

Qualifications reform engagement workshops

Early engagement outputs

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Executive summary

Early engagement with educators and learners has identified a number of areas of consensus relating to qualifications reform, alongside clear messages about the changes needed to make the system more flexible, relevant, equitable, and sustainable.

There was strong support for moving away from qualifications that are overly content heavy and reliant on high-stakes, end-of-year assessment. Educators and learners both highlighted the pressure created by large volumes of content and the perceived emphasis on recall rather than understanding. There was support for a wider range of assessment approaches, greater recognition of learning over time, and, where appropriate, more practical and applied assessment.

There was also support for greater modularisation and more flexible qualification structures, provided these remain coherent and meaningful. Educators saw potential benefits around flexibility, progression, and learner access, but wanted greater clarity about how modules would contribute to overall qualifications and how assessment and workload would be managed.

Whether discussing internal assessment, digital assessment, or modularisation, participants stressed the importance of fairness, consistency, credibility, and national standards. A consistent message was that flexibility must nevertheless be accompanied by strong quality assurance.

Equity and accessibility emerged as important considerations throughout the engagement. Participants highlighted differences in learner circumstances, access to resources, geography, school and college capacity, and the ability to cope with particular assessment models.

Taken together, the early engagement outputs suggest that stakeholders see reform as an opportunity to reduce unnecessary complexity and assessment burden, increase flexibility and relevance, strengthen vocational pathways, and recognise achievement more holistically. However, there is an equally strong expectation that any new model should maintain credible national standards, be equitable and accessible, and work in the practical realities of schools and colleges.

Context

Over the next few years, we will [review and reform](#) our qualifications to make sure they fit in a modern, flourishing Scotland. Our aim is to make sure that our qualifications continue to meet the needs of learners, centres, employers and wider society — now and in the future.

This is a long-term programme of work. It involves review of our vocational and technical qualification types alongside reform of our National Courses. We'll engage throughout the whole programme — working with partners, educators, employers, learners, parents and carers to ensure our reformed qualifications provide clearer, more flexible progression pathways for all learners.

Early engagement events throughout the spring captured views from learners and educators. These outputs will help to shape our intensive engagement activities which will begin in September 2026.

This report details the findings from two strands of early engagement activity. The findings provide valuable insight into the views and experiences of those who participated and will help to inform the next stage of qualifications reform engagement activity. However, this was exploratory engagement rather than representative research, and participants were not necessarily representative of the wider learner, educator or stakeholder population. The findings are therefore indicative rather than definitive. They will be used to shape further, more detailed engagement with a broader range of participants as the reform programme develops.

Educator engagement

Context

Throughout spring 2026, our School Partnership Team engaged extensively with stakeholders, key partners, and educators. This engagement included workshops at several schools and a number of national events. The key findings from this engagement are set out below.

Findings

Modularisation

Participants were given a draft definition of modularisation aimed at learners:

Modularisation means constructing qualifications from smaller components called modules.

Each module focuses on specific outcomes, like a topic or set of skills, and a module can often be taught and assessed on its own. When you complete all the required modules, you finish the full course or qualification. Modules can be assessed internally by your teacher or externally by Qualifications Scotland.

This approach makes learning more manageable and flexible and allows you to build up achievement towards your final qualification.

Participants viewed modularisation very positively, with almost all of them indicating that the definition fully or mostly met their expectations. Feedback suggests strong support for the principle of breaking qualifications into smaller, manageable components that can contribute towards an overall award.

Participants saw potential benefits in terms of flexibility, learner access, and progression, but sought greater clarity around how modules would combine to form qualifications.

They discussed whether modules could have standalone value, how progression between levels would be recognised, and how modularisation differs from existing unit-based approaches. They also raised concerns about assessment frequency, teacher workload and the risk of increasing focus on assessment at the expense of broader learning.

Overall, participants were supportive of the concept of modularisation but wanted more detail on qualification structures, assessment arrangements, and practical implementation such as a national bank of assessment resources.

Rebalancing methods of assessment

Participants were provided with a draft definition of rebalancing methods of assessment:

Rebalancing assessment in a summative context means changing how assessments are weighted, designed, and varied so they give a fairer and more complete picture of what students have learned — rather than depending too much on just one type, like a final exam or practical assessment.

