

## Changes to the National Qualifications

The NASUWT has been fully engaged via the work of the Assessment and National Qualifications (ANQ) Working Group over the changes to the National Qualifications (NQs). Discussion has continued since the removal of mandatory unit assessments was announced in September 2016. Outside of the working group, the NASUWT has met with the Cabinet Secretary on several occasions over the impact of the proposals to revise National 5 qualifications from 2017/18, raising concerns regarding a potential lowering of attainment in some subjects with the introduction of, or expansion to, the final examination. The Union also emphasised to the Deputy First Minister that inappropriate presentation of candidates was often a result of ignoring the classroom teacher's professional judgement.

The NASUWT highlighted directly to the Minister the need for an Equalities Impact Assessment of any proposed changes to ensure that no group of pupils with protected characteristics is potentially disadvantaged. This needs to be undertaken at the start of the process, however, as in the past this did not happen, and the Union will continue to press the Scottish Government to fulfil its duties under the Equality Act.

The NASUWT argued strongly for the reintroduction of a proper appeals system to act as a safety net for borderline candidates in National 5 should no fallback option to National 4 be available. The Union has responded to consultation on draft guidance and conducted a survey of secondary members, seeking their views on the potential impact of the changes and using the feedback to inform discussion.

On 30 March 2017, advice and guidance to local authorities, schools and teachers on the changes was released by the Scottish Government and the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), covering the following areas:

### **1. The implications of the removal of unit assessments from the National Qualifications**

Although the Scottish Government accepts that there are a range of factors that have contributed to over-assessment in schools, the main purpose of the advice issued is to provide guidance to schools and local authorities to ensure that the workload benefits of removing unit assessments are achieved across the system.

The removal of mandatory unit assessments is specifically intended to reduce the amount of assessment experienced by young people taking NQs and the teacher workload created as a result of administering the units. The course aims, content and rationale are not changing.

It is critical that schools use this guidance to ensure that the resultant changes necessary to NQs have the desired effect on workload. The NASUWT will monitor this robustly, as the Union has concerns that some of the changes may in fact exacerbate the teacher workload issue.

The SQA has insisted that, with the removal of unit assessments, the course assessments for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher need to be strengthened to maintain 24 SCQF credit points and protect the standards of the NQs.

For each National 5 course, the changes have resulted in one or more of the following:

- extension of the existing question paper;
- extension/modification of the existing item of coursework;
- a new question paper;
- a new item of coursework.

Detail for each subject at National 5 was published by SQA in January 2017, with further detail to follow in revised course documentation by the end of April 2017. This will replace the current course documentation with one single document per subject.

Members have expressed concern around the potential for increased workload, specifically in relation to preparation for lengthier examinations. The NASUWT will be looking to the Scottish Government to work with the Union to ensure that the changes following the removal of unit assessments will not result in teachers facing additional assessment-preparation burdens.

In terms of units that were previously part of National 5, these will remain available as free-standing units at Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) level 5 but will no longer form part of the National 5 course. The decision to retain units as free-standing qualifications is intended to support flexibility in meeting the different needs of individual learners. Schools will now be expected to decide for any National 5 course whether a young person is presented either for units or for the full course award.

The NASUWT is concerned that, despite this clarification, schools may opt to retain units as the 'easy option' rather than move to make the changes required as outlined.

For some learners, schools should consider planning pupils' learning experience over two years. The unit and course entry data will be reviewed at the end of each session by schools, local authorities and Education Scotland to gain a better understanding of how learners are being presented.

## **2. The importance of well-informed and accurate presentation decisions**

Schools are required to make judgements about the most appropriate NQs pathway for each learner. As the vast majority of pupils now stay on until at least S5, schools are being encouraged to plan progression over at least a two-year period.

NQs were designed to be flexible. Decisions about learning pathways will require discussion with young people and their parents/carers about their longer-term aspirations. Reliable assessment information on whether a young person has achieved third or fourth curriculum level by the end of S3 should be used to inform these discussions.

All of this will inform the decision on whether a learner should embark on a course leading to National 4 or National 5, or a Higher, and whether the qualification should be undertaken over one or two years. The benchmarks across the Broad General Education for each curriculum area are intended to support teacher judgement of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) levels, with the necessary information to inform this judgement.

The benchmarks for the remaining curricular areas were finally released on 24 March and can be found at: <https://education.gov.scot/improvement/curriculum-for-excellence/benchmarks>.

