Examination of the Perceived Usefulness of Exam Preparation Provided to Students Undertaking National Qualification Courses in Scotland’s Colleges

A Research Report by the Scottish Further Education Unit

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Examination of the Perceived Usefulness of Exam Preparation to NQ Students in Colleges

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Executive Summary

Background

Previous research conducted by the Scottish Further Education Unit (SFEU) (2005) investigating the factors contributing to the success of National Qualification (NQ) students in Scotland’s colleges found that ‘adequate preparation for assessment’ is an important factor for success in completing National Qualification courses. When asked to rank the most important contributing factors to successful completion of the course, 69% of students suggested ‘learning exam techniques’. College lecturers expressed a similar view with nearly all (96%) of them ranking the ‘promotion of exam techniques’ as a contributing factor to successful completion on NQ courses. Given the perceived importance of exam preparation to student success by students and college lecturers the Scottish Executive commissioned SFEU to undertake a study into the perceived usefulness of exam preparation provided to students undertaking National Qualification courses in Scotland’s colleges.

Research objectives and method

The research project had three main objectives:

1. To identify the extent of exam preparation undertaken on NQ courses.
2. To examine the perceptions of lecturers, Principal Assessors and student perceptions of the importance and the effectiveness of exam preparation undertaken on NQ courses.
3. To compare and contrast the views of lecturers, Principal Assessors and students about exam preparation on NQ courses.

The research comprised a literature review, an online questionnaire with teaching staff (111 respondents), seven in-depth interviews with college lecturers and three in-depth interviews with Principal Assessors and two focus groups with students. The research took place from December 2005 to June 2006.

Main findings

Exam preparation on NQ courses appears to be fairly widespread with 61% of courses sampled offering preparation for the prelim and 50% offering preparation for the external exam. Of those providing prelim preparation, almost two-thirds provided between 3-6 hours and about another third provided 9 hours or more preparation. A lack of consistency across courses and colleges with regard to exam preparation provision was evident. Students receive different amounts of preparation delivered through a range of exam preparation methods, although the use of past papers dominates.

Each of the respondent groups (i.e. lecturers or teaching staff, Principal Assessors and students) suggested that before entering the course students were not as well prepared as they could be to sit exams. There was an overwhelming consensus from each of the respondent groups that prelim preparation for NQ courses at college was important in improving student performance, mainly through familiarisation of students with the exam process and the identification of weak areas before the external exam. However, the teaching staff and students were not convinced that prelim preparation was effective in improving student performance on NQ courses and found it difficult to directly link the preparation activity with the prelim outcome.
Examination of the Perceived Usefulness of Exam Preparation to NQ Students in Colleges

The Principal Assessors were much stronger in their view that prelim preparation was effective in improving student performance on NQ courses. Each group of respondents found it much easier to indicate that they thought that exam preparation for the external exam was effective in improving student performance in the exam for the NQ course.

The Principal Assessors were unanimous in their view that exam preparation was very much part of the learning experience and it helped students to develop their intellectual skills. The students also recognised that preparing for the exam contributed to their learning about the subject. However, the majority of teaching staff considered exam preparation as an end in itself. Only one lecturer considered that it perhaps contributed more than this, adding to and enhancing the students' lifelong learning.

Conclusion and recommendations

It is suggested that exam preparation on NQ courses is considered to be useful at improving student performance on NQ courses, particularly at the external exam stage. However, there does seem to be scope to improve student experience of exam preparation. For example, it could be argued that students should be offered a service that is consistent across NQ courses and colleges, where relevant. Specific suggestions on how the preparedness of NQ students for prelim exams can be improved were gathered during the research process. For example, the prelim preparation process could be improved by considering the timing of the prelim exam, ensuring that students received adequate prelim preparation time, providing adequate and appropriate forms of assessment throughout the year, and facilitating the availability of prelim papers and the sharing of prelim papers with other colleges. Professional development is one way in which the teaching staff could be supported to bring about improvements in their ability to deliver exam preparation to students on NQ courses. Development opportunities could be provided to improve the writing of prelim papers and to acquire marking experience.

As little research has been conducted in the area for exam preparation for National Qualifications undertaken by college students, implementation of some of these recommendations is likely to require further research. For example, there would seem to be a need to gather more evidence on the effectiveness of prelim and external exam preparation and, in particular, more evidence is needed on what types of preparation are particularly effective for NQ courses in colleges and how the process can best be organised. In order that colleges can share effectively ‘good practice’ in exam preparation a mechanism that enables this ‘good practice’ to be identified should be considered. Further research could also be conducted to examine the contribution of exam preparation to the learning experience on NQ courses in colleges.
1. Background and Introduction

1.1 National Qualifications

National Qualifications (NQ) are qualifications for students in secondary schools and colleges of further education. NQs have been designed to be as flexible as possible to meet the needs of all students. NQs are National Courses and National Units and cover hundreds of subjects. National courses are available at 7 different levels: Advanced Higher; Higher; Intermediate 2; Intermediate 1; Access 3; Access 2 and Access 1. Courses are usually made up of three subject-related National Units that are qualifications in their own right. Each unit is a block of work which generally takes 40 hours to cover and is achieved upon successful completion of a unit assessment. Unit assessments are normally drawn from a National Assessment Bank (NAB) and students are awarded the unit when the assessments are passed.

To achieve the national courses students must take an external assessment which can take many forms. For the most part this is an exam that is sat in May/June but for some subjects it is project work or folios completed during the course. In all forms of external assessment students have to demonstrate that they can use and apply the knowledge and skills gained from the whole course. Performance in the external assessment determines the grade given for the course and a course award is only given if a student passes all national units and the external assessment.

In order to prepare students for the rudiments of external assessments most colleges will set a prelim exam at some point during the course. Prelims help students understand what exam conditions are like and also give them and lecturers an indication of potential performance in the external assessment. This is used to assist in making estimates which are used in the appeal process.

1.2 Progression and assessment in colleges

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC, 2005) identified that students in colleges had a good rate of progression through their NQ courses. Student and staff performance indicators for 2003-04 (SFC, 2005) showed that for those students completing their programmes in 2003-04, 78% of those on college programmes with a NQ aim gained the award or progressed to the next year of study. Equally college students appear satisfied with their overall college and course experience. Over the last five years the Scottish Funding Council commissioned three student experience surveys of college students. During this time, students have expressed consistently high levels of satisfaction with both the quality of learning experience and college as a whole. When students were asked about their overall satisfaction with the quality of their learning experience, 90% (2001), 94% (2003) and 92% (2005) said they were fairly or very satisfied. Similarly, when asked about level of satisfaction with the college as a whole, 89% (2001), 93% (2003) and 90% (2005) said they were fairly or very satisfied. The Scottish Funding Council also commissioned a longitudinal survey of learners in 2004 (SFC, 2004). The On Track survey reviewed learners’ perceptions of their recent college/university experience in relation to a wide range of factors, including those aspects covered in the previous student satisfaction survey. The results again show a high level of satisfaction with both courses, university (82%) and college (77%).
One element of the student experience that has received little evaluation is the area of assessment. Whilst students were asked to comment on a range of influential variables on their student and learning experience in both the Student Experience Survey and On Track surveys including, number of hours contact with teaching staff, receipt of adequate general help, learning support and guidance, there were no specific questions regarding assessment or exam preparation. One source of policy documentation that provides limited information on assessment is Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education reports for academic years 2000-04 (cited in SFC, 2005). During the period of 2000-2004, SFC noted that HMIE completed 46 college reviews looking at subject level provision and cross-college arrangements. Both parts evaluated the student experience and promoted quality improvement. As part of the subject review, nine individual elements were analysed including assessment. Eighty-four percent of colleges reviewed were awarded 'good' or 'very good' for assessment.

One further important source of feedback regarding assessments is the Principal Assessors' report that is produced each year following external assessments. The report provides statistical information on the number of entries, course award data and course assessment data. With regard to exam preparation they provide general comments on candidate performance, areas of external assessment in which candidates performed well, areas of external assessment in which candidates had difficulty and feedback to centres.

Previous research conducted by the Scottish Further Education Unit (SFEU) (2005) investigating the factors contributing to the success of National Qualification students in Scotland's colleges found that 'adequate preparation for assessment' is an important factor for success in completing NQ's. Students, lecturers and principal examiners were all questioned about the various factors contributing to successful completion of NQ's. When students were questioned about their experience in undertaking NQ courses, 69% agreed or strongly agreed that they were prepared for the exam and 32% said that they found the course assessment to be easy. When asked to rank the most important contributing factors to successful completion of the course, 69% of students suggested 'learning exam techniques'. Similar sentiments were expressed by lecturers who overwhelmingly ranked 'promotion of exam techniques' as a contributing factor to successful completion (96%).

When assessing institutional factors, 89% of lecturers ranked 'lecturers understanding of the whole NQ assessment process' as fair or very important in institutional factors affecting successful NQ course completion. Similarly, 66% of lecturers suggested that 'guidance given to lecturers re: prelim design and procedure' were very or fairly important. As a result, the report also recommended that lecturers are provided with activities that are specifically devised to 'provide their students with thorough preparation for external assessment and understanding of exam techniques'.

2. Literature Review

In an attempt to capture a wide review of literature a number of academic databases were interrogated. These included: Professional Development Collection; ERIC; and Educational Research Abstracts. Search terms included: examination, assessment, examination preparation, perception of assessment/examination, factors affecting examination outcome. Papers identified that were of interest were accessed online via Athens. The literature review did not identify any material of direct relevance to the research question. A small amount of indirectly relevant material was identified and the report summarises the aspects that were of importance.
Torrance and Coultas (2004) conducted a review of literature on assessment in post-compulsory education in the UK with particular reference to whether summative assessment and testing have a positive or negative effect on post-16 learners’ motivation for learning. They noted the difficulty in accessing appropriate literature regarding assessment and in particular, the experience of the learner and assessment. Most of the literature they noted focused on policy implementation and general development rather than the experience of the learner. They noted that the empirical base of the field is relatively weak. Torrance and Coultas report on some ethnographic studies in the 16-19 further education (FE) sector, but report that most of this work does not address assessment directly. They go on further to suggest that most other material does not report in detail on methodology and is very difficult to evaluate for research quality. The report concludes noting that ‘We know very little about how assessment procedures and processes are operationalised and experienced by learners (and indeed tutors) in action, and a key finding of this review is that more research is needed to identify what actually happens in practise and to learn specific lessons about what sorts of support make a positive difference in what circumstances.’ Therefore, adding support for the current research question looking at the perception of the importance and effectiveness of exam preparation.

In an attempt to evaluate the effect of an examination preparation unit on academic examination performance, Wilson (1986) conducted an experimental study where an exam preparation unit was offered to 47 low-achieving and underachieving sixth graders. The unit consisted of four 50-minute sessions focusing on study skills and attitudes related to exam preparation. Experimental students scored significantly higher on the final examination average than did control students, showing the positive influence of the exam preparation unit. However, in a follow-up study (1991) comparing the effect of an exam preparation unit offered in two guidance formats on the performance of low-achieving and underachieving middle school students, the results were inconclusive and failed to support the intervention.

Sturman (2003) undertook research into the examination preparation offered to Year 6 pupils in England for key stage 2 tests in the subject of science. The results of the research indicated that preparation for the 2001 science tests was widespread and occupied a large proportion of curriculum time. For the majority of teachers this preparation replaced other activities but for over one-third, it complemented normal classroom activities in science. A wide range of resources was used to help prepare the pupils and all respondents used practice tests. Test-taking skills were widely taught and pupils were offered the opportunity to practise specific item types. She also found evidence of ‘teaching to the test’ but argues that this may not always be the negative activity that it is assumed to be. Sturman (2003) suggests that ‘teaching to the test’ can mean different things to different teachers and that some of the activities can develop understanding and the ability to apply knowledge.