This could include:

- 1. Using a wider range of assessments - Including different types of tasks, such as projects, portfolios, performances, or presentations, as well as written tests or digital assessment based on what balance is appropriate for the subject and how national standards should be maintained.*
- 2. Changing how much the balance of each assessment counts - Adjusting the percentage each assessment contributes to the final grade (for example, final exam = 30%, coursework project = 50%, presentation = 20%).*
- 3. Balancing internal and external assessments - Reviewing how much of the assessment is done by the school or teacher (internal) versus by Qualifications Scotland (external), based on what balance is appropriate for the subject.*
- 4. Changing the rules around supervision, resources and time - Making changes to the conditions that learners are assessed in (for example, bringing a resource sheet into an exam or allowing more time for an assessment).*

Rebalancing methods of assessment received strong support, with almost all participants reporting that the definition fully or mostly met their expectations.

Participants particularly welcomed the opportunity for learners to demonstrate achievement through a wider range of assessment approaches, recognising the potential benefits for inclusion, accessibility and learner confidence, especially for those who may struggle with high-stake, end-of-year exams.

Key concerns focused on maintaining consistency, fairness, and credibility across qualification subjects and levels, as well as ensuring appropriate safeguards around authenticity, artificial intelligence (AI) use, remote learning and external assistance. Participants also highlighted the importance of maintaining challenge and rigour, while seeking greater clarity on the balance

between internal and external assessment and the role of digital assessment within future models.

Overall, the feedback demonstrates broad support for a more balanced assessment system, accompanied by a strong expectation that robust quality assurance and clear communication will underpin its implementation.

Qualifications size and structure

The majority of participant feedback indicates that some National 5 qualifications are too large in content and challenging to deliver within available time. While having defined learning hours is broadly accepted in principle, there is strong evidence that delivery in practice often does not align, particularly within one-year models. As a result, many centres have adapted by extending delivery of courses over 18 months to two years, enabling better curriculum coverage, greater subject choice, and improved preparation for progression to Higher.

Concerns relate less to the number of hours and more to content volume, assessment demands, and course structure. In subjects such as Sciences, Social Subjects and Technical Subjects, content is widely described as extensive and difficult to deliver in depth, contributing to a culture of 'teaching to the exam'. This limits opportunities for deeper learning, creativity and practical application, while increasing learner stress and workload.

Participants also found the expectation of self-directed learning hours unrealistic, unmeasurable and inequitable, particularly for learners in S4. This raises concerns for the negative impact this expectation has on learner wellbeing, especially for those with additional support needs. Participants highlighted concerns around equity, noting that not all learners have the same resources or circumstances to complete these requirements. There is a clear call from almost all participants to review or remove this aspect of qualification design.

There is a strong consensus that qualification size should be reconsidered holistically, taking into account teaching time, assessment load and delivery models. There is a clear view that content and assessment should be reduced to enable a one-year delivery. Two-year models are seen as supporting greater depth, improved progression and increased equity, particularly for learners requiring more time. Some schools, particularly smaller, more rural schools, require qualifications in S4, S5 and S6, to be the same size for timetabling purposes.

Participants also identified assessment approaches as a key issue, viewing current models as overly reliant on a high-stake, end-of-year exam, with inconsistencies across subjects. Some

assessments, particularly assignments, are viewed as memory-driven, workload-intensive, and not reflective of learners' abilities.

Most participants support a more balanced model of assessment, combining exams with other assessment approaches. However, there is a concern that expanding internal assessment would lead to increased workload or reduced confidence in standards. A minority of participants suggested that an online platform of assessments provided by Qualifications Scotland would support this (similar to the Scottish National Standardised Assessments model). Also, any future model must ensure that assessment weighting recognises knowledge, skills and application, while remaining manageable and credible.

A strongly consistent theme across all engagement is the need to re-introduce Recognition of Positive Achievement (RPA) and fallback. Current arrangements, including dual presentation, are widely viewed as time consuming, inefficient and not fully effective in supporting progression. Additionally, dual presentation, late level change and late entry for National Progression Awards (NPAs) increase learner and teacher workload and impact negatively on learner wellbeing. There is support for integrated models, where a range of attainment is recognised within a single qualification. Participants highlighted the strengths of previous models, particularly their ability to recognise achievement and promote equity across levels, notably the Standard Grade model.

