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CULTURE, STRATEGY AND TRANSFORMATION

*A case study of high stakes qualifications and assessment in
Scotland*

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Abstract

Attempts to change national education systems are recognized internationally as extremely challenging. This is particularly true when the success of a potential innovation requires support from wider society. Reform of high stakes qualifications and assessment is such a case; where success depends not only on the commitment of learners and teachers but also on the active support of wider groups such as parents, policy makers, employers, universities, and colleges. This article presents a case study of a policy process, the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment in Scotland, commissioned by Scottish Government. The methodology attempted to co-construct policy with all those whose support would be crucial to the successful enactment of policy proposals. First establishing the context for change, the article introduces the theoretical model that underpinned the policy process and how that influenced the development to the point when the report, 'It's Our Future', was submitted to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills in Scotland. The Review advocates significant reform to qualifications and assessment in Scotland, moving from qualifications that are principally subject-based to "The Scottish Diploma of Achievement", an inclusive, baccalaureate-style graduation diploma. The article concludes by reflecting on challenges in reform of national high-stakes qualifications and assessment and tensions inherent in deeply collaborative approaches to national policy development.

Keywords: national qualifications, assessment reform, transformation, co-constructed policy, changing culture

Résumé

Les tentatives de transformer des systèmes éducatifs nationaux sont reconnues internationalement comme étant extrêmement complexes. Ceci est particulièrement vrai lorsque le succès d'une innovation potentielle requiert le soutien de la société dans son ensemble. La réforme des qualifications et des évaluations à forts enjeux est un de ces cas : son succès dépend non seulement de l'engagement des apprenant·es et des enseignant·es, mais aussi du soutien actif de groupes plus larges tels que les parents, les décideur·ses politiques, les employeur·ses, les universités et les hautes écoles. Cet article est une étude de cas d'un processus politique, la Révision Indépendante des Qualifications et Évaluations en Écosse, commanditée par le Gouvernement écossais. La méthodologie a tenté de co-construire les documents cadres et lignes directrices avec tou·tes celles et ceux dont le soutien serait crucial pour le succès des propositions. Après une description du contexte, l'article introduit le modèle théorique qui sous-tendait le processus politique et comment il a influencé le développement jusqu'au moment où le rapport « Notre avenir nous appartient » a été soumis au Secrétaire du Cabinet pour l'Éducation et les Compétences. La Révision préconise une réforme significative des qualifications et évaluations en Écosse, passant de qualifications principalement basées sur les disciplines scolaires, au « Diplôme Écossais d'Accomplissement », un diplôme de type baccalauréat inclusif. L'article conclut en réfléchissant aux défis de la réforme des qualifications et évaluations nationales à forts enjeux et aux tensions inhérentes aux approches profondément collaboratives du développement des politiques éducatives nationales.

Mots-clés : qualifications nationales, réforme de l'évaluation, transformation, co-construction des politiques éducatives, transformation de la culture

1. Introduction

Qualifications and Assessment in Scotland have been subject to scrutiny since COVID 19 led to changes in established practices (Hayward & O'Leary, 2022; Hayward et al., 2023). Scotland has had a long tradition of subject-based qualifications often referred to colloquially as "Getting Your Highers". Higher awards, originally introduced in 1888, form one part of national qualifications in Scotland but have been the currency most commonly used for access to Employment, Further or Higher Education.

In Scotland¹, qualifications are a way for individuals to demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and abilities in a particular subject or field. Qualifications are typically obtained through a formal process of study and assessment including examinations. There are different levels of qualifications in Scotland, ranging from National Qualifications (such as National 5, Higher, and Advanced Higher) awarded by the Scottish Qualifications Authority, to vocational qualifications (such as SVQs and HNCs). Each qualification has its own set of requirements and assessment methods, and is designed to help individuals progress in their education or career. Overall, qualifications in Scotland are important for individuals

¹ For an overview of the Scottish education system, visit <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/bf624417-en/1/3/1/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/bf624417-en&csp=51c450f180c5a8837f5b133c929c2dfe&itemIGO=oecd&itemContentType=book#section-d1e754>



looking to advance their education or career, as they provide a way to officially recognize and validate their skills and knowledge.

In many ways, education in Scotland has been perceived to serve most learners well. For example, Scottish Government (2022) reported that “a record 95.5% of pupils were in a ‘positive destination’ including work, training or further study within three months of leaving school last year” (n.p.).

Of these, 45.1% of school leavers went on to higher education courses at college or university. However, over the past ten years, but more acutely since COVID 19, the perception that the existing qualification and assessment system serves all learners well has been challenged.

Two OECD reports on progress in Scotland’s curriculum, entitled Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), had identified challenges in its implementation. The first (OECD, 2021) suggested that whilst CfE remained a “bold and widely supported initiative ... learning practices and assessment approaches in the Senior Phase also need adapting to be consistent with CfE’s vision”. The Senior Phase is the term used to describe the final three years of education in secondary schools in Scotland (students aged 16 to 18). The second report (Stobart, 2021) focused on a perceived “misalignment” between curriculum and assessment and advocated for reform of qualifications and assessment in the Senior Phase.

Both OECD reports (OECD, 2021; Stobart, 2021) emerged during the COVID 19 pandemic. In some countries, including in Scotland, COVID 19 had a major impact on qualifications (Hayward & O’Leary, 2022). In 2020 and 2021, it was not possible because of public health concerns, to hold examinations. The central role that examinations have played as part of qualifications in Scotland, and thus the gravity of the decision to cancel them, was recognized in the announcement made to the Scottish Parliament by the then Deputy First Minister (DFM), John Swinney MSP (BBC, 2020).

