

National Qualifications Policy: SCQF levels 4 and 5 reform — current and legacy

Scottish Qualifications

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Introduction

This report forms part of a wider programme of work exploring early thinking around the future reform and modularisation of National Qualifications at SCQF levels 4 and 5. It brings together evidence, historical analysis and practitioner perspectives on the development, implementation and operation of National Qualifications at these levels across different phases of Scottish education reform.

The report examines both current and legacy qualifications, including Standard Grade, Intermediate 1 and 2 qualifications, National 4 and National 5, to identify recurring themes, strengths and areas of challenge in qualification design and delivery. It focuses particularly on the implementation of National 4 and National 5, grading approaches, mechanisms for recognising positive achievement, presentation strategies, dual entry patterns, and progression between curriculum levels and learner pathways.

These themes were selected because they highlight many of the issues currently associated with National Qualifications at SCQF levels 4 and 5, including:

- transition from the broad general education into the senior phase
- progression between qualification levels
- outcome-based differentiation and recognition of learner achievement
- assessment load and practitioner workload
- presentation strategies and over-assessment
- progression into further learning, training and employment

The report also recognises aspects of previous and current qualifications that have been viewed positively by learners, teachers and lecturers. These include the flexibility and outcome-based differentiation offered by the tiered Standard Grade model, opportunities for recognition of positive achievement within National Qualifications, and the accessibility of internally assessed approaches for some groups of learners.

The purpose of this report is not to advocate for a particular model of qualification reform, but to support informed discussion and evidence-based decision-making. By examining how different qualification structures and assessment approaches have operated over time, the report aims to contribute to ongoing consideration of how future National Qualifications at SCQF levels 4 and 5 can best support learners, practitioners and the wider education system.

Methodology

This report uses secondary research. Historical data and research produced by SQA were reviewed alongside other sources¹.

The implementation of National 4 and National 5

Edited extract from: SQA (2021a) SQA information for OECD Independent Review of qualifications and assessment. (p28–33).

The new National 4 and 5 courses were implemented in 2012 for first certification in 2014. At this stage, the National 4 and 5 courses had moved from the design and development stage to implementation in line with the implementation model.

During the design and development phases, SQA worked in partnership with the wider system to ensure that learning at curriculum levels 3 and 4 provided the underpinning knowledge and skills to allow a smooth progression to the senior phase qualifications and to avoid the ‘two-term dash’ that was prevalent at Higher. It was intended that the broad general education (BGE) would provide substantial ‘overlap’ (Kidner, 2013), with curriculum level 4 broadly equating in content and demand to National 4. In addition, there was an expectation that learners should only be presented for National 5 when they were ‘secure’ in their learning at curriculum level 4.

Implementation period

At the time of implementation, Standard Grade was still being dual run, with last certification in 2013. As the size of the new qualifications, at 160 hours notional delivery time, remained the same as Standard Grade, practitioners immediately made comparisons between the legacy Standard Grades and the new National Courses at these levels. Although the design of the new qualifications was intended to allow flexibility in approaches to delivery, many schools initially adopted timetabling models broadly aligned with existing Standard Grade arrangements as they worked to manage continuity and stability during the transition period.

¹ SQA, Qualifications Scotland’s predecessor body, will be used throughout this report.

Given these comparisons, practitioners raised concerns about how revised timetabling would allow for eight subjects to be undertaken in a single year (S4), where previously Standard Grade was delivered across two years.

In addition, there was uncertainty about how the curriculum levels supported the senior phase qualifications, and concerns were raised about the relationship between the National 4 and National 5 courses and the assessment burden of delivering these courses in bi-level classes.

In 2015, after implementation, SQA carried out independent research that looked at how schools were presenting candidates for National 4 courses (Axiom, 2015). Forty interviews were conducted from a sample of 46 teaching professionals — a response rate of 87%.

Findings indicated that decisions about presenting learners for National 4 or 5 courses were made at departmental level and that final presentation was decided as late as possible in the year to offer learners the opportunity to maximise their potential. This was particularly true of 'borderline' learners. However, presentation strategies were often heavily influenced by parents and guardians, who believed that the National 4 qualification lacked worth and expressed concerns around the reliability of internal assessment and the lack of grading. This had the effect of teachers and lecturers becoming 'risk averse' (Axiom, 2015, p. 12), with two thirds of respondents indicating that their learners were undertaking both the National 5 courses and the National 4 Added Value Unit, to utilise the recognising positive achievement (RPA) mechanism. RPA allowed candidates who were unsuccessful in their National 5 course assessment, but who passed a combination of SCQF level 5 freestanding units and the National 4 Added Value Unit, to automatically achieve the National 4 course.