Participants also raised concerns about the credibility and recognition of National 4 qualifications, alongside a lack of alignment between National 4 and National 5 content and assessment, which can create challenges for progression, multi-level teaching and learner pathways.

Modularisation is also identified as a potential area for reform. While previous unit-based approaches were associated with fragmentation and over-assessment, there is support for modernised modular models, where components contribute meaningfully to final certification and support progression. Such models could reduce reliance on single high-stake exams and enable greater flexibility, provided they remain coherent, cumulative and aligned to overall outcomes.

Across all themes, participants emphasised the need for a system that is manageable, equitable and coherent, with reduced complexity and a stronger alignment between policy expectations and classroom reality.

Digital assessment

Most participants support increasing the use of digital assessment across the qualifications system, with many seeing it as necessary and positive. Stakeholders highlighted benefits around accessibility, inclusion, flexibility and assessment innovation. However, significant concerns remain regarding current infrastructure, equity of access, security, authenticity of learner work and the impact of AI. There was broad agreement that successful implementation would require a secure national platform, clear guidance, investment in digital infrastructure and a balanced approach that recognises that digital assessment may not be suitable for all subjects or learners.

Higher National and Vocational Qualification (HNVQ)

Most of the feedback suggests that the growing use of HNVQs, NPAs, Awards and other vocational qualifications is being driven by a desire to provide more flexible, engaging and relevant pathways for learners. Schools value the opportunities these qualifications create for widening choice, supporting progression, improving engagement and recognising achievement beyond traditional academic routes. However, concerns remain around the complexity of the qualifications landscape, parity of esteem with National Qualifications, the drive to improve attainment measures, and recognition by employers, colleges and universities.

Learner engagement

Context

Throughout June 2026, our Learner and Parent Engagement Team visited five secondary schools to conduct workshops with learners relating to qualification reform.

The workshop session was designed to explore participants' views on qualifications reform, wider awareness and perceptions of National Qualifications, and issues including learners' access to these qualifications, as well as the benefits and challenges of delivery and assessment.

Several key themes emerged, including time pressure, making assessment more meaningful, quality assurance, opportunities beyond National Qualifications, and approaches to learner-centred design of future qualifications.

Findings

National Qualifications

When asked to comment on what they liked or disliked about their courses, learners questioned whether the current balance of learning across courses is right. However, they were not asking for 'easier' courses — many acknowledged that they need to be challenged.

Across several subjects, particularly Higher History, Modern Studies, Biology, Physics, English and Maths, learners described a cycle where large amounts of content have to be covered quickly, particularly towards the end of the year. This means learning starts to feel rushed and assessment feel like a memory exercise rather than a demonstration of true understanding.

Learners commented on fairness in terms of workload across subjects, fairness between peers who learn differently, fairness for those who do not perform well under exam pressure, and fairness between schools where some courses are delivered over different timescales.

Some learners also wanted more assessment throughout the year, as many felt that one final (high stakes) assessment is unfair and carries too much weight. The language used repeatedly was about having 'a bad day', 'blanking', or being judged on memory rather than knowledge.

Finally, there was a clear distinction between subjects where learners feel the assessment reflects the skills being developed, and subjects where they think it does not. Physical Education, Art, Photography and other practical subjects came up repeatedly, with learners

questioning why written components carry as much weight as practical performance in these subject areas.

1. *Do you have enough, too much, or too little time throughout the year to complete your coursework and assessments for your qualification?*

Some learners described having enough time, particularly in subjects such as Geography, Music, Maths, Modern Studies and some experiences of English and History. Others described exactly the opposite experience in the same subjects. Delivery and timetabling may be impacting some learners' experiences.

Even those learners who felt there was technically enough time nonetheless suggested pressure building towards the end of the year. Several learners mentioned content being rushed, final units being squeezed in, or coursework, assignments, prelims and assessments all colliding in the same period.

Learners mentioned History, Art and Photography where they experience time pressures with topics feeling rushed, particularly the final units. Learners talked about needing time to generate ideas, develop creative work and complete portfolios, with some describing the pressure as creating a 'creative block'. Higher Maths, Biology, Physics and Human Biology were also frequently described as rushed and content heavy.

