

# **National Qualifications Policy: Exploring the Benefits and Challenges of Grading in Modularised Courses**

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# Introduction

This paper has been developed in the context of a series of recent independent reviews and reports on the Scottish education system, including:

- Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education (Scottish Government, 2022)
- It's Our Future: Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment (Scottish Government, 2023a)
- All Learners in Scotland Matter: The National Discussion on Education (Scottish Government, 2023b)

These reports emerged following the OECD's independent review of Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) (OECD, 2021), which called for greater coherence, flexibility and responsiveness within Scotland's education and qualifications system.

Among the recommendations arising from these reviews, particularly the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment (hereafter IRQA), were proposals to explore more modular approaches to qualifications as part of wider qualification reform. Such proposals have prompted further discussion about how modularisation might operate in Scotland's senior-phase qualifications system, and the implications this might have for approaches to assessment, grading and certification.

Modularisation refers to the organisation of qualifications into discrete, separately assessed components or units that can be combined in different ways to form a full qualification, supporting flexibility, progression, and accumulation of learning over time (OECD, 2021).

This definition reflects how the OECD described modular or unitised approaches in its analysis of qualifications systems, particularly in relation to CfE reform, where it emphasised the need for greater flexibility, improved progression pathways, and more transparent alignment between stages of learning and certification.

Further discussion on the potential modularisation of senior-phase National Courses has focused on issues of grading, and particularly on whether individual modules should be graded and, if so, how such grades might contribute to an overall course award. This raises a range of interrelated considerations, including the appropriate modes of assessment, the weighting of modules within a qualification, and the intended purposes of assessment. It also requires careful attention to how modular grades would align with national standard-setting processes, as well as how they would be used for certification and the reporting of learner achievement.

Grading in a modularised system is widely held to be a complex process that can have significant impact on the validity and reliability of assessments. An earlier SQA research project from 2009 cites the validity of the grading aggregation process as a major consideration, saying

‘the greater the number and heterogeneity of the components to be combined into one grade, the more difficult it becomes to achieve adequate validity’ (SQA, p.30).

Yet, a publication by Cambridge Assessment argues that reliability of assessment results can actually increase with grading numerous elements of a subject as ‘the aggregation of more finely graded judgements can be fairer because of the additional information that is captured at the first assessment stage’ (Williamson, 2018, p.25).

Discussions of grading, assessment validity and reliability have been explored in depth in other SQA publications (see SQA 2007a, SQA 2007b and SQA 2009). We will refer to these important considerations throughout this paper because any possible future models will have to ensure that they adhere to SQA’s principles of assessment, that all SQA assessments must be:

- valid
- reliable
- practicable
- equitable
- fair

This paper aims to explore the potential benefits and challenges of grading modules in senior-phase National Courses by examining various models, with a view to informing potential approaches to awarding that support internally- and externally-assessed graded components.

## **Background and context**

For the purposes of this paper, only general senior-phase qualifications delivered in school settings and benchmarked at SCQF levels 4 and 5 will be analysed, not vocational qualifications.

SQA has used various grading models in its senior-phase National Courses over the years: from a mix of internally-assessed graded units and external assessment in Standard Grade; to CfE courses in which internally-assessed, ungraded units formed part of courses and could also be certificated separately; to the current RNQ models in which grades are calculated using marks solely from externally-assessed course components, with some exceptions (such as courses with IACCAs).

Comparisons with other modularised systems which use grading for internally-assessed modules in senior-phase qualifications will also be explored, including: Welsh GCSEs, the New Zealand National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA), and New South Wales’s High School Certificate (HSC).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As of August 2026.

It is worth exploring these models as they serve to highlight the benefits and challenges of different types of grading systems which use internally and externally-assessed graded components.

## **What do we mean by grading?**

Grading (also referred to as awarding) is the process through which candidates' results or grades are determined on the basis of available assessment evidence (SQA, 2019). In traditional examination systems, this involves converting marks from assessment components into component and overall subject grades (SQA, 2009).

Grading is used for various purposes, including: to record attainment at the point of taking assessments; to decide who can and can't get access to certain opportunities in further study and the labour market; and as part of school evaluation and accountability processes (Qualifications Wales, 2023).

## **Setting standards**

To support the intended uses of grades, awarding bodies must set standards to ensure learners are judged against consistent, defined standards, within and across cohorts. SQA's standards approach in normal years can be categorised as 'attainment referencing' — performance standards are maintained using expert judgement of assessment performance, measured against defined assessment criteria, supported by the use of statistics as a means of sense-checking the plausibility of outcomes (SQA, 2024a).

This is similar to the GCSE system in Wales where, under attainment referencing, learners receive grades that are intended to reflect their holistic attainment in the qualification at a standard that is comparable with the attainment required for that outcome in previous years' qualifications (Qualifications Wales, 2023).

Attainment referencing, unlike other standards approaches such as 'norm-referenced' approaches (which seek to maintain the same overall outcomes regardless of individual performance) or 'criterion-referenced' approaches (which seek to prioritise performance standards through consideration of performance against specified criteria), is a mixed-methods approach. This means that both statistics and human expert judgement are used to set grading standards on senior-phase National Courses (SQA, 2023a).

SQA has traditionally used grade boundary meetings at the end of each examination and marking diet to determine grades for National Courses. These meetings take into account some or all of the following, as appropriate to the qualification:

- performance and grade descriptions
- exemplar material

- the assessment and associated marking instructions
- candidate evidence
- statistical information (such as mark distributions, item statistics, cohort information)
- other relevant qualitative and quantitative information (SQA, 2023b).

Grade boundary meetings embody the attainment reference approach to standard-setting in which the professional judgements of assessment and subject experts (such as the Principal Assessor and SQA qualifications development staff) as well as national statistics are jointly used to set standards (SQA, 2022).

According to Meadows et al (2023), attainment referencing is ‘designed to counteract changes in the difficulty of the question papers while maintaining a relationship between candidates’ attainment and the grades they are awarded. Written grade descriptors may be used to explain the kinds of knowledge and skills that candidates awarded each grade should have demonstrated in the assessment’.