This was particularly true for those candidates who were leaving school at the end of S4. This led to early perceptions of the National 4 qualification as representing a compensatory award for a failed National 5 attempt.

The intention of the senior phase qualifications was to provide flexibility to support a continuous learning experience from S3 to S6, led by learning and teaching, with assessment and certification at appropriate points in a learner's journey. The one-year delivery model that was adopted by a significant number of schools had the unintended consequence of squeezing what was now a large amount of work into a very short timescale.

Prescriptivity

To compound this, concerns were also raised about the lack of prescription within the unit specifications. The design of units was based on the requirement, in line with the decision made by the multi-stakeholder Qualifications Governing Group (QGG), to move away from criterion-based (atomised) delivery and assessment towards units of learning that could be delivered flexibly by teachers and lecturers. The specifications were intended to be high-level to allow room for teachers' and lecturers' professional judgement, and were content-free to encourage contextualised delivery. The unintended consequence was that teachers and lecturers did not receive the clarity they needed about what to teach and the level at which to assess performance.

This uncertainty was particularly pronounced at National 4. The National 4 Added Value Unit, like other units within the National Courses, was intentionally non-prescriptive, while also functioning in a similar way to an ungraded course assessment. As implementation progressed, many teachers and lecturers sought greater clarity on what constituted an appropriate standard of evidence for a 'pass' at this level.

In response, SQA introduced Judging Evidence Tables (JETs) in the National 4 Added Value Unit to support teachers' and lecturers' understanding of the national standard. An unintended consequence of this approach was that the JETs became a key point of reference in assessment decision-making, with some teachers and lecturers placing increased emphasis on meeting the specific requirements outlined in the tables, alongside continued requests for further prescription.

However, there was criticism of the design of the course materials provided by SQA. The legacy Standard Grade and National Course materials had been held within one set of 'arrangements documents' that laid out the course in full. SQA's new National Course materials were multiple, including unit specifications, course specifications, separate course and unit support notes from National 4 to Advanced Higher, and course assessment specifications from National 5 to Advanced Higher. The intention of these different documents was to separate out the aspects of the course that were mandatory from those that were optional. This approach was designed to help practitioners differentiate between mandatory and optional content and set out the national standard. This approach was in direct response to previous criticism of the Standard Grade arrangements documents that had been perceived as doing this ineffectively.

The volume of documentation appeared to create confusion for practitioners, who repeatedly requested clarification from SQA about which aspects of the course materials were mandatory and which were not. Particular criticism was received around duplication of references to the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) values, purpose and principles, which were seen as repetition across the course documents.

Revision work by SQA

At the same time, revision work was also being undertaken during implementation in response to strong feedback from the teaching community about the detail provided within the course materials. Support notes were improved and small changes were made to course materials to clarify content in particular subjects. This led to a continuous stream of changing course materials.

Against this background, teachers and lecturers were also expected to carry out similar processes for moderation and internal verification for the internally assessed elements of the new National Courses. SQA developed its Understanding Standards programme to illustrate the requirements of the new units and courses and deliver a series of events for teachers. The Understanding Standards support was well received by practitioners and continues to the present.

One of the issues raised in the consultation phase was the concern that internal assessment would not have parity of esteem with external assessment. SQA published its internal verification toolkit to help schools understand SQA requirements, along with information to explain the quality assurance processes that would enable SQA and centres to exercise shared responsibility for internally assessed elements of the National Qualifications. The arrangements were:

- production of materials for the Understanding Standards programme and events for teachers and lecturers
- production of the internal verification (IV) toolkit
- prior verification service for assessments created by schools
- external verification rounds (initially three, later reduced to two), comprising:
 - the SCQF levels to be examined in a round
 - the date for uplift of centre evidence for consideration at a central IV event
 - the dates during which there would be visiting verification for centres chosen by SQA
- post-qualification verification

- publication of Key Messages for each subject to guide future assessment and further build understanding of standards

This verification effort was conducted by teams of subject verifiers, each with a team leader reporting to a Principal Verifier, supported by a Depute Principal Verifier.

This arrangement (selecting and retaining candidate evidence and creating documentation) proved onerous. It was alleviated somewhat by reducing the number of rounds of verification to two, and then more significantly reduced with the development of unit assessment support packs by SQA (from 2016).

In August 2014, the CfE Management Board produced its report of the first year of the new National Qualifications (Curriculum for Excellence Management Board, 2014). Among a variety of wider stakeholder actions, SQA was tasked to work with Education Scotland (previously LTS) to help schools to develop assessment practice with a view to helping teachers and lecturers to understand how to build up robust assessment evidence. SQA was also asked to provide clear exemplification of 'combined assessment' to reduce the assessment load and to clearly indicate how learning in the BGE supported transition to the senior phase qualifications. Further guidance was required on the relationship between the unit and course assessments, including approaches to streamline unit assessment and clarify re-assessment requirements. In addition, SQA was asked to clearly signal where the latest version of updated course materials were held so teachers and lecturers could easily locate and work with the correct versions.