In an interesting study conducted by Williams and Clark (2004) students were asked to rate the strength of possible contributors to their exam performance after completing a multi-choice exam and receiving feedback. They were asked to choose between innate academic ability, student effort or teacher input. Students rated student effort items (amount of reading course materials, level of note-taking and frequency of class attendance) higher than teacher input and student ability items, meaning they thought that increased effort put into exam preparation was more important than teacher input and the student ability.
However, across all exams, ratings of student ability and teacher input correlated more strongly with exam performance than did student effort ratings, thus students appear to have overvalued their effort and undervalued their ability and teacher input as potential contributors to exam performance. The data suggests that perceived teacher input is more important in accounting for performance on multiple-choice exams than is the perception of one's own effort. In an earlier study Williams and Clark (2002) found that for a wide range of imagined academic successes and failures, effort was the strongest causal attribution, teacher input was second, student ability was third and luck last.

Van Etten, Freebern and Presley (1997) conducted a study assessing college students’ beliefs about exam preparation. It must be noted that this paper was the closest match to the research question found in the literature review and for interest they noted that they ‘could locate no investigation that attempted to map students’ overall perceptions of the examination preparation process, the many factors that actively affect exam preparation, at least from the students’ perspective’.

Their study showed that students’ beliefs about preparing for exams could be organised into four overarching categories: motivations for studying, strategies for coping with test demands, affect about test preparation, and external factors affecting test preparation. Their research findings showed how students organise themselves and their surroundings to best effect in order to prepare for exams. See Table 1.

Table 1: Highlights of Students’ Beliefs about Exam Preparation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivations for Studying</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Obtain good grades on exams is the primary motivation for studying.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students reported motivation to study is tied to perceptions that studying will help obtain the grade they want, (e.g. if they believe they already know material and can get a good grade without studying, they study less).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are a variety of other motivations for studying, (e.g. learning the material, meeting expectations of self and others, getting a good job).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations about the likely grade on a test affects studying and effort.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies for Coping with Test Demands</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students can keep up with readings, having a variety of strategies for coping with the volume of reading in college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students recognise that valuable information is presented in class and that attending can reduce study efforts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students manage test preparation time, which is a precious commodity, juggling non-studying commitments to permit study time. Although students recognise the value of studying well in advance in tests and distributing study, cramming sometimes occurs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students use study strategies, which vary depending on type of test questions expected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They reduce distractions in the study environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students prepare in study groups, recognising a number of benefits to group presentation, although also aware that groups vary in effectiveness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They cheat, with students aware of many ways to gain unfair advantages during exam preparation and while taking examinations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affect and Test Preparation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive mood can either facilitate or interfere with studying.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative mood prevents effective study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students dislike some types of tests more than others.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>External Factors Affecting Test Preparation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instructors can do much to make preparation easier or more difficult.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiencing exams in a course provides valuable information about subsequent exams in the course.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social environmental variables can undermine studying, (e.g. demands of friends and family) or facilitate studying, (e.g. encouragement of friends and family).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Physical environment can support study, (e.g. if comfortable and quiet) or make studying more difficult, (e.g. if noisy, too warm, inadequately lighted).

The characteristics to the to-be-studied content affect study, with some materials, (e.g. major courses, content perceived to be important, difficult but manageable content) given greater attention than others, (e.g. material so difficult that student perceives there is no hope of learning it).

Van Etten et al. (1997) provided further detail regarding external factors influencing exam preparation. The perceived positive influence and methods utilised by instructors (lecturers) were drawn from student interviews and they suggested the following to improve the exam preparation process:

‘They can provide plenty of advance warning about exactly when exams will occur and assignments will be due:

- By being prepared (e.g. materials needed for a presentation are ready), instructors can be clear and coherent in their presentations, giving presentations that are neither too general nor too detailed. Well-prepared presentations include examples and analogies that make the content understandable.
- They can discuss readings and assignments in class, making clear how assignments relate to course goals.
- They can identify the content that should be emphasised during study and make important connections between different concepts and details presented in the course.
- There is productive interaction between students and the teacher in class. The good instructor asks pertinent questions. If students falter in responding, the instructor provides scaffolding in the form of hints or more specific questions. Good instructors also field student questions. The instructor seeks to improve student understanding through responses to student questions, rather than implying in responses that students are deficient in their understanding.
- All interactions with supportive instructors are friendly and respectful of students, treating all students fairly, never playing favourites.
- In general, good instructors emphasise improvement and effort by each student rather than competition between students.
- Good instructors are available for consultation outside of class.
- They can provide old tests, indicating the format, content coverage emphasis, and the required depth and length of good answers to test questions. Such information was cited as critical for knowing how to study for upcoming tests. The students reported that there is much variability between professors with respect to the types of examinations used, but there was also great variability within professors as well. Thus, the professor who is helpful to students in preparing for exams is providing information throughout the course.
- They do not provide the exact exams used previously. Provision of exact questions results in students memorising answers to the forthcoming test.
- They only test on material that has been covered or assigned.
- Often they will provide helpful notes pertaining to especially critical content.
- They provide adequate time to take tests, and students are aware of this, with the result being reduced anxiety.’

Van Etten et.al. found that students were aware that supports such as information about how to study for an examination and clear presentations aid studying, and that ‘compensations’, such as the exact questions that would be in the exam, undermine studying and learning.
The students in this study also indicated how critical it is for them to know the format of an upcoming examination. Torrance and Coultas (2004), cite work completed by Ecclestone (2002), who reported that making learning objectives and criteria of assessment explicit benefits learners (2002). Martinez (2001), in a review of why students withdraw from courses, also reports that students withdraw because of: ‘poor, inadequate or inappropriate advice and guidance ... [and] insufficient understanding ... of the demands of their course, (e.g. balance of practical and classroom work, assessment requirements) ... excessive or poorly scheduled assessment.’ This is consistent with guidance offered by the SQA.

2.1 Summary

The literature review did not identify any direct references for the proposed research question. The closest match was research conducted by Van Etten et al., who outlined guidelines proffered by student beliefs on exam preparation most of which are supported by research and guidelines offered by the SQA. But there is little evidence to tell us what students and lecturers actually think about exam preparation and whether it is effective or important. For this particular reason therefore, the second phase of this study is primarily inductive using interviews and focus group methods with students, lecturers and Principal Assessors to generate information on the efficacy of examination preparation.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

The overall approach for the research aims to capture pertinent secondary and primary data to answer the main research question: ‘How useful is exam preparation provided to students undertaking NQ courses?’ The research was designed to ensure that the opinions and knowledge of key stakeholders (that is, the college lecturers, Principal Assessors and students) in relation to exam preparation were accessed.

Three specific research objectives were identified and data to address these was captured through secondary and primary research. The secondary research takes the form of a literature review (see 2. Literature Review) and the primary research comprises two phases. The first phase captured quantitative data through an online questionnaire and the second phase captured qualitative data using in-depth interviews with lecturers and Principal Assessors and focus groups with students on NQ courses. Figure 1 outlines the overall research design.
Figure 1: Research design

Research question: How useful is exam preparation provided to students undertaking NQ courses?

Research objectives:
1. To identify the extent of exam preparation undertaken on NQ courses.
2. To examine the perceptions of lecturers, Principal Assessors and student perceptions of the importance and the effectiveness of exam preparation undertaken on NQ courses.
3. To compare and contrast the views of lecturers, Principal Assessors and students about exam preparation on NQ courses.

Literature review

Primary research:
Phase 1: Online questionnaire.
Phase 2: In-depth interviews with college lecturers and Principal Assessors and focus groups with students.

Compare and contrast different perceptions

Conclusions and recommendations
3.2 Primary research

The primary research took place from December 2005 to April 2006 and comprised two main phases. The first phase of the research was to conduct an online survey with college lecturers currently teaching on NQ courses. The purpose of the questionnaire was to gather information on prelim development and delivery, the preparation of students for prelim exams and the effectiveness of exam preparation. Respondents were also asked if they would participate in a follow-up interview examining exam preparation and whether they were willing to allow access to student groups. The second phase of the research comprised in-depth interviews with college lecturers currently teaching on NQ courses, in-depth interviews with Principal Assessors reporting on NQ courses and focus groups with college students studying on NQ courses.

As the research was completed prior to the diet of external exams for NQ courses, which usually take place in May and June, emphasis was placed on exam preparation for the prelim, while asking about external exam preparation process in a more general sense.

3.2.1 Online questionnaire

The online questionnaire was distributed to college lecturers currently teaching on NQ courses in December 2005. This questionnaire was sent to the Staff Development Officer and/or SQA officer at all colleges with a request to pass it on to the college lecturers teaching NQ courses. About half the colleges in Scotland took part in the survey with a total of 111 responses to the online questionnaire. For a copy of the questionnaire please refer to Appendix A.

3.2.2 Qualitative research

3.2.2.1 In-depth interviews with college lecturers

SFEU contacted each lecturer who volunteered to be interviewed (n=10) by e-mail explaining the purpose of this phase of the research and that an external research consultant would contact them directly to arrange interview time. Seven lecturers responded saying they were happy to be interviewed and interviews were arranged in consent with lecturers and conducted in their place of work.

Interviews were undertaken using a semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix B). The aim of the schedule was to elicit in more detail than the questionnaire, issues regarding the effectiveness and importance of exam preparation. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by SFEU administrative staff.

Data from the individual follow-up interviews were imported into Nvivo1 (Qualitative data analysis package) for analysis. Transcripts were analysed by question and under the general areas outlined in Figure 2.
3.2.2.2 In-depth interviews with Principal Assessors

In agreement with the SQA an external consultant interviewed three Principal Assessors. Due to time constraints one interview was carried out face-to-face and the other two interviews were carried out via the telephone.

Interviews were undertaken using a semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix C). Questions were asked on issues regarding the effectiveness and importance of exam preparation, the usefulness of Principal Assessor reports and whether lecturers should receive staff development in exam preparation.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed by SFEU administrative staff. Transcripts were analysed by question and under the general areas outlined in Figure 2.

3.2.2.3 Focus groups with students

SFEU contacted those college staff who were willing to ask students if they would participate in the research. It was hoped to arrange four focus groups of students but due to the timing of the research and the proximity to final examinations only two groups in different colleges could be arranged. One group had six male respondents and the other group had nine female respondents.

The focus groups were undertaken using a semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix D). Questions were asked regarding preparedness to sit exams before entering the course, effectiveness and importance of prelim preparation, effectiveness and importance of external exam preparation and contribution of exam preparation to the learning experience.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed by SFEU administrative staff. Transcripts were analysed by question and under the general areas outlined in Figure 2.
4. Results

4.1 Online questionnaire findings

The survey was divided into five sections: characteristics of survey respondents, prelim development and delivery, preparation of the students for the prelim, effectiveness of exam preparation and final comments. For ease of interpretation in this section, the survey respondents are referred to as teaching staff while, in fact, they are composed of lecturers, tutors, course co-ordinator, senior lecturer, curriculum leader, etc.

4.1.1 Characteristics of survey respondents

One hundred and eleven teaching staff from 22 colleges, out of a total of 43 colleges in Scotland, responded to the online survey. Thus about 50% of all colleges were represented in the survey. The survey respondents had the following characteristics:

- Over half (53%) of the survey participants were lecturers within their college, 19% were Curriculum Leader/Heads, 14% were senior lecturers, 6% were Course co-ordinators and 2% each were Class tutor and Head of School. In the other category (4% of respondents), there were two Assistant or Depute Heads of Faculty, a Flexible Learning Manager and a Curriculum Co-ordinator.
- The majority of respondents had a permanent contract, with 82% on a full-time permanent contract and 16% on a part-time permanent contract. The remainder were on temporary or evening contracts (1% each).
- Teaching qualifications were held by 89% of the teaching staff, leaving 11% without a teaching qualification.
- Over half of respondents with teaching qualifications held a TQ(FE) qualification (55%) and 32% had a secondary/primary teaching qualification. The remaining 13% held a range of varying qualifications.
- Only 16 percent of the respondents were currently studying for a teaching qualification.
- Only 19% of the teaching staff participating in the survey were SQA markers this year. Less than one in four (23%) had been an SQA marker in the last five years.

