



SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Education Department
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Dear Sir/Madam

GUIDANCE ON THE APPROPRIATE AGE AND STAGE WHEN YOUNG PEOPLE CAN BE PRESENTED FOR EXTERNALLY ASSESSED QUALIFICATION.

1. I am directed by Scottish Ministers to draw your attention to the attached guidance on the appropriate age and stage when young people can be presented for externally assessed qualification.

Background

2. In March 2004, as part of the National Debate on Education, the Scottish Executive consulted on the future of Age and Stage regulations. As a result of that consultation, the Scottish Executive decided to replace the Age and Stage regulations with guidance. Since then the publication in 2004 of *Ambitious Excellent Schools* has set out the broad agenda within which *A Curriculum for Excellence* will be developed. This has implications for when it will be appropriate for young people to be presented for formal externally assessed qualifications within the National Qualifications framework.

Purpose

3. It is important to note that the abolition of the Age and Stage regulations should not be seen as encouragement to present young people for formal qualifications early. Rather it allows for this option in particular circumstances. This guidance is intended to provide safeguards to protect young people from pressure to be presented for formal qualifications at too early an age. It is also intended

to help education authorities, school managers, and teachers working in partnership to use their professional judgement to decide, in discussion with the young person and his/her parents/carers, when a young person is ready to be presented for a formal qualification.

Publication and Arrangements for Additional Copies

4.. The guidance will be included in the SQA's publication *Conditions and Arrangements for National Qualifications 2005/2006* which will be issued to all schools and colleges in August. The guidance will also be available on the SQA's Website www.sqa.org.uk and the Scottish Executive Website www.scotland.gov.uk. Additional copies can also be obtained by contacting Lyndsey Hair, Scottish Executive Education Department, Qualifications, Assessment & Curriculum Division, Area 2-A, Victoria Quay, Leith, Edinburgh EH6 6QQ Tel: 0131 244 0973, Fax: 0131 244 7001, Email: Lyndsey.Hair@scotland.gsi.gov.uk.



MISS CHRISTINE CARLIN

Qualifications, Assessment and Curriculum Division

Guidance on the appropriate age and stage when young people can be presented for externally assessed qualifications

Background and purpose of this guidance

1. In March 2004, as part of the National Debate on Education, the Scottish Executive consulted on the future of Age and Stage regulations. As a result of that consultation, the Scottish Executive decided to replace the Age and Stage regulations with guidance. Since then the landscape has changed with the publication in 2004 of *Ambitious Excellent Schools* which sets out the broad agenda within which *A Curriculum for Excellence* will be developed. This has implications for when it will be appropriate for young people to be presented for formal externally assessed qualifications within the National Qualifications framework.
2. Abolishing the regulations increases flexibility for schools. Challenge, motivation and choice can, of course, be provided without presenting the young person for a formal qualification. As a general principle, formal certification of each young person's attainment should be limited to that necessary to provide evidence to allow him/her to progress to the next stage of education, training or work.
3. It is important to note that the abolition of the Age and Stage regulations should not be seen as encouragement to present young people for formal qualifications early. Rather it allows for this option in particular circumstances. This guidance is intended to provide safeguards to protect young people from pressure to be presented for formal qualifications at too early an age. It is also intended to help education authorities, school managers, and teachers working in partnership to use their professional judgement to decide, in discussion with the young person and his/her parents/carers, when a young person is ready to be presented for a formal qualification.

Curriculum principles

4. In *Guidance on Flexibility in the Curriculum*, the Scottish Executive suggested that:

Ministers are keen to encourage education authorities to review their current approaches to flexibility and innovation in the curriculum. The intention is to ensure that schools and teachers are in a position to take advantage of the full range of existing flexibility in order that all young people have the opportunity to achieve their full potential

(*Circular 3/2001*, Scottish Executive, 2001)

5. In *A Curriculum for Excellence*, the Scottish Executive sets out the values, purposes and principles which should underpin the 3 – 18 curriculum. Seven principles for curriculum design are set out. Three of the principles are particularly relevant to decisions about when a young person is ready to be presented for a formal qualification:

Challenge and enjoyment

At all stages, learners of all aptitudes and abilities should experience an appropriate level of challenge, to enable each individual to achieve his or her potential.

Progression

Young people should experience continuous progression in their learning from 3 to 18. Young people should be able to progress at a rate which meets their needs and aptitudes, and keep options open so that routes are not closed off too early.

Personalisation and choice

The curriculum should respond to individual needs and support particular aptitudes and talents. It should give each young person increasing opportunities for exercising responsible personal choice as they move through their school career, particularly through the personal learning planning process. There should be safeguards to ensure that choices are soundly based and lead to successful outcomes.

(*A Curriculum for Excellence*, Scottish Executive, 2004)

Principles to guide decisions about when a young person is ready to be presented for a formal qualification

6. The following key principles should guide decisions about when a young person is ready to be presented for a formal qualification.

