, as departments and centres re-focused their efforts to deal with this immediate change.

- ◆ There was some evidence that in some subjects, some centres were bringing content and in some cases unit assessment events into S3. This was driven by focusing on the need to improve skills and knowledge development for those subjects receiving smaller time allocations in the BGE. The published and imminent (at the time of our visits) benchmarking documents from Education Scotland were also being looked at to help with this ongoing process.
- ◆ Many subject areas are continuing the process of looking to map some aspects of content from NQ courses onto the work being undertaken by learners as part of the BGE to assist with the transition. This appears to be undertaken in order to help learners cope with levels of knowledge and understanding in some subject areas. It also appears to be a pattern across most subjects in order to cope, and help, with the demands of S4. (See further points in section 3.6 Assessment: general points.)
- ◆ A high proportion of centres used tracking and monitoring evidence, including unit assessments and other assessment results, to help determine the appropriate level of presentation for learners, along with professional judgement and/or discussion.
- ◆ Centres commented that they were still considering the potential implications of the advice issued by Education Scotland in May 2016.
- ◆ While parents and carers were generally happy about the transition from primary to secondary, they felt there was a degree of 'marking time' in S1–3, noting an increase in pace particularly in S4. They were often unclear as to the attainment level reached by the end of S3 and found the terminology confusing.
- ◆ While parental and carer experiences varied when helping their child choose subjects for the Senior Phase, the main concern appeared to be the perception that doing a reduced number of subjects had reduced choice and had made choices more difficult to make, and that sometimes choices were being made at the 'wrong time'. There was concern about a reduced flexibility associated with taking fewer subjects in S4 and concern that the variation in numbers of subjects being taken across schools was unfair to learners.

3.2 National 4 course structure and assessment — unit assessment

The National 4 course consists of three (occasionally two) internally assessed units and an added value unit (AVU), also internally assessed. In the AVU, learners will draw on and extend the skills they have learned from across the other units and demonstrate

the breadth of knowledge and skills acquired in unfamiliar contexts and/or integrated ways.

Last year's fieldwork identified concerns in centres about the structure of National 4 courses. The National 4 course structure and assessment continued this year to be a source of discussion and concern in centres, although a variety of reasons for this were expressed among the various focus groups. Some centres indicated that there was pressure to 'mis-present' some candidates at National 5. They indicated that this was due to the National 4 qualification not being valued by parents and carers and employers and the negative perception of National 4 in the absence of a question paper.

The National 4 AVU continues to be used in centres in a variety of ways. Some of these, as noted in the first phase report, are used not as initially intended by SQA.

Firstly, in some centres, whole cohorts of learners across all the ability ranges appear to be undertaking the AVU. This is not viewed as burdensome by centres or learners, but rather a good preparation for future assessment events. It remains, however, an additional assessment for very many learners.

Secondly, the timing of the point where centres administer the AVU varies widely, dependent on curriculum arrangements within a centre and how the centres/departments view the purpose of the AVU. For example, some centres use it as an assessment item at the end of S3, some at the beginning of S4, some as a bridging unit between the two, or some as a discrete assessment item to differentiate between potential National 4 and National 5 S4 learners. This pattern of variation is also subject-dependent.

Thirdly, the AVU continues to be viewed by teachers and SMTs alike as a limited substitute for a question paper at National 4. However, it should be noted that there is a wide variation in this view, both among staff and learners and, while this disparity is not universal, it is fair to say that no clear view emerged as to the most appropriate assessment arrangements for National 4.

3.3 National 4 course structure and assessment — course assessment

Previous research indicated that an examination paper might not be the most appropriate assessment for this level and that the current National 4 assessment structure might be better suited to the cohort and facilitate better potential progression routes to college for many of these learners. In 2010, the CfE Management Board approved the current approach to applying external verification to internally assessed units as the mechanism for certifying National 4.

There has been significant discussion on the use of internal assessment and the views of SMTs and teaching staff were sought as to how they felt this approach impacted on their centre. The question asked:

‘Our fieldwork report last year noted concerns about the lack of an exam paper at National 4. The National 1–National 4 National Qualifications were designed in this way because research showed that a lot of candidates at these levels did not perform well under examination conditions. What impacts might a National 4 exam have on National 4 candidates in your school?’

There were additional prompts for staff on attainment, motivation and management of any such change.

- ◆ The discussions tended to centre around issues of parity of esteem with National 5, the potentially increased motivation of learners, learner confidence, etc. These comments mainly seemed to stem from teachers’ previous experience of Standard Grade and its assessment approaches, rather than any acceptance that the National 4 assessment structure might be better suited to the cohort for which it was intended, and facilitate better potential progression routes to college for many of these learners.
- ◆ Most S4 learners in the focus groups were undertaking a mixture of National 4 and National 5 qualifications, and there were clear indications from learners that, firstly, they were happy for the National 4 qualification to remain as it is, ie with no question paper component; and, secondly, they indicated that any addition of a question paper at National 4 would add significantly to their workload and stress levels if they were asked to prepare for more examinations.

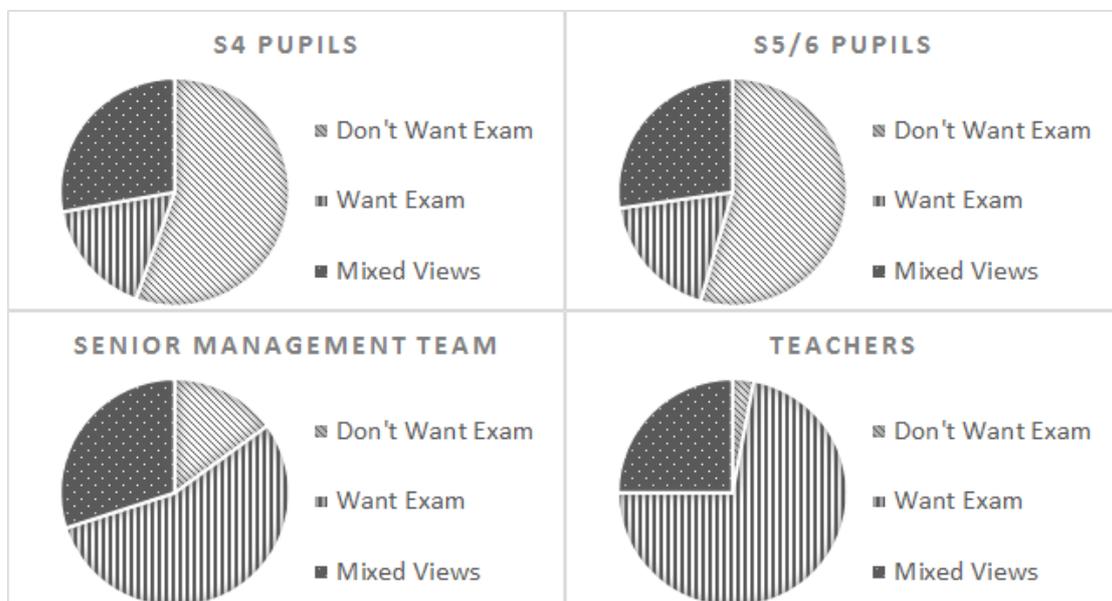
National 4 differentiation

There was some discussion of a graded element to the National 4 qualification, to reward those learners who complete the National 4 coursework to a high level, rather than the course being a simple pass or fail. The view expressed by staff and learners alike was that this move would enhance the value of the National 4 qualification.

National 4 question paper

Among teachers, there was very strong support for the introduction of a National 4 question paper, and this was mirrored very closely by some SMT members. However, in some centres, SMTs collectively were against the introduction of a question paper at National 4. Nevertheless, there was a recognition among both these groups that some learners would not cope with a formal exam and might fail National 4 as a result, resulting in a downward trend (at least initially) in attainment and pass rates for this level, and attainment levels overall.

There are a wide range of views about the National 4 qualification as illustrated in the pie charts below:



3.4 Presentations for National Qualifications

Comments from teachers

Teachers tended to speak from their own experience as classroom practitioners or from a departmental perspective.

Nearly all teachers to a greater or lesser degree felt pressure to mis-present learners at National 5 despite learner performance evidence indicating National 4 presentation was more appropriate. This could come from a variety of sources — parents and carers or SMT or the local authority. They felt this was mainly due to National 4 not being valued by parents and carers and employers. They often felt such pressure was not in the long-term interest of the learners.

About half or more of the teachers make their presentation decision after the preliminary examinations, or use their professional judgement from evidence generated in the class or by candidates outwith the classroom.

Comments from SMTs

Members of SMTs tended to comment more broadly on presentation practice and policy.

Three-quarters of schools reported using tracking and monitoring evidence, including unit tests and other assessment results, to determine the appropriate level of presentation for learners, and one half used professional judgement and/or discussion. Almost three-quarters of schools reported feeling pressure from parents and carers to present at a level they did not feel was appropriate (usually higher). Over half of all schools reported taking an 'aspirational' approach to presentation (aiming high, with later decisions being made and learners 'falling back' to a lower level if necessary, for example from National 5 to National 4). One-quarter of schools used communication with parents and carers or learners to determine the appropriate level of presentation, and over one-quarter reported feeling little or no parental pressure to present at a level they did not feel was appropriate.

Schools were aware that asking learners to complete unit assessments for both National 4 and National 5 was adding to workload for both learners and staff. Nearly half of schools reported that their practice in this regard was changing over time, with well over one-quarter saying that this was resulting in a reduction for learners. Well over one-quarter of schools left the decision on assessment at National 4 and National

5 mainly or entirely to departments, whereas one-quarter had a whole-school (or local authority) approach.

Half of all schools used the National 4 AVU as a safety net for 'fall-back' purposes. Well over one-quarter reported that all learners do the AVU (whether or not they were presented for National 4); well over one-quarter of schools reported that only 'borderline' learners do the AVU; and well over one-quarter reported using the AVU as part of learning and teaching in preparation for the National 5 assignment, or for operational or equality reasons in bi-level classes.

3.5 Progression through National Qualifications

Comments from teachers

As for presentation, teachers tended to respond as classroom practitioners or from a departmental perspective.

About half or more of the teachers thought that progression from National 4 to National 5 was poor (due to a low pass rate), and/or was challenging (due to the level of demand on learners) and/or difficult (hard to teach in the time available).

For progression from National 5 to Higher, teachers' opinions were very divided within centres and across subjects – some stated that progression from National 5 to Higher was poor, challenging and difficult for some subjects, especially for students who achieve a grade C at National 5, with others saying progression was good for their subject.

Again, opinion was split regarding progression from Higher to Advanced Higher — between being good for some subjects and poor, challenging and difficult for others. A few mentioned that learners can find the demands of independent learning at Advanced Higher difficult to get used to.

Comments from SMTs

SMTs tended to comment more broadly on progression for learners, helped by a wider perspective through link departments and school performance overall through the Senior Phase years.

Well over one-quarter of SMTs reported that the smoothness of progression varies by subject. Well over one-quarter said that progression from National 4 to National 5 was generally problematic. Well over one-quarter reported that progression from National 5 to Higher was problematic for some subjects. One-quarter reported that progression from National 5 to Higher was fine or improved, but the same number noted that progression from National 5 to Higher was difficult for the learner obtaining only a C pass at National 5. Around one-quarter of SMTs reported that progression from Higher to Advanced Higher was acceptable.

3.6 Assessment: general points

- ◆ Many centres again commented on the lack of clarity in the relationship(s) between unit assessment and other course assessment, including the question paper. This is particularly true where they feel unit content or assessment is not reflected or linked to work for coursework assessment or question paper.
- ◆ Learners and centres continued to feel that unit assessments were not adequate preparation for the question paper — where one existed — as learners believe they are benchmarked below C level or at minimum competence.
- ◆ SMT members indicated that, in most cases, the assessment regimes were left to individual departments to decide. Many centres and learners commented again that they found unit assessment burdensome and time-consuming. Some centres and learners commented that the Subject Review Reports issued by SQA in May 2016 had clarified the unit assessment position where threshold scores had been introduced, but in other subjects areas, while the had been welcomed, they had not yet had a significant impact on unit assessment. (This may be in some part reflective of when visits to centres took place — in November and December 2016.)
- ◆ Many learners again expressed the feeling that lots of unit assessment came at particular pressure points in the year, and that their teachers seemed under pressure over the level of assessment, although this had improved and in some subjects with the reduced need for re-assessment.

3.7 Changes to National 5 — Advanced Higher course structures and assessment

Removal of National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher unit assessment (UA)

The teacher and SMT focus groups were asked the following question:

‘The CfE Management Board has announced that unit assessments for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher will be removed and will no longer be a requirement to achieve an overall course award. Course assessment (exam

and/or coursework) will be strengthened to ensure it assesses the full content of the course. The changes will be implemented for National 5 in the 2017–18 session, for Higher in the 2018–19 session, and for Advanced Higher in the 2019–20 session. How do you foresee these changes impacting on your practice?’

The responses to this question were in some respects coloured by the fact that further information on the strengthening of coursework or question paper was not available to centres in advance of the focus group discussions. However, a number of viewpoints were noted including the fact that many SMTs and staff initially welcomed the CfE Management Board announcement and they expressed the view that there would be a consequent reduction in workload/marketing/administration/recording of unit assessment results for centres.

