

JOINT MESSAGE FROM SQA AND COLLEGES SCOTLAND**27th August 2020****Higher National Certificates and Diplomas, SQA Advanced Certificates and Diplomas, Professional Development Awards, National Progression Awards, National Certificates, Skills for Work Awards and NQ Freestanding Units**

We would like to acknowledge the collaboration and support of centres in working together to develop alternative assessment arrangements for learners during the unprecedented circumstances we have all had to face in the 2019–20 session.

We advised you on 26 June 2020 that work was underway to determine the approach for these qualifications for session 2020-21.

We appreciate that you will be considering a more blended learning environment in the year ahead, and to help with this, we have continued to focus on three areas which we believe will support you and your candidates.

Assessment Requirements

For session 2020-21, we are looking at opportunities to provide adaptations to assessment requirements which will support a blended learning environment. SQA will also offer centres the flexibility to adapt conditions of assessment, therefore reducing reliance on face-to-face assessment. We are currently reviewing these adaptations, given the return to unit requirements this year, and we will publish subject guidance by 1 September.

Combined Assessment

For some qualifications, there may be an opportunity to develop a combined assessment model. You may already take this approach for some of our qualifications. We have published generic guidance on implementing such a model, which you will find attached.

We will also be delivering a small number of online support events for our centres. We will email invitations for these shortly. We will also share recordings of the events, for those unable to attend.

For centres who would like to move to a combined assessment approach, we would recommend you notify operationshmvq@sqa.org.uk so our subject experts can provide virtual guidance and support at the planning stage. Your College or SQA Co-ordinator will provide further details of how to access this support later this month.

External Verification

We are finalising our approach to external verification for the year ahead. This will include virtual verification options, together with remote, visiting, and central activities. We will be publishing updated processes in the coming weeks.

We appreciate that some of your candidates may have been deferred due to specific conditions of assessment. For these candidates, you can continue to use the holistic approach set out in response to the COVID-19 pandemic for session 2019-20. However, you should continue to review course team judgements through your Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) Panels.

If you have any candidates who are still deferred at 31 December 2020, please provide the relevant candidate details and Group Award code to operationshmvq@sqa.org.uk by 15 January 2021 at the latest. You should retain all evidence of IQA discussions and decisions until 31 May 2021. Thank you for your continued support and co-operation.



Supporting the delivery, assessment and verification of SQA units, session 2020–21:

Information and guidance for centres

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Scope

This document applies to the following group awards:

- ◆ Skills for Work
- ◆ Awards
- ◆ National Progression Awards
- ◆ National Certificates
- ◆ Higher National Certificates/Diplomas (including Graded Units)
- ◆ Advanced Certificates/Diplomas
- ◆ Professional Development Awards

It also applies to freestanding National Units.

This document **does not** apply to regulated units and group awards, such as Scottish Vocational Qualifications, VQ units etc.

Context

We would like to acknowledge the collaboration and support of centres in working together to develop alternative assessment arrangements for learners during the unprecedented circumstances we have all had to face in the 2019–20 session. Using a professionally informed and evidence-based holistic approach with robust quality assurance, learners were recognised for their hard work and learning, and appropriate academic standards were maintained throughout. This holistic approach, which focused on candidate evidence relative to course aims where appropriate, was undoubtedly the most appropriate solution when lockdown occurred, where a substantial element of learning, teaching and assessment had already taken place. Moving forward into session 2020–21, it is now appropriate to revert to assessment and verification on the traditional unit basis.

We recognise that the learning environment and social landscape remains very challenging with new operating models in centres involving, in many cases, a delayed start to the academic year, more remote and blended learning approaches, and significantly less opportunity for face-to-face delivery and assessment. Face-to-face time with learners will become increasingly valuable, and needs to be used to best effect to engage, motivate and support the learning journey. In support of this, we are encouraging centres, and course teams in particular, to continue to consider and plan more innovative approaches to assessment, and to seek opportunities to combine assessment where there is commonality or duplication across units of study. SQA will also offer (wherever possible) flexibility around assessment requirements, making delivery more accessible for staff and students.

With careful planning and a whole course team approach, taking opportunities to combine assessment and adapting the assessment requirements (where possible) should decrease the volume of evidence that needs to be generated under conditions that may be impractical in session 2020–21 (eg observed practical assessment or closed book written assessment under supervised conditions).

