

**REPORT (FINAL DRAFT)
RESEARCH INTO NON-NATIONAL COURSE
QUALIFICATIONS REFORM
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**Research into Non-National Course
Qualifications Reform**

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

This report details findings to emerge from qualitative research undertaken on behalf of Qualifications Scotland which focused on issues relating to the reform of non-National Course qualifications.

Focus groups were undertaken with learners in S4 to S6 (through a mix of face-to-face and virtual sessions) and 27 one-to-one interviews were undertaken with school educators (all virtually or by telephone).

Learner Focus Groups

The focus groups were undertaken amongst learners who have taken or are taking non-National Course qualifications available in the senior phase and learners who have not or are not doing so, ie are only taking National Qualifications (at National 5, Higher or Advanced Higher). These focus groups incorporated a range of learners in terms of their gender and academic ability, and who were from a variety of backgrounds.

The focus groups were undertaken with school learners across Scotland.

One-to-One Educator Interviews

The school educators interviewed:

- Were delivering or had delivered non-National Course qualifications and/or
- Were responsible for making decisions about what was offered in schools and/or
- Were responsible for designing school timetables

The last of these two categories included individuals in senior management roles, Qualifications Scotland Co-ordinators and other educators in relevant roles.

Timeframes

The learner focus groups and educator interviews were undertaken during February and March 2026.

Report Structure

Section 2.0 details key findings to emerge from the learner focus groups, whilst Section 3.0 details findings to emerge from the educator interviews.

In both cases, supporting verbatim comments are provided, where appropriate.

It should be noted that, during the course of the learner focus groups and educator interviews, respondents frequently referred to SQA. However, as the organisation transitioned to Qualifications Scotland in February, this report very largely refers to Qualifications Scotland throughout, even when participants had referred to SQA.

Finally, Section 4.0 notes key outcomes for the research in terms of commonalities and differences expressed by learners and educators.

2.0 LEARNER FOCUS GROUP OUTCOMES

2.1 Awareness and Experience of Non-National Course Qualifications

2.1.1 Awareness and Understanding of Non-National Course Qualifications

There appeared to be **high levels of awareness** of non-National Course qualifications across all of the learner groups. This included those who were solely studying for these types of qualifications, those who were solely studying for National Qualifications (and, in particular, National 5s and Highers) and those who were studying for a mix of these types of qualifications.

However, as this element of the discussion was expanded upon, it became apparent that there were **variances** in terms of the extent to which participants were aware of qualifications from the non-National Course qualifications portfolio and, in particular, the number of qualifications of which they were aware. In this regard, there appeared to be no correlation between whether or not learners were solely or jointly studying for these types of qualifications and, in addition, there was no correlation between the number of non-National Course qualifications of which participants were aware and their level of academic ability.

Having considered **levels of awareness** of non-National Course qualifications, consideration was then given to levels of understanding of these qualifications by participants. There was a notable degree of **variability** in this regard, with those believing that they had a well-developed knowledge and understanding of non-National Course qualifications tending to be those who were either solely or jointly studying these qualifications in conjunction with National Qualifications. In particular, this was based on their presumption that their

understanding of the key purpose, nature and elements of non-National Course qualifications they were studying applied to others they were aware of but were not studying. In addition, however, amongst those who were solely studying for National Qualifications, there also appeared to be a basic understanding of the purpose, nature and elements of non-National Course qualifications.

This part of the discussion also highlighted that non-National Course qualifications tend to be **promoted well** in all of the schools that were participating in the research, with this being done in a number of ways, including:

- These qualifications being discussed at times of option choices
- The discussion of these qualifications at registration
- The discussion of these qualifications at parents' evenings
- The promotion of these qualifications through visits to local colleges

In this regard, however, it should be stressed that there was evidence of the **targeting** of these qualifications to particular types of learners and, in particular, those who may struggle to achieve a pass at Higher level. However, it should be stressed that a number of participants stated that, although they were solely studying for National Qualifications, non-National Course qualifications were also promoted to them in terms of the value which they may accrue in respect of broadening their knowledge and skills base which could be beneficial when applying to some universities and in their broader learning and vocational journeys.

- “I don’t know much about these qualifications, but I reckon that they are much more focused on what learners will need if they want to go on to college or to get a job”

- “I think they are best for pupils that might struggle to get a Higher after they’ve done a Nat 5, particularly because they are more practical and you don’t have to sit an exam”
- “Yeah, we are told about these types of qualifications at school. They are mentioned quite a lot at regi and are there as an option choice”
- “I’ve been told that these qualifications could be helpful when I’m putting in my application for uni because some universities accept them as well as your results at Higher and Advanced Higher”

2.1.2 Experience

As noted earlier, in all of the focus groups there were participants who were solely studying for non-National Course qualifications and those who were currently doing so in conjunction with National Qualifications, with these learners indicating that they were studying a range of such qualifications, including:

- Skills for Work qualifications
- National Progression Awards
- Foundation Apprenticeships

It should also be noted that many of those participating in the focus groups stated that they were undertaking – or had undertaken – qualifications other than National 5s, Highers and Advanced Highers or non-National Course qualifications. However, these tended to be at a lower SCQF levels specific and relatively short in nature.

For those who were studying for non-National Course qualifications, this was often being done in conjunction with colleges and involved full or part-time visits (mostly once a week) or, in some cases, over a number of days or longer.

In terms of **why** participants chose to study for non-National Course qualifications, these individuals fell into a number of categories, including:

- Those who believed that they would have struggled to have achieved Highers (either in their own opinion or the opinion of their teachers)
- Those whose teachers – including Guidance Teachers – believed that these qualifications would be best suited to them
- Those who wanted to avoid having to sit a final exam and had a preference for ongoing assessment
- Those who believed that achieving such qualifications would supplement their National Qualifications, particularly those who were looking to move onto college or university and felt that studying for such qualifications would be beneficial in terms of preparing them to do so
- Those who believed that such qualifications were less formal and more practical in nature
- Those who were attracted to the opportunity of learning outwith the school environment and, in particular, at college (which they believed would not only be an attractive alternative to school, but would also allow them to learn more independently)

It is also of interest to note that, for those who had chosen **not** to study for non-National Course qualifications, this was a function of a number of factors, including:

- A belief that such qualifications would be of little or no value to them, particularly those who were hoping to move onto college and, more specifically, those who were hoping to move onto university
- Teachers – including Guidance Teachers – advising them that they would be best to focus on National 5s, Highers or Advanced Highers

- Those who had concerns that working towards non-National Course qualifications would impact upon their ability to perform well and achieve good results in their National Qualifications
- Parental concerns as to the value and credibility of non-National Course qualifications

In the context of the second of these bullet points, it is of interest to note that those studying solely for National Qualifications stated their belief that teachers often provide more support to 'less academic pupils' to help them get through and achieve non-National Course qualifications than they would to those following a strictly National 5, Higher or Advanced Higher progression route.

Finally, it should be noted that some of those who were going to on to university stated that, if they got an unconditional offer at the end of S5, they would think about taking these types of qualifications.

