

REPORT (FINAL DRAFT)
KEY FINDINGS:
RESEARCH INTO NQ AND NON-NATIONAL COURSE
QUALIFICATIONS REFORM
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**Key Findings:
Research into NQ and Non-National Course
Qualifications Reform**

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

This report details findings to emerge from two pieces of qualitative research undertaken on behalf of Qualifications Scotland which focused on:

- The reform of National 4 and National 5 qualifications
- The reform of non-National Course Qualifications

1.1 National Qualifications (NQ) Reform

Learner Focus Groups

The focus groups were undertaken amongst learners who were currently studying National 4 and/or National 5 qualifications, or who had recent experience of doing so. Within each group, there was a gender split and range of learners of varying academic ability.

The focus groups were undertaken with school learners across Scotland.

One-to-One Educator Interviews

The educators interviewed were currently teaching National 4 and/or National 5 courses, or had recently done so. There was a gender split in terms of the educators interviewed, they taught a variety of subjects, had a range of educator job roles (such as classroom teachers, heads of departments, Qualifications Scotland Co-ordinators, head teachers and depute head teachers) and a range of SIMD and geographical areas.

1.2 Non-National Course Qualifications Reform

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 educators interviewed:

- Were delivering or had delivered non-National Course qualifications
- Those making decisions about what was offered in schools
- Designed school timetables

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

1.3 Timeframes

The learner focus groups and educator interviews for both pieces of research were undertaken during February and March 2026.

1.4 Report Structure

Section 2.0 details key findings to emerge from NQ Reform Research, whilst Section 3.0 details findings to emerge from the non-National Course Qualifications Reform research.

2.0 KEY FINDINGS: RESEARCH INTO NQ REFORM

2.1 Learner Focus Group Outcomes

2.1.1 Overall Experience

- Learners believed that the primary ‘good things’ about National Courses were that they didn’t have a final exam, were assessed on an ongoing basis and were easier than National 5s
- Learners believed that the two primary problems or challenges associated with National 4 courses were that they were too easy to pass and not sufficiently challenging, and that there is a stigma associated with studying National 4s rather than National 5s which was based on a perception amongst many learners that National 4s are not as credible as National 5s
- Learners believed that the primary ‘good things’ about National 5 courses were that they are fair and appropriately challenging and that they incorporate an end of year exam
- Few learners identified any notable problems or challenges with National 5 courses, with those noted primarily relating to pressure, stress and anxiety associated with preparing for the final exam, concerns about – or experience of – covering all of the course content for National 5 courses in sufficient depth and the ‘big step up’ between National 5s and Highers
- There was a significant degree of uncertainty amongst learners in terms of what Qualifications Scotland should think about when reforming National 4 and National 5 qualifications. Nonetheless, the primary change suggested by those studying – or who had previously studied – National 5s was to reduce the gap between National 5 qualifications and Highers

2.1.2 Assessment and Grading

- There was a general consensus amongst learners that National 4s should be assessed by teachers, particularly amongst those who were studying for these qualifications
- Those in favour of National 4s being assessed by teachers primarily stated that this was the case due to their belief that teachers better understand their learners' skills and abilities and, therefore, can assess them more effectively, particularly on the basis of having a better understanding of what learners are saying in their answers
- Learners had a preference for National 4 assessments to be graded, with this preference tending to be far stronger amongst those sitting National 5s than those sitting National 4s. It should be stressed, however, that there was a notable degree of debate in this regard
- Preference for grading of National 4 assessments was primarily due to a belief that this was a fairer way to demonstrate the performance and ability of pupils
- Learners generally believed that assignments at National 5 should count more towards final National 5 outcomes, primarily due to a belief that this would take pressure off of pupils in terms of their performance in the final exam
- Learners tend to strongly believe that assignments at National 5 should be graded, primarily due to a belief that this is an effective means of demonstrating how well a pupil has performed in their assignment
- There was a notable preference amongst learners for National 5 assignments to be marked by Qualifications Scotland rather than

teachers, primarily due to the belief that teachers marking assignments would impact on the credibility of assignment grades

- There was a total consensus amongst learners that Qualifications Scotland should be marking final exams rather than teachers, primarily due to a belief that the marking of exams by Qualifications Scotland facilitates and promotes credibility of outcomes
- Although subject to a degree of debate, on balance, there was a desire for teachers or schools to create assignments that count towards National 5 qualifications, but absolutely no desire or preference for schools and teachers to create final exams that count towards National 5 qualifications due to beliefs that it is of critical importance to the credibility of National 5 exams that they are created by Qualifications Scotland and a desire to ensure consistency and comparability across Scotland

