



**COMMISSION  
ON SCHOOL  
REFORM**

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**Challenge Paper**

**Assessment & qualifications in  
Scotland's schools**

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**June 2023**

Membership of the re-convened Commission on School Reform is as follows:

- **Keir Bloomer (Chair):** Education Consultant and former Director of Education
- **Cllr Sarah Atkin:** Independent Councillor at The Highland Council and member of the Education Committee. Former Parent Council Chairwoman and School. Worked in ASN for 12 years.
- **John Barnett:** University Court Member, retired finance professional and former Parent Council Chairman.
- **Carole Ford:** Former head teacher of Kilmarnock Academy and former president of School Leaders Scotland
- **Jim Goodall:** Former Head of Education and Community Services at Clackmannanshire Council and former Lib Dem councillor at East Dunbartonshire Council
- **Anna Hazel-Dunn:** Headteacher, Royal High Primary, Edinburgh
- **Johann Lamont:** Former teacher (1979-99) and retired Member of Scottish Parliament (1999-2022)
- **Frank Lennon:** Former Head of Dunblane High School and St Modan's, Stirling
- **Ross Martin:** Economic agitator with experience in a variety of roles in education – including school teacher, voluntary tutor, chair of local education authority, member of college board and university court, Chair of a charity, and, most importantly, a parent and former student.
- **Lindsay Paterson:** Professor emeritus of education policy in the School of Social and Political Science at Edinburgh University.
- **Cllr Caroline Shiers:** Councillor for Blairgowrie and Glens ward since 2007 and Convenor of Lifelong Learning since 2017. Also Mum to two children in S5 and S2

Please note that all members of the commission participate in an individual capacity and that the views of the commission do not represent the views of any other organisation to which the individual members belong.

## Introduction

Since the pandemic a veritable plethora of reports on education have been published<sup>1</sup>, but actual reform in Scotland moves at a glacial pace. Professor Hayward, who chairs the Scottish Government's Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessments, commented recently that the necessary reforms will be slow to implement and that the first pupils likely to benefit are currently in the early stages of primary school. That is a lot of reviewing and report writing and very little actual reforming.

While we do not doubt that the consultation on, and implementation of, radical change will take a substantial length of time, this also implies that the current system, with all its faults, is here to stay for at least another eight years.

Scottish pupils will continue to be subjected to a narrow, formulaic assessment system, continue to lose valuable teaching time to revision and assessment, and the system will continue to fail to motivate a significant minority of pupils, exacerbating the serious behavioural issues in our schools. We cannot wait eight years for improvement.

The purpose of this paper is to outline six possible changes to the current system which could affect improvement now, immediately alleviating some of the most serious concerns.

## Hayward Review

The ongoing Hayward review on the Scottish assessment and qualification system has identified several concerns regarding the system as it currently stands:

- The over assessment of pupils, in all three years of the senior school.
- The perceived over reliance on external assessment.
- The narrow, formulaic experience associated with current assessment strategies.
- Inequity in educational outcomes for different groups of pupils, particularly the less economically and socially advantaged.
- The two term dash to Higher.
- The rigidity in the assessment system which struggled to respond appropriately to the Covid pandemic.

There are other issues in Scottish education which are indirectly related to the assessment and qualifications system. In a major reform of the system, the potential to contribute positively to these concerns should also be considered. These issues would include:

- Falling educational standards in Scotland as evidenced by the international Pisa study, and anecdotally by many teachers.
- Deteriorating pupil behaviour which hinders learning, saps teacher morale and contributes to a serious teacher recruitment problem, particularly in STEM subjects.

The review group has issued an interim report which identifies possible strategies to address the concerns, including a recognition that some of the proposals would require a significant shift in both the public and professional mindset. Professor Hayward has also suggested that the first pupils to benefit from any changes will currently be in the early years of primary school.

