

**REPORT (FINAL DRAFT) RESEARCH
INTO NQ REFORM**
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Research into NQ 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 the possible reform of National 4 and National 5 qualifications.

A total of 6 focus groups were undertaken with learners in S4 to S6 (through a mix of face-to-face and virtual sessions) and 26 one-to-one interviews were undertaken with educators (all virtually).

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, with the focus groups incorporating learners in S4 and S5. Four of the focus groups consisted of 8 participants, with the two remaining focus groups consisting of 10 participants. 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 Scotland¹.

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, taught a variety of subjects and had a range of educator job roles (such as classroom teachers, heads of departments, Qualifications Scotland Co-ordinators, head teachers

¹ The topics covered in the focus groups were rotated in order to ensure that all were covered.

and depute head teachers) and range of SIMD and geographical areas²³.

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, verbatim comments are provided where appropriate.

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

² The topics covered in the interviews were rotated in order to ensure that all were covered.

³ Appendix I notes the subjects which respondents were currently teaching or had recently done so at either or both National 4 or National 5 levels.

2.0 LEARNER FOCUS GROUP OUTCOMES

2.1 Overall Experience

2.1.1 Positives of National 4 Courses

When those participating in the focus groups were asked what they thought was 'good' about National 4 courses, their **primary responses** focused around:

- National 4 courses not having a final exam
- National 4 courses being assessed on an ongoing basis
- National 4s being easier than National 5s

Thereafter, **secondary mention** was made here of:

- National 4s having less content than National 5s and, therefore, not putting so much pressure on learners
- National 4s being a good 'backup' for those who are struggling with National 5s, with references being made here to National 4s being a 'safety net'

Finally, **more specific mention** was made of positives of National 4 courses in terms of:

- National 4 courses often being quicker to achieve than National 5 courses which, it was felt, would be a particular advantage for those with attendance issues
- National 4 courses being a potential 'stepping stone' for those who achieve well and have the opportunity to either 'step up' to National 5 or study for National 5s at a later date

With respect to all of the outcomes noted above, it should be stressed that it was felt that, to a greater or lesser extent, they would make study at National 4 level more attractive for many learners, particularly those who may struggle to achieve National 5s.

- “For a lot of pupils, it’s good that Nat 4s don’t have a final exam. It puts less pressure on them as some people find sitting exams difficult” (N4 learner)
- “You get assessed as you go along through Nat 4s. That’s good because your teacher knows how you’re doing” (N4 learner)
- “National 4s are a lot easier than National 5s which means that a lot of pupils who wouldn’t be able to get a National 5 will be able to get a National 4” (N5 learner)

2.1.2 Problems or Challenges with National 4 Courses

Those participating in the focus groups identified two **primary** problems or challenges which they associated with National 4 courses, namely beliefs that:

- They were too easy to pass and not sufficiently challenging (albeit that there was recognition that, if they were to be made more difficult, pupils may struggle to achieve National 4s)
- There being a ‘stigma’ associated with studying for National 4s rather than National 5s – particularly noted by those studying for National 5s – including a specific stigma for those stepping down from National 5s to National 4s. This was based on a perception amongst many learners (and, indeed, some teachers) that National 4s are not as credible as National 5s

Thereafter, **secondary mention** was made here of:

- There being a big ‘step up’ from National 4 to National 5 for those taking this progression route, as a result of National 4s being ‘too easy’
- Teachers giving more attention to National 5 learners than National 4 learners where there is bi-level teaching (and, as part of this, a belief that teachers are ‘more interested’ in National 5 learners)
- There being no final exam for National 4s which adds to their perceived lack of value and credibility (albeit that, again, it was recognised that this is a feature of National 4s which will be attractive to many learners)

Finally, **more specific mention** was made here of problems or challenges associated with National 4s in terms of beliefs that:

- There can be difficulties for those stepping down from National 5 to National 4 due to content of these courses in the same subjects being significantly different
- Disruptive behaviour of those studying for National 4s – particularly, although not exclusively, noted by those studying National 5s – where there is bi-level teaching and the impact that this has on National 5 learners and also to some National 4 learners

- “Nat 4s are far too easy and don’t push people very hard, but if you made them harder some learners wouldn’t be able to pass them” (N5 learner)
- “If you study for Nat 4s, you get looked down on, particularly by people that are studying for Nat 5s who think they’re better than you” (N4 learner)
- “I had to step down from Nat 5 to Nat 4 in a couple of courses because I was finding them too difficult. It wasn’t a nice thing to go

through because of the attitude of some people about me doing this” (N5 learner)

2.1.3 Positives of National 5 Courses

When those participating in the focus groups were asked what they believed to be ‘good’ about National 5 courses, their **primary responses** focused around:

- National 5s having high credibility (due to having a final exam, course content and level of learning), particularly in comparison to National 4s
- National 5 courses being fair and appropriately challenging
- Having an end of year exam (which, it was believed, was a good preparation for sitting exams at Higher, Advanced Higher and beyond, and added to the credibility of National 5 qualifications)

Thereafter, **secondary reference** was made here to:

- Studying for and achieving National 5 qualifications building learner confidence to move onto Highers
- The assignment element of National 5 courses, on the basis that it promoted independent learning and was different from learning in the classroom

Finally, a range of **more specific positives** were noted in relation to National 5s, including:

- National 5s – both in terms of sitting a final exam and independent learning – being a good preparation to go onto college or university
- Studying for National 5s being part of a well-established pathway to Highers and Advanced Highers

- National 5 courses being well planned and structured (particularly compared to National 4s)
- The availability of online resources which can be accessed that relate to National 5 courses which are being studied
- The variety of subject choices at National 5
- Engagement of teachers in the teaching of National 5s (to a greater extent than is often the case in relation to National 4s)
- (For teachers) Not requiring to give as much help and support as they provide to National 4 learners

- “National 5s are at the right level for most people that are studying for them. They are quite challenging at times but that’s good” (N5 learner)
- “I think Nat 5s are better than Nat 4s in terms of having assignments and final exams” (N5 learner)
- “If you didn’t have an exam at the end of Nat 5s, the first exam you’d be sitting would be at Higher which would be far more difficult” (N5 learner)

2.1.4 Problems or Challenges with National 5 Courses

It was apparent across all of the groups that they had encountered **few** problems or challenges with National 5 courses.

Nonetheless, three emerged with some note, with these **primarily** relating to:

- Pressure, stress and anxiety associated with preparing for the final exam (although a number of participants made reference here to this being a ‘good thing’ as it made them focus on the need to study)

- Concerns or experience of teachers having difficulties in covering all course content, including covering course content in sufficient depth
- There being a 'big step up' between National 5s and Highers

In addition, a number of those participating in the focus groups made reference to there being a lack of guidance and support from their teachers in terms of preparing their assignment, which led to a degree of uncertainty as to what they should be doing and how the assignment should be best structured in order to achieve good marks.

- “Preparing for the final exam was really stressful. You have to put a lot of time in and you’re always worried that you will muck up on the day” (N5 learner)
- Some of my National 5 teachers are finding it really difficult to get through the course content and I’m not sure if we’re actually going to cover it all in some of my subjects. It seems like some teachers are just racing through to get all the content covered” (N5 learner)
- “There’s a big jump up to Highers. I know that because my big brother did Highers and National 5s and said there was a big difference in terms of the level you are learning at. That really worries me” (N4 learner)
- “Maybe Nat 5 should be at a higher level so there’s not so big a gap between them and Highers but I know that might make them more difficult for people to pass and get a good grade” (N5 learner)

2.1.5 Reforming National 4 and National 5 Qualifications

When participants were asked what they thought was most important for Qualifications Scotland to think about when reforming National 4 and National 5 qualifications, there was a significant degree of uncertainty, particularly amongst those who were currently studying National 4s.

