



The National Parent Forum of Scotland Focus Group:

Experiences of 2nd year of N4, N5, and 1st year of new Highers

Glasgow Caledonian University, Tuesday 26th May 2015

Introduction

The purpose of this focus group was to explore parents' experiences of the new National 4 and 5 exams and new Highers qualifications, in the second year of Nationals and the first year of new Highers. In particular NPFS was interested in understanding how well schools, teachers and pupils are adapting to the new qualifications, whether some initial teething problems with Nationals 4 and 5 have been addressed, and how the transition has worked for pupils who may be taking a combination of old and new qualifications. This report incorporates the comments of parents at the focus group, as well as some written comments passed to the organisers and comments on the NPFS website from parents who were not able to attend the focus group.

Summary

Parents were very concerned about children in the first cohort of Nationals, new Highers and new Advanced Highers being “guinea pigs”, with the potential for long term impacts on their career prospects and confidence.

There was a widespread feeling among parents of new Highers students that pupils and teachers had not been adequately prepared for the style of questions in some papers. This was mostly, but not exclusively, focused on one new Highers maths paper. This came down to a combination of:

- Papers failing to adequately test the full range of students, e.g. including only high-level questions
- A mismatch between the specimen papers provided and the actual exam papers
- The integration of literacy and numeracy into subject assessments, e.g. a “wordy” Maths paper and a “mathsy” Biology paper.

Schools and local authorities appear to have a high degree of flexibility in practical details of how the new qualifications are being applied. School-level decisions on assessment style, expected number of subjects, study leave arrangements, revision support, timing of transitions and assessments and multi-level teaching can lead to very different educational experiences for pupils. Some parents were concerned that this would lead to increasing inequality between areas.

Many parents were concerned about the level of stress their children were under, particularly in S4. This is exacerbated by some teachers under extreme stress, “passing it on” to their pupils. Stress on

both pupils and teachers in these transition years seems to be the result of both high workloads, constant rolling assessments, and uncertainty about the new syllabus for each subject and new qualifications.

Findings

Workload

Most parents were concerned about the high workload for pupils taking National 5s, and the step up in workload from S3 to S4. However, there is clearly inconsistency between schools and authorities in the number of National 5s young people are expected to sit, impacting their overall workload. We heard of S4 students taking a range from 6 to 9 National 5s; one parent reported that pupils in one school are made to take 9 National 5s, with PE as a compulsory subject, reflecting that “*making things compulsory narrows choices*”.

One parent described her daughter’s experience in the first year of National 5s, and how sitting eight National 5s with 24 internal units became “*a constant cycle of assessments*”; other pupils in her year group were “*completely stressed because of it*”. By comparison, studying 5 new Highers has been much more manageable: “*she coped much better in her Highers year*”.

While expecting young people to take a lot of different subjects at National 5 level is in some ways in line with the principles of Curriculum for Excellence - a breadth of education, allowing for individual choice, and striving for high attainment- there is clearly a trade-off for young people between breadth of study and a manageable workload.

“*[Studying 8 National 5s] looks like a good thing - big picture etc. There's a lot of focus on choice, but it's not the be all and end all.*”

Schools are adapting to Nationals in a number of ways

Parents with children in the second year of National 4 and 5s felt there were some signs that schools are beginning to adapt to the new qualifications. One parent commented that teachers are better prepared and have stepped up the workload in response to the new assessments:

“*I feel my younger daughter is getting a lot more of the work her sister didn't get- maybe the school is taking it on board. She's more prepared for assessments, and she knows what to expect*”.

Some schools have adapted to the workload of S4 by starting to “*bag assessments*” in S3. There is a clear trade-off between Broad General Education in S3 and advance preparation for assessment in Senior Phase (S4).

Several parents felt that sacrificing some S3 education in preparation for Nationals was a good thing.

“*Broad General Education should be sacrificed for National 5 assessments in S4*”.

On the other hand, as one parent commented, assessments “*drowning out the Broad General Education is really going against the philosophy of Curriculum for Excellence*”.

