

The Educational Institute of Scotland

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# Achievement, Attainment, Qualifications, Certification

A policy paper from the EIS Education Committee

## Introduction

This paper develops established EIS policy on assessment in the context of *A Curriculum for Excellence*, current Scottish Executive policy and practice, current education authority practice, and statements from politicians in the pre-election and election periods. The paper was approved as policy by the Education Committee in March 2007 and by Council in May 2007.

## Formative and summative assessment

The EIS has consistently supported the development of formative assessment in Scotland's schools. The development and implementation of the *Assessment is for Learning* Programme is highly significant for several reasons. Firstly it encouraged teachers and pupils to focus on the processes as well as the outcomes of learning, processes over which teachers and pupils have some level of control and responsibility; secondly it moved educational debate well away from the previous discourse which had assumed that all that matters in education is that which can be easily measured through paper and pencil tests; thirdly it recognised the breadth of learning within the classroom rather than focusing on a few curricular areas; fourthly, it empowered both pupils and teachers; finally it developed a model of educational and professional development which ensured the active participation of all of those involved.

The EIS recognises that summative assessment is essential for various purposes. Pupils and their parents are entitled to recognise and celebrate when they have passed significant milestones in their learning. Young people as they come to the end of their school education are entitled to have their attainment certificated through the qualifications system. Summative assessment is useful as one means of evaluating the success of our school system. These various functions of summative assessment must be kept distinct in policy and practice; there is clear evidence that when summative assessment which is intended to recognise or certificate pupil attainment is used inappropriately for selection and setting or for the purpose of evaluating the school or system it adds to the stress on pupils and teachers and fosters limited teaching and learning.

The EIS is concerned that too often the only forms of summative assessment which are promoted as valid and reliable are various systems of externally created tests taken under formal examination conditions. Such a view leads not only to much valuable evidence of pupil learning being ignored but on occasion to damage to the self-confidence of teachers and to the demoralisation of pupils. When such examinations are carefully designed to assess the pupil's learning in a specific course there is clearly value in such assessments. However, the evidence for the validity, reliability and value of tests which are not formally related to the taught curriculum is much less convincing than proponents of such systems state.

In essence, formative assessment is relevant and appropriate feedback in the context of formative teaching strategies: teaching which promotes learning in response to pupil need within a curricular framework, as opposed to teaching which is constrained and determined by the curricular framework, and narrow prescribed assessment and testing criteria. The concepts of convergent and divergent assessment (referred to in the Appendix) are relevant in this context.

The EIS is concerned that formative assessment is being redefined by some local policy makers and constrained into the same rigid models which have led to summative assessment limiting teaching and learning. Teachers are presented with a prescribed set of techniques to be used without consideration of the teaching context; in many cases the recording of pupil responses takes priority over meeting the pupil's immediate needs. If

teachers fail to use the prescribed technique, they are accused by managers of failing to use formative assessment, no matter how thoughtfully they consider and reflect on the learning of their pupils and no matter how responsive their teaching is to the needs of pupils. Formative assessment is not a tick list of practices to be imposed on all pupils, all teachers and all classrooms; rather it is an approach to learning which supports pupils' understanding of the aims of their learning, their progress towards attaining these ends, and the steps that they require to take to achieve them; it is a support to teaching which encourages teachers to develop through reflection on their practice the most effective means of teaching their pupils.

The EIS is clear that assessment must be primarily formative in nature. Real formative assessment draws on a wide range of techniques and evidence, will often not be recorded and will have an impact on the interaction of pupil and teacher. Summative assessment will play a smaller role within Scottish education; but it too must draw on a wider range of techniques than those utilised within reductive models. The employment of a wider range of techniques will require teachers to develop and share their understanding of standards. Teachers must be afforded the opportunities which they consider appropriate for this purpose, especially through collaborative moderation, without additional workload or bureaucracy. Teachers must also be afforded opportunities to collaborate in order to clarify and resolve those tensions and complications which arise when summative assessment frameworks are superimposed on pupil cohorts which have regularly utilised formative assessment techniques.