Implementing a combined approach to the collection of candidate-generated evidence, where this is possible, should reduce assessment requirements by addressing duplication or overlapping assessment.

This guidance applies for candidates who will require certification by end of August 2021, and will apply to units from across the SQA portfolio. However, there may be some subject-specific or unit-type restrictions that will restrict the flexibility that can be offered (eg, Health and Safety requirements, License to Practice, Sector Skills Council requirements). Where this is the case, we will provide clear additional guidance.

We acknowledge also that the landscape remains fluid and, indeed, quite fragile. This guidance is valid at time of writing, but may change as necessary — for example, where tighter restrictions are re-introduced locally, nationally or internationally.

Core principles

Three core principles continue to be at the heart of all decision making for SQA qualifications. These are:

- ◆ Fairness to all learners.
- ◆ Safe and secure certification of qualifications, while following the latest public health advice.
- ◆ Maintaining the integrity and credibility of the qualification system, ensuring that standards are maintained over time, in the interests of learners.

In support of this, for all centres, in whatever circumstances, the first duty is to deliver high quality learning and teaching, and to assess candidates in a way that is valid, reliable, practical, equitable and fair. This guidance seeks to support course teams in delivering this key duty in ways which uphold the integrity of qualifications, without unnecessary barriers, acknowledging the need to be flexible and responsive to conditions which remain unpredictable.

Guidance

This guidance is provided to support the most effective ways for candidates to generate evidence of competence and for assessors to judge that evidence against unit standards. This may involve alternative approaches where usual approaches are not considered accessible or suitable. Please note that it will be necessary to generate evidence that demonstrates that all outcomes of all units have been met.

SQA will support centres as follows:

- ◆ Guidance and practical support on how to make the most of opportunities for combined assessment.
- ◆ Flexibility to adapt the assessment requirements, wherever possible.
- ◆ Modification of external verification activity (visiting and virtual) to reflect the combined assessment model.

Course mapping

The starting point for all course teams will be to undertake (or re-visit) a mapping exercise to collectively review outcomes and all of the associated assessment activities across all the units of study. This will be key to identifying:

- ◆ potentially compatible outcomes and evidence requirements and opportunities to combine assessment
- ◆ any potential requirement to adjust or reduce the evidence required
- ◆ any considerations around established assessment requirements

Valuable information can often be found in group award specifications.

Once the mapping exercise has been undertaken, course teams may wish to use the Assessment Planning Tool (Appendix 1). This has been designed to support the course team in considering the options available to them and the processes to follow.

While the course team may carry out this process wholly at centre level, we encourage centres to exploit opportunities for collaborative working and sharing of practice through established subject networks or by exploring opportunities to create new ones. We will support these by making external verifiers and qualification managers or other staff members available wherever possible.

Quality teams within centres can help identify opportunities for cross-sector collaboration. Equally, quality teams should be kept informed of any collaborative activities that a course team may initiate or join.

You must ensure that robust internal quality assurance processes are in place to support, advise and guide course teams and to ensure that appropriate protocols are followed to ensure that the standards, integrity and credibility of qualifications is maintained. SQA requires that centres can demonstrate that all assessors and internal verifiers have a common understanding of the standards required, as well as evidence of how you have checked the assessment instruments for validity (currency and fitness for purpose).

The result should be a carefully considered and cohesive assessment plan that is agreed and supported by the whole course team and endorsed by the centre.

As centres or clusters develop new or modified assessment approaches, we will highlight good practice examples through our website subject pages, and will signpost any newly developed instruments of assessment, which will be published on our Secure site. You can request access to these materials via your SQA co-ordinator or quality team (which is the established process).

Combining assessment

In SQA qualifications, it is not necessary to assess each outcome separately. We encourage a combined approach that allows evidence to be gathered for a range of outcomes or evidence requirements within a unit or across more than one unit. This can:

- ◆ be more meaningful for learners
- ◆ take less time
- ◆ give assurance of overall competence
- ◆ avoid over-assessment and improve motivation
- ◆ facilitate flexible approaches to verification
- ◆ benefit learning

Combined assessment can arise from identifying similar assessment requirements within and across units, removing duplication. For example, it may be possible to identify an overarching task that allows evidence for a range of outcomes within or across more than one unit to be gathered by a single coherent activity.

