

Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment in Scotland – Phase Three: The Proposed Model – Sector Response – April 2023

Introduction

Colleges Scotland is the collective voice for the college sector in Scotland, representing its interests and ensuring that colleges are at the heart of a world class education sector that is recognised, valued and available to all. As the membership body, Colleges Scotland represents all 26 colleges, which deliver both further education and around 24% of the provision of all higher education in Scotland.

Questions

Question 1 – Do the three areas (Subjects or Curricular Areas, Learning in Context and A Personal Pathway) offer learners the potential to gather and reflect a broader range of achievements important for their future progress? Is there anything you would add or delete?

The three areas proposed are broadly welcomed by the college sector, as they present a wider spectrum of attainment for the learner. The move away from high stakes, end-of-course assessment is a positive step which presents the ability to develop parity of esteem across vocational and academic subjects.

The system proposed is more closely aligned to the continuous internal assessment model in colleges which has proven to offer validation of learning within the subject discipline. Moreover, this will help those learners who perform less well in exams, as well as offering them the opportunity to have personal development activity recorded and recognised; creating a fuller picture of achievement.

These areas allow for greater interdisciplinarity across the sector, as it can be beneficial for all young people to deepen their subject knowledge by building in a college experience. It is especially beneficial for rural learners as it provides opportunity to enable interdisciplinary projects where there is a lack of capacity elsewhere.

Concerns arose from the sector regarding how the new subjects or curricular areas were chosen and if they differed from the current choices. Furthermore, there were questions raised as to how these would be mapped out and what tools would be used to help ensure parity of recognition and esteem amongst the learning pathways. This has been a key consideration emerging from the Scottish Education Council, chaired by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills.

Question 2 – What are your views on the proposals for recognising achievements in subjects/curricular areas?

The college sector generally welcomes the opportunity to introduce a broad range of approaches to assessment. Colleges are familiar with ongoing and continuous assessment and express that caution should be exercised when such assessment is not well managed as this can lead to an overload of work on the learner which impacts on attainment – in this respect balance will be essential.

The challenge will be to get schools, learners and parents to value the sections of the award other than the narrow grades in specific subjects. By creating a common naming scheme for levels of qualifications it provides an opportunity to create parity of esteem between academic and vocational subjects and as a result broaden the curriculum for all learners.

Questions were raised around the role of colleges as part of the Scottish Diploma of Achievement. There is also a lack of clarity regarding the assessment methods used and if there is to be a reduction in external assessment then what is the proposed model that will be used?

There is also a need to define the Diploma in the context of similar awards when a learner transitions from a college to a higher level of study.

Question 3 – What are your views on the proposals for recognising achievements in knowledge and skills in action?

The move away from purely subject-based qualifications is a positive step as it has the potential to encourage greater collaboration with colleges to evidence outcomes. Placing a greater emphasis on project work will support students to develop and demonstrate attributes in self-management, problem solving and collaboration that will be valuable for moving on to further study or employment.

The college experience of interdisciplinary projects identifies that there is a need to develop students' abilities to tackle projects and to ensure they have appropriate knowledge and ability to participate effectively in this approach.

For these approaches to be successful they need to be suitably supported and also ensure that there is fair access. Other concerns are raised around the assessment criteria – it will be important to ensure that the rigour of the students' work and the assessment approaches are communicated well so that this is a valued and recognised part of the award. Furthermore, there is concern that there is a danger of this approach being too broad which would lead to difficulties in ensuring quality of assessment.

Question 4 – What are your views on the proposals designed to recognise achievements in respect of personal learning?

The ability of learners to be able to consider, record and present a broad picture of their achievements and in doing so encourage civic and cultural engagement is welcomed. With that said it is not clear what the role of the college is in assessing or supporting the work.

There is some concern surrounding the quality frameworks which would be in place to assess this element of the approach – is there an assurance of equity? There is particular concern in relation to this with regards to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds or with additional personal barriers and how this approach may impact negatively on them. Furthermore, how can activities outside of curricula be identified and who would be delegated to grade this work?