An inconsistent approach to beginning Nationals preparation in S3 also risks creating inequality between schools: “*...this gave a huge advantage to those pupils whose schools took this course of action [preparing in S3] against instructions*”.

Parents’ experience of the first year of National 4 and 5s suggests that some schools’ decision to begin National 4 and 5 preparation in S3 is well justified. One parent described intense stress in the first year of National 5s when the guidelines for science projects arrived:

“I felt destabilised. They were up until 3 in the morning working on it. The school had to open over Easter to help them prepare for it”.

After feedback from parents, the school is now starting preparation for science projects in S3.

Parents of new Highers students reported a general lack of preparedness for the new qualifications - for example, pupils did not have a syllabus to consult, which “*slowed down the teaching process*” as they were not able to prepare for upcoming topics or look back on topics.

“The total lack of textbooks in many subjects means that often the pupils have absolutely no idea what material is or isn’t in the syllabus which they are supposed to be studying”.

Parents feel that their children - and their children’s education – has suffered from being ‘guinea pigs’

Several parents expressed frustration that their children were being used as the “*guinea pigs*” for a new system - particularly as due to the sequential roll out of new qualifications, the first cohort of National 5s are currently taking the first round of new Highers, and will go on to be the first cohort of new Advanced Highers. As one parent put it: “[my daughter] has been the guinea pig - if it gets better, it’ll get better for someone else”.

“I feel really devastated about my son’s experience - he’s a real guinea pig. How many kids have been put off education completely?”

“... the total lack of fairness or level playing field for all of those pupils sitting N5 qualifications last year and new Highers this year”

One parent described how their daughter, at the end of S5, was in the position of being forced to take more Highers instead of Advanced Highers, because the school was not ready for new Advanced Highers. The fact that some - mostly smaller - schools are not yet ready to offer new Advanced Highers next year (when old Advanced Highers will no longer be available) creates inequality of opportunity for students. This may have long term effects as universities use Advanced Highers qualifications as an entry filter for some courses. Although in some areas pupils are able to transfer to neighbouring schools for an Advanced Higher not offered in their own school, this is not likely to be a possibility in rural areas, creating geographic inequality. One parent described frustration at this on the online forum:

“My daughter’s school was one of the few that decided not to sit any National exams (if staying on) which in itself was stressful as the kids have nothing to fall back on if their Highers don’t go well. The kids who were borderline Higher maths felt they had no choice but to revert to National 5 as, if the Higher was failed, they had no qualification. If the National 5 exam was sat in 4th year like the majority of Scotland then they would have no choice but at least try for the Higher.”

Many of the new Higher exams have been very different from those expected

Almost all parents with children studying new Highers felt that there had been a severe mismatch between their children’s, and even their teachers’ expectations of exams and the exams themselves.

“Last year children’s expectations of the new Nationals were met by the exams - this year the new Highers were nothing like it”

Most parents were particularly concerned about one particular new Higher Maths paper: however, their concerns were not limited to one paper, and the feeling that teachers did not know what to expect from new Highers exams appeared to be a wider problem across subject areas.

The main complaint, specific to the offending Higher Maths paper, was that it did not adequately test lower level students - as all the questions were at a high level and required a hurdle, mid-level students would not be differentiated from poor students. One parent suggested that in future exam papers should be subject to stronger Quality Assurance - with standards tested against young adult control groups.

Parents felt that this particular exam was likely to have done long-term damage to students' confidence in other exams and perhaps their career prospects, as well as to wider perceptions of Maths.

"Maths has not changed - but that Paper has shot the confidence in the teaching profession in North Lanarkshire. Schools are now finding no one wants to choose Advanced Highers in Maths for next year."

"I think they'll be traumatised - it will damage their future attitude."

One parent described their child's angst after having worked through all the past papers: "I'm as prepared as I can be but I know I've failed".

