

The Educational Institute of Scotland

AGM 2017 Remitted Motion N5 and Higher English Folio

Background

The 2017 AGM remitted the following Motion to Council, it subsequently being assigned by Executive to the Education Committee for consideration:

“This AGM instruct Council to campaign for the assessment of National 5 and Higher English Writing by means of external examination rather than through the current SQA procedure of folio assessment.”

The Committee agreed to endorse existing policy on the assessment of Writing in the interests of social justice and assessment validity; that the workload, inequity and authenticity issues raised by the mover continue to be addressed in appropriate fora; that English Subject specialists would be surveyed post-submission of English folios and that the data collected would inform future discussions with the SQA, and that a paper would be disseminated to members through Reps’ and Members’ bulletins, and via the HT & DHT Network.

Action

During the summer term, the Education Department emailed all members of the English Subject Specialist Network (six) and Secondary members of Council who teach English (six). Replies were received from five English subject specialists.

English subject specialist views on the Folio of Writing

1. How well, in your view, does the Folio of Writing support students’ skill development in Writing?

‘If the student has been put into the correct level of course and the stated conditions and approaches suggested by SQA are followed then it does develop writing skills and ideas.’

‘The writing folio can support skill development very well, especially in S4 National 5 courses which can only be timetabled for 3hrs 20mins a week [130 hours]. The shortfall of a notional 30 hours prohibits depth of teaching and learning and SQA portfolio course requirement supports writing skills focus.’

‘I like that the folio is a process – the pupils have an opportunity to redraft and think about the piece of writing, which is an important part of any writing process.’

‘Reasonably well. It is a pity that the exhortation for centres not to begin N5 courses before S4 means that (like the old Standard Grade) pupils can’t write

a more extensive, organic portfolio across S3 and S4. It would also be useful if formally responding to feedback and evaluating their own editing/improvements (as per the AH creative folio unit assessment) was a formal part of the assessment process.

We would also like to see greater rigour and consistency in how pupils are expected to use academic referencing across all SQA coursework tasks.'

'It supports it well, along with skills in planning, editing and working to deadlines.'

All five respondents are of the view that the Folio of Writing is a support to the development of students' skills in Writing. The most positive comments pointed to the design of portfolio assessment articulating well with the key elements of the writing process and enabling independent learning.

Two of the comments contain the qualification that the Folio works well in developing writing skills if students are enrolled for the correct level of course and if SQA assessment conditions and guidance are adhered to. Another comment suggests that the students' experience of writing pieces for the Folio are curtailed by annual presentation patterns, while another indicates that the Folio provides some compensation for the shortage of class time in which to complete one-year N5 qualifications, presumably because students can work on Folio pieces outwith class time.

None of the respondents provided comments to suggest that they do not see the English Folio as being an appropriate process and method of assessment to support skills development in Writing.

2. Are there any workload concerns that you would wish to raise with regards to the Folio?

'It is important to make clear expectations and deadlines at the start of the course. Key dates should be provided. Sometimes teachers can leave this work until too near the end of the course and it can become demanding. Also if pupils don't meet deadlines for various reasons teachers will always give them longer to complete which can mean a lot of pressure at the last minute.

In relation to the submission on the template, the dept built that factor into its planning from the start, recognising the only way to address this was for the CL to manage it.'

'Teachers recognise the practical support they can offer students to complete and submit folio essays on the template but this adds to an already unwieldy process of getting regular access to 20 – 30 computers in ICT suites. The tracking and supporting of individual students through the process creates an equally unwieldy

workload burden for teachers, which is inequitable given English teachers can have more than one presentation class in a single session.'

'If the SQA guidelines are followed there shouldn't be workload implications. Teachers should only be marking one draft of each piece.'

'The administrative side could be hugely simplified if pupils were able to submit their folios online. It could also allow for a more rigorous approach towards tackling plagiarism, by using a system like 'Turnitin'.'

