COMMISSION
ON SCHOOL
REFORM

Smarter Thinking:

Assessment in the Senior Phase

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Introduction

Currently the Scottish education system is experiencing a number of difficulties: the falling standards, as identified by the PISA results and the resultant conclusion that curricular change is necessary; the high pupil absence rate, rising before Covid but now at an alarmingly high level; the behavioural problems in many classrooms, too often culminating in actual violence; and the staff recruitment problem, particularly in STEM subjects and in rural areas. In comparison to these issues, both individually and cumulatively, improvements to the assessment system may appear to be less pressing. However, how and when pupils are assessed has a significant impact on how they behave, on how they learn and how well they will cope with future learning. It influences how and what teachers teach. In short, improving the assessment system is a worthwhile objective in itself and doing so would also have a positive impact on several of the current problems.

The emphasis of this paper is on the relatively easy changes which could be made within a short timescale. More fundamental change will take longer but given the scale of the challenge facing the Scottish education system, making things better now is a better approach than waiting for perfection later. Also, smaller improvements now do not preclude planning for more radical change.

Current problems with the assessment system

Many of the problems associated with the assessment system occur at S4. While there are several curricular and qualifications issues at S5/S6, largely associated with catering for the needs of the relatively less able pupils, the key issue for the current assessment system is the lack of time for completing Higher courses. While not the subject of this paper, the relative lack of suitable provision for less able pupils in S5/S6 is a serious failure of the Scottish education system.

The shortage of time for Higher courses rests largely on the loss of teaching time during the lengthy examination period in S4 which stretches from the end of April to early June. Parents are aware of the seemingly endless weeks of study leave during which, for many S4 pupils, very little actual study takes place. Schools may operate study classes during this period but experience shows that the more advantaged pupils are more likely to attend. Extended study leave therefore adds to the disadvantage experienced by more deprived pupils. For S5/6 pupils, the time for study is more crucial and is usually more fruitfully deployed.

Obviously, class time is lost during the study leave period itself but there is also a loss of momentum on the return to school in June partly because it is so close to the summer holidays. Behaviour and attitude are strongly associated with habit, and many pupils struggle with the return to school after such a protracted period of absence, as Covid has clearly demonstrated. It is also the case that school attendance falls off during June. In effect, despite their best efforts to motivate pupils and chase non-attenders, many schools have to start or re-start Higher and Advanced Higher courses in August. This is an additional critical loss of productive teaching time, the culmination of which results in the two term dash to Higher.

In addition to the time lost during the actual examination period and thereafter in June, for many subjects in S4 the revision period begins several weeks before the exams themselves and includes

large amounts of time devoted to repetitive exam practice. This is a further loss of productive teaching time and has a demotivating impact on pupils. This is classic 'teaching to the test'. The current examination regime is bedevilled by exams which are too formulaic in format, too predictable in content, and allow pupils to achieve high grades on the basis of an extremely narrow knowledge base. This is not a sound basis for future study; knowledge builds knowledge and the current assessment system places insufficient value on acquiring it. Scotland's declining Pisa results are related to the low knowledge base of our pupils. In short, the examinations need to emphasise the retention of knowledge to a far higher degree. The current balance between skills and knowledge is disproportionately skewed towards skills.

Finally, the current scope of the examinations system excludes a large number of pupils for whom a Nat 5 course is not appropriate. There are no examinations at Nat 3 or Nat 4 levels. This has resulted in a number of negative impacts.

Teachers frequently report that behaviour and motivation in classes at Nat 4 level are significantly worse than at Nat 5. Pupils are demotivated by their perception that they are not worth an examination. There is a stigma attached to the non-examined courses. Large numbers of pupils inappropriately attempt Nat 5 courses to avoid that stigma. This is not in their individual interests as learners and it also leads to double entry, at Nat 5 and Nat 4, to provide a safety net for such pupils. In the interests of social inclusion, a system which makes such a significant distinction between the assessment system for more able pupils, at Nat 5 level, and the rest is not appropriate. It harks back to the days of certificate and non-certificate classes which the introduction of Standard Grade eliminated.

