

Your Voice Panel Research

The future of Qualifications Scotland

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Introduction

Before SQA's transition to Qualifications Scotland, Research & Evaluation undertook research with the organisation's [Your Voice panels](#) to better understand stakeholder perspectives on SQA, the new organisation, and the changes they felt should be a priority following the transition.

A further aim of this work was to encourage educators, learners, and parents and carers to join the Your Voice panels so the Research & Evaluation Team would have groups of engaged stakeholders to contact with research opportunities.

The three Your Voice panels (educators; learners; and parents or carers) were launched in late-2024 to give stakeholders an opportunity to have a greater voice in decision-making in Qualifications Scotland, support its development, shape services, and make things better for other learners and educators.

This report details the perspectives of Your Voice respondents on the broad changes they felt should be implemented by Qualifications Scotland.

Methodology

This research surveyed the Your Voice panels through a series of short snapshot surveys that were open between 19 March and 22 May 2025.

The initial planned method of research for this project was to roll out six snapshot surveys to the Your Voice panels over three months, with a new survey going out every few weeks. However, after the first survey, there was a steady decline in the participation rate. So, after the third survey, we decided to combine the last three questions into a single survey. Therefore, in total, there were four surveys circulated to the Your Voice panels over approximately two months.

As the final two snapshot surveys clashed with the 2025 exam period, these were not circulated to the learner panel. Table 1 provides an overview of the questions asked, topics covered for each survey and the survey dates. Table 2 provides a breakdown of the respondents per survey.

Table 1: Your Voice Panel Snapshot Survey questions and topics

Survey Number	Questions Asked	Topics Covered	Survey Dates
Survey 1	Qualifications Scotland will replace SQA later this year. What is the one thing you most want to see from the new organisation?	Changes that the new organisation should make	19/03/25 – 26/03/25
Survey 2	Qualifications Scotland will replace SQA later this year. How do you think the new organisation should engage with educators, learners, and parents and carers?	Engagement with stakeholders	31/03/25 – 07/04/25
Survey 3	Qualifications Scotland will replace SQA later this year. As we transition to Qualifications Scotland, what actions can we take to make sure that the organisation is trusted?	Ensuring the trust of stakeholders	23/04/25 – 03/05/25
Survey 4	- What do you think Qualifications Scotland needs to do differently to SQA? - How can Qualifications Scotland be more flexible in meeting your needs? - How can Qualifications Scotland build a stronger relationship with you?	Differences from SQA, flexibility in meeting needs, and building stronger relationships	07/05/25 – 21/05/25

Table 2: Your Voice Panel Snapshot Survey respondent profile

Survey Number	Stakeholders Surveyed	Sample Size	Educators (%)	Learners (%)	Parents and carers (%)
Survey 1	Educators, learners, and parents and carers	700	81%	8%	11%
Survey 2	Educators, learners, and parents and carers	347	82%	4%	14%
Survey 3	Educators and parents and carers	323	87%	-	13%
Survey 4	Educators and parents and carers	295	92%	-	8%

During our initial analysis of data, it became clear that many of the most prominent themes were consistent across the four surveys. Similar issues, priorities and recommendations were raised repeatedly by different stakeholder groups, resulting in considerable overlap between the individual survey findings. Consequently, rather than presenting each survey separately, we analysed the data using a thematic approach. This enabled common themes to be identified and synthesised across all four surveys, reducing unnecessary repetition while providing a more integrated understanding of stakeholder perspectives. Organising the findings thematically also facilitates direct comparison between stakeholder groups, highlighting both areas of consensus and points of divergence, and provides a clearer evidence base to inform the development of Qualifications Scotland.

Limitations

One of the primary limitations of this research is the representativeness of the sample. It is possible that those individuals who have chosen to take part may not be representative of the views of all stakeholders. Therefore, the results of the research may not be entirely generalisable.

Another limitation of this research is that learners were not contacted for the third and fourth iterations of the survey because of the 2025 National Qualifications examination period. This means that the learner perspective is missing from the analysis of those surveys.

Ethics

This research was approved by SQA's ethical review process and follows SQA's Code of Research Practice.