- "I don't think I would have got a good Higher grade and my teachers told me that these types of qualifications would be better for me"
- "I like that they've got practical parts and it's not just all about learning by listening to your teacher and reading books"
- "I don't really like being here, so the idea of getting out to a college for some of the time sounds good. I don't think it would be all about your teachers telling you what to do"
- "I'd be really worried that if I spend time working towards these types of qualifications, that could mean that I wouldn't do so well in my Highers"
- "I spoke to my parents about these kinds of qualifications and they didn't rate them at all and really didn't want me to do any of them"

2.1.3 Opportunities to Learn at College with a Training Provider or Employer Whilst at School

A number of focus group participants had had the opportunity to undertake learning at a college, with a training provider or with an employer and that the vast majority – at least in principle – had or had had the opportunity to do so, although most stated that they hadn't had the chance to take up this opportunity.

It should be stressed that there was a **widespread belief** that having the opportunity to learn at college, with a training provider or employer had or would be associated with a range of **positives**, particularly in terms of:

- Learners being provided with an experience that would help to better prepare them for their learning and vocational journeys
- Learning with a college, training provider and – perhaps to a lesser extent – with employers promoting independent learning and study
- Learning outwith school being more enjoyable

In addition to these perceived positives, there were also a number of **beliefs** associated with learners having the opportunity to learn at college, with a training provider or with an employer, including:

- That this would be best suited to 'less academic pupils', with this belief being noted, not only those who would describe themselves as being 'less academic', but also by those studying for National Qualifications
- 'Less academic' pupils may thrive in a non-school environment given their dislike of studying at school
- 'Less academic' pupils would be more likely to stay at school

In addition, there was a belief amongst a number of those participating in the focus groups that their parents or carers may have concerns about learning at college, with a training provider or with an employer due to potential impacts on meeting their National Qualification study goals.

One further point to note here is that a number of those who had experience of work placements stated that they had arranged these themselves. These included those who wanted to go into the hospitality and tourism sector, sports related careers and care/clinical related careers (such as carers, nurses and doctors).

Finally, it should be noted that a number of those in the focus groups undertook part time work (in evenings or weekends) and believed that this was a valuable means by which they could develop broader skills and knowledge which would be of value to their learning and vocational journeys and, in this regard, believed that this would be more valuable than studying for non-National Course qualifications (particularly those who believed that this may impact on the outcomes of their National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher studies).

- “It would be great to get the chance to go to college when I’m still at school and also to go and work with an employer for a while. I think that would be really good in terms of making sure that I make the right decisions in terms of what I do next”
- “I would enjoy being at college for while rather than being here”
- “I think some of my friends would be more likely to stay on at school if they knew they had the chance to be at college or somewhere else for part of the time”

2.2 Value and Perception

2.2.1 Advantages of Studying for Non-National Course qualifications

Collectively and often individually, those participating in the focus groups identified a wide range of **advantages** of studying for non-National Course qualifications, with these **primarily** focusing around:

- This providing a learning opportunity for 'less academic' pupils which they otherwise wouldn't have
- Non-National Course qualifications not having a final exam which was seen as being attractive to those who struggled with exams
- Developing life skills and knowledge in general and skills and knowledge which will be of benefit for further learning and succeeding in the workplace

Thereafter, a range of **secondary advantages** were noted here, including:

- Achieving qualifications which align with the needs for specific jobs and of specific sectors
- Having the opportunity to learn in a less stressful environment which would lower levels of anxiety, not just in terms of there being no need to sit a final exam, but also in terms of having a less structured environment
- Achievement of such qualifications supplementing a college or university application
- Pupils learning 'what they want to learn' rather than 'what they are expected or required learn'
- Learners having the opportunity to see what they have learnt to date being put into practice
- Non-National Course qualifications at National 6 qualifications being equivalent to a Higher pass

More specific advantages were also noted in relation studying for non-National Course qualifications, including:

- Providing learners with a wider variety of learning opportunities (with this applying to learners at all levels and across a wide range of subject areas)
- Providing learners with the opportunity to, for example, study for three Highers together with a non-National Course qualification (particularly those who may struggle to study for more than three Highers)
- The achievement of such qualifications being good on a learner's CV when seeking a job or apprenticeship directly after school

Finally, it should be stressed that there was **virtually no extent** to which those participating in any of the focus groups believed that there were **no advantages** of studying non-National Course qualifications.

- “If there weren't these types of qualifications, there probably wouldn't be any qualifications which some pupils could do and they would just leave school”
- “I find exams difficult and a lot of other people do as well so if they can do a qualification which didn't involve an exam, I'd like that”
- “These qualifications are all about making sure that you can maybe go onto college or something and do your job better”
- “I think a lot of people would like to learn in a less formal environment because when you do things like Nat 5s and Highers there's a kind of set structure and format that you need to follow”

2.2.2 Disadvantages of Studying for Non-National Course Qualifications

There was a **widespread consensus** across all of the focus groups that there were potential **disadvantages** of studying for non-National Course qualifications, with these concerns not being correlated with the study or otherwise of these types of qualifications.

The **primary disadvantages** of non-National Course qualifications focused around:

- These qualifications not being considered to be as credible as National Qualifications (with the example being provided here of non-National Course qualifications at Level 6 and Highers), partly due to the lack of a final exam but also due to the fact/belief that they are not externally examined
- An understanding that these qualifications are not graded which is not a reflection of a learner's ability and unfair on those who have done particularly well but don't get any recognition for this
- Beliefs that lack of grading may be an issue for employers, colleges and universities when considering the ability of applicants

Thereafter, **secondary disadvantages** included:

- Those studying for non-National Course qualifications being viewed as being 'less intelligent' than those solely following a National Qualifications pathway
- Colleges and universities – particularly the latter – preferring candidates to have Highers and Advanced Highers rather than non-National Course qualifications
- The varying views of universities as to the acceptability of non-National Course qualifications, with an example being provided here relating to Foundation Apprenticeships which Aberdeen

University considered to be an equivalent of an A grade Higher pass, but these not being recognised at all by Strathclyde University

- The impact of working towards non-National Course qualifications on the successful pursuit of National Qualifications, particularly at Higher level

It should also be noted that one further **specific disadvantage** of non-National Course qualifications was identified, namely their perceived 'lack of theory content'.

Finally, it should also be noted that there was a **general consensus** that there will be fewer disadvantages for 'less academic' pupils.

- "I just don't think these types of qualifications are as credible as National Qualifications, particularly if you are doing a Level 6 PDA compared to doing a Higher"
- "Do they get a grade? (response from facilitator – 'no') Well that's just not right. Someone could have worked really hard and would be due an A grade and would be just the same as someone who hadn't worked hard and only just passed"
- "It might be a bit like Nat 4s where people who sit them are seen as being less clever than people that are sitting Nat 5s. So, I think that might also be the case for pupils that are doing these kinds of qualifications at Level 6 and pupils that are doing Highers"
- "I'm not sure what a university will think of these qualifications and reckon that they'll prefer people to have Highers and Advanced Highers"

2.2.3 Non-National Course Qualifications Being Valued

During the course of the focus groups participants were asked if they believed that non-National Course qualifications were valued by their school, parents/carers, universities and employers, there was a **strong**

consensus that these are valued by schools but – in general – to a lesser extent, by parents/carers, universities and employers.