However, despite this, 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, potentially by pitching them at a higher level.

Thereafter, **more specific suggestions** for change were made here in relation to:

- Increasing the content or difficulty of some National 4 courses and, more specifically, those which seem to be easy to pass due to lack and level of content (including references to some National 4s which can be passed with minimal attendance at school)
- Ensuring that National 4 and National 5 courses are not taught at the same time in the same classroom (which was very largely supported by those studying National 5s and also to some extent by those studying National 4s who were interested in achieving National 5s)
- Having more teacher support and guidance when National 5 assignments are being prepared

It is also of interest to note that there were three areas where participants believed there should be **no changes** in the reform of National 4 and National 5 qualifications, including:

- A belief that National 5 qualifications do not require major changes but only minor amendment
- Keeping assignments and final exams for National 5s (but potentially placing greater weighting on the former)
- Ensuring that National 4s can continue to be a fallback for those who find difficulty in working towards National 5s

- “They need to do something about the step up to Highers once you’ve done Nat 5s. I was really surprised when I started my Highers and found out how hard they were compared to Nat 5s”
(Higher learner)

2.2 Assessment and Grading

2.2.1 National 4 Qualifications Being Assessed by Teachers

There was a **general consensus** amongst those who had studied for – or who were studying – National 4s that they should be assessed by teachers, with those studying National 4s being most likely to agree that this should be the case.

For those who were in favour of National 4s being assessed by teachers, this was **primarily** due to their belief that teachers better understand their learner’s 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.

Thereafter, **more specific mention** was made here of receiving results more quickly than if they were externally assessed which allows any difficulties or problems for learners to be quickly identified and addressed.

For those who were **not** in favour of National 4 qualifications being assessed by teachers, this was **primarily** due to concerns that:

- Teachers could be biased either in favour or against particular pupils
- Teachers not being sufficiently skilled markers

- Teachers possibly being tempted – or potentially instructed – to mark easily in order that schools can hit their targets, with this resulting in National 4s being relatively easy to pass
- Colleges and employers possibly viewing National 4s as being less credible due to teacher assessment

Thereafter, **more specific reference** was made here to perceptions that:

- Teacher assessment resulting in pupils not being sufficiently ‘pushed’ on the basis of their belief that assessment should be easy
- Concerns about lack of consistency between departments in schools and between schools in the marking of assessments by teachers

- “Teachers should keep assessing National 4s. They know their pupils and can understand what they’re trying to say in their assessments. If someone didn’t know you, they might not realise that you are good at something but may not be good at putting that down in an assessment” (N4 learner)
- “Teachers can be biased when they mark, maybe because they like someone or maybe because they don’t like someone” (N5 learner)
- “Just because you’re a good teacher, doesn’t mean you’re a good marker” (N4 learner)
- “I think some teachers give better grades at National 4 than people deserve. I don’t know if they’re told to do that or not” (N5 learner)
- “If employers knew teachers were marking National 4s I don’t think they’d think much of them. I think they’d think much more about National 4s if they were marked by SQA” (N5 learner)

2.2.2 Pass/Fail or Grading of Qualification Outcomes

Across all of the learner groups, there was 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 and with no desire or intention to move on to study National 5s. It should, however, be stressed that there was a notable degree of debate in this regard.

Those who expressed a preference for National 4 qualifications to be graded **primarily** stated that:

- This was a fairer way to demonstrate the performance and abilities of pupils, on the basis that, if a pupil had worked very hard and achieved well, this would not be reflected in a pass/fail situation and, in particular, it would not be apparent that they had performed well and to a high standard, whilst other pupils performed far less well and had only just passed
- Grading of National 4 qualifications would make them more credible

In addition, there were **more specific beliefs** stated here by these participants, including:

- Grading potentially being preferred by colleges and employers as it would provide them with a better measure of an applicant's abilities
- Grading possibly encouraging learners to work harder in order to achieve a good grade

Those who expressed a preference for National Qualifications to be awarded on a pass/fail basis (which, it should be remembered, were in the minority) felt that this was preferable as there would be less pressure on pupils.

Furthermore, there was a belief that grading might put learners off working towards National 4s, thereby limiting their future learning options.

Finally, it should be noted that a number of learners in the focus groups believed that grading would not be a significant issue for employers on the basis that they would be primarily interested whether or not an applicant had passed a National 4.

- “I think you should get a grade for National 4s. If you’re just told you’ve passed or failed, that’s not fair if you’ve worked really hard and done well. You’ll just be at the same level as someone who just scraped through” (N4 learner)
- “Just passing or failing doesn’t tell you much about how well a learner has done” (N4 learner)

2.2.3 Consideration of Assessment of National 5s

Contribution of Assignments Towards Final National 5 Qualifications

There was a **general consensus** across the groups that assignments in National 5 should count much more towards final National 5 outcomes.

For those who believed this to be the case, this was **primarily** due to them believing that this would take the pressure off of pupils in terms of their performance in the final exam.

Thereafter, a range of **secondary references** were made here to increasing the extent to which assignments count more towards final National 5 outcomes:

- Mitigating against poor performance in a final exam 'on the day'
- Being a fairer reflection of the amount of time and effort put into putting together assignments

Amongst those who did **not** believe that assignments should count more towards final National 5 qualification outcomes – of whom there were some in each of the focus groups – this related to concerns about the extent to which AI and other types of support (such as parents/carers and tutors) could be utilised when developing assignments. Indeed, some argued that, in the advent of AI, assignments should count less towards National 5 outcomes.

In this regard, it should be stressed that there was a widespread belief across the groups that many schools are taking measures to reduce or eradicate the use of AI in assignments and other learning (for example, through the first draft of assignments being done in class). However, it was recognised that it would be very difficult for schools to totally eradicate the use of AI, including in assignments.

Finally, it should be noted that, in some of the groups, there was a belief that the extent to which assignments contribute towards final National 5 qualification outcomes varied between subjects and, in particular, in some subjects, this could be more (for example, Social Sciences, Geography and History) and, in some subjects, less (for example Maths, Physics, Biology and Chemistry).

Grading of Assignments

There was a **strong consensus** in all of the groups that assignments at National 5 should be graded.

This was **primarily** due to a belief that this is an effective means of demonstrating how well a pupil has performed in their assignment.

In addition, **more specific comments** were made here to grading being preferable due to this:

- Providing evidence of a learner's capabilities
- Being more precise than a pass/fail outcome

In addition, a number of those participating in the groups believed that colleges and, in particular, universities may be interested to know the grade of a pupil's assignment, particularly given the fact that this may be pertinent to assignment based work that they do in further or higher education.

- "I think that your assignments should count for more because you have to put a lot of hard work into it" (Higher learner)
- "If your assignment counted for more, then there's not so much pressure on you to do well in the final exam" (N5 learner)
- "Assignments should definitely be graded as that will show if you've put a lot of hard work into it and you've put together a good assignment" (N5 learner)

2.2.4 Teachers Marking National 5 Assessments and Final Exams, Rather than Qualifications Scotland

National 5 Assignments

On balance, there was a **notable preference** for Qualifications Scotland to be marking National 5 assignments rather than teachers.