Learners worried about assignments and assessment becoming concentrated into the same few months. There was a large amount of anxiety around deadlines and timing.

2. *What do you think about the content of the course?*

One of the strongest themes to emerge from the research is that across many subjects, learners have to remember large amounts of information that does not appear in the final assessment or feels unlikely to be useful beyond the course. The comments regarding History and Modern Studies stand out, with learners commenting on the essays they need to memorise and the material they need to prepare which may not be required. Learners felt exams assess memory rather than understanding. This was noted across multiple subjects.

History attracted more comments than almost any other subject. Learners generally enjoy the subject and recognise its value, but many believed the content load is excessive and too much is assessed through memorising content for essays.

3. *Do you think that assessments you do throughout the school year should count more toward your qualification than they do now? What would your ideal balance look like (how often would you be assessed and what would those assessments look like)?*

The vast majority of learner participants support assessments throughout the year contributing in some way to final grades. Learners expressed worry about stress, anxiety, panic and blanking during exams. Many believed a year of work should carry more weight than one end-of-year assessment. Several participants suggested that ongoing assessments provide evidence of growth, effort and developing understanding while others suggested that end-of-year assessments reward those with good recall. Learners viewed ongoing assessment as a better measure of actual understanding.

Feedback from learners suggested that unit assessments, assessments once a term, and a weighting split between coursework and final, end-of-year assessment are their preferred options. Only a minority of learners pushed back against greater use of ongoing assessment. Their concerns were consistency and fairness. Some felt final exams remain the fairest way to ensure everyone is assessed to the same standard.

4. *What would you change about your course?*

Learners mentioned reducing excessive course content, relying less on memorisation, increasing the value of coursework towards the final qualification, and making assessments a more meaningful reflection of skills and knowledge.

Learners asked for qualifications that recognise performance over time, place greater value on coursework and practical skills, and give them more opportunities to demonstrate understanding rather than simply recalling information under pressure.

Quality assurance

1. *How do you feel about your teachers marking assessments that count towards your qualification rather than Qualifications Scotland marking them? What are the positives and negatives?*

Much of the feedback in this section centred around the relationship between teacher and learner. Several learners said teachers would be better placed to interpret handwriting, understand what they were trying to say, and provide support afterwards because they know the learner's strengths and weaknesses already. Many learners also mentioned faster

turnaround, faster feedback, and faster understanding of their results. Learners clearly see value in not just getting a mark but understanding the reason behind it.

However, workshop feedback also highlighted potential teacher bias, both positive and negative, leading to unfair marking. Learners felt that relying heavily on teacher judgement means fairness might be questioned. Consistency was also highlighted as an important theme with learners noting anxiety around differing standards between both schools and individual teachers. Some learners appeared more worried about this than about bias.

A number of learners mentioned their own experiences where class tests, prelims or assessments had to be remarked because marks had been missed or incorrectly awarded. While learners trust teachers because they know the course and know the learner, learners also noted instances of human error such as mistakes with marking.

Several learners also distinguished between internal assessment and external, end-of-year assessments. As teachers spend most of their time teaching, rather than marking against national standards, learners seem to have a higher level of trust and confidence in Qualifications Scotland marking.

Although many learners liked the idea of teacher involvement in setting and marking assessments, they were also keen to see some form of external quality assurance and input from Qualifications Scotland to create consistency, reduce potential bias and provide credibility to qualifications.

Learners valued the fact that teachers are familiar with their work and can provide meaningful feedback. However, there was an equally strong belief that qualifications have to be seen as fair, consistent and independent. They wanted to see a balance between both approaches.

Wider offering in schools

- 1. Do you feel any qualifications that are not National 5, Higher, Advanced Higher, are valued by your school, parents/carers, or by potential employers/colleges?***

Perceived value of qualifications

Learners who participated in the research valued qualifications such as NPAs, Foundation Apprenticeships, First Aid, Sports Leadership and other vocational awards. Many learners talked positively about the practical skills, industry knowledge and real-life experience they gained from these qualifications. Some learners believed they gained more from these types of qualifications than from some traditional Nationals or Highers. However, they felt that these

qualifications are viewed by others as 'less than' traditional qualifications. Learners believed that society in general sees National 5s, Highers and Advanced Highers at the top of the qualifications hierarchy.