<sup>1</sup> The Additional Support for Learning Review (June 2020); International Council of Education Advisers: 2nd Formal Report (December 2020); Scottish Government: Equity Audit (January 2021); Closing the poverty-related attainment gap: a report on progress 2016-2021 (March 2021); Audit Scotland: Improving Outcomes for Young People through School Education (March 2021); Scotland's Curriculum: Into the Future: Implementation

framework for the OECD's 2021 review of Curriculum for Excellence (June 2021); OECD Education Working Papers, No. 253, Upper-secondary education student assessment in Scotland: A comparative perspective. Stobart, G. (August 2021); Education Recovery: Key Actions and Next Steps The contribution of education to Scotland's COVID Recovery (October 2021); Review of the Regional Improvement Collaboratives (December 2021).



## What we could do now

We should acknowledge that assessment at the end of S4 serves a different purpose to assessment in S5/S6. It provides a reality check on progress so far, clarifies strengths and weaknesses, and offers a useful guide to future fruitful routes to progress. Absolutely crucially, assessment in S4 improves motivation and work rate throughout S3/S4. The removal of external assessment at the end of the National 4 courses has had a seriously negative impact on work rate and motivation, as many teachers will attest. On the other hand, assessment in S5/S6 leads to endpoint qualifications which offer entry to higher education, training or employment opportunities. There is no logical reason to tie these two assessment processes together.

Once S4 exams are no longer tied to S5/S6 then the examination timetable for both the older and younger pupils can be shortened and shifted in the school calendar. For example, S4 examinations could be held in the two weeks prior to the Easter holidays. Given that most prelim diets are accomplished in a two week period, this seems eminently possible. S5 courses would begin at the start of the summer term, immediately lengthening Higher courses from two terms to three. The loss of teaching time for study leave and revision is dramatically reduced. Curriculum content may be adjusted to accommodate the earlier assessment period; alternatively, the Broad General Education (BGE) phase could end in S2 rather than S3, as is already the case in many schools.

The S5/S6 assessment timetable could begin in June. The timetable will be condensed with the removal of S4 exams, and marking will be faster for the same reason. Teaching time for senior courses is further extended, in addition to the gain in the summer term for S4 pupils. As an aside, separating S4 from S5/S6 in assessment terms would allow for an expanded curricular offering in the final two years of school; this in turn creates further motivation for pupils in S4.

A simple timetable change for examinations could improve the loss of teaching time for all senior

pupils and eliminate the problem of the two term dash to Higher. Changes to the nature of final examinations, and to the moderation of coursework or internal assessments, offer more possible improvements.

The debate on external versus internal assessment is often heated. The reliance on external assessment is virtually universal in both international terms and in subject terms, for one fundamental reason; it is fairer, more reliable and more valid. From the driving test to piano grades, from bar exams to medical degrees, the assessment process is routinely divorced from the teacher. For many reasons, mostly positive, teachers are biased assessors. They care about their pupils and are more likely to give the benefit of any doubt, rather than adhere to a strict marking scheme. The halo effect associated with having seen a previously higher standard of performance is well known. It is virtually impossible to remove a positive bias; nor would we wish to interfere in positive teacher/pupil relationships. It is also the case that a very small minority of teachers will exhibit negative bias, conscious or otherwise, towards specific groups, historically girls and religious or ethnic minorities. There is an argument that working class boys, whose behaviour is sometimes more challenging, may also be impacted by negative bias. In the past, discriminated sections of society have made progress as a direct result of independent examinations, rather than more biased internal gradings.

Internally assessed coursework is an essential component of assessment in some subjects. However, coursework has always been vulnerable to inappropriate and unfairly distributed levels of support. It is close to impossible to determine authorship of coursework; teachers, parents, friends and tutors can have an undue influence on outcomes. Add to that list AI in the form of chat bots, and the use of coursework as an assessment tool may be unreliable, unfair and lacking in validity, without a rigorous moderation process.

Many of the difficulties associated with external assessment are the result of poor quality examinations. It should not be possible to teach

to the test. It should not be possible to rehearse written answers in advance. It should not be possible to achieve an excellent grade without covering the whole course.

But the issues associated with both external and internal assessment are open to amelioration.

For each subject, a working group of experienced teachers should recommend the assessment process, working within specific assessment time constraints. It is experienced teachers who understand the forms of assessment which will provide the most reliable, valid and fair outcomes for their subject. The instruments of assessment may vary markedly between subjects, as they should. Artificially forcing all subjects into a prescribed assessment model is counterproductive to the aims of fairness, reliability and validity.