This was **primarily** due to concerns about the extent to which teacher marking of assignments would impact on the credibility of the grades given to assignments.

Indeed, this fed into a further concern relating to potential bias of National 5 assignment teacher marking – albeit potentially unconsciously – which could lead to teachers favouring particular pupils or having a desire to improve school performance and outputs.

Furthermore, there were concerns about the quality of marking by teachers in this regard, particularly in terms of:

- Teachers not having time to mark assignments
- Some teachers lacking experience to do so accurately and effectively

For those who were in favour of teachers marking assignments, this was **primarily** a function of a belief that this could be done quickly which would allow feedback to be provided to pupils regarding any deficiencies which could then be addressed in advance of the final exam.

In addition, **more specific references** were made here to:

- Through teachers marking assignments, allowing them to develop a better understanding of pupils and, thereby, prepare them better for the final exam
- Teacher marking of assignments being acceptable if Qualifications Scotland could put in place some kind of quality control mechanisms to ensure that marking is done to the correct standard and impartially

Final Exams

There was an **absolute consensus** across all of the groups that Qualifications Scotland should be marking final exams rather than teachers.

This was **primarily** based on a belief that the marking of exams by Qualifications Scotland facilitates and promotes credibility, which is seen as being of particular importance, irrespective of desired post-school destinations.

Thereafter, **more specific references** were made here to desires for Qualifications Scotland to mark final exams due to:

- This promoting fairness across Scotland
- This promoting consistency across Scotland
- Teachers not being highly skilled markers which was expected to be the case of Qualifications Scotland markers (albeit that it was recognised that they are also teachers)

- “Just like SQA, Qualifications Scotland should be marking assignments. If they were marked by teachers, this would reduce their credibility” (N5 learner)
- “I worry about teachers marking assignments and trying to make learners look good and trying to make their department look good” (N5 learner)
- “Qualifications Scotland should definitely be marking final exams and not teachers because it’s really important that they’re valued by colleges and universities and even employers. I think if the final exams were marked by teachers, colleges or universities might worry that they hadn’t been marked properly” (Higher learner)

2.2.5 Teachers or Schools Creating Assignments and Final Exams Which Count Towards National 5 Qualifications, Rather than Qualifications Scotland

There was absolutely **no desire or preference** for schools and teachers to create **final exams** that count towards National 5 qualifications. This was a function of two factors, namely:

- Beliefs that it is of critical importance to the credibility of National 5 final exams that they are created by Qualifications Scotland
- A desire to ensure consistency and comparability across Scotland in order that there is fair comparability between learners in different parts of the country

However, there was a degree of debate within groups and between groups in terms of desire for teachers or schools to **create assignments** that count towards National 5 qualifications. However, on balance, there was a stronger desire for this not to be the case.

Those who supported teachers or schools creating assignments that count towards National 5 qualifications believed that this would allow assignments to be set which better reflect what is being covered in courses and learning that's being undertaken in schools.

Amongst those supporting internal assignment creation, there was a strong belief across the focus groups that teachers or schools should be able to incorporate a degree of flexibility in terms of the creation of assignments and that this should be done within restrictions and guidelines set by Qualifications Scotland.

- “There’s no way that schools or teachers should be putting together final exams. That would really affect what colleges and universities think about them” (N5 learner)
- “It’s got to be Qualifications Scotland that designs the final exam papers because you need pupils across the country to be sitting the same exam at the same time” (Higher learner)
- “Teachers should be creating assignments because that will allow them to make sure that they’re more in line with what is taught in class” (Higher learner)

2.3 Size and Structure of Courses

2.3.1 National 4 Considerations

Completing Course Content of National 4 Courses

There was a strong consensus across all of the focus groups that those who sit National 4s have enough time to complete all of the course content in them, with this even applying to those who were often absent from school and those who did not contribute well in the classroom when they did attend school.

Studying for National 4 Courses Outside the Classroom

It was apparent that few of those who had studied or were studying National 4s did little of this outside the classroom, primarily due to a belief that it wasn't necessary to do so.

Indeed, a number of those participating in the focus groups stated that they did not want to study for their National 4s outwith the classroom, with a further belief that many of those studying for National 4s would be reluctant to do so.

2.3.2 National 5 Considerations

Completing Course Content of National 5 Courses

There was a **general concern** across all of the focus groups that there will or can be difficulties for learners to complete all of the course content of their National 5 courses (with specific reference being made here to subjects such as Physics, Geography and History). Indeed, it was emphasised by those who believed this to be the case that this impacted upon their time for reflection and revision.

The remaining participants fell into **two relatively small groups**:

- Those stating that they had no concerns about completing National 5 course content
- The very few who believed that they had too much time to complete National 5 course content

It is also of interest to note that, amongst those stating that they had concerns about completing their National 5 course content, some had a desire for course content to be reduced. However, there were others in each of the groups who argued that this shouldn't be done on the basis of this:

- Impacting on the credibility of National 5 qualifications
- Increasing the gap even more between National 5s and Highers

Studying for National 5 Courses Outside the Classroom

It was apparent across the focus groups that many participants spent a significant amount of time studying for their National 5s outwith the classroom, particularly in terms of homework and the assignment element of National 5s.

In this regard, it was also apparent that, for a number of those participating in the focus groups, studying outside the classroom is stressful on the basis that they had to do this far more independently than is the case in terms of classroom teaching. In addition, it was clear that those studying for National 5s and Highers at the same time believed that studying outwith the classroom was impacting on their potential achievement of Highers.

It was also very apparent that there was **no notable desire** for more time to be spent studying for National 5s outside the classroom as it was believed that this would impact on the time available for classroom teaching which, it was felt, was critically important.

Finally, it should also be stressed that a number of those in the focus groups stated that they believed that they spent **too much time** studying for their National 5s outwith the classroom and that, again, this was impacting on classroom time available with their teachers.

Teaching and Assessing National 5 Courses in Smaller Blocks of Study

There was a **fairly even split** in terms of those who were for or against National 5 courses being taught and assessed in smaller blocks of study.

For those who were in **favour** of this, this was **primarily** due to a belief that this would allow issues or difficulties that learners were facing to be identified quickly and, thereafter, addressed (both of which were important for those who may be struggling with National 5 courses, even at an early stage).

Thereafter, those in favour of teaching and assessing National 5 courses in smaller blocks made reference here to beliefs that this:

- Would allow content to be delivered in more manageable ‘chunks’
- Would avoid learners having to go back to early elements of content when they are studying for their final exams which many said can be more difficult than reviewing content which was delivered later in the academic year

For those who were **against** National 5 courses being taught and assessed in smaller blocks of study, this was **primarily** due to concerns that:

- Ongoing assessment meant there would be less time available to cover course content (and would potentially have an impact on time for non-directed learning)
- This approach would interrupt the flow of learning

Thereafter, **more specific reference** was made here – albeit by a small number of participants – to their belief that pupils tend to develop their knowledge, skills and confidence towards the end of their National 5 courses and, accordingly, it would be unfair or unrepresentative to assess pupils at early stages in their National 5 courses when they are still ‘finding their feet’ in terms of the content of their National 5 courses and how to approach them.