Views of stakeholders

A recurring comment from learners was that parents and carers encourage them to follow traditional academic routes. Learners talked about parents and carers viewing alternative qualifications as weaker options compared to traditional qualifications. They also felt parent and carers are unfamiliar with NPAs and many vocational qualifications.

In addition, many learners believed vocational qualifications lose value because they don't always contribute in the same way towards university entry requirements. University continues to be viewed as an important, perhaps the most important, destination even among learners who recognise the value of vocational learning.

Interestingly, schools generally received more positive feedback in the research in terms of valuing vocational learning than parents and carers or universities. Learners talked about schools proactively promoting and supporting learners to consider:

- Foundation Apprenticeships
- NPAs
- Skills-based qualifications
- Wider achievement opportunities

However, learners still thought that some qualifications are viewed as a 'backup option' or something taken by learners who are struggling in more traditional subjects. This perception appeared repeatedly in the research; not everyone agreed with it, but many recognised it exists.

Employability

Learners consistently described vocational and skills-based qualifications as practical, relevant, linked to employment and useful in real life. The First Aid qualification was mentioned several times by learners as a good example of a practical skills-based qualification. Learners can immediately see the value of it. At the same time, they also mentioned that a university or employer will not specifically ask for an NPA in the way they ask about Higher qualifications.

Learners believed in the most part that traditional qualifications carry status and wider achievement qualifications carry more practical value. They did not think employees treat those two types of qualifications equally.

2. *How important is it for your qualification to have a final exam?*

Unlike previous discussions where there was broad agreement around reducing the weight of end-of-year assessments, learners' responses on final exams were mixed. Some learners felt very strongly that a final exam matters, while others would happily remove final exams altogether.

Those in favour of talked about three things that an end-of-year assessment provides:

- **Proof of learning:** Many learners believed a final exam demonstrates their knowledge. For them, an end-of-year assessment is evidence that knowledge has been retained and understood. Some described them as a necessary check that someone has learned all necessary elements of the course they have been studying all year.
- **Preparation for the future:** Other learners in the discussion linked exams directly to university and college. They argued that if higher education relies heavily on formal assessments, school qualifications should help prepare learners for that reality.
- **Motivation:** Some learners felt having an end-of-year assessment gives them something to work towards. The exam creates a deadline, a goal and a reason to keep studying. Without it, some learners worried motivation would drop.

The objections to end-of-year assessment were consistently around them being perceived as memory tests, stressful, unfair and unrepresentative of real ability. The phrase 'one bad day' was used repeatedly in the responses. There was a strong feeling that a single assessment can undo months of effort. Some learners argued that these assessments reward recall rather than understanding. Others believed they disadvantage people who struggle with pressure but understand the subject.

When considered collectively, the responses suggest that participants are not opposed to a final exam but are uneasy about the final exam carrying most of the weight in determining outcomes. Even those learners who supported final exams would like to see more unit assessments, more continuous assessments, and less weight placed on an end-of-year assessment.

3. *How important is it for your qualification to have a grade?*

All learner participants supported graded qualifications. They felt it is important to show the difference between varying levels of performance. There was a strong belief amongst participants that effort should be recognised, achievement should be visible and high performance should be rewarded. Several comments specifically asked how difference in marks would be recorded if one learner scrapes a pass while another scores highly.

Another common theme was progression. Learners recognised that grades matter as they are recognised by universities, colleges, employers and are viewed as creating future opportunities. Even those learners who disliked the pressure associated with achieving the required grades acknowledged their practical value. Learners believed the better the grade, the greater the opportunities.

Learners' enthusiasm for grades was not without reservation, however. Some learners pointed out that grades can increase anxiety, encourage comparison and move the focus from simply learning to competition for an A. However, most participants accepted the pressure because they believe grades serve a useful purpose.

Work experience, college and training provider opportunities

1. Has anyone done any qualifications that are not a National 4/5, Higher or Advanced Higher? If so what and why did you choose it?

Many of the participating learners had engaged with something beyond the traditional National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher pathway. The variety of practical learning qualifications mentioned include Foundation Apprenticeships, Duke of Edinburgh Award, Mentoring programmes and leadership awards.