2.1.3 Size and Structure of Courses

- Learners strongly believe that those who sit National 4s have enough time to complete all of the course content in them, with many participants believing that there was more than enough time to complete all of the course content of many National 4s
- It would seem apparent that learners spend little time outside the classroom studying for National 4s, primarily due to a belief that they don't need to do so
- Learners often encounter difficulties in terms of completing all of the course content of National 5 courses, with some suggesting that the content of some National 5 courses should be reduced, although there were concerns raised in terms of the extent to which this would impact on the credibility of National 5 qualifications and

would increase the gap even more between National 5s and Highers

- Many learners spend a significant amount of time studying for their National 5s outwith the classroom, particularly in terms of homework and assignment preparation
- Learners were fairly evenly split between those who were for or against National 5 courses being taught in smaller blocks of study, with those in favour of this primarily referring to a belief that this would allow issues or difficulties that learners were facing to be identified and addressed quickly

2.2 One-to-One Educator Interviews

2.2.1 Overall Experience

- Educators primarily believe that the positives of National 4 courses are the absence of a final exam and these qualifications allowing access to learning for less academic and more practically orientated learners, including those who are likely to struggle with National 5
- Educators identified a wide range of problems or challenges associated with National 4 courses, with these primarily focusing around National 4s not being viewed positively by many learners, parents/carers and, increasingly, teachers, colleges and employers, lack of external assessment of National 4s, there not being a final exam for these qualifications, lack of attendance and the significant amount of support National 4 learners require from teachers which is a particular challenge in the context of bi-level teaching
- Educators primarily believe that the positives about National 5 courses are that they have a final exam which is externally marked,

prepare learners better for assessment at Higher, Advanced Higher and beyond, have established a highly positive profile quickly in terms of their quality and integrity, incorporate an element of independent learning and are a highly effective pathway to move on to study for Highers and beyond

- Educators identified four key problems or challenges that were associated with National 5 qualifications, namely there being too much courses content (which is a challenge for both learners and pupils), the amount of content being unmanageable (which is a significant challenge for teachers), the 'jump' between National 5s and Highers and the pressure and stress of the final exam for some pupils which can lead to poor performance 'on the day'
- The educators interviewed identified a number of primary issues or challenges in the delivery of National 4 and National 5 courses, namely lack of time to cover all course content in sufficient depth in National 5s, significant challenges associated with bi-level teaching, attendance issues, particularly at National 4 level, the amount of remedial time which must be spent with pupils who are frequently absent from school, peaks in teacher workload and trying to minimise the gap for learners between National 5 and Highers
- Educators identified a number of key principles which they believed were important to be taken into account when Qualifications Scotland was reforming qualifications at National 4 and National 5, namely reintroducing the closed book assessment of National 5s, ensuring that course content can be taught in sufficient depth, aligning assignment and classroom content better, retaining assignments within National 5s and considering increasing the extent to which they contribute towards final outcomes, making extensive efforts to decrease the gap between National 5s and Highers, considering introducing an option of National 5 pupils only

submitting an assignment and introducing more internal assessments of National 5s

2.2.2 Assessment and Grading

- Educators were relatively evenly split in terms of believing that National 4 assessments should be marked by teachers, with those believing that this should be the case placing the argument around beliefs that teachers better understand the skills and abilities of pupils they work with and could reflect this when marking submitted assessments and that the marking of assessments allows teachers to monitor pupil progress and identify issues/problems they face and, thereafter, address these issues or problems
- For those who did not believe that National 4 assessments should be marked by teachers, this was primarily due to beliefs that this impacts on the credibility of National 4 qualifications, there being a lack of quality assurance associated with internal marking, concerns about bias in teacher marking, concerns that teachers may allocate marks that are better than they should be, this will reduce pressure and workload for teachers and that some National 4 learners will work harder if they knew that Qualifications Scotland will be marking their assessments
- There was, again, a split between educators who believed that National 4 assessments should continue to be on a pass/fail basis rather than be graded, primarily due to a belief that this approach puts less pressure on many pupils and is less daunting than a graded outcome
- For those who had a preference for a graded approach, this was primarily due to beliefs that this will enhance the credibility and perceived value of National Qualifications amongst a wide range of

audiences and that this is fairer for learners who perform well and is a better measure of pupil performance