Further work was carried out in 2014–15 on the unit assessment support packs and course materials to highlight opportunities for combined assessment, clarify the national standards, and reduce the assessment load.

Ongoing research

Over sessions 2015–16 and 2016–17 SQA carried out fieldwork with schools and colleges to identify their perceptions of the new National Courses (SQA, 2016, 2017).

Interviews with teachers and lecturers and students were undertaken to identify key issues around transition from the BGE to the senior phase, assessment, personalisation and choice, and documentation. Teachers and lecturers identified that National 4 students believed they were not as capable as their National 5 counterparts, particularly where both levels were taught in the same classroom. This was compounded by the fact that they were not permitted study leave and found

themselves with very little to focus on during the study leave period. Teachers and lecturers also expressed concern about the volume of unit assessment required during bi-level delivery and the jump from National 4 to National 5 and Higher in terms of standard. They also highlighted a need for stability and that the constant stream of changing documents were not allowing them to bed in teaching practice, and that the documentation generally was excessive and repetitive.

However, many of the learners interviewed were positive about National 4, expressing the view that a qualification that did not have an exam at the end relieved the pressure, particularly when they were studying for National 5 examinations.

Cut-off scores

To further support bi-level delivery and to reduce teacher and lecturer assessment load, SQA introduced thresholds, cut-off scores or both to National 4 and 5 units in early 2016. The intention was to outline the volume of key evidence that was required to meet the assessment standards within units. The unintended consequence of this, in relation to the CfE values, principles and purposes, was to atomise assessment, with a tighter focus on what candidates had to do to achieve a pass at unit level — in effect this was a return to assessment leading learning and teaching.

During this period concerns were still being raised around the transition from the BGE into the senior phase. In 2016, Education Scotland released its CfE benchmarks that sought to clarify the standards at each curriculum level. The intention was that the benchmarks would further support teachers' and lecturers' understanding of the national standard within and between curriculum levels. These benchmarks were introduced four years after the initial implementation of National 4 and 5 courses. Given that the fourth level curriculum was designed to align with National 4 and 5 as a key transition point from the BGE to the senior phase, it was important that this alignment was retained. However, SQA's involvement in the design and content of the curriculum level 4 benchmarks varied from subject to subject. The unintended consequence of this was that some National 4 courses no longer provided a smooth transition from the BGE to the senior phase as the standards were no longer aligned.

This had a further unintended consequence for some National Courses because adjusting National 4 and National 5 to meet the curriculum level 4 benchmarks meant

adjusting Higher and Advanced Higher for purposes of progression. This led to a series of multi-level reviews, some of which are still ongoing.

Vocational provision

It took some time for partnerships with colleges or other providers to develop in support of vocational provision. This aspect of provision was given much greater prominence through the implementation of the Scottish Government's youth employment strategy: *Developing the Young Workforce* (DYW). This seven-year strategy, begun in 2014, built on the CfE entitlements for young people as set out in *Building the Curriculum 4: skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work*. A significant enabler of this strategy was the extensive suite of National Progression Awards developed by SQA to provide awards at SCQF levels 4, 5 and 6 that had a vocational bearing. There are around 190 such courses in the SQA catalogue, constructed around National Certificate vocational units and covering topics that are highly relevant to career opportunities — such as cybersecurity, health and social care, animal care, accounting and hospitality.

Despite this heightened vocational offering, presentation strategies in 2014–15 identified that candidates, for the most part, were being entered for both National 5 and the National 4 Added Value Unit as the default position, and that vocational provision was not widely offered. However, with widening access to school and college partnerships by 2017, the proportion of school leavers obtaining one or more vocational qualifications at SCQF level 5 or above increased from a base of 7.3% in 2014 to 14.8% in 2018. This highlights that this system change, in terms of partnership working between schools and colleges, provided schools with more confidence to offer a wider variety of courses to better suit the needs of young people, rather than offering National 4 and 5 as a matter of course.

Conclusion

In the first two years of implementation, SQA undertook a significant amount of work to support practitioner understanding of the National 4 and 5 courses. Calls for greater prescription, further exemplification and assessment support were met through engagement events with practitioners, partnership working with key stakeholder bodies and extensive communication. However, issues concerning presentation strategies and teacher and lecturer workload persisted during the implementation of Higher and Advanced Higher.