- “I think almost everybody who sits National 4s can get through the course easily in the time that’s available. Even if you don’t turn up to school a lot you can still get through the content for most of the Nat 4 courses easily” (N5 learner)
- “I don’t do anything at home for my Nat 4s. I don’t need to and do everything I need to do at school” (N4 learner)
- “I found it difficult to get through everything in some of my Nat 5 courses” (Higher learner)

- “It took a lot longer to get through our courses than I thought. That meant I didn’t have as much time at the end to think about what I’d done when I was preparing for the final exam” (Higher learner)
- “I did a lot of work at home when I did my National 5s. There was a lot of homework and I spent a lot of time putting my assignment together. I also put a lot of time into studying and revising for the final exam” (Higher learner)
- “Yeah, I’d like the idea of smaller blocks of study that you get assessed on as you go through the year because teachers could see where you were finding things hard and help you to improve” (N5 learner)
- “If you had assessments all the time, that would make it even more difficult to cover all of the course content and also make it harder to find time to develop your assignments” (Higher learner)
- “If you are getting assessed all the time, then it would affect the kind of rhythm of your learning. It would be too stop start” (N5 learner)

3.0 ONE-TO-ONE EDUCATOR INTERVIEWS

3.1 Overall Experience

3.1.1 Positives of National 4 Courses

When educators were asked what they considered to be the positives about National 4 courses, **primary references** were made here to:

- The absence of a final exam, which was seen to be a key factor for many learners who struggle with exams and a key attraction to many learners
- National 4s allowing access for less academic and more practically orientated learners, including those who are likely to struggle with National 5s

Thereafter, **secondary mention** was made here of:

- The flexibility of National 4s in delivery, personalisation and choice and allowing the tailoring of tasks, content and outcomes
- National 4s reducing barriers for some learners, including those for example, who struggle with attendance or literacy issues (with particular reference being made here in this regard to unit assessments)
- Continuous assessment being valuable on the basis that learner progress can be monitored closely

Finally, **more specific reference** was made here to positives of National 4s such as:

- National 4s being 'straightforward' for young people
- National 4s allowing a progression pathway onto National 5s

- National 4s providing a fallback for those who are struggling to cope with National 5s

It is also of interest to note that there was a belief noted by a number of educators that, in theory, National 4s are good, but in practice, this has not proven to be the case.

- “Not having a final exam is a real positive of National 4s for a lot of learners and, in particular, those who struggle with exams”
- National 4s provide a progression route for learners, particularly those that are less able and like practical elements of learning”

3.1.2 Problems or Challenges with National 4 Courses

There was a strong consensus across all of the educators interviewed that there were **many** issues and 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 (mainly because they are viewed as being too easy and not sufficiently challenging, both of which contribute to the perceived low credibility of these qualifications)
- Lack of external assessment which, again, adds to perceptions of low credibility of these qualifications
- There being no final exam at the end of National 4s which, once again, contributes to perceptions of low credibility of these qualifications
- Lack of attendance (makes it difficult for teachers to prepare pupils fully in terms of covering course content and to ensure that they are assessed appropriately)
- Significant support of National 4 learners being required from teachers, which is a particular challenge in the context of bi-level

teaching (where there can be significantly different content between National 4 and National 5 courses being taught and the attitudes/ behaviours of some National 4 learners negatively impacting on other National 4 learners and National 5 learners in the same classroom)

- The 'jump from National 4 to National 5' which creates difficulties in terms of articulation

Thereafter, **secondary mention** was made here of:

- Inappropriate levels and types of support provided by some teachers in some schools (referred to as 'scaffolding') meaning that some learners may achieve a pass that is not merited
- Outdated content and teaching materials
- The administrative burden associated with the added value unit
- National 4s being too prescriptive

Finally, there were a number of **more specific** perceived issues or challenges with National 4s, including:

- Assessments being challenging for some learners
- Inappropriate practices by some pupils ('cheating')

- "A lot of people don't rate National 4s. I think that's pretty much been the case since they came in amongst learners and their parents, but I think we're increasingly seeing that amongst teachers, colleges and employers"
- "Very often they are seen as being too easy which means that a lot of audiences don't think they've got much credibility"
- "The credibility of National 4s is also hit by the fact there's no final exam. I know that in a lot of schools they struggle to get National 4 learners to engage and a lot of National 4 learners don't

attend school frequently. That makes it tough for teachers who are trying to work with these young people”

- “Very often a lot of National 4 learners need an awful lot of support. That can be really difficult if you’re teaching Nat 4 and Nat 5 at the same time”
- “Bi-level teaching is a nightmare. On the one hand you’ve got a lot of Nat 5 kids that want to learn and on the other hand you’ve got some Nat 4 kids who aren’t interested in learning and really disrupt classes”

3.1.3 Positives of National 5 Courses

When the educators interviewed were asked to consider what they believed to be the positives about National 5 courses, a wide range were identified and, indeed, many **primary positives** were noted, namely:

- National 5s having a final exam which is externally marked which, it was believed, adds to the credibility of these qualifications (amongst learners, parents/carers, teachers, colleges, universities and employers) and prepares learners for assessment at Higher, Advanced Higher and beyond
- National 5s having established a highly positive profile quickly in terms of their quality and integrity (again, across a wide range of audiences)
- National 5s incorporating an element of independent learning (which, it was felt, would prepare pupils better for future learning and the workplace)
- National 5s being a highly effective pathway to move on to study Highers and beyond

Thereafter, **secondary mention** was made here of:

- National 5s being appropriately challenging for learners at that level
- The variety and breadth of course offerings
- National 5s being well structured in terms of it being clear what needs to be done and what outcomes are required (in the classroom, in assignments and for the final exam)

Finally, a number of **more specific positives** were noted with respect to National 5s, including:

- National 5s presenting a progression pathway from National 4s (albeit that this is a pathway that can throw up challenges for learners related to, for example, the jump from National 4 to National 5 and nature of learning at the two levels)
- National 5s being viewed as being more academic in nature than National 4s

- “A real strength of National 5s is the final exam and the fact that it’s externally marked. That makes these qualifications highly credible”
- “Pupils have to sit final exams for Highers, Advanced Highers and university so it’s good that they sit a final exam at Nat 5 as it will prepare them for future final exams”
- “A lot of people weren’t sure about National 5s when they started but they have built up a good reputation, far more than National 4s have”
- “Having an assignment in National 5s is really good. It means that pupils learn how to do something very largely by themselves”
- “National 5s have become a well-respected part of the pathway that can take learners on to future learning at school, at college and at university”

3.1.4 Problems or Challenges with National 5 Courses

The educators interviewed identified **four** key problems or challenges associated with National 5 qualifications, namely:

- There being too much course content which represents a challenge for both teachers and pupils and is a result of the breadth and depth of content
- The amount of content being unmanageable which is a significant challenge for teachers
- The 'jump' between National 5s and Highers which, in part, is due to there not being a sufficiently seamless transition between the two levels of qualifications
- The pressure and stress of the final exam for some pupils which can lead to poor performance on the day in exams which is not a true reflection of a pupil's knowledge and abilities

Thereafter, **secondary references** were made in this regard to:

- Assignments placing a notable degree of pressure on pupils and, indeed, teachers, particularly in more deprived areas where parents/carers tend not to provide a significant amount of support
- Lack of parental support increasing the attainment gap and the achievement of positive National 5 outcomes
- Bi-level – and, in some cases, tri-level – teaching of National 5s (including, as noted earlier, issues pertaining to content variances and the behaviour/attitudes of National 4 learners in the classroom)
- The potential use of AI in the preparation of assignments which is difficult to identify. In this regard, it should be noted that a number of the schools with which interviews were undertaken stated that they had gone down the route of a first draft of assignments being done in class. Thereafter, however, second drafts can often be very different and it's difficult to prove AI has been used. It was

also highlighted by a number of the educators interviewed that level of support – for example, from parents/carers and tutors – is a longstanding issue, but that AI represents an increasing concern for educators