Thematic Analysis

Assessment

Educators

A number of respondents indicated that they wished to see changes made to the current models of assessment following SQA's transition to Qualifications Scotland. However, there was not a clear consensus over the changes that educators wished to see. While some asserted that they wanted to see a greater amount of continuous assessment, others were concerned about the reliability of internal assessments:

The way young people are assessed in Scottish secondary schools needs to be modernised for the rapidly changing world we live in and work environments - removal of course learning's propensity to rote learn content/associated skills would be a step towards this as would [the] removal of external assessment for three consecutive school years.

Reduce over-assessment and exam pressure. Develop balanced approaches to assessment that don't rely too heavily on final exams. Embed ongoing coursework, project-based learning, and practical assessments. A change to the way courses are assessed. There are a growing number of pupils who require additional arrangements for written exams and schools are struggling with the requirements and cannot meet learners needs adequately.

A full and public acknowledgement that AI has rendered internally assessed or partially internally assessed qualifications unreliable measures of attainment, and therefor[e] a return to [...] external assessment under controlled conditions totally managed and supervised by the qualifications organisation to maintain impartiality and integrity.

There was also disagreement over how standardised assessments should be across different subjects. Some educator respondents thought that there should be greater consistency in the perceived difficulty and mode of assessments between different subjects. However, others felt that Qualifications Scotland needed to recognise the differences in qualifications and should develop a more tailored approach to assessment:

More consistency to the challenge of exams — eg why is one Higher 100% exam on the day but another is 50% practical assessed?

Need to create parity across subjects in terms of assessment.

Understand that different subject disciplines have different types of knowledge that require to be assessed in different ways, rather than trying to impose generic principles that all subjects must adhere to.

SQA had a bad habit of trying to shoe-horn different subjects into a similar format.

There were a number of other comments from educator participants on assessment. These covered a broad range of topics, including the exam timetable, prelims, progression and flexible assessment:

More forethought about spacing of children's exam timetable. Give them a break and don't cluster the obvious ones together.

SQA exams are getting earlier every year, having massive detrimental impacts on how courses are taught, stress for pupils and ultimately performance. If exams were in June, marking would happen over the summer (a sacrifice many teachers would be happier with to avoid the clash with teaching work), and school management and administration would sort out the new timetable, class lists etc over the summer break. The pressure and workload every year of the timetable change in June is absolutely unfair workload compared to other countries' educational system.

Qualification Scotland should provide a database of questions that schools can use to produce prelims. You should also have an AI generate questions of an [exam] standard to aid pupil revision.

Introduc[e] more modular and customisable assessment options. Provide greater flexibility in how learners are assessed [...].

Learners

Many learners stated that they would like to see changes made to the current models of assessment. Prominently, several respondents stated that they wished to see greater balance of continuous assessment and end-of year examinations, or the removal of end-of-year examinations altogether:

Results more reflective of progress throughout the year and not just on one day

Less exam/memorisation-based assessments and instead more coursework to be submitted that isn't under exam conditions (time limit etc).

To examine students based on knowledge as [opposed] to testing how well they can remember quotes, formulae etc. It is unfair to determine a candidate's ability on a single test based on memory.

Other learner respondents stated that they wanted to see changes or improvements made to end-of-year assessments and examination timetables:

[...] Have exams more spaced out so we aren't doing multiple exams every day / week. Have people sit an exam before the main exam so that if they have bad news the day before they don't feel pressured to come in for an exam (if we keep doing exams).

A review of exam times as some exams are too short and others too long, especially Higher History where you are expected to write two essays of around five or six paragraphs in only an hour and a half.

Some learners stated that they would like to see assignments change to be completed at home, over longer timescales, or to be removed completely:

Assignments to be done at home, earlier in the year and not under exam conditions.

Less assignments relying on memorisation because they mostly feel like memorisation tests, no[t] tests [of] our knowledge ... also if all assignments could be like the English folio and music composition, where you can do the assignment over the course of a few weeks then hand it in instead of stressing out over memorising something you've worked so hard on.

Parents and carers

Several parent and carer participants stated that Qualifications Scotland should introduce more continuous assessment rather than end-of-year exams:

I think they need to focus on the child and their learning journey, rather than end of year 'final' exams. Continual assessment seems a much better fit.

... [Qualifications Scotland] needs to look at the Nat 5 and Higher structure. It is dated and inflexible and highly reliant on the day of the exam. It puts unnecessary barriers in the way of many students and offers no realistic resit option. The current system is not fair or equitable.