The belief that non-National Course qualifications are valued to a greater or lesser extent by each of the audiences under consideration in a function of a number of factors

Schools

Primary reference was made here of schools valuing non-National Course qualifications based on:

- The increasing provision of such qualifications within schools, particularly recently
- Providing learning routes for pupils to whom they are best suited and providing them with the opportunity of gaining qualifications which may have been more difficult to achieve were non-National Course qualifications not available to them
- How well schools promote these qualifications to all pupils, particularly to those to whom they are likely to be most suited

Parents/Carers

From a **positive perspective**, participants believed that once parents/carers learn more about non-National Course qualifications they tend to respond positively to them, both for less academic pupils and also for more academic pupils as a supplement to their National Qualifications. In this regard, it should be stressed that many of those participating in the focus groups stated that their school was making considerable efforts to improve the awareness, understanding and value of these qualifications amongst their parents/carers.

From a **negative perspective**, it was clear that, for some learners, their parents/carers continued to attribute limited value to non-National Course qualifications on the basis that they continue to have a preference for their child to follow the NQ route, particularly those who are seeking to move onto university.

Universities

There was a widespread belief across the groups that some universities – but not all universities – are increasingly recognising the value of non-National Course qualifications for two **primary reasons**:

- Study for such qualifications better preparing learners to come into university on the basis of their better exposure to independent learning and to developing skills and attributes which will be beneficial to them at university (including communication and presentation skills)
- That attainment of non-National Course qualifications being valuable in terms of supplementing National Qualification outcomes, particularly where it is difficult to differentiate between applicants

Employers

From a **positive perspective**, there was a **strong consensus** across all of the groups that many employers will value these types of qualifications as they should help to prepare learners better for the workplace. In this regard, however, it was stressed by a number of focus group participants that there is a fundamental need to make sure that employers are made aware of these qualifications and their value to employers.

In contrast, from a **negative perspective**, reference was made by a number of those in the focus groups of employers that they had

approached not recognising non-National Course qualifications, with particular reference being made here, for example, by two learners seeking to enter into a graduate accountancy apprenticeship after they leave school.

- “There are a lot more of these types of qualifications being offered every year at this school so that must mean that the school thinks they’re valuable”
- “Our school must think they are valuable because they tell us about them a lot of the time, particularly the pupils who would probably be best taking these qualifications”
- “My parents weren’t very sure when they first heard about Foundation Apprenticeships but once they found out more they thought they sounded good and that they would be useful for me, even although I want to go to university”
- “I think the school needs to do a lot more to tell parents about these qualifications. If they don’t, they won’t understand that they could be useful for all types of learners”
- “Even when my parents found out more about these types of qualifications they were totally against me taking them as they thought it might affect the amount of time I had to focus on my Highers to get to university”
- “It’ll be very different learning at university compared to learning at school so if you do – what are they called, non-National Course qualifications – (response from facilitator – ‘yes’) you’ll be doing a lot more learning by yourself which is what you’ll do a lot more at university”
- “It must be difficult for universities to tell who the best students are. A lot of them go along with really good Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications so if they’ve taken time to add to their National Qualifications, that could help universities to tell which pupils it would be best to take on”

- “I think if employers knew about these qualifications and understood about them they would reckon they are good because they should help pupils when they come to them to do their job better, but I’m not sure if employers would actually know anything about these types of qualifications”
- “I want to do an accountancy graduate apprenticeship when I leave school. When I talked to a couple of companies about qualifications which weren’t Nat 5s or Highers, they weren’t interested in them”

2.2.4 Promotion of Non-National Course Qualifications in Schools

It was apparent from the programme of focus groups that non-National Course qualifications **are** promoted in schools, but the extent to which this was the case varied. In this regard, a number of **observations and beliefs** are worthy of note:

- There being a tendency for non-National Course qualifications to be promoted more to learners to whom teachers believed these types of qualifications would be best suited and, indeed, also promoted more to the parents/carers of such learners
- There was evidence that in many schools pupils at all academic levels are encouraged to consider taking these types of qualifications
- Non-National Course qualifications being increasingly promoted to ‘more academic’ pupils on the basis that they can supplement their National Qualifications (in terms of their value in applications to some universities and developing skills and knowledge that will be useful whilst studying at university)
- There was evidence that some schools don’t do enough to promote non-National Course qualifications, including beliefs that, although pupils are made aware that these qualifications are an option

choice, they are often not ‘pushed’ by teachers, particularly to those who are more able

It should also be stressed that it was apparent that schools make efforts – although to a varying extent – to promote non-National Course qualifications through a number of **means**, including:

- Discussions at parents nights
- Offers to parents/carers come into school to meet with teachers to discuss non-National Course qualification options for their child
- Holding specific events/meetings to do so around subject choice time

In addition, it was apparent that many learners are made aware and build up their understanding of non-National Course qualifications through formal and informal discussions with their teachers and, in addition in some cases, employers who come into schools to speak with pupils about the benefits of taking non-National Course qualifications.

- “Teachers spend a lot more time telling pupils who they think should be sitting these qualifications but not much time speaking about them to pupils that want to go to uni”
- In our school everybody is encouraged to take these types of qualifications even if you’re wanting to go to university”
- “In the last year, some of our teachers have talked quite a bit about how achieving these types of qualifications might help you get into uni. It’s a bit like Duke of Edinburgh which unis like to see on your application because it shows something different from just going through the traditional route of Highers and Advanced Highers to get in”
- “I don’t think our school really does much to tell us about these types of qualifications. Ok they’re on as an option, but they’re only

really pushed by teachers to the type of pupils who they think should be taking them”

- “My teacher spoke a lot with me about PDAs. We also had an employer who came in to do some mock interviews and he talked about what he thinks about these types of qualifications and that he thinks it’s good for us to take them”

2.3 Future Pathways

2.3.1 Post School Destinations

It was apparent that, given the different academic levels and abilities of those participating in the focus groups, a wide range of post-school destinations were being considered or aspired to, namely:

- University
- College
- Graduate apprenticeships
- Vocational apprenticeships (that would include college study)
- Entering employment

University

For those noting a desire to go to university after leaving school, this was for a number of **reasons**, including:

- That doing so would represent their best option in terms of having a successful and rewarding career, both for those who were seeking to study vocational courses at university (such as Engineering, Law or in clinical disciplines) and those who were looking to undertake non-vocational specific courses
- That going to university would be a positive learning experience

- That going to university would be good from a social perspective and, in particular, meeting new people and having different social experiences

It should be noted here that a number of those aspiring to go to university recognised that there was currently some degree of debate as to the value of achieving a university qualification, particularly non-vocational degrees. Nonetheless, even in these cases, there was a belief that going through a university educational pathway would be likely to be the best option from a career perspective.