Finally, **more specific reference** was made to issues or challenges with National 5 courses that related to:

- Assignments not being sufficiently aligned with course content
- Assignment difficulty varying between subject areas
- Pupils with poor literacy skills tending to struggle with National 5 generally
- Having to teach units to all pupils as a fallback for those who may have to revert to National 4 which was considered a waste of time, on the basis that the vast majority of National 5 pupils tend to be able to achieve National 5 without doing so
- Lack of flexibility in deadlines for the submission of assignments
- Beliefs that some elements of National 5 courses could be introduced earlier in the academic year in order to reduce pressure later in the year in terms of completing assignments and course content

- “Some Nat 5s have far too much course content. That can make them difficult, both for us as teachers and for pupils. Managing all of that is a particular challenge for teachers”
- “There’s far too big a gap between Nat 5s and Highers. Ideally you’d want learners to transition smoothly between Nat 5s and Highers but that just doesn’t work, mainly because of the gap between them”
- “A lot of pupils find it really stressful to prepare for the final exam and sometimes they don’t do well on the day. That’s a real pity because, if that happens, it doesn’t really reflect the knowledge and skills that these pupils actually have”

3.1.5 Issues or Challenges in the Delivery of National 4 and National 5 Courses

When educators were asked to identify the issues or challenges in the delivery of National 4 and National 5 courses, their responses often replicated those noted in Section 3.1.4 regarding problems or challenges with National 5 courses per se.

Accordingly, the **primary issues or challenges** noted by the educators interviewed in the delivery of National 4s and National 5s related to:

- Lack of time to cover all course content in sufficient depth in National 5s
- Significant challenges associated with bi-level teaching, including non-alignment of content in the same subject at the two levels, impacts on the learning experience of pupils, stress for teachers and difficulties in delivering practical elements of courses
- Attendance issues, particularly at National 4 level but also, to some extent, at National 5 level resulting in assessment and knowledge gaps
- The amount of remedial time which must be spent with pupils who are frequently absent from school
- Peaks in teacher workload
- Trying to minimise the gap for learners between National 5 and Highers

Thereafter, **more specific references** were made to a number of other issues and challenges, including:

- Having to teach all units to all pupils, not just those struggling with National 5s

- The attitude, behaviours and lack of motivation of some learners at National 4 level
- The administrative burden associated with teaching both National 4s and National 5s

In the context of the outcomes noted above, it is of interest to note that those educators whose schools were teaching National 5s over two years generally tended to face fewer and less notable issues and challenges.

- “Bi-level teaching can be a nightmare. You’ve got pupils – mostly doing National 5s – that want to learn and some pupils – largely doing National 4s – who don’t and can cause havoc in the classroom. That’s before you even take into account trying to teach content at the same time which is significantly different for National 4 and National 5”
- “The challenge of getting pupils to attend tends to apply to those studying for National 4s, but also applies at times to those studying at National 5. This is a real challenge for teachers in terms of trying to ensure that these pupils are progressing, although to be honest, some kids at National 4 just don’t want to learn even when they do attend school”
- “It’s a challenge knowing that you’re teaching a National 5 course – and teaching it correctly – when you know that a lot of pupils are really going to find it difficult to move up to Highers because of the gap. I’d love to prepare them better to make that gap smaller, but I’m not sure how that could be done”

3.1.6 Reforming National 4 and National 5 Qualifications

When educators were asked what were the most important things that should be considered when Qualifications Scotland was reforming

qualifications at National 4 and National 5, a number of **key principles** emerged, namely:

- Making greater efforts to ensure increased perceived credibility of National 4s across a wide range of audiences (learners themselves, parents/carers, teachers, colleges and employers)
- Avoiding increasing workload for teachers and, if at all possible, reducing their workload
- Improving articulation between National 4 and National 5 and, thereafter, between National 5 and Higher
- The fundamental importance of teaching to a pupil's abilities
- Listening to educators when reforms are being considered and giving a commitment to take their views on board
- Ensuring that sufficient staff training is undertaken in relation to any reforms introduced

Thereafter, responses provided in terms of things which Qualifications Scotland should consider when reforming National 4s and National 5s tended to be **specific in nature**, and included the following:

National 4s

- Retaining internal assessment
- Better prioritising the promotion of attendance, particularly for those with health and other issues which are barriers to them attending school (with this being noted to a lesser extent in relation to those studying for National 5s)
- Continuing to adopt a pass/fail approach to the assessment of National 4s
- Making greater efforts to celebrate National 4 achievement (in order to promote a sense of achievement amongst learners)

National 5s

- Retaining externally marked final exam (which was the most notable outcome here)
- Reintroducing the closed-book assessment to National 5s
- Ensuring that course content can be taught in sufficient depth
- Aligning assignment and classroom content better
- Retain assignments within National 5 but consider increasing the extent to which they contribute towards final outcomes (albeit that some educators had concerns about the potential impact of doing so on the credibility of National 5s)
- Making extensive efforts to decrease the gap between National 5s and Highers (with suggestions of 'introducing something' between National 5 and Higher study)
- Consider introducing an option of National 5 pupils not sitting a final exam and only submitting an assignment (although, again, there were potential concerns about the impact on the credibility of National 5s amongst a wide range of audiences)
- Introducing more internal assessments of National 5s that would count towards final outcomes

National 4s and National 5s

- Clarification of minimum requirements
- Decreasing bi-level teaching or – at the very least – reviewing how bi-level teaching can be taught in the classroom (including suggestions to try to make efforts to make sure that the content of National 4 and National 5 courses is similar when they are being taught in the same classroom at the same time)

- “Something needs to be done to increase how National 4s are viewed in terms of their credibility for everybody with an interest in them, from learners to employers”

- “Qualifications Scotland needs to make sure that all course content can be taught and, not only that, that they can be taught to the depth required”
- “I think more could be done to try and align assignments with what’s taught in the classroom. I think that would add value to learner outcomes”
- “Qualifications Scotland really needs to keep assignments in National 5s. In fact, they should contribute more towards grades”
- “I believe that assignments should contribute more towards final outcomes, but I worry about what that would mean in terms of the credibility of these qualifications”
- “Something has to be done about the gap between National 5s and Highers. Would it be possible to have something between National 5s and Highers to bridge the gap?”
- “I think there would be merit in having more internal assessments at National 5 that could be added to grades for assignments and final exam. I think that would be a useful addition to the portfolio of evidence that could be submitted to Qualifications Scotland for a learner”

3.2 Assessment and Grading

3.2.1 National 4 Qualifications Being Assessed by Teachers, Rather than by Qualifications Scotland

There was a relatively **even split** between educators who believed that National 4 assessments should be marked by teachers and those who believed that this should not be the case.