Teachers and SMTs were asking questions about potential consequences of such a set of annual changes, notably:

- ◆ What would replace the unit assessments?
- ◆ What did the term ‘strengthening’ mean?
- ◆ Would the SQA units and unit assessment support packs (UASPs) still be available for use?
- ◆ If centres still wanted to present learners for units only, how would that work in practice?
- ◆ Would the removal of the unit assessments actually create an increase in workload and stress?

The reaction to the CfE Management Board announcement also varied across subjects, centres and individual members of staff and SMTs. Many members of teaching staff viewed the removal of the unit assessments as a negative move, stating that it was not the unit assessments themselves that were the problem, but the need for 100% achievement across all outcomes and assessment standards. In the view of many, a correction of this aspect was the requirement, and not wholesale removal. Indeed, those subjects (notably Mathematics and the sciences) where threshold or cut-off scores had been introduced in the Subject Review Reports published in May 2016, had welcomed the changes and this had reduced their levels of re-assessments. In those subjects where guidance had reduced the number of assessment standards to

be passed or where clarification about assessment standards had been given in the Subject Review Reports, the general feeling was that not much had been amended.

The reaction to the removal of unit assessments in the college sector was different. In many cases, the college departments were using the unit assessments in different ways:

- ◆ as diagnostic tests to ascertain whether learners would be able to cope with the other course components, ie the assignment and question paper
- ◆ to group units together across subject areas to facilitate college awards
- ◆ to evaluate learner readiness to progress to Higher National Courses

So, in many cases, colleges will continue to use the unit assessments to facilitate combinations of units and associated unit assessments to benefit their candidates. There were questions here, however, as to how often the unit assessments would be refreshed in order to avoid repetition of assessments over coming years.

‘Strengthening’ of National 5 course assessment

In addition, the section of the question for SMTs and teaching staff indicated that:

‘Course assessment (exam and/or coursework) will be strengthened to ensure it assesses the full content of the course.’

At the time of the visits to centres, this phrase was giving cause for some concern. Centres were waiting to see what those changes or strengthening would look like. This was clearly linked to the concerns expressed (see above) about the removal of unit assessments at National 5, Higher and ultimately Advanced Higher, and the concern that learners whom centres considered ‘borderline’ would be those who might be most affected. In other words, the concern was that attainment might actually decrease slightly as a result of this change. (Note: details of the changes to course assessment [examination and/or coursework] were published in January 2017, shortly after the visits to school centres. SQA explained here that the content and standards of courses had not changed.)

Practical impacts on centres

In considering the practicalities of the removal of unit assessment at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher, a number of issues were raised:

- ◆ The main impact would be a continued period of change for centres and departments when what they were looking for was a period of stability.
- ◆ Departments would have to review how progress through the content of courses at these levels would be assessed, and how they would come to judgements about presentation levels.
- ◆ There remained some concerns around the consistent application of conditions of assessment for coursework, and the potential impact on learners. Concerns were also raised about the perceived consistency of external marking and lack of standardisation, consistency and integrity in internal marking within centres.
- ◆ There might be some confusion in centres who decided to retain the unit assessments as a means of judging progress through units, though now learners would get no credit for passing them if they were ultimately presented for the course assessment. This was particularly an issue in the case of those 'borderline' learners who, it was viewed, might leave the year with no qualification.
- ◆ The practical aspect of 'strengthening' the conditions of assessment for assignments meant staff felt they would have to re-assess how they structured the assignment component during the school year. They also identified that the potential lengthening of question papers may make the examination diet longer, eating into time for teaching and learning and preparation of learners for the question paper.
- ◆ There were also some concerns expressed that the element of 'strengthening' might have a negative impact on the attainment of some learners. This was mentioned in the context of some schools having 'aspirational' presentation policies for 'borderline' learners.

3.8 Personalisation and choice

- ◆ The response to this question was similar to the previous round of fieldwork. However, the older learners from S5 and S6 often became more vocal on this question when they put it in the context of 'responsibility for their own learning' and commented thereafter that there was a wider element of personalisation and choice.
- ◆ There was some evidence of more personalisation and choice being available as learners moved up through the Senior Phase. This element of their learning experience varied widely across subjects and levels and, in most cases was sometimes limited to the assignment aspect of course assessment, which many learners valued. Teachers expressed the view that they could only offer a limited amount of personalisation and choice in the qualifications. Open choice exposed the problems of resourcing, monitoring and expertise in some areas when it came to making assessment judgements.
- ◆ SQA visited four ASN schools. Both teaching staff and SMTs were very clear that their circumstances allowed them to design very specific programmes for their young people, often with a mixture of units at one level and courses at another level

to match the different aptitudes and interests of candidates. They were also very clear that they were preparing these young people for life after school and the concept of personalisation and choice permeated their approach.

3.9 Developing the Young Workforce (DYW)

- ◆ Most centres continued to believe that they had appropriate provision in place to deliver a range of vocational qualifications, some in line with the aspirations of DYW, but a number indicated that this provision was continually under review. The variety and extent of this provision is captured in Annex 8 which outlines SMT responses, but in response to the question below:

‘The DYW report and the CfE Implementation Plan suggest that schools introduce more vocational qualifications and establish links with colleges and employers. In this centre, is there anything that has helped you to offer these qualifications, or do you have any challenges in offering these qualifications?’

- ◆ Very few of the centres expressed the view that this provision was directly linked to the DYW initiative, but rather that it was a continuation and extension of their former vocational provision or school–college partnerships. They continued to express the view that provision of these courses as additional or, in some cases, alternative, provision was vital to the delivery of a balanced curriculum for their learners.
- ◆ Some centres expressed the view that the recent changes to college structures continued to impact on their school–college partnerships, which for most are the main vehicle for delivery of vocational qualifications. In addition, the impact of some colleges requiring minimum numbers for courses to run was noted, which centres could not always match.
- ◆ Concerns around literacy and numeracy were echoed in one college with regard to learners entering for part-time or post-16 courses. Some colleges noted that they had introduced ‘bridging courses’ for their learners to compensate for this, and to allow learners to access other aspects of college qualifications.
- ◆ Centres continued to cite many issues that impacted on their provision under DYW, notably:
 - Geography: this continues to be an issue for rural and urban centres alike. Travel is not always to the nearest campus for college provision. Rather, it is to that campus which the college has designated for a particular delivery.
 - Timing: timetabling and other timing issues impact on delivery. In local authorities where alignment of timetables has taken place, this helps a number of centres send learners to the college at the same time. From both the centre and college perspective it increases the possibility that viable class sizes can be created and sustained.
 - Cost: many schools are now trying to deliver courses in-house in order to address the issues outlined above and to control costs. Although this approach has been taken previously, many centres are moving towards this type of provision, citing the building of ‘hub’ facilities.
 - Sustainability: Some centres indicated that investing in some forms of provision was determined by how many learners were interested in

participating, and how this investment could be sustained for small numbers.

4 Acknowledgements



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Above all, again, thanks to the school and college managers for giving up their time to meet the teams and helping to organise the meetings with the focus groups. Also, many thanks to the teachers, lecturers, candidates and parents and carers for taking the time to meet with the teams and complete the detailed questionnaires.

5 Annexes to Executive Summary



5.1 Questions for S4 learner focus groups

Broad General Education (S1 to S3)

1. Did the *speed of learning* in S1-3 prepare you for the work you are doing this year?
2. Thinking back to what you learned in S1–S3 in terms of *skills and knowledge*, how well did that prepare you for your work this year?

Your SQA National Qualifications (NQ)

3. Do you know if the pupils in your classes are all working at the same level of NQ (all at N4, or all at N5, etc)? If different levels are being taught in the same class, how does your teacher do this?
4. Are pupils able to change level during the course, to N3 or N4 or N5, if they are finding the work too hard or too easy?
5. N4 courses have no exam at the end, unlike the N5 courses. What do you think about this?
6. Do you know if you did any of the work or assessment for your NQ courses when you were in S3?

And finally...

7. Are you doing any qualifications other than SQA's National Qualifications (things like Skills for Work, other vocational qualifications, ADSAN courses or the Duke of Edinburgh award)? If so, please tell us about them. Are you enjoying them? Are you doing them in school or somewhere else? Are you learning in different ways?
8. What do you plan to do at the end of S4 — look for work, continue in school, go to college, something else?
9. Is there anything else you'd like to say about your experience of SQA National Qualifications?

5.2 Summary of S4 learner responses

Introduction

The order of sections in this annex mirrors the order in the overall Executive Summary Report. Not all sections are commented on because of the nature of the questions asked of this focus group.

The methodology of recording comments made at the focus groups is outlined in the Executive Summary Report. We have used the terms 'all', 'three-quarters', 'half', 'one-quarter' and 'a few' to designate the volume of comments in the reports.

In all, some 265 learners were part of the focus groups, but only 223 interviewees completed a questionnaire in advance of the visit. Reference to some of that data is included in the next paragraphs.

There was a relatively fair balance of male and female learners within the groups – 149 male to 116 female, with centres themselves choosing the learners.

Of the 223 learners questioned, when asked to rate how hard they were working in S4, on a scale of 1–5 (1 being not very hard and 5 being very hard), all bar 25 were in categories 3–5, feeling they worked hard or very hard.

Moving to the analysis of the focus group responses, and grouping the responses under specific headings, the following high-level points emerge.

Transition from Broad General Education to the Senior Phase

Pace of learning

S4 learners from about half or more schools said that the pace of learning in the Broad General Education did not prepare them well for the Senior Phase. Typically the responses included learners describing their learning as too slow in S1–3. As a result they are now experiencing a 'jump', finding learning very fast and challenging.

However, S4 learners from about half or more schools also said that they feel they were better prepared in some subjects and/or by some teachers over others. Their

experience of the pace of learning in S1–3 was not consistent in all subject areas and with all teachers. As a result these learners are now feeling ill-prepared in some subject areas and finding that some learning is too fast.

S4 learners from about a quarter or more schools said that they feel S1–3 has prepared them fairly well for S4–6. This has resulted in a fairly smooth transition to the Senior Phase. S4 learners from a few schools noted that there was a big jump in learning from S2 to S3. This group distinguished between the pace of learning in S2 and S3; they believe that S3 prepared them better for S4–6. S4 learners from a few schools experienced a highly appropriate pace of learning in S1–3. As a result they felt very well prepared and have had a smooth transition from S3 to S4–6.

Skills and knowledge

S4 learners from significantly more than half of the schools said that they felt their experience in S1–3 was inconsistent across subjects and with different teachers. Learners felt better prepared in some subjects and by some teachers than others. There was variation across the schools as to what learners found more challenging and difficult in terms of development of skills and knowledge in S1–3 in preparation for S4–6.

S4 learners from significantly more than a quarter of schools used language illustrating that skills and knowledge development in the Broad General Education did not prepare them well for their studies in S4–6. As a result they have experienced a gap in knowledge in S4. For example, in one school, learners highlighted that in French and Spanish there was insufficient development of vocabulary skills in S1–3.

In parallel, however, learners from more than a quarter of schools said through feedback that they believe skills and knowledge development in S1–3 prepared them fairly well for S4 studies.

S4 learners from a few schools confirmed that skills and knowledge development in S1–3 prepared them very well for S4. S4 learners from a few schools confirmed that skills and knowledge development in S1–2 helped develop their confidence before progressing to more challenging work.

Introduction of National 4/other National Qualifications in S3

S4 learners from almost all schools indicated that they completed some work for National Qualifications in S3. S4 learners from almost half of the schools confirmed they completed a National 4 AVU in S3 for all or some subjects. S4 learners from a few schools were uncertain if they completed a National 4 AVU in S3. S4 learners from a few schools confirmed they did not complete a National 4 AVU in S3.

National 4

Some S4 learners in a few schools noted that they feel stress and pressure due to National Qualifications. This was a general comment and not specific to any particular aspect of National Qualifications. Some learners spoke about subject availability and choice, feeling that they did not have a fair choice of subjects. Some learners said it would be helpful to have been taught or developed study and time management skills in S1–3. Some S4 learners in a few schools noted that it would be helpful to have developed examination and other skills at an earlier stage. Some S4 learners in a few schools highlighted that courses are rushed and/or not managed appropriately.

National 4 course structure and assessment — course assessment

Impact of introducing an examination for National 4

S4 learners from more than half of the schools are in favour of continuing to have no examination at National 4 level. In contrast S4 learners from a few schools are in favour of an examination being introduced. S4 learners from a quarter of schools had an unclear view, or no majority view. Many points were noted on this subject. Learners pointed out that they already have a lot of tests and didn't see the need for an examination. Well over half thought examinations are not helpful where a learner is already struggling with the course. They said, the absence of an examination helps to build up confidence, and takes stress off the learner. Many did have the perception that National 5 learners looked down on National 4 learners. Having an examination for both National 4 and National 5 was identified as giving learners more work with the possibility that the learners would do less well in their National 5 courses.

Possible negative impact of introducing an examination for National 4

S4 learners from more than half of the schools indicated that the introduction of an examination for National 4 level would increase stress and pressure. S4 learners from

more than a quarter of schools believe that introducing an examination at National 4 would have a negative impact on their studies at National 5. This feedback was given from learners studying a mix of National 4 and 5 level qualifications. The learners in this group believe that introduction of an examination would impact negatively on their time management since it would require them to spread their revision time more thinly to prepare for a greater number of examinations. S4 learners from a few schools also commented that introduction of an examination may lead to failure and that an examination does not suit all learners. A range of other concerns occasionally emerged in conversation: that the introduction of an examination may result in the loss of a more appropriate continual assessment approach; may result in loss of confidence; or may lead to reduced opportunities for skills development.