Overall, the implementation of the new National 4 and 5 qualifications highlighted the scale and complexity of system-wide educational reform. While a number of unintended consequences emerged during the early years — particularly in relation to workload, assessment approaches and progression pathways — the period was also characterised by significant responsiveness and collaboration across the system. These experiences will provide important insight that can help to shape future reform of qualifications, ensuring that changes are better aligned to the needs of learners, teachers and lecturers, while supporting greater coherence across Scotland's education and assessment system.

Grading in SCQF levels 4 and 5 qualifications

This section outlines grading models in current and legacy national qualifications at SCQF levels 4 and 5.

Standard Grade: 1984–2013

Standard Grade courses were structured around 'elements', which were broad areas of skills or knowledge within a subject. Examples included Reading, Writing and Talking in English, and Number, Algebra, Shape and Statistics in Mathematics. 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 and General, or General and Credit. Standard Grade General and Credit were benchmarked on the SCQF at level 4 and level 5, respectively.

Learners' overall grades were derived from a weighted mean of the grades from the assessable elements and the examination grade. 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.

The Standard Grade system ensured that learners were not limited to attaining a grading at one level, as they were offered the opportunity to demonstrate maximum attainment at various points in the course and using various methods of assessment. This is described in practice as outcome-based differentiation. Providing grading for all elements of the course ensured that all aspects were valued (SQA, 2021b).

Standard Grade was generally popular with learners, parents and practitioners because the tiered system allowed learners to aspire to higher grades.

Higher Still Intermediate 1 and 2: 1999–2014

Intermediate 1 and 2 qualifications 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.

Units were assessed as pass or fail and could be taken as component parts of a course or certificated separately. External assessment provided the basis for grading attainment at A–C through an external examination and coursework.

After a period of consultation, grade D was introduced in 2004, replacing the previous fallback arrangement of grade A at the NQ level below (see *recognising positive achievement* section below for more detail on this). It was felt that this reflected candidates' performance more accurately by recording the actual achievement at the level of the NQ course undertaken. Candidates who achieved a result of band 7 (45–49%) in the course assessment were awarded a grade D.

Curriculum for Excellence National 4: 2014–present

National 4 courses are composed of internally assessed, ungraded units. Learners are required to pass all component units as well as an Added Value Unit that is designed to assess the breadth, challenge and application of learning across the course. The Added Value Unit was intended to provide learners with an opportunity to demonstrate the integration and application of knowledge, skills and understanding developed throughout the course in a more holistic way than individual units allowed. Approaches vary by subject but could include practical activities, performances, assignments, investigations or projects completed under varying levels of supervision and control. Units can be certificated separately, reflecting the modular structure underpinning CfE National Qualifications.

Concerns over grading of National 4 courses include the lack of differentiation for National 4 learners and a perceived lack of credibility compared with qualifications which include an externally assessed and graded component. Questions were also raised around the consistency and manageability of internal assessment arrangements and the extent to which the unit-based structure supported progression and recognition of attainment.

Curriculum for Excellence National 5: 2014–17

CfE National Courses at National 5 also followed the unit-based structure set out in SQA's 2014 design principles. Courses were made up of internally assessed, ungraded units combined with an external course assessment designed to assess added value across the course as a whole. Learners were required to achieve all mandatory units to complete the full course, although units could also be certificated independently. At National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher, the overall course award was graded A–D on the basis of the external assessment component, which could include examinations, performances, portfolios or practical activities depending on the subject area.

National 5 courses were changed in 2017, when units were removed as part of SQA's Revised National Qualifications strategy (RNQ). The grading model for RNQ courses is now based on an externally assessed question paper or coursework, or both, with some exceptions (for example, subjects with Internally-Assessed Course Components such as ESOL). Course assessment for each subject is graded A–D, with banding, determined by performance in the course assessment.

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, 2021b).

Basing most final subject grades on candidate performance on endpoint summative course assessments has led to concerns over the 'high-stakes' nature of current National course assessments. This has been explored in depth in a number of high-profile reports (OECD 2021, Muir, 2022, IRQA, 2024).

Recognising positive achievement in senior-phase Scottish qualifications — a historical overview

Over the years there have been a number of reviews undertaken by SQA focusing on fallback, recognising positive achievement and compensatory awards. This section outlines previous iterations of these mechanisms in senior-phase National Courses, how these operated, as well as the selected outputs of previous reviews.

Standard Grade

The tiered system at Standard Grade, as a basis for outcome-based differentiation, required candidates to sit two external assessments at two levels, either Credit and General or General and Foundation, which provided the opportunity for candidates to be recognised for their achievement at the highest level, based on their performance.

Standard Grade allowed learners to aspire to achieve higher grades through the tiered system. However, allowing all candidates to sit papers at two levels to allow the best grade achievable had significant cost implications, was overly complex in relation to examination timetabling, and was highly resource intensive.