In all of our history, Scotland has never cancelled the exams. Since 1888 they have been held every May or June without fail. In the midst of two world wars, the exams went ahead. It is a measure of the gravity of the challenge we now face, that I must today announce the exams will not go ahead this year.

The ramifications that followed the OECD conclusions and the impact of the pandemic, led the Scottish Government to instigate an Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment to investigate whether the existing qualifications system remained fit for the future and, if reform was required, what that might look like. This article reflects on that Review.

Reforming qualifications is a complex business. Any attempt to reform qualifications that conceptualises change only as a technical issue, a matter of changing the ways of gathering assessment evidence, will fail. Building on the famous quotation from management guru, Peter Drucker who is alleged to have said, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast”, Guley and Resnick, (2019, p. 62) add... “and transformation for lunch”. They argue that any well thought out strategy that seeks to transform must begin from mindset change that leads to behaviour change which enables transformation. Given the multiple purposes that societies commonly ask qualifications to serve, any change to behaviours in qualifications will require mindset change across society. Therefore, a major focus of this article is on the process that underpinned the advice to Government on possible reform to Scotland’s qualifications and, in particular, on how attempts were made to design the Review to co-construct



recommendations with all those who had a stake in making reform to qualifications successful.

Qualifications matter. They hold an almost unique position in education systems internationally in the crucial ways in which they serve both learners and societies. They provide information to learners and to their parents or carers as they sum up what has been achieved in education in school. Yet qualifications are more than that. In many countries internationally, including in Scotland, National Qualifications are the currency used to determine opportunities. The level of achievement identified by the letters or numbers reported through qualifications act to open or close doors to future opportunities in further and higher education or in employment. In some countries, including in Scotland, examinations play a major role in qualifications. Parents and carers are aware of the potential consequences of performance in qualifications, their high stakes, and many, intentionally or unintentionally, pressure young people to perform well. Young people often report high levels of stress in the qualification years. Learners understand that universities, colleges and employers use qualifications as a sifting mechanism to decide, for example, who should have access to courses or be invited for interview. Scottish Education offers a myriad of pathways for young people to follow post school, and thus the traditional high stakes of examinations in the Senior Phase have been reduced, yet the perception remains that qualifications taken at the end of schooling change lives for better or worse.

In many countries, qualification data are also used as a proxy measure of quality in schools, data that are used to create league tables. Even in Scotland, where Government does not produce league tables of schools, the media does. League tables sell newspapers and discussions amongst parents about whether local schools are seen to have improved or not, are commonly linked to whether a school has risen or fallen in league tables. The evidence of what happens when assessment evidence is used for multiple purposes has long been recognised. In the Editorial for a Special Edition of *Assessment in Education: Research, Policy and Practice*, Stobart (2003) argues that “assessment is never a neutral process-it always has consequences. The task is to make these as constructive as possible, particularly for those who are assessed” (p. 139).

However, despite convincing evidence over time that assessment has consequences, many countries continue to live in the shadowlands of an uneasy relationship between the aspiration to have a high stakes assessment system that will serve all learners and society well, and practices that seem to run counter to that ambition. Too often, high stakes assessment systems depend on examinations that emphasise reliability over validity, what is easier to measure reliably matters more than what really matters in the subject. This is an issue currently being faced in Scotland.

2. The Scottish Education System

Scotland is a small nation. It is part of the United Kingdom, however, since 1999, has had a separate parliament. Scotland has always had a separate education system and thus education is a crucial part of the country’s identity. Although its population is approximately 5.5 million people and thus less than one tenth of the UK population, Scotland is almost one third of the land mass. Given the land mass, the population size and the fact that large sections of the population live in the country’s central belt, in more rural areas, many schools are small. Most young people attend local comprehensive schools. Of almost 800’000 pupils (Statista, 2023), 30’000 were in private education (Education Scotland,



2023). Education is divided into three stages, Early Learning and Childcare which encompasses all provision until school age (5 years), Primary Education (7 years – 5-11) and Secondary Education (up to 6 years – 12-18). Secondary Education is divided into two phases, the first three years offer a Broad General Education (12-15) followed by the Senior Phase (16-18). The Senior Phase is increasingly characterised by schools working in close partnerships with colleges, to provide a more extended range of vocational, technical, and professional opportunities for learners.

There is no statutory national curriculum in Scotland, but almost all schools follow the national curriculum framework, Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). CfE was one of the first curricula to adopt the development of 21st century capacities as the focus of education. CfE was designed to foster four capacities in all learners, who should become:

- successful learners
- confident individuals
- responsible citizens
- effective contributors

There has been consistent support over time for these four capacities from the profession and from wider society (Campbell & Harris, 2023) and very similar models have emerged in other countries, e.g., Wales, Australia, Finland and Canada.

Scottish Government (n.d.) state that CfE was “implemented in 2010” (n.p.). In describing the curriculum, they emphasise the importance of “inter-disciplinary learning, skills development and encouraging personal achievement” (n.d., n.p.). National Qualifications were first introduced in 2013. The curriculum in Scotland is articulated in terms of experiences and outcomes described progressively across five levels (Early Years, First, Second and Third Levels – from early years until the end of the Broad General Education). The fifth level, the Senior Phase, does not have experiences and outcomes and Qualification Study Programmes are the basis of learning. Stobart (2021) suggests that there is a major concern that Qualification Study Programmes have replaced CfE to become the curriculum (OECD, 2021). Qualifications are perceived to dominate learning and teaching in the Senior Phase.