Although standard-setting happens at the end of an assessment process, standards approaches are in fact embedded throughout the cycle of qualification design and delivery (Qualifications Wales, 2023). The standards of the knowledge and skills to be assessed are specified in qualification design principles and course documentation (known variously as, for instance, course specifications, arrangements documents, course syllabus).

SQA’s course and unit specifications set national standards for acceptable performance, given that there is no single overarching prescribed curriculum for senior-phase schooling in Scotland (SQA, 2016). Under Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), the curriculum is intentionally designed to provide flexibility for schools and teachers to develop learning programmes that reflect local contexts and learners’ needs, rather than prescribing detailed national content at senior-phase level. While CfE provides a broad framework for learning from ages 3 to 18, the senior phase (S4–S6) is structured around qualifications, pathways and learner choice, with schools determining how curriculum entitlement is delivered. As a result, National Course specifications play an important role in defining the knowledge, skills and standards required for assessment and certification.

Curriculum for Excellence is underpinned by four capacities, which aim to develop young people as: successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens, and effective contributors (Scottish Government, 2008). National Standards therefore operate within this broader curricular philosophy, defining the level of demand of course content and the level of candidate performance required for successful achievement while supporting the wider aims of CfE.

A comparable situation currently exists in Wales, where standards are set out in terms of defined subjects. However, a significant wide-ranging consultation about the purpose, range and content of curriculum in Wales has led to the passage of the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 introducing a new approach – Curriculum for Wales. This legislation introduced a different approach to curriculum design in that it is structured around progression

within six broad Areas of Learning and Experience — Expressive Arts; Health and Well-being; Humanities; Languages, Literacy and Communication; Mathematics and Numeracy; and Science and Technology. This is underpinned by four purposes that aim to enable learners to become ambitious, capable learners; enterprising, creative contributors; ethical, informed citizens; and healthy, confident individuals (IAC, 2022).

In the international jurisdictions under discussion here, standards are prescribed by national curriculum aims and outcomes.

- In New South Wales, course syllabuses for each subject are developed by NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA). These set out the knowledge, understanding, skills, values, and attitudes that students are expected to develop at each stage of learning as well as: an aim and rationale for the learning, outcomes and content, cross-curriculum priorities, general capabilities, specific requirements for delivery, and Australian Curriculum content inclusions (NESA, n.d. 1), (see Appendix 1).
- In New Zealand, Achievement Standards are set by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) and are informed by the New Zealand Curriculum and the Qualifications Framework. Examples of specific standards from courses will be explored in greater detail below.

## Standard Grade

At Standard Grade, 160-hour courses were broken down into assessable, individually graded 'elements'. Each subject had specific elements — for example, the elements of Standard Grade English were: Reading, Writing and Talking; the elements of Standard Grade Physical Education were Practical Performance, Knowledge and Understanding, and Evaluating. Learners had to provide evidence of achievement in all 'elements' of a subject before an overall grade could be awarded.

In most subjects, learners sat an exam at two adjacent levels, either foundation/general or general/credit. Learners' overall grades were derived from a weighted mean of the grades from the assessable elements. Standard Grade attainment was graded at one of seven grades: grades 1 and 2 (Credit); grades 3 and 4 (General); grades 5 and 6 (Foundation); and grade 7 (course completed) (SQA, 2008). Standard Grade used a form of profiling learner achievement by reporting both the element grades and the overall grade on the learner's certificate. Elements could not be stand-alone and were not certificated separately.

The elements were assessed in a variety of ways. In some elements, students had to demonstrate practical or performance skills, which were usually internally assessed by the class teacher. Other elements were assessed by examination or on the basis of folio work submitted to SQA for external assessment. All learners were assessed in a way designed to enable them to demonstrate positive achievement, measured against stated standards (SQA, 2008). The standards took the form of aims or purposes of learning which were clearly set out in each

subject's syllabus (known as the arrangements document). These aims informed subject specific grade related criteria (GRC), which were positive descriptions of performance against which a candidate's achievement was measured.

Each syllabus contained two types of GRC: Summary GRC and Extended GRC. Summary GRC were broad descriptions of performance and were published as an aid to the interpretation of the profile of attainment by candidates, parents, employers and other users of the Certificate (the Scottish Certificate of Education which detailed candidate's achievements). Extended GRC were detailed descriptions of performance and were intended to assist teachers in making their assessments for each element, and to be used by examiners when conducting external assessment (SQA, 2010). Using GRC for both internally- and externally-assessed elements of Standard Grade helped the teaching profession become more familiar with assessment standards and led to a higher concordance between internal and external assessments.

## Aggregation process for Standard Grade

Marks from assessments within elements had to be converted into an overall element grade. Each element grade was aggregated into a final grade. In Modern Languages for example, there were four assessable elements: Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening. Reading and Listening were assessed externally by means of question papers; Writing was externally assessed by means of a folio of three pieces of work, produced internally under controlled conditions; and Speaking was internally assessed by teachers using three assessment tasks. The following advice was given on the aggregation of grades in the Course Arrangements document:

Grades for Speaking will be calculated on the basis of candidates' normal performance in each of the three task-types. Final grades are calculated by adding the three grades together and then dividing by three. Final grades containing .66 should be rounded up. Final grades containing .33 should be rounded down.

Grades for Writing will be calculated by SQA on the basis of candidates' performance in the three pieces of writing. Final grades are calculated by adding the three grades together and then dividing by three. Estimate grades should be calculated in the same way, ... [for example]:

| Speaking      | Grade | Writing | Grade |
|---------------|-------|---------|-------|
| Prepared talk | 2     | Task 1  | 3     |
| Conversation  | 3     | Task 2  | 3     |

|                |                  |               |                 |
|----------------|------------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Speaking       | Grade            | Writing       | Grade           |
| Role-play      | 5                | Task 3        | 2               |
| Total          | $10(\div 3=3.3)$ | Total         | $8(\div 3=2.6)$ |
| Speaking grade | 3                | Writing Grade | 3               |

(SQA, 2003)

The teacher-generated grades for the internally-assessed Speaking element were then added to the grades for the externally-assessed elements, as in the following example:

|                | Reading | Speaking | Listening | Writing | Total |
|----------------|---------|----------|-----------|---------|-------|
| Grade          | 1       | 1        | 1         | 3       |       |
| Weighted Value | 1 x 2   | 1 x 2    | 1 x 1     | 3 x 1   | 8     |
| $\div 6$       |         |          |           |         | 1.33  |
| Overall Grade  |         |          |           |         | 1     |

(SQA, 2003)

The elements of speaking and reading were double-weighted to reinforce the importance of these skills for the subject. The grade for speaking was generated by internal assessment, meaning that a higher proportion of this course was graded using teacher-based judgements than for other subjects such as English. Grades for speaking were also generated using formative assessment methods throughout the year.