Possible positive impact of introducing an examination for National 4

In contrast, S4 learners from more than a quarter of schools felt that the introduction of an examination for National 4 may help build skills and give learners the confidence to progress further. A range of other positives occasionally emerged in conversation: that the introduction of an examination may result in a more credible qualification; may result in increased learner motivation; and may result in a greater opportunity to be graded. It may also enable learners and teachers to gauge progress more accurately than at present.

S4 learners from a few schools would like the National 4 qualification to be graded. S4 learners from a few schools suggested methods of improving the National 4 qualification without introducing an external examination. Methods suggested included: introduction of an examination-style test to give a taste of National 5, no formal examination but a graded paper of some sort, internally marked perhaps.

Presentations for National Qualifications

Changing levels

S4 learners in significantly more than half of the schools said that it is fairly easy to move up or down a level. For example, if a learner is studying at National 4 level then he/she may move up to National 5. Similarly, a learner working at National 5 level may move down to National 4. The method of deciding changing levels varies across and within schools. A decision may be arrived at by the school or individual teacher in a number of ways.

S4 learners in more than a quarter of the schools believe that it is usually more common to move down than up a level. S4 learners in significantly more than a quarter of schools said that decisions on changing level are often taken after assessments or prelims are completed. S4 learners in significantly more than a quarter of schools stated that classwork, effort and performance in homework are sometimes recognised in deciding level. However, the approach varied between these schools. Sometimes learners spoke of only one of these factors being used to decide level. Learners in a few schools confirmed that there is opportunity to discuss decisions to move with the teacher. Learners in a few schools confirmed that it is usually the teacher who makes the decision as to level and whether or not a learner should move up or down. S4 learners in a few schools noted that it is usually only possible to change level at certain times of year. S4 learners in two schools highlighted that opportunity to change level may be limited by need to balance class size. For example, a few learners identified examples of being unable to move up to the next level as there is no space in the class.

Frequency of bi-level teaching

S4 learners in all schools indicated that some classes are taught as bi-level. In a few cases classes are taught as tri-level groups. However, the extent of bi-level teaching varies across schools. S4 learners in more than half of the schools said that classes in either Maths or English, or both, tend to be delivered at one discrete level. In one school, learners noted that subjects such as Mathematics and English have single-level classes. The learners used their different experiences to compare bi- and single-level learning and teaching. There was an occasional perception that learners in lower sets can tend to be in bi-level classes while higher sets tend to be in discrete sets.

Management of bi-level teaching

S4 learners in slightly more than a quarter of schools said that the teacher usually spends an equal and fair amount of time with all learners. However, S4 learners in significantly more than a quarter of schools indicated that some teachers do not spend an equal and fair amount of time with all learners. Learners said that usually where this occurs, National 4 learners receive less teacher time and input than their National 5 peers.

S4 learners in more than a quarter of schools gave examples illustrating that teachers provide learners with differentiated work. S4 learners in a few schools gave examples highlighting that there is a lack of differentiated work. S4 learners in a few schools highlighted that a support teacher helps in some bi-level classes. Learners said they found this approach useful.

Developing the Young Workforce

Opportunities to go to college

S4 learners in significantly more than half of the schools confirmed that opportunities for S4–6 learners exist to go to college. Learners in two schools identified that this opportunity was available to S5–6 learners only. One school shared an information brochure on school/college partnerships issued by the local college to schools in the area. The brochure highlights the programmes on offer, including national qualifications, Skills for Work programmes and Social and Vocational Qualifications (SVQs). Routes into the college were clearly outlined for young people.

Uptake of opportunity to go to college

Learners in more than half of the schools either have personal experience of college programmes or cited examples of other learners outwith the focus group participating in these programmes. Learners participating in college programmes sometimes attend for a full or half day. For the learners in all of these schools, learning and teaching opportunities at college very often involve participating in ‘taster’ courses. Learners described having the opportunity to sample programmes in different curricular areas. Sometimes learners selected a curricular area to focus on prior to going to college.

Experience of college

S4 learners in significantly more than a quarter of schools made comments suggesting a very high level of satisfaction with their college experience. Learners were enthusiastic and motivated to participate in college studies.

Qualifications

S4 learners in about half of the schools have experience of studying ‘taster’ courses at college; in a few schools Skills for Work programmes were offered at college.

S4 learners in significantly more than half of the schools have experience of studying for the Duke of Edinburgh award while at school. In a few schools there was opportunity to study Skills for Work programmes and engage in other vocational qualifications within the school. This was because in these schools suitable resources exist to enable this to happen. In some instances the qualifications are delivered by school teachers. Sometimes a lecturer from the local college visits to deliver a particular programme in-house. In addition to vocational qualifications, a few schools offered some other programmes. Qualifications that were noted as being delivered in a few schools include the following: ASDAN; John Muir; Saltire; Princes Trust; First Aid; Food Hygiene; City and Guilds Bike Maintenance; Sports Leadership and Community Learning and Development Life Skills award.

Opportunities to study vocational and other qualifications at school

S4 learners in significantly more than half of the schools said they have the opportunity to study vocational and other qualifications at school. In terms of uptake, S4 learners in more than half of the schools have experience of studying vocational and/or other qualifications at school or know of other learners who have this experience. S4 learners in more than a quarter of schools enjoyed studying vocational and other qualifications at school.

Opportunities to participate in work experience

S4 learners in significantly more than a quarter of schools confirmed that the opportunity exists to participate in work experience. In terms of uptake, S4 learners in a quarter of schools confirmed that they have experience of a work placement, have one arranged, or know of another learner who does. S4 learners in a few schools confirmed that they have had a positive experience on work experience placement or are looking forward to going on placement.

Opportunities to participate in volunteering or charity work

S4 learners in a few schools have the opportunity to participate in volunteering and/or charity work. Learners in these schools said that they enjoy volunteering and participating in charity work.

Careers advice

S4 learners in more than half of the schools confirmed that careers advice is available. Learners in more than a quarter of the schools confirmed that careers advice is helpful.

Learner destinations

Some S4 learners in significantly more than half of the schools indicated that they intend returning to school to complete S5. In significantly more than a quarter of schools some S4 learners indicated that they may stay for both S5 and S6. Some S4 learners in significantly more than half of the schools indicated that they hope to go to college.

However, only some learners in a few schools indicated that they have an offer of a place at college. (Given the timing of the fieldwork and the recruitment processes of colleges, this is possibly an area worth further examination, since it may be helpful to learners to make application at an earlier stage. Very often popular college courses are full many months prior to the start date. For example, a popular course with a start date of August 2017 may be full by January 2017.)

Some S4 learners in more than a quarter of the schools indicated that they hope to start work after leaving school. That is in preference to staying on for S5–6 or going to college. Some S4 learners in more than a quarter of the schools indicated that they hope to start an apprenticeship after leaving school. Some S4 learners in more than a quarter of the schools are uncertain about their next step after S4.

5.3 Questions for S5/S6 learner focus group

Broad General Education (S1–S3)

1. Thinking back to what you learned in S1–S3 in terms of *skills and knowledge*, how well did that prepare you for your work in the Senior Phase (S4–S6)?
2. Did the *speed of learning* in S1–S3 prepare you for the speed of learning in the Senior Phase (S4–S6)?

Your SQA National Qualifications (NQ) courses

3. Did you do any work towards your National Qualifications in S3, in any of your subjects? Did you do any unit assessments or the N4 AVU in S3?
4. What was your experience of assessment during the last year in terms of the amount of time spent on assessments across your subjects?
5. N4 courses have no exam at the end, unlike the N5 courses. If you have done any N4 courses, what did you think about this?
6. How hard or easy is what you are doing this year compared to last year?
7. Last year, did the unit assessments help you to prepare for course assessment (for question papers and/or coursework)?
8. If anyone in your class was re-assessed for any unit or part of a unit, how was that arranged?
9. SQA has made changes to unit assessment this year. Has this made it easier to pass unit assessments first time?
10. How much personalisation and choice do you feel there is in how you are learning and how much effect does that have?
11. How much responsibility do you feel you have for your own learning?
12. Do you usually have a clear idea of how you are progressing over the year?
13. Is there anything else you'd like to say about your experience of SQA National Qualifications?

5.4 Summary of S5/S6 learner responses

Introduction

The order of sections in this annex mirrors the order in the overall Executive Summary Report. Not all sections are commented on because of the nature of the questions asked of the focus group.

The methodology of recording comments made at the focus groups is outlined in the Executive Summary Report. We have used the terms 'all', 'three-quarters', 'half', 'one-quarter' and a few to designate the volume of comments in the reports.

It should be noted that the focus groups varied in size and composition across the centres visited, owing to the fact that the learners were selected by the centres themselves. In general, however, centres chose learners who represented a range of experiences when it came to the new National Qualifications.

In all, some 260 learners who were part of the focus groups also completed a questionnaire in advance of the visit and reference to some of that data is included in the following paragraphs.

The questionnaire indicates that the learners in the groups all had experience of National 5 and Higher, with a number of the S6 learners in the initial stages of doing Advanced Higher. In addition, there was a relatively fair balance of male and female learners within the groups, although centres selected learners for the groups. However, this school-based selection did limit in some respects the inclusion of learners who had had wide experience of the National 4 qualifications. Groups, in general, represented a cohort who had high levels of achievement. As most centres did not operate a 2-year National 4/ National 5 curriculum model, most of these groups had moved directly from the Broad General Education to presentation for National 5 in S4, with the associated issues noted below in the section on 'Progression' and in the 'aspirational' nature of presentation in many centres. This meant that, in some centres, all learners are assumed to be working towards the National 5 qualification from the beginning of S4, with final appropriate presentation levels being decided much later in S4 that year.

Of the 260 learners in the sample, when asked to rate how hard they had to work in S4, on a scale of 1–5 (1 being not very hard and 5 being very hard) over three-quarters of them reported that they had had to work hard or very hard.

Of the 260 learners questioned, when asked to rate how hard they had to work in S5, over three-quarters of them responded they felt they had had to work harder in S5.

Of the 129 learners who represented the S6 cohort, over half of them reported they had had to work harder in S6.

Moving to the analysis of the focus group responses, and grouping the responses under specific headings, the following key points emerge.

Transition from the Broad General Education (BGE) to the Senior Phase

- ◆ Over half of the groups felt that the BGE had not prepared them well enough in terms of pace of learning, and that the pace in S1–3 was too slow. Many groups mentioned that the change of pace in S4 was significant and this applied across most subjects.
- ◆ Over half of the groups felt that the BGE had not prepared them well enough in terms of content and knowledge and understanding, and that the change of language in some subjects was significant, with Mathematics and the sciences being mentioned as examples.
- ◆ Over half of the groups felt that these features (pace, knowledge and understanding) of the BGE varied across subjects, with subjects such as English mentioned as having prepared them fairly well for the Senior Phase, while others such as Mathematics and the sciences preparing them less well.
- ◆ Over half of the groups felt that work for new National Qualifications (either content or assessment) had been started before S4. (It should be noted that this cohort of learners would have been in the BGE before clarification on this issue was given by Education Scotland).

National 4 Experience.

In most cases, learners in these S5/6 focus groups had little experience of National 4 qualifications, and in some cases said they had difficulty recalling what their S4 experiences were like generally. The responses should perhaps be viewed with those caveats in place. In terms of the proposition that National 4 should include an examination question paper as part of course assessment:

- ◆ About one-quarter of the groups felt that National 4 should include a question paper.

- ◆ About one-quarter of the groups had mixed views on the inclusion of a question paper.
- ◆ About one-quarter of the groups felt that the inclusion of a question paper at National 4 would help better progression to National 5, as they would have had earlier experience of sitting an examination paper.
- ◆ A few of the groups felt that it would reduce 'discrimination' between learners doing National 4 and National 5. This view was expressed in the context of classes where both levels were in the same class and it was felt that teacher time was not evenly divided.
- ◆ Some groups felt that once a final decision had been taken about final presentation levels, teacher time was not evenly divided between National 4 and National 5 learners.)
- ◆ A few groups said that National 4 as a qualification was not 'valued' by the school because it did not have an examination paper. (This view was echoed by staff members across centres and subjects).

Assessment

- ◆ Over half of the groups felt that they had spent a lot of time on unit assessments.
- ◆ Over half of the groups felt that the unit assessments had not prepared them well for course assessment and the gap in challenge was caused by the unit assessments being pitched at 'C' level or at minimum competence with an absence of 'A' and 'B' type questions to prepare them for the question paper.
- ◆ Over a quarter of the groups felt that the unit assessments had prepared them well for course assessment, but this response varied across centres and subjects.
- ◆ About half of the groups felt that the arrangements for re-assessment were well understood by learners.
- ◆ About half of the groups felt that the arrangements for reassessment were not well understood by learners.
- ◆ However, over half of the groups felt that arrangements for assessments and reassessment varied across subjects, and again this response varied across centres and subjects.
- ◆ Comments concerning coursework assessment were far fewer, with less than a quarter of learners expressing concern about the time spent on coursework assessment.
- ◆ However fewer than a quarter of the groups expressed the view that the level of support when completing coursework assessment varied across subjects.
- ◆ Arrangements for assessments and re-assessments varied quite widely across the centres.