"Her confidence in the exams has been damaged and she is even more frightened to go into the next one. She feels that no matter how much she studies it may not do any good anyway. She has lost motivation and I am sure this has affected her next exam."

"My daughter is in S5 and has also recently sat her Higher maths. After a year of tutoring she went into the exam with confidence which she had previously lacked when it came to maths. When coming out of the exam her confidence was shot and lower than ever. As she has not completed her exams she has expressed concerns as to how she will 'tackle' the up and coming exams and has already started to rethink her career choice."

The other main complaint about new Highers papers in general was that the types of questions were very different from questions in the specimen papers provided, and that teachers and pupils alike were unprepared for the style of questions.

"The style of questions was not representative of the taught material and specimen paper."

One complaint about the style of questions was that they were very "wordy", leading pupils to feel that their literacy and problem solving skills were being tested rather than what they understood as maths skills.

The integration of literacy and numeracy may weaken the inclusion agenda

We heard several concerns about the accessibility implications of integrating literacy and numeracy into subject assessments. As well as the new Highers Maths paper, parents gave examples of a physics exam in which the questions were very "wordy", requiring a "close reading". This appears to be a consequence of creating more literate, solution based exams - which many felt discriminated against dyslexic students, who might be strong in physics yet perform poorly in a "wordy" physics exam.

"It tests your ability to interpret a question rather than solving the thing itself."

Another parent described how her son with borderline dyslexia had chosen to take a National qualification in Lifeskills Mathematics, expecting that it would be both easier and more applicable to

real life than pure Maths. The parent was disheartened to discover that the assessments involved questions which were “*like an essay*”.

Other parents expressed a concern that integrating literacy and numeracy into assessments “*moves the goalposts*” for students, making it harder to prepare for and predict assessment criteria. One parent commented that her daughter “*felt that, however much she prepared, she didn’t know what she was preparing for*”.

Constant rolling assessments are causing stress and getting in the way of learning new things

Parents were in general agreement that constant, rolling assessments were causing their children stress in S4 and 5. One parent described how their child taking National 4 and National 5s had “*60 assessments before the final exams- it’s madness*”.

“*The level of fearfulness they have, it’s abysmal.*”

“*It’s assessment gone mad.*”

“*It really feels like death by assessment.*”

“*My daughter was stressed out with the amount of assessment.*”

While in theory unit by unit assessments should reduce exam stress by distributing assessment through the year, the experience of many parents is that the prolonged stress of a constant stream of assessments is worse than the alternative of concentrating assessment into a single exam diet.

“*My experience is that when they have infinite assessments it’s just a constant threat of failure.*”

“*They found that the end of year exams were the easiest part- just surviving the year was the hard part.*”

Some parents pointed out that grouped assessments helped to deal with this problem, with fewer, more substantial assessments.

Prelims are a valuable introduction to the art of examinations

In contrast to the general feeling about constant rolling assessments, parents in this focus group were almost universally positive about the usefulness of prelim exams at N5. On the whole, parents find prelims “*worthwhile*”, a helpful measure of progress and an indication of likely scores. As one parent put it,

“*It gives them an idea of where they are, and it gives parents an idea of whether we need to kick them up the backside.*”

Other parents described how prelims gave their children a useful taste of the exam process, mitigating stress by demystifying exams - “*oh actually, I did survive that*”.

“*People need to be familiar with a formal exam.....the procedures, the quietness, the timescales, and presentation of their work. Exams teach as well as test!*”

Some schools are using prelim exams as a filter, encouraging pupils who perform poorly in prelims to drop out of a subject or down to a lower assessment level. Parents seemed to have a mixed reaction to filtering on prelims - this may be positive in preventing pupils from being “*set up to fail*”, but also has the potential to lock young people out of subjects they hope to study before really testing them out.

There is some inconsistency between schools in their approach to prelims - including when to fit prelims into the school year so as not to clash with course content, and whether or not study leave is offered for prelims. There are inconsistencies around when prelims are sat in relation to the school year and course content, as well as the flexibility for pupils to take the same exams in S4 or S5 exam diets or resits. This creates a burden for the school to create multiple tailored prelim exams for students at different stages.