Formative assessment underpins the planning of pupils' learning. This does not mean that every assessment must be formally recorded; it does not mean that every individual pupil's learning must be recorded and constrained within her/his own tick box document imposed on the teacher; it does not mean that pleasure in learning must be replaced by ever more detailed planning for the future. Rather, what such an approach must do is build on the skills of the teacher in observing and responding to pupils' learning; planning is not simply a paper exercise carried out outwith the classroom; it is both the concomitant and the result of interaction between pupil and teacher. Such an approach values diversity and recognises that pupils cannot be forced into a mould in which all simultaneously attain the same prescribed detailed outcomes.

## National Assessments

The EIS has consistently supported the use of high quality summative assessment which draws on a wide range of evidence and which supports a broad curriculum and which is fit for purpose. This description does not apply to National Assessments.

The EIS has made clear its opposition to any forms of assessment which have perverse effects and which damage learning. It is evident that National Assessments have had and continue to have a number of effects which are harmful to sound teaching and learning.

National Assessments were introduced to replace National Tests because there was a near universal consensus that National Testing had caused considerable damage because its narrow focus on certain aspects of the curriculum led to a concentration on these within the classroom, narrowing the curriculum and focusing teaching and learning on the skills required to pass the tests. This damage was greatly exacerbated by the use of these results to set up public league tables and foster competition among schools and education authorities. Finally the public's understanding of assessment was limited by the political approval and promotion of this model of testing as the only reliable form of assessment to the detriment of the skills deployed by teachers; ironically, if perhaps understandably, there has never been any publication of the data on which the validity and reliability of National Tests were established.

The EIS recognises that it was intended that National Assessments would not cause such damage to the processes of teaching and learning. It was intended that these assessments provide a clearer reflection of the curriculum in aspects of English language and mathematics and that their origins in the Assessment of Achievement Programme would ensure greater credibility in terms of validity. It was hoped that the procedures by which National Assessments were produced would reduce pressure to teach to the test. Finally, the Scottish Executive decision that National Assessment results should no longer be nationally collected and published would remove some of the pressures that attend all high stakes assessment. National Assessments would enhance teacher professionalism as they would be used only to confirm the teacher's judgement that a pupil had attained a particular level.

Regrettably these hopes have not become reality. National Assessments have been used for almost identical purposes to National Tests. Education authorities have taken action to ensure that teachers' use of their professional judgement is discouraged (or indeed forbidden), have continued to gather statistics of results and have continued to create league tables of schools, privately or publicly. Indeed some authorities seem to have sought to construct consortia which will set up their own league tables to replace the national ones. This has led to a continuing focus on narrow aspects of attainment to the detriment of children's broader achievement.

The random generation of National Assessments has not reduced pressure to teach to the test. The system does not technically prevent teaching to the test; indeed electronic transmission of materials makes it easier to produce 'practice' tests based on what the pupils will be sitting. All that the random generation of materials has achieved is to ensure that the tests are decontextualised and perceived by pupils as less integrated into the classroom routines of learning and therefore as possibly more threatening than the National Tests which they have replaced.

*A Curriculum for Excellence* redefines both the nature of curricular levels and the number of levels. It is evident that the existing system of National Assessments will no longer be viable or relevant. This affords an opportunity to ensure the removal of this system and its damaging consequences. It is essential that no similar system is imposed on classroom practice in the context of *A Curriculum for Excellence*.

Proposals for the introduction of literacy and numeracy tests for individual pupils at what are perceived as key educational points have been floated by some politicians. These tests, so far as the concept has been outlined, are unlikely to be related to the taught curriculum and are therefore of very limited real value. They will provide no additional value over and above the informed judgement of teachers; more damagingly they will lead to teaching to the test and will distract attention from real learning. They are open to the same objections as National Assessments and are completely at odds with the philosophy and intentions underpinning *A Curriculum for Excellence*. Given the high standards in sophisticated concepts of mathematics and literacy attained by young people in Scotland, the introduction of such limited and narrowly defined tests is more likely to reduce rather than raise real attainment. It is essential that no such system is imposed on pupils and teachers.

