

THE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTE OF SCOTLAND

National Qualifications System: Social Inequalities

Interim Report

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The following Resolution was passed at the 2015 AGM:

"This AGM instructs Council to investigate and review the National Qualifications system to determine whether social inequality has been created and if so to bring forward reforms to the system."

- 1.2 This paper addresses aspects of the National Qualifications system both terms of its design and its delivery.

- 1.3 The definition of social inequality intended by the mover of the original motion and applied within this paper is as follows:

Unequal access to opportunities and their associated benefits among groups characterised by such features as socio-economic status, gender, disability, race and ethnicity.

2. Action

- 2.1 Relevant information was sought from Subject Specialist Group members. The terms of the Resolution were also raised with the SQA and the Scottish Parent Teacher Association (SPTA).

3. Key Issues: National Qualifications Design

- 3.1 Key issues emergent from discussions and indicated within the responses of Subject Specialist Group members were as follows:

The structure of internal assessment was identified within the responses from Subject Specialist Group members as a potential cause of social inequality. There was criticism of the fact that all assessment standards across the full range of skills required in a subject must be passed in order for the candidate to pass units, unit passes being required for an overall subject award. Similar skills are covered in the final externally assessed exam for which an overall mark is aggregated. This incongruity was said to present unnecessary hurdles to student success and to undermine recognition of achievement, which, it was suggested, is likely to be having a disproportionate impact on more disadvantaged learners.

- 3.2 An alternative view, however, is that the opportunity afforded to students to re-sit aspects of unit assessment, and the fact that they are not generally subjected to time constraints, is more favourable

for students than an external exam. Research generally shows that working class students perform better in unit based and continuous assessment arrangements.

- 3.3 The creation, in some subjects, of distinctly different courses for S4 pupils in particular has inhibited opportunity for mixed ability teaching and differentiation by outcome, in contrast to the design of Standard Grade which had facilitated such an approach. There is a perception that the new system of qualifications has created division between groups of learners who, in the past within Standard Grade courses, would have been taught together in the same classes with less obvious delineation on the basis of ability, and greater fluidity in terms of decision-making around final presentation levels. The view of many teachers is that learners from less affluent backgrounds benefit least from the more marked setting arrangements forced by the differences in course content between the new CfE qualifications at different levels.
- 3.4 It should be noted that the design principle behind the new qualifications was for hierarchical course content which would have allowed for significant overlap in skill terms between different levels but this is not what has transpired.
- 3.5 The difference between the external assessment for qualifications at National 4 and below, and those at National 5 and above, was identified as potentially creating social inequality. A common theme of the responses from Subject Specialist Groups was the stigma felt by pupils being presented in particular at National 4 for which there is no external exam. This was reported to have an effect on pupils' self-esteem, the perception being that the N4 qualification is of limited value in comparison to N5.
- 3.6 Responses did not refer to the fact that there is no exam included within the assessment of N1, N2 or N3. This is likely to be because these qualifications replaced Access courses for which there was no exam within the previous assessment system, although N3 is stated by the SQA to be the equivalent of Foundation Level at Standard Grade. National 4 is stated to be the equivalent of Standard Grade General for which there was an exam in the past. Significant numbers of students are being presented at this level.
- 3.7 It is important to note that the original intention underlying the non-inclusion of an external exam as part of the course assessment within Nationals 1, 2, 3 and 4 was to remove potential barriers to achievement for groups of learners for whom these levels of course are appropriate. From this perspective, this aspect of the design of National Qualifications may be regarded as one which may promote better equality of opportunity for all learners to succeed, including those with special educational and additional support needs.
- 3.8 It is also worth noting that the design intention of senior phase curriculum and assessment was to minimise the number of

assessments and external examinations for students, with a view to there being one external assessment at the point of exit. Were such principles reflected in decision-making on curriculum architecture at local authority and/ or school level, a much smaller proportion of students in S4 (which is identified within the responses as being the stage at which this inequality is most stark) would be being presented for National Qualifications. Presentation would be confined to those students who were leaving school and moving into Further Education, training or employment. The remainder of the cohort would continue pursuit, over a two year period, of whichever qualification was deemed the most appropriate for them. In effect, there would be relatively few students sitting exams at all in S4.

- 3.9 There was no consensus within the responses from Subject Specialists as to whether the inclusion of an external exam within the overall course assessment at every level was desirable. Rather the responses indicated simply that the exclusion experienced by a significant proportion of students sitting National 4 with no exam, while their N5 counterparts do sit an exam, in schools which continue to present all of S4 for qualifications, was undesirable.

4. Key Issues: National Qualification Delivery

- 4.1 Related to this are the differentiated arrangements associated with schools, in responding to the variance in design of new National Qualifications, awarding study leave to some S4 students and not to others during the SQA exam diet. This was said to intensify the division between groups of learners and further erode the morale of learners who are not being presented at National 5. It was reported that although classes for students who are not sitting exams continue to run during the exam diet, these are not regarded by students as valuable learning opportunities and attendance is often poor.
- 4.2 It was also highlighted that the distinction between students being presented for exams and those not is further underlined by school assemblies for S4 students which focus on the importance of exams and the need to prepare adequately for them. Significant portions of time over the course of the year are given from assemblies to this topic to the exclusion of young people who are not being presented for external exams.
- 4.3 An issue has also been raised about the possible impact of the new Post- Results Service (previously-known as the appeals service) at a time when councils are short of funds. The charge applied by the SQA for clerical checks and the re-marking of externally assessed material for candidates who may have qualified for an appeal within the previous system was highlighted as a potential source of inequality.
- 4.4 A further potential contributor to social inequality was identified in relation to the variation in the way in which local authorities and/or

