

# National 4 and 5s: Unintended consequences

## FAST FACTS

- The maximum number of N4 or N5s that pupils can study for in S4 varies between 5 and 8 depending on which school a pupil attends.
- Curriculum for Excellence was supposed to broaden pupils' education. Unfortunately, for some it is narrowing it, at least in the senior phase.
- While some local authorities have a council-wide maximum, in other areas, there are variations within the council area.
- Our research highlights the maximum number of exams a pupil can sit in S4, not the average. Some pupils will sit less than the maximum.
- Young people offered fewer exam opportunities are likely to be placed at a disadvantage, whether they are leaving after their exams or continuing to study.
- Now is a time when obstacles need to be removed, not added in improving attainment opportunities.
- Every pupil should have the same opportunity to sit the appropriate number of exams based on their individual ability.
- The opportunity to sit exams should not be restricted by schools setting differing numbers of maximums.

## CONTEXT

Research by Reform Scotland has highlighted a wide variation in the maximum number of National 4 and 5s S4 pupils can sit. Our research does not look at the average number of N4 & 5s actually sat, as there will be variation depending on individual pupils'

prospects of success. But it examines the maximum allowed. This is the maximum number of N4 or N5s that a pupil is able to sit in each school, regardless of their academic ability.

The same Freedom of Information question was submitted to each local authority in Scotland, asking what was the maximum number of Nationals S4 pupils could sit. The question focused on the maximum allowed, not the number actually being sat.

The answers highlighted that while in some schools pupils could sit up to eight exams, similar to the situation under the old Standard Grades, in other schools pupils were restricted to only five – this was regardless of ability or prospects of success.

We are already aware of the attainment gap that exists between the most wealthy and least wealthy areas. This situation means that, in addition, not all pupils are even getting the same opportunity to gain the same number of awards.

This is not an issue about ability, but one of opportunity. An able student at Braes High, for example, will almost certainly end up with fewer N5s than a similarly able student at Bearsden Academy, simply because they are not allowed to sit the same number of exams.

This is likely to adversely affect those who leave a school that allows only 5 or 6 exam sittings at the end of fourth year, as they will probably end up with fewer exam results than they otherwise might if they attended a different state school. For those going on to study Highers, they have a smaller pool of subjects to choose or have to consider more crash Highers.

Either scenario puts the pupil at the school with the lower maximum at a disadvantage.

Now is a time when we need to be removing obstacles and narrowing attainment gaps, not creating more.

The purpose behind the Curriculum for Excellence was to broaden children's education. However, for some, it appears to be narrowing it.

This is not the result of any government policy. Rather, it is the unintended consequence of the failure to plan a smooth articulation from the phase of broad general education into the senior phase.

## BACKGROUND

In 2014, as part of Curriculum for Excellence, the Standard Grade exams system was replaced with National 4 and 5s.

Where Standard Grades were taught over a two year period, National 4 and 5s are studied in S4 only. The intention was to extend the broader education provided in S1 and S2 into S3, with students studying for the new exams in S4 only. Decisions to reduce the number of subjects appear to be based on crude calculations of the available hours of study in S4 only.

However, this is effectively saying that nothing studied in the subject up to the start of S4 counts towards examinable knowledge of the subject. But course work will often build upon work studied in S1-3. Work done in S3 should contribute to later study

The N5 qualification has a formal examination at the end of it, while the N4 qualification relies on continuous assessment.

The aim of the change brought about by the Curriculum for Excellence was to provide a broader education for pupils. However, depending on how the change in examinations is being implemented at different schools it can mean that pupils at some schools are limited to only being able to sit five N4 or N5s in S4, while others can sit eight.

This [parents' guide](#) to the change, produced by the BBC in 2014, highlights the issue of schools allowing pupils to sit a different maximum number of exams:

*"It was commonplace for academic children to study for 8 O Grades and recently most children studied for 7 or 8 Standard Grades. Different schools and local authorities have taken different decisions about how many National 5s to routinely let children study for. These decisions would normally have been taken after consultations with parents..."*

*"...Another part of the thinking is that the important thing is the number of qualifications a youngster has when they leave school - not how old they were when they got them. It's also worth mentioning that qualifications can, in effect, become redundant when a student goes on to study a subject at a more advanced level. For many, O Grades and Standard Grades were just stopping off points on their way to a Higher. Some of the most academically able youngsters have not been studying for National 5s in all subjects this year but have spent S4 working towards the Highers they will sit next year.*

*"One concern some parents have raised is that children who attend schools which give them the chance to study more National 5s in S4 will be at an unfair advantage - especially when it comes to university. However university entry is determined by Higher results and interviews*