New Highers are exams which are more consistent with the CfE approach

One parent whose daughter had taken a combination of old and new Highers described how the newer Highers using the portfolio approach to assessment had seemed easier because of the clearer progression. By contrast, the old Highers had involved “*reams of stuff to memorise*”, which will not be remembered after the exam.

One parent whose daughter had taken both new and old Highers described the exam period as “*the longest month of my life*”.

Several parents felt that the overlap of old and new Highers was unfair on the ‘guinea pig’ cohort, who will compete for jobs and university places against students with apparently similar qualifications gained under different circumstances.

“The biggest disgrace this year is why some schools are still being allowed to have the old Highers whilst others have the new Highers. The big problem with this is that the old Highers were very much more predictable and so those students had a very much better idea of what to expect in the final examination papers as did the teachers who taught them. This should not have happened”.

Some parents are concerned about employers not understanding or recognising the new qualifications. One described confusion at a workplace with applicants for an apprenticeship scheme: “*if he gets an application form now, he doesn’t know what level they’ll be at... we know [because of our experience as parents], but there’s a whole world out there which doesn’t have a clue*”.

Multi-level classes don’t seem to be causing the problems they were last year, but there is a strong temptation to teach to the more able

Although for the majority of subjects in many schools, teaching is split by level, we heard of some cases where pupils were studying for Highers alongside pupils studying for a National 5 or 4 in the same subject. Most parents agreed that for some subjects this can work, for example where learning is incremental rather than covering new topics each year, while for other subject areas it is not appropriate. However, in smaller classes or less mainstream courses, schools may not have the option to split teaching by level, even if the subject matter does not suit multi-level teaching. One parent felt that combining students at different levels (e.g. National 5s and Highers) within a course had led to the course being taught out of sequence. Another parent described the challenge their child’s teacher had faced, teaching Highers level Spanish to a class that included students with an A at National 5 alongside beginners, as well as older students not working towards an exam.

“It’s too big a range for the amount of work you have to fit in.”

One parent who is also a teacher commented on the difficulties of teaching multiple levels - “*your time is swallowed up by the more advanced, and the less able - who have equal need - don’t get it*”. Another parent gave the example of a physics class where pupils were studying for Intermediate and Highers exams in the same class - “*most of the intermediate students failed and the Highers level students passed*”.

Teachers are under a lot of stress – which affects their pupils

Several parents expressed a concern that adapting to the new qualifications and CfE was putting teachers under extreme stress, which was being transferred onto the pupils.

One parent (also a teacher) explained that, although the vast majority of teachers are using a unit-by-unit approach to assessment, resulting in year-round rolling assessments, there are two other options available - a combined approach and a portfolio approach - which can arguably result in lower workloads for both students. “*Teachers are shattered- they’re too tired to consider combined assessments.*” “*All these assessments prevent you from teaching.*”

“*My daughter would come home saying - ‘my teacher’s saying they don’t have a clue, what am I going to do?’*”

“*I am so disappointed that my son in S4 has decided to leave school when his 2 elder sisters loved school and stayed on until 6th year. I feel his decision reflects in part the pressure which has been on him and his teachers. He certainly feels his teachers were under pressure.*”

“*The teachers were very stressed throughout the transition and were in effect teaching two different curriculums. This stress was definitely relayed to the students.*”

There is a lot of variation in the effectiveness of communications with parents about the new exams

We heard conflicting views on whether the new qualifications and Curriculum for Excellence are improving progress reports. One parent reported that as a result of the continuous assessment, his daughter was aware of her own progress at all times - but also that getting immediate feedback from teachers was “*very helpful to her*”. Other parents felt that unit-by-unit assessments throughout the year were not useful for understanding progress.

“*You get no idea of progression from unit assessments.*”

The group reflected that successful communication about progress, and whether assessments lead to a better understanding of progress, depends very much on the individual teacher.