individual schools design access to and delivery of senior phase qualifications. In some schools only five National 5 subjects are being studied in S4, while in others, the number lies between six and eight. There are contrasting views on the nature of the inequality that this creates: a narrowing of curriculum choice and therefore disadvantage where subject choice is limited to five versus a lack of depth and therefore disadvantage where subject choice extends to eight. Nonetheless, such disparity was considered by some Subject Specialist respondents to be problematic. Drawing any firm conclusions about the extent to which such variance in senior phase curriculum design may contribute to social inequality would require careful analysis of school by school curriculum architecture, and pupil cohort and attainment data.

- 4.5 Students' access to resources for new courses was reported to be unequal. New materials to support teaching and learning within the senior phase have been developed but this has coincided with cuts to departmental budgets which have resulted in restrictions on the photocopying of such material for students. As a consequence, a growing number of resources are being uploaded to online platforms for students to access and print at home, which can present difficulty for those whose families are on low incomes and who may not have access to the necessary equipment and internet services at home. While schools provide support by offering library time for internet access and providing pupils with photocopying allowances, such support is limited, thus placing many less affluent students at further disadvantage. In effect, austerity-driven budget cuts have impacted negatively on the provision of new qualifications course materials to students in general, but members have reported that there has been a disproportionate impact on students from poorer backgrounds whose families are less able to provide resources at home.

5. Design and Delivery Issues: English

- 5.1 English Subject Specialist Group members raised a number of issues specific to English and Literacy courses which they believed to be contributory to social inequality, some of which were raised with the SQA by the EIS.
- 5.2 The requirement for students sitting National 4 English to pass a discrete Literacy Unit in addition to the core English Units in order to receive the overall award for the course was identified as an inequality. Students presented at National 5 and above are not required to overtake a separate Literacy Unit in order to attain an English award. In effect, this presents the least able and most disadvantaged students with more barriers to achievement than their less disadvantaged peers.
- 5.3 Furthermore, the withdrawal of human readers and scribes for candidates being presented for Literacy qualifications at National 4 level and below was highlighted as a contributor to social inequality. Candidates sitting National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher still have

the benefit of human reader/ scribe support where appropriate to need. Some of the candidates affected by the withdrawal of these assessment support arrangements are legally recognised as being disabled. In addition, of the children and young people who are registered as having additional support needs generally, a disproportionately high number are from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The SQA has repeatedly defended its position with regards to this decision, citing the availability of technology as sufficient replacement for human support. However, returns from Subject Specialists also highlighted the inequality that exists across schools in terms of ICT access, resulting in further inequality among students.

- 5.4 English Subject Specialist Group members cited the introduction of the Scottish set text element to National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher as having placed strain on departmental budgets with the result that some schools are no longer purchasing texts for students to use. Students at these schools are required to purchase literary texts independently, which presents difficulty for students whose families are on lower incomes. Students who cannot afford to purchase the texts are disadvantaged. Again, according to the information received, the impact of austerity has presented challenges in the delivery of aspects of the new qualifications at school level.
- 5.5 A further social inequality was identified in the lack of diversity within the set text list within which all but one of the authors included is white. This reflects the lack of diversity within the Scottish literary landscape generally. The inclusion of black and minority ethnic writers in the study of English has predominantly required the use of texts by authors who are not from Scotland. Some English teachers are critical of the fact that the mandatory nature of the Scottish set text element has been at the expense of exposing students to greater ethnic diversity in the range of literature studied within senior phase English courses.
- 5.6 Concern was also raised about the new folio template introduced by the SQA which requires students to download and print the proforma in order to submit their work for external assessment. This requirement does not take account of the limited access that some pupils have to internet and printing resources at home, or the variability of access to such resources across schools as they struggle with cuts to per capita budgets.

6. Interim Conclusions

- 6.1 The perceptions of those EIS members who responded to the request for information were that the design and/or delivery of National Qualifications is contributing in some way, to a larger or lesser extent, to social inequality.

- 6.2 The terms of the Resolution to “*determine whether social inequality has been created and if so to bring forward reforms to the system*”, however, require that more reliable evidence is gathered from a range of sources over a longer period of time to identify any relevant trends and patterns that may enable sound conclusions to be drawn.
- 6.3 With this in mind, the EIS may wish to consider commissioning specific socio-educational research in this area in the future.

7. Further action

- 7.1 In the meantime, the EIS, having called for a review of the CfE senior phase qualifications to include focus on the potential inequality arising from the new system, is now represented on the ministerial-led Working Group on Assessment and National Qualifications, the remit of which is to examine and make recommendations on assessment within CfE 3-18.
- 7.2 In contributing to the discussions within the group the EIS will seek to have addressed some of the factors which may be contributing to social inequality, reflecting the issues highlighted within this report. The need to focus on the value of wider achievement and on gaining parity of esteem both for academic and vocational qualifications will also be raised by the EIS in the context of these discussions.
- 7.3 To further inform contributions to this discussion, the Education Committee should seek the views of EIS-FELA.
- 7.4 In addition, the EIS should continue to monitor the issue in the longer term both at local and national level.
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