- Educators were split in terms of believing that assignments should count more towards National 5 qualifications, with those believing that this should be the case primarily stating that this was due to this relieving pressure on performance in the final exam, whilst for those who believed that this should not be the case, this was primarily due to concerns about external influences/inputs to assignments and, in particular, the advent of AI
- There was a strong consensus that more of a learner's grade at National 5 should not be based on assessments marked by teachers rather than Qualifications Scotland
- Educators unanimously believed that the National 5 final exam should continue to be marked by Qualifications Scotland and not by teachers on the basis that this was of critical importance to the perceived value and credibility of these qualifications
- There was a degree of debate amongst educators as to whether or not more of a learners grade at National 5 should be based on assignments (and, potentially, additional assessments were this to be introduced) being marked by teachers rather than Qualifications Scotland. On balance, however, this was viewed as being an unfavoured approach, primarily due to concerns about the credibility of qualifications and/or additional assessments being marked by teachers and increasing workload for teachers were this to be introduced
- Educators in favour of teachers marking assignments believed this was due to teachers better understanding the skills and abilities of

those they teach and, therefore, being better able to interpret what is presented in assignments or any additional assessments

- Educators unanimously believed that National 5 final exams should continue to be marked by Qualifications Scotland, on the basis that this was of critical importance to the perceived value and credibility of these qualifications
- There was also universal agreement amongst the educators that more of a learners grade at National 5 should not be based on the creation of these by teachers or schools rather than by Qualifications Scotland, with this being underpinned by concerns about the negative impact that this would have on the credibility of National 5 qualifications and concerns about the lack of consistency across Scotland

2.2.3 Size and Structure of Courses

- On balance, there was a preference amongst educators for National 5 courses to be taught and assessed in smaller blocks of study, with this preference being primarily due to beliefs that this will help to better monitor pupil progress, identify and address problems quickly and that this will be more manageable for pupils
- For those who did not have a preference for National 5 courses being taught and assessed in smaller blocks, this was primarily due to concerns about teachers being able to cover all course content in sufficient depth and missed assessments for those who are off due to illness or other issues
- Generally, there was a belief that National 4 courses are too small, many National 5 courses are too big and that some National 5 courses 'feel about right' in terms of their size

- Amongst those who believed that the notional sizes for National 4 courses were unrealistic, this was due to a number of factors, including beliefs that there is very often no need for 80 hours of self-directed learning in National 4 courses and there is very often no need for 160 hours of directed learning in National 4 courses
- In terms of National 5 courses, particular concerns were noted in terms of 160 hours of directed learning within a year being unrealistic in terms of the ability for teachers to cover all course content in sufficient depth
- Educators identified a range of issues or challenges in the delivery of National 4 and National 5 courses, with these primarily focusing around lack of time to cover all course content in sufficient depth, significant challenges associated with bi-level teaching, including non-alignment of content in the same subject at two levels, impacts on the learning experience of pupils for teachers, and difficulties in delivering practical elements of courses, attendance issues, and trying to minimise the gap for learners between National 5 and Highers

3.0 KEY FINDINGS: RESEARCH INTO NON-NATIONAL COURSE QUALIFICATIONS REFORM

3.1 Learner Focus Group Outcomes

3.1.1 Awareness and Understanding of Non-National Course Qualifications

- There appear to be high levels of awareness of non-National Course qualifications available in the senior phase across all of the focus groups. 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 the qualifications from the non-National Course qualifications portfolio and, in particular, the number of qualifications of which they were aware
- There was a notable degree of variability in terms of understanding of non-National Course qualifications in the focus groups
- It was apparent that non-National Course qualifications are promoted well in all of the schools that were participating in the research and in a number of ways, and 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
- Those studying for non-National Course qualifications were primarily studying for Skills for Work qualifications, National Progression Awards and Foundation Apprenticeships
- Those who chose to study for non-National Course qualifications fell into a number of categories, whilst for those who were not studying for such 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, teachers advising them that they would be best to focus on National 5s, Highers or Advanced Highers, having concerns that working towards non-National Course qualifications would impact upon their ability to perform well and achieve good results in their National Qualifications and parental concerns as to the validity and credibility of non-National Course qualifications

- A number of focus group participants had had the opportunity to undertake learning at college, with a training provider or with an employer, with the vast majority of others believing that they would have liked to have had the opportunity to do so, with there being a belief that this had or would be associated with a range of positives

3.1.2 Value and Perception

- The focus group participants 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, non-National Course qualifications not having a final exam and learners developing life skills and knowledge in general and knowledge which will be of benefit for further learning and succeeding in the workplace
- The primary disadvantages of studying for non-National Course qualifications which were identified by focus group participants focused around these qualifications not being considered to be as credible as National Qualifications, these qualifications not being graded and that lack of grading may be an issue for employers and universities