“*Some are on the ball, but some have no idea at all.*”

Some parents described a negative experience of progress feedback - when feedback only comes as a result of assessment, this can mean a late warning for parents.

“*We only get progress reports at the end of the year- we get an interim report which is fairly meaningless and without depth. It means that you don’t know what’s happening until it’s too late.*”

Parents had mixed experiences of communication from schools in terms of parent information evenings. On the whole the information events described were either too little or too late. Parents attending an information evening held after a prelims session in which a lot of high-achieving children had failed prelims were “*very disgruntled*” and “*didn’t feel any better after the meeting*”. Another school had held an information session on participatory learning which was only available to members of the Parent Council. While this is a pragmatic approach to space limitations, it is likely to exacerbate the disadvantage felt by children of parents who are less active in their engagement with the school.

Some parents commented that the information on new qualifications was not easily accessible on the Scottish Qualifications Authority’s website: “*You can find useful things on the SQA website, but only by mistake*”.

“We’ve had no communication from the school about anything. No explanation about anything at any point”.

The nature and value of study leave is mixed – and may disadvantage young carers

Parents had mixed experiences of study leave. Study leave provision varies from school to school, and whether or not children benefit from study leave varies from child to child, depending a lot on the teacher, school-based resources and the home environment. While some well-prepared pupils were enjoying a well-earned break, others were “*floundering about*”, and as one parent commented, young people with chaotic home lives may be severely disadvantaged by a long study leave.

For those taking National 4s in S4 with no formal exams to sit, timetabled study leave can be a waste of time:

“The S4 timetable was suspended for study leave....this time could have been better spent....a whole term lost!”

More parental involvement, more inequality?

One parent reflected that the focus on parental involvement in CfE had the potential to increase inequality for young people with chaotic home lives, whose parents are unable to or do not engage with their child’s education. This is particularly a problem for young people who are acting as carers for parents with health problems or disabilities.

“If school becomes more chaotic, then more rules, more assessments, and more study leave mean that these kids are set up to fail.”

Although all young people in a “guinea pig” cohort are at risk of being disadvantaged in the workforce or in Higher Education relative to other cohorts, young people with chaotic home lives or whose parents are unable to engage are doubly disadvantaged. They may be less likely to be able to attend voluntary revision sessions at school let alone private tutoring, less able to commit time to revision at home, and their parents may be less able to access the information to help them navigate the new system of qualifications.

Recommendations

Parents of students in the “guinea pig” cohorts of Nationals, new Highers and new Advanced Highers feel they need reassurance from the Scottish Qualifications Authority that qualifications gained during the transition will be fairly valued against both old qualifications and future cohorts. In some specific cases (e.g. Higher Maths) this may involve moderation.

The SQA’s process for setting papers is thought to deserve investigation, in the context of the controversial Higher Maths paper of 2015, to ensure that future papers are more strongly quality-controlled, assess pupils across the full spectrum, and are appropriately accessible. While the integration of literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills into subject teaching is a key aim of Curriculum for Excellence, parents felt it may be fairer for students to restrict this integration to the classroom and allow assessments to focus on subject area skills.

Schools could be encouraged to try portfolio or combined assessment rather than unit-by-unit assessment in all subjects, as a way to mitigate the high workload and stress caused by continuous assessment for both teachers and students.

Parents would welcome less variation in schools’ approach to study leave, the timing of assessments, guidelines for the number of subjects and early preparation for Nationals, and subject exchanges, based on what seems to be working best for pupils, teachers and parents.

In advance of new Advanced Highers qualifications in 2015/16, schools could be encouraged to have plans in place for arranging subject exchanges to allow students to have a full choice of subjects, and avoid further disadvantaging the “*guinea pig cohort*”.

Dr Nancy Burns
Richard Scuthorne
Rocket Science UK Ltd
www.rocketscienclab.co.uk

Focus Group for
The National Parent Forum of Scotland
www.npfs.org.uk