All external assessments should meet the criteria of being sufficiently random and sufficiently comprehensive to minimise the problems outlined above. In subjects where coursework is essential, each internal grade should be moderated by the external grade. There will be variation between grades obtained internally and externally, but statistical analysis on a pupil by pupil basis will identify individual schools or teachers whose internal grades are shown to be unreliable, either positively or negatively. This offers a training opportunity for schools and staff, not punitive scrutiny, and the existence of such a robust moderation system will have a positive impact on anyone tempted to game the system. The assessment pattern at S4 could be quite different to that at S5/S6, bearing in mind the different purposes of assessment at these stages.

The assessment working groups are also best placed to identify the changing context of their subject specialism, and react to it. A change required in the format or content of one subject assessment need have no impact on any other. One size fits all has contributed to the rigidity of the assessment system. Chat bots are unlikely to have much impact on assessment in Higher Maths for example, although their use could contribute to educational outcomes, but they may call into

question the place of the folio in Higher English. The role of the SQA, or its successor organisation, should be largely executive in nature.

## Standards and behaviour

Final assessment regimes do motivate pupils, and removing any part of such a regime needs very careful consideration. Anecdotally, behaviour in Scottish schools has deteriorated markedly since Covid and the recent statistics on violence in schools bears this out. Poor behaviour of even a small minority of pupils in a class has a negative impact on the education of every pupil in the class. Whatever changes are contemplated for the Scottish assessment and qualifications system, low motivation and consequent poor behaviour must be a key factor to consider.

Similarly, poorly constructed examinations, formulaic and predictable, impact on teaching. Teachers have a responsibility to maximise pupil outcomes; if endless revision and constant practice for a specific examination achieves this, then teachers are obliged to deliver. Wider content knowledge and higher order skills are sacrificed. This is the inevitable outcome of poorly constructed examinations. Coursework elements which are wide open to unfair practices undermine the validity of final qualifications and erode public trust in the system. When Scotland re-enters the international surveys of achievement, it would be extremely disappointing if our narrowly focused examinations and ill moderated internal grades are shown to have hindered pupil progress. Many teachers fear this will be the case.

## Summary

There are some things that we could do quickly which could improve the Scottish assessment and qualifications system now. There is nothing to stop the wider debate continuing, to examine and agree on radical changes to the system. But we should not let perfection at some distant point in the future get in the way of a better now. The suggestions below are not intended as a blueprint for Scotland's assessment system; they merely offer an illustration of how things could be improved in the immediate future.

- The separation of the S4 assessment system from the S5/6 system. These serve different purposes.
- S4 final examinations to be limited to one paper, to shorten the duration of the examination timetable. This can be supplemented if necessary by effectively moderated internal assessments.
- S4 assessments completed in a two week period before the Easter break. Senior school term to begin formally at the start of the summer term, adding a full term of teaching time to the Higher course. This has obvious implications for the length of courses and starting dates. Currently in many subjects, courses are already completed well before Easter. Limiting the BGE to S1/2 and beginning qualifications courses in S3 could create extra time if necessary. Many schools already follow this pattern.
- S5/6 assessments completed in June. This allocates yet more time to the Higher course. Examination marking for S4 will be completed earlier leaving more time for S5/6 marking in the shorter time frame.
- For each subject, the creation of an expert group of currently serving, experienced teachers to determine the format and content of all instruments of assessment,

within agreed time and format parameters, and key principles associated with reliability and fairness. The specific concerns regarding predictability, leading to an overemphasis on revision and practice, to be a key quality indicator for all assessments. These groups to be tasked with ongoing evaluation of the assessment system, to react to subject developments and events. The role of the SQA or its successor should be to facilitate each group.

- External assessment data to be used to moderate internal grades to ensure fairness, equity for traditionally marginalised groups, and ensure public trust in the system. This data driven moderation to be at individual teacher level, to provide feedback which will lead to professional development in assessment. The existence of a robust moderation system will minimise the temptation to game the system.