In summary, improvement to the assessment regime is a three fold process:

(i) alteration to the exam timetable, to reduce the time spent on exams and excessive revision in S4

(ii) alteration to the nature of the assessments themselves, to preclude the effectiveness of excessive exam practice and to increase the emphasis on acquired knowledge

(iii) alteration to the assessment system to make it more socially inclusive, thereby improving behaviour and motivation, and obviating the rationale for double entry for exams.

Improvements to the examination timetable

Changing the examination timetable constitutes the low hanging fruit in improvements to the assessment system. Most of the lost teaching time takes place during S4. The increased level of content in Higher and Advanced Higher courses generally precludes an excessive time period for revision. It is also the case that the loss of momentum during June has a much greater impact on S4 pupils aiming for Highers in S5, than on S5 pupils aiming for Advanced Highers in S6. This is simply a function of their level of maturity.

The role of formal assessment in secondary education serves different purposes at the end of S4 compared to the end of S5 and S6. There is an academic jump from National to Higher level in every subject. There is a change in expectations of pupils in terms of behaviour, attitude and study habits. The assessment process should be regarded as two distinct processes, one for S4 pupils and another

for S5/S6. Using a single examination timetable for the two distinct stages in the senior phase is simply historical practice, with no practical or pedagogical foundation.

The example of a revised assessment timetable below is based on acknowledging the difference between S4 and S5/S6 assessment systems, treating them as two separate entities, and reducing the time spent on revision and study leave in S4. This practice of separating the assessment periods for the two stages has in fact been common practice in schools for prelim examinations for many years. S4 prelims take place before Christmas, S5/6 in January. The advantages in relation to SQA marking, as mentioned in the model below, have already been experienced by schools in relation to prelim marking.

The volume of content in National courses, as compared to Higher and Advanced Higher courses, readily accommodates an earlier assessment diet for S4 pupils, as evidenced by the current extended revision period.

Possible model:

(i) All S4 assessments to take place prior to the Easter holidays. The timetable should be as condensed as possible, ending on the last day of term. Changes to the exams themselves could facilitate a condensed timetable.

(ii) S4 pupils commence Higher courses on their return to school after the Easter holidays. This will eliminate the protracted period of study leave and the consequent loss of momentum, and will add a minimum of 8 weeks teaching time to the Higher course. There would still be time for the usual summer term activities at the end of June.

(iii) SQA marking of S4 papers will be conducted in April and early May.

(iv) S5/6 assessment timetable to end one week before the end of the summer term, to allow for any celebration activity. Timetable to work backwards from the agreed endpoint, using as condensed a timetable as possible.

(v) Assuming a maximum of 5 weeks for the S5/6 exam timetable, this would add at least 4 weeks to teaching time at the beginning of the summer term. The net result is the equivalent of a full extra term for Higher, where the real deficit lies, consisting of 8 weeks in S4 plus 4 weeks in S5. This would also result in an extra 4 weeks for Advanced Higher.

(vi) SQA marking of S5/6 exams could be accomplished in the shorter time frame since S4 marking is already completed.

Condensing the exam timetable could entail extending the school day slightly during the exam period. Since independent invigilators are involved, this would have no impact on teacher workload.

The calendar for such a model depends on a more flexible approach from the SQA, and an acceptance that the senior phase in schools is not a unified block but rather the two stage entity that most pupils, teachers and parents already consider it to be. This example is just that, one possible format. But the principle of bringing forward the S4 assessment period, starting Higher courses immediately after Easter and pushing back the S5/S6 assessment period could certainly alleviate much of the time pressure for Higher courses.

Bringing forward the S4 exams would amount to a two week shortening of the National courses which is fairly minimal given the extra time gained in the summer term. The psychological impact of embarking on courses at the start of term, rather than several weeks in and perilously close to the summer holidays, is well worth it.

Characteristics of high quality assessment

The harder task in improving the assessment system in secondary schools is to change the nature of the assessments themselves, to assist in halting the decline in educational standards. High expectations are the essential precursor to high standards; the assessment system should be designed to promote these. Currently it does not.

In addition, the exams which are needlessly formulaic and predictable lend themselves to the seemingly endless practice of pre-prepared answers, from which pupils learn little.

The importance of knowledge in the curriculum has now been widely accepted and will prompt future changes to the curriculum. The retention of knowledge, sometimes described as rote learning in an effort to downplay its importance, has been seriously undervalued since the introduction of Curriculum for Excellence. But it is possible to shift the emphasis from skills to knowledge without waiting for curricular changes. The focus of the assessment system could change teaching practices in classrooms by according the retention of knowledge the importance it deserves.