College

For those planning to go to college, this was for a number of **reasons**, including:

- That this would be the best route to get the type of job which they were seeking after leaving college, particularly on the basis that they could focus on courses which are relevant to specific sectors that they wanted to work in
- Beliefs amongst some participants that they were 'not ready' to go to university (either from an academic or maturity perspective) and, accordingly, studying for an HNC and/or HND would prepare them for university
- That going to college would mean that some respondents wouldn't have to move away from home
- That college would represent an attractive learning experience
- That attending college could be good from a social perspective

Graduate Apprenticeship

For those planning to go through a graduate apprenticeship route, it was felt that this would provide them with the opportunity of getting a

degree (which would enhance their future job prospects) whilst being in the workplace allowing them to see how what they were learning at university is applied in a working environment.

Getting a Job

For those who wished to go straight into employment after school, this was for a number of **reasons**, including:

- A desire to earn money
 - Having no interest in further learning or gaining further qualifications
 - Beliefs that people don't necessarily need to have qualifications to progress in a job or career
- "Going to university is the best thing to do to get a job that I want to do. I've got friends that want to be things like engineers and doctors that need to go to university to study what's going to get them a job, but it's also important for me as I want to do something in social sciences that's not job related but still want to get a good job"
 - "By the time you go to college you've got a better idea about what you want to do so can do a course that will help you to do the type of job you want"
 - "I'm not ready to go to uni yet. I need a couple of more years so I'm going to go to college then hope I'd then be ready to go onto uni"
 - "I'm fed up at school I just want to go and start earning money"
 - "I know lots of people that haven't got good qualifications but have done really well as they work hard and are good at their job"

2.3.2 Subject or Qualification Gaps

There was almost **no evidence** across the focus groups that there were any subjects or qualifications that participants wished they could have done or would have better helped them to get where they wanted to go.

Nonetheless, there was some discussion – particularly amongst those in S4 and S5 – regarding future investigation of non-National Course qualifications which may help them to achieve their desired post school destination.

In this regard, it was believed by a number of focus group participants that it would be of value for their school to inform them about non-National Course qualifications which they could undertake but which were not offered by their school. In particular, it was felt that there could be an opportunity to undertake non-National Course qualifications at other schools or at college and, accordingly, it would be of value if they could be made aware of other non-National Course qualifications could be accessed in their local area.

- “No, there’s nothing I can think of. What I’ve done at school is what I’ve needed to do at school and chose the subjects I needed and wanted to do”
- “Now that I’ve been here today I’m going to look a bit more into these types of qualifications in case they’ll help me to do what I’m wanting to do when I leave school”
- “I know there are some subjects you can’t do at this school that you can do at another school in the town. I’d like to know if you can do that with these types of qualifications”

2.4 Additional Desires for Future Non-National Course Qualifications

In all of the focus groups, participants were asked if they could design a non-National Qualification that could start in school what it would 'look like'.

In response, four **primary elements** for a future non-National Qualifications were noted, namely, the qualification:

- Incorporating knowledge and skills that employers and industry want learners to have
- Incorporating practical elements (although it was recognised that this may not always be possible depending on the content/nature of the subject matter of the qualification)
- Incorporating work experience/work-based elements (although, again, it was recognised that this might depend on the content/nature of the subject matter of the qualification)
- Incorporating ongoing assessment/assignments which would represent a significant contribution to final grades (were the qualification to be graded)

Thereafter, **secondary suggestions** included:

- Ensuring that the qualification was enjoyable for learners
- Making it clear what further additional qualifications the new qualification could lead to – including what career pathways the qualification could lead to – and promoting this
- Making it clear what further learning opportunities (for example, with a college, training provider or at university) the new qualification could lead to and promoting this
- Including core skills such as communications and time management (with a number of learners making reference here to meta-skills)

- Including and promoting a significant degree of independent learning in the qualification (with particular reference being made here in this regard to learners moving onto college or university)
- Ensuring that working towards the newly designed qualification would not impact on learners seeking to achieve positive outcomes in their National Qualification studies

Finally, a number of **more specific suggestions** were made with regard to a future non-National Qualification, including:

- Incorporating an element of study leave
- Having the option to study for the qualifications over a two year period (if at Level 6 or above)
- That the qualification should not involve group work, on the basis that one poor participant in a group could affect the quality of outcomes for the whole group (including grades, if incorporated)

It should be noted that there were **two elements of debate** here related to the incorporation of a final exam and grading, namely:

- In terms of incorporating a final exam, a number of those in the focus groups believed that this **should** be the case as it would promote the value and credibility of the qualification. However, these were largely balanced out by others who argued that a final examination would be off-putting to learners who struggle with final exams
- In terms of grading, again there was a **split** between those who felt that grading should be used for both assessment/assignments and final exams, on the basis that it would help to differentiate between learners who had achieved well and those that achieved poorly, whilst on the other hand, there were those who argued that this should not be the case as this might add pressure to those who may be anxious about trying to achieve a good grade

- “We’d need to make sure that this qualification is teaching pupils things that employers want”
- “The qualification should have practical stuff not just theory because that would be really good for people when they go to get a job”
- “You should be able to go into an office or a factory or somewhere like that as part of the qualification so that you could see how what you’re learning would mean for what you’d be doing when you were in a job”
- “At the moment too much of your final grade depends on how you do in the exam so, in the new qualification I think that there should be a better balance between the percentage given to an assignment and percentage given to a final exam”
- “We should make it enjoyable because if you find something enjoyable, you’re more like to stick with it”
- “It should be clear what getting this qualification will lead to in terms of things like going on to study more or get a job”
- “The qualification should help people in their lives generally, not just in terms of what they learn in the future or what they’ll do when they get a job, but I know that might be difficult to do because the main thing about the qualification is that it should help you do well in life which really means going on to learn more or having a good career”

3.0 EDUCATOR ONE-TO-ONE INTERVIEW OUTCOMES

3.1 Awareness and Experience of Non-National Course Qualifications

3.1.1 Awareness and Understanding of Non-National Course Qualifications

The educators interviewed primarily fell into **two groups** – those who believed that they had a ‘well-developed’ awareness and understanding of non-National Course qualifications and those who believed they had a ‘reasonably well-developed’ knowledge and understanding of these qualifications. Thereafter, there were a more limited number of educators who believed they had a limited understanding of non-National Course qualifications.

For those who believed that they had a **well-developed** understanding of non-National Course qualifications, this was **primarily** due to the fact that they themselves or their school had been delivering these qualifications for a number of years, with **secondary mention** being made in this regard of their understanding being a function of:

- Being an SQA and now Qualifications Scotland Co-ordinator
- Being responsible for timetabling within their school
- Writing group award specifications for NPAs

Amongst those who believed that they had a **reasonably well-developed** awareness and understanding of non-National Course qualifications, this was due to the fact that, as they had no direct experience of delivering such qualifications, they were dependent on colleagues and information available from SQA (and now Qualifications Scotland).