## Benefits of grading in the Standard Grade system

Standard Grade courses contained a range of assessment types and methods, and had a mix of internal and external assessment, all of which were graded. Learners therefore had various opportunities to display their skills and subject knowledge, and the evidence of these strengths was captured in the recording and reporting of grades for each element.

The Standard Grade system ensured that learners were not limited to attaining a grading within one level — learners were offered the opportunity to demonstrate maximum attainment at various points in the course and using various methods of assessment. Providing grading for all elements of the course ensured that all aspects were valued (SQA, 2021). Further, by sitting an exam at two adjacent levels, Standard Grade allowed learners to aspire to achieve higher grades within the tiered system.

Reporting grades for each element was also viewed as motivating for learners, conveying information on candidate's strengths, which was useful for progression purposes and ensuring qualifications' predictive validity (the degree to which the assessment accurately predicts how well a candidate will perform the competences in future careers or education) (SQA, 2007b).

Grading elements was also felt to give recognition for those who did well (which would motivate pupils to work harder); provide pupils with useful feedback; and provide high quality evidence for appeals (Scottish Government, 2009).

Having grades count towards the final award was also viewed as fairer because it took into account pupils' achievements throughout a course. Pupils would take units more seriously and therefore be motivated to work harder and more consistently throughout the entire course (Scottish Government, 2009).

## **Challenges of grading in the Standard Grade system**

Not all grades were valued by end-users. A 'survey of users' perceptions of Standard Grade certification showed that, while candidates and presenting centres found the element profile useful, colleges and employers were more interested in the overall awards' (Philip, 2009).

Weightings of elements within Standard Grade courses were not always equal, as highlighted in the modern languages example above. In other subjects such as Computing, where there were three assessable elements — Knowledge and Understanding, Problem Solving and Practical Abilities — the weighting of each of the elements was in the ratio of 1:2:2, reflecting the relative importance of problem solving in the syllabus and the emphasis on the internally-assessed practical abilities. However, not all schools placed this value on the internally-assessed components of Standard Grade; in some schools, learners could only move to Higher if they had achieved a 1 or a 2 in the externally-assessed elements.

Unequal weightings of internally and externally-assessed components between subjects could lead to potential variations in standards. More generous grading associated with internally-assessed components could potentially lead to less valid and reliable assessments. It is widely recognised in literature on assessment that teacher assessments tend to produce higher grades than external examinations (Wikström and Wikström, 2005).

Robust internal QA models are required to mitigate the risk of potential grade inflation as a result of increased internal assessment. However, variations in the quality of QA models across schools meant that a standardised approach was difficult to achieve. The Scottish Examination Board (later known as SQA) used various models of external moderation to verify centres, but this had large cost implications.

Allowing all candidates to sit papers at two levels to allow the best grade achievable also had significant cost implications: 'Although Standard Grade was proving very successful, there was growing concern in the SOED and among local authorities about its cost. One very expensive feature was the fact that virtually all candidates were taking papers at two Levels' (Philip, 2009).

Teachers were put under increased pressure to allow pupils to re-sit assessments to improve their grades, leading to an increased burden of assessment for teaching staff.

Using the same grade related criteria in internal assessment as well as external assessment meant there was a possibility of over-assessment.

## **Intermediate 2 grading model**

Intermediate 2 qualifications were 160-hour courses introduced as part of the Higher Still programme of educational reform in 1999. They were based on a combination of internal and external assessment, with candidates having to achieve a pass in all component units of a course as well as a pass in the external assessment. External assessment provided the basis for grading attainment at A–D through an external examination and coursework.

Units could be taken as component parts of a course or certificated separately. Unit outcomes were internally assessed by teachers using National Assessment Banks (NABs), which were usually summative and had cut-off scores. Learners were usually allowed to re-sit NAB assessments twice, as long as different instruments of assessment were used. Internal assessment decisions were externally moderated by SQA.

Weightings of units varied across subjects. For example, in Intermediate 2 English, learners had to complete two compulsory units; English Language Study and English Literary Study, each worth 1 SQA credit point and 40 hours each, and one optional unit, either English: Personal Response (written) or English: Personal Response (Spoken) each worth one credit point and 40 hours. In Intermediate 2 Modern Languages, learners had to complete a mandatory Language Unit worth 2 credit points (80 hours) as well as one from the following options: Personal Communication, Language in Work or Extended Reading/Viewing, each of which was worth 1 SQA credit point and 40 hours.

Units were pass / fail, but in some subjects, when units were taken as component parts of a course, candidates had the opportunity to demonstrate attainment beyond that required to achieve each of the unit outcomes. This attainment was recorded by teachers and used to

contribute towards course estimates and to provide evidence for appeals. See Appendix 2 for more information on this.

National Course specifications contained information on the aims and rationale for each subject and outlined the unit outcomes and performance criteria to be met by learners.

## **Aggregation process for Intermediate 2**

Unit level results (pass / fail) were calculated using the marks achieved in NAB assessments, which covered the unit outcomes and the performance criteria. These assessments were marks-based and had cut-off scores to determine the pass threshold. For example, a NAB assessment for the English Literary Study Unit, Outcome 1: Textual analysis of an unseen text, contained a textual analysis worth 30 marks. This was a summative assessment and to achieve a pass, a candidate had to gain at least 15 marks out of 30. The NAB assessment for Outcome 1 of the other compulsory Language Study unit contained a Close Reading passage with questions worth 30 marks, again the cut-off score was 15 marks out of 30 for a pass. In the third unit, English: Personal Study (Written Response) or English Personal Study (Spoken Response), the examples of writing or speaking were also assigned a numerical mark (SQA, 2002).

