SUPPORTING LIFELONG LEARNING
THE NEW INTEGRATED SCOTTISH QUALIFICATIONS SYSTEM

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Index: Lifelong learning, Vocational Qualifications, Outcome-based units; National Qualifications Framework; Scottish Qualifications Certificate

Abstract: The new National Qualifications system in Scotland represents the coming together of the previous academic and vocational qualifications systems in schools and colleges. The new qualifications are based on a single curriculum, assessment, quality assurance and certification system covering all subjects from Chemistry to Care and English to Engineering. The new modular qualifications are built up of outcome-based units.

The launch of the new qualifications has been accompanied by the launch of the Scottish Qualifications Certificate. This is a cumulative, computer-based certificate which will show success in every unit and programme which a learner achieves.

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2000, in the very week of this important IVETA conference, a very significant event will take place in Scotland. The first large-scale issue of a new kind of certificate will take place to recognise students' success in the new National Qualifications in Scotland.

Before continuing to describe this system, it may be useful to draw your attention to Appendix 1 which contains definitions of some of the general terms used in this paper since there can be considerable variation in definition of terminology between countries operating qualifications systems.

New National Qualifications

The significance of our new National Qualifications for the theme of the IVETA conference arises in three ways.

Firstly, the new National Qualifications system in Scotland represents the coming together of the previous academic and vocational qualifications systems in schools and colleges.

The reform is based on a system that has been developing since the early 1980's aimed at raising the quality and quantity of education and training provision. The model has the following characteristics. It is:

- Coherent – providing clear progression routes between qualifications by the development of an integrated national framework of qualifications

- Responsive – the modular (also called 'unitised') approach ensures the content of the learning is relatively quick and easy to adapt to changing needs

- Interactive – allowing for more learner-centred approaches to learning including distance and IT-based learning

- Flexible – allowing flexibility of entry to qualifications and flexibility with pace and place of learning
- Credit-based – providing credit for prior learning and for partial success by certification of individual units
- Open and fair – the standards required for success in a qualification are specified in advance and available publicly
- Focused on positive achievement – the assessment focuses on what a learner can do

The new National Qualifications have been developed to meet the needs of increasing numbers of young people who are staying on in education and training beyond the compulsory school leaving age of 16. Therefore new subjects and new levels have been introduced so that everyone has relevant and challenging, but achievable. courses available to them. The new qualifications are based on a single curriculum, assessment, quality assurance and certification system covering all subjects from Chemistry to Care and English to Engineering. One of the main aims of the new system is to ensure that achievement in vocational and academic subjects has equal value in the eyes of parents, students, further and higher education institutions, and employers.

The new qualifications are built up of outcome-based units which can be studied free-standing or can be combined into certificated programmes. Additional flexibility is built into the system by having design rules that identify selection from a range of optional units in addition to the required compulsory units.

The units provide the publicly available standards against which the students are assessed. We have tried in our new qualifications to combine the advantages of internal and external assessment to ensure a valid, reliable and credible national system. Units are assessed internally by the teacher or lecturer and are not graded. Assessments can be taken when the learner is ready. To ensure that internal assessments achieve the consistent application of national standards, we have developed a national bank of assessment instruments that are available to centres on CD-Rom. On successful completion of a course learners must pass an external assessment that may be an examination or, for vocational subjects, may be a practical project or performance. This external assessment requires the learner to integrate knowledge, understanding and skills from the units that make up the course. This external assessment is devised and marked by SQA and is graded.

There are no age limits or entry requirements for the new qualifications – and their modular nature and wide-ranging catalogue of units means that they can meet all learners' needs. They are designed to link to the more advanced qualifications of colleges and universities and to the qualifications designed to test full employment competence. There are also qualifications within the national qualifications framework for those with learning difficulties. A diagram illustrating the SQA framework of qualifications and how they link to university degrees is provided in Appendix 2 of this paper.

One of the features of the new National Qualifications is their emphasis on 'core skills' – those key competences required by individuals to function effectively in personal, vocational and occupational contexts and as lifelong learners. The skills that have been identified in Scotland as critical for personal development and performance are: communication, numeracy, problem solving, information technology, and working with others. Standards for these core skills have been developed at each of 5 levels of the new National Qualifications system.

The second link with the theme of the Conference is that the launch of the new qualifications has been accompanied by the launch of the Scottish Qualifications Certificate. This is a cumulative, computer-based national certificate produced by SQA which shows success in every unit and programme which a learner achieves. It grows as the learner adds new successes year-by-year and

includes automatic calculation of achievement when the learner has entered for programmes of units (such as diplomas). Success in a programme is also recognised by the issue of a special commemorative certificate. The Scottish Qualifications Certificate is, in effect, a lifelong learning record of success in all the qualifications in the Scottish Qualifications Authority portfolio. The importance of core skills is demonstrated by their being listed separately on the Scottish Qualifications Certificate.

Thirdly, the new qualifications system and the new certificate are being developed to extend ways in which successfully-completed learning can be rewarded. This is responsive to the government's 'inclusion' policy that aims to encourage the disadvantaged back into learning. Initiatives include recognition for smaller "chunks" of learning and quality assessment by SQA of non-certificated training. New link-ups with other organisations such as the broadcasting media are being developed to encourage people to come back into learning and to aim for the achievement of qualifications. A recent example was a link with the BBC to promote the use of the Internet through television programmes and an interactive training CD-Rom.

As another element of flexibility, more responsive forms of assessment, including on-line assessment, are being explored so that assessment is available where and when the learner is ready for it. These are being developed alongside all the exciting developments in on-line teaching and learning. In the next few years we will move increasingly to ICT-based assessments that will be better targeted to individuals and be less time-consuming because they will be adaptive. The system will use the full range of possibilities which smart software and web-based resources offer. This should take us well beyond the computer-based standardised testing that has been used for some years. We are developing ICT-based assessment banks and can envisage the development of software smart enough to vary the values and contexts in standardised types of questions. However, assessment of performance evidence may be slower to be absorbed into the ICT system. Although the use of internet-based video-conferencing can link the assessor and learner who are geographically apart, the challenge is to ensure that we have dealt effectively with the authenticity and security issues. This is critical if we are to retain confidence in the assessment results.

CONCLUSION

We have been actively involved in the reform game for twenty years and we still have many challenges to face. The opportunity to share ideas and experiences at this prestigious international conference is invaluable in shaping ideas for the way ahead.

APPENDIX 1

Definition of Terms

Standard	a set of information which forms the basis of an assessment judgement
Unit or module	a self-standing group of related skills and knowledge – standards - against which an assessment judgement will be made
Qualification	a set of standards which form a package of achievement worthy of formal recognition in a certificate
Learner	any individual engaged in learning, whether in a school, college, university, training organisation, home, workplace or through open, distance or technology-based approaches

Assessment	the process of comparing evidence produced by a learner against a standard
Centre	the organisation responsible for the assessment of the learner's achievements against the standards. Centres can be schools, colleges, universities, training organisations, skills-testing services, workplaces and other appropriate organisations

APPENDIX 2

Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework

Capability			Competence
Masters/Post Grad degree			SVQ 5
Honours degree			
Bachelor degree			
Deg Yr 2		HND	SVQ 4
Deg Yr 1	Adv Higher	HNC	
Higher			SVQ 3
Intermediate 2			SVQ 2
Intermediate 1			SVQ 1
Access 3			
Access 2			
Access 1			

Capability   **Competence**

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