4.1.2 Prelim development and delivery

This section included questions on the subjects taught by the survey respondents and the conditions surrounding prelim development and submission to the students. The focus of this section is the description of the teaching staff and colleges’ involvement in prelims.

Respondents were asked to list all the courses (subject and level) they currently teach on. Table 1 shows that the majority of teaching is delivered by respondents at the Intermediate 2 (52 respondents) or Higher (54 respondents) levels. The five top subjects delivered are: Business Management and Administration (20 respondents), Care (18 respondents), Social Science (12 respondents), Art and design (11 respondents) and Science (11 respondents).
Respondents were then asked which course they spent most time teaching on and to respond to the rest of the questionnaire based on this specific course. As would be expected the majority of teaching time is spent delivering Intermediate 2 and Higher classes. The five top subjects delivered based on course most time spent teaching on were: Business Management and Administration (19 respondents), Care (17 respondents), Science (11 respondents), Social Science (9 respondents) and Engineering (7 respondents).

When asked whether students were provided an opportunity to sit a prelim in relation to the main course college staff spent most time teaching on, 108 respondents replied to this question and 67% (72 respondents) said that a prelim was available for students. Thus one in three students did not have a prelim for the specific course asked about. (Although, it becomes apparent from responses later in the questionnaire that prelim and external assessments may not be appropriate for all courses/students).

Of those that had a prelim available for their main course, 42 respondents said their centre prepared the prelim and 42 respondents said they were involved in designing the prelim for the course.

Of the 70 teaching staff who replied to the question: ‘When do candidates sit the prelim for this course?’, the majority stated that prelims were mainly provided in the months of March (59%) and February (26%) (Chart 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Intermediate 1</th>
<th>Intermediate 2</th>
<th>Higher</th>
<th>Advanced</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Art and Design</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Management and Admin.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computing and IT</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English and Communication</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESOL</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hairdressing and Beauty</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitality</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land and Environment</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maths and Numeracy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Studies</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern Languages</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performing Arts</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Science</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport and Leisure and Tourism</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel and Tourism</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>12</strong></td>
<td><strong>52</strong></td>
<td><strong>54</strong></td>
<td><strong>11</strong></td>
<td><strong>129</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: What subject(s) and level(s) are taught by questionnaire participants
Chart 1: Month of prelim

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Internal college staff, primarily the lecturer who teaches the class (54% of respondents who answered this question) or another lecturer who does not teach the students (17%), senior lecturers (6%), or support staff (4%), invigilated the prelim. External invigilators (7%) and ‘other’ responses (13%) comprised the rest of the responses to this question.

Most of the prelims are held in the usual classroom (62% of respondents who answered this question), while 16% sat the prelim in the same place as the external exam and 12% sat the prelim in a different classroom. The ‘other’ responses (8% of respondents who answered this question) included: college assessment centre, gym hall, a classroom with other groups and classroom set out as exam room.

4.1.3 Preparation of the students for the prelim

For the colleges that provided a course prelim, almost two-thirds (61%) provided prelim preparation. Almost two-thirds (60%) of courses provided between 3 and 6 hours of preparation, but interestingly 32% provided 9 or more hours of preparation (see Chart 2). Almost all of the 53 respondents (94%) stated that the subject lecturer delivered prelim preparation. This left the remaining responses to include guidance tutor (4%), and curriculum manager (2%).
A range of different types of preparation were provided by the teaching staff for students on their courses. Of 52 respondents, 92% of them used past papers as a preparation strategy. The next most frequent responses were reading of questions (71%), time management strategies (62%) and navigation of prelim papers (55%). Other responses included the use of mock prelims (40%), memory techniques (35%), writing essays (29%) and stress management strategies (19%). The ‘other’ category had an 8% response which included a number of other techniques, such as quick quizzes and support sessions on a drop-in basis.
4.1.4 Effectiveness of exam preparation

There were six questions inquiring about the effectiveness of exam preparation by the teaching staff. Respondents were asked to rank how well developed the students’ examination techniques are prior to entry on the course. Chart 4 shows that of the 58 teaching staff who responded to this question, the majority did not think that the students’ exam skills were well developed prior to entry on the course.

Chart 4: Perceived examination skills held by student when starting the course

Based on the survey results, it appears that the majority of the teaching staff felt students did have a good appreciation of the role of prelims for assessment of attainment. Chart 5 shows that of the 56 teaching staff who responded to this question, the majority thought that students understood the role of prelims.

Chart 5: The lecturers’ view of students’ understanding of the role of prelims
When respondents were asked about the importance of prelim preparation in improving prelim performance, of the 57 respondents who answered this question, 84% thought that prelim preparation was very important or important in improving prelim performance (Chart 6).

Chart 6: Importance of prelim preparation in improving prelim performance

![Importance of prelim preparation in improving prelim performance](chart6)

Of the 56 respondents who answered the question asking about the effectiveness of prelim preparation in improving students' performance in the prelim exam, three-quarters believed that prelim preparation was very effective/effective. Others were less sure of the relationship between prelim preparation and performance but there was no response to the 'not at all effective' category.

Chart 7: Effectiveness of prelim preparation to improved prelim performance

![Effectiveness of prelim preparation in improving prelim performance](chart7)

As well as asking about prelim preparation teaching staff were asked about external exam preparation. Respondents were asked whether the college provided external exam preparation. Of the 104 responses to this question, 50% said they did provide external exam preparation and 50% said they didn't.
The results from this question, when cross-tabulated with the response from the question on whether the respondent's college provides prelim preparations, provide interesting results. Of the 73 respondents who have answered both these questions, 42% have provided both prelim and external exam preparation, 19% have provided preparation for the prelim but not for the external exam, 21% provided preparation for the external exam but not for the prelim and 18% do not provide preparation for either the prelim or the external exam.

Table 2: Cross-tabulation between provision of preparation for prelims and preparation for external exams

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>External exam preparation provided</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prelim preparation</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>provided</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prelim preparation</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>provided</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chart 8 demonstrates the distribution of responses, with nearly half of the respondents (48%) saying that external exam preparation was very effective in improving student performance and a further 30% felt that external exam preparation was effective in improving student performance.

Chart 8: Teaching staff view on the effectiveness of external exam preparation in improving student performance
Examination of the Perceived Usefulness of Exam Preparation to NQ Students in Colleges

When comparing the responses of perceived effectiveness of preparation for prelim and external exam preparation in improving performance it is evident that the teaching staff responses from both questions appear to support the idea that pre test preparation is effective in improving results, whether prelims or external exams (Chart 9).

Survey respondents were asked if they would benefit from staff development in delivering exam preparation. About half 49% (51 respondents) thought they would benefit from staff development, while 51% (53 respondents) didn’t think they would benefit from staff development in delivering exam preparation. When asked which areas of staff development would be of most interest, the most frequent responses were: memory techniques (36%), reading questions (22%), writing essays (16%), time management strategies (12%), stress management techniques (3%) and ‘other’ (10%). The other category included three responses saying that all the categories were of interest.

4.1.5 Final comments

At the end of the questionnaire all survey respondents were asked if there was anything else that they would like to mention about prelim and exam preparation that hadn’t been discussed so far. Twenty of the respondents chose to make further comment. For example, respondents commented on the lack of time available for prelim preparation:

‘We are given no extra time for prelim preparation.’

‘Within our centre the onus is on the staff delivering the courses to incorporate time into their delivery schedule for exam preparation. This is made difficult due to the fact that students receive only 4 taught hours per week and one hour directed study. I would very much welcome (as would students, I believe) the opportunity to undertake more focused exam and prelim preparation …

‘Not much time to do prelim exam preparation, but we do need good quality prep for the actual exam.’
Examination of the Perceived Usefulness of Exam Preparation to NQ Students in Colleges

‘Time spent preparing for the prelim impacts on an already short time for delivery in colleges. I doubt whether a prelim is of any great advantage provided students are prepared with delivery by the use of past exam papers.’

Respondents also commented on issues related to the materials used for prelims and their availability, and made suggestions to improve their practice.

‘Lack of materials to use for examination practise as the Administration course this year has a new framework – no past papers to use as a prelim practise – for levels 1, 2 or higher levels.’

‘Sharing of prelims with other colleges.’

‘… Staff being given recognised development time to produce valid and reliable prelims would also be welcomed.’

‘I do not have time to be a marker but would like to know more about how knowledge is marked (theory papers).’

The final area that respondents mentioned in this question referred to the absence of exams as part of the assessment process and therefore no need for a prelim exam.

‘Exam not applicable, continuous formative and summative assessment used.’

‘Existing in-house assessments used to examine students – no real examinations.’

‘SVQ hairdressing 1, 2, 3 do not have exams; they work towards assessments when they feel ready especially in practical areas following specific criteria and range statements. Written tests are carried out when the knowledge required has been delivered.’

‘In our section of work we need to adapt assessments to meet the needs of the students (learning disabilities).’

4.1.6 Summary

- Responses from 111 college staff with a responsibility for teaching and learning in colleges in Scotland to the online questionnaire were received. The sample represents 22 out of 43 colleges. 98% of the sample held a permanent contract, 82% held a full-time permanent contract. 89% had a teaching qualification. Only 19% of the teaching staff participating in the survey were SQA markers this year. Less than one in four (23%) had been an SQA marker in the last five years.
- Responses to the questions in the questionnaire were given in relation to the subject most time spent teaching on. The most popular subjects were Business Management and Administration, Care, Science, Engineering, Social Science delivered at Intermediate 2 and Higher levels.
- Two-thirds of the colleges sampled (72 respondents) provided prelims for the course identified in the questionnaire. While this means that one third did not provide students the opportunity to sit a prelim, this may not be an appropriate form of assessment for the type of course or for the students on the course.
- Forty-two respondents said their centre provided a prelim and 42 respondents were involved in designing the prelim.
Eighty-five per cent of prelims were offered to students in March and February 2006; the prelims were mainly invigilated by internal college staff (81%) and two-thirds took place in the usual classroom (62%).

Of those colleges that provided a prelim, 61% offered preparation for the prelim. About two-thirds (60%) offered 3-6 hours preparation and about one-third (32%) offered 9 hours or more of preparation.

The types of prelim preparation provided were extensive, but the use of past papers was the most frequent (92%) closely followed by reading questions (71%), time management strategies (62%) and navigation of past papers (55%).

The majority of the students were described as having not well developed examination skills prior to entry on the course – only 22% of the teaching staff who offered a prelim rated students’ skills as very well developed or well developed, leaving over three-quarters (78%) with less developed skills.

The majority of the teaching staff who offered a prelim thought that students had some understanding of the role of prelims in the assessment process, with few respondents (13%) viewing students as not understanding the role of prelims in the assessment process.

Eighty-four per cent of the teaching staff that offered a prelim said that prelim preparation was important in improving student performance in the prelim examination.

Seventy-five per cent of the teaching staff that offered a prelim thought that prelim preparation was effective in improving student performance in the prelim examination.

When all respondents were asked (n=104) about external exam provision, 50% said they did provide external exam preparation and 50% did not. Over three-quarters of those who provided external exam preparation (78%) thought it was effective in improving performance in the external exam.

Of the 73 respondents who have answered both the questions on prelim preparation and external exam preparation, 42% have provided both prelim and external exam preparation, 19% have provided preparation for the prelim but not for the external exam, 21% provided preparation for the external exam but not for the prelim and 18% do not provide preparation for either the prelim or the external exam.

About 50% of all survey respondents (n=104) thought they would benefit from staff development in delivering exam preparation. The three most popular areas for staff development were memory techniques, reading questions and writing essays.

In the final comments, the teaching staff commented on the lack of time available for exam preparation, the materials available for prelims and suggestions to improve their practise in relation to prelims. There was also mention of the absence of exams as part of the assessment process for their particular course and therefore no need for a prelim exam.