- There was a strong consensus that non-National Course qualifications are valued by schools but to a lesser extent by parents/carers, universities and employers
- Non-National Course qualifications appear to be promoted in schools but the extent to which this was on an equal basis with National Qualifications varied
- It was apparent that, given the different academic levels and abilities of those participating in the focus groups, there are a wide range of post-school destinations which were being considered or aspired to
- 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 to where they wanted to go
- There were four primary elements that those participating in the focus groups believed that future non-National Course qualifications should incorporate, namely knowledge and skills that employers and industry want learners to have, practical elements, work experience/work-based elements and ongoing assessments/ assignments which would represent a significant contribution to final grades (were the qualification to be graded)

3.2 Educator One-to-One Interview Outcomes

3.2.1 Awareness and Experience 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 that they had a reasonably well-developed understanding of these qualifications

- There was a consensus amongst the educators interviewed that learners and 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 far more limited
- There was a widespread belief amongst the educators interviewed that awareness and understanding of non-National Course qualifications is improving
- There was significant variation in terms of the extent to which – and number of – non-National Course qualifications were delivered by an educator's school, ranging from those whose school delivered very few to those whose school delivered many, with non-National Course qualifications delivery primarily focusing around Skills for Work qualifications, National Progression Awards and Foundation Apprenticeships
- There was a widespread belief amongst the educators interviewed that non-National Course qualifications are valued – and, indeed, increasingly valued – by their school, with this being primarily a function of three factors, namely increased delivery of non-National Course qualifications in schools, increased interest in delivering these qualifications in the near future and non-National Course qualifications providing an opportunity for learners to continue learning, rather than leaving school
- There was a widespread belief amongst the educators interviewed that their school promotes non-National Course qualifications well, including on the basis that they are available as an option choice. However, it was apparent that schools tend to promote non-

National Course Qualifications to learners to whom they believe they are best suited

- The primary positives noted by educators in terms of their experience of delivering and/or supporting the delivery of non-National Course Qualifications were the enhanced opportunity for schools to work more effectively with partners, having staff (including staff with specialised knowledge) and timetabling capabilities (particularly in S6) to deliver non-National Course Qualifications
- The primary negatives identified by educators in terms of delivering and/or supporting delivery of non-National Course qualifications were staffing and timetabling issues (despite this not being an issue for many of the educators interviewed) and the administrative burden associated with delivering and supporting the delivering of non-National Course qualifications
- The educators interviewed overwhelmingly believed that learner experiences of studying for non-National Course qualifications were positive

3.2.2 Value and Perception

- Educators primarily believed that the key drivers for uptake of non-National Course qualifications were the opportunity for learners to broaden their skills and knowledge, increased employability of learners through developing real world skills and enhancing opportunities for learners to go to further learning, particularly those who may struggle with Highers
- There was an extremely widespread belief amongst 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

- 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 and that the primary barriers for schools were those of timetabling issues, staffing issues, and lack of facilities and equipment for particular vocational activities undertaken during the course of delivering elements of non-National Course 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, with the primary image problem identified being that Vocational Qualifications continue to be viewed as less credible and having less integrity than National Qualifications, particularly amongst learners and parents/carers of learners following a more 'traditional academic route'
- It was apparent from the programme of educator interviews that employers engage with schools, albeit that this is to a greater or lesser extent, with engagement being facilitated by a wide range of factors

3.2.3 Future Pathways

- There was a widespread consensus amongst the educators interviewed that there are no notable or significant skills or knowledge gaps that they felt learners have when they leave school that Qualifications Scotland could better address, with two exceptions relating to AI and 'soft' employability skills, with AI being believed to pose a significant challenge for teaching in all academic environments

- There was a strong consensus amongst 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 were 'more able', with this belief being due to a wide range of factors
- Educators primarily believe that existing non-National Course qualifications could support learner pathways and progression routes in a number of ways, including if employers understood these qualifications better, if there were a wider range of non-National Course qualifications, if these qualifications could contribute more effectively to streamline learner pathways and progression routes, and if their value and credibility could be better recognised by learners, parents/carers, employers, colleges and universities

3.2.4 Desires for Future Non-National Course Qualifications

- When educators interviewed were asked what else they would like to see in any possible non-National Course qualifications in the senior phase, their primary desires focused around more project based training, these qualifications having a strong skills development focus, specific sectoral pathways and being more industry led, and there being better qualification provision at lower SCQF levels