*with the candidates. The number of National 5s a candidate sat would not be a factor in deciding whether to offer an applicant a place.*

*“However there is a potential issue for school-leavers and those who don't gain qualifications beyond N5. Employers may be unaware that youngsters at different schools may have been put forward for a different number of qualifications so employers will need to be aware that the number of N5s a candidate has achieved by a particular age cannot automatically be used as a judge of their ability.”*

But why is there such a wide variation in the maximum number of allowed subjects. While previous Reform Scotland research ([A Class Apart](#)) highlighted a variation in the number of contact hours a pupil could receive, even that difference couldn't explain how some schools can manage a timetable to enable the brightest pupils to study for eight exams, while others only manage 5.

It is up to each school or local authority to explain its position. However, we had a look at some school websites to see if there was any indication of how things were being done differently in different schools.

The following extract is from James Gillespie's High School's website (Edinburgh), where the maximum is 8. It is followed by an extract from Braes Academy's website (Falkirk), where the maximum is 5.

#### **James Gillespie's High School, Edinburgh<sup>1</sup>**

**“S3 curriculum** *In S3 and S4 learners specialise further according to choice and aspiration. Some subjects (Maths, English and a Language are compulsory).*

*“In S3, programmes of work are planned around the Experiences and Outcomes of level 4, with some pupils consolidating work at level 3 and most pupils stretching into work at National 4 and 5 levels. Work which will form useful preparation in terms of content, skills and methods of assessment for the Nationals is undertaken as part of level 4 and National 5 level work, but pupils do not undertake assessments for National 4 and 5 qualifications during S3.*

**“Learner Reviews** *In February/March of S3, there will be a learners' review at which stage a planning discussion will be held for those young people for whom 8 subjects is deemed to be inappropriate. This decision will not be confirmed until discussions with parents have taken place and a bespoke curriculum has been agreed.”*

#### **Braes Academy, Falkirk<sup>2</sup>**

*“Pupils work in all 8 curriculum areas, detailed below, progressing through the CfE levels as appropriate. This grounding in all areas of the curriculum in S1 is augmented by the Enhancement course, which give pupils to the opportunity to further develop their Literacy, Numeracy and skills for life, learning and work. Pupils continue with a similar experience in S2 before beginning to personalise their learning in S3, selecting more specific areas of study from each curriculum area. The curriculum areas Mathematics English Sciences Technologies Expressive Arts Health and Wellbeing Social Studies RME*

<sup>1</sup> <http://jamesgillespies.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/JGHS-curriculum-rationale-May-2014.docx>

<sup>2</sup> [http://web.educationlincs.ftbuk.net/\\_site\\_images/cu\\_1356/1722633\\_1.pdf](http://web.educationlincs.ftbuk.net/_site_images/cu_1356/1722633_1.pdf)

*“As pupils begin S4 and the senior phase, they select 5 National Qualifications to study through S4 and S5. The expectation is that most pupils would be presented for a qualification at an appropriate level at the end of S4, before continuing with the subject into S5, leading to presentation at a more advanced level.”*

This seems to suggest that there could be a difference in how S3 is treated. In some areas, pupils pick their choice of up to 8 subjects at the end of S2, which they study over the two years which enables them to sit up to eight exams. In other areas, while eight subjects may be studied in S3, that work doesn't seem to count towards what will be done in S4, and a smaller number of subjects is then chosen to study for exams.

There may be good reasons for the different approaches. However, the restriction being placed on the maximum number of subjects pupils can sit in S4 can only place those pupils at a huge disadvantage.

### **Policy recommendations**

**Every child in Scotland should have the same opportunity to be able to sit the number of exams appropriate for their ability. The most academically able child should be able to sit the same number of exams regardless of which school they attend.**

Of course pupils with different abilities should be able to sit a varying number of exams in S4. However, the decision over the number of exams they sit should be taken by the pupil, in conjunction with their teachers and parents. At the moment that is not the case.

It is clear from the results detailed in the Table that some local authorities leave it up to individual schools to make a decision, while others impose a blanket decision across the council area. A blanket decision means that individual schools and teachers are unable to take account of the differing needs and circumstances of their pupils.

It is ironic and disappointing that a policy about extending broad general education into S3 has actually narrowed the education on offer in S4 for many young people.

The maximum number of National 4 and 5s that can be studied in S4 at each state secondary school in Scotland. All the information below was provided by councils in response to Freedom of Information requests.