For those who **did** believe that National 4 qualifications should continue to be assessed by teachers, this focused around arguments that:

- They better understood the skills and abilities of pupils they work with and could reflect this when marking submitted assessments
- The marking of assessments allows them to monitor pupil progress and identify issues and problems they face and, thereafter, address these issues or problems

For those who did **not** believe that National 4 qualifications should continue to be assessed by teachers, this **primarily** focused around beliefs that:

- This impacts on the credibility of National 4 qualifications
- There being a lack of quality assurance associated with internal marking which results in variations in marking of assessments within and between schools
- Concerns about teacher bias in marking – either unconsciously or consciously
- Concerns that teachers may allocate marks that are better than they should be (potentially due to a desire to enhance their schools performance outputs) which leads to a reduction in the perceived integrity of these qualifications
- A desire to reduce pressure and workload for teachers
- A belief that some National 4 learners will work harder if they know that Qualifications Scotland will be marking their assessments

- “I know there are times when a pupil knows what they are trying to say in assessment but isn’t really saying it, so I can take that into account when I’m marking it”
- “When I’m assessing a pupil I can pick up if they’ve got any difficulties or problems and immediately do something about it”
- “Teacher assessment definitely impacts on the credibility of National 4 assessments. Maybe that’s why, at times, colleges aren’t keen on them”

- “I think there could be times when teachers provide a mark that’s better than it probably should be but I wouldn’t like to speculate why they might do that”
- “Teachers shouldn’t be assessing National 4s because they have too much other work to do”

3.2.2 Pass/Fail or Grading of National 4 Qualification Outcomes

There was, again, a **split** between educators who believed that National 4 assessments should continue to be on a pass/fail basis rather than being graded.

For those believing that **pass/fail** should continue to be utilised, this was **primarily** due to a belief that this approach puts less pressure on many pupils and is less daunting than a graded outcome.

Thereafter, **secondary reference** was made here to a belief that, if a National 4 qualification were to be graded, then this may demotivate some learners on the basis of their – potentially inaccurate – belief that they are unlikely to achieve a good grade.

Finally, **more specific mention** was made here of a preference for pass/fail due to:

- This reducing barriers to progression
- Teachers being a better gauge of the potential for a pupil to move onto National 5 than a grade

Amongst 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 4 Qualifications amongst a wide range of audiences, including learners, parents/carers, colleges and employers
- This is fairer for learners who perform well and is a better measure of pupil performance which, in turn, will help, for example, employers and colleges to distinguish between those who have performed well and those who have only marginally passed

Thereafter, **secondary mention** was made here to beliefs that:

- Grading of National 4s being valued by colleges and employers and meaning that these qualifications will be better respected by both of these audiences
- Grading being a better way to inform teachers if a pupil might be capable of moving onto National 5
- Grading providing greater motivation for some learners
- Grading better preparing learners for future learning and the world of work

Finally, **more specific mention** was made here of beliefs that:

- Grading would align better with other graded qualifications
- Grading would provide a sense of achievement for those who have performed well

It should be stressed that the outcomes noted above in relation to pass/fail approach or grading of National 4 assessments overwhelmingly applied to the course as a whole and to unit assessments.

- “A pass/fail approach for a lot of pupils that are studying for National 4s is better because having to try and achieve a grade

would put them under much more pressure and cause them a lot more stress”

- “I think that having a graded approach would make National 4s more credible which is important, not just for learners, but also for moving forward to college or into a job”
- “Grading is much fairer because it distinguishes between those who have worked hard and done well and those who haven’t and have done less well”

3.2.3 Contribution of Assessment to Counting More Towards the Final National 5 Qualification

At this point in the conversation with educators, many focused on the National 5 assignment rather than additional assessment and it should be noted that it was believed by some respondents that the introduction of more assessments within National 5 courses could be beneficial in terms of monitoring the progress of a pupil and quickly responding to difficulties or challenges which they were encountering. However, others argued against this on the basis that the introduction of additional assessments would make it more difficult for teachers to complete the content of courses in sufficient depth.

Therefore, it should be stressed that this element of the conversation tended to focus around the assignment element of National 5 and, in this regard, the educators interviewed were, once again, **split** in terms of believing that assignments should or should not count more towards final National 5 qualifications.

For those who believed that this **should** be the case, this focused around a belief that this relieves pressure on performance in the final exam which may not always be a fair representation of a pupil’s abilities and knowledge if they perform badly ‘on the day’.

For those believing that this should **not** be the case, this was **primarily** due to concerns about external influences/input to assignments and particularly the use of AI. More specifically, although it was recognised that many pupils are assisted by, for example, their parent/carer or tutors, there was a significant concern that AI can have a far greater impact on the content and quality of assignments which brings into doubt their validity.

Thereafter, **more specific responses** were provided here relating to beliefs that:

- Pupils mature and improve significantly in terms of their performance in the final part of National 5s and, therefore, it's unfair to assess them earlier
- The existing balance is appropriate

Finally, it should be stressed that there was a significant degree of **uncertainty** in this regard amongst many of the educators interviewed and a belief that they would have to reflect further before they felt they could provide an appropriate response.

- "Assignments should count far more towards final grades because that takes the pressure of pupils having to perform on exam day. which sometimes isn't the case"
- "There shouldn't be more weight placed on assignments because there is such a rise in the use of AI. I know we've always had external influences in assignments from parents and tutors, but the use of AI is a different scale and much more difficult to identify and deal with"

3.2.4 More of Learners Grade at National 5 Being Based on Assessments Marked by Teachers, Rather than Qualifications Scotland

National 5 Assignments

There was a degree of **debate** as to whether more of a learners grade at National 5 should be based on assignments (and potentially additional assessments were they 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 that:

- The impact that this could have on the credibility of National 5 qualifications
- Additional assessments being marked by teachers as opposed to Qualifications Scotland increasing workload for teachers were this to be introduced

Thereafter, **secondary concerns** were raised with regard to pay issues and, in particular, those who are currently paid to mark final exams as appointees having an expectation of being paid to mark assignments and any additional assessments.

Finally, **more specific concerns** were raised here with regard to:

- The training which would be required for teachers to mark effectively (which they would lack time to do and would be costly for Qualifications Scotland if this was done outwith school hours)
- Some teachers not being willing to train outwith working hours

For those who were **in favour** of teachers marking assignments and additional assessments, this was based upon arguments previously cited that pertained to National 4s, namely 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.

In addition, there was an argument put forward here by some educators that teacher marking of National 5 assignments or additional assessments would allow issues or difficulties to be flagged up and addressed if these were pertinent to performance in the final exam.

Final Exam

There was a **unanimous belief** amongst all of the educators interviewed that the National 5 final exam 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 amongst learners themselves, their parents/carers, teachers, colleges, universities and employers.

- “More of a learners grade shouldn’t be based on assignments marked by teachers because that’s bound to impact on their perceived credibility, whereas if Qualifications Scotland mark assignments, it’s far more likely that they will be seen as being credible, so long as, for example, employers realise the strong links between Qualifications Scotland and SQA which has been seen as credible over many years”
- “If more of a learners grade was based on assignments marked by teachers, that would increase their workload and the vast majority of teachers wouldn’t like that”
- “National 5 final exams have to be marked by Qualifications Scotland in order to be viewed as being valuable and credible to a

wide range of audiences, particularly those that are possible destinations for learners”

3.2.5 More of a Learner’s Grade at National 5 Being Based on Assessments Created by their Teacher or School, Rather than Qualifications Scotland

Assignments

With reference to more of a learners grade at National 5 being based on assignments created by teachers or schools rather than Qualifications Scotland, there was **universal agreement** amongst the educators interviewed that this should **not** be the case. This universal belief was underpinned by a belief that this would have a negative impact on the credibility of National 5 qualifications across a wide range of audiences and would similarly have an impact on their perceived value.