There will be very little uniformity between the instruments of assessment for different subjects. Assessing mathematical knowledge and ability bears little resemblance to assessing musical knowledge and ability. Rather, the nature of assessment in each subject should display specific characteristics which will lead to the improvements required. It is therefore not the intention here to prescribe methods of assessment; that requires subject knowledge and teaching expertise in each individual subject. The intention is to clarify the essential characteristics for all forms of assessment in every subject.

Essential characteristics:

(i) Fairness is possibly the most important characteristic for any assessment method. It is important in terms of social justice for each individual pupil but also to maintain public confidence in the system and, by extension, the education system itself. History has shown us that traditional examinations are the fairest for marginalised groups; other forms of assessment may require specific conditions, mimicking some of the conditions of traditional examinations, to render them as fair as possible.

(ii) Reliability is key. In the context of assessment, this means that if the assessment were repeated, a very similar result would pertain. The most obvious example of unreliability is where a change of marker results in a different outcome. Clearly, subjectivity in some subjects cannot be eliminated but it should be minimised. The possibility of bias must also be minimised. The single most effective way of maximising reliability is the use of external independent marking. If a mode of assessment is solely marked internally it lays itself open to accusations of bias and a loss of public confidence. It is the perceived reliability of national examinations, as opposed to internal school grades, which has led to their use as a measure of accountability.

(iii) Assessments must be valid. That is, the instrument of assessment should measure what it is intended to measure, and not be unduly influenced by extraneous factors. Using expert groups of subject specialists to create them should ensure the validity of assessments.

(iv) High quality assessments also promote the desired curricular aims. In the context of Scotland's current educational performance this would include: full curriculum coverage, with both wide and unpredictable sampling of course content, thus eliminating the possibility of pre-prepared answers; a shift in the balance between assessing retained knowledge and skills; and an appropriate level of challenge to allow pupils of all abilities to demonstrate their capabilities and drive up standards.

(v) Any form of assessment which takes up excessive amounts of teaching time will not be an improvement on the current system. Assessment methods must be efficient and manageable within reasonable time constraints.

(vi) Secondary schools are facing a recruitment crisis, particularly in STEM subjects. There are a number of reasons for this but workload is certainly one of them. In constructing an improved assessment system, the implications for teacher workload must be considered. Indeed, following the recent Cabinet Secretary announcement regarding examinations at the end of S4, and her comment about a rebalancing between examinations and other forms of assessment, the immediate reaction from many secondary teachers was to the effect that there would be more internal assessment which meant more work for them. This was not positively received.

In summary, while the individual assessment strategies must be developed by subject expert groups, all assessments should display these essential characteristics:

(i) fair
(ii) reliable
(iii) valid
(iv) assess the full curriculum in a less predictable format, with increased emphasis on the retention of knowledge and appropriate high levels of challenge
(v) pay due attention to the overall assessment load in terms of time for teaching
(vi) take due account of teacher workload

Specific forms of assessment

There are a number of options in relation to assessment strategies, both as individual methods and in combination. The particular form of assessment for any given subject should be largely decided by an expert group. However, it will be important to assess each suggested method against the quality criteria which embody the specific aims of the changes. Many forms of assessment are excellent diagnostic, pedagogic or motivational tools. The discussion here relates solely to their use as summary assessment.

Written examinations

This is the most common and most traditional form of summary assessment and requires the least explanation. Under the standard exam conditions with which everyone is familiar, a written examination is generally accepted as both fair and reliable. With the widespread use of AI, there may in fact be an increase in the use of this method as anything produced outside the examination hall may be subject to scrutiny and/or suspicion.

Examinations are flexible instruments. They can be readily altered to change the emphasis on knowledge or skill as required, they can be designed to sample fully across the curriculum, and to pose questions which are sufficiently unpredictable to forestall any attempt to pre-prepare answers. They can be adapted to suit any level of challenge to suit candidates' levels of ability.

Exams do not eat into teaching time provided the revision period is not excessive and, externally produced and marked, they have little impact on teacher workload.