## Quality Assurance

It is evident to almost all that Scotland's schools are subject to a wide range of quality assurance measures. These must not be limited to the use of assessment results. These must be consistent with the principles of *A Curriculum for Excellence* and the Assessment is for Learning Programme. It is crucial that Quality Assurance procedures do not overburden schools or teachers and must not distract from learning or teaching or have perverse effects on learning and teaching.

The statistical principles underpinning STACS data are not always subject to scrutiny within secondary schools with the result that invalid or unreliable conclusions are drawn from these data. However, within some secondary schools, teachers, subject departments and school management use SQA results effectively to identify areas for improvement, developing sophisticated approaches to using STACS data which identify underlying issues related to promoting pupil achievement. Regrettably there are still some school managers and education authority officials who use these data simply to set one subject against another or one school against another and to make ill-informed judgements which have serious implications for teachers and pupils. Statistics can do no more than provide an informed starting point for discussion.

The limited value and narrow focus of National Assessments has made this type of analysis more difficult to carry out in primary and early secondary school. However there is evidence of good practice in which the achievement of different groups of pupils is the subject of analysis informed by a range of sources of evidence, with the aim of improving learning. This range of evidence must draw on high quality relevant assessment data from all curricular areas, crucially including insights provided by the class teacher from interactions with the pupils. There is a need for staff development in this area in both primary and secondary sectors.

The major criticism of National Assessments from some authorities is that they are not rigorous enough to ensure quality in teaching and require to be supplemented by commercially produced assessment packages. All too often these have provided little valuable data to inform teaching and learning within the school or classroom; all too often they have been used to set up schemes of target setting which label pupils, set up mechanically defined targets and are not supportive of broader achievement.

The aggregation of individual pupil results, whatever their source, to set up league tables as a means of quality assurance has proved so damaging to pupils and to teaching and learning that all such attempts must be opposed.

There are in existence more sophisticated, valid and reliable means of using assessment results to contribute to evaluating the effectiveness of school education in Scotland. The Scottish Survey of Achievement permits this evaluation to be carried out both nationally and at the level of the education authority in a range of curricular areas. Because only a sample of pupils is involved it is possible to assess a wide range of skills far more effectively and in much greater depth than by aggregating the results of simple tests sat by all individual pupils.

International assessment and evaluation permits us in similar ways to identify the overall success of Scotland's schools in selected curricular areas.

## **Certification and qualification**

The EIS considers that the debate on options for certification and qualification, in particular the debate on SCQF levels 4 and 5, must be conducted within a broader context than that of rationalisation and efficiency. Specifically it must be clearly related to the development of *A Curriculum for Excellence*.

The starting point for debate must be a consideration of the educational experience of older pupils. Certification and qualifications must reflect rather than determine the curriculum. The education system and schools within Scotland have demonstrated that they are capable of developing the curriculum, both as a whole and in terms of individual subjects, to meet new or changing demands. Developments must recognise the strengths of current provision and must avoid any simplistic development schema. Recent history demonstrates

all too clearly the results of imposing a single pattern of provision on all subject areas and the results of failing to involve the teaching profession in the development process.

It is crucial that any system of certification and qualifications provides opportunities for progression in certification as the pupil moves from one stage to the next. It is evident that the current system provides opportunities for progression from Standard Grade into New National Qualifications and for progression within New National Qualifications; it is evident that there are discontinuities in some subjects between the two systems and that there are discontinuities from one level to the next in some subjects within the New National Qualifications structure.

It is equally crucial that any such system ensures that assessments are appropriate to the age and stage of the candidates; this is particularly the case at a period of such rapid individual development as adolescence. New National Qualifications were developed to meet the needs of older pupils and students and of adults returning to education; this in some cases will make them unsuitable for younger pupils.

The EIS is convinced that any development of the current system must build on the strengths of existing provision. Standard Grade has demonstrated the value of its underpinning principles over the last two decades. It has also demonstrated an ability to develop over this period in terms of the introduction of new subjects, changes to the content of individual subjects, and changes in the assessment of individual subjects. The continuing commitment to Standard Grade of many subject teachers demonstrates its continuing effectiveness as an assessment system and means of certification. It is likely that this can be attributed to the fact that the development of Standard Grade was informed by both the practical experience of teachers and a clearly articulated theory of assessment; this approach ensured that the issues specific to each subject were addressed.