For the limited number of educators who noted that they had a **limited** awareness and understanding of non-National Course qualifications, this was entirely due to the fact that their school delivered very few of these qualifications (although all of these respondents stated their belief that their school would increasingly do so through time).

A final **observation** worthy of note here is that, amongst those who believed that they had a reasonably well developed awareness and understanding of non-National Course qualifications, all stated that their awareness and understanding was increasing at a personal level and also within their departments and within their school.

- “I’ve got a well-developed understanding of non-National Course qualifications mostly because we’ve been delivering these for a number of years and also because I was an SQA Co-ordinator and am now a Qualifications Scotland Co-ordinator, am responsible for putting together the timetable for our school and I also write specifications for NPAs”
- “I’ve learned a lot more recently about non-National Course qualifications and I can see that’s also the case, not just within my department, but also across the school”

3.1.2 Learner Awareness and Understanding of Non-National Course Qualifications

There was a **consensus** amongst the educators interviewed that learners in their school tend to have a well-developed awareness – and, indeed, increasing awareness – of non-National Course qualifications, but that their understanding of these qualifications can be more limited.

Amongst those who believed that levels of awareness of knowledge and understanding of non-National Course qualifications delivered by

their school were **good**, this was due to the fact that pupils are were made aware of these qualifications when option choices were being considered.

In addition, a number of educators stated that levels of awareness and understanding of non-National Course qualifications are **best** amongst those to whom they are targeted (ie those for whom teachers believe these qualifications would be best suited) and were far poorer amongst those to whom these qualifications were **not** targeted, with particular reference being made here to non-National Course qualifications tending not to be 'pushed' for those who may be believed by teachers would be best suited to follow a 'more traditional academic progression route'.

For those who believed that learners in their school, in general, would have a **poor** awareness and understanding of non-National Course qualifications, this was entirely due to the fact that their school delivered few of these qualifications and that these tended to be delivered by few departments. Accordingly, learners in many departments would have a limited awareness and understanding – if any – of non-National Course qualifications.

Finally, it should be stressed that there was a **widespread belief** amongst the educators interviewed that awareness and understanding of non-National Course qualifications is improving as alternative pathways for learners are emerging and as learners become aware that these pathways are becoming more commonly available.

- “Pupils in our school definitely know about non-National Course qualifications in the senior phase but I think they don’t understand an awful lot about them unless, of course, they are sitting them or have sat them in the past”

- “We tend to promote non-National Course qualifications to learners that would be best suited to take them on so, as a result, they tend to understand more about these types of qualifications than other learners do”

3.1.3 Non-National Course Qualifications Delivered by Schools

There was **significant variation** in terms of the extent to which – and number of – non-National Course qualifications delivered by educators’ schools, ranging from those whose school delivered very few to those whose school delivered many.

The non-National Course qualifications delivered by schools **primarily** focused around Skills for Work qualifications, National Progression Awards and Foundation Apprenticeships.

The delivery of **Skills for Work qualifications** were noted in a wide range of subjects, including Applied Sciences, Creative Industries, Energy, Health and Laboratory Science, Leadership, Sport and Fitness and Travel and Tourism, with **NPA**s being delivered in subjects such as Animation, Art and Design, Arts and Drama, Business and Marketing, Business and Technology, Childcare, Climate Change and Sustainability, Criminology, Cyber Security, English, Furniture Making, Games Design, Laboratory Science, Language for Life and Work, Maths, Media, Music, Musical Theatre, Photography, Psychology, Sciences, Sports Coaching, Travel and Tourism, and **Foundation Apprenticeships** being delivered in subjects such as Hospitality and Health, Science Technologies and Social Care.

It should also be noted that a number of those interviewed stated that their school’s delivery of non-National Course qualifications was often in conjunction with local colleges.

In addition, it should be noted that a number of the educators interviewed stated that their department or school were considering future delivery of a range of non-National Course qualifications in terms of Skills for Work qualifications, NPAs and Foundation Apprenticeships.

3.1.4 Non-National Course qualifications: Valued and Promoted in Schools?

Non-National Course Qualifications Being Valued

There was a **widespread belief** amongst the educators interviewed that non-National Course qualifications are valued – and, indeed, are increasingly valued – by their school, with this being **primarily** being evidenced by a number of factors, including:

- The delivery of non-National Course qualifications in their school
- Increased interest in the delivery of non-National Course qualifications in the near future
- Non-National Course qualifications providing an opportunity for learners to continue learning, rather than leaving school (particularly those to whom it is believed that these might be best suited)
- Non-National Course qualifications being viewed as being an important part of a schools wider curriculum or dedicated wider achievement curriculum
- Non-National Course qualifications promoting a learner pathway which is less stressful for some learners, particularly due to the lack of a final exam

Thereafter, **secondary mention** was made here of beliefs that non-National Course qualifications are valued by schools due to:

- Qualifications Scotland very much encouraging schools to go down this route

- Non-National Course qualifications being increasingly attractive to those in S6 who have completed their National Qualifications either fully or partially
- Teachers supporting pupils to work through and achieve non-National Course qualifications

It should be noted here, however, that there was a **concern** amongst a number of the educators that employers, some colleges and, in particular, some universities may not recognise the value of non-National Course qualifications, with evidence of some universities not recognising these qualifications at all or only taking them into account minimally when applications are made.

In this regard, it should also be noted that a number of the educators interviewed stated that they believed that non-National Course qualifications weren't valued as much as they should be.

Finally, a further point to take on board here is that reference was made here by a number of respondents of their **observation** that promoting the value of non-National Course qualifications to learners and their parents/carers has been a 'long journey'.

Promoting Non-National Course Qualifications

There was a **widespread belief** amongst the educators interviewed that their school promotes non-National Course qualifications **well**, particularly on the basis that it was made clear that they are available as an option choice.

In the context of the above, a number of **observations** are worthy of note, including:

- It was apparent that schools tend to promote non-National Course qualifications to learners to whom they believe they are best suited
- Many schools promote the availability of non-National Course qualifications which could be delivered in conjunction with partners, including for example, colleges
- A number of educators stated that their school was keen to promote alternative pathways in general to learners and that, in this regard, non-National Course qualifications were seen as an effective and accessible alternative pathway given their emphasis on non-examinable outcomes
- A number of the educators interviewed stated that, as well as non-National Course qualifications being an option choice for all learners, many teachers promote these qualifications in classes and to individual pupils on an informal basis in order to increase awareness and understanding of them and the extent to which they may represent a learning option that some learners would be attracted to

- “We promote non-National Course qualifications a lot, particularly to particular types of learners, for example, those who would find Highers difficult, although everyone has them as an option choice”
- “We like, where possible, to deliver non-National Course qualifications in partnership with others in the town, particularly our local college as we believe that this is a good learning experience for a lot of pupils”
- “We don’t just note that these qualifications are an option for learners, but a lot of teachers talk to their classes about them and also they talk to individual pupils to tell them more about these qualifications and how they can be of benefit to them”

3.1.5 Experience of Delivering/Supporting the Delivery of Non-National Course Qualifications

Educator experiences of delivering and/or supporting the delivery of non-National Course qualifications were mixed, with references to both **positives** and **negatives**.