Progression through National Qualifications

Progression through levels was seen as an important issue in most centres, and should be viewed alongside the issue of transition from the BGE to the Senior Phase as an

area of serious concern to learners. As noted above, almost all of the groups felt that the step up from the BGE to S4 was very significant and this was consistent across most subjects. The groups in this cohort, as noted above, in general had little experience of National 4 as they had gone on to progress to Higher. They would therefore, in general, have been talking about the jump from the BGE to work being undertaken with a view to them being presented for National 5 level.

National 4 to National 5

There was little comment from this group about this transition as most had transitioned to National 5 in S4 and then to Higher the following year.

National 5 to Higher

- ◆ More than half the groups felt the step up from National 5-Higher was very difficult across most subjects.
- ◆ Over one-quarter of groups felt this varied across subjects.
- ◆ More than one-quarter of groups felt that the step up in pace and content was significant, although again this varied across the groups present in terms of subject.

Higher to Advanced Higher

- ◆ More than a quarter of groups felt that the step up in pace and content was significant
- ◆ A few learners who were doing Advanced Higher expressed the view that some subjects at this level still presented high levels of challenge in terms of content, but that having done Higher, methodologies in the subject were better understood.

Personalisation and choice

Again as noted in the Year 1 fieldwork, this question was not well understood by learners, as the term 'personalisation and choice' does not seem to be common currency in centres when offering wider choice to learners. However, when the idea of personalisation and choice was discussed along with the idea of having responsibility for their own learning, many of the learners could articulate their experience of this.

As before, there was variation across subjects and level, but the general picture emerged that personalisation and choice was more apparent to the learners as they moved from National 5 to Higher to Advanced Higher. It also seems that personalisation and choice seems restricted in general to the assignment component of

coursework, but there is also variation here. Some subjects allow a fairly open choice when it comes to the assignment, whereas others guide their learners more. There were some issues mentioned by learners about the availability of support materials and textbooks to support progress at Advanced Higher, with some references to the sciences mentioned in this regard. However, with those caveats noted;

- ◆ About one-quarter of groups felt that personalisation and choice was available to them.
- ◆ About one-quarter of groups felt that personalisation and choice was not available to them.
- ◆ Substantially more than half of the groups felt that access to personalisation and choice was varied across subjects and level.

Responsibility for learning

- ◆ Almost half of the groups felt they had responsibility for their own learning
- ◆ More than one-quarter of the groups felt that responsibility for their own learning varied across subjects

Understanding of progression

- ◆ About one-quarter of groups felt they had a good understanding of their progression
- ◆ About one-quarter of groups felt that tracking and monitoring did help them gain a good understanding of their progression
- ◆ About half of groups felt that the quality/consistency of tracking and monitoring did not help them or was varied. This was mentioned specifically in the context of how final presentation levels for National 4/National 5 and levels above were arrived at across subjects

Other Group Issues (expressed by small numbers or individuals in response to the last open question or in individual comments during discussion).

- ◆ Some learners said that some courses have too much content, eg Business Mathematics and Biology.
- ◆ Some learners said that in the sciences the jump in language between National 5 and Higher is too great.
- ◆ Some learners commented about the level of jargon on the SQA website.
- ◆ Some learners felt that the SQA was not in touch with the feelings of learners.
- ◆ General comments were made about the jump from National 5-Higher being too big (see detail above).

- ◆ Some said that marking instructions in some subjects were too vague.
- ◆ Some learners felt that communications from SQA to staff was not always being passed on to learners.
- ◆ Some learners felt that the level of detail in the Course Specifications varied across subjects.
- ◆ Some learners felt that conditions of assessment varied considerably across subjects.
- ◆ Some learners felt that high levels of content and work impacted on their social life.

5.5 Questions for teacher focus groups

Historically, we have always had candidates who achieved Access 3 or Foundation awards only (equivalent to N3), or a mixture of Access 3/Foundation and General awards (N3 and N4). However, presentation patterns are changing with far more pupils now presented at N5.

- 1. How do you try to ensure that candidates are being presented at the appropriate level? Do you feel parental or other pressure to enter candidates for a level that you do not feel is appropriate?**

Our fieldwork report last year noted concerns about the lack of an exam paper at N4. The N1-N4 qualifications were designed in this way because research showed that a lot of candidates at these levels did not perform well under examination conditions.

- 2. What impacts might a N4 exam have on the N4 candidates in your school?**

Our statistics colleagues have drawn our attention to the fact that 20% of N5 candidates achieving Grade A are also sitting the N4 AVU, which is significantly adding to the time for assessment in the classroom, and to pupil workload.

- 3. What is your departmental practice? Has that changed since last year?**

Our fieldwork report last year concluded that many teachers and candidates felt that the Broad General Education (BGE) was not preparing candidates well for the pace and challenge of National Qualifications, though most schools said that they were making changes to BGE to account for this.

- 4. Can you talk to us about any changes your department or school has now made in BGE to address this?**

The CfE Management Board has announced that unit assessments for National 5, Higher, and Advanced Higher will be removed and will no longer be a requirement to achieve an overall course award. Course assessment (exam and/or coursework) will be strengthened to ensure it assesses the full content of the course. The changes will be implemented for National 5 in the 2017/18 session, for Higher in the 2018/19 session, and for Advanced Higher in the 2019/20 session.

5. How do you foresee these changes impacting on your practice?

We also want to ask you about the Subject Review Reports that were published in May 2016, with actions that were intended to reduce the volume of assessment for candidates and ease recording for staff from this year onwards.

6. Were these changes appropriate and what impact have they had? Have there been any unforeseen consequences?

The course assessment at N5, Higher and Advanced Higher consists of a question paper (exam) or coursework (assignments, portfolios, practical activities, etc), or both.

7. Do you have any suggestions for how we might improve the coursework assessment?

Schools have now presented pupils for the full range of National Qualifications up to and including Advanced Higher.

8. How smooth for most pupils is the progression from National 5 to Higher to Advanced Higher in terms of skills and knowledge development and pace of learning?

9. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about your experience of the new National Qualifications?

5.6 Summary of teacher responses

Introduction

The order of sections in this annex mirrors the order in the overall Executive Summary Report.

The methodology of recording comments made at the focus groups is outlined in the Executive Summary Report. We have used the terms 'all', 'three-quarters', 'half', 'one-quarter' and 'a few' to designate the volume of comments in the reports.

Transition from Broad General Education to the Senior Phase

When discussing the Broad General Education (BGE), about half or more of the teachers said they do work towards the qualifications and/or assess their learners in S1-3. The same proportion of teachers also said that they were revisiting and making changes to their BGE. Some of these changes were occurring across the school while others were within individual departments. Such changes typically involve them reviewing, evaluating and rewriting their courses and incorporating the development of more general skills. Some teachers said they were revisiting the BGE, incorporating more skills development in Literacy/English and the sciences. In making these changes, the teachers explained that they felt that the BGE was not preparing learners for S4 and course assessments.

About a quarter of teachers stated that they were carrying out little or no change to their BGE. The changes that they were making were to ensure that the CfE Level 3 and 4 Experiences and Outcomes aligned better with the National Qualifications (NQs) and allow better articulation. They felt that refining the BGE has been made more difficult by the ongoing changes to National Qualifications and consequent advice from SQA, information from Education Scotland, insufficient time to consider changes and timetabling and staffing challenges within schools. Some teachers said they were waiting for the publication of CfE Benchmarks at Level 3 and 4 before making these changes in BGE.

National 4 course and unit assessment — unit assessment

About half or more of teachers stated that when the national courses were first introduced, all learners would have done the National 4 AVU, as they had felt it would be useful preparation for National 5 coursework and examination. Similarly, about half or more of teachers had some of their National 5 learners do the AVU as they felt it would be helpful to decide on presentation levels.

Overall now, after several years' experience, practice has changed. The approach by the majority of teachers is to have only borderline learners doing the AVU; or to get all learners to do the AVU in S3 as part of the learning and teaching process; and/or mark their National 5 Assignments against National 4 AVU marking instructions.

National 4 course and unit assessment – course assessment

Nearly three-quarters of teachers said they were strongly in favour of introducing an examination at National 4. When discussing the impacts of introducing an examination at National 4, about half or more teachers felt that there would be several positive impacts, including improving the status and parity of esteem between National 4 and National 5. They also felt that it would give National 4 learners more of a sense of achievement, increase their motivation, their focus and their challenge. It would also give National 4 greater rigour, credibility and value among stakeholders, eg learners, teachers, parents and carers, employers and Further Education. They also felt that this would help learners to develop examination skills in preparation for National 5.

Over a quarter thought that it would also make it easier for teachers to manage bi-level classes when all learners are working towards an examination. They also thought that an end-of-course examination would improve attendance to the end of year and would remove the problem of what to do with National 4 learners during examination leave at prelim time and during the main diet of examinations.

Over half of teachers felt that a possible negative impact on National 4 learners would be a reduction in attainment as a number of National 4 learners at present would not perform well under examination conditions. In spite of that, the majority were also in favour of an examination. As an alternative to an examination, a number of schools suggested grading a component of course assessment for National 4 for differentiation purposes rather than have the course simply designate a learner as passing or failing.

In contrast, a few teachers felt that there would be possible negative impacts for National 4 learners, including reduced motivation, lower self-esteem and confidence, and would increase stress and increase teaching to the test. Additionally, a few stated that examinations are not appropriate for some subjects and they felt that there needs to be a change in the mind-set that examinations are intrinsically more important as an assessment strategy. They saw continuous assessment as a valid method of assessment, with no examination at National 4 as a progressive step, but felt there needed to be better understanding of this by parents and carers, teachers and employers.

Presentations for National Qualifications

Nearly all teachers to a greater or lesser degree felt pressure to mis-present learners at National 5 despite pupil performance to the contrary. This pressure could come from parents and carers mainly, but also from SMT and occasionally the local authority. They felt this is mainly due to National 4 not being valued by parents and carers and employers. Teachers often felt such pressure was not in the long-term interest of the learner.

About half or more of the teachers said they make their presentation decision after the prelims or use their professional judgement from classroom evidence. A few teachers use unit assessments plus A/B tests, or a 2-year National 5, starting in S3 or use unit assessments in year 1 then course assessment at end of year 2.

Progression through National Qualifications

There were wide-ranging comments on how learners could progress between the levels of qualifications.

About half or more of the teachers expressed some concern about progression from National 4 to National 5.

- ◆ Some thought that progression from National 4 to National 5 was poor due to the low pass rate.
- ◆ Some thought it was challenging due to the increased level of demand at National 5.

- ◆ Some thought it was difficult because it was hard to teach in the time they had available for the course.

For progression from National 5 to Higher, teachers' opinions were very divided within schools and across subjects.

- ◆ Some teachers felt that progression from National 5 to Higher was poor; some said it was challenging and difficult for some subjects, especially for learners who achieved a Grade C at National 5.
- ◆ Others felt that progression was good for their subject.

Again opinion was split regarding progression from Higher to Advanced Higher, between being good for some subjects and poor, challenging and difficult for others. A few mentioned that learners can find the demands of independent learning at Advanced Higher difficult to get used to.

Changes to National 5 — Advanced Higher course structure and assessment

SQA's revised approaches to unit assessments at National 5 were announced in the Subject Review Reports in May 2016. More than half of the teachers stated that these have had a positive impact because either a threshold score has been introduced and/or the number of assessment standards has been reduced for a unit. However, a significant number said that there is little or no impact yet or it was too early to say at the point we interviewed them. (SQA's programme to reform units was superseded by the Deputy First Minister's announcement in September 2016 regarding the removal of units and unit assessment.)

Teacher views diverged on the September 2016 announcement to remove mandatory unit assessment from courses. A large number saw this as positive while many would have preferred to have retained them. This latter group all wanted improved and easier to mark unit assessments, and more than half stated that they may still use unit assessments with some or all learners.

Teachers felt that the positive aspects of removing the unit assessments meant that they could design better assessments themselves to include A/B tests, and also that there would be more time available for learning and teaching.

However, more than half of the teachers raised several potential issues, including the removal of Recognition of Positive Achievement (RPA) and concern regarding the 'strengthening' of course assessment, which they felt would lead to more 'teaching to the test'. Over half of the teachers were unsure of the implications of removal at the time of interviews in November and December 2016. They didn't know exactly what the changes are going to be, so felt that they couldn't prepare. (Note: details of the changes to course assessment [examination and/or coursework] were published in January 2017, shortly after the visits to school centres. SQA explained there that the content and standards of courses had not changed.)

About half or more of the teachers felt that the main issues regarding the non-question paper components of course assessment were the perceived lack of standardisation and consistency regarding the conditions of assessment; reasonable assistance; and internal marking. They felt that this could potentially lead to unfairness for learners. Some teachers felt that the non-question paper components were too challenging and/or time-consuming and felt there was inconsistency in question paper/coursework mark weightings and word counts across subjects. Several suggested that an externally marked piece of coursework would be more rigorous and therefore would be taken more seriously.

A few teachers suggested that there is a lack of clarity about what work will gain good marks and that more exemplar materials/support materials are required. A few even suggested getting rid of the coursework element altogether.

Personalisation and choice

A question on personalisation and choice was not included for teachers.