4.2 In-depth interviews with college lecturers

4.2.1 College lecturer background

All interviewees had teaching qualifications (TQ(FE)), were on full-time permanent contracts and mostly teaching at Intermediate 2 and Higher level. Three of the lecturers are or have been SQA markers and value this experience as having contributed to their exam preparation experience. They suggested that this experience gave them insight into quality and standard expectations of exam answering and how marks are attributed and in turn students have added value to their learning experience.
‘Well the students know what is expected of them, their responses, because the stuff that they do throughout the year for their subject unit is either practical or multiple choice questions so they’re not used to writing and how much to write and you know how to interpret the questions, describe, explain. I know that maybe sounds obvious but doesn’t seem as obvious to younger students especially because I know how they mark them, so I can tell them the way to write it the way to answer it, what is expected of them to get the best mark. So I think it does benefit them.’

Those who did not mark also saw the potential benefit of this experience and how it could influence their teaching. Reasons given for not marking generally featured around the time commitment and for some the perceived low remuneration.

‘… but I think it would help my job in dealing with our own NQ students and getting them ready for the exam see if you are a marker then you will be on board you will know what’s expected of the students.’

Two of the Principal Assessors specialised in the area of care and the other was in psychology. One had just been appointed for this academic year, one had completed 2 academic years and the other had 5 years experience. All were teaching in colleges.

4.2.2 Exam skills and preparedness

Lecturers were asked how equipped students were to sit exams before entering the course and in turn what exam preparation skills they lacked. Lecturers on the whole felt that it very much depended on the students’ ability and experience. Generally, those who came straight from school seemed to be more ‘conditioned’ to the way of exams whilst some of the more mature students who have been away from formal education for some time may not be used to preparing for exams. Alternatively, one lecturer noted a number of younger students (15, 16 year olds) who have not done well at school for both academic and social reasons arrive in FE with very little in the way of examination prep skills and who need lots of guidance.

‘Depending on the make up of the group, if it’s people who have come straight from school they are very much already into the kind of idea that they know there is an exam at the end of the course and they are going to have to prepare near the end so in that sense the are equipped that they are going to be experienced it but because it’s FE and a number of students could be mature students who haven’t been in education for a long time they are not equipped they tend to be very worried and a bit scared.’

‘I think it varies. I mean we have such a spectrum of ability and experience. We have some young school leavers in the class and we have some mature people who are adult returners coming back and each year I would have a different response because the class is different and some people are quite prepared, maybe those who have come straight from school and have done standard grades are more prepared than maybe people who haven’t sat exams for a long time. It’s difficult to answer that question.’

When discussing the type of skills students lacked, lecturers mentioned their difficulty in gauging and distributing time for answering questions. They also mentioned students’ inability to write discursively but concisely, to read and understand not only the question but also the instructions and underpinning all, the ability to do so under exam conditions.

‘… it’s really that trying to get them to a really advanced stage as being analytical yet conflict of trying to get it down in time, which in some respects may be interpreting the question appropriately as well.’
Examination of the Perceived Usefulness of Exam Preparation to NQ Students in Colleges

‘Even techniques like reading the question first and breaking it down into areas that they are familiar with and thinking it through. Their tendency is just to look at it and panic or look at it and think I know that wee bit and try and do it and realise they have not read it correctly I have found that that really is an issue.’

Independent study was mentioned a number of times where students fail to revise in their own time because of personal time restrictions where they have dependants, part-time jobs, etc., or where they fail to see the value in it because they have yet to experience the external exam. Lecturers also noted a lack of general study skills where students do not know how to revise and their inability to organise their own time and learning.

‘I think something as kind of simple as really their own study skills even, which is almost the pre exam bit. You tell them to read a chapter of 10 pages or whatever and they don’t have skimming techniques. They don’t seem to understand that you don’t need to understand and remember every single line. You know it’s a matter of getting the gist of it, so that kind of thing. Basic study things. I think when they first come in they don’t realise that they are going to have to spend a lot of time studying as well as being in class. So sort of self directed stuff is difficult for them and they are quite often juggling work. Some of them have got kids as well, so it’s difficult for them. So the study skills that they probably lack with revision, again some of them aren’t very organised … so they need a lot of guidance in that respect, and they will probably just see revision as doing everything again, rather than the idea of putting it into bites that you can remember and finding ways to help you remember stuff.’

‘Time management type issues, organisational skills certainly I sort of think the majority of my students are not well organised.’

4.2.3 Prelim and prelim preparation

All lecturers made available an opportunity for their students to sit a prelim and provided prelim exam preparation. Most held their prelim exam end of March, with a couple mentioning that they held it as late as possible to cover all of the course content (end of April/May). Prelim exams were compulsory and all were held under exam type conditions. Time allocation for prelim preparation depended on how teaching time was configured throughout the academic year with some managing to cover all the course content before the prelim and others for various reasons not completing the course till just prior to external exam. Hence the amount of time dedicated to prelim preparation was dependant on how much of the course they had completed. Time allocation for prelim prep varied between 9 and 12 hours. Some lecturers noted that they also did exam prep during guidance time and others mentioned the fact they were mindful of the fact that they were preparing students for an external exam and as such they were preparing students for exams throughout the year and not just confined to exam preparation classes.

a) Importance

Nearly all lecturers noted that conducting a prelim and providing prelim preparation was important, if not ‘crucial’ for student success. Lecturers thought it was important to provide a prelim in order to prepare students psychologically for undertaking an exam under exam like conditions. Familiarising students with the rigours of an exam, the pressures associated with it and the regulations that need to be adhered to, serve to prepare the student for external examination. It allows identification of common pitfalls on a personal level for students at a retrievable stage before the external exam. Finally, it provides an opportunity for both the student and lecturer to identify gaps in knowledge and where focus is needed for external exam preparation.
‘… think it’s a good thing to have a prelim. One of the main reasons for that is that it gets people used to exam conditions, because it’s very different from the ongoing assessment for the timing. We have some people who are maybe a wee bit under confident and they are very, very thorough and they’ll take forever, but the work is very good, but obviously you can’t do that in the exam. So the prelim gives them an opportunity to be put under that kind of pressure. So I think it is a good thing and that is why we are certainly doing a prelim this year because it is very important.’

‘I think it’s good. It can give them, I was going to say gives them a bit of a shock, but not necessarily because they do exam preparation anyway before that, even when we’re doing exam preparation we might do a practice paper under exam conditions. We do that occasionally before the prelim and again we might do another one before the actual exam. So they know that there is a time slot, because there is a few of them that it is the time that throws them.’

The prelim for some students can also be a time of reassurance providing confirmation of their level of knowledge and understanding.

‘It’s the only time they really get a full flavour of what the exam is going to mean. It gives them a clue of where their gaps are and the stuff they think they really knew they suddenly realise they don’t know it at all. And to some of them actually it’s very reassuring because they find that they can go in there, they coped with the situation and it does take some of the fear away. So it can be bit of a sort of a pick up the whatever and a reality check sometimes, or it can be this is not as bad as I thought, and I’m capable.’

One lecturer questioned the importance of the prelim, suggesting the time taken to prepare and conduct an exam in an already tight schedule is unnecessary and should be questioned. Whilst accepting prelims are necessary for appeals it was suggested that evidence could be gathered in other ways. She suggested more formative type assessments throughout the year to gather evidence rather than relying on one summative exam at the end of the year.

‘I know the history behind why you have to do a prelim but I don’t know if that’s always the best use of the time that you have since the time is very tight and actually although it’s a prelim maybe it is only a two hour exam the time focusing on that can sometimes take away from the time focusing on the actual exam which at the end of the day is the most important I think there are ways of gathering evidence for appeals than just a prelim.’

‘I guess doing maybe more mini type exams covering all the syllabus rather than one prelim covering part of the similar to the external exam but maybe won’t cover the same topics that’s where some students can fall down because it is not covering the whole course.’

Lecturers noted that prelim preparation allows time to address the dearth of study skills mentioned above and focussing in on skills necessary for exam completion. Reading, deciphering questions and time-managed answers to focus students’ attention towards the prelim were all noted as important.

‘Yes I certainly do, I think at least it gives them the kind of idea of the things they are going to be faced with and the kind of time management things they might need to consider.’
Lecturers in the main say they use past papers for prelim preparation as these give the students an idea of how questions are posed and an opportunity to explore sample answers. They are adopted in a variety of ways using them as a benchmark at the beginning of preparation and reassessing later in the block or as a whole class teaching method. Others use multiple choice questions to revise breadth of knowledge and mini assessments to get students used to writing for long periods of time.

‘Yes you look at past papers, we have specimen papers from the SQA, any extra questions, we might even do extra questions from the units that we’ve already done, extra revision. We use different resources off the internet that have practice questions, obviously there’s not enough past papers to do one every week, but we might re-use one. I might use one right at the beginning to see what they know and then use the same one a few weeks later once they have done a bit more revision and see if they get a better mark on the same questions, just to judge their levels of what you know they need to concentrate on. But that’s the main thing, using past papers, any extra practice questions we can get our hands on from the Internet or from different sources.’

‘… revision to actually do one sometimes two kind of formal mini assessments in the class and these could be multiple choices to start with but also I tend to put in as a set with learning questions having difficulties with writing try to put in long formal questions so that they actually have to write a paragraph in order to get them on board to practise writing answers.’

b) Effectiveness

Lecturers were asked whether they thought prelim prep is effective in improving students’ performance in the prelim exam. Most felt this was difficult to answer objectively and categorically, however the alternative (in not providing any preparation) led them to consider that it was effective. They noted that given the time limitations they provided effective preparation yet it was ultimately reliant on the students’ commitment and ability. Nonetheless most felt it prepared students (as noted above) for answering exam type questions as through the course they were commonly using multiple-choice questions which made no demand on their ability to decipher questions and answer in depth, yet concisely under time restrictions. Prelim preparation effectiveness was also somewhat dependent on the time of year the prelim was held as this impacted on the amount of the course covered and therefore the authenticity attached. If held too early not all of the course is covered and if held too late it left little time for external exam preparation, it was necessary to try to achieve a balance.

‘I think it prepares them better because they are not used to answering questions like that because their units are all now multiple choice questions which is much easier for them, they are not used to writing out full answers, so the exam prep prepares them for that because they aren’t used to that element of it, because everything is written that they do at all levels and it’s not multiple choice so that does kind of throw them a little bit so they need that preparation definitely. It does help them.’
‘I suppose it is just getting them as ready as possible, covering as much as you can as possible so that the prelim is as realistic as it can be, cause you know in the past, I think they have offered the prelim back in February or something, but that means it hasn’t got the full range of questions or if it has, students don’t have a choice, you know, because they won’t have done all the studying. So it’s not having it too early, but having it, not having it too early so they have covered as much as possible but having it also early enough so that there is a space between it and the exam, so that what they learn strategy wise and where they are in subjects, they can then change it or implement what they need to implement in that space.’

4.2.4 General preparation

Nearly all colleges provided generic centrally driven exam preparation classes with some staff using this facility more than others. Some were not aware of any and two were aware of the central student support providing optional classes but for no particular reason had not encouraged it in class time. Others embraced this generic resource more fully inviting members of support staff to provide a session (normally one class session) with their students embracing general exam preparation techniques. One mentioned that a session is provided early in the year as part of the students’ induction but considered that this was far too early for students to fully embrace it. As a follow-up they repeated the event in class time and this was deemed more appropriate and thus successful.

Those who used the facility felt that it was effective in providing general study skills from sources with specialist educational skills. Bringing in a ‘fresh’ face, someone who was independent of the students learning they felt, introduced students to different study techniques, to the general importance of exam preparation and generally reinforced lecturers ‘mantras’ about preparation. However, these lecturers considered that although generic preparation was a useful additional tool which could be utilised more for exam preparation it could not replace specific subject exam preparation.

‘So I thought it was quite good. I mean it’s only one thing that we do as well as their exam preparation, but if there was more things like that, that we could do to help them, think of ways to remember things, it would be really good.’

‘Yeah definitely. I mean as much as it is really common sense to me, she explained it better, you know she had a better way of explaining how the mind works and how different people work in different ways and different techniques that you could use, so I thought it was very helpful. Anything additional that I could get would be great.’

‘Yes they seem to be finding it very positive. I think also maybe it’s good for them to have a fresh face and a fresh angle on it, because they’ve had us all year. Me going on about numbering your examples and stuff, but *** could come in and she’s unbiased and she just wants them to succeed kind of thing.’