An understanding of children's needs — not every child fits into the box of being able to sit in a crowded hall to undertake an exam that can ultimately decide their future. More coursework and evidence-based assessments rather than the archaic system of basing a child's knowledge on a one-off test, which can put unnecessary pressure on young people.

Other respondents highlighted different elements of assessment that they wished for Qualifications Scotland to reform. In particular, they wanted Qualifications Scotland to improve the scheduling of assessments:

No more high pressure from secondary schools / teachers on pupils who are being asked to complete assignments whilst studying for prelims whilst having to attend school full time...far, far too much pressure and workload from teachers.

Some parent and carer respondents mentioned that they would like to see changes made in the approach to timetabling following the transition to Qualifications Scotland:

Better planning for the exam diet — making such significant changes in February is absolutely unforgivable.

Exams need to take place over a longer period of time, especially for S4 subjects. Trying to complete two different subject exams in one day or back-to-back is very taxing on the student and it is likely that the second exam will suffer regardless of how much prep work has been completed.

When you set exam dates, do the consultation with schools before you release final dates, don't change them months afterwards. This has caused emotional and financial distress for us.

Qualifications

Comments under this theme pertained to a number of different topics. One was the curriculum, which was mentioned on several occasions. It is important to clarify that Qualifications Scotland is not solely responsible for the curriculum. Rather, it works with others across the education system, including Scottish Government and Education Scotland.

Educators

There were a number of changes that educator respondents would like to see Qualifications Scotland implement. Some of these are specific to qualifications and courses, others are more broad ranging. Educator respondents particularly highlighted that they would like to see the redevelopment of a number of qualifications that they felt were outdated or not fit for purpose:

You need to understand that making a joined-up and engaging course for students is a priority — assessment criteria from 2007 cannot facilitate this, so lose the tedious, menial busywork.

Overhaul and rationalise school qualifications and NPAs etc to reduce [the] burden of assessment. Some school subjects have way too much assessment compared to other subjects.

Speaking to all subject specialist and revamping course content and assessment to bring courses up to date and more fit for purpose.

Course specifications need to be seriously updated and should reflect some of the findings of the Hayward report, should reflect the changing pupil needs post covid, should reflect the views of teaching staff.

Other respondents asserted that qualifications should be updated or redeveloped so that they remain relevant to industry:

Make courses relevant to the jobs markets especially where we will be short of candidates in the future.

More collaboration with lecturers to develop exciting curriculum that is relevant to the industry and the needs of students now. To not become stagnant and move with education, looking at leading education providers across the world for ideas and strategies.

Should any courses be updated or redeveloped, educator respondents requested that they were provided with adequate time to prepare both themselves and their learners:

Ample warning of any changes or variations in course spec (not already within the year of delivery).

Any changes to course specifications, assessment instruments and other materials should be published in advance of the academic year they take effect, and should consider timetables can change in schools as early as May.

There were, additionally, a number of specific requests for change made with regards to National 4 and National 5 qualifications. Several of these comments referred to the need for a safety net for pupils who strive to achieve a higher level of National Qualification and do not meet their expectations:

Have a clearer, fairer system of 'fallbacks' so that automatic recognition of prior attainment is available for those who make a meaningful, but failed attempt ... so long as they've met certain key criteria. Removal of the previous arrangements is what has fuelled dual presentations and excessive workload.

Consider rebuilding the N3 / 4 / 5 qualification as a two-year Standard Grade style course [...] Specifically a common curriculum for all three levels [...] with unit testing being selected by the pupils at the correct level for them from a nationally-provided bank of tests (to ensure equality and consistency across Scotland), with [the] ability at the final exam to sit two levels instead of one [...] to allow pupils [the] best chance of obtaining a qualification at the highest level for them.

Changes such as this would support educators being able to teach multiple levels of a qualification in the same classroom, which they assert is an inevitability:

Qualifications that can successfully be taught within the one class when pupils have widely varied levels of ability — in the way Standard Grade could be — catering for pupils from Foundation up to Credit. Attempting to teach N5, N4 and N3 in the one class just isn't working, the assessments and topics don't correlate ...

Actual teachers involved removing the clutter, making courses flow and accepting that multilevel classes will happen in schools so make the courses work for them.