The original intention of CfE was that there would be close alignment between curriculum, assessment and qualifications. The agency in Scotland responsible for qualifications is the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). Qualifications are available to *all* learners in the Senior Phase. They are structured to be increasingly challenging, from National 1- National 5 (N1 – N5), progressing to Higher and Advanced Higher. National Qualifications N1- N4 are awarded based on teacher assessment. National level 5, Higher and Advanced Higher are externally examined. Many of the qualifications, when originally designed, included a range of assessment approaches, e.g., project-based work, oral assessment, performance (Assessment and National Qualifications Working Group, 2018). Although an extensive range of qualifications is available from the SQA, most students in Scotland take National Qualifications.

Since their introduction in 2013, National Qualifications have undergone several revisions for a variety of reasons. For example, the original design of national qualifications included a balance of unit assessment (in school) and external assessment. However, in 2016, the demands that internal unit assessment made on teachers was perceived to be unsustainable and units were removed (Scottish Government, 2016). This led to a revision



of the qualifications and, in many cases, the introduction of an extended examination. Over time, the design of qualifications has become less innovative.

Stobart (2021) reports that although N5 examinations are most commonly taken in S4 (age 16, the minimum school leaving age), 88% of students continue into S5 where they study for Highers. Highers, often referred to as the “gold standard”, are used as the basis for entrance to higher education. Data from Scottish Government in 2023 shows this trend continuing. 12.4% of pupils left school in S4, 27.7% left in S5 (age 17) 59.8% at the end of S6 (age 18) (Scottish Government, 2023).

Since 2001, the level of challenge for almost all qualifications is identified by its position in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF, 2023). For example, N5 sits at level 5 on the SCQF framework, Higher at Level 6 and Advanced Higher at level 7. Within this framework, as previously indicated, a wider range of other qualifications, including technical, vocational and professional qualifications, is available. These include, for example, Foundation Apprenticeships, Higher National Certificates and Diplomas, National Progression Awards and Personal Development Awards. Many schools have partnership arrangements with local colleges who offer vocational, technical and professional qualifications to students. Increasing numbers of students take qualifications at college as an addition, or as an alternative, to National Qualifications. School/college partnerships are more challenging in rural areas without easy access to a local college, although in some areas, college staff offer vocational, technical and professional courses in schools.

In theory, to be consistent with the aspirations of CfE, Scotland’s qualification system was intended to be flexible and responsive, offering a wide range of options to support learners in whatever pathway matched their aspirations. Traditional boundaries between academic and vocational study would be blurred as would the line between age and stage. For example, within the Senior Phase, it would not matter if a learner achieved N5 at 16, 17 or 18, what would matter would be the profile of qualifications achieved by the end of the Senior Phase. In practice, the experience of qualifications during the Senior Phase was reported to be very different from the intentions of its designers.

Learners achieve in Scotland in many ways that go beyond what is currently recognised by the formal qualification system. Many learners engage in a wide range of experiences in schools, colleges or in their local communities. These provide young people with opportunities to demonstrate wider attributes, e.g., attitudes, competences, dispositions and skills. Different opportunities are available in different parts of the country but there are numerous examples. These include experiences where young people can achieve an award, e.g., The Duke of Edinburgh’s Award, The John Muir Award, The Caritas Award and Awards Scheme Development Accreditation Network (ASDAN) programmes, Awards in STEM Leadership (Scottish Schools Educational Research Centre, SSERC), The Prince’s Trust, Young Enterprise Scotland Company Award. Not all awards exist within the SCQF framework, but they are valued by students, parents, further and higher education and employers.

3. The Context for the Review

In October 2021, the then Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills in Scotland, Shirley-Anne Somerville MSP, announced an Independent Review of Qualifications and



Assessment, which I was asked to lead supported by a Secretariat comprising a small team of civil servants.

The Independent Review was established for four main reasons. First, in common with many countries internationally, Scottish Government recognised that the pace of change in society was ever increasing. It was intended that the Review should look to the future to consider whether the current qualifications and assessment system was likely to remain fit for a potentially very different future. Second, Scotland's existing qualification system had struggled in the COVID-19 pandemic. As previously stated, significant numbers of students in Scotland take National Qualifications. Many National Qualifications include examinations in three consecutive years (N5, Higher and Advanced Higher). Examinations, therefore, are taken by large numbers of students in examination halls and during COVID, Public Health restrictions made this impossible. This led to the cancellation of examinations in two consecutive years (2020 and 2021). Alternative approaches to National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications had to be designed at very short notice. Teachers were asked to submit their estimates of student results to the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). To ensure that students' results obtained during the pandemic were perceived to have credibility, in common with many other examination boards, the SQA sought to moderate teachers' professional judgements. As a result, when students received their results, some were different from those expected by the students. These initial results from the 2020 qualifications were challenged by learners, parents and teachers (Priestley et al., 2020) and there was widespread public concern about fairness and perceptions of inequity (Hayward et al., 2023). The Minister for Education overturned the results issued by the SQA, and students received results based on their best performance; either the results as judged by their teachers or the SQA moderated results. Third, two OECD reports (OECD, 2021; Stobart, 2021), commissioned to review progress in CfE had identified a need for change in the Senior Phase. Fourthly, the OECD findings reflected longer-term concerns within Scotland about a disconnect between the intentions of the CfE and qualifications as they were being experienced by learners. A full account of the four drivers for the Review can be found in the report of the Independent Review, "It's Our Future" (IRQA, 2023).