Miscellaneous

The final question was open-ended. Discussions could be quite wide-ranging, but a number of points were made fairly often relating to the quality and quantity of SQA documents, subject marking issues and changes to marking, communication of changes, and the poor design of the SQA website.

About half or more of the teachers spoke of a number of wider concerns. They felt that SQA needed to communicate more effectively so that all teachers were aware of all

changes that were made to courses. They felt SQA needed to make sure that all teachers were aware of up-to-date marking instructions. They felt that SQA needed to take account of the potential increased workload for teachers and learners as a result of changes.

Developing the Young Workforce

While many of our questions to teachers matched those asked of SMT, we chose not to ask subject teachers about DYW, preferring to ask this of SMT, who would be able to give us high-level answers on school and college links and authority support in developing DYW.

5.7 Questions for SMT focus groups

Historically, we have always had candidates who achieve Access 3 or Foundation awards only (equivalent to N3), or a mixture of Access 3/Foundation and General awards (N3 and N4). However, presentation patterns are changing with far more pupils now presented at N5.

- 1. How do you try to ensure that candidates are being presented at the appropriate level? Do you feel parental or other pressure to enter candidates for a level that you do not feel is appropriate?**

Our fieldwork report last year noted concerns about the lack of an exam paper at N4. The N1-N4 qualifications were designed in this way because research showed that a lot of candidates did not perform well under examination conditions.

- 2. What impacts might a N4 exam have on N4 candidates in your school?**

Our statistics colleagues have drawn our attention to the fact that 20% of N5 candidates achieving grade A are also sitting the N4 AVU, which is significantly adding to the time for assessment in the classroom, and to pupil workload.

- 3. What is school practice here, or is it departmental?**

The CfE Management Board has announced that unit assessments for N5, Higher, and Advanced Higher will be removed and will no longer be a requirement to achieve an overall course award. Course assessment (exam and/or coursework) will be strengthened to ensure it assesses the full content of the course. The changes will be implemented for N5 in the 2017/18 session, for Higher in the 2018/19 session, and for Advanced Higher in the 2019/10 session.

- 4. How do you foresee these changes impacting on practice in your school?**

We also want to ask you about the Subject Review Reports that were published in May 2016, with actions that were intended to reduce the volume of assessment for candidates and ease recording for staff from this year.

- 5. Were these changes seen as appropriate by staff and what impact have they had in this school?**

The course assessment at N5, Higher, and Advanced Higher consists of a question paper (exam) or coursework (assignments, portfolios, practical activities, etc), or both.

6. Do you have any suggestions for how we might improve the coursework assessment?

The Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) report and the CfE Implementation Plan suggest that schools introduce more vocational qualifications and establish links with colleges and employers.

7. In this centre is there anything that has helped you to offer these qualifications, or do you have any challenges in offering these qualifications?

Schools have now presented pupils for the range of National Qualifications (NQ) up to and including Advanced Higher.

8. From your overall perspective as the Senior management team, how smooth for most pupils is the progression from N5 to Higher to Advanced Higher in terms of skills and knowledge development and pace of learning?

Our fieldwork report last year concluded that neither teachers nor candidates felt that the Broad General Education (BGE) was preparing candidates well for the pace and challenge of NQs, though most schools said that they were making changes to BGE to address this.

9. Can you talk to us about changes the school has made in the last year in BGE to address this, via school improvement planning or other mechanisms?

10. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about your experience of the new NQs?

5.8 Summary of SMT responses

Introduction

The order of sections in this annex mirrors the order in the overall Executive Summary Report.

The methodology of recording comments made at the focus groups is outlined in the Executive Summary Report. We have used the terms 'all', 'three-quarters', 'half', 'one-quarter' and 'a few' to designate the volume of comments in the reports.

Transition from Broad General Education to the Senior Phase

Almost all schools had made, were making, or planned to make, changes to their Broad General Education (BGE) programme. In well over one-quarter of schools those changes were focused on skills development (including examination skills, generic skills and subject-specific skills), and in well over a quarter of schools the focus was on improved articulation with the Senior Phase. A quarter of schools reported that their focus on changes in BGE was to improve literacy and numeracy, and the same number reported that their focus was on improving the transition from primary schools. There were other areas on which a smaller number of schools were focusing, most commonly in relation to Education Scotland guidance (eg Significant Aspects of Learning, CfE Benchmarks); to assessment, tracking and monitoring; and to building pace and challenge.

More than one-quarter of schools reported that they had introduced National Qualification work or assessment in S3.

National 4 Course Structure and assessment

More than three-quarters of schools identified possible positive impacts of introducing an externally-assessed examination at National 4, and there was a majority in favour of introducing an externally-assessed examination at National 4 in half of the SMTs. Half of SMTs said that an externally-assessed examination would increase the motivation and engagement of their National 4 learners, and in the same number of school SMTs said that an examination would give the qualification greater credibility and value among learners, parents and carers and teachers.

However, in half of all SMTs a range of possible negative impacts of introducing an externally-assessed examination at National 4 was identified — reduced motivation, less rich learning. Half of SMTs said that introducing an externally-assessed examination might reduce attainment. One-quarter of SMTs felt that not having an examination at National 4 was a progressive step, and that the examinations-focused culture needed to change.

Over one-quarter of SMTs favoured the idea of grading National 4 (not necessarily associated with an externally-assessed examination) in order to differentiate beyond a simple pass or fail.

Presentations for National Qualifications

Three-quarters of schools reported using tracking and monitoring evidence, including unit assessments and other forms of assessment, to determine the appropriate level of presentation for learners, and one half used professional judgement/discussion. Almost three-quarters of schools said they felt pressure from parents and carers to present at a level they did not feel was appropriate (usually higher) for a learner. Over half of all schools reported taking an ‘aspirational’ approach to presentation (aiming high, with later decisions being made and learners ‘falling back’ to a lower level if necessary, for example from National 5 to National 4). One-quarter of schools communicated with parents and carers or learners to determine the appropriate level of presentation, and over one-quarter reported feeling little or no parental pressure to present at a level the school did not feel was appropriate.

Schools were aware that asking learners to complete unit assessments for both National 4 and National 5 was adding to workload for both learner and staff. Nearly half of schools reported that their practice in this regard was changing over time, with well over one-quarter saying that this was resulting in a reduction for learners. Well over one-quarter of schools left the decision on assessment at National 4 and National 5 mainly or entirely to departments, whereas one-quarter had a whole-school (or Local Authority) approach. Half of all schools used the National 4 AVU as a ‘safety net’ for fall-back purposes. Well over one-quarter reported that all learners do the AVU (whether or not they were presented for National 4); well over one-quarter of schools reported that only ‘borderline’ learners do the AVU; and well over one-quarter reported using the AVU as part of

learning and teaching in preparation for the National 5 assignment, or for operational or equality reasons in bi-level classes.

Progression through National Qualification levels

Well over one-quarter of SMTs said that the smoothness of progression varies by subject. Well over one-quarter said that progression from National 4 to National 5 was generally problematic. Well over one-quarter reported that progression from National 5 to Higher was problematic for some subjects. A quarter reported that progression from National 5 to Higher was fine or improved, but the same number noted that progression from National 5 to Higher was difficult for the learner obtaining only a C pass at National 5. In around a quarter of SMTs it was reported that progression from Higher to Advanced Higher was steady.

Changes to National 5 — Advanced Higher Course Structures and Assessment

Two questions related to unit assessment. One concerned the impact of changes to unit assessment which had been described in the Subject Review Reports published in May 2016, which apply to all National 5 unit assessments from this academic year. The other question concerned the possible impacts of the September 2016 decision to remove unit assessment as a requirement of course assessment from all qualifications at National 5, Higher, and Advanced Higher.

Subject Review Reports

In relation to Subject Review Reports, over half of participating SMTs said they were uncertain of the impact of these changes to unit assessment. Well over one-quarter felt that the impact depended on the subject and well over one-quarter felt that the changes were generally welcomed or appropriate. However, while one-quarter of SMTs made specific positive comments about the Subject Review Reports (not always in relation to unit assessment), well over one-quarter of SMTs made specific negative comments about the changes in unit assessment explained in the Subject Review Reports and that they did not believe workload would be reduced for staff and learners.

Removal of unit assessment at National 5, Higher, and Advanced Higher

In relation to the removal of unit assessment from courses at National 5 and above, nearly half of SMTs said that these further changes and uncertainty would add to staff workload and stress. One half of SMTs said it was too early to know what the impacts of this might be, or that they didn't have enough information to determine potential impacts. Over one-quarter of SMTs said that the removal of unit assessments was initially or generally welcomed, but the same number said that unit assessments were valuable and needed only some revision, not to be removed altogether. One-quarter of SMTs reported that the removal of unit assessments was generally not welcomed and was a concern to them.

Three-quarters of SMTs identified a range of potentially negative impacts: one-quarter thought that attainment would be reduced; one-quarter feared possible negative impacts of a strengthened course assessment; just under one-quarter were concerned about the loss of Recognising Positive Achievement from National 5 to National 4; and just under one-quarter were concerned about the impact on 2-year courses.

More than half of SMTs identified a range of potentially positive impacts: well over one-quarter felt that staff workload would be reduced; one-quarter suggested more time would be available for learning and teaching; and one-quarter suggested that the assessment load for learners would be reduced.

Just under one-quarter of SMTs said that one of the positive impacts would be that teachers could provide learners with improved or different assessments.

More than half of SMTs said that they were likely to continue to use unit assessments. A number of different purposes and reasons for this were proposed, of which the most common was tracking and monitoring, mentioned by just under half of SMTs.

Changes to National 5 – Advanced Higher Coursework assessment

Although almost all SMTs could identify problems with coursework assessments, they were asked to suggest improvements to these and so it is inevitable that they would identify issues that any improvements should address. Consequently, while almost all schools identified problems with these assessments, that very high figure should be viewed in the context of the question asked and should not be given undue significance.

One-quarter of SMTs made unsolicited positive comments about coursework assessment.

Half of SMTs were concerned about the consistency of assistance given to learners by schools across Scotland. Nearly half expressed concern about inconsistencies across subjects (eg in terms of marks allocated, conditions of assessment, for example). Nearly half would welcome clarity on the conditions of assessment and how marks were allocated, noting that a period of stability was required. More than one-quarter of SMTs expressed a lack of confidence in SQA marking of coursework. The same number were concerned about coursework workload associated with specific subjects or across subjects, and one-quarter were concerned about the impact of submission bottlenecks at particular times of the year.

(In June 2017, SQA published a new document 'Guidance on conditions of assessment for coursework' which should provide the clarifications SMT were looking for)

https://www.sqa.org.uk/files_ccc/Guidance_on_conditions_of_assessment_for_coursework.pdf

Developing the Young Workforce (DYW)

Well over half of SMTs said that a number of their learners undertake non-NQ qualifications at colleges, and nearly half undertake such qualifications or other activities in school. The very wide range of DYW-related qualifications and activities reported by schools is given in the table below. The most commonly reported were Skills for Work qualifications and other employability skills development which was mentioned by nearly half of SMTs.

SMT said a number of factors facilitated delivery of DYW-related qualifications and activities. The most commonly mentioned were close links with colleges, as reported by half of SMTs; and close links with employers, relevant local authority or national strategies/support, and timetabling of vocational programmes or options, as well as individualised timetabling, as reported by one-quarter of SMTs.

A third of SMTs reported that a challenge to making progress with DYW are college-related issues such as unsuitable provision; one-quarter reported that provision is made

more difficult by lack of resources in schools; and one-quarter said that they face problems associated with travelling to college.

Other comments made by at least a significant minority of schools

Over one-quarter of SMTs said that the continuous changes being made by SQA are problematic, and over one-quarter criticised communication by SQA and others in relation to National Qualifications implementation. One-quarter expressed support for Curriculum for Excellence and suggested that it needs time and a degree of stability to become well established.

One-quarter of SMTs reported that the school operates bi-level classes (with a majority of those reporting that bi-level teaching is problematic at least for some subjects/levels). One-quarter of SMTs reported that they offer or are considering offering 2-year courses for NQs.

One-quarter reported that they have few/reduced presentations at Advanced Higher. They reported that Advanced Higher qualifications are not valued, or that Advanced Higher courses are difficult to resource.

Just under one-quarter of SMTs reported that since implementation they had reduced the number of NQ subjects taken in the Senior Phase.

In discussion with SMTs, a number of more general points emerged from time to time which indicated some awareness of how the CfE programme may bed in over time:

- ◆ That the movement by schools towards fewer subjects and less duplication of assessment for both National 4 and National 5 should ease workload for both learners and staff, and leave more time for learning and teaching.
- ◆ That the widely-taken 'aspirational' approach to presentation, in which National 4 is something that is dropped back to, with the AVU being commonly used for 'fall-back', may have contributed to National 4 being undervalued by staff and learners. Several schools suggested that further communication on the value of the National 4 qualification for many learners is required.
- ◆ The changes being made to BGE by many schools, including the introduction of NQ-related work and assessment in S3, will take time to develop and then more time to have an effect on the ease with which learners cope with NQ in the Senior Phase.