Higher Still

With the introduction of the Higher Still Courses (Intermediate 1, Intermediate 2, Higher and Advanced Higher), a fallback award was introduced to take account of, and recognise, the work achieved by candidates throughout courses. A fallback award of grade C at the course level below was awarded to candidates who had achieved a 'near miss' (categorised as a candidate who had successfully completed all internal assessments and scored between 45%–49% in the external assessment). For a fallback award to be made, the course had to be available at both levels (SQA, 2012).

Following a consultation on fallback awards for 2001, the level of the fallback award was changed to grade A at the level of the course below.

A review of the fallback awards was carried out in 2002, and the following is a summary of the main issues identified at that time:

- Subject hierarchies / levels — inconsistency when there was no course at the level below. A significant number of Intermediate 2 courses were in this category.
- Validity of grade A for fallback award — concerns were expressed about whether a candidate achieving a ‘near miss’ at one level demonstrates a performance that meets the requirements of the grade descriptions for A at the level below. A number of sectors, including universities and employers, raised concerns over the value of grade A fallback awards.
- Recognition for unit credits — the fallback award was seen to undermine efforts to gain proper recognition for units.
- Grade descriptions — grade descriptions at the level below were not designed to take into account performances in units and examinations at the level below.

After a period of consultation, grade D was introduced in 2004, replacing the fallback arrangement of grade A at the NQ level below. grade D was described as recognising achievement against the majority of grade descriptions for the level of the course, indicating that the candidate has undertaken that level of course and external assessment, achieved all the National Units for the course, and gained a band 7 in the external assessment (SQA, 2014). See below for more information on the status of grade D.

Intermediate 1 — Access 3

Where course hierarchies permitted, candidates were automatically awarded an Access 3 course if they failed the external assessment of the corresponding course at Intermediate 1 but passed all the internally assessed units at Intermediate 1 and attained a result of 8 or 9 for the Intermediate 1 external assessment.

Curriculum for Excellence

Awarding of units and recognising positive achievement

National 4 and 5 unitised courses were implemented for first certification in 2014. Where learners achieved all of the required units in a National 5 course, they received recognition for this on their Scottish Qualifications Certificate.

If a candidate received a band 8 or 9 (No Award) in the National 5 course assessment, they could achieve a National 4 course award as part of August certification, as long as the following requirements were met:

- there was a hierarchical or corresponding course at National 4
- they had passed all the required internally assessed units in the National 5 course
- they had passed the National 4 Added Value Unit
- they had passed a Literacy or Numeracy Unit — this was an additional condition that applied to English, Gàidhlig and Mathematics Courses only (not Lifeskills Mathematics)

At National 4, learners who achieved all the units except the Added Value Unit were awarded the course award at National 3, if the units achieved at SCQF level 4 were hierarchical with the course units at SCQF level 3.

The recognising positive achievement mechanism allowed candidates who were unsuccessful in their National 5 course assessment, but who passed a combination of SCQF level 5 freestanding units, and the National 4 Added Value Unit, to automatically achieve the National 4 course.

However, this mechanism led to an increased assessment burden, with a significant number of learners undertaking both the National 5 courses and the National 4 Added Value Unit to ensure fallback. This indicated confusion regarding the purpose of the National 4 Added Value Unit and perceptions of the National 4 qualification as representing a compensatory award for a failed National 5 attempt (SQA, 2021a).

Revised National Qualifications

In 2017 grade D was extended at National 5, from 45–49% to a notional 40–49%. This was to recognise the achievement of a wider group of candidates at SCQF level 5. grade D was also extended from 45–49% to 40–49% as part of the revisions to Higher and was extended for Advanced Higher from session 2019–20.

This 10% range brought a grade D award into line with the ranges for grades B and C. This move was intended to ensure that young people who do not achieve at the level predicted in the course assessment receive credit for their achievement at the SCQF level of the qualification for which they were entered (ANQG, 2017).

Historically, there was evidence to suggest that since its introduction, grade D was not highly valued in the sector, with reports that some centres requested that candidates were certificated for a National 4 award, rather than a National 5 at grade D (SQA, 2014).

Recognising Positive Achievement — the automatic fallback from National 5 to National 4 — ended from session 2019–20 due to the removal of units from courses at National 5. Candidates who were unsuccessful in their National 5 course assessment, but who passed a combination of SCQF level 5 freestanding units, and the National 4 Added Value Unit, would no longer automatically achieve the National 4 course.

The removal of recognising positive achievement, or ‘fallback’, has contributed to teacher workload associated with over-assessment and over-presentation, particularly of borderline candidates who are being entered for all of the units, including the Added Value Unit at National 4 as well as the National 5 course assessment (SQA, 2021a). The number of dual entries for National 4 and National 5 year-on-year is significant; in 2024, dual entries were 30,085 or 9.2% of entries at National 5.