Aspects of the landscape for qualifications in Scotland had been subject to regular review and amendment. McVittie (2008) provides a short history of assessment development in Scotland that summarised reviews of school qualifications undertaken since the 1970s. The report identifies common themes emerging from successive reforms. Each approach sought to address a challenge in the Education system, e.g., Standard Grade qualifications were introduced in the 1980s to ensure that all learners had access to qualifications. The 16-18 Action Plan sought to address the relationship between academic and vocational qualifications to promote parity of esteem and the challenge of what is commonly described as the "two-term dash". Each year of the Senior Phase in Scotland has three terms. Teachers commonly report that they spend two terms supporting learning and one term practising for examinations. Thus, study, in particular towards Higher level, is perceived to be constrained by consecutive years of high stakes assessment. However, throughout all the changes to qualifications in Scotland, since 1888 the Higher has remained as "the gold standard". Although the context for qualifications had evolved over time, many of the fundamental issues raised by McVittie in 2008, remained concerns in the evidence gathered for the Independent Review in 2023.

National Qualification systems have a major impact on education systems, on the learning and teaching experiences in schools and in classrooms. This is particularly true where systems are examination based and learner experiences are often dominated by rehearsal, practising to respond to that which can be measured by an examination. They are also



notoriously difficult to change (Young, 2009). The high stakes that they have for learners, parents, schools and wider society make even small changes seem risky and the higher the stakes, the more risk averse people, governments and teachers, are likely to be. Stobart (2021) warns,

Assessment systems usually change gradually. The brake on any radical change may, in part, result from a social reluctance to change an established system. When a system has been in place for generations, parents, policy makers and teachers are familiar with it and value it - even when it may no longer be fit-for-purpose. (p. 30)

Isaac and Gorgen (2018) recognising the challenge of changing national qualification systems, establish three pre-conditions for change. There must be dissatisfaction with the current model. There must be an alternative, agreed upon, model that is a better fit. And those supporting the new approach must outnumber or outweigh those supporting the current model. The Independent Review was designed to address these pre-conditions. However, Isaac and Gorgen (2018) warn that such is the power of traditional assessment systems that even if pre-conditions are met, significant change may not take place. Minor adaptations to existing systems are more common.

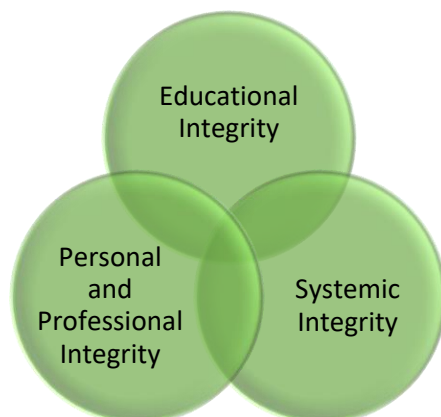
4. The Theoretical Frame for The Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment

The genesis for the design of the approach taken to the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment emerged from the Isaac and Gorgen (2018) pre-conditions. In Scotland, there was significant evidence of the first pre-condition, dissatisfaction with the current assessment model. To meet the second and third pre-conditions, i.e., to find sufficient agreement for an alternative model to satisfy Isaac & Gorgens' (2018) condition that those supporting the model should outweigh those supporting the current model, the review design drew on the Integrity Model of Change (Hayward & Spencer, 2010). This model suggests that for any change in policy to become deeply embedded and sustainable in practice, planning for change must be designed around three overlapping and interacting areas: Educational Integrity, Personal and Professional Integrity and Systemic Integrity. At the heart of the diagram (Figure 1), where the three circles of the Venn diagram intersect, is change likely to be embedded and sustainable. This model was developed originally from empirical data in Scotland from the Assessment is for Learning Programme, a research informed, collaboratively developed policy programme seen to be highly successful in its impact on practice at scale (Hutchinson & Young, 2011).



Figure 1

The Integrity model for change (Hayward & Spencer, 2010)



First, the design of the change process should address the *Educational Integrity* of the endeavour, the moral purpose of the proposed change. In education that would imply that change would lead to better educational opportunities and better life chances for every learner. Second, designing for *Personal and Professional Integrity* means creating space for each individual to make a personal connection with the aims of the change and having their contribution recognised as central to its success. Everyone who has a role to play in making the innovation successful should be involved in its design and development, recognising and valuing one another's crucial role. Finally, change that is sustainable must be embedded in system practices. To have *Systemic Integrity*, the design of the process of change must promote alignment across the various parts of the system in support of the reform. In any reform of qualifications, learners, parents and carers, government, national agencies, professional associations, local communities, teachers, education providers, colleges, employers and universities, all have to be actively involved in the change process if that reform is to be successful.

4.1 Educational Integrity and the Three Phases of the Independent Review

To help establish the Educational Integrity, the Review was undertaken in three interconnected phases, developing a shared vision for the future of qualifications and assessment, exploring what the vision might look like in practice, sense checking the proposed model and identifying implications for practice.

The Review began by working with learners - what was their vision for the future of qualifications? Scotland has enshrined into law the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and is committed to learners being at the heart of decision making. To develop a possible Vision and Principles for the future of Qualifications and Assessment in Scotland. Colleagues from the Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP) and from the Children's Parliament worked with members of the Review team to develop a draft statement as the starting point for the Review. The focus on Educational Integrity was sustained through three phases of the Review process. The range of participants involved in this process and how the process was carried out will be described in the next section of this paper. The first Review phase sought views on the draft Vision and Principles. The feedback from those involved was analysed independently (Bórquez Sanchez, 2022) and



used to revise the Vision statement and the Principles. The vision for the future of qualifications and assessment was agreed to be:

An inclusive and highly regarded Qualifications and Assessment system that inspires learning, values the diverse achievements of every learner in Scotland and supports all learners into the next phase of their lives, socially, culturally and economically. (IRQA, 2023, p. 58)

The second phase of the Review used the Vision and Principles as the touchstone against which various parameters for a future model for qualifications in Scotland could be considered. Views were sought on a range of issues, for example,

- the range of evidence - should qualifications comprise evidence of learners' achievements on part of the CfE curriculum, i.e., successful learners, or should evidence reflect the broader curriculum, i.e., the other three capacities of CfE, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens;
- the balance between internal assessment evidence from schools and colleges and external assessment;
- the use of technology to enable new approaches to assessment and qualifications and as a means of recording achievements.