Learners often chose qualifications connected directly to something they want to do when they leave school such as Film and Media, Hair and Beauty, Creative Thinking, and Business and IT. For many, these qualifications felt more connected to what happens after school than traditional subjects.

Several learners also associated vocational qualifications with flexibility and reduced pressure. The phrase 'no exams' was mentioned several times and was generally used positively when describing practical and vocational qualifications. This was not because these were viewed as the easier option, but because learners felt they can demonstrate what they've learned without the pressure that comes with traditional assessment.

2. What are your initial thoughts when you hear the names of any of the following qualifications: 'Award, Foundation Apprenticeship, National Progression Award, Skills for Work'?

Participating learners clearly recognised the value of practical and vocational qualifications. They talked positively about the skills gained, the experience, the confidence and the relevance to future employment. At the same time, many still saw them as sitting slightly below traditional

qualifications in terms of status. A few comments suggested it could be the names themselves that create this perception. Award, Skills for Work and National Progression Award did not seem to carry the same immediate recognition as a Higher for some learners.

There were a handful of comments where learners openly admitted that they do not really know what a Foundation Apprenticeship or National Progression Award is. It is difficult for a qualification to build status and credibility if learners themselves aren't entirely sure what it involves. These perceptions around vocational pathways come from a lack of understanding rather than negative experiences.

Work experience was the least controversial topic across all four workshops. Whether learners had completed work experience already or were hoping to do so in future, the responses were overwhelmingly positive. Learners consistently described work experience as beneficial, useful and something they'd like more of. They saw it as helping them understand careers, build confidence and make informed choices about their futures.

One of the clearest messages from the research was that learners saw a difference between learning about work and experiencing work. They valued both, but they saw workplace experience as something that cannot really be replicated in a classroom

Similarly, learners viewed college partnerships, training providers and Foundation Apprenticeships positively. They valued the independence, personal responsibility, different teaching approaches and learning environments that feel closer to life after school and all of them would welcome more of these learning experiences.

The small number of learners who had completed Foundation Apprenticeships had positive feedback. They talked about work placements, applying learning in real workplaces, developing confidence, improving digital skills, and learning organisation and time management.

Learner-centred design

- 1. Imagine you were designing a qualification that you could start in school. Which of these statements would you pick or would be more important to you? Explain why.***

Table 1: Preferred features of a future qualification

Theme	Option A		Option B	
Grading	You get a grade when you finish.	93%	You get a 'pass' or 'fail'.	7%
Assessment	It is assessed throughout the year, with no end-point exam.	56%	It has an end-point exam.	44%

Theme	Option A		Option B	
Skills development	You develop skills for the workplace through work experience.	76%	You develop skills for the workplace in school.	24%
Group work	You learn and are assessed through group work.	7%	You learn and are assessed independently.	93%
Equalities	It takes a whole school year.	63%	It takes as long as it takes.	37%
Certification	You get your certificate on results day.	64%	You get your certificate whenever you finish your qualification.	36%
AI	You should be able to use AI in your qualification.	19%	You should not be able to use AI in your qualification.	81%

Learners were asked to choose which option they preferred from Table 1 above, either A or B. Looking across all responses, there are some very clear patterns. On a few themes, learners were almost unanimous. Overall, learners described a qualification model that has a number of consistent features. They wanted qualifications that:

- award grades rather than simple passes or fails
- recognise learning across the year
- include meaningful workplace experiences
- assess individual achievement rather than group achievement
- operate within a clear timeframe
- retain formal certification processes
- place clear limits on the use of AI in assessment

The most conclusive findings were around grading, independent assessment, workplace learning and restrictions on AI use, where preferences were particularly strong. The only area where opinion was genuinely split was assessment, which echoes previous findings and suggests that learners may be open to a range of assessment models they feel are fair and credible.

2. *National Courses like National 4 and 5 are going to be changed over the next few years, and your views will help with that. What are the most important things Qualifications Scotland should think about when designing new National Courses?*

Assessment

More than any other theme, participants focused on qualification assessment when answering this question. Once again, there was much support for assessment being spread throughout the year rather than relying heavily on one final exam. As before, there was a strong sense that one exam cannot fully reflect a learner's understanding or effort. Several learners suggested that assignments should carry greater weight, that every qualification should include some form of coursework, and that previous work and assessment should provide a safety net if an exam goes badly.