The **primary positives** noted were:

- Enhancing the opportunity for schools to work more closely with partners, including other schools and colleges
- Having staff (including staff with specialised knowledge) and timetabling capacity (particularly in S6) to deliver non-National Course qualifications, although there were concerns noted in this regard in terms of the extent to which both of these would continue to be the case as the number of non-National Course qualifications delivered increased within a school

Thereafter, a **secondary positive** noted here was the level and quality of support provided by Qualifications Scotland.

Finally, **more specific reference** was made here to **positive** experiences of delivering and/or supporting the delivery of non-National Course qualifications in terms of there being no preparation for final exam (which was noted as being time consuming for National 5).

In terms of **negatives** of delivering and/or supporting the delivery of non-National Course qualifications, a number emerged with **notable prominence**, including:

- Staffing and timetabling issues (despite this not being an issue for many of the educators interviewed)

- The administrative burden associated with delivering and supporting the delivery of non-National Course qualifications

Thereafter, a number of **more specific negatives** were noted here, including:

- The complexity of the processes associated with the verification of non-National Course qualifications (including specific references to NPAs)
- The frustration for schools of some universities not recognising – or sufficiently recognising – non-National Course qualifications having gone through the effort to teach them
- Inconsistent support from Qualifications Scotland (and previously SQA, albeit, as noted earlier, that a number of the educators interviewed praised the support provided by these organisations)
- The volume of assessments associated with the delivery of non-National Course qualifications which can be a significant burden for teachers
- Lack of support from a school's Local Authority (albeit that this was seen as improving through time as Local Authorities recognise the value and role of non-National Course qualifications as a learner pathway)

Finally, it should be noted that there were **mixed views** regarding supporting documentation available on the SQA – and now Qualifications Scotland – website relating to non-National Course qualifications, with some being good and others being poor and, in some cases, non-existent (with this making it difficult for teachers to deliver these qualifications well).

- “Non-National Course qualifications are great because they give the opportunity for myself and others in the school to work with

partners. Personally I do a lot of work with other schools and colleges”

- “We’re lucky because we have a number of staff who have particular skills which are relevant to a number of non-National Course qualifications and we’ve also got the space in our timetables to deliver them.”
- “Actually, unlike other schools you’ve spoken to, we have real problems in terms of staffing and timetabling non-National Course qualifications”
- “The administration and stuff you have to do when you’re delivering or want to deliver non-National Course qualifications is huge”

3.1.6 Learner Experiences of Studying for Non-National Course Qualifications

The educators interviewed **overwhelmingly** believed that learner experiences of studying for non-National Course qualifications were positive, **primarily** in terms of:

- Better suiting learners learning style, particularly those who may be less academic
- Non-National Course qualifications being more enjoyable and interesting than National 5s and Highers (which promotes engagement and attendance)
- Non-National Course qualifications being less stressful than Highers for many learners (particularly in terms of there being no requirement for a final exam)
- The practical/real world nature of some aspects of learning whilst studying non-National Course qualifications

Thereafter, **further positives** identified here by educators included:

- Providing some learners with more achievable outcomes than Highers
- Providing skills which will be of value in future learning and in the workplace (for example, such as communication and presentation skills)
- The ability to have the achievement of units recognised, even if a full course is not passed, which provides a sense of achievement for learners and is valuable when considering their future options
- The value that S6 pupils are increasingly recognising in terms of studying and achieving non-National Course qualifications in supporting applications to universities, together with the opportunity to building on qualifications previously achieved

Indeed, it was argued that the positive learner experience of working towards non-National Course qualifications is evidenced by:

- The value they place on them in terms of helping them to move forward in their learning and employment pathways
- Increasing uptake of non-National Course qualifications through time within schools

Finally, it is of interest to note that, although few in number, there were some educators who noted **negative experiences** for learners here, namely:

- A perceived 'prestige gap' amongst both learners and parents/carers between non-National Course qualifications at Level 6 and Highers
- The amount of assessment required of pupils (which was, at times, described as being 'onerous') which was a particular issue for pupils with a poor attendance record

- “I think a lot of learners really enjoy non-National Course qualifications because they better suit them in terms of the way they like to learn and the fact that it’s a lot less stressful than taking Highers”
- “Pupils really seem to enjoy non-National Course qualifications and they find them far more interesting than things like National 5s and Highers. That’s good because they tend to engage more in classes and attend school more often than they would or would even still be here in the first place”
- “Learners enjoy the practical parts of non-National Course qualifications and the fact that they are learning things that apply to what’s going on around them”

3.1.7 Key Drivers for Uptake of Non-National Course Qualifications

The **primary** key drivers identified by educators for uptake of non-National Course qualifications were:

- Increased employability of learners through developing real world skills which align with industry and employer needs
- Enhancing opportunities for learners to go on to further learning, particularly those who may struggle with Highers
- The opportunity for learners to broaden their skills and knowledge which would be of value, not only in terms of developing life skills, but also in terms of supporting university applications for those in S6

Thereafter, a number of **secondary** key drivers were noted, including:

- There being no requirement to sit a final exam and a preference for continual assessment approach
- Teaching staff promoting the value of non-National Course qualifications for whom they are best suited

- Non-National Course qualifications being increasingly recognised by universities

Finally, a number of **more specific** key drivers were identified, including:

- Non-National Course qualifications being more enjoyable and attractive than National 5s and Highers
- Parents and carers who, through being informed about non-National Course qualifications, promote them to their child

- “A lot of pupils are attracted to non-National Course qualifications because they know – by being informed by their teachers – that they will provide them with the type of skills which employers want”
- “A lot of learners want to study more but realise they are going to struggle with Highers so like the idea of these types of qualifications because they’ll allow them to do so”
- “When learners are told that non-National Course qualifications will develop their skills and knowledge which will be important to them when they leave school they tend to like the idea of this”

3.2 Value and Perception

3.2.1 Importance of School Learners Engaging in Some Form of Work-Based Learning

There was an **extremely widespread** belief amongst the educators interviewed that it is of great importance for all learners to engage in some form of work-based learning to support the development of their employability skills.

Indeed, it was stressed that work-based learning was an essential element for pupils in terms of preparing them for the future world of work, including those who were aspiring to go to university.

In particular, **primary reference** was made here to the importance of work-based learning in terms of:

- Providing a bridge between learning and the world of work and, in particular, facilitating a greater understanding of expectations of employers (including for example, in relation to discipline as it applies to time keeping) and what different types of jobs entail
- Work-based learning helping learners to see the real world relevance of their studies

In the context of these outcomes, however, it is of interest to note that a few of the educators interviewed believed that work-based learning was less important for those aspiring to go to university after school, on the basis that their vocational destination was several years away and also in the context of the need for these learners to devote as much time as possible to achieving National 5s, Highers and Advanced Highers (together with achieving non-National Course qualifications to support university applications).