Responses to the second phase were again independently analysed (The Lines Between, 2023) and the evidence, combined with that obtained from the Independent Review Group (IRG)² and the Community Collaborative Groups (CCGs)² was used to inform a possible future model for qualifications and assessment. This draft model became the focus for discussion in the third phase of the Review.

The third phase of the Review sought to sense check the draft model. Did the model proposed reflect the views expressed by a majority of those who responded to Phase Two of the Review? Respondents were invited to consider the extent to which the model was consistent with the agreed Vision and Principles. They were also invited to identify what practical steps would be required if the draft model, or an adapted version of it, were to be successfully enacted. The initial analysis was undertaken by an independent company, Progressive Partnerships (2023). However, responding to a request for an extra time for teachers to respond to the consultation meant that later responses had to be analysed by the Review Secretariat using the framework developed by Progressive Partnerships.

As a further attempt to sense check ideas, the Review investigated qualification practices in countries with curricular aspirations similar to Scotland. The task was undertaken in two parts. The first analysed four existing international comparative reviews of education systems:

- Stobart's "Upper-secondary education student assessment in Scotland" (2021);
- SQA's "Comparative study of organisational structures in high performing jurisdictions and how they support successful assessment, curriculum, and qualifications" (2023);
- O'Donnell's report for the National Council for Curriculum Ireland "Upper Secondary Education in Nine Jurisdictions" (2018);
- Masters' "Review of High Performing Countries" (2022).

² The roles of these groups are discussed in 4.2 Personal and Professional Integrity.



As the second part of the task, informal meetings were held with individuals currently working in eight of the jurisdictions where specific practices were of particular interest to potential developments in Scotland. For example, in Canada where teacher assessment played a major role in high stakes assessment and where learner service was part of their system; in New Zealand where a National Certificate of Educational Achievement had been developed; or in Norway, where the number of examinations taken by any student is limited using an examination lottery. The purpose of these meetings was to go beyond evidence in policy statements and to have opportunities to explore practices that had developed in response to policy decisions.

Thus, the Independent Review sought to be both principled and practical. The Vision and Principles and the methodology of engagement provided a principled approach to the design and development of the review of qualifications and assessment. The review of practices in wider contexts focused on practicalities, ensuring that any innovative recommendation contained in the final report was already in practice in at least one other country.

The evidence from the three phases of the Review was used to construct the final report, “It’s Our Future” (IRQA, 2023) to the Scottish Government.

4.2 Personal and Professional Integrity: co-constructing informed policy

The second feature of the design of the Review within the Integrity Model of Change was people focused; to consider how everyone with a role to play in making the innovation a success should be involved in its design and development, i.e., for the reform to have personal and professional integrity.

A matrix of participation was developed. One axis of the matrix included three groups of participants whose involvement was central to the success of any changes to qualifications in Scotland.

- Those who experience qualifications; learners and, as appropriate, parents or carers;
- Those who design, develop and offer qualifications; educational professionals, including teachers and lecturers, school and college leaders and local and national policy-makers;
- Those who use qualifications – colleges, employers and universities.

To ensure that the work of the Review was informed by research, the other matrix axis comprised research-based groups of national and international experts. Five groups offered advice on aspects key to the work of the Review:

- Equity: proposals should include every learner;
- Curriculum, Assessment and Qualifications and how to promote strong alignment;
- Qualifications and Assessment: leading edge thinking
- Change Processes: international evidence to inform recommendations to support the process of change;
- Policy Alignment: In addition to the Review of Qualifications and Assessment, several other reviews on aspects of reform in Scottish Education had recently been



commissioned. This fifth group sought to ensure that the review of qualifications aligned with the wider reform process.

Individuals from all parts of the matrix were invited to work collaboratively as members of the Independent Review Group (IRG). This group had responsibility for the development of the Review.

Members were invited to join the IRG, not to represent their own organisations, but as someone whose task was to link to their wider community. In bringing together people from within their community, IRG members were asked to include those who were commonly not part of policy development, e.g., young people who were care experienced. These groups were called Community Collaborative Groups (CCG). The relationship between IRG and CCGs was iterative. Ideas considered in IRG were discussed with CCG members and evidence and insights from the CCGs was brought back to the monthly IRG meetings to form part of the wider evidence gathering process. The task was for each CCG to work through the three phases of the Review, informing and reflecting on ideas with the IRG.

IRG members worked with 13 core CCGs and several allied discussion groups. For example, within IRG, there were four groups from professional practice. One focused on the profession, whose CCG included teacher professional organisations and members who worked with learners from a wide range of communities and had specialist expertise in, for example, race, socioeconomic disadvantage, carers and able pupils. A second engaged directly with classroom teachers, a third engaged with school leaders and a fourth with college principals.

The number of CCGs increased during the Review. For example, in the original design, it had been intended that there would be one CCG for employers. However, during the Review, it became clear that one CCG could not reflect the very disparate needs of employers. The engagement with employers was extended to three CCGs; one for national and international employers, a second for public and third sector employers and one for small and medium employers (SMEs).

The CCG model was more challenging in some communities. For example, despite the best efforts of parental groups, it was difficult to engage a wide range of parents consistently over the course of the Review.

In addition to the IRG and related CCGs, a range of approaches was introduced to extend the reach of the Review. Attempts were made to engage with every school and college in the country in the three phases of the Review. Materials, e.g., interactive materials including video introductions were distributed with a request to engage all teachers and college lecturers in the process. There was a public consultation during Phase Two of the Review. The extent to which these approaches were effective will be discussed later in this paper.

