

SQA Assessment Changes to N5, Higher and Advanced Higher

Background

Following successful industrial action by EIS members in response to assessment-related workload in the senior phase, mandatory unit assessments are being removed from N5, Higher and Advanced Higher Qualifications on a phased basis from August 2017.

The removal of unit assessment has significant implications for senior phase curriculum architecture and timetabling. This was flagged up to Education Scotland and Scottish Government by the EIS at the point at which the agreement around the removal of unit assessments was reached and repeatedly thereafter.

The Assessment and Qualifications Review Group has now, on March 31st, issued advice on the changes to local authorities, schools and teachers. This EIS advice, initially published on the website, has now been updated with new sections highlighted in boxes, as in this document.

The EIS has a clear view that these decisions should have been made much earlier in the session and communicated to schools timeously. It is over 6 months since agreement was reached on the removal of units and the implications of those changes have been known since last September. It would seem that the simple lesson from the introduction of the new qualifications, that schools (parent, pupils and staff) need time to adjust to changes has yet to be learned.

Frequently Asked Questions

What changes have been/ will be made to the assessment of National 4 Qualifications?

None at present.

Assessment arrangements remain the same- mandatory internal unit assessment plus the Added Value Unit (AVU).

Discussion is underway within the NQ Review Group about the possibility of introducing a level of differentiation to the N4 award and an element of external marking. The EIS will be pushing for any changes to be made in time for session 2018-19.

What about N4 verification?

Random verification of the AVU continues.

Verification of other N4 units is on the following basis:

- Where centres are **new to delivery within a qualification group as a whole**. This means centres entering candidates for either a new course in a qualification group for which they have never previously entered candidates for *any* course, or in qualification groups where no verification activity has taken place since the inception of the new qualifications.
- Where the **initial outcome of verification within a qualification group was not accepted in 2015/16**, centres will be eligible for selection for unit verification. Also included are centres who received '**not accepted**' within a qualification group in an earlier session (2013/14 or 2014/15), but **have not been not verified since**. Where centres are eligible for selection under the 'not accepted' criteria, they may be selected for **any course within the qualification group - often for a different subject than verified previously**.

Why hasn't there been a decision to introduce an exam to the N4 qualification?

The National Qualification Review Group has discussed this possibility.

The view of Scottish Government and others, has been that introduction of an exam is not necessarily the best means by which to address the issue of the perceived lack of parity of esteem between the N4 and N5 qualifications. There is broad agreement around the need for N4 to be differentiated in some way, for example, by a pass threshold and a 'pass plus' grade, but the potential mechanism for this has not been agreed, as yet.

It has been agreed that more work needs to be done to support schools to consider alternative senior phase architecture, featuring more 2-year qualifications rather than year on year presentation from S4 through to S6, and introducing a wider range of pathways that will allow for greater accommodation of the needs of learners for whom National 5 courses are not appropriate at a given stage.

It is understood that work needs to be done, also, with parents and employers, to enhance their understanding of senior phase qualifications and curriculum architecture, and of the need to ensure that the skills, talents and achievements of all learners, are to be valued.

The NQ Group is aware of the evidence which shows that learners from poorer socio-economic backgrounds can be disadvantaged by external exams. For this reason, also, while it has been recognised that there are issues associated with presentation of whole cohorts at N4 or N5 in S4, EIS policy to date has not been in favour of formal examination at National 4.

Also, within the Qualifications Group there is little support for a 'mini' N5 approach to differentiation at N4, although there is general agreement around the need for something more than a threshold pass, in order to support better articulation with N5 where that is the pupil pathway. The strength of current N4 arrangements in terms of acting as a gateway to vocational or horizontal progression also needs to be protected.

What changes have been made to N5, Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications so far?

1) Introduction of thresholds to unit assessment marking for session 2016-17.

To ease the workload burden with regards to reassessment, the SQA introduced thresholds for Unit assessment for this session. This means that candidates are no longer required to pass every element of an assessment to pass the unit overall. Thresholds have been applied in three categories as follows:

Category 1: Maths and Sciences- application of a 60% threshold score to unit assessment tests in Maths; 50% threshold score to unit assessment tests in Sciences.

Category 2: Social Subjects, Business and Technical- application of a threshold to the number of assessment standards that candidates must meet to achieve each unit. SQA has, where appropriate, introduced for each unit, within each subject, a threshold for the number of assessment standards that all candidates must meet to achieve units. Details should be checked on a subject by subject basis.

Category 3: Performing and Expressive Arts, PE, Languages and English: application of a threshold judgement within each assessment standard.