Finally, **two observations** are worthy of note here, namely that:

- It is apparent that schools are constantly trying to establish work-based opportunities for their learners
- Schools are finding it increasingly difficult to find work-based learning opportunities due to lack of local business engagement (which they felt was increasingly the case in the current economic climate)

- “It’s really important that all learners – no matter what level they are at or how clever they are – should get involved in work-based learning. As I said earlier, the practical nature of work-based learning is important because it helps learners to see how what they are studying relates to the real world”
- “Work-based learning helps learners to see what employers want from them once they start working. One of the big things for me is people who don’t attend or turn up for school late. They find out in the workplace you simply can’t do that as an employer will just tell you not to come back”

3.2.2 Barriers to Delivering Non-National Course Qualifications in the Senior Phase

There was a general belief that there are more barriers for schools than there are for educators and learners in terms of delivering non-National Course qualifications in the senior phase, although the extent and nature of these barriers varied between schools.

For **centres**, the **primary** barriers identified were those of:

- Timetabling issues (and, in particular, having sufficient time to deliver non-National Course qualifications in the context of the need to deliver National Qualifications), with there being concerns that these issues will increase as schools have a desire to deliver more non-National Course qualifications
- Staffing issues, including lack of staff to deliver these qualifications, allied to lack of staff who have specialised knowledge in order to do so with, again, there being concerns about this increasingly being the case as schools seek to expand the delivery of non-National Course qualifications
- Lack of facilities and equipment for particular vocational activities undertaken during the course of delivering elements of non-National

Course qualifications, with this being allied to the cost of procuring suitable equipment and concerns about space availability to deliver these courses

Thereafter, **more specific mention** was made of barriers for centres in terms of the delivery of non-National Course qualifications in relation to:

- A belief that schools are being increasingly judged by their performance in National 5s, Highers and Advanced Highers and, therefore, need to focus more time on these types of qualifications rather than non-National Course qualifications
- The administrative workload associated with the delivery of non-National Course qualifications
- Complex approval and verification processes associated with the delivery of non-National Course qualifications
- Lack of support from Local Authorities

For **learners** – and their **parents/carers** – a **key barrier** to the delivery of non-National Course qualifications were perceptions of their relatively low credibility, with this being associated with a challenge to persuade both learners and their parents/carers that these qualifications are both credible and valuable, particularly those learners and parents/carers who had a preference to go down a more ‘traditional academic route’.

It should also be noted that, with reference to **educators** – and in the context of timetabling issues noted earlier – a **key barrier** is lack of time for them to deliver non-National Course qualifications.

Furthermore, for both **educators** and **learners**, it was believed that a **key barrier** was the volume of assessments required in the delivery of non-National Course qualifications, particularly in the context of

achieving assessment requirements where attendance is an issue for a pupil.

Finally, in the context of the outcomes noted above, it is of interest to note that, for both **centres** and **learners**, there is a **challenge** for them to identify colleges and universities which accept non-National Course qualifications.

- “We find it really difficult to deliver the full content of N5s and to get pupils through N4s so, having to fit in teaching non-National Course qualifications is a big issue for us”
- “We just don’t have the facilities or stuff to do what we’d really like to do. We used to have a lot of space but because our school role has increased, we can’t use that for the practical elements of non-National Course qualifications. Also, it costs us a fortune to buy equipment and we just don’t have that kind of money”
- “A lot of learners and their parents just don’t think that non-National Course qualifications have any real credibility. When you suggest them to some learners and their parents, they’re just not interested in them because of that. It’s a really difficult thing to change their minds, particularly when you’re trying to persuade the parent of a learner going into S6 that these types of qualifications would be valuable to their son or daughter”

3.2.3 Image Problem for Vocational Qualifications Compared to National Qualifications

There was a **strong consensus** amongst the educators interviewed that there **is** an image problem for Vocational Qualifications compared to National Qualifications amongst parents/carers and learners.

The **primary image problem** identified was that Vocational Qualifications per se continue to be viewed as being less credible and

having less integrity than National Qualifications, particularly amongst learners and parents/carers of learners following a more ‘traditional academic route’ (albeit that this view was also held by many learners and parents/carers of learners who were less likely to follow a ‘traditional academic route’). In this regard, it should be stressed that there was a widespread belief that this **image issue** needs to be addressed significantly and urgently.

Amongst those who believed that there was an image issue here, **more specific references** were made to beliefs that:

- The image problem between Vocational Qualifications and National Qualifications is similar to that between National 4s and National 5s, (ie with the latter being viewed as more credible)
- This image problem is driven, in part, by lack of recognition of Vocational Qualifications by some colleges and, in particular, some universities

Amongst the minority of educators who believed that there was **not** an image problem for Vocational Qualifications compared to National Qualifications, this was due to their observation of positive learning experiences of undertaking and achieving Vocational Qualifications.

In particular, these respondents believed that any image problems here are decreasing through time as Vocational Qualifications are increasingly seen as a valuable alternative route for learners of all types of academic ability.

- “There’s definitely a real image problem for VQs compared to NQs. They’re just not seen as being as credible”
- “We really need to address this issue. It’s a bit like the image problem for National 4s versus National 5s. That’s not just going away. It’s getting worse”

3.2.4 Employer Engagement

It was apparent from the programme of educators interviews that employers engage with their school, although the extent to which this was the case varied from one school to another.

It was also apparent that employer engagement is facilitated by a wide range of methods, including through:

- Dedicated DYW co-ordinators or teams (which were mentioned by a number of those interviewed)
- Employers coming into schools to speak with pupils, including careers talks for those in the senior phase and conducting mock interviews
- Employers delivering training in schools
- Employer fairs and events
- Mentoring of learners
- Local Authority support teams
- Curriculum partnerships with employers which help to 'bring the curriculum to life'
- Careers advisers

With respect to employer engagement, a number of **observations** are worthy of note:

- That employers increasingly find it difficult to engage with schools due to having challenging business and economic circumstances
- COVID-19 decreasing engagement massively and employers not fully recovering from this making it more difficult for them to engage with schools
- There being significant geographical barriers for school in remote areas in terms of their ability to engage with employers

- There being greater barriers to engagement with employers for schools in poorer areas

- “It’s really difficult to get employers to engage with us. A lot of them are having really tough times and are focusing on their business rather than putting aside time to deal with their local schools”
- “Because we’re in a rural location, there’s not that many employers near us so that’s a factor both in terms of low number of employers but also in terms of time and cost of getting pupils to visit employers or placed with them”
- “As you know, we’re in a poor area of Glasgow and for some reason employers don’t want to work with us as much as employers in richer areas want to work with their local schools”

3.3 Future Pathways

3.3.1 Learner Skills and Knowledge Gaps

This element of the one-to-one interviews elicited minimal feedback on the basis that there was a widespread consensus amongst educators that there are **no notable or significant skills or knowledge gaps** they felt learners have when they leave school that Qualifications Scotland qualifications could better address. However, there were **two exceptions** here that related to AI and soft employability skills.