Again, a theme that repeated throughout the research was that participants were frustrated by qualifications they believed test memory rather than knowledge. Suggestions such as open-book assessments, limited essay plans, more practical tasks, and greater emphasis on applying knowledge were mentioned as a means of improving current assessment offerings. Learners would like qualifications that reflect what they can do with knowledge rather than what they remember under pressure.

Accessibility

Learners would like to see different teaching and assessment methods that support all learners and learning styles. They mentioned equity of learning provision to cater to those with disabilities, additional support needs, different working paces and difficult home circumstances. Learners viewed accessibility broadly and mentioned wider circumstances that can affect performance and achievement. They believed that qualifications should be designed around the realities of their lives rather than expecting all learners to fit the same model.

Relevant qualifications

Work experience came up again, as it did throughout the vocational learning discussions. Learners valued qualifications that connect directly to careers, workplaces and future opportunities. They also talked positively about courses that are enjoyable, practical and clearly linked to particular jobs or industries.

AI

Interestingly there was resistance to AI use in schools from many learner participants. Concerns focused on reliability, bias and impacts on learning. However, a smaller number of learners suggested AI could have a place for tasks such as finding sources, supporting research or helping with spelling and proofreading. Overall, learners expressed caution, with a distinction between AI supporting learning and AI completing work on behalf of them.

Learner voice

Overwhelmingly, learners wanted to be involved in shaping future qualifications. They suggested surveys, feedback portals, focus groups, and opportunities to review and test proposed assessments before they are introduced. A particularly strong point emerged around involving younger learners in reform work. Several learners mentioned that by the time changes are implemented, older learners may have already left school, so those who will ultimately benefit should have a say.

Future pathways

- 1. What are your plans after leaving school? Are you considering college, university, apprenticeships, or employment? Do you think the qualifications you are doing will help you get there?***

Progression to university

Many participating learners viewed university as the natural next step after school and discussed qualifications largely in terms of helping them achieve this. Learners were aware of the grades they need, the subjects they need and, in some cases, the degree they want to study. They mentioned medicine, engineering, business, economics, teaching, journalism, nursing and law-related pathways when asked for details of future pathways. Learners showed clear understanding that certain careers require relevant qualifications and that subject choices made in school can significantly shape future options.

Learners viewed National Qualifications as a stepping stone rather than an end point. The qualification is important because it allows them to go onto further study. At the same time, they mentioned that the connection between school qualifications and future goals could be stronger. Some would like access to more specialised subjects and others feel their school does not currently offer qualifications that align closely enough with their interests.

Choice

However, not all learners have future goals mapped out; many involved in this research were undecided. Those undecided learners often described choosing a broad range of subjects to keep their options open. Rather than seeing uncertainty as a problem, they viewed qualifications as a way of preserving future opportunities while they worked out where they wanted to go after school.

While some learner participants valued having a broad curriculum to maintain flexibility, others felt constrained by the range of subjects and qualifications available in their school. They wanted access to more specialised courses and pathways that reflected a wider variety of interests and connected more directly to particular careers.

Work experience

Although the focus of this section was future pathways, some learners also mentioned work experience again. There was a suggestion that while qualifications help them gain entry to university (or to a lesser extent employment), work experience helps them understand whether a particular career is right for them. Learners valued experience and, in some cases, experience is seen as the thing that turns an idea into a realistic career choice.

Learner support

One theme that emerged quite strongly towards the end of the responses was a desire for better support around transitions. Several learners suggested schools should do more to help young people understand university applications, job applications, completing CVs, apprenticeships and what happens after school. Some learners suggested dedicated classes focused entirely on preparing for the move into higher education or employment.

In summary, the goal of learners involved in this research was a university place, apprenticeship, career, future opportunity. They understood that qualifications help them move towards those goals, particularly where subject choices align with their career ambitions. However, the discussion also highlighted some gaps around subject availability, work experience opportunities and support with future planning. Importantly, learners wanted more guidance and support to explore potential careers and opportunities for life after school.