In many of the HNC/D and Advanced Certificate and Diploma frameworks, there are opportunities to generate evidence through a single task that may satisfy different units. For example, producing a newsletter could provide some evidence to meet the requirements of an IT Applications Software unit and a Communication unit.

- ◆ When you are developing an assessment across units, do ensure that the content of the units is sufficiently related to make the assessment coherent and meaningful to learners.
- ◆ Some assessment methods lend themselves more easily to combining outcomes and units than others. Teams are therefore advised to select the more obvious opportunities to combine and those which will make the biggest impact in terms of reducing the burden of assessment. Trying to combine more obscure evidence requirements may, in fact, be counterproductive and introduce unnecessary barriers.
- ◆ When combining assessments, take care to ensure that the assessment task is of the same level of demand for the candidate as would be required by the original individual assessment requirement.

Course teams should use their own experience, expertise and qualification/subject knowledge to identify the most obvious opportunities to combine, avoiding at all times any risk to the standard of the qualification. You should seek further expert guidance and support where there is any doubt.

The activities of a combined assessment should be included in an assessment plan and cross-referenced back to the outcomes (the course team's mapping). This will help to ensure that all outcomes of all the units have been achieved.

Where a combined assessment approach is developed, assessors must also consider how to deal with any need for candidate remediation and re-assessment. This should be in line with the centre's policy for remediation and re-assessment.

Flexibility to adapt the assessment requirements

Alongside combined assessment, SQA will also offer centres the flexibility to adapt assessment requirements to reduce reliance on face-to-face assessment. We will identify (and communicate) specific qualifications or subject areas where Health and Safety, Licence to Practice or other particular limitations mean that it is not possible to offer flexibility. These

are likely to be broadly similar to the subject-specific guidance which was issued in the context of the 2019–20 holistic assessment approach.

For all other qualifications, you should use professional judgement in collaboration with the wider course team and internal verifiers to agree additional and alternative opportunities for candidates to demonstrate their competence, knowledge and understanding through a range of reasonable and practicable alternative activities. Some examples are:

- ◆ **Remote testing** (this could be paper based, app based, online, audio, video). This should assess skills, knowledge and understanding and should include sufficient challenge and application to demonstrate the appropriate level of attainment.
- ◆ **Professional discussion.** This would be recording a professional discussion between a learner and an assessor. The discussions would focus on, and enhance, evidence already provided or demonstrated by the learner — including real work activities, practical tasks, a case study, project, portfolio or some other form of assessment.
- ◆ **Practical assessment.** In some circumstances, evidence may be assessed using remote assessment (video, photographic, portfolio, witness testimony), alongside work already demonstrated and assessed.

Where assessment requirements are adapted, you should consider any additional action required, on a risk-assessed basis, to confirm the authenticity of the candidate's work. You must ensure that the evidence on which the assessment decision is made belongs solely to the candidate being assessed — assessors are only able to make accurate assessment decisions if this is the case.

It is important that the security of existing secure closed book assessment instruments is not compromised. You should adapt assessment requirements for centre-devised instruments of assessment in the first instance — you should not do so for SQA secure material without prior permission from SQA.

If you intend adapting a centre-devised instrument of assessment that has previously been submitted to SQA for prior verification, and is shared on the secure site, you must notify SQA by email: qvprior@sqa.org.uk.

The distribution and use of secure assessment materials will be monitored by SQA. If the security of any national instrument of assessment is compromised, this must be reported to SQA via your SQA co-ordinator immediately.

Approaches to external verification

SQA will provide centres with the opportunity to request support in the early stages of the development of combined assessment approaches, and will encourage centres to engage in developmental activity (ideally on a sector or cluster basis).

SQA will provide training and support for qualification verifiers, as required, to ensure that the combined assessment model approach is understood and supported.

Dialogue around the course mapping and agreed approaches to assessment relative to Outcomes, evidence and assessment requirements will be an important element of any visiting or virtual verification activity.

While visiting and remote verification will remain, we have developed a new model of virtual verification which will allow the capacity to have group award verification for HN and PDA qualifications that were previously verified on a unit-by-unit basis. The new virtual verification model will require more collaboration between SQA, EVs and centres during planning for visiting verification to determine whether group award verification is appropriate and, if so, the requirements for verification activity.

