

The Review of the Future of Qualifications and Assessment in Scotland

A Response from the Awards Network

Introduction

The Awards Network was established in Scotland in 2008 as a forum of providers of non-formal learning opportunities for young people, recognised by youth work awards. Our (currently) 37 member organisations and Strategic Partners work together to raise awareness of the range and impact of youth awards and to grow access to the opportunities they provide for recognition and accreditation of young people's personal learning, skills development and achievement.

Our Vision is that 'Young people's non-formal learning youth awards are nationally recognised and equitably valued with formal learning qualifications as evidence of attainment and achievement.'

A HMI Review of Youth Awards in Scotland concluded that: 'youth awards can play a key role in helping young people to be successful, confident, effective and responsible citizens with a greater focus on non-formal, experiential learning and the development of personal and interpersonal skills and competencies.'

Launching the 5th edition of our flagship resource, *Amazing Things* – a guide to youth awards in Scotland, Jamie Hepburn MSP, Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training, acknowledged "*the positive impact that so many young people across Scotland gain from their involvement in youth awards*" and said "*Youth awards complement learning done in the classroom and offer the right recognition at the right time in the right way for many young people.*"

Sharing experience of youth awards as part of the curriculum offer in school, a teacher said "*The value and impact of these Awards is more than we could ever have hoped for. I see that there are two parts to this but both of these parts are interlinked. On the one hand, there is the attainment, recognition and accreditation part.... But for me more importantly in terms of value is the skills developed and opportunities experienced by our young people.*"

Review Response

Q1. Should information be gathered across all four capacities?

Yes.

2. Please consider each of the capacities in turn. What kinds of information should be gathered on learners' progress and achievements in each capacity?

The four Capacities of CfE are not pick and mix options but rather are collectively central to evidencing successful delivery of curriculum outcomes. It should also be understood that Curriculum for Excellence is not confined to school but embraces the totality of the learning

offer to young people from ages 3 to 18. Indeed, this understanding of 'education' is also reflected in the UNCRC Article 29 aims of education which notes that '*Education... goes far beyond formal schooling to embrace the broad range of life experiences and learning processes which enable children, individually and collectively, to develop their personalities, talents and abilities and to live a full and satisfying life within society.*'

To that end, the information gathered must include formal and non-formal learning and achievement within and beyond the school gates. This will encompass extra-curricular activity organised through schools and learning that is independent of school, provided externally through e.g. youth work and community organisations.

The refreshed curriculum narrative also identifies four contexts for the curriculum to include opportunities for personal achievement and interdisciplinary learning. It could be argued that these indeed remain relevant beyond age 18, to a lifelong learning journey.

Assessing progress and achievement within each of the four capacities cannot adequately be approached simply by way of summative assessment through a final exam or project. Rather it requires a formative approach that recognises and tracks a progression continuum, embracing formal and non-formal learning from a multiplicity of contexts and settings. This aligns strongly with the ethos of youth work, which attaches particular importance to the journey rather than just the end destination.

Relevant interdisciplinary learning can be particularly helpful to facilitating progression and achievement across all four Capacities. Capturing progress can perhaps best be achieved through personal profiling that enables and values young people recording progression in personal learning, skills development and achievement throughout their learner journey.

There are numerous examples of how this can be approached. The youth work sector developed *Step It Up - Charting Young People's Progress* (Ted Milburn et al) in 2003. It included a web-based tool providing 'a structure for young people to chart their progress in social and emotional development and show evidence of this.' Incorporating a Plan Do Review process, a personal profile developed through self-assessment is supported by reflective discussion with a youth worker (or teacher). The Prince's Trust's [My Journey](#) resource used by participants on its Achieve programme is of a similar nature, tracking change over time. The recently combined [Youth Work Outcomes and Skills Framework](#) provides another helpful tool to identify skills that can readily transfer across the four Capacities.

Non-formal learning Youth Awards are increasingly being utilised in youth work, school and community settings to recognise and accredit personal learning and achievement. They engage young people in a wide range of interdisciplinary and experiential learning and can provide opportunities to recognise learning and skills gained through other programme offers that are often referred to in schools as 'wider achievement'. Clear links can be made across all four Capacities through programmes that engage young people in volunteering, campaigning, youth social action, mentoring, leadership, STEM, sustainability, fundraising, enterprise, arts and creativity and so much more.

The issue is surely less about what information should be gathered, but about putting in place an approach and related capacity to support young people to recognise and record progression and achievement.

3. What, if any, information on learners' achievements obtained outside school and college should be gathered? Please explain your response.

As above, we believe that young people should be encouraged and facilitated to record all their personal learning achievements and to recognise the transferability of the skills developed in the process.

A Report for the UK Social Mobility Commission - [An Unequal Playing Field: Extra-Curricular Activities, Soft Skills and Social Mobility](#) identified '*strong evidence of a link between extracurricular activities and educational outcomes as well as other positive outcomes such as soft especially social skills*'. The Report concludes that access to extra-curricular activities through school, youth work or otherwise, can deliver '*not only positive educational outcomes but also offering the possibility of developing a wider set of skills beyond the qualifications from school*'.