Presentation of candidates over SCQF levels

Dual entry in National 4 and National 5

With the removal of recognising positive achievement (fallback) as part of the Revision of National Qualifications (RNQ), dual entries for National 4 and National 5 would not be routinely expected in the presentation of candidates. However, dual entries have generally increased since 2019. The table below shows the dual entries figures from 2019 to 2024 for the full National 5 cohort (though note the increase in the size of the cohort when comparing years, and the effect of different awarding conditions during the Covid pandemic).

Level	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Dual Entry	17,075	10,270	10,310	21,585	31,340	30,085
Single Entry	271,485	290,415	287,830	288,680	290,045	297,890

Total Entries	288,560	300,685	298,135	310,265	321,385	327,975
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Table from SQA Attainment Reporting Series 2024: Dual Entry Patterns (SQA, 2024a)

For a historical picture of National 4 and National 5 dual entry in a single subject (Mathematics) since 2014, see the following graph. Please note the different awarding conditions in 2020 and 2021 due to the Covid pandemic.

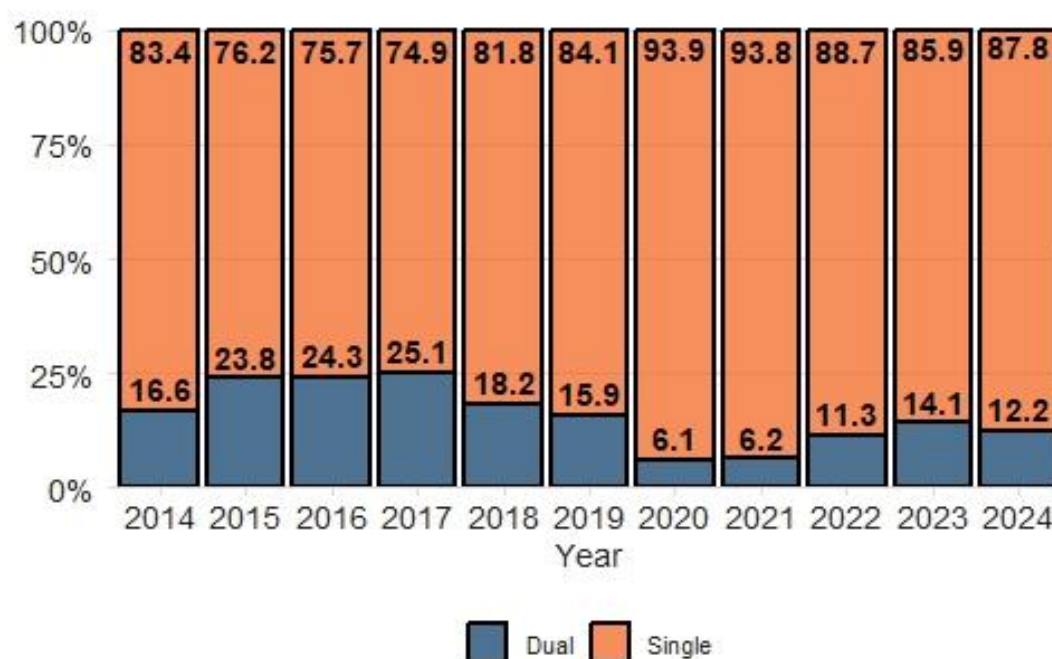


Figure from: [SQA \(2024b\) Evaluation of the 2023 Approach to National Qualifications Assessment: Performance in National 5 Mathematics](#)

Entries at SCQF levels 3, 4 and 5

Across time, during the changes in qualifications from Standard Grade through Higher Still and on to Nationals, there has also been a notable shift in school-based entries at SCQF levels 3, 4 and 5. Note that factors external to the qualifications themselves, such as the Scottish Government's Insight benchmarking tool, may have had an effect on presentation patterns at different SCQF levels.

The figure below shows entries from local authority school-based centres between 2009 and 2023 specifically for: Standard Grade (Foundation = SCQF 3, General = SCQF 4, Credit = SCQF 5); Higher Still Access 3 (SCQF 3), Intermediate 1 (SCQF 4) and Intermediate 2 (SCQF 5); National 3, 4 and 5 (SCQF level as course title).

The coloured bars show the percentage (y-axis) of the qualifications above at each SCQF level for each year shown (x-axis).