This was **primarily** due to concerns about lack of consistency across Scotland allied to difficulties in terms of ensuring that assignments are created to a national standard, even were Qualifications Scotland guidelines to be strengthened.

Thereafter, a range of **more specific issues** were raised here, including:

- Content in assignments created by teachers or schools being too skewed with what is being learned in the classroom (again adding to concerns about inconsistencies across Scotland)
- Pay issues (as was outlined in Section 3.2.4)
- Concerns about increases in teacher workload

Those who agreed that more of a learner's grade at National 5 should be based on assignments being created by teachers or schools argued that this would be a better reflection of what had been taught to learners and would allow a greater degree of alignment between assignments and directed learning through classroom teaching.

Assessments

In the context of the outcomes noted above relating to assignments, it should be stressed that there was a strong consensus that – were additional assessments to be introduced – it would be perfectly valid for these to be created by teachers or schools, but only if these did not contribute towards the final National 5 outcomes. This was based on a belief that it is of great importance to monitor the progress of learners and that additional assignments would be a means of doing so, albeit that there were concerns about this adding to the workload for teachers and could impact on the ability of teachers to cover all course content in sufficient depth.

Final Exam

There was an **extremely strong consensus** that more of a learners grade at National 5 should **not** be based on final exams created by teachers or schools. Once again, this related back to concerns about the impact on the credibility of qualifications were they to be created by teachers or schools rather than Qualifications Scotland, together with ongoing concerns about this leading to the potential for significant inconsistency across Scotland.

- “More of a learner's grade at National 5 definitely shouldn't be based on assignments being created by their teacher or school as this would have a major impact on the credibility of assignments”

- “I think it would be fine if teachers or schools created content for any additional assessments that were introduced, but I think this should be for the purposes of progress monitoring rather than contributing to final National 5 outcomes”
- “I would be absolutely against any move towards schools or teachers creating content of exams. That could be a real can of worms in terms of credibility and consistency which are absolutely critical for National 5s”

3.3 Size and Structure of Courses

3.3.1 Teaching and Assessing National 5 Courses in Smaller Blocks of Study

On balance, there was a preference for National 5 courses being taught and assessed in smaller blocks of study. For those preferring this, this was **primarily** due to beliefs that:

- This will help to better monitor pupil progress, identify problems quickly and address them
- This will be more manageable for pupils (who will feel this ‘less daunting’ than being taught and assessed in larger blocks of study)

Thereafter, **secondary reference** was made in this regard to:

- This being more manageable for teachers (by providing a more structured approach and the ability to teach in smaller blocks)
- Pupils being more likely to take in more information and knowledge and be better able to ‘digest learning’ if they are taught in smaller blocks

Finally, **more specific references** were made here to a preference for National 5 courses being taught and assessed in smaller blocks of study due to:

- The more limited amount of content in these smaller blocks of study
- Smaller blocks of study placing a greater degree of emphasis on understanding rather than being designed to produce assessments which are ‘memory tests’

For those who **did not** prefer National 5 courses being taught and assessed in smaller blocks of study, this was **primarily** due to concerns about:

- Teachers being able to cover all course content in sufficient depth
- Missed assessments for those who are off due to illness or other issues and, in particular, these learners ‘playing catch-up’ and it being more difficult to determine learner progress

Thereafter, **secondary mention** was made here regarding:

- The impact that this would have on the flow of courses
- Increased pressure for pupils who struggle with assessment as a result of being assessed on a more regular basis
- The potential for increased teacher workload due to ongoing assessment

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

- Beliefs that, if National 5 courses were to be taught and assessed in smaller blocks of study, these smaller blocks would have to be very well defined
- Many schools already undertake regular class tests

- The extent to which teaching assessment in smaller blocks of study would be useful would be likely to vary from one subject to another
- If this approach is to be taken then it would be beneficial to deliver National 5s over two years (which some schools already do)

- “Teaching National 5s in smaller blocks. I’m in favour of that because you would be able to check a learners progress and pick up problems quickly”
- “I think that learners could deal better with smaller blocks, particularly given the fact that a lot of National 5s are content heavy”

3.3.2 How Realistic Notional Sizes for National 4 and National 5 Courses Are

Context

It is Ashbrook’s understanding that both National 4 and National 5 courses are designed to be the same notional size in terms of the hours of learning expected within each course, with these being 160 hours of learning expected within each course, with these being 160 hours of directed learning (classroom based learning/learning with a teacher) and 80 hours of self-directed learning (outside the classroom without a teacher).

A context for the outcomes noted below is that National 4s are predominantly delivered over a period of one year, with National 5s being delivered primarily over one year, but in some cases, over two years.

Overall Outcomes

Generally, there was a belief that:

- National 4 courses are too small
- Many National 5 courses are too big⁴
- Some National 5 courses 'feel about right in terms of their size'⁵

National 4 Courses

A number of views were expressed here with regard to the notional sizes for National 4 courses in terms of how realistic they are, including beliefs that:

- There is very often no need for 80 hours of self-directed learning in National 4 courses and, indeed, few pupils devote anywhere near this amount of time to this type of learning whilst studying for National 4s (due to a lack of motivation to do so, lack of parental encouragement or support, issues at home, social issues and, at times, lack of access to the internet)
- There is very often no need for 160 hours of directed learning in National 4 courses

National 5 Courses

With respect to National 5 courses, a range of other opinions were noted with respect to how realistic their notional sizes are, with **particular reference** being made here to concerns that 160 hours of

⁴ As noted, this applied to many National 5 courses, with particular reference being made here to subjects such as Business, Computing Science, Mathematics and Social Subjects.

⁵ As noted, this applied to only some National 5 courses and most notably related to Geography, History and Modern Languages.

directed learning within a year is unrealistic in terms of the ability for teachers to cover all course content in sufficient depth.

Thereafter, a number of other **more specific** beliefs were noted, including that:

- The number of hours for self-directed learning in National 5s being underestimated due to the amount of time required to prepare assignments well
- Notional sizes for National 5s being a problem if pupils have attendance issues

National 4s and National 5s

With respect to both National 4s and National 5s, it was stated that there are a number of factors which contribute to whether or not notional sizes are realistic, including:

- Decreasing attendance at school (particularly for those studying at National 4 level)
- Increasing mental health issues in schools
- Increasing staff absences

Observations

Finally, there are a number of **observations** pertaining to how realistic notional sizes for National 4 and National 5 courses are, including:

- There being significant discrepancies in this regard between school departments in the same school
- With respect to National 5s, the number of hours of directed learning can be challenging as there is a requirement for units to be taught to all pupils, not just those struggling to cope with National 5s

- Studying for National 5s over two years can be difficult for those studying for five Highers, but can be beneficial for those studying, for example, three Highers
- Beliefs that studying for National 5s over one year is more appropriate for 'more able pupils' as this will allow them to focus on studying for Highers
- The extent to which the notional sizes for National 4 and National 5 courses are realistic is subject dependent (particularly in relation to National 5s)
- That decreasing the number of hours of directed learning in National 5s would impact upon the quality and credibility of these qualifications
- Beliefs that studying National 5s over two years can be helpful in bridging the gap between National 5s and Highers

- "There's definitely no need for 80 hours of self-directed learning at National 4. I can't think of any pupils I've taught who have remotely done this and, in fact, a lot of pupils don't seem to do any whatsoever"
- "160 hours of directed learning at National 4 is a nonsense. It's way more than what's needed for the vast majority of National 4s"
- "A lot of the time 160 hours of directed learning isn't enough for National 5s. As a teacher, I've a tendency to end up cramming things in at the end to get through all of the content, but I'm not sure with timetabling issues if it would be realistic to increase the hours here, particularly given the fact that you wouldn't want to be counting down the hours spent on non-directed learning by pupils"

4.0 KEY COMMONALITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN LEARNERS AND EDUCATORS

This section of the report highlights key commonalities and differences in the views expressed by learners and educators. In this regard, it should be stressed that the differences highlighted are not always mutually exclusive.