Learners' achievement of all units in the English Intermediate 2 course, despite their numerical marks in each, were reported as pass / fail.

It should be noted that, from 2010 onwards, the assessment structure of the Intermediate 2 English course was rebalanced — learners now had to complete two internally-assessed pass / fail units of 60 hours and 1.5 credit each, as well as an externally-assessed folio of writing weighted at 20% of the total mark, with 80% of the grade being decided by a summative, externally-assessed question paper. The amount of internal assessment was not reduced and remained ungraded, but the skills, knowledge and understanding required for writing were now graded.

## **Benefits and challenges of the Intermediate 2 grading model**

The unit structure of intermediate 1 and 2 courses allowed learners to gain recognition for smaller steps of achievement, and provided opportunities for certification even where the full course was not completed. Internally-assessed units also supported a broader range of assessment approaches, and enabled teachers and lecturers to monitor learner progress throughout the course. The separation of unit achievement (pass / fail) from course grading was intended to distinguish between demonstrating minimum competence and achieving higher levels of performance in the overall course assessment.

The model also supported flexibility and progression. Units could be taken individually or as part of a full course, facilitating movement between levels and providing opportunities for learners to

build qualifications over time. The use of National Assessment Bank (NAB) instruments and external moderation processes aimed to support national consistency in internal assessment decisions.

However, the model also generated significant challenges. The requirement for candidates to pass all internally-assessed units before being eligible for the graded external assessment contributed to concerns about excessive assessment and re-assessment. Frequent use of NAB assessments, combined with opportunities for re-assessment, increased teacher and lecturer workload and led to perceptions of over-assessment within some subjects. The high volume of internal assessment also risked narrowing learning and teaching towards assessment preparation.

In addition, because unit achievement was reported only on a pass / fail basis, internally-assessed performance did not directly contribute to the final course grade. This created tensions within the system, as substantial evidence of learner attainment generated during the course was not formally recognised in certification. Two learners achieving the same overall course grade could therefore demonstrate very different profiles of attainment across units and course components.

Concerns were also raised regarding consistency and reliability in internal assessment decisions across centres. Although SQA implemented external moderation arrangements, maintaining comparability of standards nationally remained resource intensive. More broadly, the Intermediate model highlighted the inherent tensions involved in balancing flexibility, continuous assessment and learner recognition, with the need to maintain manageable assessment demands and consistent national standards.

Reporting an overall grade without a breakdown of learners' unit performance potentially masked significant differences between individual learners, as 'two students with the same grade could have a completely different profile of marks on individual papers, or a large difference in their total marks. These differences could be important to some users of the qualifications' (Rushton, 2021).

## **CfE grading model**

Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) National Courses at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher required the achievement of units and an external assessment, which was graded. The guidance on course assessment set out the purposes of unit assessment and course assessment as follows: 'Unit and Course Assessment complement each other. However, Unit and Course assessment have different purposes. Unit assessment assesses competence in terms of unit outcomes and Assessment Standards on a pass / fail basis, while Course assessment assesses added value and provides the basis for grading' (SQA, 2015). National 5 to Advanced Higher CfE courses were graded A–D. Units had to be passed to complete the full course, but they could be certificated separately.

Units were internally assessed by teachers using unit Assessment Support Packages (UASP) provided by SQA, or teachers could devise their own assessments which could be prior verified by SQA. Units were externally verified by SQA.

Teachers based their decision on whether a candidate provided enough information to show understanding by referring to the 'judging evidence tables' given in the UASPs. Assessors were advised to use professional judgement and a holistic approach in deciding whether candidates have achieved the Assessment Standards. Candidates did not have to answer every question correctly as they could demonstrate achievement of the Assessment Standards across questions. There were no cut-off scores for unit assessment (although latterly this was introduced for some subjects).

## **The benefits and challenges of CfE model (2014–17)**

One of the principal benefits of the original CfE National 5 to Advanced Higher grading model was that it aimed to balance breadth, depth and progression within learning. Internally-assessed units were intended to support ongoing assessment throughout the course and provide opportunities for learners to demonstrate achievement across a range of knowledge and skills, including practical and applied learning that may not be fully captured in a final examination. The model also aligned with the broader CfE philosophy of supporting assessment as part of learning and teaching, with teachers and lecturers using professional judgement to assess learners holistically against assessment standards.

Certification of units also provided opportunities for recognition of partial achievement. Learners who did not achieve the full course award could still gain certification for individual units, supporting progression and recognising attainment. In addition, separating unit assessment from course grading was intended to distinguish between demonstrating minimum competence in units and demonstrating higher levels of attainment in the externally-assessed course assessment.

The pass / fail nature of unit assessment created tensions within the grading model. Although learners generated substantial evidence of achievement during units, this evidence did not contribute to the final course grade. As a result, internally-assessed learning was sometimes perceived as carrying less value than the externally-assessed course assessment. In practice, this often led to a strong focus on preparation for the final examination, particularly in subjects where the external assessment carried the entirety of the grade (SQA, 2015; SQA, 2021).

In response to these concerns, SQA introduced measures intended to reduce assessment burden and improve consistency, including combined assessment approaches, thresholds and cut-off scores in some subjects, and enhanced Understanding Standards support. Nevertheless, concerns about workload, over-assessment and the relationship between unit assessment and course grading remained significant factors in the eventual removal of mandatory units from National 5 courses in 2017–18.

The benefits and challenges of the CfE model, including discussion of grading, have been explored extensively in other SQA publications (SQA, 2021), particularly in relation to the perceived ‘burden of assessment’ for learners and increased workload for teachers associated with internally-assessed units.