It should be noted that there are potentially significant equity issues around extra-curricular activity, including e.g. affordability and geographic inequality of access. These can to a limited degree be ameliorated through strengthening youth work and school partnership.

In our [video clip recorded for the 2022 Scottish Learning Festival](#), young people make clear that there is more to them than school and exams:

If someone "just looked at a person's exam results... they wouldn't know what type of person they are"

"What I do outside school is as important, if not more important than what I do in school"

These echo similar views of young people in [Insight #SQA Futures](#), Oct 2018:

'Extra-curricular activities should be better recognised by employers, universities, and other opportunity providers, as equally important to academic qualifications.'

'More value needs to be attached to the skills developed through practical volunteering experience and other activities.'

'Young people should be able to present a well-rounded portrait of themselves as an individual to potential employers and universities, reflecting their interests, hobbies, aspirations, and volunteering activity.'

Recording such broader achievement information should not be compulsory, but if the resulting 'product' is valued by educators and employers, it is likely also to be valued by parents and this should support greater engagement by young people than perhaps has been evident in past experience with pupil profiles.

4. Should information be gathered on learners' skills and competencies as part of their senior phase?

Yes

5. If you have views on how this might best be done please provide them here.

As statements from young people in our response to Q3 highlight, young people do wish to be able to present a more rounded picture of themselves to prospective employers and others. We referred earlier to the [Youth Work Outcomes and Skills Framework](#) developed through YouthLink Scotland. This and similar tools (e.g. SDS My World of Work, Careers Standard 'I Can' Statements), can help young people to identify their skills and competences and reflect these in a CV or personal profile.

However, it's not sufficient to simply list skills. Young people need to be able to articulate and demonstrate understanding of their transferability, evidencing how they have been applied and what differences skills they have developed have made to how and why they (inter)act.

Youth awards and other extra-curricular activities, including work experience, can equip young people with 'stories' that may illustrate the application of their skills in different contexts.

6. Please share your thoughts on what a 'better balanced' assessment system would look like. As well as considering the balance between external examination and internal assessment you may also wish to comment on the frequency of examinations.

Young people tell us that they do not want to be defined by exam results alone.

"A young person's achievement shouldn't just be based on their exam results... It should be a collection of everything... like communication skills and team working and all the other things that's done to get there and then you're not just capturing their academic ability. You're also capturing everything else that doesn't fit onto that."

There may be a place for exams, but the current over-emphasis on external exams and assessment is not felt to be compatible with the (draft) Vision and Principles advanced for Qualifications and Assessment in Scotland. Indeed, the focus on exams is not reflective of what young people are likely to encounter in the real world of work that they are supposedly being prepared to enter.

What is more important – qualifications or learning achievement, knowledge or skills? The answer will differ from one young person to another. Reflecting that requires creation of a system that puts the needs of the individual learner at the centre. Measuring 'success' of an individual or a school almost entirely in terms of formal qualifications and grade results cannot be perpetuated in a qualifications and assessment system that is fit for purpose.

The world of work demonstrates that learning progression and achievement by and large does not require formal qualifications and exams. The youth work sector demonstrates that personal learning and skills development can be facilitated through personalised task or project milestones, with progression measured by a combination of self, peer and worker assessment, and achievement recognised by youth awards or certificates. Lockdown demonstrated that pupil achievement could be measured through continuous assessment rather than exams.

A 'better balanced' assessment system will provide a better fit for all learners, many of whom are currently disadvantaged by exams that, for a variety of personal and practical reasons, do not enable them to truly demonstrate their strengths and abilities. It is felt that introducing alternatives to exams as the key assessment method would also serve to enhance parity of esteem between academic and vocational /non-academic pathways and qualifications.

Scotland could perhaps learn from the Finnish experience, where teacher professionalism replaces standardised exams in assessing the progress of pupils. Without the pressure of preparing for exams, the Finnish experience also points to young people having more time to engage in activities that can help them develop wide-ranging and critical life and employability skills.

Moving from a system where exams predominate to one that more fully embraces continuous / alternative assessment will have potentially significant initial resource implications, not least in terms of investment in workforce development to ensure consistency and quality. Having confidence in professional judgement of educators, alongside robust moderation, should enable alternative assessment methods to replace exams.

To be true to CfE, the focus should be on recognising personal learning achievement rather than gaining qualifications. Such is the case already within the youth work sector, where youth awards, badges and other certification are used to recognise non-formal learning achievement, with internal assessment and independent moderation as appropriate.

Whilst a growing number of youth awards are on the SCQF, the majority are not matched to SCQF levels. As Stobart and Muir Reports have noted, achievement of awards such as the Saltire and Duke of Edinburgh Awards should be recognised and celebrated alongside formal qualifications, *'providing evidence of impact of the broader curriculum offered and the achievement of broader activity undertaken within and outwith educational settings.'*

7. Please share your thoughts (advantages/disadvantages) on the idea of introducing an achievement, award or qualification at the end of the BGE.