For less advantaged candidates, their relative lack of support compared to other pupils is less problematic in an exam hall than it is with many other forms of assessment.

Continuous assessment

This involves a series of assessments at various stages of the course. Those assessments themselves may take many forms – a test, project, essay, speech – but in essence, the pupil is assessed as they progress through the course, rather than at the end, with some form of algorithm generating an overall grade.

There are a number of issues with continuous assessment. Marking is usually internal since it is difficult and expensive to organise external marking at frequent intervals. This impacts on both fairness and reliability. There is little or no requirement for retained knowledge, which is why many pupils and students prefer this form of assessment. Repeated assessments are time consuming in relation to class teaching time and can significantly increase teacher workload in relation to the administrative burden, particularly if retests for absence or failure are involved, and to marking.

The experience with continuous assessment associated with the introduction of National qualifications was not positive.

Practical assessment

Practical assessments are essential in some subjects. They result in one of two outcomes: a demonstration of skill or a product. For example, in Music, where the candidate will play an instrument or sing; in Art & Design or Photography, where the candidate produces an artwork of a relevant genre. The issues with practical skills assessment depend on whether it is a performance related assessment or product related. Currently, in both cases, external marking is the norm, using peripatetic teachers or sending products to be assessed.

For product creation, there is no way to measure the level of external assistance from teachers, tutors or others. There is an inbuilt measure of unfairness in this, particularly in relation to pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. The reliability of the grade is open to serious question. In performance based subjects where the pupil is assessed on the day, with no outside support, reliability is less of an issue.

The second issue does include all practical subjects. If the final grade is limited solely to the practical element, as intimated as a possibility in the Cabinet Secretary's recent statement, then there is no assessment at all of the essential retained knowledge base which will be crucial to future study at a higher level. That important reality check on probable future success in the subject is missing. It is entirely possible for a talented musician to have little or no chance of success at Higher for example because of poor knowledge of musical theory. It can be very disappointing for pupils and parents to discover that a high grade at Nat 5 may not equip the pupil for success at Higher.

Assignments and projects

Knowledge and skills may be assessed by means of an extended essay, project, investigation or assignment. For example, mathematical investigations, accounting projects in business subjects, extended essays in social subjects, programming projects in Computing Science; all involve a lengthier piece of work which allows pupils to demonstrate their ability to synthesise knowledge and/or apply it to a specific context or problem.

The key advantage of this form of assessment is its emphasis on the synthesis of knowledge and skills. The longer time frame allows for more depth of study on a particular topic, and more depth in the response of the pupil. It also provides an introduction to study techniques at a higher level.
The crucial disadvantage of this form of assessment is its potential for unfairness and unreliability. As with other forms of assessment which are not constrained by exam conditions, the influence of teachers, tutors and parents cannot be measured or accounted for. The widespread use of AI is a further confounding factor in the use of this assessment strategy. And as with practical assessment, this form of assessment can exacerbate pupil disadvantage. If marked internally, reliability would be seriously in question.

Used as a sole means of assessment, there is no coverage of the curriculum and no assessment of retained knowledge.

Mitigating strategies

If a particular form of assessment is deemed to be the best for any given subject but there are issues around fairness, reliability, curriculum coverage, retention of knowledge, level of challenge, time constraints or teacher workload, there are specific strategies which could mitigate the problems.

(i) Fairness – complete the assessment in school under controlled conditions to reduce unfair levels of support. Balance the overall assessment grade with a second method which is demonstrably fair.
(ii) Reliability – use external markers for every element which contributes to the final grade.
(iii) Validity – using experts groups of subject specialists should ensure that assessment instruments are valid.
(iv) Does not meet all of the curricular aims – balance with a form of assessment which makes good the gaps. Often the addition of a short examination will do this, particularly in relation to assessing retained knowledge and covering the curriculum.
(v) Requires excessive class time – there is very little room for manoeuvre in school timetables without negatively impacting other subjects or activities. An assessment approach which uses lots of class time should be avoided.
(vi) Increases teacher workload – use external markers if possible. Mandate school administrative support for specific tasks or create specific software to ease the burden. Reconsider the approach if workload remains high.