Table of DYW-related courses

1.	Skills for Work/ Employability skills
2.	Foundation Apprenticeship
3.	Hair and Beauty
4.	Cookery & Hospitality related
5.	Sport & Leisure related
6.	Childcare
7.	Travel & Tourism related
8.	Engineering/Electronics/Automotive related
9.	Duke of Edinburgh; John Muir Trust; Saltire/ Leadership
10.	Young Enterprise; EDGE
11.	Modern Apprenticeship
12.	Science related
13.	Arts/Performing Arts related
14.	Work Experience
15.	Maritime/Rural related
16.	Crafts & Construction related
17.	Unspecified National Certificate/ Higher National Certificate/ National Progression Award
18.	ASDAN etc (lifeskills-related)
19.	Volunteering
20.	YASS modules
21.	Retail
22.	Health related
23.	Bicycle maintenance
24.	Uniformed Services
25.	IT-related

5.9 Questions for learner focus groups in Additional ASN schools

The SQA team may prompt the conversation with additional information where necessary, for example where they feel there are differences between subjects.

1. Think about the work you did in school last year.

What did you do? National 1s? National 2s? National 3s?

Now think about the work you're doing in school this year.

Do you think the work this year is:

easier about the same more difficult?

2. Think about the work you are doing in school this year.

- a) How do you know when you are being assessed or tested?
- b) Do you find the assessments or tests: easy okay hard?
- c) Have you had to do any assessments or tests more than once (re-assessment)?
- d) Do you think your assessments or tests take up a lot of time over the year?

3. Thinking about the subjects you are doing this year, or those you did last year:

- a) Did you get to choose any of your own work or did your teachers help you choose topic work?
- b) How do you know you are doing well in a subject?
- c) Are there any differences between your subjects?
- d) Can you give us an example of a subject where you are doing **very** well?

4. The National 4 courses have no exam at the end, unlike the National 5 courses. What do you think about this?

5. Are you doing any qualifications other than SQA's National Qualifications (things like Skills for Work, a college course or the Duke of Edinburgh award)? If so, please tell us about them. Are you enjoying them? Are you learning in different ways?

- 6. What do you think you will do at the end of this year — look for work, continue in school, go to college, something else?**

- 7. Is there anything else you'd like to say about what you like or don't like about your school work?**

5.10 Questions for teacher focus groups in ASN schools

Historically, we have always had candidates who achieved Access 3 or Foundation awards only (equivalent to N3), or a mixture of Access 3/Foundation and General awards (N3 and N4). However, national presentation patterns are changing with far more pupils now presented at N5, although this pattern may be different in your school.

- 1. How do you try to ensure that candidates are being presented at the appropriate level? Do you feel parental or other pressure to enter candidates for a level that you do not feel is appropriate?**

Our fieldwork report last year noted concerns about the lack of an exam paper at N4. The N1-N4 National Qualifications were designed in this way because research showed that a lot of candidates at these levels did not perform well under examination conditions.

- 2. What impacts might a N4 exam have on N4 candidates in your school?**

Our statistics colleagues have drawn our attention to the fact that 20% of N5 candidates achieving grade A are also sitting the N4 AVU, which is significantly adding to the time for assessment in the classroom, and to pupil workload. If this is applicable to your school:

- 3. What is your departmental practice? Has that changed since last year?**

Our fieldwork report last year concluded that many teachers and candidates felt that the Broad General Education (BGE) was not preparing candidates well for the pace and challenge of NQs, though most schools said they were making changes to BGE to account for this.

- 4. Can you talk to us about any changes your own department or the school has now made in BGE to address this?**

The CfE Management Board has announced that unit assessments for National 5 and above will be removed and will no longer be a requirement to achieve an overall course award. Course assessment (exam and/or coursework) will be strengthened to ensure it assesses the full content of the course. The changes will be implemented for N5 in the

2017/18 session, for Higher in the 2018/19 session, and for Advanced Higher in the 2019/20 session. To the extent that this is applicable in your school:

5. How do you foresee these changes impacting on your practice?

We also want to ask you about the Subject Review Reports that were published in May 2016, with actions that were intended to reduce the volume of assessment for candidates and ease recording for staff from this year.

6. Were these changes appropriate and what impact have they had? Have there been any unforeseen consequences?

Schools have now presented pupils for the full range of National Qualifications.

7. How smooth for most pupils is the progression from N1 to N2, N2 to N3, N3 to N4 and N4 to N5 in terms of skills and knowledge development and pace of learning?

8. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about your experience of the new National Qualifications?

5.11 Questions for SMT focus groups in ASN schools

The SQA team may prompt the conversation with additional information where necessary, for example where the SMT feels there are differences between subjects or across the school.

Historically, we have always had candidates who achieved Access 3 or Foundation awards only (equivalent to N3), or a mixture of Access 3/Foundation and General awards (N3 and N4). However, national presentation patterns are changing with far more pupils now presented at N5, although this pattern may be different in your school.

- 1. How do you try to ensure that candidates are being presented at the appropriate level? Do you feel parental or other pressure to enter candidates for a level that you do not feel is appropriate?**

Our fieldwork report last year concluded that neither teachers nor candidates felt that the Broad General Education (BGE) was preparing candidates well for the pace and challenge of National Qualifications, though most schools said they were making changes to BGE to address this.

- 2. Can you talk to us about any changes the school has made in the last year in BGE to address this, via school improvement planning or other mechanisms?**

Our fieldwork report last year noted concerns about the lack of an exam paper at N4. The N1-N4 National Qualifications were designed in this way because research showed that a lot of candidates at these levels did not perform well under examination conditions.

- 3. What impacts might a N4 exam have on N4 candidates in your school?**

The CfE Management Board has announced that unit assessments for National 5 and above will be removed and will no longer be a requirement to achieve an overall course award. Course assessment (exam and/or coursework) will be strengthened to ensure it assesses the full content of the course. The changes will be implemented for National 5

in the 2017/18 session, for Higher in the 2018/19 session, and for Advanced Higher in the 2019/20 session. To the extent that this is applicable in your school:

4. How do you foresee these changes impacting on your practice?

We also want to ask you about the Subject Review Reports that were published in May 2016, with actions that were intended to reduce the volume of assessment for candidates and ease recording for staff from this year.

5. Were these changes seen as appropriate by staff and what impact have they had in this school?

The 'Developing the Young Workforce' report and the CfE Implementation Plan suggest that schools introduce more vocational qualifications and establish links with colleges and employers.

6. Is there anything that has helped you to offer these qualifications? Do you have any challenges in offering these qualifications?

7. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about your experience of the new National Qualifications or any other SQA qualifications?

5.12 Summary of ASN responses

Introduction

SQA visited four ASN schools in the spring of 2017, meeting learners, teachers and members of the SMTs. The questions for each of these groups were forwarded to the school in advance. The ASN schools visited have a wide range of learners with a wide range of additional and complex needs. This report collates the responses from the three types of focus groups we met in these schools.

Responses from the learners spoken to in the various schools were influenced by the nature of their support needs. The responses ranged from learners who could communicate well, to learners who could communicate verbally with some prompting and assistance, and to learners who were more limited in their ability to communicate verbally and needed more assistance from their instructors. Some learners had severe and complex additional needs, but still managed to respond to some of the questions being asked.

All schools were very clear that their role was to enhance the real life experiences of the learners. Learners spoke positively and enthusiastically about their experiences in school. They seem to enjoy school. One felt that the most important/useful learning is that related to the development of skills for life, a view reiterated by others, and referred to several times in the narrative of this report.

Broad General Education (BGE)

Most departments have changed their forward plans slightly, so that the BGE can map and progress smoothly into qualifications, eg where one person pointed out that the CfE experiences and outcomes gave good seamless progression into qualifications and college.

Staff felt that the BGE occurs at a suitable pace and challenges and prepares the learners very well for the Senior Phase.

Staff said that the curriculum in all the schools has been developed to fit the ASN requirements of their learners. No NQ work is done in S1–3. All NQ work starts in S4.

Staff felt there is less of a gulf between the BGE and the Senior Phase in S4–S6 in ASN schools due to single-teacher departments, as the same teacher tends to have the learners from S1. Tracking in the BGE is designed to prepare for National 1 and National 2. Many of the learners tend to have attained no higher than CfE First Level in BGE, so moving on to National 1 or National 2 units is quite smooth.

Literacy and numeracy tends to be managed across a range of subjects to ensure consistency of language and number and allow a better overview of progression for learners. Some of the schools also operate a holistic view of the sciences and social subjects and in this way are able to deliver a smoother progression through the BGE and into the Senior Phase, eg National 2 Business in Practice offers good progression from other National 2 units.

In all the ASN schools visited, qualifications tend to be regarded as secondary to living skills. They are a bonus and are recognised as not necessarily being the most important outcome of progress for each pupil.

Unit assessment

The schools were very positive about the value of units, since they suit the pace of work for the learners and a unit-by-unit approach works well for learners. However, one centre stated that some of the National 1 and National 2 units need to have a revision of wording in some places. Some assessment standards at National 1 and National 2 are not appropriate as they ask the learners to be self-reflective which is not always appropriate for many learners. (The staff of the same school felt that ASDAN modules were better as they accredit work-based learning and contain less jargon than the SQA units.)

Staff felt that the introduction of thresholds in some subjects in May 2016 in the Subject Review Reports has helped a great deal, as well as the removal of some assessment standards. Judging Evidence Tables (JETs) are very useful. Photographic evidence, which has always been used, is very useful for learners in these schools. In some

units, learners are expected to 'reflect' and 'communicate', which can be an issue for some learners.

Staff said that the range of SQA units allowed them to use the units very flexibly. In one school, the units are used in the school's bespoke Lifeskills course in S5 and S6. The flexibility of the units is very good as it allows appropriate pace of work and encourages learners to achieve and progress. In turn, it builds up learners' confidence and raises their self-esteem. In National 2 Art, for example, there is a choice of five units, so learners can achieve all five units over several years.

Learners were doing a range of units, depending on their ability, including Communication, Business in Practice, Number Skills, Personal Achievement awards and ICT. Learners explained that they knew when they were getting assessments and they were OK. Some learners felt that completing the assessments took a long time while others said that they just accepted it and teachers would be supportive. Learners said that if a pupil is being re-assessed they are given notice and the teacher discussed it with them. Learners were especially enthusiastic and motivated when they could select topics, select what to make, or select their own area for research in various subjects.

The staff and SMT view in all schools was that the removal of units for National 5 would heavily impact on many of their learners. Currently, in one school, there are two learners doing National 5 and this will be less likely in the future, either because these learners would not cope or may be in mainstream schools. They will still use the National 5 units, probably in S6.

Course assessment

Teachers and the SMT felt that discussion on course assessment would not be applicable. SQA was happy to concur with this view, given the circumstances of these schools.

National 4

In all schools visited, staff felt that introduction of a National 4 examination would have a negative impact for many learners. It would make the National 4 qualification

inaccessible and not achievable for the learners. All said it would destroy learners' confidence and cause them additional stress, pressure and anxiety. It would also mean that significant additional support would be required.

Staff felt that the AVU is much more flexible especially as it can be spread over two years. In several schools the learners tend to do a unit per year, therefore they would not be doing the examination until S6.

Staff explained that their current presentation policy is very aspirational for their learners. If a National 4 examination was introduced, the schools would enter fewer learners for National 4, with concerns expressed that therefore attainment would drop and positive progression would drop. The current National 4 level courses enables staff to scaffold learning and helps them build learner confidence and such courses are ideal for their learners. They felt that examinations would be a real barrier and highly detrimental to their learners. All learners said that the National 4 qualification is fine the way it is and felt it worked well for them. Overall, it was very clear that no-one (learners or staff) wanted a National 4 examination.

Presentations

Members of staff said they know the learners very well due to the smooth transition between primary and secondary stages. Some of the ASN schools visited are 'all-through' schools from P1 to S6, which helps to monitor progress even further. Learners' progress is tracked continuously and systematically throughout their learning. Therefore, staff said that they are confident that learners are placed at the appropriate level.

All schools maintain a fairly robust profile of their learners, using monitoring and tracking, as well as using their professional judgement to guide presentation decisions. In all cases, teachers felt they know the learners very well. Parents and carers, in general, are very supportive of ASN schools. They accept the professional judgement of staff when it comes to course choice for their children. Parents and carers tend to be most concerned about their children developing good independent living skills. As a result, teaching staff do not feel under pressure to present learners at an inappropriate level.

Progression

Schools had a variety of Personal Learning Journey charts or tracking sheets so that staff, parents and carers and learners knew how well they were doing. Learners stated that they knew how well they were doing in their subjects as the teacher tells them. They spoke about the subjects they really enjoyed and these were a broad range of subjects.

Progression from National 1 to National 2 and National 3 to National 4 is OK in all subjects. It was felt across the board that National 2 does not lead well into National 3 and the progression from National 2 to National 3 is very challenging.

Staff also felt that the many National 3 learners who were secure at National 2 found there was too much content at National 3. This meant that the pace is too much and the step up too great.

National 3 qualifications need much more higher-order skills than National 2. Many teachers mentioned that there almost needs to be a step between National 2 and National 3 — several schools suggested, tongue-in-cheek, a National 2.5. Many learners have a problem retaining knowledge and this can be an issue for them in succeeding in some courses.

Learners who achieve level 2 should be able to achieve National 2 by the end of S4. However, in reality many learners achieve higher levels than this. Staff explained that learners sometimes 'spike' in some subjects, attaining higher than expected levels in particular qualifications. However, schools said they are able to cope with this. In parallel, they pointed out that if a pupil has reached a plateau in their learning then they have the flexibility to offer something else for them.