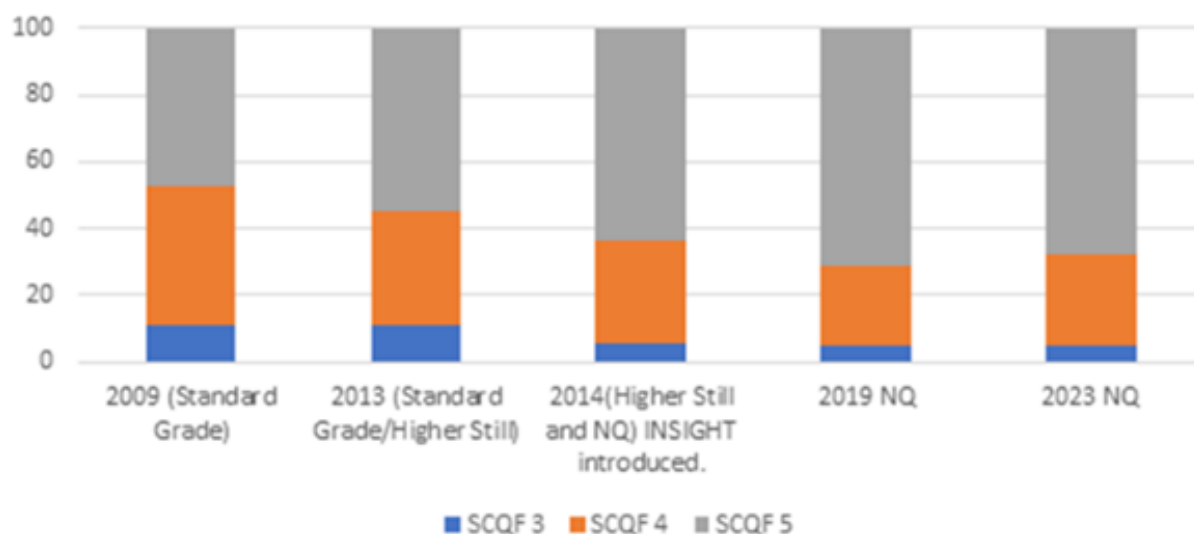


Figure from: SQA (2024c) The Insight Benchmarking Tool: Impact on SQA Course Choices in Local Authority School-based Centres.

Progression

Progression is one of the key aspects of qualification design. It is linked directly with the purposes of qualifications — SQA’s Design Principles for all National Courses stipulate a requirement for progression opportunities to be an intrinsic aspect of the qualification design and development process. Each course at each level should provide as effective a bridge as possible between the course at the level below and the course at the level above, as a hierarchy. National Courses are also marketable qualifications for progression into further study, training and employment.

Recent reports in Scottish education have raised concerns over progression in the Curriculum for Excellence, with the Muir review (2022) stating that only 22% of respondents to a public consultation thought that Curriculum for Excellence provides a coherent progression in the journey of learners (3–18 and beyond) that gives them the best possible educational experience and enables them to realise their ambitions.

More specifically, the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment highlighted concerns about ‘progression between broad general education and the senior phase, progression within the senior phase and the extent to which there was clear progression within subjects’ (2024).

This section will focus on reported issues with progression specifically related to National 4 and National 5, including:

- Progression from BGE into National 4 and National 5
- Progression between course levels: National 4 into National 5, and National 5 into Higher
- Progression from National 4 and National 5 into further study (including vocational provision), training and employment

Progression and purpose

The design of National 4 — featuring non-graded, minimum-competence units that are internally assessed on a pass or fail — was intended to support the following purposes of the qualification:

- progression from the broad general education for learners who were still working at Level 4 when they enter the senior phase while preparing them for further study at National 5, SCQF level 4 or 5, National Certificates (NCs) and National Progression Awards (NPAs)
- progression from National 3
- an exit-point qualification providing a gateway into college or training

National 5 courses use different aspects of qualification design, including mainly external assessment (through coursework and examinations), and A–D grading to support similar purposes:

- progression from the broad general education for learners who are secure at curriculum level 4
- progression from National 4
- preparing learners for further study at Higher, SCQF level 5 or 6, NCs, NPAs
- an exit-point qualification providing a gateway into college, university, training or employment

However, feedback from various stakeholders raises doubts over the extent to which National 4 and National 5 adequately provide such progression and meet their intended purposes.

Issues with progression from BGE into National 4 and National 5

In CfE, the curriculum is divided into two phases: the broad general education (from early learning and childcare into S3) and the senior phase (from S4–S6). Each curriculum area is currently planned using experiences and outcomes, which are a set of statements about children's learning and progression in each curriculum area. Using these statements, benchmarks set out lines of progression from Early to Fourth Levels to clarify what learners need to know and be able to do to progress through the levels (OECD, 2021).

Level 4 of the broad general education, which covers S1–S3, should prepare students for the senior phase by focusing on the development of a broad range of skills and knowledge across different subjects.