4.2.5 External exam preparation

It was difficult to distinguish the difference between the preparation for prelim and external examination with the only exception being that external examination preparation was possibly more focused on areas of need that were identified through the prelim exam. Lecturers categorically felt that it was important to prepare students for the external exam and that external exam preparation was effective in improving performance. For this reason the interviews focused more on the content of external exam preparation and possible proposed improvements to the external preparation.
Lecturers remarked that external examination preparation was not wholly different than prelim preparation. It generally kicked off with an autopsy of the prelim exam providing whole class and individual feedback on performance. The prelim allowed identification of knowledge gaps and areas for revision and reinforcement of regulations/instructions that lead to common pitfalls. Preparation is therefore now more focused on identified needs which are proposed by lecturers and students alike and past papers are predominantly used as revision sources.

‘I use the text from the prelims as a good step to iron out the problems before they get to the exam. For example in the exams cause again students don’t read the front sheet and the instructions and if you take some of the exams they have to answer section one and choose one out of the three options a number of times the students have actually answered all three, every option even though they have not been taught every option they will go through because they don’t read. But we in the prelims hope that we can get these things ironed out.’

‘Example questions from past papers stressing the importance of things like being able to read questions and manage your time and timing them how long it might take them to answer a particular question and looking at how you would lay things out because in accounting that is obviously important and where they can pick up marks so that type of thing rather than say techniques like how to study.’

‘We look at obviously the responses to the prelim papers and if there’s a particular area that there are quite a lot of the students haven’t been able to do, then obviously we’ll focus on that. Or we might just ask the students themselves, is there a particular unit you would like us to concentrate on today in exam preparation session?’

There were a couple of proposed improvements suggested by lecturers for external preparation and both of these are being put in place. One department was engaging the generic student learning services to do a reinforcing exam prep session post prelim as this was considered as an enhancement feature of preparation. One other department was organising a staff development session on marking as they considered their marking was too lenient and by default this had affected their exam preparation. It is hoped that by providing such development, staff will be more strategic in exam preparation. Lecturers on the whole however, felt that they could do little to improve external exam preparation. It was now in some ways up to the student to engage with the program, to embrace the techniques/suggestions proposed by lecturers and to complete their own revision.

‘I don’t know actually how much more, you know, we could physically do in preparing people.’

‘We’ve worked on this for the last few years and come to a point where I would say that our schemes have matured and we’ve learnt from our mistakes or good practices. So I think our programmes is fine, our time allocation is ok, it is just how much you get the students to make use of it. The most challenging aspect is enticing learners to take the responsibility of learning on their own shoulders.’
4.2.6 Examination and the learning experience

The notion that exam preparation could enhance student learning was explored with lecturers. The majority considered exam preparation as an end in itself with the ultimate aim of achieving relative optimum performance on an individual basis. It is a time for revision, reinforcement and returning to topic areas completed earlier in the year. One lecturer considered that perhaps it contributed more than this and looked upon it as adding to and enhancing students’ lifelong learning.

‘Teaching is for passing their assessment with you that is teaching for the effect of it.’

‘Well I suppose seeing that most of them are hoping to go on to Uni, then I would say yes, because it’s teaching them skills that are going to be useful every time they have to sit any kind of assessment. If they are students who are going to leave the year and never sit an exam again in their life, then it’s a means to a short-term goal. I suppose, I mean I suppose one of the views could be that yes it would enhance their learning because it’s meaning that they do go over things, they’re looking at things from different angles, their dealing with the material differently from what they did first time round and stuff. So I suppose in that way it does enhance their learning.’

4.2.7 Professional development

Lecturers on the whole felt confident in their ability to prepare students for examination. Most felt this was attributable to their experience of teaching exam classes, knowledge of exams and for a couple the fact that they were working as part of a team, so could seek advice and corroboration from colleagues. Nonetheless, nearly all said they would benefit from staff development in this area. Those who did not said that it was either not an area of priority or that they did not see it as an area of need. Specific areas of staff development that were mentioned included, general exam techniques, learning from other lecturers – what they use and what they have found that works, and general psychological/emotional preparation, e.g. improving memory, reducing stress, etc.

‘… but I know that I would benefit from something that can give me tips and ideas of how to prepare students better than I think that they are prepared.’

‘… well maybe other peoples experiences and what works, you can’t always tell what works but at least be able to judge whether it is something that your class could benefit from.’

‘Memory techniques I would think. Yeah. Overall they don’t seem to get, I don’t know I’m not a student and I don’t get stressed, but obviously they will get stressed. I suppose we could do a wee bit of that as well, how to keep calm. We do try to tell them that if you don’t know a question then miss it out, don’t sit and ponder over it for hours. Just basic things like that, you would do anyway. I mean if there’s anything else that we can do it would be great, anything at all.’

Identified in the background and introduction section was the important contribution made by Principal Assessors’ reports for individual subjects. As part of the research it was deemed important to assess the level of access and usage amongst lecturers of these Principal Assessor reports. Only two were shown to have accessed the reports in the past (one used to work for the SQA and was familiar with them and the other was the NQ co-ordinator). The remaining lecturers had either not accessed them for no apparent reason or had not heard of them and would not know where to access them. For this remaining group the interviewer had to explain what they were and their purpose.
'Yeah I think I would probably assume it was there rather than know it was there. But again, having only been through that system once it's not something I've accessed, but probably should. Or I should make sure the team accesses it.'

'No. I don't even know where to get them.'

For the two lecturers who used them they could readily point out the many benefits of accessing the reports and the contribution they make to examination preparation.

'The information is really beneficial I think there are some bits of it that you might not particularly need personally for your class but generally the section on information about the candidates and how they performed in the exam I think everybody should read if they are preparing someone for an exam.'

'Yes, I use it because you know how they are going to mark things typical … It's not what the SQA are looking for they don't want to know about specific, they want to know do the students understand the whole generic thing about what is this package called; it's called a word processing; it's called a spreadsheet; so they come back with things like that saying this is where students have lost marks on.'

Lecturers suggested that Principal Assessor reports should be more accessible and possibly subject lecturers targeted with their subject reports by e-mail. One lecturer that uses the reports suggested that although all the report headings were consistent the amount of detail contained was not. And this may influence lecturers’ willingness to seek such information because of the increasingly paper driven nature of their jobs and the associated time limitations.

'But also, then maybe for kind of instance, something simple like an e-mail from SFEU or SQA or our own internal people who do have jobs who basically they don't have any teaching or anything but they are just going to develop the managers who actually have to deal with these things, so an e-mail for an appropriate lecturer who is doing NQ. Something like that or for SFEU to send us, you know, to be more in front of your eyes.'

'I think one thing may be a combination with that perhaps making sure that these Principal Assessors’ reports are consistent across subject areas. I know that all the headings are the same but the way that they are written so that it is easier for people to understand because you sometimes don't pick up what they mean.'

'Again it's like Principal Assessors – some of them take that report very seriously and put a lot of work into preparing it really well so that schools and colleges will really benefit from what's in it and other Principal Assessors don't put too much effort into it at all.'

'Sometimes there is a cultural oh no not more information to read; quite often people don’t use SQA's website so if the SQA co-ordinator maybe pass them to senior lecturers reports they will come to the lecturers so they will maybe read them if they were in their mail tray but they certainly I don’t think will seek them out.'

4.2.8 Final comments

At the completion of interviews, each lecturer was invited to comment on any aspect of the NQ exam preparation that had not been discussed or which they would like to make further comment on. What was addressed by a number of lecturers was the increasingly academically diverse group of students they teach and the many associated challenges.
In relation to this, time demands to get through the course and preparation of this diverse group of students for exams were highlighted. Finally, a couple mentioned where a team of lecturers who are contributing to the same NQ, that teaching and exam preparation is consistent.

'The one thing is we have got several tutors all preparing NQ social care students for the exam because we've got 4 different tutors, and every tutor has their own way of working and they are going at a different pace and it's maybe getting those tutors together to look at where they are at and what is best for the students. You know that's an area that can be challenging, because of course everybody is busy and getting tutors together. Getting us all together at the right time is quite a challenge.'

'If you did actually have more time which was official time it probably would help but again we are doing quite a lot within the year and we do rely on the students to help themselves as well and some do, some don't. Like I say it really is the students we get in are such a mix they are such an age group 15 to 60 they can get and all have different experiences on things like that but we probably as I say I can understand why schools probably get higher marks as well because the type of student they get, how many hours they are there and they probably don't cover as much as we do as well and we get students anywhere on there and there are students who have already failed at school which are the difficult ones.'

4.2.9 Summary

- All interviewees were experienced qualified lecturers teaching either Intermediate 2 or Highers in further education. Three of the lecturers are or have been SQA markers and value this experience as having contributed to their exam preparation experience.
- When discussing the type of skills students lacked, lecturers mentioned their difficulty in gauging and distributing time for answering questions. They also mentioned students' inability to write discursively but concisely, to read and understand not only the question but also the instructions and underpinning all, the ability to do so under exam conditions.
- They all provided an opportunity for students to sit a prelim exam and in turn provided prelim preparation for this. Nearly all lecturers noted that conducting a prelim and providing prelim preparation was important if not 'crucial' for student success.
- Familiarising students with the rigours of an exam, the pressures associated with it and the regulations that need to be adhered to, serve to prepare the student for external examination. It allows identification of common pitfalls on a personal level for students at a retrievable stage before the external exam. Finally, it provides an opportunity for both the student and lecturer to identify gaps in knowledge and where focus is needed for external exam preparation.
- Lecturers in the main say they use past papers for prelim preparation as these give the students an idea of how questions are posed and an opportunity to explore sample answers. They are adopted in a variety of ways using them as a benchmark at the beginning of preparation and reassessing later in the block or as a whole class teaching method. Others use multiple-choice questions to revise breadth of knowledge and mini assessments to get students used to writing for long periods of time.
• Whether they thought prelim prep was effective in improving students’ performance in the prelim exam, for most it was difficult to answer objectively and categorically. They noted that given the time limitations they provided effective preparation yet it was ultimately reliant on the students’ commitment and ability. Prelim preparation effectiveness was also somewhat dependent on the time of year the prelim was held as this impacted on the amount of the course covered and therefore the authenticity attached.

• Nearly all colleges provided generic centrally driven exam preparation classes with some staff using this facility more than others. Those who used the resource felt that it was effective in providing general study skills from sources with specialist educational skills. However, these lecturers considered that although generic preparation was a useful additional tool which could be utilised more for exam preparation it could not replace specific subject exam preparation.

• It was difficult to distinguish the difference between the preparation for prelim and external examination with the only exception being that external examination preparation was possibly more focused on areas of need that were identified through the prelim exam. Lecturers categorically felt that it was important to prepare students for the external exam. For this reason, the interviews focused more on the content of external exam preparation and possible proposed improvements to the external preparation.

• The notion that exam preparation could enhance student learning was explored with lecturers. The majority considered exam preparation as an end in itself with the ultimate aim of achieving relative optimum performance on an individual basis. One lecturer considered that perhaps it contributed more than this and looked upon it as adding to and enhancing students’ lifelong learning.

• Lecturers on the whole felt confident in their ability to prepare students for examination. Nonetheless, nearly all said they would benefit from staff development in this area. Specific areas of staff development that were mentioned included, general exam techniques, learning from other lecturers – what they use and what they have found that works, and general psychological/emotional preparation, e.g. improving memory, reducing stress, etc.

• Only two lecturers were shown to have accessed Principal Assessor reports, however, they could readily point out the benefits of accessing them and the contribution they make to examination preparation. Lecturers suggested that PA reports should be more accessible, readily available and attention drawn to them.

• Finally, lecturers commented on the increasingly academically diverse group of students they teach and the many associated challenges. In relation to this, time demands to get through the course and preparation of this diverse group of students for exams was highlighted.