The EIS argues that experience in different subjects must be respected. There is a very small number of subjects in which teachers in schools have demonstrated a preference for using New National Qualifications in S3 and S4 in place of Standard Grade; this experience must be respected in any development of the qualifications system. There is a much greater number of subjects in which teachers have demonstrated a commitment to continuing to use Standard Grade in S3 and S4; again this experience must be respected.

The EIS believes that the above considerations are more valid than any argument that the continuation of a dual system is confusing or expensive. It can be pointed out that recently the landscape has become more complex with the introduction of Skills for Work courses at Intermediate levels which have no final external assessment and are not graded; this additional complexity has not been described as a source of anxiety; critics must be consistent in their arguments.

Despite the different rationales on which Standard Grade and New National Qualifications were developed, both types of course have internal assessment as a major aspect of provision and both rely heavily on external examinations. Certification in both cases records both elements or units and a final award. There are of course significant differences between these concepts, in particular the internal elements within S Grade contribute to the final grade of award in contrast with unit assessments in Intermediate courses, a situation which has led many to question the value of internal assessment in New National Qualifications while this criticism is rarely voiced about internal assessment within Standard Grade. A further difference is the prescription of a single unit length across almost all New National Qualification courses, including those at Intermediate levels, while the contribution of an element is differently weighted in different subjects. The specific value of Standard Grade provision, even in these areas where practice in the two systems may be perceived as analogous, must be recognised.



The profession must be fully involved in any discussion regarding the future of Standard Grade, including any consideration of which S Grade courses have proved increasingly unpopular and have been replaced by Intermediate courses. The profession must also be involved in any discussions as to whether in some subjects the differences between S Grade and Intermediate 1 may not be as great as might appear at first sight.

The EIS remains concerned that the experience of pupils (and indeed of teachers) in the upper secondary school remains dominated by assessment for certification. There are a number of practical steps which can be carefully considered to reduce this burden. In particular, the burden of the Standard Grade system could be reduced by limiting the routine presentation at two levels; this would require consideration of the possibility of developing a concept of headroom, different from that rejected in developing assessment of new National Qualifications. More radically, it could be argued that schools and more importantly pupils and their parents should be persuaded that assessment at the point of exit from a subject should become the norm which would lead in some cases to there being less use made of Standard Grade and of Intermediate assessment. Such developments would require a change in culture at all levels of the system which is dependent on ensuring that there are safeguards in place for all learners.

While National Qualifications of both types make use of a wide range of types of assessment, the system remains dominated by the traditional written assessment carried out under timed examination conditions. While this is a highly efficient means of assessing large numbers of candidates and while Scotland has developed very considerable expertise in this field, an overdependence on this means of assessment limits the effectiveness, value and flexibility of the system and places considerable strain on many candidates. The EIS is clear that there must be no increase in the workload of either pupils or teachers arising from developments in assessment for qualification but considers that the profession must be involved in discussions on methods of assessment which permit teachers to make use of a wide range of methodologies and of evidence. Such developments may well require local moderation which should be planned primarily by the teachers involved and supported administratively by the education authority or SQA. This will require to be supported by staff development identified by the teacher through the PRD process and the allocation of sufficient time. Any such development must not impose bureaucratic burdens on staff or candidates. They must not constrain teaching and learning and must recognise the professionalism of teachers and their rights to plan and manage their own teaching.

Many pupils (and their teachers) are subject to the stress of candidates being placed in certificate classes at too demanding a level. This arises both from the understandable ambition of parents and, less honourably, from the constant competitive drive to raise recorded levels of attainment. Inappropriate placement can lead to an experience of failure at the wrong level, rather than celebrating success at a more appropriate level. This success can often be the preparation for further progress and advancement, rather than the frustration, negativity and disaffection with learning, which often undermines positive teacher- student relationships; this experience can also prejudice future learning within the credit qualifications framework via any number of pathways at school and beyond. Any development of the assessment system, including the collection of attainment data, must inhibit opportunities for this pressure to place candidates at an inappropriate level of presentation.