These changes should have resulted in reduction in the amount of re-assessment undertaken and associated teacher workload, as 100% compliance is not required.

Full subject-specific details in relation to thresholds can be found on the relevant pages of the SQA website.

2) SQA has suspended random verification for this session for N5, Higher and Advanced Higher. These arrangements will remain in place for Higher in session 2017-18 and Advanced higher until session 2018-19.

This session unit verification will take place for N5, Higher and Advanced Higher only under the following circumstances:

- Where centres are **new to delivery within a qualification group as a whole**. This means centres entering candidates for either a new course in a qualification group for which they have never previously entered candidates for *any* course, or in qualification groups where no verification activity has taken place since the inception of the new qualifications.
- Where the **initial outcome of verification within a qualification group was not accepted in 2015/16**, centres will be eligible for selection for unit verification. Also included are centres who received '**not accepted**' within a qualification group in an earlier session (2013/14 or 2014/15), but **have not been not verified since**. Where centres are eligible for selection under the 'not accepted' criteria, they may be selected for **any course within the qualification group - often for a different subject than verified**

previously.

What other changes are being introduced to N5, Higher and Advanced Higher?

From August 2017, August 2018 and August 2019, units will no longer be part of the N5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses, respectively. (Titles within the "new" course descriptors are likely to broadly match those used in current documentation, but not as units.)

Freestanding units and accompanying assessment will exist but not as part of these courses, which will be entirely based on external exam and/ or coursework.

The SQA has now written to centres with details of the first swathe of changes on a subject by subject basis. With the removal of Unit assessments, in order to maintain the 'integrity, breadth and standards' of the National Courses, the SQA say, changes have resulted in one or more of the following for each subject:

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

What are the immediate implications of the changes for senior phase options and timetabling?

In light of the significant differences between N4 and N5 course delivery and assessment, schools should be planning for classes that enable coherent pathways for students.

EIS advice, consistent with existing policy on bi-level and multi-level teaching, is that rather than seeking to run bi-level classes of N4 and N5 where pupils would face different assessment arrangements, and teachers would grapple with significant resultant workload, discrete classes should be the norm as far as possible in the interests of learning and teaching, and teachers' health and wellbeing. Extant EIS policy in relation to bi-level classes should be noted. It can be accessed here:

<http://www.eis.org.uk/images/education/Bi-Level%20and%20Multi-Stage%20Classes.pdf>

In particular, this extract from the policy is of key importance:

"The detrimental impact of teaching bi-level and multi-level classes on the wellbeing of teachers should be highlighted and measures established to alleviate this. Possible solutions may include additional time for preparation and correction allocated to teachers of bi-level and multi-level classes and smaller class sizes."

In schools where bi-level N4 and N5 composite classes are configured, in the context of advice from the NQ Review Group having been issued to schools so late, members should seek advice from the Local Association Secretary.

Free standing unit assessments will remain available at SCQF level 5 but centres will be advised to enter candidates for either a N5 course award (based on external assessment) or a series of unit awards – not both.

It will be essential make sure that candidates are enrolled for courses which best suit their prior learning and attainment at the point at which options are being considered.

The Deputy First Minister has taken the decision, however, that for an interim period only, while consideration is being given to possible differentiation of candidate performance at N4, in a very limited number of exceptional circumstances, the current mechanism of recognising positive achievement will be available. This is in circumstances where the view of the teacher and head teacher, in discussion with parents and the young person, is that it is in her/his best interests to be presented both for SCQF level 5 units and the N5 course award as a protection if they do not achieve 40% in the exam. Having passed N5 units and on successful completion of the N4 Added Value Unit, an N4 pass will be awarded. Presentation patterns will be reviewed at the end of each session by local authorities and Education Scotland.

The EIS is clear that in the interests of workload reduction for both for teachers and students, this must be an interim arrangement for session 2017-18 only and must only be used in a minority of cases. **Under no circumstances** should whole classes or large numbers of students within a year group be presented in this way. Should such presentation patterns emerge within an establishment, the Local Association Secretary should be informed.

Whilst the EIS recognises that some concern has been expressed about the general removal of the former RPA mechanism, the simple fact is that this extension of that arrangement will mean that some pupils, those on the cusp between N4 and N5, will face even more assessment than previously, as a result of the continued use of unit assessment. The EIS does not believe that this approach is likely to facilitate a positive learning experience for pupils and would advocate the use of a two-year approach for pupils in this situation, utilising N4/SCQF level 5 units plus AVU in year one and progressing to a N5 course award in year 2.