4.3 Systemic Integrity: promoting sustainable change

The third aspect of the Review design sought to identify where the practices of different parts of the education landscape should align to support ideas emerging from the review. Systemic Integrity is crucial to the success of any process of reform. Like the cogs and wheels of a traditional watch, if any one of the cogs or wheels jams, the watch no longer functions. If qualifications are not valued by colleges and universities and used as the basis



of entry decisions, their value to learners and parents will be reduced. If employers do not believe that the evidence from any revision to qualifications will provide them with better evidence on which to base their decisions about who to invite for interview, their currency will decline. If qualification evidence is used for purposes of accountability, then, if a government focuses only on certain qualifications, these qualifications will be perceived to be of greater value. Similarly, if school inspectors focus only on some achievements of some learners, that focus will be reflected in the day-to-day actions of schools and colleges. All parts of the system must work together in support of agreed policy.

As part of the Independent Review, in addition to ensuring that all key groups were involved in the IRG and the CCGs, meetings were held with politicians across political parties, wider groups and organisations (N=58). A number of visits to schools was also undertaken (N=20). Presentations were also made at a range of events targeted at different communities, from local authorities and school leaders to voluntary organisations and awarding bodies. The central purpose of these meetings and visits was to engage as many people as possible within communities in the development of thinking, recognising the importance of each community in shaping practice.

5. The Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment: The Genesis of the Scottish Diploma of Achievement

More than 400 individuals engaged in detailed discussions through the three phases of the Review in the IRG and the CCGs. More than 700 responses were submitted to the public consultation. Detailed findings can be found in the report (IRQA, 2023).

In summary, there was almost universal agreement on the need for change to qualifications and assessment in the Senior Phase (this was true across IRG/CCG discussions, responses to the public consultation including schools and colleges). There were several broad areas of agreement but within each area different interpretations of implications for practice. The broad areas where there was general agreement included:

- Subjects or curricular areas should remain an important part of qualifications.
- Recognition of achievement should go beyond individual subjects/curricular areas. For example, learners should have opportunities to demonstrate skills using knowledge from across subjects/curricular areas in real life contexts.
- Learners should have broader evidence of their achievements recognised, socially, culturally and economically.
- Explore a “graduation certificate” for every learner to allow credit to be built bringing together different forms of learning.
- Integrate “academic” and “vocational” (technical and professional) qualifications using the SCQF framework.
- Qualifications should allow for personalisation to reflect the individuality of learners.
- A digital learning profile would allow evidence to be effectively gathered and would transition beyond school (lifelong learning).

However, many of the most powerful messages related to the process of change. The degree of success of any change was perceived to depend significantly on the extent to



which there was system-wide support. Change could not be regarded as resource neutral. Time for professional engagement would be crucial as would a clear and phased plan, a pathway to implementation linked to the level of resource available. Since success in changes to qualifications was recognised to depend on support from learners and parents, colleges, universities and employers as much as from the profession, a comprehensive communication strategy would be required. This would be long term. Finally, feedback identified systems and structures where change would be required to ensure that practices were aligned with the aspirations of reformed qualifications. These included, Initial Teacher Education, School Inspection (HMiE), the General Teaching Council, data measures (Insight) and leadership.

Building on the feedback, the Review proposed that Scotland should move towards a graduation certificate, a baccalaureate type qualification, called a Scottish Diploma of Achievement, that would reflect more of the curriculum. A recent review of the framework for CfE had led to a “refreshed narrative”. Several respondents suggested that the four contexts for learning as presented in the refreshed narrative for CfE would offer a better framework for qualifications and assessment. (Scottish Government, 2019) The refreshed narrative was used as the starting point. The proposed reformed qualification would have three dimensions.

Figure 2
CfE refreshed Narrative

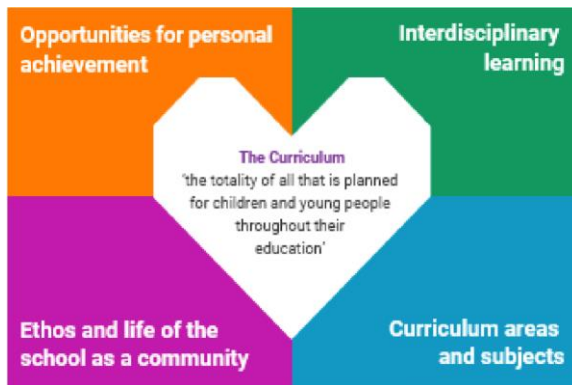


Figure 3
The Scottish Diploma of Achievement



- Programmes of Learning:

First, achievements in *curriculum areas and subjects* in the CfE refreshed narrative (academic, technical, vocational and professional achievements) would be included in the learner’s Programme of Learning. This aspect would remain largely consistent with current qualifications. Recommendations would be made to address previously identified problems.

- Project Learning:

Second, reflecting the *interdisciplinary learning* quadrant of the refreshed narrative, within the Project Learning dimension of the Scottish Diploma of Achievement, learners would have opportunities to work collaboratively to apply the knowledge and skills from their Programme of Learning to tackle a global or local challenge. Different levels of challenge in Project Learning would be recognised using the Scottish Credit and Qualifications



Framework levels 1-7 and assessment would meet or not meet criteria. Achievement would not be graded.

- Personal Pathway:

The third dimension of the Scottish Diploma of Achievement, the Personal Pathway, brings together the final two areas of the refreshed narrative, *opportunities for personal development* and the *ethos and life of the school as a community*. The Personal Pathway should encourage and celebrate the interests, learning, skills and achievements of every learner. It should aim to include social, cultural, economic and well-being aspects; experiences learners have had and contributions they have made. The focus of the Personal Pathway is not on the number of experiences, but on what an individual has learned through experiences.