The EIS has consistently opposed the view that the early introduction of certificated qualifications into the earlier years of secondary school is a panacea for perceived problems in S1/S2. Such an approach confuses learning and assessment, assumes that the only motivation for learning is the instrumental one of gaining qualifications, and confuses qualifications with achievement. Those education authorities which have encouraged or imposed this approach on schools and teachers run counter to Executive

advice. The introduction of *A Curriculum for Excellence* with its clear recognition that there is no place for assessment for qualification before S3, with its clear insistence on the primacy of learning and teaching, and with its stress on the recognition of wider achievement, supports the view that certification should be restricted to the period immediately leading up to the end of compulsory school education. Standard Grade has successfully carried out this function for some considerable time.

## Recognising Wider Achievement

The EIS welcomes the move away from the previous excessively narrow focus on aspects of certificated attainment. Learning in school is much wider than this. All pupils and students should experience a broad, challenging and enjoyable education which results in children and young people achieving a wide range of outcomes. Such achievement should be recognised and celebrated. Children and young people should be aware of their wider achievements and of how they can build upon these. The EIS believes, however, that there are dangers in moving from recognising and celebrating achievement toward recording this, especially if this is constrained within an imposed framework.

The EIS considers that the recording of wider achievement within a culture of target setting will be accompanied by considerable levels of administrative procedures; this, of course, will result in significant workload and bureaucratic burdens, which would detract from the main focus of learning and teaching. It may well be difficult to report achievement without falling into the trap of unnecessarily or excessively recording in this area.

The EIS is also aware that the formal recognition of wider achievement is likely to result in considerable pressures on some children and young people to take part in activities out of school which carry certificated qualifications (eg recognised music performance qualifications). In other cases the pupil's pleasure in achievement may be diminished by, if not actually replaced by, the goal of attaining a certificate or a desirable contribution to a CV. There is a great danger of encouraging social inequality in that high attaining pupils would focus on 'real' achievement certificated through traditional and publicly respected channels while lower attaining pupils were encouraged to focus on the recognition of other achievement regarded as motivating; this would result in a closing of future options for those young people already disadvantaged.

The EIS would prefer that consideration is given to promoting a model which understands how wider and deeper achievement across a number of areas directly contributes to, indeed is critical to, improving attainment: a model where the promotion of social capital provokes and promotes the growth of cultural capital.

The accumulation of social capital in terms of explicitly building community and collaboration within all classrooms supports raising attainment in a number of ways rather than coaching to raise certification which both undermines attainment and ignores the importance of wider achievement. Social and cultural capital can also be developed through providing all pupils with opportunities to enjoy learning in a range of environments within and outwith school. Curricular flexibility will afford opportunities for such learning to be more readily provided. Such learning and enjoyment should not be constrained by the requirements of certification.

The accumulation of social and cultural capital is relevant to the principles which underpin *A Curriculum for Excellence*, the Assessment is for Learning programme and the promotion of inclusive education.

It will not be possible, or desirable, to measure all aspects of attainment or achievement through the certification and qualification framework. However, it is important that



certification should reflect, as widely as possible, the attainment of independent, confident, successful and responsible individuals within a social context in which the collective experience combines to promote the wider and deeper attainment and achievement of all.

## Recommendations

### Formative assessment

The EIS will promote the importance of formative assessment in supporting teaching and learning as the primary purpose of assessment.

The EIS will promote formative assessment which empowers teachers and pupils; it will oppose the imposition of bureaucratic schemes on schools and teachers which are claimed to be formative in purpose but which constrain teaching.

### Testing

The EIS will continue to oppose the use of National Assessment results to judge schools and set up league tables.

The EIS will utilise the opportunity afforded by the introduction of the structures of *A Curriculum for Excellence* to seek to ensure that National Assessments are ended and are not replaced.

The EIS will oppose any introduction of literacy and numeracy tests at any stage of schooling.

The EIS will continue to oppose the introduction of decontextualised standardised tests to determine pupils' futures.

### Quality assurance

The EIS will continue to support the use of high quality national and international assessment surveys (such as SSA and PISA) which recognise the breadth of the curriculum in supporting quality assurance of the school system.