Why should it not be possible to present all students both for units and the full course award?

To present for both would not bring about the reduction in assessment-related workload for pupils and teachers which was the aim of the recent EIS industrial action.

In fact, because of expansions to coursework and exams as a consequence of the removal of unit assessment within courses, to present students for both units and external assessment, would result in an overall increase in the amount of assessment that some students would undertake, this to the likely detriment of their wellbeing and that of teachers.

The SQA has indicated that from August 2017, N5 units will no longer exist. Instead, there will be SCQF level 5 units. In the short term, these will be the same in terms of content as they were at N5, but over time, their content is likely to diverge from that of the N5 course towards vocational learning. The same will be true of Higher units from 2018.

What about Recognising Positive Achievement(RPA) or 'fall-back' for candidates who fail the N5 exam?

The NQ Review Group has agreed the extension of the Grade D pass range at N5 to a 10% spread (i.e. 40-49 rather than 45-49) to provide a bigger safety net for candidates who may be at risk of failing the final exam. This move is intended to ensure that young people who do not perform as well as predicted in the course assessment, receive credit for the SCQF level of the qualification for which they were entered.

A Grade D award at N5 will be worth more SCQF points than are currently obtained by the successful completion of N5 units with the N4 Added Value Unit.

In effect, this is the new RPA mechanism.

The SQA is of the view that the current RPA, whilst intended to support aspirational presentation, has had the unintended consequence of inappropriate patterns of presentation, with young people being presented for course awards that do not reflect the level of their prior learning and achievement.

The Deputy First Minister has taken the decision, however, that for an interim period only, in a very limited number of exceptional circumstances, the current mechanism of RPA will be available. This mechanism will continue to exist while consideration is being given to possible differentiation of candidate performance at N4 and should only be used in circumstances where the view of the teacher and head teacher, in discussion with parents and the young person, is that it is in her/his best interests to be presented both for SCQF level 5 units and the N5 course award as a protection if they do not achieve 40% in the exam. Having passed SCQF level 5 units and on successful completion of the N4 Added Value Unit, an N4 pass will be awarded. Presentation patterns will be reviewed at the end of each session by local authorities and Education Scotland.

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How are centres to encourage aspiration among students through presentation?

For students who intend to stay in school beyond S4, one timetable model which schools might consider is that students aim for the N5 qualification over 2 years, allowing time for depth and consolidation of learning within the subject, and opportunity to re-course

at the beginning of S5 if necessary. Students could undertake SCQF level 5 units in S4 as part-preparation for the N5 course the following year.

In schools which continue to present students for qualifications annually, within N4 classes, pupils who plan to sit N5 in the following year could attempt some SCQF level 5 units, also. This might address concerns around N4 threshold passes being a poor preparation for N5 courses.

Whichever way the senior phase is designed, some learners may be presented for full courses in some subjects and free-standing units in other subjects.

Linked to the issue of encouraging aspiration is the esteem within which qualifications are held by teachers, pupils and parents. In the interests of social justice, a shared understanding is required of the need to recognise and value the qualifications that all young people attain where these represent the best achievement that each is capable of at a given point in their learning.

Won't the changes to N5 assessment force early decisions about presentations?

Currently, many schools continue to present students for qualifications following Standard Grade patterns, making initial presentation decisions with their students around February of S2, midway through the Secondary phase of the BGE. Final presentation decisions are required by the SQA by March of S4.

Adjustments to senior phase curriculum architecture, in line with the original design intentions of CfE, would mean that initial presentation decisions would not be made until at least a year later- February of S3- when young people have had full opportunity to have their prior learning and achievement within the BGE assessed, recorded and considered.

The NQ Review Group has agreed that centres must provide an accurate indication of their presentation patterns by November.

Why has the SQA expanded course assessment?

SQA has stated that the removal of the unit assessment from courses, without adjustment to other elements of assessment, would represent a shrinkage in the assessment coverage of course content and erosion of the value of the qualifications.

The EIS is of the view that the SQA has gone too far in extending course assessment. The EIS had previously provided evidence to the NQ Review Group of significant duplication of assessment across units, coursework and the final exam. The SQA conceded that there was duplication. It is therefore concerning that the SQA has announced that there will be extension to coursework in 64% of N5 courses, extension or introduction of an exam in 88%, and both extended coursework and question paper in more than 50% of courses. The EIS will therefore look carefully at the detail that the further detail on assessment that the SQA will publish by the end of April 2017.

Won't lengthier exams have a negative impact on students?