The only workload concerns are if the rules are being bent about 2 drafts maximum per essay, whether it's pressure from management or parents.

The comments provided highlight some potential workload generation associated with the Folio. The SQA requirement for Folio pieces to be submitted using an electronic template was identified by two of the respondents as a source of additional workload, in one case for English teachers generally and in the other, for the Curriculum Leader. This was the only aspect of the Folio-related workload that respondents commented on that is directly attributable to the SQA. On the other hand, one respondent indicated a preference for online submission, believing this to offer a streamlining of processes.

Two respondents suggest that adherence to SQA guidelines around the number of drafts allowable minimises workload, the corollary being that where such guidance is breached, teacher workload increases.

One respondent indicated the importance of transparency around key dates and adherence to deadlines for submission of portfolios, highlighting the risk of workload bottle-necks either where timing determined by the teacher or late submission by students, creates disproportionate pressure on time immediately preceding the SQA Folio submission deadline. While to a large extent this is down to establishment-based policy, it has become clear from recent discussions with them that the SQA is reluctant to make formal deadlines known to all Secondary teachers, preferring to circulate these only to SQA co-ordinators.

3. A strong argument in favour of the inclusion of the Folio, and one which the EIS supports, is that it enables students to demonstrate skills and knowledge in a context other than the final exam, so benefits students from less affluent backgrounds.

To what extent is this reflected in your experience of working with students on the Folio?

'Yes, this is true, and in relation to a personal piece it can be very rewarding for the student (and at times their families if they read it once it has been completed).

The discursive/persuasive piece can enable students to consider an issue more deeply and can influence their thinking and their lives. However, if the student has

been put into the wrong level of course, it can be difficult for her/him and the class teacher if her/his professional judgement on which course is appropriate is ignored. Students who struggle with this can get an essay/s on-line. However, most teachers will spot this and challenge the student.'

'This is our experience in a school where most backgrounds are far from affluent: often the creative writing offers a way for students to express and reflect on some very challenging life experiences.'

'I work in a school in an affluent catchment area so have little experience of teaching less affluent pupils. In my experience, students from affluent backgrounds can buy tutors to help with writing the folio and in that respect coursework can in fact favour affluent pupils.'

'While we support a coursework element that is not assessed under exam conditions, the suggestion that it creates a more even playing field for disadvantaged pupils seems misguided. Regardless of the systems and strictures that schools/departments put in place to try and guarantee pupils' work is entirely their own, those who can afford the help of tutors or who have 'helpful' family members will inevitably employ them to the disadvantage of pupils without.'

'Those from more affluent backgrounds often have a tutor – this is a concern because there is no way of proving definitively if the tutor has had too much input into the folio. This is not, however, a reason to remove the folio; perhaps more time could be freed up elsewhere in the course to allow more of the folio to be done in school – this would certainly help those from less affluent backgrounds who lack the space and/or peace and/or resources for research or production at home.'

Two respondent comments echo the EIS position that a folio-based approach to the assessment of writing as opposed to an exam-based one, can enable students from less affluent backgrounds (implied by one respondent, all students) to engage more meaningfully and rewardingly with the writing process.

One of these two statements contains the qualification that this occurs when students are appropriately placed in terms of course level and suggests that where students are inappropriately placed and the level of demand too great, there may be temptation by candidates to plagiarise the work of others or falsely present pieces that have been obtained from the internet as their own work.

Three of the five respondents highlighted the inequality of tutor intervention and/or other at-home assistance with, Folio work for students from more affluent backgrounds. None of the three suggest that this would warrant the replacement of folio-based assessment with an exam, however. One suggests that more time spent in class on Folio writing would be a better leveller, enabling less affluent students the requisite access to the resources, research materials and conducive learning space, which tend to be in shorter supply for such students within the home environment.

4. Are there any other issues that you wish to raise?

'It might be helpful if the conditions under which folio pieces are to be completed were stated more often/more prominently.'

Creativity doesn't often flourish under pressure like an exam.