Some form of recognition of achievement should be available at the end of BGE. However, this should be a component of a system that tracks formal and non-formal learning achievement and skills development throughout the learner journey rather than a stand-alone award or qualification.

A word of caution: A National Enquiry Report, 'Recognising Achievement Literature Review and Model for Managing Recognition Processes' (John Hart et al, Scottish Government Social Research 2010), suggested that *'In practice there tends to be a perceived link between the need to recognise wider achievement and lack of achievement within the formal curriculum. Within the school sector, this can mean that the recorded recognition of wider achievement may be seen as a compensatory award and at worst as a badge of failure.'*

It is clear that the OECD, Stobart and Muir view 'wider achievement' more positively. It is to be hoped that a record of achievement at end of BGE for all pupils will be widely valued.

For those remaining within the formal education system such a record of achievement will be helpful to shaping their Senior Phase pathway.

For early leavers there is a need to ensure that the record of achievement is valued by prospective employers and others, 'telling their story' of learning, skills developed, wider achievements and application within and beyond school as appropriate.

8. Please share your thoughts (advantages/disadvantages) on the idea of introducing a type of leaving certificate at the end of the Senior Phase.

As with our response with respect to BGE, we are supportive of Certificate as the culmination of a record of achievement that tracks progress throughout the learner journey, to include Senior Phase. Incorporating learning, skills and wider achievement within and beyond school rather than just formal academic qualifications, it would enable young people to present a truer reflection of the totality of their educational outcomes across all four Capacities.

Young people agree:

"I think there should be a certificate (on leaving school) that captures all your achievements from school and from all the activities you do outside school. ...It would show a lot more and be more formal as well"

"It gives them (employers, universities) the chance to see you at your fullest potential"

The Certificate must have currency and credibility with key stakeholders, including employers and universities. It cannot be seen as an alternative to exam results, but rather as the principal cumulative record of personal learning, skills and achievement gained from within and beyond school by end of Senior Phase.

Achieving this will require a process of significant culture change, particularly for many in current formal education sectors. Owned by the individual learner and thus relevant to post-school destinations for academically and less-academically minded pupils, all key stakeholders must be involved in its design, including young people and parents.

9. How should Scotland's qualifications and assessment system make best use of digital technologies?

Responding to, and preparing young people for, a digital world, it should be expected that digital becomes the norm, but not to the exclusion of those facing access or other barriers to engagement.

Digital technology can be harnessed to aid recording and assessment and to facilitate development of e-portfolios / profiles. Through e-DofE, other youth award programmes and special interest groups, in addition to experience in school, many young people are already familiar with using systems and platform requiring uploading of text and visual evidence to support recognition of progression, assessment and achievement. Should exams continue, digital offers options to replace written scripts with text and / or visual input.

Consideration must be given to a joined-up approach across all local authorities to recording and tracking achievement, and to investigating and investing in possibilities for interaction with / by external organisations, such as youth work organisations and related award providers.

10. How can we make sure that proposals for a future qualification system will uphold the rights of all learners to demonstrate their achievements?

Adhere to the Vision and Principles. Recognise every learner's achievements and attach equitable value to academic and non-academic achievement.

Scotland is committed to embedding the UNCRC, which, as we note at 1 above, regards education as more than formal schooling. The qualifications and assessment system adopted must accommodate recognition of learning and achievement within and beyond school, whether organised by a school or through another education provider, including the youth work sector.

Adopt a co-design approach and engage learners in system monitoring and review.

Put the learner at the centre. Value the journey and not just the destination.

11. Is there anything else in relation to the reform of qualifications and assessment which is not covered in this consultation which you would like to raise?

The focus of this review is on Senior Phase, but this cannot be addressed in isolation from other elements of the learner journey. We are concerned at the lack of attention given to the place of Insight, which currently disregards achievement prior to Senior Phase and only recognises awards and qualifications on the SCQF.

The Awards Network recognises education as a shared responsibility. We would like to see greater emphasis on securing parity of esteem between formal and non-formal learning, valuing all qualifications, awards and achievements, differing learning styles, assessment, approaches to teaching and educating, and embracing learning and skills developed from a wide variety of experiences. The lack of parity of esteem is reinforced by a points-based Insight system that fails to capture, and hence value, the breadth of every young person's personal learning achievement. It also serves to reinforce marginalisation of youth work and youth awards as a valid educational approach, undermining efforts to foster, and gain from, greater youth work and school partnership.

We would like to see more attention given to celebrating achievement beyond exams. Perhaps a Leaving Certificate will focus minds beyond Results Day exam mania and league tables. It might also have been worthwhile to give more consideration to the purpose of qualifications and assessment beyond meeting the needs of the university sector.

Submitted on behalf of the Awards Network, 13 January 2023, by

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