Personal learning should be developed in conjunction with colleges and universities, as consideration is needed on how this work would be used in relation to SCQF levels and how there can be transition onto appropriate pathways for the learner.

Question 5 – What are your views on the idea of a Scottish Diploma of Achievement for all learners in Scotland?

Young people leaving school with a recognition of the breadth of their learning is a very positive step. Learners being able to explore further their passions and achieve a recognised award as a result is very welcome also, especially without the need for a high-pressure, end-of-year assessment.

There is however some broad apprehension over the use of the word 'Diploma' as it denotes a level of academia that is perhaps higher than the achievement awarded.

It is hoped that the development of an overarching record of achievement, along with the proposal for common naming levels of study would be treated as an opportunity to create parity of esteem across 'vocational' and 'academic' subjects, and encourage students to undertake a variety of educational opportunities.

Questions were raised over the lack of clarity concerning the end point of the Diploma of Achievement – will the award be added to when the learner progresses to college, or does it end when the learner leaves school, or reaches a certain age? Furthermore, what is the value it will hold at their next stage of learning?

Question 6 – If you support the idea in question 5, what actions should be taken to make this approach work in practice? What alternative would you propose that would be consistent with the vision and principles identified in Phase One of the Review?

It is generally felt that more detail needs to be given regarding the assessment criteria and the language used to define the qualification. There also needs to be a dialogue with employers and other stakeholders to create legitimacy surrounding the Diploma. Moreover, it is essential that the learner is involved in the development of the approach to ensure that young people (and parents/carers) understand its value.

Question 7 – What changes to existing practice, if any, would you recommend to support the development of a new qualifications and assessment system?

Development of support for teaching staff could be tested by a pilot scheme to aid the delivery of the new assessments by training staff accordingly. There needs to be a concerted effort made to put sufficient time and resources into the creation of a sustainable learning framework, including an appropriate emphasis on quality assurance processes. Unless staff continue to develop and understand the emerging approaches across learning, teaching and assessment it will hinder progress.

Secondary education should adopt more of the assessment strategies and approaches that currently exist in tertiary education.

The creation of truly personalised learning students need flexibility outwith restrictions of the academic year, such processes could be accommodated whilst still allowing young people time away from formal learning.

Question 8 – To promote parity of esteem across all qualifications, academic or technical and professional, should all qualifications at a particular SCQF level have the same name?

There is general consensus that this would be a positive step. By standardising the name, it could help employers and other stakeholders understand the qualification. Furthermore, if equally recognised in the record of achievement the Diploma would allow for broadening of curriculum opportunities. There is caution expressed that the qualification is not yet well defined enough and would need to be distinct from pre-existing qualifications such as SVQs and HNCs for example.

Question 9 – Do you have any additional comments about the proposed approach to qualifications and assessment set out in this paper?

Now is an opportunity to build vocational learning and skills into the senior phase across all Scottish schools. Young people in school need experiences beyond exams and studying academic subjects. Incorporating vocational and skills learning through colleges into all senior phase options for all young people would be an exceptional step change and progress.

As previously emphasised in our response to Phase 2, this review is one of a number of key consultations taking place at this time under a wider strategic review of educational reform. This consultation and review must link into the wider strategic discussions in order to maximise the opportunity for fundamental system change. This includes the Scottish Funding Council's Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability, and the importance of a qualifications and assessment system that works across all of the educational landscape. The focus also need to capitalise on the importance of ensuring any system going forward can support the aspirations of the Pillars set out in the National Strategy for Economic Transformation.

As an overarching approach, the qualifications and assessment system must ensure a model that will deliver future requirements of learning throughout life, along with the recognition of up skilling and reskilling. All of these will require more focused periods of study and so a system that can support micro-credentials and reskilling and upskilling will be required.

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