National 4 courses are broadly equivalent in demand to curriculum level 4, but are more specific to allow for the study of discrete subjects. There have been reported issues with the relationship between the BGE and entry into the senior phase at National 4, as referenced above in the implementation of National 4 and 5 section.

Further issues have been identified in relation to the progression from curriculum level 4 to National 5. According to Education Scotland's *Building the Curriculum 5*, 'young people should be secure in the relevant aspects of CfE Fourth level if they are to follow a course leading to N5 or another learner pathway in S4 at SCQF level 5' (2011). However, various reports have stated that there is a misalignment in the level of demand between fourth level curriculum benchmarks at the end of the BGE and National 5, and that this is particularly pronounced in some subjects (OECD, 2021, SQA 2017, SQA, 2022, Priestley, 2022). According to Priestley, many young people felt that the BGE did not adequately prepare them for the demands of courses in the senior phase.

There are also concerns over the differing assessment methods used between fourth level and National 5. The internal, formative assessment methods used in BGE differ significantly from the external, summative nature of assessment methods used at National 5, and this is proving overly challenging for some learners.

Issues with progression from National 4 to National 5

There are similar concerns over progression between National 4 and National 5, with stakeholders highlighting a lack of articulation between a pass at National 4 and the demands of a National 5 course, which has been in part attributed to the different assessment methods used at these levels.

Current National Courses were developed with content hierarchies to support articulation between the levels. However, at the development stages of National 4 and National 5, there was no requirement to use the same assessment method in the National 4 Added Value Unit and in the course assessment of the equivalent National 5 course. It was recognised that using the same assessment method at each level could provide continuity for learners and practitioners, but also that this could result in too much assessment load for learners at the lower level (SQA, 2017a).

Feedback from various stakeholders suggests that the different assessment methods for each level are problematic for some learners who are unprepared for the demands of summative, question paper assessments at National 5.

Differing grading approaches at each level have reportedly also had an adverse impact on progression. The ungraded minimum-competence unit assessments in National 4 have been reported as being limited in their usefulness in identifying learner strengths and informing next steps. Some practitioners feel that the pass-or-fail model does not allow for a nuanced understanding of learner progression and readiness for further study (SQA, 2017b).

Progression from National 5 into Higher

Progression between National 5 and Higher generally does not seem to be quite as problematic as it is in lower levels. However, feedback from a 2018 SQA consultation with stakeholders highlighted challenges in moving from National 5 to Higher in some subjects. The increased complexity of concepts, as well as the extent of subject vocabularies in subjects like Chemistry, Physics and Mathematics, were raised as specific issues.

Some respondents also stated that for students who achieve a grade C at National 5, progression to Higher was poor, challenging and difficult in some subjects (SQA, 2018).

Progression from National Qualifications to vocational senior-phase provision, employment and training

Feedback on National 4 suggests that it has not successfully provided a smooth progression into National 5. Yet, for the purposes of providing a gateway award for vocational learning, or a progression route to wider senior phase pathways, National 4 seems to work better. Some positive feedback on National 4 highlights the fact that it provides learners, who may have previously found an external exam to be overly challenging, with an opportunity to demonstrate their attainment (Scottish Government, 2018).

Conclusion

The evidence presented throughout this report highlights the complexity involved in designing qualifications at SCQF levels 4 and 5 that successfully balance credibility, progression, inclusion, manageability and recognition of learner achievement.

Across successive generations of Scottish qualifications — from Standard Grade and Higher Still to National 4 and National 5 — recurring tensions can be identified between flexibility and consistency, internal and external assessment, breadth and depth of learning, and the competing demands of progression, certification and accountability. While reforms have often sought to address concerns associated with earlier systems, they have also generated new challenges and unintended consequences.

A number of key themes emerge consistently across the evidence reviewed in this report. These include concerns around progression from the broad general education (BGE) into the senior phase, articulation between National 4 and National 5, the impact of assessment design on learner experience, and the consequences of presentation strategies and dual entry practices for teacher workload and learner outcomes. At the same time, the report identifies aspects of qualification design that have been valued by practitioners and learners, including opportunities for flexible progression pathways, recognition of positive achievement and differentiated approaches to assessment.

The report also illustrates that qualification design cannot be considered in isolation from wider system factors. Curriculum alignment, accountability measures, assessment practices, practitioner understanding, vocational pathways and broader policy priorities all shape how qualifications are experienced in practice.

As discussions continue regarding the future of Scottish qualifications, the historical and contemporary evidence outlined in this report provides an important basis for reflection. Consideration of both the strengths and limitations of legacy and current models will be essential in supporting the development of qualifications that are credible, inclusive and capable of supporting progression for the full range of learners.

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