Colour code: **Five** / **Six** / **Seven** / **Eight+ or no limit**

Local authority	School	Maximum number of N4 & N5s that can be studied in S4
Aberdeen City  ("In exceptional circumstances, dependent on teachers' professional judgement of the best interests of individual pupils, some pupils may study more than 6")	Aberdeen Grammar School	6
	Bridge of Don Academy	6
	Bucksburn Academy	6
	Cults Academy	6
	Dyce Academy	6
	Harlaw Academy	6
	Hazlehead Academy	6
	Kincorth Academy	6
	Northfield Academy	6
	Oldmachar Academy	6
	St Machar Academy	6
	Torry Academy	5
Aberdeenshire	Aboyne Academy	6 National 5 courses, or more, agreed upon on a case by case basis.
	Alford Academy	6 National 5 courses, or more, agreed upon on a case by case basis.
	Banchory Academy	6 National 5 courses, or more, agreed upon on a case by case basis.
	Banff Academy	6 National 5 courses, or more, agreed upon on a case by case basis.
	Ellon Academy	6 National 5 courses, or more, agreed upon on a case by case basis.
	Fraserburgh Academy	6 National 5 courses, or more, agreed upon on a case by case basis.
	Inveruie Academy	6 National 5 courses, or more, agreed upon on a case by case basis.
	Kemnay Academy	6 National 5 courses, or more, agreed upon on a case by case basis.
	Mackie Academy	6 National 5 courses, or more, agreed upon on a case by case basis.
	Mearns Academy	6 National 5 courses, or more, agreed upon on a case by case basis.
	Meldrum Academy	6 National 5 courses, or more, agreed upon on a case by case basis.
	Mintlaw Academy	6 National 5 courses, or more, agreed upon on a case by case basis.
	Peterhead Academy	6 National 5 courses, or more, agreed upon on a case by case basis.
	Portlethen Academy	6 National 5 courses, or more, agreed upon on a case by case basis.
	The Gordon Schools	6 National 5 courses, or more, agreed upon on a case by case basis.
Turriff Academy	6 National 5 courses, or more, agreed upon on a case by case basis.	
Westhill Academy	6 National 5 courses, or more, agreed upon on a case by case basis.	
Angus	Arbroath Academy	6
	Arbroath High School	6

	Brechin High School	6
	Carnoustie High School	6
	Forfar Academy	6
	Monifieth High School	6
	Montrose Academy	6
	Webster's High School	6
Argyll & Bute	Campbeltown Grammer School	6
	Dunoon Grammar School	6
	Hermitage Academy	6
	Islay High School	6
	Lochgilphead Joint Campus	6
	Oban High School	6
	Rothsay Joint Campus	6
	Tarbert Academy	9
	Tiree High School	6
	Tobermory High School	6
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar	Castlebay	6
	Linacleit	6
	The Nicolson Institute	7
	Sir Eliot Scott	7
Clackmannanshire	Alloa	6/7
	Alva	7
	Lornshill	7
Dumfries & Galloway  ("Currently schools in Dumfries and Galloway enter pupils for up to 8 National Qualifications at National 4 and National 5 in S4. This depends on the pupils needs.  As from next session our schools will enter pupils for up to 7 national Qualifications at National 4 or 5")	Annan Academy	8
	Castle Douglas High School	8
	Dalbeattie High School	8
	Dalry High School	8
	Douglas Ewart High School	8
	Dumfries Academy	8
	Dumfries High School	8
	Kirkcudbright Academy	8
	Langholm Academy	8
	Lockerbie Academy	8
	Maxwelltown High School	8
	Moffar Academy	8
	Sanquhar Academy	8
	St Joseph's College	8
	Stranraer Academy	8
Wallace Hall Academy	8	
Dundee	Baldragon Academy	6
	Braeview Academy	6
	Craigie High School	6
	Grove Academy	6
	Harris Academy	6
	Menzieshill High School	6
	Morgan Academy	6
	St John's RC High School	6
	St Paul's RC Academy	6
East Ayrshire	Auchinleck Academy	7
	Cumnock Academy	7