This new model of virtual verification will also provide a platform for other HNVQ verification activity. This will also be determined during planning for visiting verification.

We will update the *Qualification Verification Process Guidance for Centres* with the requirements relating to group award, unit and virtual verification activity.

Additional sources of information

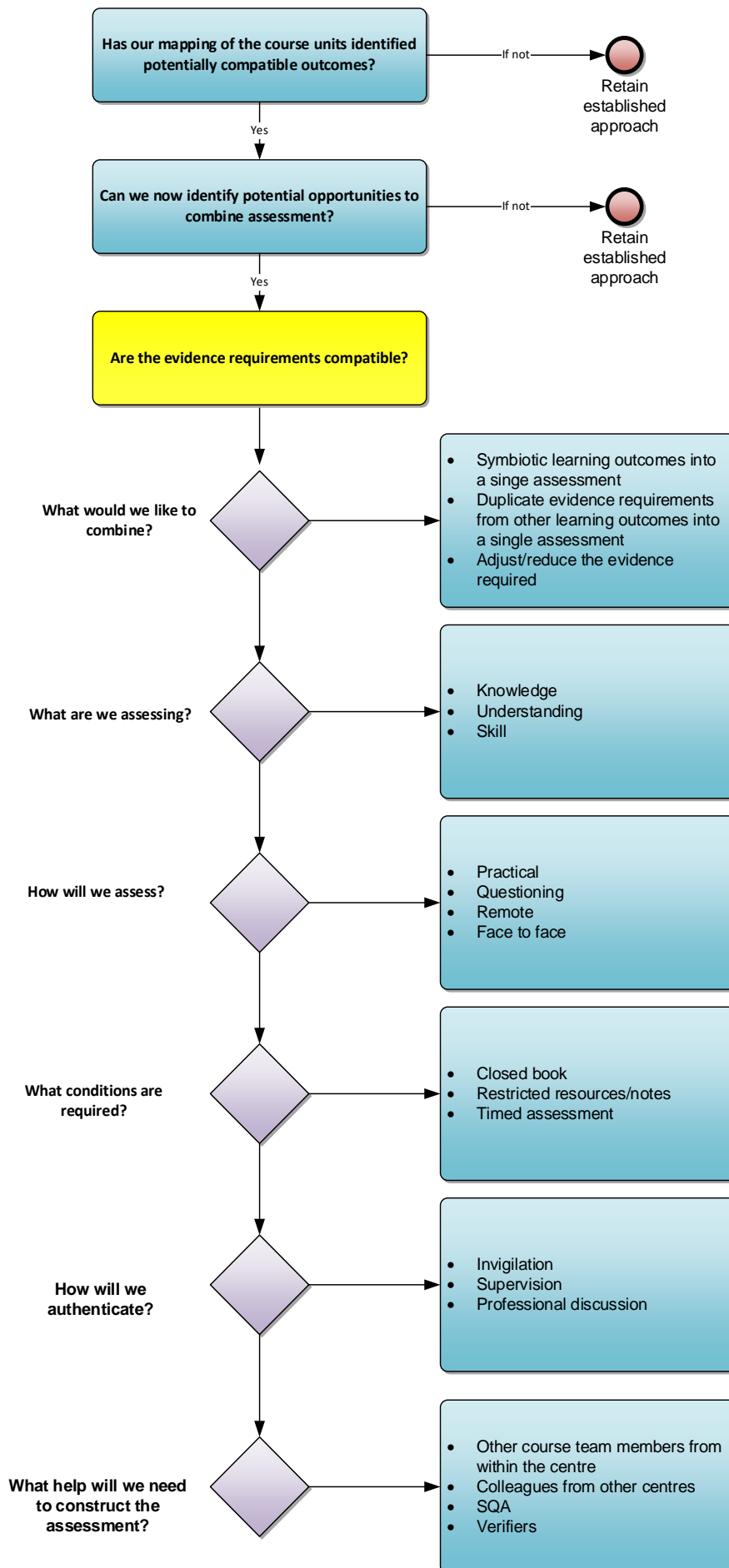
SQA Guide to Assessment

The Qualification Verification Process Guidance for Centres

Prior verification page on our website — this will provide guidance on all three options (this link won't change) <https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/74665.html>

Secure site

Appendix 1: Assessment Planning Tool



Appendix 2: Frequently asked questions

1 Why is it not possible to continue with the Course Aims approach?

We have considered this. However, it is necessary with an academic session ahead to ensure that there is assessment evidence for all outcomes and all units of study to protect the integrity of qualifications and certification as well as the SCQF framework levels. Contingency arrangements will remain, and will be implemented should tighter restrictions be reintroduced, which would impact further on delivery models in centres.