## **RNQ Grading Model**

As mentioned previously, the RNQ grading model for National Courses is based solely on external assessment, with some exceptions (see Appendix 3). A candidate’s overall grade is determined by their performance across the course assessment. The course assessment is graded A–D, with banding, on the basis of the total mark for all course assessment components.

Band Estimated performance Notional percent range are:

- 1 Band A (upper) range 85–100
- 2 Band A (lower) range 70–84
- 3 Band B (upper) 65–69
- 4 Band B (lower) 60–64
- 5 Band C (upper) 55–59
- 6 Band C (lower) 50–54
- 7 Band D 40–49\*
- 8 No award 30–39
- 9 No award 0–29

\*The band for grade D was extended from a notional 45–49% to a notional 40–49% to bring it in line with the range available at grades B and C, and to recognise the achievement of a wider group of candidates (SQA, 2021).

For subjects with internally-assessed course component assessments (IACCAs), such as English at National 5, centres submit the outcome of the Performance: Spoken Language component to SQA. Teachers assess this component using detailed marking instructions set out in the N5 English Course Specification. All aspects of the performance must be met by candidates to achieve the National 5 English Performance–spoken language component. This component does not contribute to a candidate’s overall mark, but must be achieved for the course to be awarded. Resits are not allowed. IACCAs are externally verified by SQA.

## **Benefits and challenges of RNQ Grading Model**

Basing grading on one final exam makes it easier to maintain standards over time, according to Baird et al, 2019. However, as has been explored in depth in literature in education, it can have

a significant detrimental impact on students' well-being, motivation and engagement (IAC, 2023).

## Wales

General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs) are the main general qualifications taken by 16-year-old learners in Wales. They are available in a range of subjects and can be used as a basis for further study or training, or direct entry into employment. Single award GCSEs last for 120-140 guided learning hours over the course of two years. In Wales, some GCSEs are linear (all exams taken at the end of the course) and others are modular. For this paper, only current modular GCSEs will be analysed.

Modular GCSEs are made up of units of study which are either internally or externally assessed. Internally-assessed components are referred to as non-exam assessments, and generic tasks and prescribed content are provided by WJEC. Teachers can, however, devise their own assessment tasks to suit the needs of their learners.

Grading scales for all Welsh GCSEs are A\* to G. For some GCSEs there are two tiers of entry: Higher, A\* to D; and Foundation, C to G (WJEC, 2015). For unitised qualifications, results are reported as a uniform mark (UMS) and a grade for each unit. See Appendix 4 for further detail on UMS.

WJEC's English Literature GCSE course is one example of a tiered, modularised qualification in which modules are graded.

### Welsh Literature GCSE structure

| Unit                                                                                                                            | Assessment Type         | Weighting | Raw Marks | UMS |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----|
| Unit 1: Prose (different cultures) and poetry (contemporary)                                                                    | External question paper | 35%       | 50        | 70  |
| Unit 2a: Literary heritage drama and contemporary prose<br><b>OR</b><br>Unit 2b: Contemporary drama and literary heritage prose | External question paper | 40%       | 60        | 80  |
| Unit 3 Non-exam Assessment                                                                                                      | Internal                | 25%       | 48        | 50  |

## Aggregation process

In unitised GCSEs, the raw marks for each unit or component are allocated a total raw mark. Raw marks are then converted into a uniform mark (UMS) on the Uniform Marks Scale (UMS).

The UMS is used as a device for reporting, recording and aggregating candidates' unit and component assessment outcomes. The overall qualification grade is calculated by adding together the uniform marks achieved in the individual units. This gives candidates a total uniform mark which converts to an overall grade based on the grade boundary (WJEC, 2022). Grade boundaries are set at overall subject and unit level. UMS Grade Boundaries remain the same every year as the range of UMS mark percentages allocated to a particular grade does not change (WJEC, 2022).

Resits are allowed in the current Welsh GCSE system but are capped at once per module.

The UMS allows standards to be maintained in modular qualifications in which candidates may take units at different stages during the course and may retake units before certification. There is more information on this at [wjec.co.uk](http://wjec.co.uk).

## **Benefits and challenges of the Welsh grading system**

Threats to standards as a result of grading modules in GCSEs have been explored in depth by Meadows et al (2023). A summary of these threats is provided below, see Meadow et al (2023), pp 36-39 for a comprehensive analysis of this.

The authors argue that various factors can affect standards, including:

- Students sitting units at different times throughout the course means that different question papers that require different grade boundaries have to be used, making comparability of standards difficult to achieve.
- The likely difference in the characteristics of students who are sitting an early unit and students certificating at the end of the course due to exposure to teaching / course content, maturity levels, motivation — if students take an early unit knowing there is the opportunity to re-sit, they might be less motivated to take it seriously, practise and prepare. The authors suggest that the extent to which these factors might influence performance is difficult to quantify, meaning that generating appropriate statistical predictions at the unit level is challenging.
- Regression to the mean, which is an effect that occurs when student performance on units is not perfectly correlated. The weaker the correlation, the greater the effect. At the top grades, outcomes on units will be higher than outcomes at qualification level. At the bottom grade, outcomes on units will be lower than outcomes at qualification level.
- Currently, students are allowed to re-sit each unit in a modular GCSE once. Students typically improve their performance when they re-sit units (Vidal Rodeiro & Nádas, 2012). The facility to re-sit means that even if standards have been set appropriately on each unit initially, outcomes are likely to shift as some students choose to re-sit the assessments and perform differently. This can only be in an upwards direction, since students receive their best mark as their final mark.

## **New South Wales**

In New South Wales students complete a Higher School Certificate (HSC) in the senior phase of schooling, based on modules of study which are assessed by units and an external exam. Students must complete a minimum of 12 units of preliminary courses (usually taken during year 11) and 10 units of HSC Courses (usually taken during year 12). Year 12 courses are 120 hours, made up of up to four modules, ranging from 30 to 60 indicative hours each.

The units are internally assessed in schools, with NESA providing detailed syllabus packages and assessment and reporting documentation, indicating the mandatory components for HSC assessment and the weightings to be attached to those components.