	Doon Academy	7
	Grange Academy	7
	James Hamilton Academy	7
	Kilmarnock Academy	7
	Loudoun Academy	7
	St Joseph's Academy	7
	Stewarton Academy	7
East Dunbartonshire	Bearsden Academy	8
	Bishopbriggs Academy	8
	Boclair Academy	8
	Douglas Academy	8
	Kirkentilloch High School	8
	Lenzie Academy	8
	St Ninian's High School	8
	Turnbull High School	8
Edinburgh	Balerno Community High School	<p>The Council does not set an arbitrary maximum of National 4s. However, our records do not hold at the moment any pupil doing any more than 10 at the secondary schools in the area.</p> <p>Again, we do not fix a maximum number of National 5s. However, our records do not hold that any pupils at secondary schools in the area normally do any more than 8 National 5s.</p> <p>Again, we don't set an arbitrary maximum but the likely maximum combination of National 4s &amp; 5s is 9.</p> <p>The guiding principle is that qualifications are taken at the appropriate stage for the individual young person over the 3 years of the senior phase. The precise number and range of qualifications on offer, as well as when they are taken will be a decision for schools to take in consultation with the learners and parents.</p>
	Boroughmuir High School	
	Broughton High School	
	Castlebrae Community High School	
	Craigmount High School	
	Craigroyston Community High School	
	Currie Community High School	
	Drummond Community High School	
	Firhill High School	
	Forrester High School	
	Gracemount High School	
	Holy Rood RC High School	
	James Gillespie's High School	
	Leith Academy	
	Liberton High School	
	Portobello High School	
	Queensferry Community High School	
	St Augustine's High School	
	St Thomas of Aquin's High School	
	The Royal High School	
	Trinity Academy	
	Tynecastle High School	
	Wester Hailes Education Centre	
East Lothian	North Berwick High School	6
	Ross High School	6
	Musselburgh Grammar School	8
	Knox Academy	8
	Dunbar Grammar	8
	Preston Lodge High School	6
East Renfrewshire	Barrhead High School	No Limits set. Number of presentations by any individuals will be recommended by the school, through discussions with pupil and others.
	Eastwood High School	No Limits set. Number of presentations by any individuals will be recommended by the



		school, through discussions with pupil and others.
	Mearns Castle High School	No Limits set. Number of presentations by any individuals will be recommended by the school, through discussions with pupil and others.
	St Luke's High School	No Limits set. Number of presentations by any individuals will be recommended by the school, through discussions with pupil and others.
	St Ninian's High School	No Limits set. Number of presentations by any individuals will be recommended by the school, through discussions with pupil and others.
	Williamwood High School	No Limits set. Number of presentations by any individuals will be recommended by the school, through discussions with pupil and others.
	Woodfarm High School	No Limits set. Number of presentations by any individuals will be recommended by the school, through discussions with pupil and others.
Falkirk	Bo'ness Academy	6
	Braes High School	5
	Denny High School	6
	Falkirk High School	7
	Graeme High School	6
	Grangemouth High School 6	6
	Larbert High School	6
	St Mungo's High School	6
Fife	Auchmuty High School	7
	Balwearie High School	7
	Beath High School	6
	Bell Baxter High School	5
	Buckhaven High School	6
	Dunfermline High School	7
	Glenrothes High School	6
	Glenwood High School	6
	Inverkeithing High School	6
	Kirkcaldy High School	7
	Kirkland High School	6
	Lochgelly High School	6
	Madras College	7
	Queen Anne High School	7
	St Andrew's R C High School	6
	St Columba's R C High School	6
	Viewforth High School	6
	Waid Academy	7
Woodmill High School	6	
Glasgow	<p>The council does not hold the information requested. The explanation given was as follows:</p> <p>"Some schools (e.g Hillhead High 'bypass' National 5 exams and present at Higherlevel), others have a range of presentations 6, 7, 8 etc.</p>	

	<p>“There are also situations where young people may sit, for example, 4 National 5s and 2 National 4s in the same session.</p> <p>“Young people are presented at varying levels and numbers dependent upon their needs/aptitudes and the curricular structure of the school they attend.”</p>	
Highland	Alness Academy	6
	Ardnamurchan High School	6
	Charleston Academy	6
	Culloden Academy	6
	Dingwall Academy	6
	Dornoch Academy	6
	Farr High School	6
	Fortrose Academy	6
	Gairloch High School	6
	Glen Urquhart High School	6
	Golspie High School	6
	Grantown Grammar School	6
	Invergordon Academy	6
	Inverness High School	6
	Inverness Royal Academy	7
	Kilchuimen Academy	6
	Kingussie High School	6
	Kinlochbervie High School	6
	Kinlochleven High School	6
	Lochaber High School	8
	Mallaig High School	6
	Millburn Academy	6
	Nairn Academy	6
	Plockton High School	6
Portree High School	6	
Tain Royal Academy	6	
Thurso High School	6	
Ullapool High School	6	
Wick High School	6	
Inverclyde	Clydeview Academy	6
	Inverclyde Academy	6
	Notre Dame High School	6
	Port Glasgow High School	6
	St Columba’s High School	6
	St Stephen’s High School	6
Midlothian	Beeslack Community High School	8
	Dalkeith High School	8
	Lasswade High School Centre	8
	Newbattle Community High School	8
	Penicuik High School	8
	St David’s RC High School	8
Moray	Buckie High	6
	Elgin Academy	6
	Forres Academy	6