All learners would have a digital profile to allow them to record achievements in Programmes of Learning, Project Learning and Personal Pathway. The profile would be owned by the learner. The Qualifications Body (SQA) would regulate the information about achievements in Programmes of Learning and Project Learning. Evidence in the Personal Pathway would be owned by the learner in a private digital space. Evidence would be validated but not examined or graded. When applying for college or university entrance or employment, a learner would be able to select what they wish to make public using evidence in their Personal Pathway.

This draft model was used in the third phase consultation, where communities were invited to consider if the proposed model for the Scottish Diploma of Achievement was or was not consistent with the agreed Vision statement and if the feedback from phase two of the consultation had been interpreted accurately. Seeking consensus is a common term in policy contexts but, no matter the model of engagement used, if consensus means that everyone is in agreement, then in an area as contentious as education, it is an illusion. The purpose of the third phase was to establish whether there was broad agreement in principle to the proposal. Beyond that, the review sought feedback to revise and to improve the proposal. The analysis of feedback raised issues about the nature of the proposal for a different approach to qualifications in Scotland. It also raised issues about the process.

Members of the IRG and the CCGs welcomed the Diploma approach. The Learner CCG was particularly enthusiastic. Many of the respondents in the School and College Survey also welcomed the proposals. They argued, for example, that the Diploma would showcase a wider range of learners' achievements and would offer a more rounded picture for them, their future employers and for entry to further and higher education. The Diploma approach would be inclusive, reflecting the achievements of every student. Although the idea of a more broadly based approach to qualifications was welcomed by many, others expressed concerns, e.g., what the implications of ideas might mean for practice and whether changes to qualifications might lead to greater inequity. Concerns were expressed about equity, from the CCG whose particular focus this was but also from wider communities. Three issues were of particular concern; teacher assessment and teacher bias, the impact of removing external assessment from N5 qualifications and the potential for the Personal Pathway to advantage families able to fund activities not available to some learners.

The CCG discussions on Project Learning component were mainly positive, with learners being especially enthusiastic. Benefits identified included opportunities for learners to develop skills for adult life, further and higher education and employment. Further, it was suggested that working individually or collaboratively on a project of significance to



learners could improve motivation, providing opportunities to explore areas of interest and to apply their learning in a meaningful context.

Interesting differences emerged from the responses of different groups. For example, responses from the CCGs tended to be more positive than responses from the School and College Survey. This might have been anticipated since the profile of the CCGs differed to the School and College Survey. Most survey responses received were from secondary school teachers, many of whom indicated a more general lack of trust in the education system. Teachers, it was argued, would be expected to change practice without support, no matter what assurances were given. They also raised practical concerns, e.g., the potential burden of moderation (how standards could be shared across the country), how timetables would be managed, who would teach project learning. CCG responses included a far broader range of stakeholders. They included teacher groups but also groups of learners, parents and carers, universities and colleges academics and admissions' officers, local authority directors of education, college quality managers, employers (national and international, public and small and medium enterprises), researchers and policy professionals. The method of engagement was also different. CCG members had been involved throughout the process working with their IRG member and had opportunities to debate issues during each of the three phases. It was unclear how many of the survey respondents had completed the third phase of the survey without having engaged in the first two phases. The data would suggest that to have been the case, as there were many more respondents to the third phase survey than to the surveys from phases one and two. It was also unclear whether those responding to the survey had had opportunities to discuss the model in any depth.

The practical issues raised provided extremely helpful feedback for the Review. First, they identified practical actions that would be required if ideas were to become desirable practices. The feedback also pinpointed areas of particular concern to different communities and why tensions existed. For example, concern amongst learners that the Personal Pathway should be owned by them and concern amongst employers that information contained within the Personal Pathway should be dependable. Second, the feedback was helpful to national groups who were able to target areas of particular concern. For example, Education Scotland, the national agency responsible for quality and improvement, was able to share concerns with a timetabling group they had established, and issues related to project learning with their interdisciplinary learning group. The SQA, the national qualifications body, could reflect on the feedback and implications for any shift in the balance between internal and external assessment in qualifications and explore the potential for modular learning. For the Independent Review, feedback was used to inform and to refine recommendations to Government in the final report (IRQA, 2023).

There were, however, issues that were less easily resolved. The initial design of the review included an attempt to engage every teacher in Scotland in the three phases of consultation. Materials, including videos, PowerPoints and briefing papers were developed with the intention that they would be used to stimulate discussion amongst all teachers. However, despite using a range of strategies to engage schools and colleges, levels of engagement were uneven. Some schools and colleges involved all or most teachers/lecturers, some a more limited number of teachers/lecturers (volunteers or a group selected by Headteachers/College Principals), other schools and colleges did not engage, some were unaware that these opportunities existed or were not able to find time within the consultation window. The failure to engage all teachers/lecturers in the review as it developed without doubt led to misunderstandings and feelings of alienation amongst those who felt that their views had not been considered. It was clear that Scotland had no



existing model to engage all teachers in policy development, yet it was equally clear that not having such a model would be likely to create problems later in the policy process.

6. The Report of the Independent Review

The final report of the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment was submitted to the new Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, Jenny Gulruth MSP, in June 2023. The title, “It’s Our Future”, was a quotation from a learner frustrated that all too often young people feel that they have little say in educational issues that really matter to them. Ensuring that qualifications support learners to thrive socially, culturally and economically is an issue for all of society and for all the communities who were part of the Independent Review. It is our collective future.