The EIS will argue for the provision of the opportunities desired by teachers to ensure common understanding of standards (for example through local moderation).

### Certification

The EIS recognises that there is a need to develop practical means of reducing the burden of certificate assessment on pupils and teachers.

The EIS will seek to ensure that the value of Standard Grade is recognised and that Standard Grade continues to remain an important aspect of certificate provision in Scotland.

The EIS will seek to ensure that teachers play an active role in any developments in certification.

### Recognition of wider achievement

The EIS believes that all pupils and students enjoy experiences which are broad, challenging and enjoyable.

The EIS is concerned that formally recognising wider achievement could, if not implemented appropriately, be accompanied by bureaucratic procedures and a concentration on defined outcomes at the expense of the pupil's experience.

### **Resourcing**

The EIS will continue to argue that all developments must be fully resourced.

In particular, meaningful formative assessment, dialogue with learners and opportunities for achieving in a wide range of contexts all demand a critical reduction in class sizes.

These developments equally require a culture of professionalism in which teachers are trusted and work in a collegiate environment.

## Appendix

The table below seeks to compare and contrast attainment as currently certificated within the qualifications framework with wider achievement, largely not included within that framework. It should be noted that these are at two ends of a spectrum and very little summative assessment is tied to either extreme of this spectrum; rather the certification of attainment will lie toward one end while any formal recognition of achievement will tend to lie towards the other end of this spectrum. This table is intended to stimulate discussion. It does not form any part of EIS policy.

	<b>certification</b>	<b>recognition</b>
There are differences between the elements which are typically assessed	The assessment and certification of subjects and of basic skills relates to the accumulation of cultural capital; this can be argued in terms of content (passing on recognised knowledge) and in terms of recognised value of certification	The recognition of wider achievement permits and supports the development of social capital in terms of the skills developed and recognised; the processes may themselves foster the reserves of social capital available to the young person
In terms of Bernstein's work	The certification of attainment is marked by rigid framing in that the domains that are assessed are those which are defined by the school and not by everyday life	The recognition of wider achievement is less rigidly framed in that it can draw on life outwith the classroom and indeed outwith the school
Again in terms of Bernstein's work	The certification of attainment reflects the classification of knowledge and skills into discrete subjects within the school	In contrast the recognition of wider attainment is comparatively unclassified in that skills and dispositions can be evidenced within a number of different classrooms within the school
In terms of the means of assessment	Attainment is usually formally examined, under controlled conditions, with rigorous external assurance	Wider achievement can be recognised outwith formal examinations, in 'real' or less controlled situations, where the processes of internal assurance will be significant
Locus of definition	Content and assessment procedures will be rigorously defined and prescribed by 'arrangements documents' etc	Content and means of recognition will be defined by the school and the candidate

	<b>certification</b>	<b>recognition</b>
The extent of freedom is different in the two systems	This will be tightly constrained and externally defined and will be common to all candidates	This will involve some processes of negotiation and individualisation
The range of evidence to be drawn upon	In certification of attainment the range of types of evidence will be limited; while we have moved away from relying solely on traditional examinations there is still a dependence on written assessment	In recording wider achievement a wider range of types of evidence can be drawn upon; in particular observation of process and dialogue with the learner will be important tools for assessment
The concept of convergence versus divergence	Convergent assessment takes a predetermined 'thing' and sets out to discover whether a learner knows, understands or is able to do it	Divergent assessment is an open-ended process that aims to find out what the learner can do without defining that in detail before assessment
The breadth of focus	Certification and qualification will tend to narrow the focus of what is taught to what is to be examined	Recognition of wider attainment can support (or at least not inhibit) a broader curriculum and range of learning experiences
Levels of attainment	It is relatively easy, given the technologies which we have developed, to place certification of attainment within a framework of different levels	It is less easy (and perhaps counter-productive) to do so for the recognition of wider attainment
In terms of traditional definitions of reliability	Certification of attainment has developed highly sophisticated quality assurance procedures to maintain high levels of reliability	Recognition of wider achievement requires some form of assurance procedure outwith the formal structures of the school
Validity in each case is defined by the purpose to which the assessment is put		