Researching an issue for the folio is a good skill for like and work beyond school.

For students who have EAL the fact the folio pieces are not timed and they can use English dictionaries (not bilingual ones) to support their writing can mean that their marks for the folio are higher proportionately than they are able to gain in the exam, with its added pressures. The overall outcome in terms of final grade in August can sometimes disappoint.

The need to have the submissions word-processed can be difficult for some students, not because they don't have access to equipment as they use school computers or iPads, but because their typing skills are poor/slow.'

'I don't think the folio should be replaced with an exam.'

'We are concerned about a narrowing of pupil experience - that pupils who progress through N5 > H > AH will increasingly write in the same narrow range of genres (one creative, one discursive) for fear that experimenting beyond these will be seen as 'risky'. We accept that, ultimately, it is up to centres and practitioners to design their own courses, and we appreciate that having the same folio element at every level creates greater 'articulation'. However, repeating exactly the same pattern year on year runs the risk of further diminishing the breadth of the pupil experience in English (just as the Scottish Set Text element has), especially when time to deliver the courses is already squeezed - it risks leading to a 'lowest common denominator' approach from practitioners and candidates.'

Final comments referenced more of what are considered by some to be shortcomings arising from SQA decisions: insufficient communication of the detail of assessment conditions; and the mirroring of Folio requirements from National 5 to Advanced Higher, which one English Department considers to be limiting. One comment referenced the difficulties associated with school-based decisions to set the requirement that pieces are word-processed, which can pose challenge to students lacking the requisite digital skill level to manage this well.

Comments also pointed to further benefits of folio-based assessment: stimulating creativity among students who are engaged in the writing process; encouraging the development of good research skills; giving students the freedom to write

without being under tight pressure of time; and the greater accessibility of this assessment mode for students for whom English is an additional language.

Again, none of the final comments from respondents called for an end to the Folio as an assessment of Writing in favour of external examination. One respondent stated quite simply that the Folio should not be replaced in this way.

Conclusions

Only five of those invited to respond to the survey did so, meaning that the views obtained are from a small number of English subject specialists. That more members did not respond to the survey with calls for the Folio to be scrapped is also telling. It would appear that there is not great appetite among members of our networks who are English teachers to abandon the Folio of Writing at National 5 and Higher.

None of the responses called for this, though did highlight some of the issues posed by the Folio in terms of teacher workload, ICT demands, ensuring the authenticity of candidate work, inequality in the levels of support that more and less affluent candidates receive at home, and impact on the curriculum.

On balance, the Folio was judged to be strong on assessment validity, enabling and encouraging the acquisition of knowledge and understanding, and of skills development, in relation to the writing process. There was acknowledgement, also, of the alignment in terms of assessment design, with social justice principles: the view expressed was that the process of writing within the framework of a Folio, more closely mirrors the process associated with the art of writing, as opposed to the on-demand nature of writing under exam conditions, and this is beneficial to students from poorer backgrounds.

That many candidates complete Folio work at home, largely as a result of annual presentation patterns and significant time constraints within one-year courses, was thought to contribute to rather than reduce inequality between the most and least deprived students. A move to two-year qualifications could helpfully address this issue, among others.

Recommendations

The EIS should maintain its support of assessment practice that is known to enhance learning and which is evidenced to minimise disadvantage to poorer students whose outcomes run greater risk of being compromised as a result of the socio-economic challenges that they face.

The EIS should continue to call for greater support for schools to diversify in terms of senior phase pathways, to move away from one-year presentation patterns as the norm, and within such a senior phase framework, to ensure as far as possible that students undertake courses that are appropriate to their learning needs.

The Education Committee should, in its discussions with the SQA, revisit the matters of insistence on submission of Folio pieces using an SQA electronic template; and the need to publicise clearly to all Secondary teachers, the formal deadlines for Folio submission and the appropriate conditions of assessment for Folio writing.

Advice to members in relation to SQA-related workload should be re-iterated through member bulletins.