An educator similarly said that the current pathway through National Qualifications lacked coherence and continuity. They asserted that the previous system offered a smoother transition for learners:

The previous system offered a smoother transition pathway, with Standard Grade flowing naturally into the Higher Still programme. This created a coherent educational journey that supported students through each stage of their academic development. The current progression routes lack this continuity and create unnecessary barriers to advancement.

Parents and carers

Some parent and carer respondents noted that they wished to see changes made to the curriculum and range of qualifications available for learners. In particular, they stated that wanted a broader range of qualifications, a more up-to-date curriculum, a return to the Standard Grade qualifications model and several other changes:

Much better curriculum — Curriculum for Excellence has totally failed our young people.

A relevant curriculum for the 21st century in terms of content, applicability to the workplace, and testing that is flexible and appropriate for our young people.

An overhaul of qualifications — something to resemble Standard Grade where all young people are given an exam.

Inspiring range of educational and vocational qualifications for young people.

Resources

Educators

A number of respondents stated that they would like Qualifications Scotland to change or improve resources available to educators. Several of these comments asserted that they would

feel more supported in the teaching of their courses if resources were more readily available and clear about how to achieve success:

Access to knowledge regardless of whether or not you are a marker — these nuances should be open to everyone, not just those that work for you.

Clear guidelines and a coherent system of sharing these with all teaching staff directly from the new organisation, without reliance on VAs/markers to share information, are essential

Improved clarity on the specifics of the qualifications and how to achieve success in each aspect of the assessment, particularly when small changes are made year on year.

Educator respondents, additionally, stated that the Qualifications Scotland websites should be redeveloped to make them more user-friendly and improve the accessibility of resources:

A much clearer, updated and easier to navigate website. This is especially true in the case of SQA Secure, which has many assessments which are poorly produced and out of date. Many have a very poor and complicated layout and marking system. There is a need to use plain English and to set out instructions in a much clearer way. This is also true for the course documentation on the main site.

[Qualifications Scotland] should ensure that [the] Understanding Standards website is updated annually. In addition, all subjects offered in schools should be on it, for example not all NPA courses are on it. SQA Secure needs to have resources on it that teachers can actually use — instead of [being] told at verification that we shouldn't use an assessment from SQA Secure — don't have it on the system if it isn't fit for purpose.

Relatedly, some respondents requested that Qualifications Scotland provide more training opportunities and resources to support their professional development and teaching:

[...] Have access to online assessments instead of a secure website so that teachers can access materials instead of having to go through a middleman. Offer more subject related events instead of those just around marking. In person events are much more valuable than being spoke at through an online meeting. All markers meetings should be in person.

Support us with resources. Giving a course outline is not useful. We all know how much better we feel when we see another teacher's lesson plans and realise what the course practically requires.

Learners

Several learner respondents stated that they would like to see more resources available to them to assist with their revision and examination preparation:

Better online/app presence. Maybe some tools to help revision.

A website where all required knowledge for each subject is set and laid out clearly for students to access so they can be fully prepared for their exams, in case they miss lessons or don't understand something at school.

Parents and carers

A few parent and carer participants stated that they need educational resources to be more accessible, which would allow them to support their young people with their qualifications and assessments.

Engagement

Educators

Educator respondents expressed the desire for greater number of engagement opportunities with Qualifications Scotland:

Regularly meet and listen to classroom teachers from across Scotland.

Have a more open process of involvement, rather than relying on the experienced people from SQA who will only recreate the same system.

Work collaboratively with educators through empowered practitioner panels and long-term co-design groups. Recognise professional expertise in pedagogy and curriculum design, not just delivery.

Respondents asserted that, while Qualifications Scotland should engage with all stakeholders, the focus of engagement should be on educators, as they are working on the 'frontline':

Teaching staff are on the frontline and know better than most what works well for each pupil they teach and what would work better.

For Qualifications Scotland to effectively engage with the education community, it must place teachers at the centre of its initiatives, fostering a collaborative environment where their expertise can guide developments.

By consulting with the people who are on the frontline — those people who have to carry out procedures and [are] directly impacted by the procedures.

In terms of how educators should be engaged, respondents suggested a range of methods including committees, engagement forums, surveys and focus groups:

Qualifications Scotland should consider establishing regular forums where educators, learners, and parents / carers can voice their opinions and concerns. This could be achieved by creating dedicated committees for teachers and learners to ensure their perspectives are integrated into decision-making processes.