2 How will teams know where there can and can't be flexibility around assessment requirements?

We will provide subject-specific guidance to identify areas where it is not possible to adapt assessment requirements. Please note that it is likely that this will be broadly in line with the subject-specific guidance issued earlier in 2020, although there will be some significant additions and amendments.

3 When will that guidance be available and where can I find it?

We will begin issuing guidance on our website immediately, together with publication dates for all subject-specific guidance.

4 Are our existing internal verification procedures sufficient, or do we need something additional?

You will need to take a risk-based and proportionate approach. Your SQA co-ordinator and/or quality team will be able to guide on the arrangements your centre will use to oversee the application of the guidance, to support teams and to ensure standardised approaches.

5 Will additional support be available to implement the guidance and to support the development of alternative assessment instruments?

You should liaise with your SQA co-ordinator and/or internal quality team to request additional support from your subject networks, where these exist, as well as SQA from qualification specialists and/or external verifiers.

6 Where assessment is combined, how do we ensure that a student who fails just one aspect of the full task/assignment does not necessarily fail all the component outcomes/units?

This will be an important part of planning the assessment, and it will be necessary to develop a matrix to show which aspects of the task contribute to which outcomes and/or units. You can then use this information to design assessment arrangements to fill gaps and ensure coverage of all unit requirements. It may be possible to isolate an outcome that has not been achieved for re-assessment.

7 How do we handle remediation/re-assessment within combined assessment?

As with any assessment task, the level of remediation/re-assessment required will depend on the evidence requirements that have not been met. This is no different to any other assessment.

8 If we wish to change the assessment requirements, do we necessarily need to amend the content of the assessment instrument too?

If an assessment approach is problematic because of restrictions, it is worth considering whether there are opportunities to introduce a different way to assess, including combined assessment — see SQA's *Guide to Assessment*. However, if you choose just to change the assessment requirements (in line with SQA guidance), you will need to review your approach to assessment to ensure it is still fit for purpose.

9 We deliver a programme in different formats, to distinct groups of students — eg a full-time cohort and a part-time distance learning cohort. Can we take a combined approach for our full-time cohort and a unit-by-unit approach for our part-time delivery?

Yes, you can use a different approach for different cohorts as their needs vary. You should work closely with internal verifiers in standardisation to ensure equivalence across the different tasks.

10 Are there any model templates available from SQA that can be used to support the combined approach to assessment?

As materials are generated by centres, we will promote these and make them available via subject pages or the secure site as appropriate. Remember that SQA Group Award Specifications often contain valuable information on combined assessments.

11 How will external verifier deployment work to support the development of combined assessments – at individual centre level or where a number of centres choose to collaborate?

We will provide a range of options, including the possibility to request the support of an EV to work with an individual course team at the time of assessment design as well as the opportunity to participate in a virtual combined assessment meeting. This may involve multiple centres and more than one external verifier.

12 How will external verifiers be able to take a standardised approach to the quality assurance of combined assessments where they include units that are not common across centres?

We are providing extensive training to external verifiers and senior external verifiers over the coming weeks and months. External verifiers will be working with us to support centres in the context of the guidance, which acknowledges the need to be flexible while upholding the integrity of qualifications.

13 Due to on-going social distancing measures, it will be challenging to deliver and assess practical-based subjects during academic session 2020–21. What advice, guidance and/or support will be provided to centres?

Subject-specific guidance will be developed for practical-based qualifications to support centres with delivery and assessment. We will work with our established qualifications support teams (QSTs) to develop the required subject-specific guidance.

If you would like to ask a question that is not covered in this document, please send it by email to operationshvg@sqa.org.uk and we will contact you with an answer. Thank you.