For most HSC Courses, internal assessment constitutes 50% of the overall mark for the HSC. The other 50% is made up of external exam marks. Schools send assessment marks for students in a rank order to NESA via an online system called 'Schools Online' at the end of the internal assessment programme and NESA then moderate the marks. The mark submitted by the school provides a summation of each student's achievement measured at several points throughout the course. Each school group's assessment marks are then adjusted based on how it performs in the HSC exam (NESA, n.d.).

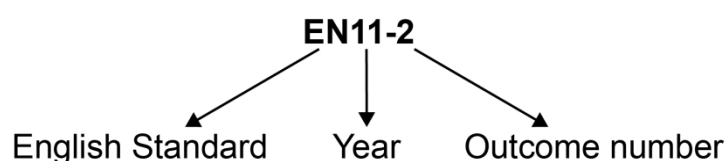
For most HSC Courses students receive an exam mark, an assessment mark and an HSC mark. The HSC mark is the rounded average of the exam mark and assessment mark, and a performance band, which shows how well they performed compared to other students in the course.

## **Standard-setting**

NESA syllabuses support a standards-referenced approach to assessment by linking students' achievement to specified standards, through evidence collected from a number and variety of activities and from observations over time. It involves teachers gathering evidence of student achievement formally and informally, to make judgements and to facilitate and monitor students' progress using syllabus outcomes. The standards describe what students are expected to know, understand and do, described in syllabus objectives, outcomes, content and standards materials, as well as how well students have achieved (NESA, n.d.).

Syllabus outcomes are coded to aid the reporting of evidence of achievement, as can be seen in the following example from the syllabus for the English Standard Stage 6, year 12 course:

Outcome Coding: Syllabus outcomes have been coded in a consistent way. The code identifies the subject, Year and outcome number. For example:



| Outcome code | Interpretation                                  |
|--------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| EN11-1       | English Standard, Year 11 – Outcome number 1    |
| EN12-4       | English Standard, Year 12 – Outcome number 4    |
| ENLS6-6      | English Life Skills, Stage 6 – Outcome number 6 |

(NESA, 2017)

The objective and outcomes are described in detail, with differentiation for year 11 and year 12 students:

### Table of Objectives and Outcomes – Continuum of Learning

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>Objective A</b></p> <p>Through responding to and composing a wide range of texts and through the close study of texts, students develop knowledge, understanding and skills in order to:<br/>communicate through speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing*</p>                                                                                                                    |
| <p><b>Year 11 course outcomes</b></p> <p>A student:</p> <p><b>EN11-1</b> responds to and composes increasingly complex texts for understanding, interpretation, analysis, imaginative expression and pleasure</p> <p><b>EN11-2</b> uses and evaluates processes, skills and knowledge required to effectively respond to and compose texts in different modes, media and technologies</p>                      |
| <p><b>Year 12 course outcomes</b></p> <p>A student:</p> <p><b>EN12-1</b> independently responds to and composes complex texts for understanding, interpretation, critical analysis, imaginative expression and pleasure</p> <p><b>EN12-2</b> uses, evaluates and justifies processes, skills and knowledge required to effectively respond to and compose texts in different modes, media and technologies</p> |

(NESA, 2017)

In this standards-referenced system, the outcomes are broad, and grading is based on the holistic judgement of teachers. Teachers award students an overall grade from A to E, which is a summation of each student's achievement measured at several points throughout the course.

Student performance in each HSC course is measured against defined standards. HSC marks for each course are divided into bands, and each band aligns with a description of a typical performance by a student within that mark range. The performance bands and descriptions give meaning to the HSC mark. For a two-unit course, Band 6 indicates the highest level of performance and the minimum standard expected is 50.

- Band 6 = 90 - 100 marks
- Band 5 = 80 - 89 marks
- Band 4 = 70 - 79 marks
- Band 3 = 60 - 69 marks
- Band 2 = 50 - 59 marks
- Band 1 = 0 - 49 marks

The Universities Admissions Centre (UAC) uses the HSC results to calculate a rank order of students known as the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR). The ATAR is not a mark, nor is it a summary of the HSC. It is a ranking system used to allocate university placements. Calculation of an ATAR is optional (NESA, n.d., quoted in SQA, 2022).

NESA also issues the Record of School Achievement (RoSA) to eligible students who leave school before completing the HSC. The RoSA shows a student's comprehensive record of academic achievement, which includes:

- completed courses and the awarded grade or mark
- courses a student has participated in but did not complete before leaving school
- results of any minimum standard literacy and numeracy tests that may have been sat
- date the student left school

It includes an A to E grade for all Stage 5 (Year 10) and Preliminary Stage 6 (Year 11) courses the student has satisfactorily completed (NESA, n.d., quoted in SQA, 2022).

NSW employs a digital online system for external moderation of coursework, coupled with moderation using final examination grades as a further check (NESA, n.d., quoted in SQA, 2022). The moderation process adjusts school assessment marks using both internal and external components so they can be compared across schools. It is carried out by NESA (SQA, 2022).

## **Benefits and challenges of the NSW grading system**

The use of digital technology ensures grades have consistent meaning across the state, by allowing schools to report grades and provide samples of student work, making moderation and

QA processes more streamlined. NESA monitors the grades awarded and reviews work samples provided by schools (NESA, n.d. 1).

Reporting grades on the RoSA as well as the HSC is useful for end-users of the qualifications. It forms a fall-back position for students who do not achieve the HSC. The RoSA is useful to students leaving school before the HSC because they can show it to potential employers or places of further learning (NESA, n.d. 2).

Grading of internal and external elements of the senior-phase curriculum in NSW has been linked to 'unacceptable levels of performance anxiety amongst students', as was reported in the recent NSW Curriculum Review report (2020).

The review was also told that many teachers, particularly in secondary schools, believe they are required to teach every syllabus dot point and so approach the syllabus as a 'checklist'; that early career teachers may be particularly reluctant to take risks by not covering all dot points; and that some teachers may believe everything in a syllabus must be covered to assign A to E grades accurately (NSW, 2020).