The detail of the extended examination papers has not been published, as yet, by the SQA. Whilst it was expected that any course element previously covered only by unit assessment would migrate to either the external exam or coursework, the EIS is not convinced that the general extension by the SQA of the majority of exam papers is justified, especially given the previously identified duplication between unit assessment and external exams. This will require to be monitored and the relationship between the exam papers and the course content assessed. However, SQA insists that course content is not changing, and the extended exams should not create any additional teaching burdens. Again, this will have to be evaluated.

In addition, the EIS is concerned that longer exams may be another source of stress for students, and detrimental to the wellbeing and, therefore, the performance of some students in the exams. Another factor to be considered is the performance of students who face socio-economic challenges in light of evidence that working-class students perform less well in exams. This is therefore an aspect which will require to be monitored over time.

That said, however, young people were under significant pressure, with many suffering mental health problems, as a consequence of the heavy burden of internal assessment, particularly in S4, as reported by many EIS members, and confirmed by the SQA's own research in this area. This situation was unsustainable.

Will the changes to exams impact on teacher workload?

There has been no change to course content, therefore lengthier exams for students should not be a generator of workload for teachers. Particularly in light of the replacement of the appeals system, there is no need for the generation of candidate evidence that mirrors that which would be produced in the final exam. Existing unit assessments, internal assessments and prelim papers will still be valid for use as formative and summative assessment tools.

What consultation has there been by the SQA with teachers on these changes to assessment?

These changes have been designed with only limited consultation with teachers. Consultation has been with the SQA's National Qualification Support Teams. The SQA had stated that they would be unable to consult more widely on the detail of the changes if they were to manage to deliver the changes within an acceptable timescale.

EIS has expressed concern at the narrow focus of consultation around the changes, and at the scale of the overhaul of the qualifications that the SQA has planned, it being much more complex than simply removing unit assessments.

The EIS has also stressed repeatedly the need for SQA to get the changes right (including with regards to the balance of exam and coursework), to communicate the changes clearly to the profession, and to do so in good time.

SQA is now in the process of restructuring course materials without using existing units as organisers. This is a lengthier process than that which had been called for, which was simply the indication that unit assessments were no longer mandatory. The decision by the SQA to proceed in the way that it has, leaves schools, once again, facing a tight turnaround from existing arrangements.

SQA has indicated that further details of the changes to course assessment will be provided to teachers along with revised and streamlined course specification documents by the end of April, which, for many schools is at the very point at which new courses will begin.

This is clearly a matter of real concern for EIS members who will be delivering National 5 qualifications next session.

How can the necessary preparation for the new assessment arrangements be overtaken in time for the new session?

While the changes are to take effect from August 2017, the reality in schools is that senior timetables change any time from April onwards.

The EIS is clear that teachers should not be asked to work beyond their 35 contracted hours to deliver these changes.

Advice for Secondary members on SQA-related workload remains in force.

Members are advised to conduct time audits of all SQA activity in which they are engaged. Where calculations are that the time required to overtake, in this case, development work, cannot be accommodated within the 5 available hours for Collegiate Time within the Working Time Agreement per week, discussions with the management of the school should be sought.

Discussions should take place with a view to agreeing workload priorities and, where SQA-related development is judged to be a priority, to agreeing which other duties will be removed in order that SQA-related development can be addressed within the parameters of the 35-hour working week.

Any member who encounters difficulty in this regard should seek the advice of the School or College Branch representative, in the first instance.

What is the EIS nationally doing in response to members' concerns about the workload implications of the tight timescales in which the changes will be introduced?

EIS has raised and will continue to raise, these concerns with SQA, Scottish Government and local authorities, both directly and within the NQ Review Group and the CfE Management Board, with a view to ensuring that the changes are implemented within the terms of teachers' contractual hours, while minimising any negative impact on students' learning experience and achievement.

EIS Council has passed a Resolution calling for an additional Inset day as one way of addressing the tight timescale in which to make preparations for the changes.

What other issues related to the assessment changes will the EIS raise with SQA, Scottish Government and Education Scotland?

The need for progress with the removal of mandatory unit assessment from Higher to remain on-track within agreed timescales.
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The possible need for additional staffing resources in order for the SQA to ensure that schools and colleges have what is needed from them sooner than currently projected will be raised with SQA and Scottish Government.

EIS will also press SQA on the need for early issue of new exemplar exam papers.

Subject-specific concerns will be brought to the attention of the SQA.

The need for funding of new subject course materials and text books, will be raised with Scottish Government and Local Authorities.

It is clear, also, that an early decision on changes to N4 needs to be made to ensure a sense of clarity and cohesion around the senior phase.