Logistically, due to small numbers in some schools, there is an issue of multi-level classes, ie National 1 to National 4 in one class. Staff felt that bi-level classes for National 2 and National 3 presented issues.

The schools' main aim, apart from the formal qualifications that the learners are following, is to enable the young people in their care to prepare for life beyond school, where their additional and, in some cases, complex needs may present barriers to employment and training.

Developing the Young Workforce (DYW)

Some schools have appointed either a Deputy Head Teacher of Employability or Principal Teacher to develop DYW and coordinate the wide range of additional opportunities available to their learners.

Most schools operate highly structured programmes, involving option choices in a wide range of areas. Many of them include work experience and/or day-release to college. The programmes are individualised to suit each pupil and their specific/unique difficulties. These opportunities includes working with the elderly, hospitality courses, nursery placement, drug awareness programme, first aid certificates, construction, landscape gardening, cookery, digital media, sound engineering, construction, etc. Many learners stated how much they enjoyed attending college.

The schools also deliver Lifeskills courses to help with wider achievement, eg Duke of Edinburgh, Princes Trust, Independent Travel qualification, Youth Enterprise Scotland (YES), John Muir Awards, Cycling Proficiency, Dynamic Youth Awards, etc. Skills for Work courses are also offered to as many learners are as able to cope with them. Learners spoke of the broad range of opportunities that exist within their schools. They value the various volunteering experiences/opportunities to gain extra certificates. They could identify the skills they have developed and in some instances the learners have cultivated an interest in a particular career path through this experience. The majority of learners said that they had clear ideas of what they wanted to do next, including progressing to college to study a variety of courses, or to work.

However, one school expressed concerns about future opportunities for learners, especially employment, due to lack of relevant or appropriate provision at college. The same school stated that Skills Development Scotland seem to lack experience of dealing with learners with additional support needs. They also find it difficult to find employers willing to take on ASN learners for work experience. One school felt that there were gaps in SQA's suite of vocational units in Care (early years and the elderly) as well as in Animal Studies.

Miscellaneous comments for Question 9

Question 9 was an open question designed to pick up on any other issues missed by the other questions.

It was very evident that teachers in ASN schools feel very isolated and felt more support could be offered to them, citing:

- ◆ more exemplification is required for National 1 and National 2 Units and that there are little or no course materials for National 1 and National 2, eg no textbooks
- ◆ developing and writing materials in their circumstances takes a huge amount of time
- ◆ getting release to attend Understanding Standards events, etc, is problematic
- ◆ they would like more development visits.

They also said that SQA's External Verification (EV) processes do not take account of the needs of ASN centres, as they are often not prepared to offer verification materials until later in the academic year. ASN schools feel under pressure from SQA to adhere to deadlines which in their view are more suitable for mainstream schools. They felt that the timing for EV visits is a problem — it was too early for ASN schools. SQA timescales are tricky due to the delivery model in these schools as they tend to do the AVU in May/June, which is too late for verification. Some visits had not been enjoyable for the staff.

In English, it would be helpful if reading; writing and listening skills could be assessed independently of each other.

5.13 Questions for college learner focus groups

The SQA team may prompt the conversation with additional information where necessary, for example where the staff feel there are differences between subjects.

1. Focusing on transition:

First of all, what made you decide to come to college rather than the other options open to you? Having made that decision, what was easy and what was hard in the move from school to college? Importantly, are you enjoying college?

2. Focusing on curricular transition:

Do you feel that there has been a smooth progression in difficulty through the various qualifications you did in school and are now doing in college? Have any of the steps from one qualification to another been especially difficult (or too easy)?

3. Managing assessment tasks:

Could you tell us how you are managing your time for the assessment tasks you have to do for your course?

4. Types of assessment:

Some of you may have taken a N4 qualification, which has a number of assessments during the course and an AVU at the end. Some of you may now be taking vocational qualifications that also have continuous assessment all through the course. How do you feel about this kind of assessment?

5. Awareness of progress:

How do your lecturers let you know about how you are getting on in your course?

6. Positive destinations and equity:

There are different types of positive destinations at the end of S4: return to school for S5/6, get a job, get training, go to college, go to university, etc. What do you think about these different pathways?

7. Are there any other issues you would like to raise with us?

5.14 Questions for college lecturer focus groups

The SQA team may prompt the conversation with additional information where necessary, for example where the staff feel there are differences between subjects.

1. Skills and attitudes of learners:

- a) What are your perceptions of the skills and attitudes to learning of candidates now reaching you with experience of Curriculum for Excellence and the new National Qualifications (NQs)?

2. Progression between levels of National Qualifications:

- a) What are your perceptions about how smooth are the progressions through the different levels of new National Qualifications, and how well the levels articulate with each other?

3. Transition from school to college:

- a) College learners tend to be treated more as adults in comparison to the way in which pupils are regarded in schools. In what ways do you think this benefits college learners?
- b) In general terms, how does the college support the transition from school to college?

4. Types of assessment:

- a) Some of you may have experience of preparing learners for N4 qualifications which have no examination at the end of the year, unlike most N5 courses. What is your view of this arrangement?

5. Loss of units in N5 courses:

- a) The Deputy First Minister announced in September 2016 that SQA will remove mandatory unit assessment from the N5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses in successive years. (These units will continue to be available as free-standing national units.) What impact do you think this will have on your delivery of these courses?

6. Developing the Young Workforce (DYW):

- a) One of the DYW report aims was to develop better links between school, employer and college to achieve better outcomes for young people. If you are involved in this — either in a teaching or a management role — could you explain what you and your partner schools are doing to achieve better outcomes for young people?

7. Is there anything else you would like to raise with us?

5.15 Questions for college manager and senior college manager focus groups

The SQA team may prompt the conversation with additional information where necessary, for example where the staff feel there are differences between subjects.

1. SQA support:

SQA support for the implementation of our qualifications takes many forms — the wider role of nominees, the liaison team, verification reports, Understanding Standards events and materials and, more recently, webinars.

- (a) What use has the college made of these support mechanisms?
- (b) When talking to departments or individual staff, what is your perception of how useful and supportive these have been in influencing departmental practice and leading to better outcomes for young people and for staff?

2. Managing implementation of new National Qualifications (NQs):

- (a) Please describe what has gone well in your teams when implementing the new NQs, and what has been problematic. What do you see as positive and negative aspects of the new NQs?

3. Skills and attitudes of learners:

- (a) What are your perceptions of skills and attitudes to learning of candidates now reaching you with experience of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) and the new National Qualifications?
- (b) How readily are learners progressing into the next stage of their learner journey — whether it is to a set of units, group award, vocational qualification, next level of National Qualification, apprenticeship, employment, or work placement?

4. Transition and Developing the Young Workforce (DYW):

The DYW report and the CfE Implementation Plan suggested that schools introduce more vocational qualifications and establish links with college and employers.

- (a) Please describe how you and your partner schools are working together to achieve better outcomes for young people.

5. Other:

Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your experience of the new National Qualifications or any other SQA qualifications?

5.16 Summary of college responses

We visited four colleges in the spring of 2017, meeting learners, lecturers, managers and senior managers in each college. The questions for each of these groups was forwarded to the college in advance. The colleges visited have a wide range of learners with a wide range of courses on offer. This report collates the responses from the four college groups we met.

Comments from learners

Reason for studying at college and level of enjoyment

Learners who participated in the focus groups are from diverse backgrounds and had different experiences prior to starting college. Learners who participated included adult returners as well as direct entrants from school.

Learners explained that their reasons for coming to college included: doing so in preference to staying at school; deciding to change career and retraining; having no or few qualifications and using college to gain qualifications before progressing to university; and entering education as an adult returner with no definite plan. A few learners indicated that they had remained at home to look after children or had caring responsibilities for a relative; as a result they had come to college as a mature learner.

The general consensus of opinion from all learner focus groups is that college is a good experience. Learners appear to enjoy the cultural change and learning style. Generally, learners spoke positively about their enjoyment of college.

Transition from school to college

Almost all learners from all colleges visited believe that the transition to school from college has been smooth. One learner commented that study of National 5 qualifications prior to coming to college had been helpful in preparing for current studies. Another learner commented that the transition from National 4 to National 5 at school was difficult; this was clarified by confirming that the volume of subjects created difficulty. One learner in a college commented on not being allowed to study Higher Physics at school; this learner is now studying Higher Physics at college and making progress.

National Qualifications, assessment and feedback

Learners spoke about their experiences from school and college. Almost all learners in all colleges enjoy the continuous assessment approach and appear motivated by their college experience of assessment. Feedback from learners indicates that they believe that unit assessment helps increase confidence and supports the individual learner to track their own progress.

Almost all learners in all colleges commented that sufficient notice of assessment is given and that assessment scheduling is well-planned. Feedback from two colleges indicated that bottlenecks can exist. Lecturing staff generally structure assessment to ensure that bottlenecks do not result: where there is a heavier assessment load lecturers are usually flexible and make appropriate adjustments. However, this is not a consistent experience across all curricular areas in all colleges. Occasionally a few learners feel over-burdened with assessment requirements.

A few learners in one college reflected on their experience of National Qualifications at school. Learners enjoyed studying National 4 qualifications and noted that the qualifications were straightforward and were happy there were no examinations. As a result of there being no examination at National 4, learners felt they were better able to manage their time in preparing for examinations at National 5. A few learners noted the relevance of examinations and that an examination has purpose. These learners value the experience of examinations.

Almost all learners in all colleges noted that lecturing staff support learners well. Learners are provided with appropriate, detailed, constructive feedback and encouraged to progress.

Learners from two colleges described formal guidance feedback sessions where each learner meets with a manager/personal tutor at regular intervals to review overall progress. In one college a traffic light system is used to monitor learner progress. Learners said they value this system and find it helpful in supporting them to progress. This contrasts with the experience of learners in one college. In this college, learners identified that support from the guidance tutor is not consistent; and not all learners find the system helpful.

Learner opinion on positive destinations

Feedback from learners in two colleges indicated a fairly strong feeling of lack of support from legacy schools in supporting 'low achievers' in selecting progression pathways. One mature learner with two children with different levels of ability noted that schools focus more on learners that are doing well. Another learner commented that at school there appeared to be more focus on helping those making university applications. However, not all learners agreed with this view.

In the main, learners appeared to have taken responsibility for their own progression. This involved investigating and sourcing information using various means including college websites; college open days; advice from potential employers; and support from Skills Development Scotland.

A few learners in two colleges noted that they believe learners currently at school have more options than they experienced. School learners appear to be better supported.

Learner progression

Most learners had clear plans for future study and employment; they spoke confidently about their aspirations and future plans. Learners are involved in a wide range of activities including small business start-up and volunteering within college. Learners spoke of plans to study at the next level within college; about employment opportunities; and a few learners spoke of their desire to progress to university following successful completion of Higher National Diploma (HND) programmes. In one college all learners in the focus group spoke confidently of progression to university; they appeared to perceive this progression route as very achievable.

Comments from lecturers, middle, and senior managers

Skills and attitudes of learners

Almost all lecturers from all colleges noted that since the introduction of the National Qualifications there is very little difference in learners coming from school to college; there has not been any improvement. However, in one college, lecturers in English and the sciences noted that learners who have completed National 5 qualifications are better prepared. Nonetheless, these lecturers also felt that learners are less able to work independently and that their motivation levels are lower than previous cohorts. A

group of lecturers in one college felt this generation of learners had experienced a great deal of change.

Lecturers in three colleges noted general concern that learners' core skills are poorer. Similarly, feedback from middle managers in two colleges highlighted concern regarding the level of core skills. In one college a general comment made was that 'even learners with Highers don't seem to have the core skills'. Senior managers in one college noted that they have concern regarding learners' core skills.

Learners are supported in the initial stages of college programmes through well-planned, comprehensive induction programmes. Learners progressing from school to HNC–HND programmes generally lack confidence and ability to undertake independent study. However, lecturers confirmed that as the academic year progresses learners become more self-reliant.

Senior managers in one college noted that there is no difference in learners' skills and attitudes since the introduction of National Qualifications. However, it was suggested that this may in part be attributable to colleges delivering in a holistic way. In another college, senior managers highlighted that more motivated learners have better analytical and research skills. Those with lower motivation levels have not shown the same improvement. Feedback from these managers indicated that it is challenging for learners to move from SCQF level 5 to SCQF level 7; it is more difficult than it was previously.

Managing implementation of the new National Qualifications (NQs)

In one college, senior managers noted that there are no concerns related to the implementation of the NQs. This contrasted with feedback from senior managers in another college who highlighted concern related to assessment load and additional workload in managing student records. In another college, senior managers noted that Curriculum for Excellence had not fulfilled expectations.

Middle managers in one college noted that the main concern is to ensure that members of lecturing staff are familiar with the qualifications.

Middle managers from across the colleges discussed subject-specific experience. For example, in one college National 5 Cake Craft has been introduced with a very positive response to recruitment.

Progression between levels of qualification

Responses from lecturers from different curricular areas varied. In Biology, English, Social Studies and Politics the transition from National 4 to National 5 is smooth. It was noted by lecturers in two colleges that transition from National 5 to Higher Biology is good and better than it was previously. In contrast, the transition in Chemistry is less smooth.