“It’s Our Future” (2023) is the report from the Independent Review Group. It sets the context for the review and makes the process and the evidence emerging for the three phases of the explicit. It attempts to show how feedback influenced design and led to the 26 recommendations for the future of qualifications and assessment in Scotland.

The recommendations can be clustered around the three areas of the Integrity Model for Change. To have Educational Integrity, qualifications and assessment must be fit for the future. In Scotland, a society striving to build greater equity, qualifications in Scotland must recognise every learner’s achievements, from the learner with the most severe and complex learning difficulties to the learner with greatest achievements. To be qualified for the future, learners continue to need school subjects and learning programmes in colleges. These are crucial building blocks. However, increasingly learners, employers, colleges and universities recognise the importance of meta-skills, “timeless, higher-order skills that create adaptive learners and promote success in whatever context the future brings” (SDS, n.d., n.p.). If these are skills that future learners need to thrive, then qualifications should reflect learners’ progressive achievements. Seeing purpose in education is a crucial part of motivating learners and qualifications, often seen as a force that reduces the curriculum to that which can easily be measured and encourages repetitive practice, could equally become a force to drive relevance and to build learner enthusiasm. Qualifications that promote learners to be qualified for life, should also be more personalised, recognizing more of what matters for a citizen to be educated – socially, culturally, and economically. Concerns about the relationship between inclusion of a Personal Pathway as part of qualifications and inequity are real. Discussions around the Personal Pathway shone a light on existing inequity and led to deeper discussion in IRG about what it means to be educated in Scotland and what should be regarded as entitlements. The inclusion of a Personal Pathway within qualifications, one that focuses on learning from experiences rather than counting the number of experiences, is a stimulus to ensure that no learner in Scotland is excluded from a wider interpretation of what matters in education.

A further set of recommendations focused on Personal and Professional Integrity; how change should take place. First, the need to be clear and consistent about what reform of qualifications is setting out to achieve (as articulated in the vision and principles) and for that to be a touchstone over time against which emerging practice should be considered and re-aligned as appropriate. To remain relevant, qualifications cannot be static. They must be continually under review. Second, there are implications for the timing of change. Traditional planning with set deadlines for what is often described as implementation. This timeline may bring comfort to those who create the plan, but real change is far more



complex. It is important to have a plan with short-, medium- and longer-term priorities, but the pace of change should be linked realistically to the level of resource available. Pace can be reviewed as available resource levels increase or decrease but trying to drive pace without consideration of resource implications will be likely to drive a culture that is seen to conform rather than one where meaningful change takes place. Third, innovation has to be personalised. Not every teacher in every school will develop in the same way at the same time and plans have to acknowledge that. Finally, meaningful change must be collaborative. However imperfect the model upon which this review was based, it engendered levels of commitment across communities essential to reform in any national qualification and assessment system. The opening pages of the report contain public statements of that commitment from across the communities involved. However, for that commitment to be sustained, engagement must continue. Co-construction should no longer be a design strategy, but the essence of how we work in education.

The final set of recommendations relate to the system, Systemic Integrity. The ways in which the wider education system should respond to support the reform of qualifications and assessment. These include the need for education in Scotland to develop a reform narrative that integrates different policy initiatives. In addition, cultural change must be led by example in the practices of national and local policy makers and by national agencies. Each individual, each community in education has expertise needed for successful reform. For change to be real and sustainable, everyone has to change. For example, HMiE (school inspectors) have to amend procedures to align with the new aspirations for qualifications and assessment. Initial Teacher Education has to prepare students for new qualifications and assessment practices. Finally, qualifications and assessment do not exist in a vacuum. The Independent Review highlighted where wider change would be necessary to support the introduction of a better qualifications and assessment system. For example, the need to review the curriculum to ensure clear progression for learners from 3 to 18 and to improve the articulation of the relationship between knowledge and skills. It would also be important to build better understandings of standards across the profession. Finally, to avoid the current washback effects of accountability, current approaches to data collection should be revisited. The report proposes consideration of a national survey approach. It is interesting to note that this strategy is under consideration in Wales.

One recommendation stands out from the others. The need to take decisive action on Artificial Intelligence. The Review began before the emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the form of CHAT-GPT. There is a chapter in the report reflecting on potential implications. However, perhaps more importantly, AI developments signal the radical change coming to society. The speed of the impact of CHAT-GPT highlights the real challenge for education systems. Responding to societal change at speed for all of us is uncharted territory.

The findings of the Independent Review sit currently with the Cabinet Secretary. The Report has stimulated thinking across Scotland. It has been discussed in communities across the country, has been debated in education committees and in parliament and has been the subject of much media attention. It is expected that there will be a response from Government later in 2024.

A review of the kind described in this article is not for the faint hearted but it represents an attempt to avoid a situation where 'Culture eats strategy for breakfast' or 'transformation for lunch' (Guley & Resnick, 2019, p. 62). The extensive consultations, the inclusion of groups from across society with very different understandings of qualifications and assessment led to demanding and, at times, contentious meetings. However, the process



led to a position where there was broad consensus that has been sustained in the year since publication.

The review began with young people and, therefore, it seems appropriate to demonstrate that support using a quotation from one of the Members of the Scottish Youth Parliament who was a member of the IRG and led the Young People’s Community Collaborative Group.

Together, along with our community collaborative groups, we have spent a year working on the proposed models for change and the new Scottish Diploma of Achievement; a model which I truly believe will keep the UNCRC at its heart as it supports the young people of the future on their own learner journeys. It’s vital, however, that opportunities for widespread collaboration and youth involvement like this aren’t a one-off chance but rather the new norm for reforms in Scotland. (Beinn Grant, MYSP, CCG, Young People)

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