Social inclusion

At the time of the introduction of the National examinations, the prevailing sentiment of the educational establishment was that examinations were a necessary evil. Their existence was only to be tolerated, not embraced as a positive force for good in relation to fairness, standards, motivation or self-esteem. Removing exams from all levels other than Nat 5 was considered a progressive step. Whatever the motivation, there is no doubt that the separation of the S4 cohort into two distinct groups, those who are involved in external examinations and those who are not, has had a negative impact. Pupils in Nat 3 and Nat 4 classes are less well motivated than previously, with consequent effects on behaviour. There is a stigma associated with being in a non-examined class, 'We're not worth an exam', resulting in pupils, with parental backing, pushing to be included in Nat 5 classes, often to their individual disadvantage. Schools resort to double presentation at Nat 4 and Nat 5 to provide a safety net for them. The impact on the Nat 5 classes themselves is not negligible, with teachers struggling to deliver the full curriculum to pupils who are not capable of mastering it. This can create behavioural issues in Nat 5 classes also. Given that pupils experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage are disproportionately represented in Nat 4 and Nat 3 classes, there is a social gap as well as an academic gap. This is not a happy picture of social equity.

Re-introducing examinations to all levels in S4 should be seriously considered, as a means of improving standards, increasing the emphasis on acquiring knowledge, reducing the social inequity in our education system and restoring motivation and a sense of self-esteem to a large cohort of pupils. The effect on classroom behaviour will be positive.

It is possible to do this without a major upheaval in the curriculum or the qualifications system. There are several ways to reintroduce examinations to Nat 3 and Nat 4 levels. One possible strategy is outlined below.

Possible model:

(i) For each subject a summary examination to be created at each course level of Nat 3, Nat 4 and Nat 5.

(ii) Actual examination papers to be created at two levels, one including Nat 3 and Nat 4, and one including Nat 4 and Nat 5. Each paper starting with the lower level examination so that questions proceed from easiest to most difficult.

(iii) On the same day, at the same time, pupils take the examination at either the Nat 3/Nat 4 level or the Nat 4/Nat5 level. They work through the paper until they have completed all that they can.

(iv) The papers are marked and grades awarded on the basis of cut off scores at each of the three levels.

Under such a system, all pupils have the opportunity to perform at their highest level of ability but with the security of knowing that they will have a fallback position. At a stroke, the need for double presentation is eliminated.

Moderation of changes

Changes to the education system are always well intentioned but in the past there has been insufficient monitoring of outcomes. The evaluation of successive new initiatives has largely been anecdotal, with the inevitable consequence that participants claim success for their efforts, as with, say, the introduction of foreign languages in primary schools, or the introduction of a three year BGE period in secondary schools. Participants' positive comment is cited as evidence of success. The place of independent evaluation and data has been neglected and this issue has been discussed in a separate paper.

Any given initiative may fail to live up to its billing in terms of improvement but all too frequently it is also the unintended consequences of a change which undermine progress. To mention only a few:

(i) The extension of the BGE into S3 was a curricular initiative but it has exacerbated discipline issues by forcing pupils to continue with subjects for which they demonstrably have no aptitude nor interest. In most but not all schools, it reduced the number of subjects studied at S4 with a consequent loss of choice at S5, and it has squeezed the uptake in certain subjects, most notable foreign languages.

(ii) As previously mentioned, removing exams for Nat 3 and Nat 4 impacted adversely on motivation and behaviour in those classes.

(iii) Introducing Nat 5 Applications of Maths, presumably as a measure to address point (ii) above and to reduce double presentation at Nat 5 and Nat 4 levels for pupils for whom Nat 5 Maths is probably unsuitable. However, the result of its introduction is that 40% of the pupil uptake is also sitting Nat 5 Maths, a different form of double presentation which is rendered possible because the content of Applications of Maths is largely subsumed in the Maths course. The introduction of the 'buy one, get one free' concept into the qualifications system.

(iv) The points based approach to evaluating schools, including the creation of league tables in the press, has led to perverse incentives such as entering pupils for qualifications which will deliver points for the school, regardless of their value to the individual pupil. Five Higher passes at C is worth more to the school as a measure of achievement than four A passes. To the pupil, four As is a very significantly higher academic achievement than five Cs and is of far higher value as an entrance qualification.