I think with surveys people can feel involved. Surveys are also a really good way to generate data. Short and simple surveys like this one are a really good, cost-effective method of engagement.

Focus groups in schools involving teachers, support staff, as well as senior staff and parents. Questionnaires like this one are a great way to gather thoughts of a number of staff as focus groups can only get a very small snapshot of opinions.

Some educators additionally said that they would like to be engaged with via text messages, telephone calls, newsletters and more broadly in the media.

Educator respondents indicated that they would particularly like to be engaged with about qualifications, especially the development of new qualifications. They would also welcome engagement on the new organisation and future changes more generally:

Instead of going straight to implementation days where we are told what the new courses will be, we should be meeting to say what we think the new courses should be.

Qualifications Scotland needs to be transparent with communication and provide frequent updates on the transition process, new policies, and any changes that might affect stakeholders.

To a lesser extent, some educators recommended that Qualifications Scotland should engage with stakeholders about assessment arrangements, the current exam system, and the future of assessment. One educator also recommended that the organisation should engage with stakeholders about their perceived areas of success and those which could be improved.

Educator respondents, additionally, highlighted that any engagement opportunities should be meaningful, accessible, and that feedback should be taken on board:

It should also ensure that all communications are clear, concise, and accessible to everyone.

As an educator (teacher) I would like a more open and trusting process which reflects that we are the ones with the experience on the ground. More opportunities to ask questions and give feedback on materials, documents, etc. Less top down and more consultative.

There is a feeling that consultation doesn't matter — it hasn't changed anything in the past so what is the point?

Learners

Learner respondents expressed an interest in engagement. Three primary means of engagement were identified. These were physical media (for example, posters, leaflets and brochures); online communication (including email, social media, and the Qualifications Scotland website); and in-person events.

In terms of the topics that they would like to be engaged with about, learner respondents were interested in the new organisation, the assessment process, and the different courses available to them.

Two learners provided insight into their expectations for future engagement. They proposed that the new organisation should seek to increase transparency and build positive relationships:

The new organisation should also be way more transparent with educators, learners, [and] parents and carers as many changes (such as exam timetable and the inner workings of the SQA) happen very suddenly without much prior notice. Sometimes, these happen very behind the scenes as if something is being hidden from us.

To further build trust, with parents and carers, to build understanding and confidence between educators, and to build a generally positive relationship with learners.

Parents and carers

Parent and carer respondents outlined various expectations for future engagement. Some stated that they would like to see the new organisation consulting with stakeholders and genuinely listening, rather than presenting final decisions:

More direct engagement and more opportunity to influence decisions / approaches. As a parent, by the time I hear about it, it's too late to influence change.

To feel heard and valued will ensure the new system is effective and trusted.

Communication

Educators

A significant theme emerging from this panel was communication. Educators said that, following the transition to Qualifications Scotland, they would like to see improvements made to the organisation's approach to communication:

Openness, honesty, transparency, informal sessions, publish feedback and what has this changed. Dedicated person with specific sector knowledge and experience to offer advice and support. Embrace each sector as professional and support changes within.

Communicate better with teachers teaching classes and not just leaders. Be more open to dialogue about how to best meet the needs of learners.

Better lines of communication. More open ethos would build trust and prevent a 'them and us' culture ... Keep talking to teachers, a couple of quick surveys is not going to be enough to fully understand the needs of staff across Scotland.

Educator respondents stated specifically that they would like the organisation to be more transparent, open and accountable in its communications:

Provide open communication, advise what and when will change, listen to what educators, students, parents are saying.

Ensure transparency and rigour. Lots of communication to pupils, families and staff about the organisation and their role.

Qualifications Scotland also needs to be accountable. That means being open to public scrutiny, involving more teachers and learners in decision-making, and setting up independent channels for complaints. If someone feels the system has failed them, they should know who to turn to and trust that it will be handled fairly.

Another key issue that educators highlighted was the timeliness of communications and the need for Qualifications Scotland to provide greater insight to stakeholders on their decision-making processes:

People need to understand what's changing, why it's changing, and how it will affect them. That means publishing decisions plainly, sharing timelines early, and openly explaining how qualifications are designed and assessed. Teachers, learners and those supporting learners should never feel left in the dark.

