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Dear Parent/Carer,

Changes to National Qualifications from Session 2017-2018

As you may be aware the Scottish Government has recently made some changes to the way in which young people are assessed in National Qualifications. The most significant change has been the decision to remove mandatory unit assessment from National Qualifications, initially at National 5 level, and in future sessions, at Higher and Advanced Higher level. The purpose of this change is to reduce the amount of assessment undertaken by young people studying National Qualifications and to reduce teacher workload in administering these assessments in order them to focus more on other aspects of teaching and learning.

As a result of this decision to remove mandatory unit assessment, from session 2017/18 onwards, for each National 5 course, the changes have resulted in one or more of the following:

- extension of the existing exam question paper;
- extension/modification of the existing item of coursework;
- a new exam question paper;
- a new item of coursework.

All pupils will either sit a National 4 course, a National 5 course or National 5 units only with the intention to sit the course award the following year.

Implications of this change

Recognising the need for some kind of alternative 'safety net' for pupils, the Scottish Government has announced two measures to reduce the risk of a pupil failing to achieve any qualification at all.

Firstly, the threshold to achieve a Grade D award at National 5 has been extended to include candidates who achieve between 40% and 49% where previously it was 45% or more. Normal SQA grade boundary decisions for each subject still apply.

Secondly, for an interim period only, schools can continue to present pupils for the units that were formerly part of National 5 courses and also for the National 5 course award. By also completing the Added Value Unit, this means that a small number of candidates, identified by each school, could still benefit from the 'safety net' and gain a National 4 award in the subject should they fail the National 5 examination, as pupils have done up until now.

It is Scottish Borders Council's aspiration that all pupils will achieve a qualification in each course studied. However, the Scottish Government has been clear that this fall back should only be used in a very limited number of exceptional circumstances. A teacher's professional judgment will ensure that a pupil is entered at the correct SQA level for the subjects they are currently studying.

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In line with normal practice, faculty principal teachers will confirm to you and your young person the designated presentation level, and whether or not units form part of this presentation approach within each individual subjects. In this way, final decisions can be communicated to parents through tracking reports or a letter home.

As always, please do not hesitate to contact your school should you wish further information about the change in qualifications. Staff in schools will be continuing their development of the modified National 5 courses, while Faculty Heads and Pastoral staff will be regularly reviewing and analysing information about pupils' progress in order to ensure that appropriate presentation levels are discussed with and communicated to you.

Yours faithfully,

Head teacher

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Clarke.', written in a cursive style.

Appendix 1: Summary Questions and Answers

The questions and answers below aim to summarise the situation for parents/carers and pupils.

1. Why have unit assessments been removed as a mandatory part of the National 5 course?

Units have been removed to reduce the assessment burden on pupils and the administrative burden on staff. The aim is also to allow more time for a greater focus on learning and teaching.

2. Are young people still going to receive tests?

Yes. Teachers will continue to assess progress through each course to let pupils know how they are performing and to advise what still needs to be done to reach the required standard.

3. Will this change the level at which my young person is presented?

No. During this interim period, any pupil who is deemed to have the potential to attain at National 5 level will be given the opportunity to do so. For a minority of pupils whom Faculty Heads deem to be on the 'cusp' of an award at National 5 level, and therefore potentially facing the risk of failing the N5 exam and having no award at all, there will be a presentation also for National 5 units and the National 4 Added Value Unit. Successful completion of these will allow the young person to gain a National 4 award should the National 5 examination award be a band 8 or a 9.

4. Will all pupils be presented for the units at National 5 level, as well as the course award?

No. For the majority of pupils, and in the majority of subjects, presentation for National 5 units will be for those pupils deemed to be capable of an award. The extension of the band for Grade D to 40% gives greater surety of gaining an award for those who have been working at National 5 level. In addition, teacher assessment of a pupil's coursework will allow sensible judgements to be made as to the likelihood a pass at National 5 level. It may be the case that, as the session progresses - and for a small number of pupils - Faculty Heads in individual subjects may decide to present pupils for the units as well as the full course award.

5. What would happen if my young person failed the N5 exam but had not been presented for the N5 units?

Initially, your young person would receive no accreditation for their work. However, Faculty Heads in consultation with class teacher would look at your young person's situation and determine whether they had enough evidence to put in a presentation at National 4 level in the subject.