## **New Zealand**

The NCEA (National Certificate of Educational Achievement) is issued by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). The NCEA has three levels: 1, 2 and 3. Learners earn 80 credits per year, each credit representing 10 notional hours of teaching, learning and assessment.

Assessment for the NCEA is based on student achievement in a range of unit or achievement standards which assess their knowledge and skills in a given subject. They are used by schools to create courses. Achievement standards can be internally or externally assessed; unit standards are assessed internally (SQA, 2022). Achievement standards assess the skills and knowledge associated with the New Zealand (school) Curriculum, whereas unit standards tend to assess extra-curricular knowledge and skill, typically relating to vocational training (Yates and Johnston, 2017).

Each standard is worth a specific number of credits. A typical curriculum-based course is assessed using 5–8 achievement standards, with most standards carrying 3–5 credits (Yates and Johnston, 2017).

A general guide to the grading of Achievement Standards is:

- 'achieved' means that the student has demonstrated elementary level skills or knowledge
- 'achieved with merit' means that the student has demonstrated intermediate level skills or knowledge
- 'achieved with excellence' means that the student has demonstrated highly developed skills or knowledge

Around 40% of achievement standards are externally assessed by end-of-year national examinations which are set and marked by the NZQA. The remaining 60% of achievement standards are assessed by teachers during the school year through internal assessment. Teachers are therefore responsible for over half of the assessment for NCEA (Yates and Johnston, 2017)

## Standards-setting

Achievement standards are assigned to subjects by the NCEA, and these are outlined in materials produced by the NZQA for teachers to plan teaching, learning, and assessment programmes.

For example, for English at Level 2, there are ten achievement standards learners have to meet:

1. Analyse specified aspect(s) of studied written text(s), supported by evidence (4 credits, externally assessed)
2. Analyse specified aspect(s) of studied visual or oral text(s), supported by evidence (4 credits, externally assessed)
3. Analyse significant aspects of unfamiliar written text(s) through close reading, supported by evidence (4 credits, external)
4. Produce a selection of crafted and controlled writing (6 credits, internal)
5. Construct and deliver a crafted and controlled oral text (3 credits, internal)
6. Create a crafted and controlled visual and verbal text (3 credits, internal)
7. Analyse significant connections across texts, supported by evidence (4 credits, internal)
8. Use information literacy skills to form developed conclusion(s) (4 credits, internal)
9. Form developed personal responses to independently read texts, supported by evidence (4 credits, internal)
10. Analyse aspects of visual and/or oral text(s) through close viewing and/or listening, supported by evidence (4 credits, internal) (NZQA, n.d. 1)

Each standard is graded against subject specific achievement criteria, as the following example for Achievement Standard 7 demonstrates:

### **Achievement Criteria for Achievement Standard 7: Analyse significant connections across texts, supported by evidence (4 credits, internal)**

| <b>Achievement</b>                                                   | <b>Achievement with Merit</b>                                                     | <b>Achievement with Excellence</b>                                                |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Analyse significant connections across texts, supported by evidence. | Analyse significant connections across texts convincingly, supported by evidence. | Analyse significant connections across texts perceptively, supported by evidence. |

(NZQA, 2014)

To gain a merit or excellence grade for an individual subject, learners need to achieve 14 or more merit or excellence credits in that subject in a single year. At least three of these credits need to be from externally-assessed achievement standards, plus at least three credits from internally-assessed achievement standards (SQA, 2022).

The NZQA produces detailed *New Zealand Curriculum Guides for Senior Secondary Schools*, which provides teachers with quality-assured assessment resources to support internally-assessed Level 1, 2, and 3 registered achievement standards aligned with the New Zealand Curriculum (2007). For each achievement standard, teachers are provided with annotated exemplar extracts of student evidence, with commentary, that explain key parts of a standard. These help teachers make assessment judgements at the grade boundaries — for example, low excellence, high merit, low merit (NZQA, n.d. 2).

Teachers' internal assessment decisions are quality assured by external moderators in two ways: Agreement at the level of Credit, and Agreement at the level of Grade. When a moderator reviews the assessment decision made with respect to a piece of a student's work, they first consider whether the assessor has correctly judged whether the work has met the standard.

- If the moderator and assessor agree that the piece of work demonstrated a result of either Not Achieved or Achieved (regardless of the grade), the judgement is said to be an Agreement at the level of Credit. This term refers to the credits that a student would receive if they have achieved the standard.
- If the judgement of the assessor and moderator is that the work demonstrates achievement of the standard, the moderator will then consider the awarded grade of Achieved, Achieved with Merit or Achieved with Excellence. If the moderator agrees with the assessor that the correct level of grade has been awarded, the judgement is said to be an Agreement at the level of Grade (NZQA, 2021, quoted in SQA, 2022).

Students' results are then reported in NCEA certificates and in the School Results Summary (SRS). This profiles all standards for which students have been assessed; groups results by year, course and level; and shows any national qualifications and endorsements results achieved.

Students also receive a Record of Achievement (ROA). This official transcript of standards and qualifications achieved can be added to as students gain new standards and qualifications throughout their life (O'Donnell, 2018, quoted in SQA, 2022).

## **Benefits and challenges of the NZ grading system**

Reporting Credits and grades for each individual achievement standard in the NCEA certificate and ROA provides a detailed profile of what students can do, which can be useful for end-users of the certificate (such as higher education institutions or employers).

There is currently a Reform of New Zealand education in response to various criticisms of the system, including:

- The large number of assessment events each year, which has led to increased workload for students.
- Excessive numbers of internals driving increased teacher workload, as they bear the main burden of designing, delivering, marking and moderating internal assessment.
- Too many standards leading to increased assessment.
- Pressure on teachers to allow multiple re-sit opportunities to improve internally-assessed grades.
- Imbalance of internally- and externally-assessed standards (NCEA, n.d. 3).