Clear communication is essential. One of the biggest criticisms of the SQA was poor and delayed communication, which increased stress. Qualifications Scotland should improve this by sharing information on time, providing regular updates, and responding quickly to questions.

Tell us what meaningful changes are coming. Tell us what the structure and processes will be. Tell us when the qualifications are actually going to change, and involve us in the reform process. Right now, it feels like there's no meaningful change coming, and discussions are — presumably — happening behind closed doors.

Through improving the organisation's approach to communication, respondents believed that Qualifications Scotland could build a strong relationship with educators.

Parents and carers

Respondents from this stakeholder group asserted that, following the transition, they would like to see Qualifications Scotland improve their approach towards communicating with parents and carers. Several respondents stated that they wanted the organisation to communicate and consult with them more frequently:

Involve us. Consult us, give us advance notice of decisions and be transparent about the reason for decisions.

Clear and jargon-free communication — Provide plain-language updates via newsletters, school meetings, and online platforms.

Consistent information. Good communication and regular updates throughout process.

Communication with families should also improve and be more regular.

Other respondents noted that they wanted more frequent communication and for information to be more easily accessible. Some called for the use of ‘plain language’:

Explain to people what is happening. Let them know what will remain the same and what is changing. Keep things like the SQA website online with clear banners informing people of the new organisation, and where to find the relevant information on the new website.

Regular communication, more often.

Communicate clearly and without jargon ... if you use a term, or reference, or framework, make sure it's understood by your audience in advance.

A key topic of engagement was information about the new organisation:

Engage to generate understanding of this change and rationale behind it. What improvements are expected as a result of these changes? Communicate how new organisation is connecting with industry to ensure qualifications are fit for the future.

In terms of how they would like to be communicated with, respondents said that they would prefer to be engaged with using online methods, particularly email, social media, webinars, the organisation’s website, and online meetings. However, some respondents did caution against reliance on social media. Instead, they favoured in-person opportunities (such as school events and meetings), using literature (for example, leaflets, newsletters and postal letters) and using research methods (including surveys and focus groups).

Parent and carer respondents also stated that they wanted greater transparency and honesty from Qualifications Scotland:

Open transparency. Clear concise guidelines. Easily contactable. Good communication.

Be transparent and upfront. Changes are made and pupils, parents and carers are the last to know. Involve and consider ordinary people in your decision making.

Be clearer with course information and not change it after the course has started.

Conclusion and considerations

Across the four surveys, there are several recurring themes that have been referenced by at least two of the different surveyed groups. The frequency that they have been mentioned demonstrates their importance to various groups of Qualifications Scotland's stakeholders.

Throughout the research, all stakeholder groups mentioned at some point that a key priority for the new organisation should be the reform of assessment. The comments covered a broad range of topics, but many were related to models of assessment, assignments, end-of-year exams, and the difficulty of exams.

Every group that was surveyed also mentioned the topic of engagement in some manner. Here, all respondent groups indicated that they wished to be engaged with more. They each highlighted how they would like to be engaged, the topics that they are interested in, and their expectations of engagement.

Resources to support teaching and learning was an important theme that emerged from all stakeholder groups. Educator respondents felt that they wanted more comprehensive course support documents. As well as this, they requested that the organisation website be redeveloped to support their work and that they be offered a greater number of training opportunities. Likewise, learner and parent and carer respondents said that Qualifications Scotland should provide more resources to support revision and exam preparation.

Both educators and parents and carers noted that they would like to see changes to qualifications. Educator respondents said that they wished to see qualifications redeveloped and brought up to date. They additionally said that as and when courses are redeveloped, the changes should be implemented and communicated in a timely manner. Furthermore, they advocated for the creation of a 'safety net' for learners studying National Qualifications. Parents and carers similarly felt that the qualifications portfolio needed to be brought up to date and reformed. However, they additionally said that they wanted a broader range of qualifications available for learners.

Finally, both educator and parent and carer respondent groups mentioned similar topics with regards to communication. Broadly speaking, they wished for communication from Qualifications Scotland to be more frequent, transparent and open. This, they suggested, would improve stakeholder understanding of Qualifications Scotland's work. Respondents, additionally, stated that they would like for communications to be timelier.