- ◆ Any decision on when to enter a young person for a qualification must be taken in the best interests of that individual learner, within the context of his/her current success and further potential. It is the interests of the individual, rather than the cohort, which are key. Decisions must take account of the ability and maturity of the young person, relevance of the qualification, and sustainability of progression routes. Consolidation and broadening of learning at a particular stage may often be more appropriate. Also care should be taken to maintain breadth, depth and coherence in the individual's curriculum.
- ◆ It is the school's responsibility to make decisions on how best to meet the needs of the young person within the policy and resources of the school and within the overall policy framework set by the local authority (or, for independent schools, by the Board of Governors or equivalent). It is the responsibility of the local authority to ensure their policies are in keeping with the spirit of this guidance and reflect clearly the key role of teachers in judging the readiness of any young person for particular courses or examinations.
 - In keeping with personal learning planning, the young person and his/her parents/carers should be involved in the decision-making process. Their participation in the process should be based on an understanding of the implications of decisions. This places a duty on the school to provide full information about the possible implications of the decision, including information about the progression routes which will be available during the young person's school career and beyond. The young person and his/her parents/carers should be made aware that similar opportunities may not be available should the young person move to another school.
 - The decision must take account of the professional judgement of the young person's subject and guidance/pastoral care teachers, who should provide advice on the young person's readiness to be presented for a formal qualification in that subject or subjects.
 - Annex A sets out the criteria which HMIE will use, as part of their quality assurance activities, in evaluating the appropriateness of early presentation. School staff may wish to draw on this list of questions in coming to a professional judgement on the appropriateness of early presentation and in discussing relevant issues with parent/carers and the young person concerned.
- ◆ Where the qualification involves a formal examination, special care should be taken to ensure that the young person is mature enough to cope with the demands of that examination. Consideration should be given as to whether internally assessed Unit qualifications would be more appropriate for the young person at that stage. These might be 'banked' and the associated external assessment taken at a later date.
- ◆ Where a school offers opportunities for learners to be presented for formal qualifications in the early stages of secondary education, it should have in place arrangements to ensure that appropriate progression routes are available. These progression routes should enable young people to progress to the next level, or to other qualifications at the same level that build on their previous achievements and extend their learning.
- ◆ Schools should plan progression routes which include possible destinations post-school – the impact of early completion of formal qualifications on entry to further or higher education must be identified, and guidance on this issue provided to young people. This guidance should take account of the implications of candidate maturity and the varying levels of support provided by different types of institutions. It will be especially important to make young people aware of the possible drawbacks of taking single subjects early. For example, many universities currently prefer candidates to have taken a number of subjects at one sitting, although this is subject to potential change and the position should be monitored.

Practical considerations

7. Any proposal to present a young person for a formal qualification early should be considered in light of the particular circumstances of the school concerned. Not all schools may be able to offer the same opportunities for taking exams early. The practical issues which local authorities and schools will want to consider and plan for before making any decisions about early presentation may include the following:

- ◆ Resource issues, including the possible impact on the school timetable, class sizes, staffing, accommodation and CPD (eg the need to support teachers who may be dealing with mixed-age classes);
- ◆ Provision of appropriate progression routes (ensuring the necessary teaching expertise will continue to be available to support progression routes);
- ◆ Wider impacts such as the impact on all learners of mixed-age classes and effects on broader curriculum programmes.

8. It will be necessary to communicate clearly with staff, young people and parents/carers, so that they are aware of the principles and practicalities which place limits on early presentation. The school should have processes in place to allow all relevant parties, including young people, parents/carers, subject teachers and school managers, to contribute to the decision-making process. These processes, including records of discussions, should be open to scrutiny through the normal local authority and/or HMIE quality assurance processes.

Next Steps

9. The implementation of this guidance will be monitored and the guidance itself kept under review and refined in light of emerging practice.

10. *Ambitious, Excellent Schools* sets out the commitment to review Standard Grade and its links with other National Qualifications by 2007. To assist schools in the meantime, guidance will be issued later this year on operating in the existing 'mixed economy' of qualifications. An important aspiration within the review will be to deliver a system which ensures challenge for young people without undue reliance on early presentation.

Scottish Executive Education Department
July 2005

Quality assurance - criteria for self-evaluation and HMIE inspection

A key aspect for authorities, schools and pupils is self-evaluation. To assist with this process, as part of HMIE quality assurance activities, the appropriateness of presenting a young person for qualifications at a stage outside normal expectations will be evaluated against the following criteria:

1. Rationale for the individual(s) concerned

- Is the change likely to lead to clear educational gain for the young person in terms of improved attainment and achievement?
- Is it likely to create high pupil motivation and contribute to high self-esteem and confidence?
- Will it lead to opportunities for further study and progression?
- Are the progression routes sustainable?
- Could challenge and choice for the young person have been provided equally well, without turning to formal qualification?

2. Appropriate consultation involving the young person, his or her parents or carers and the appropriate teachers

- Has there been due consideration of the young person's ability, maturity and readiness?
- Have the parents / carers had the opportunity to discuss the issue with the school and be involved in the decision-making process?
- Have the subject and guidance/pastoral care teachers been able to contribute appropriate views and discuss the decision with the young person?
- Is the impact on pupils being monitored effectively?
- Have the local authority / HMIE access to an appropriately clear record of the process of consultation?

3. The extent to which the young person has gained, both in terms of overall achievement and the learning experience.

- How has he / she coped with being with older learners? Has he / she integrated well?
- To what extent has he / she become a more independent learner / thinker?
- How well has he/she coped with the additional demands of homework / folio production etc?