## Considerations for Scotland

- Reporting Grades using digital technology — using technology can help to broaden the range of evidence that can contribute to a student's grade, make teacher-led assessment more manageable, and make the assessment experience more relevant and engaging (Meadows et al, 2023). It can also aid the moderation process.
- Profiling of component grades provides end-users of qualifications with detailed information on candidate achievement, which can be useful for various purposes.
- One common theme to emerge from this analysis of grading is that resits to allow learners to attain higher grades in internally-assessed modules or units is overly time-consuming for teachers and leads to an increased burden of assessment.
- If the system is to move towards one that includes teachers' assessments as part of the qualifications process, it will be important to both ensure there is the necessary time for teachers to carry out this role effectively, as well as providing sufficient access to training opportunities for teachers to improve their assessment literacy and understanding of standards' (Baird, J et al, 2022). To mitigate these potential issues and maintain standards across subjects, robust moderation and verification systems are required. Further examination of the use of digital technologies in jurisdictions such as New South Wales and New Zealand could be worthwhile.
- Broadening the range of assessment measures within courses that generate grades can lead to a fairer system. Analysis of the types of assessment used in the various grading systems has been touched on here, but a more in-depth analysis could prove fruitful for consideration in the Scottish context.
- Only general qualifications have been explored in this paper, not vocational senior-phase offerings. This is because vocational courses are more likely to be ungraded. However, it is worth examining the new HN Next Gen model which now involves 'whole qualification grading using a grading matrix' (incorporating 8–12 criteria).
- It might also be worth exploring the grading model of the Scottish Baccalaureate, which is a mix of graded National Courses at H and AH along with a Graded Unit and is certificated as a Pass and a Pass with Distinction.

# Conclusion

This paper has explored the benefits and challenges associated with grading in modularised qualifications through a range of historical and international perspectives. The analysis highlights that, while modular and graded approaches can provide richer information about learner achievement and enhance the flexibility of certification, they also introduce significant challenges in relation to workload, standardisation, and the maintenance of consistent national standards.

In the context of current reform discussions in Scottish education, these issues are particularly pertinent. Recent policy developments and review recommendations signal a renewed interest in modularisation and the potential role of graded components in future qualifications. The evidence presented in this paper suggests that any movement towards such a model will require careful balancing of validity, reliability, and practicability, alongside strong national support for assessment literacy, moderation, and system-wide coherence.

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## Appendix 1: NSW Stage 6 Curriculum

NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) Stage 6 syllabuses have been developed to provide students with opportunities to further develop skills which will assist in the next stage of their lives.

The purpose of Stage 6 syllabuses is to:

- develop a solid foundation of literacy and numeracy
- provide a curriculum structure which encourages students to complete secondary education at their highest possible level
- foster the intellectual, creative, ethical and social development of students, in particular relating to:
  - application of knowledge, skills, understanding, values and attitudes in the fields of study they choose
  - capacity to manage their own learning and to become flexible, independent thinkers, problem-solvers and decision-makers
  - capacity to work collaboratively with others
  - respect for the cultural diversity of Australian society
  - desire to continue learning in formal or informal settings after school
  - provide a flexible structure within which students can meet the challenges of and prepare for:
    - further academic study, vocational training and employment
    - changing workplaces, including an increasingly STEM focused (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) workforce
    - full and active participation as global citizens
    - provide formal assessment and certification of students' achievements
    - promote the development of students' values, identity and self-respect.

The Stage 6 syllabuses reflect the principles of the NESA *K–10 Curriculum Framework* and *Statement of Equity Principles*, the reforms of the NSW Government *Stronger HSC Standards* (2016), and nationally agreed educational goals. These syllabuses build on the continuum of learning developed in the K–10 syllabuses.

The syllabuses provide a set of broad learning outcomes that summarise the knowledge, understanding, skills, values and attitudes important for students to succeed in and beyond their schooling. In particular, the attainment of skills in literacy and numeracy needed for further study, employment and active participation in society are provided in the syllabuses in alignment with the *Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF)*.

The Stage 6 syllabuses include the content of the Australian curriculum and additional descriptions that clarify the scope and depth of learning in each subject.

NESA syllabuses support a standards-referenced approach to assessment by detailing the important knowledge, understanding, skills, values and attitudes students will develop and outlining clear standards of what students are expected to know and be able to do. The syllabuses take into account the diverse needs of all students and provide structures and processes by which teachers can provide continuity of study for all students.

(NESA, 2017)

## Appendix 2: More information on Intermediate 2 grading

It is worth extensively quoting the 'Guidance on how this could be achieved', which was provided in exemplar assessment materials produced by SQA, as follows:

The primary purpose of National Assessment Bank material is to assess the candidates' attainment of the Outcomes of the National Qualifications units. The additionality involved in the integration, retention and application of the knowledge and skills gained is what makes the Course greater than the sum of its component parts. Thus the nature of the performance even at Grade C implies a level of attainment above that required by the component units. In some subjects the candidate cannot demonstrate any attainment beyond the unit outcomes while in others the tasks set are more open-ended and give the candidate headroom to demonstrate attainment beyond that required by the units.

National Assessment Bank materials with some headroom can provide some evidence of attainment against the Course Grade Descriptions, but will have to be supplemented by evidence from additional assessment tasks. Those with no headroom cannot, on their own, generate sufficient evidence to support an appeal.

The use that can be made of National Assessment Bank materials in generating evidence for appeals purposes therefore varies from subject to subject and, within subjects, the grade being appealed.'

(SQA, 2002)

## Appendix 3: RNQ Courses with IACCA

- Design and Manufacture N5 Assignment
- AH Engineering Science Project
- National 5 and Higher English performance—spoken language (event)
- National 5 and Higher ESOL performance (event)
- National 5 and Higher Fashion and Textile Technology practical activity (visit)
- National 5 and Higher Gàidhlig performance (event)
- National 5 and Higher Modern Languages — including Cantonese; French; Gaelic (Learners); German; Italian; Mandarin (Simplified); Mandarin (Traditional); Spanish; Urdu — performance (event)
- National 5, Higher, and Advanced Higher Physical Education performance (visit)
- National 5 Practical Cake Craft practical activity (visit)
- National 5 Practical Cookery practical activity (visit)
- National 5 Practical Electronics practical activity (visit)
- National 5 Practical Metalworking practical activity (visit)
- National 5 Practical Woodworking practical activity (visit)