Responding to concerns expressed by the NASUWT about the delay in their release and potential workload implications, especially for primary teachers, Education Scotland has stated that: *'at this stage there is no expectation that teachers will report on learners' achievement of a level in curriculum areas beyond literacy and numeracy. The introduction of Benchmarks for all other areas of the curriculum needs to be proportionate and manageable. Teachers and other practitioners should be given time to engage in professional discussion to become familiar with the Benchmarks and start to use them in line with their school improvement plans.'*

The NASUWT will continue to monitor the teachers' experience of working with the new benchmarks over the coming months and report any concerns to the ANQ Working Group. The Union would also remind members that the new benchmarks replace any previous assessment of a level model. Members are asked to feed back on any aspect of this to the Scotland National Executive Members via [rc-scotland@mail.nasuwt.org.uk](mailto:rc-scotland@mail.nasuwt.org.uk).

For the majority of candidates nationally, schools have several presentation options for learners moving on to NQs in the Senior Phase:

- progression to National 4 (for those who have achieved third curriculum level);
- progression to National 5 (for those who have achieved fourth curriculum level);
- progression to Higher, bypassing National 4 and 5 (for those who have achieved fourth curriculum level).

CfE is designed to be centred on the individual learner. There should therefore be no occasion where a full year group is being presented for National 5 unless every learner has achieved fourth curriculum level.

### **3. The extension of Grade D as the mechanism for recognising positive achievement**

The mechanism agreed by the ANQ Working Group for RPA going forward will be the extension of Grade D to include candidates who achieve between 40-49%. Currently, a candidate who achieves a notional 45% or above in a national course would receive an award. (Candidates above a notional 50% receive an A-C award; candidates will therefore be broadened to notional 40%-49%. This ten per cent range brings a Grade D award into line with the ranges for Grades B and C.)

This move is intended to ensure that young people who do not achieve at the level predicted in the course assessment receive credit for their achievement at the SCQF level of the qualification for which they were entered.

### **4. The plans to review assessment of the National 4 qualification**

National 4 was designed to provide a clear progression pathway from the third curriculum level either into National 5 or into college or training and other qualifications at SCQF level 5 and beyond.

The ANQ Working Group has recognised the need to look in more detail at the assessment of the National 4 qualification, with an initial focus on the value of a form of external assessment, and on the ability to differentiate candidate performance.

In response to feedback from the NASUWT member survey and other stakeholders, the Deputy First Minister has taken the decision that the current mechanism of recognising positive achievement, through fallback to National 4, will remain available for **an interim period only**. This means that schools will be able to continue to present candidates for both units that were formerly part of National 5 and the full revised National 5 course. Equally, should a candidate, having completed the units that were previously part of the National 5, achieve less than 40%, they could receive the National 4 award on completion of the Added Value Unit. Appropriate quality assurance processes, including the reintroduction of random sampling for verification of units, will need to be in place to ensure the integrity of unit and course certification, and entries must be received by SQA by November, as is currently the case.

Given the agreed need to reduce assessment-related workload, this option should only be used in a **very limited number of exceptional circumstances**, where the view of the teacher and headteacher, in discussion with parents and young people, is that it is in the interests of specific individuals. This pathway will be available as an interim measure only, until any changes to the assessment of National 4 have been introduced.

The NASUWT remains concerned that this essentially opens the door to 'business as usual', despite the advice about exceptional circumstances only. Schools will default to the status quo, even when that is against the guidance. Retaining the option of continuing to use unit assessments while still presenting for N5, along with the reintroduction of SQA verification processes, completely contradicts the stated purpose of the changes in terms of reducing workload. The Union asserts that this is highly likely to throw even greater confusion into what is already an untenable situation for classroom teachers.

## Scottish Set Texts

The SQA conducted a survey earlier this academic year of the mandatory Scottish texts in National 5 and Higher English, to which they received over 1,000 responses. These responses have informed the proposed refresh of set texts. Mindful of the need to recognise workload issues, SQA has delayed the implementation of this exercise, and the revised list of set texts will not now be implemented until the 2018/19 academic year. Also, the refresh of texts has been light-touch and an additional crossover text has been added in order to acknowledge and accommodate resource issues. Women writers are represented across all genres on the list. From the review of exam responses by Principal Assessors and exam teams, SQA has stated that it has not seen any evidence of a narrowing of the overall range of texts studied in English. However, if members have any information to the contrary, please send feedback to the NASUWT Scotland Centre.

**If you have any issues over the implementation of the new assessment frameworks or the changes to the national qualifications, including concerns or comments in relation to workload demands, please contact the NASUWT Scotland Centre immediately.**