4.1 Overall Experience

4.1.1 Positives of National 4 Courses

Primary Commonality

- The absence of a final exam, which was seen to be a key factor for many learners who struggle with exams and a key attraction to many learners

Primary Differences

Learner focus on:

- National 4 courses being assessed on an ongoing basis
- National 4s being easier than National 5s

Educator focus on:

- National 4s allowing access for less academic and more practically orientated learners, including those who are likely struggle with National 5s

4.1.2 Problems or Challenges with National 4 Courses

Primary Commonality

- National 4s not being viewed positively by many learners, parents/carers and, increasingly, teachers, colleges and employers (mainly because they are viewed as being too easy and not sufficiently challenging, both of which contribute to the perceived low credibility of these qualifications)

Primary Differences

Learner focus on:

- There being a 'stigma' associated with studying for National 4s rather than National 5s – particularly noted by those studying for National 5s – including a specific stigma for those stepping down from National 5s to National 4s. This was based on a perception amongst many learners (and, indeed, some teachers) that National 4s are not as credible as National 5s

Educator focus on:

- Lack of external assessment which, again, adds to perceptions of low credibility of these qualifications
- There being no final exam at the end of National 4s which, once again, contributes to perceptions of low credibility of these qualifications
- Lack of attendance (makes it difficult for teachers to prepare pupils fully in terms of covering course content and ensuring that they are assessed appropriately)
- Significant support of National 4 learners being required from teachers, which is a particular challenge in the context of bi-level

teaching (where there can be significantly different content between National 4 and National 5 courses being taught and the attitudes/ behaviours of some National 4 learners impacting on other National 4 learners and National 5 learners in the same classroom)

- The 'jump from National 4 to National 5' which creates difficulties in terms of articulation

4.1.3 Positives of National 5 Courses

Primary Commonality

- National 5s having a final exam which is externally marked which, it was believed, adds to the credibility of these qualifications (amongst learners, parents/carers, teachers, colleges, universities and employers) and prepares learners for assessment at Higher, Advanced Higher and beyond

Primary Differences

Learner focus on:

- National 5s having high credibility (due to having a final exam, course content and level of learning), particularly in comparison to National 4s
- National 5 courses being fair and appropriately challenging

Educator focus on:

- National 5s having established a highly positive profile quickly in terms of their quality and integrity (across a wide range of audiences)

- National 5s incorporating an element of independent learning (which, it was felt, would prepare pupils better for future learning and the workplace)
- National 5s being a highly effective pathway to move on to study Highers and beyond

4.1.4 Problems or Challenges with National 5 Courses

Primary Commonalities

- The pressure and stress of the final exam for some pupils which can lead to poor performance on the day in exams which is not a true reflection of a pupil's knowledge and abilities
- There being too much course content which represents a challenge for both teachers and pupils and is a result of the breadth and depth of content
- The 'jump' between National 5s and Highers which, in part, is due to there not being a sufficiently seamless transition between the two levels of qualifications

Primary Difference

- Educator focus on the amount of content being unmanageable which is a significant challenge for teachers

4.1.5 Reforming National 4 and National 5 Qualifications

Primary Commonality

- To reduce the gap between National 5 qualifications and Highers, potentially by pitching them at a higher level, with suggestions by educators of 'introducing something' between National 5 and Higher study

Primary Differences

Educator focus on:

- Making greater efforts to ensure increased perceived credibility of National 4s across a wide range of audiences (learners themselves, parents/carers, teachers, colleges and employers)
- Avoiding increasing workload for teachers and, if at all possible, reducing their workload
- Improving articulation between National 4 and National 5 and, thereafter, between National 5 and Higher
- The fundamental importance of teaching to a pupil's abilities
- Listening to educators when reforms are being considered and giving a commitment to take their views on board
- Ensuring that sufficient staff training is undertaken in relation to any reforms introduced

4.2 Assessment and Grading

4.2.1 National 4 Qualifications Being Assessed by Teachers Rather than by Qualifications Scotland

Primary Commonalities

- None

Primary Differences

- For learners there was a general consensus amongst those who had studied for – or who were studying – National 4s that they should be assessed by teachers, with those studying National 4s being most likely to agree that this should be the case

- Amongst educators there was a relatively even split between those who believed that National 4 assessments should be marked by teachers and those who believed that this should not be the case

4.2.2 Pass/Fail or Grading of National 4 Qualification Outcomes

Primary Commonalities

- None

Primary Differences

- Across all of the learner groups, there was a consensus 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 and with no desire or intention to move on to study National 5s. It should, however, be stressed that there was a notable degree of debate in this regard
- Amongst educators there was, again, a split between those who believed that National 4 assessments should continue to be on a pass/fail basis rather than being graded

4.2.3 Consideration of Assessment of National 5s

Primary Commonalities

- None

Primary Differences

- Amongst learners there was a general consensus across the groups that assignments in National 5 should count much more towards final National 5 outcomes

- Amongst educators there was a split in terms of believing that assignments should or should not count more towards final National 5 qualifications

4.2.4 Marking of National 5 Final Exams

Primary Commonalities

- Amongst learners there was an absolute consensus across all of the groups that Qualifications Scotland should be marking final exams rather than teachers
- Similarly, amongst educators, there was a unanimous belief that National 5s 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 amongst learners themselves, their parents/carers, teachers, colleges, universities and employers

4.2.5 Teachers or Schools Creating Final Exams and Assignments Which Count Towards National 5 Qualifications, Rather than Qualifications Scotland

Primary Commonalities

- Amongst learners, there was absolutely no desire of preference for schools and teachers to create final exams that count towards National 5 qualifications
- Similarly, amongst educators, there was an extremely strong consensus that more of a learner's grade at National 5 should not be based on final exams created by teachers and schools

Primary Differences

- Amongst learners there was a degree of debate within groups and between groups in terms of desire for teachers or schools to create assignments that count towards National 5 qualifications. However, on balance, there was a stronger desire for this not to be the case
- Amongst educators, with reference to more of a learners grade at National 5 being based on assignments created by teachers or schools rather than Qualifications Scotland, there was universal agreement amongst the educators interviewed that this should not be the case

4.3 Teaching and Assessing National 5 Courses in Smaller Blocks of Study

Primary Commonalities

- None

Primary Differences

- Amongst learners there was a fairly even split in terms of those who were for or against National 5 courses being taught and assessed in smaller blocks of study
- Amongst educators, on balance, there was a preference for National 5 courses being taught and assessed in smaller blocks of study

APPENDIX I

**NATIONAL 4 AND NATIONAL 5 QUALIFICATIONS TAUGHT BY
EDUCATORS INTERVIEWED**

- Accounting
- Art and Design
- Business
- Business Management
- Chemistry
- Computing Science
- Design and Technology
- Drama
- Economics
- Food, Health and Wellbeing
- French
- Geography
- History
- Mathematics
- Media
- Modern Languages
- Modern Studies
- Physics
- Social Subjects
- Statistics