4.3 In-depth interviews with Principal Assessors

4.3.1 Principal Assessor background

Three Principal Assessor interviews were conducted: one, face to face and two telephone interviews. One Assessor had just been appointed for this academic year, one had completed 2 academic years and the other had 5 years experience. All had taught in colleges in Scotland.

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1 The views represented here are the professional views of the Principal Assessors interviewed and are not necessarily the views of the SQA.
4.3.2 Exam skills and preparedness

Principal Assessors were fairly consistent in their views regarding the exam skills preparation skills that students lacked. They felt that many of these were basic exam skills. For example, they suggested that some students consistently failed to read and understand the structure of exam papers. Incidents of students labelling answers incorrectly, not interpreting the question and in return providing inappropriate answers were also commonplace, as was giving pre-prepared answers to demonstrate knowledge but leaving the actual question unanswered. They also suggested that students lacked the ability to write discursively yet concisely, and to show depth of knowledge and understanding. Similarly analysis and evaluation skills were regarded as poorly developed. It was suggested that this was due in some ways to the historical background of the way in which many courses were taught where students were encouraged to learn by rote and that maybe teaching approaches needed to adapt to the new courses.

‘They can learn things parrot fashion but find it difficult to actually apply it …’

‘I think the main thing really is discursive writing. Actually writing chunks of text that make sense and have a thread of thought through them. Students aren’t very good at doing that.’

‘Knowing how much to write, the length of the answer, using their mark allocation, spotting the command words in the question, whether it’s to describe or explain or just name or whatever. The number of items required, if you’re asked for one don’t give two or three, analysis and evaluation, discursive writing, research evidence, that’s one point that I could have specified. You know, students have to get into the habit of the referring to research evidence, names and dates, and interpreting and using that for analysis, etc.’

‘There is historical background to this in terms of the previous courses, and I think there has been quite a big change. Well the courses themselves have changed quite radically and I think we have a legacy of teaching approaches, which are taking time to adapt to the new courses.’

One of the Principal Assessors suggested there was a lack of consistency in relation to exam preparation across the colleges and that quite a lot depended on the individual members of staff. They felt that there were pockets of ‘good practice’ within colleges but this was not necessarily shared between college staff, even if they were in the same college.

‘I think you will find that within a big college like … that there are probably four or five lecturers teaching it and you’ll probably find that two of them do it well and the other three don’t and it is just the way that we run colleges and the way we work as teams …’

4.3.3 Prelim and prelim preparation

a) Importance

Prelim preparation was regarded as important as it allowed time for lecturers and students to revisit and possibly reinforce areas that had been covered earlier in the academic year. The prelim was seen as important in improving students’ performance, as it was part of the preparation process for the external exam and where weaknesses could be identified and addressed. It was seen as a means of getting students into the ‘right habits’.
'So the prelim is very important to the students from that point of view and therefore preparation is very important, so I mean you prepare them for the external exam, so with the prelim you are starting that preparation a bit earlier and getting them into good habits.'

'I think it helps them. Because they did some of the units away at the beginning of the year having the preparation reinforces what they've already learnt so that they can actually show this in the prelim. It also highlights weaknesses and you can hone in on these weaknesses and try and get them up to speed before the actual exam.'

The importance of the prelim as evidence for the appeal process was also recognised.

'It is important here because on the basis of the prelim, teachers will give a predicted grade, well they don't just use the prelim they use the NABs as well, they give a predicted grade. If the student doesn't reach that grade then they will consider appealing and then if they appeal then prelim evidence is regarded as the most important evidence in whether an appeal is granted or not.'

**b) Effectiveness**

All three PAs were unanimous in the fact that prelim preparation is effective in improving students’ performance in the prelim exam. Like the lecturers they saw prelim preparation as part of the process of preparing students for the external exam and as such the effectiveness was derived from the process of prelim preparation and undertaking the prelim. It was proposed that for some students it might be the first time that they are going through the process of preparing for an external exam and as such preparation would be ‘effective’ in improving their performance.

One PA commented on the efficacy of relying on NABs to provide external exam preparation rather than providing a prelim exam. Doing so, it was suggested was fraught with difficulty as it examines material students have just covered, (therefore not testing retention and linking of knowledge), material they possibly have been guided towards and as such students tend to do better in NABs than exams therefore, setting unrealistic expectations for both students and lecturers.

‘Well, the problem with the NABs is that they often it's material they have just covered, it is material which they often may have been guided towards and they therefore often do better in NABs than in exam.’

**4.3.4 Improvements to prelim preparation**

Principal Assessors provided a number of ways to improve prelim preparation. It was suggested that the prelim exam itself should be held as late as possible in the academic year and as close to external exam as possible to ensure that all the course is covered. This is to ensure that the prelim reflects the content of the external exam and is therefore a more realistic indicator of the exam. It was suggested that prelim preparation needs to be timetabled, and that students receive the 40 hours as recommended by the SQA. Equally lecturing staff, need to plan content throughout the academic year and have mini assessments to assess and encourage learning and all importantly to provide feedback.
4.3.5 External exam preparation

All Principal Assessors thought that external exam preparation is effective and important in improving students’ performance in the external exam for much the same reasons as given for the prelim preparation. The only difference now is that students and lecturers are more focused and perhaps driven by the outcome of the prelims. Preparation can also become more ‘more personalised after the prelim exam’ as realistic performance feedback is available. Principal Assessors also commented that students are more motivated to prepare for the external exam and may now more fully understand the amount of study that is necessary for the external exam.

‘If they do not get preparation, then they won’t know what to expect so it is important.’

‘Yes. Obviously it reinforces what they have learnt in the first block and brings it back into – they forget, they wouldn’t just be able to sit it. They’ve not looked at any of these subjects for three months or so.’

4.3.6 Examination and the learning experience

Prelim and exam preparation was considered by all Principal Assessors to contribute to the students’ learning experience. Students when they enter courses are deemed to be on a steep learning curve where their rate of achievement is measured throughout the year and for most this is a positive experience. This positive learning experience for some opens the gateways to further study and provides a good foundation educational experience for all.

‘Yes as it is not just about learning the facts but it’s also about assimilating it and writing it out effectively which is good preparation for their future academic career. What I’m saying is that in preparing them for assessment that is part of the learning experience. It is not simply training them to jump through hoops. It is actually helping them to develop in intellectual skills, which will get them through the exam, but it will also ensure that they have actually achieved good learning.’

4.3.7 Principal Assessor reports

All Principal Assessors thought that usage and access of Principal Assessor reports was nominal and that they were ‘not accessed as much as they should be’ despite the fact that efforts are made to make college staff aware of the reports. It was also commented that they ‘were quite vague in some ways’ and ‘were not consistent’. It was suggested that most lecturers either, do not know they exist or, do not take the time to access them. However, this was ultimately dependent on the college and ethos that existed within departments. It was suggested that the problem is exacerbated when increasing numbers of part-time lecturers are employed on ‘teaching hours only’ contracts and therefore are not required to attend team meetings where such information is shared. Accessing the reports via the SQA website was also commented on as being difficult and an area which perhaps should be addressed. It was further suggested that SQA markers within institutions should provide general feedback to their own institutions on an annual basis to raise awareness of issues.
4.3.8 Professional development

The ability to write robust prelim papers was the one area that was suggested by all Assessors. Providing a fair test for students that was reflective of the external exam was seen as crucial and a skill that was lacking for most lecturers. Equally a robust test was needed for the appeals process. Similarly it was suggested that marking experience was invaluable and that individual departments should attempt to encourage lecturers to become markers and in turn for that person to feed back to colleagues.

‘One Assessor suggested the provision of a website exclusively for lecturers hosted by SQA/SFEU that would allow lecturing staff to search topic content areas and generic examination preparation.’

4.3.9 Final comments

At the conclusion of interviews, Principal Assessors were invited to make further comment on any aspect of the NQ exam preparation. Their comments included:

‘Everyone who is teaching or doing preparation for the exam should be a marker.’

‘Person who is doing exam preparation has taught the unit and is familiar with the content.’

‘It is a pity that prelims have to be early to get in estimates it would be better if prelims were later.’

‘It is important that students receive their full 40 hours exam preparation as recommended by SQA.’

4.3.10 Summary

- The Principal Assessors were consistent in their view that a number of students did not have the necessary basic exam skills.
- There was a feeling that exam preparation was not consistent across courses and colleges and that some college staff were doing this better than others.
- The prelim and preparation for the prelim were seen as important in improving student performance in the prelim and in the external exam.
- The prelim and preliminary preparation were seen as effective in improving student performance in the prelim and the external exam.
- The prelim preparation process could be improved by considering the timing of the prelim exam, ensuring that students received adequate prelim preparation time and teaching staff providing adequate and appropriate forms of assessment throughout the year.
- All Principal Assessors agreed that external exam preparation is important and effective in improving student performance in the external exam and emphasised the important role of prelims as part of that process.
- Examination skills can be seen as a positive contribution to the overall learning experience.
- Awareness and use of Principal Assessor reports by teaching staff was low.
- Areas for future professional development include the writing of prelim papers, including making these appropriate for the appeal process and the opportunity to acquire marking experience and share this with other colleagues.
4.4 Focus groups with students

4.4.1 Student background

Two focus groups with students in two different colleges were carried out. One group consisted of 6 male respondents who were studying for an Intermediate 2 qualification in Computing Systems. The other group consisted of 9 female respondents who were undertaking a National Qualification in Social Care. Everybody on the Social Care course had started at the Intermediate 2 level but all were now working towards a Higher qualification, although it was not compulsory that the students progress to sit the final examination for the Intermediate 2 or Higher. Both groups had students of mixed ages and included those who had just left school and those who were returning to education after a period away from formal education.

4.4.2 Exam skills and preparedness

Student perceptions of their preparedness to sit exams before attending the course varied according to whether they had recently left school or they had left school some time ago. Preparedness also varied based on whether the students had had experience of sitting exams while at school. Those who had left school some time ago and those who had limited experience of sitting exams at school perceived themselves to be less prepared than students who had recently left school and who were familiar with the exam process. When prompted about why they didn’t feel prepared, confidence seemed to be a major factor, particularly confidence related to writing. Their comments included:

‘I left school to come here and I’d sat 6 years of exams so I was alright and I felt I was fine.’

‘Not at all … No. I’ve never sat exams before – ever. I think the younger people would have because they’ve done it in school and stuff but the older ones …’

‘It helps to have some kind of understanding of writing essays which I’ve never done because I didn’t do well at school and if you’ve not got that experience then even writing simple things – you never thought you were confident even writing assessments and stuff.’

4.4.3 Prelim and prelim preparation

a) Types of prelim preparation

Students were asked what type of exam preparation they had experienced for the prelim of the national qualification they were currently studying for. Both groups of students had received exam preparation for their prelim, although this was delivered differently to the two groups. For the computing systems students’ revision classes were arranged but attendance at the classes was not good and some students did not like the style of preparation offered. The social care students seemed more pressed for time and there was not the same opportunity for formal preparation, although they did revise material from the curriculum and the tutor showed them examples of past papers.

‘It was just his way of doing stuff – he spent forever going over stuff and you could have read it in five minutes.’
‘He gave you the question and two seconds later he’s handing you the answer paper of the same paper. You just want to go over the question so there’s not much point in that. You’re going to look at the answers because you’ve got them in front of you.’

‘… we didn’t get a lot of preparation in class, although we did go over things. We got the past papers the week before the exam whereas I wouldn’t feel confident getting that the week before so I got my mum to order them as soon as we got told the date of the prelim.’

Both groups of students seemed to prefer to have guidance on the direction of their studies for exams. The computing systems students were given specific areas that they had to study for the prelim. The social care students felt less directed in their revision of the social care curriculum and were able to contrast this with their experience in another class (mental health) where they felt their revision had been more directed. The social care students seemed to be aware that this was most likely due to time pressures.

‘They give you the topics and you need to sort of really need to know what you are talking about on this part and not concentrate on. To make sure you are not studying something that’s not going to be worth anything in the exam anyway.’

‘The Mental Health one is being prepared a lot better – we know exactly what we are doing with that as well because we’ve got the case study and we’ve got specific points that we’ve got to research. Whereas the Care one it is everything – you don’t know what’s going to be in it.’