(v) Point (iv) above leading to an increase in pupils undertaking Nat 5 PE and a decrease in Nat 5 Maths. With the worst health record in Europe, PE in Scotland should be focused on fitness, not qualifications, unless for individual pupil purposes. The negative implications for STEM subjects are also apparent.

There are many such instances of unintended consequences but, whatever the judgement of individual initiatives, the overall impact of change with no evaluation has seen a significant decline in Scotland's educational standing in international comparisons.

Therefore, any future changes to the assessment system should be closely monitored to detect and eliminate any such unintended consequences. The three most important issues to monitor would be:

(i) the impact of internal assessment grades on overall grades, including comparisons with subjects using only external assessment methods. Is it easier to achieve a higher grade if assessment is solely internal?

(ii) the impact on pupil uptake of subjects in relation to the form of assessment. If it is easier, will pupils choose the easy path rather than the one which might be in their own future interests and/or the economic interests of the country? Do we want a further decline in the uptake of STEM subjects?

(iii) the impact of socio-economic background on making these choices. It is possible to imagine a scenario in which a more middle class child is prevented from taking the easier option by a highly educated parent, for example. Subject choice already has an impact on future prospects; changes to the assessment system, perhaps generating the perception that some subjects are easier, should not exacerbate this.

In summary, the system must be alive to the possible negative impact of changes and be flexible enough to deal with them timeously.

The role of Qualifications Scotland and HMIe

Given the intention to separate HMIe from Education Scotland, they are considered individually here. It is difficult to comment on the remaining role of Education Scotland since much of its remit may be overtaken by the new Centre of Teaching Excellence. The comments below pertain only to the assessment system, not the education system as a whole.

Qualifications Scotland should have a very clearly defined remit in relation to assessment in schools.

(i) its function is to provide a service which meets the aims of the curriculum, in a manner that serves the purposes of school assessment, as agreed by the education system. They are a service provider for a client. It is often the perception that the SQA is dictating developments and that should change.

(ii) the timetable and format of the assessments should be designed according to the specifications of the education system, not according to the philosophy or preferred methods of the SQA, or to historic practice.

(iii) it should use its data to monitor the impact of any changes to assessment procedures, in relation to double counting of qualifications, double presentations, or changes in uptake which could be ascribed to 'easier' assessments. Their role should be to flag up issues before they become long standing practices.

(iv) quality assure internal school grades by analysing them, pupil by pupil, against external grades. Where there is a consistent and significant disparity between the two, action should be taken at school and/or teacher level.

The creation of Qualifications Scotland provides an ideal opportunity to make changes to the exam timetable and the nature of the exams themselves.

HMIe must bear a measure of responsibility for the current issues in Scotland's schools. Neither their school inspection reports nor their annual reports identified the continuing fall in literacy and numeracy standards which PISA has so clearly displayed. In essence, they have failed in the core purpose of the inspection process, to quality assure the education system.

There will be many views as to what has gone wrong with the inspection process. One view is that the inspectorate's focus has been on compliance with CfE, rather than on outcomes, possible as a

consequence of its inclusion in Education Scotland. In the primary sector, the lack of objective data is obviously a hurdle, and in the secondary sector, a blind reliance on points, with no regard as to how they are achieved, has not been a reliable method of determining pupil performance.

In short, their data analyses have not been sufficiently intelligent in discerning when qualifications are actually achieving worthwhile outcomes for pupils, rather than points for the school. Nor have they been sufficiently intelligent in measuring progress in differing socio-economic circumstances. In one analysis of HMIe reports by School Leaders Scotland, not one school with the highest levels of deprivation was awarded the highest grades. It is not difficult to imagine which schools were. The quality indicators appear not to operate successfully in diverse contexts or to take account of the points versus individually appropriate subject choices. To take it to the extreme, a school could maximise points by offering only Applications of Maths and not Maths, Spanish as the only foreign language, Modern Studies as the single social subject, eschew Physics and Chemistry in favour of Biology, and enter every pupil for qualifications in PE. The inspection process should not be open to blatant manoeuvring in the pursuit of points, even if they do mean prizes!

HMIe should be involved in monitoring the impact of changes to the assessment system, both more subjectively in relation to discipline and classroom practices, and objectively in examining presentation and results data. Longer term, changes to performance indicators will be necessary to allow for a more intelligent analysis of pupil performance than at present.