Artificial Intelligence

It was felt that AI poses a **significant challenge** for teaching in all academic environments and, in this regard, schools are taking steps to try and identify where AI has been used in work undertaken outside the classroom, particularly assignments which are part of National 5 and other non-directed learning activities. It was stressed, however, that

despite their efforts, it's very difficult for schools to identify where AI has been utilised by a learner. In this regard, a number of the educators interviewed stated that their school had taken the decision to ensure that first drafts of assignments are undertaken in classroom settings. Thereafter, however, second drafts are often very different but it's difficult to tell whether or not this change is due to the use of AI by learners.

In the context of the outcomes noted above, many of the educators expressed their desire to ensure that learners better understand the pitfalls and drawbacks associated with using AI in their learning, particularly in terms of them developing a correct appreciation of the level of their skills and knowledge

Soft Employability Skills

In terms of learner skills and knowledge gaps, reference was made to the ability of learners to work and interact with others in the workplace and, in particular, being able to work effectively as part of a team and take instruction from colleagues and, in time, provide instructions to colleagues at lower levels.

In addition, reference was made to gaps in soft employability skills in terms of, for example:

- The ability to work as part of a team
- Communication skills
- The ability to prepare and deliver presentations
- The ability to write reports that reflect the need of a task set and can be understood by colleagues and others
- The ability to deal with and answer questions when posed
- The ability to challenge appropriately
- The ability to operate in task-based professional environments

- Discipline required in the workplace, including timekeeping and the ability to complete tasks as scheduled
- Workplace etiquette, ranging from behaviours to dress code requirements
- The ability to interact and work effectively with customers and clients

- “AI is a nightmare for us, particularly when N5 learners are doing assignments, but also when learners in S5 and S6 are doing learning outwith the classroom”
- “Pupils have got to learn using AI is just cheating themselves. They’ll end up thinking they’re a lot smarter than they actually are but that will come back to bite them either later on at school or if they get to college or university”
- “Very often pupils leave school not really knowing how to work as part of a team. Okay, sometimes they’ll do group work but mostly they’re just learning on their own so I think we need to address that gap which is something which I think non-National Course qualifications are actually doing”

3.3.2 Non-National Course Qualifications Supporting Learner Pathways and Progression Routes

Ways in Which Non-National Course Qualifications Support Learner Pathways and Progression Routes Well

There was a **strong consensus** amongst the educators interviewed that non-National Course qualifications support learner pathways and progression routes well, particularly for ‘less able’ pupils, but also to an increasing extent for those who are ‘more able’. This belief that these qualifications are supporting learner pathways and progression routes well was **primarily** due to two factors, including:

- By supporting learners in terms of pathways and progression routes by teaching employability skills that will better prepare them for the workplace
- By offering achievable progression to further learning and the workplace

Thereafter, **secondary mention** was made in this regard of this being achieved by these qualifications:

- Providing the types of skills that will not only be useful for future learning and employment, but also for life outwith learning or workplace environments, particularly for learners who find it difficult to cope with National Qualifications in the senior phase
- Providing a less stressful learning route for learners

Finally, **more specific reference** was made here to beliefs that non-National Course qualifications support learner pathways and progression routes well due to them being beneficial for those who are suffering from mental health issues or anxiety.

- “These types of qualifications definitely help learners to move forward, particularly in terms of making them more employable and making sure that they’re better able to cope with a workplace environment in future”
- “For years and years, learners have left school and haven’t really got any proper life skills. They might have good academic qualifications, but nothing beyond that that helps them in their life. I think non-National Course qualifications are trying to do that”

Ways in Which Existing Non-National Course Qualifications Could Support Learner Pathways and Progression Routes Better

Educators **primarily** believed that existing non-National Course qualifications could support learner pathways and progression routes better:

- If their value and credibility could be better recognised by learners, parents/carers, employers, colleges and universities
- If employer understanding of these qualifications could be improved
- If there was a wider range of non-National Course qualifications which would allow them to be better tailored to learner needs
- If these qualifications could contribute more effectively streamlined learner pathways and progression routes, particularly in terms of making efforts to ensure that they are not viewed as being 'standalone' or 'isolated'

- "Non-National Course qualifications could support learner pathways and progression routes better if Qualifications Scotland could persuade employers and others that they are actually valuable and credible"
- "These pathways and routes you're talking about are not nearly as streamlined as they could be and I think there's a role for these types of qualifications to help streamline that process as this will help learners to move more smoothly through future learning or transition into the workplace"

3.4 Desires For Future Non-National Course Qualifications

The process of asking educators interviewed what else they would like to see in any possible non-National Course qualifications in the senior phase was done at the end of each interview and was very much a 'summing up exercise' and, therefore, little detail was provided by respondents. However, on this basis, **primary desires** expressed were for:

- More project based learning
- Qualifications having a strong skills development focus
- Qualifications having specific sectoral pathways
- Qualifications being more industry led
- Better qualification provision at lower SCQF levels

Thereafter, **secondary mention** was made of desires for non-National Course qualifications in the senior phase:

- Incorporating more work-based learning
- Having greater scrutiny of future non-National Course qualifications, particularly where these do not incorporate a final exam

Finally, **more specific mention** was made here of desires for non-National Course qualifications to:

- Incorporate more interdisciplinary learning
- Reduce the amount of administrative burden and paperwork

- “There’s a good chance that a lot of learners will leave school and go on to other courses or into jobs where they’ll have to complete projects, so we need to make sure they’re leaving school with skills that will help them work effectively as part of a project team”

- “The focus for future non-National Course qualifications should be making sure that learners leave with strong skills to allow them to have an immediate impact when they start working”
- “We need future non-National Course qualifications to be clearly targeting particular sectors. We can do that by making sure that employers and industry in general contribute more to the development of these qualifications which will help make sure that that learners are better prepared for the workplace and can make a positive impact on the economy”
- “I think non-National Course qualifications at SCQF 1 to 3 would be useful. It would get learners used to the idea of not needing to go down an academic route and help demonstrate the value of alternative ways of learning”

4.0 KEY COMMONALITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN THE VIEWS EXPRESSED BY LEARNERS AND EDUCATORS

This section of the report highlights key commonalities and differences in the views expressed by learners and educators.

It should be stressed that there were relatively few common topics which were asked of learners **and** educators resulting in there being a relatively limited extent to which commonalities and differences could be noted.

Despite this, there was evidence that educators had more awareness and understanding of non-National Course qualifications than learners, even when learners rated their awareness as being high.

Whilst learners believed that uptake of these qualifications were primarily driven by teacher suggestion, the desire to avoid exams and by those who were attracted to less formal and more practical learning, possibly outwith a school environment, educators believed that uptake was driven by these qualifications offering the opportunity for learners to broaden their skills and knowledge.

Lastly, it should be noted that there were some differences in terms of suggestions for the focus of future non-National Course qualifications, with learners emphasising a need for their incorporation of practical elements and ongoing assessment, and educators emphasising project-based learning, skills development, provision at lower SCQF levels, and greater – potentially external – scrutiny of these qualifications.