‘They were trying to cram in work before the prelim because our timetable takes us up to the actual exam, but they were trying to get in as much as they could.’

In terms of techniques for exam preparation use was made of past papers and advice was given on what to expect on the exam day. The social care tutor spent time going over certain topics with the students to help them remember, some students described it as brainwashing! It was suggested that much of this activity was not just undertaken at exam time but was taught throughout the course. Students were not introduced to memory techniques, such as, mind maps as tools for revision.

‘You get told to take time over the questions – make sure you answer the right question – what is actually asked.’

‘That has been mentioned throughout the year – you get questions like that quite a lot and if there’s anything that you cannot do throughout the year the tutor will come and explain.’

‘What is discrimination … What is discrimination … and it’s in your head and even when you’ve went off the subject she’ll come back to it, come on what is … and we’ve got to do it again. So you get it in your head because it is repeated – think about it.’

b) Importance and effectiveness

Students generally thought that exam preparation was important in improving their performance in the prelim exam. The computing systems students felt that sitting the prelim helped them to understand what was expected of them and prepared them for sitting the external exam later on. The social care students highlighted that exam preparation allowed you to pick up on areas that you weren’t doing too well in and to identify those areas where more revision is needed for the external exam.
Examination of the Perceived Usefulness of Exam Preparation to NQ Students in Colleges

‘The prelims are preparing you for your actual exams – you understand what sort of conditions you'll be under.’

‘If you’ve never done an exam in your life before until the prelim and then you understand what's being expected of you and you might not pass but at least you know what's involved in the whole exam procedures.’

‘Your prelim is preparation – well it highlights your weak points.’

‘The prelims have been very good for us because we now know where we need to improve and what areas we need more revision in.’

Both groups of students found it difficult to comment on the effectiveness of prelim preparation. They discussed the problems of measuring the effectiveness of prelim preparation and combining exam revision with class work. The social care students also found it difficult to comment on the effectiveness of the social care prelim preparation. They suggested that emphasis was being placed on the course work at this stage and that more emphasis would be given to revision for the external exam later on.

‘Yes it was. If we hadn’t had that we might not have improved on what we were going to get originally, but you can never tell – it’s just hypothetical.’

‘Because you are concentrating on doing investigations, presentations and programming and all that and then boom there’s your exam.’

‘We’re having to sit our coursework anyway because the exams are out with our coursework – they are extras, so they are trying to get us through the coursework which is the most important part of it and then the exams are up to us (it is optional whether you do it so).’

‘I think we’ll get better preparation for the real exam because they’ll have time to put in – they say they’re going to put in a couple of sessions for us to revise and stuff, but we didn’t get that for the prelim.’

4.4.4 External exam preparation

Most of this discussion was based on previous experience of sitting external exams (mainly exams sat at school) as the students had not sat their external exam associated with their national qualification course yet. The students thought that the exam preparation they had received was important in improving their performance in their external exam performance and that the exam preparation was effective in assisting this improved performance. Students perceived this preparation to be effective due to the way in which they undertook the exam preparation process. The allocation of specific periods of time for revision seemed to be particularly important to students.

‘Because you bettered your prelim grade. Most people did end up better than their prelim grade.’

‘Again at school you had study leave and you could come in and that sort of thing. We had three weeks straight before exams to learn.’
‘I found the exam preparation at school effective. It drummed it in to you – instead of having a class you would just do preparation for the exam; or we would do half an hour revision and then a lesson with questions at the end; there were sample answers so you had an idea of what was required; there were points charts at school and you got a lollipop if you did really well.’

4.4.5 Examination and the learning experience

Students thought that the examination and preparing for it contributed to their learning about the subject but there was recognition that not everything taught would be remembered. There was also some recognition of the difference between remembering and understanding of a subject and that to understand a subject requires more than short-term memory activity. It is important to note that although students are being taught the same subject it is difficult to argue that they are all having the same learning experience. Differences in the previous learning experiences of students before they come to college seem to impact significantly on their perceptions of their ability to learn.

‘I suppose it does because you have to take it all in for the exam. I’ve learned loads this year, I’ve done so much that I never thought I would.’

‘Some stuff you will remember – the stuff you’re learning most about – we’ll remember computing and we’ll remember that [?] code – but some stuff away back at the start – we’re not going to remember half of that.’

‘I think revision is to do with memory and understanding the subject. Much of it is memory but you still need to understand it. I feel that going over it few times rather than right before the exam would be more beneficial.’

‘… I think more preparation and more techniques especially for mature students who haven’t been in that environment for a good few years. Even just remembering how to study – you end up reading and reading and not actually learning anything.’

4.4.6 Improving exam preparation

The students identified two areas that they felt would lead to improvements in the exam preparation process. The first area is the process of exam preparation and how exam preparation is built into the subject curriculum. Students thought that more time should be given to allow them to prepare for the prelim exam and that exam preparation time should be allocated before the external exam.

‘Stopping class work around a week before the exam and going over everything you’ve done that year instead of saying right you’ve got this to hand in you’ve got that to hand in – right you’ve got to study as well. I know a lot of it is in your time and they try and express that but folk still have lives outside the college and there’s not everybody that can sit down in their own house and study, good study.’

The second area is the type of exam preparation techniques that are used. Students valued the process of using past papers but highlighted that these need to be made available in ‘good time’. They also indicated that if these are used, sample answers to questions in the past papers are very helpful in letting students understand the standard that is expected of them. One of the major concerns of students is remembering the knowledge they need for exams and this is certainly an area where they feel they would benefit from extra help. Other suggestions for exam preparation techniques included time management, and stress and relaxation techniques.
Examination of the Perceived Usefulness of Exam Preparation to NQ Students in Colleges

‘I think memory techniques and mind maps beneficial because out of anything else my biggest downfall is remembering. I sometimes get a mental block.’

4.4.7 Summary

- Student preparedness to sit exams depended on prior experience of taking exams and whether this was a recent experience or not.
- In the colleges where students were interviewed there did not appear to be a standard method of delivering preparation for the prelim exam or the external exam. There did not seem to be any consistency in the amount of time allocated for exam preparation but the type of exam preparation techniques seemed similar.
- Exam preparation for the prelim exam was perceived to be important by students as it allows practise and identifies areas for improvement. However, students found it difficult to comment on effectiveness when asked directly.
- Previous exam experience confirmed external exam preparation as important and effective as evidenced by improved exam results.
- Students thought that exam preparation did contribute to the overall learning experience.
- The wide range of ability and educational experiences in college classes, including the sitting of exams, means that ‘one size of exam preparation is unlikely to fit all’.
- Students identified two key areas for improving exam preparation. First is the allocation of time and the structure of courses to allow that time to be allocated, and second is the type of exam preparation techniques that are used.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

The detailed conclusions of the research are structured around two main areas: the extent of exam preparation on NQ courses and the perceptions of lecturers, Principal Assessors and students on the importance and effectiveness of exam preparation on NQ courses.

5.1.1 Extent of exam preparation on NQ courses

Exam preparation on NQ courses appears to be fairly widespread with 61% of courses sampled offering preparation for the prelim and 50% offering preparation for the external exam. In addition, it was stated that exam preparation for all NQ courses might not necessarily be appropriate depending on the type of assessment offered for the course and the type of students taking the course. Of those providing prelim preparation, almost two-thirds provided between 3-6 hours and about another third provided 9 hours or more preparation. There is variation in the types of prelim preparation provided but nine out of ten of college teaching staff have used past papers as an exam preparation strategy.

5.1.2 Perceptions of teaching staff, Principal Assessors and students on the importance and effectiveness of exam preparation

5.1.2.1 Exam skills and preparedness

The general opinion of teaching staff is that before entering the NQ course not all college students are well prepared for exams. The teaching staff thought that preparedness to sit exams depended on the students’ ability and previous exam experience.
The teaching staff described students’ general inability to perform under exam conditions as demonstrated through the lack of ability to read exam instructions, to manage their time effectively, to read and interpret exam questions and the ability to write discursively but concisely. The Principal Assessors also thought that the college students lacked basic exam skills. The students said that some of them were more prepared to sit exams than others and their preparedness depended on their prior experience of sitting exams and whether this was a recent experience or not.

The Principal Assessors felt that exam preparation was not consistent across NQ courses and colleges and that some college teaching staff were doing this better than others. In the colleges where students were interviewed there did not appear to be a standard method of delivering preparation for the prelim exam or the external exam. There did not seem to be a consistent approach in the amount of time allocated for exam preparation or in the techniques used, although the use of past papers was prevalent.

These findings would suggest that there is scope to improve the exam preparedness of college students on NQ courses. While recognising that each NQ course is likely to have individual requirements in terms of exam preparation, the exam preparedness of students on NQ courses may be improved by offering a service that is consistent across courses and colleges. Perhaps those colleges who have developed good practice in this area can share this with other colleges who have not had the same opportunity to concentrate on this educational activity.

### 5.1.2.2 Prelim preparation

There was overwhelming consensus from each of the respondent groups that prelim preparation was important in improving student performance on NQ courses, mainly through familiarisation of students with the exam process and the identification of weak areas before the external exam. The teaching staff and Principal Assessors also recognised the importance of prelims in the appeal process on NQ courses.

When asked via the online questionnaire the teaching staff thought that prelim preparation was effective in improving performance in the prelim exam. However, when probed during the in-depth interviews the teaching staff found it difficult to answer objectively and categorically. They felt effectiveness depended not only on their input but also on variables that were outside their control, such as, student commitment and ability. The students also found it to difficult to comment on the effectiveness of prelim preparation. They found it difficult to directly link the preparation activity with the results of that preparation and there was an indication that they did not perceive the preparation they had received as particularly good. The Principal Assessors were much stronger in their view that prelim preparation was effective in improving student performance on NQ courses.

Given the high degree of importance associated with prelim preparation by all respondent groups and the issues around measuring effectiveness it is reasonable to suggest that further research be undertaken to provide evidence of the effectiveness of prelim preparation on NQ courses.
5.1.2.3 External exam preparation

Each group of respondents found it much easier to indicate that they thought that exam preparation for the external exam was effective in improving student performance in the external exam on NQ courses. One of the students actually said that they could see an improvement in performance through improved grades between those obtained at the prelim and the external exam. Both the teaching staff and the Principal Assessors emphasised the important role of prelims as part of the external exam preparation process.

5.1.2.4 Exam preparation and the learning experience

The Principal Assessors were unanimous in their view that exam preparation was very much part of the learning experience and it helped students to develop their intellectual skills. The students also recognised that preparing for the exam contributed to their learning about the subject. However, the majority of teaching staff considered exam preparation as an end in itself. Only one lecturer considered that it perhaps contributed more than this, adding to and enhancing the students’ lifelong learning.

As exam preparation is considered important and effective, at least at the external exam stage, and a considerable amount of educational resource is allocated to this activity perhaps there should be further discussion about whether and how exam preparation could contribute to the learning experience of students.

5.1.3 Overall conclusion

Following the above discussion it is suggested that exam preparation on NQ courses is considered to be useful at improving student performance on NQ courses by teaching staff, Principal Assessors and students. Each of the sample groups identified exam preparation as important, but the teaching staff and students were generally less confident of effectiveness, particularly at the prelim stage. There does seem to be scope to improve student experience of exam preparation for the prelim. To do this in the most effective way for all students undertaking NQ courses, that require them to sit examinations, there is a need to provide a stronger evidence base on the area of exam preparation.

5.2 Recommendations

Suggestions on how the preparedness of students for prelim exams on NQ courses can be improved were gathered during the research process. As the classroom lecturer delivers most of the prelim preparation most of the specific suggestions made were aimed at helping them improve the service they offered students. For example, the prelim preparation process could be improved by considering the timing of the prelim exam, ensuring that students received adequate prelim preparation time, providing adequate and appropriate forms of assessment throughout the year, and facilitating the availability of prelim papers and the sharing of prelim papers with other colleges. College lecturers suggested that Principal Assessor reports should be more accessible, readily available and attention drawn to them.