	Keith Grammar	6
	Lossiemouth High	6
	Milne's High	6
	Speyside High	6
	Elgin High	5
North Ayrshire ("There is no official upper ceiling or lower. On average 7 subjects will be studied in 2016 and this will reduce to 6 subjects for 2017.")	Ardrossan Academy	7
	Arran High School	7
	Auchenharvie Academy	7
	Garnock Academy	7
	Greenwood Academy	7
	Irvine Royal Academy	7
	Kilwinning Academy	7
	Largs Academy	7
	St Matthew's Academy	7
North Lanarkshire	Airdrie Academy	7
	Bellshill Academy	7
	Braidhurst High School	7
	Brannock High School	7
	Calderhead High School	7
	Caldervale High School	7
	Cardinal Newman High School	7
	Chryston High School	7
	Clyde Valley High School	7
	Coatbridge High School	7
	Coltness High School	7
	Cumbernauld Academy	7
	Dalziel High School	7
	Greenfaulds High School	7
	Kilsyth Academy	7
	Our Lady's High School (Cumbernauld)	7
	Our Lady's High School (Motherwell)	7
	St Aidan's High School	7
	St Ambrose High School	7
	St Andrew's High School	7
	St Margaret's High School	7
	St Maurice's High School	7
	Taylor High School	7
Orkney	Kirkwall Grammar School	7
	Stomness Academy	7
	Westray Junior High School	free to accommodate timetabling and choices, but the expected norm is 7 Nationals
	Sanday Community School	free to accommodate timetabling and choices, but the expected norm is 7 Nationals
	Stronsay Junior High School	free to accommodate timetabling and choices, but the expected norm is 7 Nationals
Perth & Kinross	Blairgowrie High	6 (was 7 in 15/16)
	Breadalbane Academy	7
	Crieff High	6 (was 7 in 15/16)
	CS of Auchterarder	7
	Kinross High	7

	Perth Academy	7
	Perth Grammar	6 (was 7 in 15/16)
	Perth High	7
	Pitlochry High	7
	St John's Academy	7
Renfrewshire	Castlehead High School	7
	Gleniffer High School	7
	Gryffe High School	7
	Johnstone High School	7
	Linewood High School	7
	Paisley Grammar School	7
	Park Mains High School	7
	Renfrew High School	7
	St Andrew's Academy	7
	St Benedict's High School	7
Trinity High School	7	
Scottish Borders	Berwickshire High School	8
	Earlston High School	8
	Eyemouth High School	8
	Galashiels Academy	8
	Hawick High School	8
	Jedburgh Grammar School	8
	Kelso High School	8
	Peebles High School	8
	Selkirk High School	8
Shetland Islands	Aith Junior High	7
	Anderson High School	7
	Baltasound Junior High School	7
	Brae High School	7
	Mid Yell Junior High School	7
	Sanwick Junior High School	7
	Whalsay School	7
South Ayrshire	Ayr Academy	6
	Belmont Academy	6
	Carrick Academy	6
	Girvan Academy	6
	Kyle Academy	6
	Marr College	6
	Prestwick Academy	6
	Queen Margaret Academy	6
South Lanarkshire	Biggar High	6
	Calderglen High	7
	Calderside Academy	7
	Carluke High	7
	Cathkin High	7
	Duncanrig Secondary	7
	Hamilton Grammar	6
	Holy Cross High	8
	John Ogilvie High	7
	Lanark Grammar	6

	Larkhall Academy	6
	Lesmahagow High	6
	St Andrew's and St Bride's High	8
	Stonelaw High	8
	Strathaven Academy	7
	Trinity High	8
	Uddingston Grammar	7
Stirling	Balfon High School	6
	McLaren High School	7
	St Modans High School	7
	Stirling High School	7
	Bannockburn High School	7
	Dunblane High School	7
	Wallace High School	7
West Dunbartonshire	Our Lady & St. Patrick's High School	8
	Vale of Leven Academy	6
	Dumbarton Academy	6
	Clydebank High School	6
	St. Peter the Apostle High School	6
West Lothian	Armadale Academy	6
	Bathgate Academy	6
	Broxburn Academy	7
	Deans Community High School	8 (6 next session)
	Inveralmond Community High School	6
	Linlithgow Academy	6
	St Kentigern's Academy	8 (7 next session)
	St Margaret's Academy	7
	The James Young High School	6
	West Calder High School	7
	Whitburn Academy	6