Middle managers in one college stated that National 4 qualifications in Mathematics and the sciences do not prepare learners well for National 5. National 5 Beauty was highlighted as being practical-based. However, in contrast the Beauty course at SCQF level 6 is more theoretical. As a result of the difference in approach at these levels, it is more challenging for learners. Managers in one college delivering in Care indicated that there is now a bigger gap between National 5 and Higher. As a result, adjustment has been made to the entry requirement to National 5 to ensure that learners cope with the increased challenge when they progress to Higher.

National 4 assessment

Lecturers presented mixed views both within and across the four colleges. A few lecturers noted that having a continuous assessment approach is positive and felt this was less stressful for learners and staff. One lecturer noted that learners are not as well prepared if they do not sit an examination but added that she felt some learners would find having an examination overwhelming.

In one college, lecturers in the Sciences and Health and Social Care expressed a preference for an examination at National 4 level. This was not supported by others present who indicated that an examination is not appropriate.

In one college all participants in the small group of lecturers present thought there should be an examination at National 4 level.

Unit assessments

Lecturers from all four colleges expressed concern regarding the removal of unit assessments. However, they spoke of their intention to continue to complete the unit assessments with learners. Middle managers in one college highlighted concern regarding cascading information as there are uncertainties surrounding the change which was announced in September 2016.

In one college lecturers noted that the removal of unit assessment may impact on recruitment. This is because in that college unit passes are used as one possible entry requirement for learners making the transition from school to college.

Developing the Young Workforce

All senior managers in all colleges identified activities planned between college and local partner schools. Generally, partnership working involves regular meetings between managers of schools and colleges. In some colleges there is a designated liaison manager (Schools Liaison Officer) who provides regular contact and support. In some instances partnership working appeared to be extensive. For example, one college identified working with 18 schools while another noted that their college collaborates with 45 schools. In each of these colleges, collaboration with schools involves working across three different local authorities. Provision includes delivery of highly structured taster programmes lasting over the academic year. These programmes enable learners to sample a range of curricular courses. In one college, school learners have no option choices but take the full taster package. As a result staff felt that these learners are better informed about option choices. In one college it was noted that not all learners are given the opportunity to participate in college programmes. Sometimes college programmes are timetabled as an extra and not an option for more 'academic' learners.

In one college, HNC award courses are offered to S5 learners: this is regarded as challenging by college senior managers. Learners do not consistently complete the HNC awards, with some learners withdrawing from the programme after gaining Higher qualifications through school.

Senior managers in all colleges identified that Foundation Apprenticeships are being delivered. The volume and curricular offer varied from college to college. Examples noted across the colleges include Childcare, Business and Accounting, and

Engineering. Senior managers indicated that there is an intention to expand the portfolio of Foundation Apprenticeships on offer. One college noted that it is especially challenging as the senior managers are required to liaise with three different local authorities. Travel to and from college can be challenging for school learners due to geographical distance. Some concerns related to Foundation Apprenticeships were noted, including that: the level of the qualification is too high (level 6); many applicants do not have level 5 qualifications; it is a two-year qualification and learners sometimes leave not having completed the apprenticeship; and parents and carers as yet do not appear to value the qualification.

Middle managers' feedback in the main concurred with that of senior managers. In one college, managers distinguished between tasters for STEM and non-STEM tasters.

Lecturers from three colleges were aware of and described planned activities cross-college involving learners from schools. Some lecturers were aware of activity but did not have any direct experience or involvement in the programmes. Broadly, the programmes offered support to school learners in making the transition from school to college. Opportunities exist for school learners to sample different curricular areas: this is especially true of vocational areas. In this way, learners can experience different curricular offerings before selecting a specific route. Lecturers in the fourth college made limited comment on partnership working with schools and appeared to have no or little experience in this regard.

In one college a structured programme supporting learners' transition from education to employment is delivered.

SQA support for NQs

Both middle and senior managers contributed to feedback on SQA support for the NQs. Managers commented on a range of support mechanisms.

Firstly, both middle and senior managers across all three colleges identified Understanding Standards as very helpful, beneficial and useful. In one college a senior manager noted that sometimes it is difficult to know whether the events are intended for all staff or just nominees.

Secondly, both middle and senior managers from all colleges noted that development events are especially useful and invaluable. It was noted by a manager in one college that these events also help build good relationships with external verification teams.

Thirdly, almost all managers in all colleges noted that the liaison team provides very good support.

Having nominees within the college is regarded as helpful. The normal process is that nominees disseminate information immediately after meetings. As a result, staff members are informed of changes in practice.

Verification can be helpful. However, managers in one college noted that it is an 'unnecessary complication' having different verification systems for NQ and Higher National qualifications. Managers in another college commented that the usefulness of EV visits depends very much on the person.

Webinars are not widely used as a means of support; this feedback was given from most managers in three colleges. In one college, two senior managers noted that webinars are useful.

5.17 Questions for parent and carer focus groups

- 1) A general question — how well do you feel your child settled into secondary school and what was your impression of the S1–3 years? Did you have a clear sense of what level they had reached by the end of S3 before they moved into qualifications?
- 2) What was your experience of helping your child choose their options for the Senior Phase?
- 3) What sense did you have of your child's progress in those subjects in S4 initially, then S5 and S6? How did you gather information about what each subject would involve each year?
- 4) Did you feel the demands on them increased — reasonably? — as they moved through the school? For all subjects? Were there any big jumps between levels in some subjects?
- 5) At the end of their school career or at this point, are your child's results in line with what you expected? (Without going into specific detail!)
- 6) Parents try to be as supportive and informed as possible for their child. Have you used SQA's website. What are your views on it? What other places do you go for information? If a friend asked you about her daughter, 'How can I support Sarah this S4 year?' what advice would you give? Are there any things schools or SQA could be doing which would help?
- 7) National 1–National 4 courses are designed not to have an examination at the end of the course. We've been asking teachers and pupils about this and had some interesting replies. What is your view? What do you think an employer's view is?
- 8) The report on Developing Scotland's Young Workforce was trying to identify better routes for young people — into college or training or work, not just

staying in school or going to university. How aware are you of what is available in your area and would you say all these options are valued equally?

- 9) Is there anything else you would like to raise with us about your experience of the new National Qualifications?

5.18 Summary of parent and carer responses

Introduction

Responses of parents and carers were generated in a focus group comprising more than 20 participants from the National Parent Forum of Scotland, and from 34 independent respondents from the Scottish Parent Teacher Council. Focus group participants and individual respondents were invited to respond to the same series of questions, which included an open invitation to tell the fieldwork team about their experience of the new National Qualifications or any other SQA qualifications. The questions are enclosed as Annex 17.

Responses from individuals were analysed to determine recurring themes and frequency of comment. The headings below indicate the focus of each question, followed by the findings from the focus group. There was broad agreement between the findings reported for the focus group and for analysis of individual respondents.

It should be noted that focus group participants and other respondents may not be representative of the whole population of parents and carers, a point that members of the focus group made themselves. Furthermore, the perceptions of parents and carers are naturally influenced by the experiences of their children, which are likely to vary a great deal. In summarising our findings we have focused on broad themes that were relatively commonly expressed, or seemed generically relevant, rather than trying to capture in full the range of experiences described by respondents.

While SQA was primarily interested in parental perceptions of the new National Qualifications, the focus group members also made more general comments about education in Scotland which are recorded in this annex.

Transition to secondary school and the Broad General Education (BGE)

Focus group participants reported that the transition from primary school to secondary school was not problematic, but many parents and carers felt that there was a degree of 'marking time' in S1–3. Participants reported very variable experiences in terms of knowing what Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) level their children had reached at the end

of the BGE, and there was some confusion over the meaning of those levels and criticism of communication about this. There was recognition that changes are ongoing in BGE. Among the individual responses to the questions, almost all reported that the transition from primary to secondary had gone well for their individual child. More than half of the respondents criticised BGE for a variety of reasons, citing the apparent lack of progress in a Level during the academic year and the complexity of subject rotations during the year.

Some parents and carers with older children noted that teachers now seemed clearer about the course content and that textbooks were available to support learners.

Well over a quarter of respondents were more positive about their children's experiences of BGE, welcoming the breadth of subjects which children enjoyed, though some said they were disappointed at the low volume of homework which was set overall by the school.

More than half of the individual respondents said that they did not have a clear sense of their children's progress as they moved towards the Senior Phase, even after tracking reports and a parents' evening. Some said they found it hard to understand what the CfE levels meant.

Subject choices

Parents and carers were asked about their experiences of helping their children to choose subjects for the Senior Phase. While experiences varied, many parents and carers said that doing a reduced number of subjects had reduced choice and made choices more difficult to make, and that sometimes choices were being made prematurely. They had concerns about the reduced flexibility associated with taking fewer subjects in S4 (and even S3) and with restrictions being placed upon subject choices by some schools and local authorities. Some parents and carers suggested that the inconsistency in numbers of subjects being taken across schools was unfair to learners. There was concern that a broad general approach (eg science, rather than discrete sciences) in BGE did not prepare well for NQs. Participants also remarked upon the issue of National 4 being 'stigmatised' in schools.

Among the individual responses received, well over half reported that making subject choices had been problematic, and well over half of individual respondents expressed concerns about restrictions being placed on subject choice. On the other hand, some respondents reported that their experience of helping their children to make subject choices had been a good one, with schools making adjustments to meet learners' requests.

In relation to information about what subjects would involve, the NPFS-organised focus group noted that the NPFS publications *Nationals in a Nutshell* had been helpful. Among individual respondents, around one-quarter mentioned that they had received helpful information from the school although one half indicated that they had received poor or no information from the school.

Awareness of learners' progress in the Senior Phase

In general, participants in the focus group said that they did not feel well informed, with many reporting that most information came from their own children rather than formally from the school. They noted a focus on prelim examinations — sometimes taken early in the year — which some felt was symptomatic of schools having reverted to the old examination-focused system.

Among the individual responses, more than half were critical of schools' communication of learner progress for a variety of reasons, including mixed messages from tracking systems and late notification of a change to presentation levels. Some parents and carers felt that a single parents' evening in the year plus one tracking report was insufficient information for parents and carers.

Smoothness of progression in demand through secondary education

Focus group participants were generally in agreement that the jump between National 4 and National 5 was too great (described as 'huge' by some), as was the jump from National 5 to Higher in many cases, although this varied across subjects. They commented on inconsistency in the amounts of coursework assessment across subjects, and were aware of the pressures of completing this for some subjects.

Around half of the individual respondents commented on the challenging demands made on their children as they moved through secondary school, commenting on a jump between S3 and S4 and from National 5 in S4 to Higher in S5, for example.

Slightly less than half of the individual respondents made positive comments in this regard, and the same number reported subject differences in terms of smoothness of progression, such as in Mathematics and the science subjects.

A number of individual respondents echoed the focus group concerns about inconsistency in the amounts of coursework assessment across subjects, and were aware of the pressures of completing this for some subjects, and of completing several items of coursework at the same time of the academic year.

Children's attainment

The issue of children's attainment was not covered with the focus group, but among individual respondents, around half were happy with their child's attainment, which was in line with or had exceeded their expectations. Around a third were not happy with their child's attainment.

Use by parents and carers of the SQA website and other resources to support their children

The SQA website was criticised by focus group participants and by individual respondents for being difficult to navigate, with the focus group reporting that parents and carers are opting to 'google' rather than trying to search within the site. They also said that the number of documents on the website makes it difficult to determine which are the most relevant and up-to-date and they said documents tended to be written in 'teacher-speak' rather than being accessible for parents and carers. However, others commented that they appreciated the transparency of being able to see the guidance documents and past papers and specimen papers, and that their child had used the exam timetable and learner tools on the website.

Removal of unit assessment

Although not directly asked about this, some focus group participants were aware of the planned changes and said that the removal of unit assessment was mainly designed to

help teachers and that learners' needs had not been fully considered. Some individual respondents expressed concern about the potential negative impact of these changes on their children.

National 4 course assessment

Due to lack of time, the focus group participants were not asked for their views on the absence of an external examination at National 4, although the NPFS had recently surveyed their members about this with the details published on their website. Among the individual responses, well over one-quarter said they were in favour of having an examination and around the same proportion were opposed.

Well over one-quarter believed that employers did not value, did not understand, or did not seek National 4 qualifications for recruiting purposes.

In the focus group some feared a drifting back towards only the question paper being important, and some individual respondents were also concerned about the Senior Phase being overly focused on examinations.

Developing the Young Workforce (DYW): vocational and other non-NQ qualifications and activities

Due to lack of time, the focus group were not asked for their views on this. Among the individual respondents, some said they were not aware of this development. Some said they were aware and felt that there needed to be more provision of this kind and that awareness of it should be raised. Some commented favourably on such provision. Some noted that it had improved for younger members of their family.

Although the DYW report stresses that vocational education during the Senior Phase is relevant to all young people, well over one-quarter of individual respondents commented that DYW provision is seen as being a less valued option, and for less able learners.

Other comments made by parents and carers

The issue of greatest concern to parents and carers appeared to be restrictions placed on subject choices, whether by a reduction in the number of subjects being studied which limited choice at subsequent levels, or by timetabling restrictions, all more fully described above. A number of parents and carers perceived that schools were initially unprepared for CfE insofar as they had insufficient information and guidance for their staff from SQA. Some criticised the amount of change that has occurred in the arrangements for the new NQs and noted that these changes are continuing. However, a number of respondents stated that they were broadly positive about their children's experience of secondary education and the new NQs.