Staff development is one way in which teaching staff can be supported to bring about improvements in their ability to deliver exam preparation to students completing NQ courses. Areas for future professional development for teaching staff included the writing of prelim papers, including making these appropriate for the appeal process and the opportunity to acquire marking experience and share this with other colleagues.
About 50% of the survey respondents thought they would benefit from staff development in delivering exam preparation. The three most popular areas for staff development were memory techniques, reading questions and writing essays.

As little research has been conducted in the area of exam preparation for National Qualifications undertaken by college students, implementation of some of these recommendations is likely to require further research. For example, there would seem to be a need to gather more evidence on the effectiveness of prelim and external exam preparation and, in particular, more evidence is needed on what types of preparation are particularly effective and how the process can best be organised. In order that colleges can share effectively ‘good practice’ in exam preparation a mechanism that enables this ‘good practice’ to be identified should be considered.

Further research could be conducted to examine the contribution of exam preparation to the learning experience. ‘Teaching to the test’ has generally received a negative press but as Sturman (2001) has suggested, this need not necessarily be the case. Depending on the type of exam preparation that is implemented, exam preparation can make a significant contribution to the learning process enabling students to develop a deep knowledge and understanding of their subject as opposed to short-term memory activity. This has significant implications for teaching staff and students who would need to be encouraged to see ‘the test’ as part of the learning process of lifelong learning rather than just the end of a specific learning experience.
Examination of the Perceived Usefulness of Exam Preparation to NQ Students in Colleges

References


Appendices

Appendix A: Online Questionnaire

Lecturer Questionnaire – NQ Research Activity

Prelim

1. What subject area(s) and level(s) do you teach?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject Area</th>
<th>1 Intermediate 2</th>
<th>2 Intermediate 2</th>
<th>3 Higher</th>
<th>4 Advanced Higher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Art and Design</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Management and Administration</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computing and IT</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English and Communication</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>ESOL</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hairdressing and Beauty</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitality</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land and Environment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. Please identify the specific course (subject and level) you spend most time teaching on. Please base the rest of your answers on this course.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maths and Numeracy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Media Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Modern Languages</td>
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<tr>
<td>Performing Arts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Science</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Science</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sports and Leisure and Tourism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Travel and Tourism</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

3. Do you provide your students with the opportunity to sit a prelim for this course? (If Yes go to Q4, if No go to Q17)

Yes [ ] No [ ]

4. Does your centre prepare the prelim for this course? (If Yes go to Q5, if No go to Q6)

Yes [ ] No [ ]

5. Are you involved in designing the prelim for this course?

Yes [ ] No [ ]
6. When do candidates sit the prelim for this course?
   - [ ] August
   - [ ] September
   - [ ] October
   - [ ] November
   - [ ] December
   - [ ] January
   - [ ] February
   - [ ] March
   - [ ] April
   - [ ] May
   - [ ] June

7. Who invigilates the prelim for this course?
   - [ ] Classroom Lecturer
   - [ ] A Lecturer who does not teach the students
   - [ ] Senior Lecturer
   - [ ] Curriculum Manager
   - [ ] Support staff
   - [ ] External invigilator
   - [ ] Other (please specify)

8. Where do candidates sit the prelim for this course?
   - [ ] In their usual classroom
   - [ ] In a different classroom
   - [ ] In the gym hall
   - [ ] In the same place as the external exam
   - [ ] Other (please specify)

Prelim Preparation

9. Does your college provide prelim preparation for this course? (If Yes go to Q10, if No go to Q17)
   - [ ] Yes
   - [ ] No

10. Approximately how many hours are allocated to prelim preparation for this course?
    - [ ] 1-2 hours
    - [ ] 3-4 hours
    - [ ] 5-6 hours
    - [ ] 7-8 hours
    - [ ] 9-10 hours
    - [ ] More than 10 hours
11. Who delivers the prelim preparation for this course?

- Subject Lecturer
- Guidance Tutor
- Senior Lecturer
- Curriculum Manager
- Other (please specify)

12. What type(s) of prelim preparation is offered for this course?

- Time management strategies
- Stress management strategies
- Navigation of prelim paper
- Past papers
- Mock prelims
- Memory techniques
- Writing essays
- Reading questions
- Other (please specify)

Effectiveness of Prelim Preparation

13. In your view, how well developed do you think the students’ examination techniques are prior to entry on the course? (Please rate on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 = Very Well developed and 5 = Not Well Developed at All)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very Well Developed</th>
<th>Not Well Developed at All</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>5</td>
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14. In your view, how well do you think the students understand the role of prelims in the assessment process? (Please rate on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 = Very Well and 5 = Not Well at All)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very Well</th>
<th>Not Well at All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>1</td>
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</table>

15. How important do you think that prelim preparation is in improving students’ performance in the prelim exam? (Please rate on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 = Very Important and 5 = Not Important at All)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very Important</th>
<th>Not Important at All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
16. How effective do you believe prelim preparation to be in improving students' performance in the prelim exam? (Please rate on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 = Very Effective and 5 = Very Effective at All)

Very Effective | Very Effective at All
---|---
1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

17. Does your college provide external exam preparation for this course? (If Yes go to Q18, if No go to Q19)

Yes  No

18. How effective do you believe the external exam preparation to be in improving students' performance in the external exam? (Please rate on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 = Very Effective and 5 = Very Effective at All)

About You

19. Are you employed:

- [ ] On a full-time permanent contract?
- [ ] On a part-time permanent contract?
- [ ] On a temporary contract?
- [ ] On an evening contract?

20. Do you have a teaching qualification? (If Yes go to Q21, if No go to Q22)

Yes  No

21. Which teaching qualification do you hold?

- [ ] TQ(FE)
- [ ] Certificate: Introduction to Teaching: Further Education
- [ ] Advanced Certificate: Teaching in Further Education
- [ ] Diploma: Teaching in Further Education
- [ ] Secondary/Primary Teaching Qualification
- [ ] Other (please specify)

22. Are you currently studying for a teaching qualification?

Yes  No

23. Do you think that you would benefit from staff development in delivering exam preparation? (If Yes go to Q24, if No go to Q25)

Yes  No
24. Which of the following areas would be of most interest?

- Time management strategies
- Stress management strategies
- Memory techniques
- Writing essays
- Reading questions
- Other (please specify)

25. Are you an SQA marker this academic year for this course?

Yes  No

26. Have you been an SQA marker in the last five years?

Yes  No

27. What is the name of your college?

__________________________________________________________________________

28. What is your role/title in your college?

- Lecturer
- Course Co-ordinator
- Class Tutor
- Senior Lecturer
- Curriculum Leader
- Head of School
- Other (please specify)

29. Would you be willing to take part in a semi-structured interview on exam preparation (the interview would last no longer than one hour)?

Yes  No

30. Would you be willing to ask your students to take part in a semi-structured interview on exam preparation (the interview would last no longer than one hour)?

Yes  No

31. If you answered Yes to Q29 or Q30 please leave your contact details below: (e-mail address and/or telephone number).

32. If there is anything else that you would like to mention about prelims and exam preparation that hasn’t been discussed so far please write your comments in the space below:

Thank you for taking part in this survey.
Appendix B: Lecturer Interview Schedule

Exam Preparation for National Qualification Courses

Background

- Brief explanation of background to the research
- Thank respondents for time
- Reassurances of confidentiality
- Background to respondents role
  - What subject area and level do you teach?
  - Are you employed on a FT perm contract, PT perm contract, temp contract, evening contract?
  - Do you have a Teaching qualification?
  - Are you a SQA marker or have you been a SQA marker in the last 5 years?
  - How long have you been teaching?

General

- How equipped are students to sit exams before entering the course?
- What exam preparation skills do they lack?

Effectiveness of Prelim Preparation

- Do you provide opportunity for your students to sit a prelim for this course?
- Does the college offer generic prelim preparation for students?
  - Do you think it is effective in improving students’ performance in the prelim exam?
- Do you offer prelim preparation for this?
  - Do you think your prelim prep is effective in improving students’ performance in the prelim exam? (Q)
- Do you think it is necessary/beneficial to offer subject specific prelim preparation?

Importance of Prelim Preparation

- Do you think prelim prep is important in improving students’ performance in the prelim exam? (Q)
- How do you think prelim prep could be improved?

Effectiveness of External Exam Preparation

- Does the college offer generic external exam preparation for students?
  - Do you think it is effective in improving students’ performance in the external exam?
- Do you offer external exam preparation?
  - Do you think your exam prep is effective in improving students’ performance in the prelim exam? (Q)

Importance of External Exam Preparation

- Do you think your exam prep is important in improving students’ performance in the external exam? (Q)
- How do you think exam prep could be improved? What would be the ideal preparation?
Professional Development

• Do you feel confident in your ability to do exam prep?
  - Do you think that you would benefit from staff development in delivering exam preparation? (Q)
  - If yes, what areas – time management, stress management, memory techniques, writing essays, reading questions (Q)
• Have you accessed Principal Assessors’ reports?

Finally, do you think the process of exam prep contributes to the student learning experience?

Sum Up and Close

• Is there any aspect of the NQ exam preparation that you would like to make further comment on?
Appendix C: Principal Assessor Interview Schedule

Exam Preparation for National Qualification Courses

Background

- Brief explanation of background to the research
- Thank respondents for time
- Reassurances of confidentiality
- Background to respondents role:
  - What subject area are you an Assessor in?
  - Do you currently teach NQ courses, if so what level?
  - Do you have a Teaching qualification?

General

- What exam preparation skills do students lack?

Effectiveness of Prelim Preparation

- In your experience as a lecturer and Assessor do you think prelim prep is effective in improving students’ performance in the prelim exam?

Importance of Prelim Preparation

- In your experience as a lecturer and Assessor do you think prelim prep is important in improving students’ performance in the prelim exam?
- How do you think prelim prep could be improved? What would be the ideal preparation?

Effectiveness of External Exam Preparation

- In your experience as a lecturer and Assessor do you think external exam prep is effective in improving students’ performance in the external exam?

Importance of External Exam Preparation

- In your experience as a lecturer and Assessor do you think external exam prep is important in improving students’ performance in the external exam?
- How do you think EE prep could be improved? What would be the ideal preparation?

Principal Assessor Reports

- Do you think these are accessed by lecturers? Is there a better way of conveying information?

Professional Development

- Do you think that lecturers should receive staff development in exam preparation?
  - What aspects should be covered on this?

Finally, do you think the process of exam prep contributes to the student learning experience?
Sum Up and Close

- Is there any aspect of the NQ exam preparation that you would like to make further comment on?
Appendix D: Student Focus Group Schedule

Exam Preparation for National Qualification Courses

Background

- Brief explanation of background to the research
- Thank students for time
- Reassurances of confidentiality

Icebreaker – to suit

General

- How equipped were you to sit exams before entering the course?
  - What exam preparation skills did you lack?

Effectiveness of Prelim Preparation

- Do you think your prelim prep was effective in improving your performance in the prelim exam?
  - How do you know? What aspects are effective?
  - What aspects are ineffective?

Importance of Prelim Preparation

- Do you think prelim prep was important in improving your performance in the prelim exam?
  - Why? Can you elaborate?

- How do you think prelim prep could be improved? What would be the ideal preparation?

Effectiveness of External Exam Preparation

- Do you think external exam prep was effective in improving your performance in the external exam?
  - How do you know? What aspects are effective?
  - What aspects are ineffective?

Importance of External Exam Preparation

- Do you think external exam prep was important in improving your performance in the external exam?
  - Why? Can you elaborate?

- How do you think EE prep could be improved? What would be the ideal preparation?

Finally, do you think the process of exam preparation has contributed to your learning experience?

Sum Up and Close

- Is there any aspect of the NQ exam preparation that you would like to make further comment on?
Acknowledgements

Very special thanks are due to:

- all college teaching staff who took part in the online questionnaire and in-depth interviews
- the college staff who arranged focus groups with students and the students who participated in the focus groups
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Disclaimer

The views expressed in this report are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the Scottish Further Education Unit or the Scottish Executive.