

## Q1. Standard Grades

- Standard Grade — Credit
- Standard Grade — General
- Standard Grade — Foundation

## Q2. National Courses/Units

- Advanced Higher
- Higher
- Intermediate 2
- Intermediate 1
- Access 3
- Access 2
- Access 1



Scotland's

# National Qualifications

**A Guide**

This guide gives you the basic facts about National Qualifications (NQs) in Scotland and tells you about the range of qualifications available.

# Jargon Buster



AH	Advanced Higher
H	Higher
HNC	Higher National Certificate
HND	Higher National Diploma
Int 1	Intermediate 1
Int 2	Intermediate 2
NAB	National Assessment Bank
NQ	National Qualification
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
SG	Standard Grade
SQA	Scottish Qualifications Authority
SQC	Scottish Qualifications Certificate
SVQ	Scottish Vocational Qualification

## What are National Qualifications?

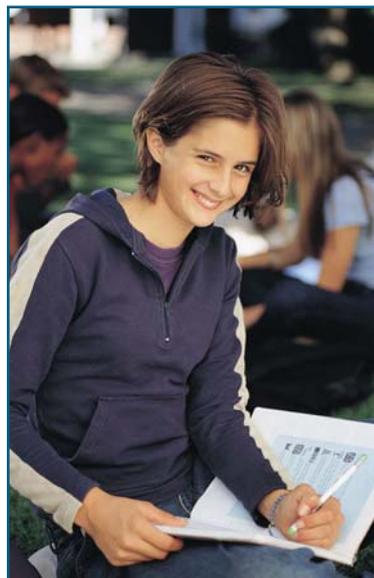
NQs are qualifications for students in secondary schools and are also offered in colleges of further education. NQs are Standard Grades, National Courses and National Units:

	Standard Grades	National Courses/Units
		Advanced Higher
		Higher
Introduced in the 1980s	Standard Grade — Credit	Intermediate 2
	Standard Grade — General	Intermediate 1
	Standard Grade — Foundation	Access 3
		Access 2
		Access 1

*These are sometimes called 'new' National Qualifications as they were introduced from 1999 to replace the previous qualifications. You might have heard them referred to as 'Higher Still'.*

NQs have been designed to be as flexible as possible to meet the needs of all students. Qualifications can be built up over time, encouraging students to progress to the highest level they can achieve. NQs cover hundreds of subjects to suit everyone's interests and skills. Schools offer a range of traditional subjects as well as new subjects that will be useful in today's workplace, such as biotechnology, media studies and information systems.

Adult learners can study National Courses and Units at further education colleges and community education centres — you don't need to have Standard Grades first. Colleges may be able to offer a wide range of vocational NQ Courses and Units in areas such as business, construction, care, hairdressing, tourism, leisure and fish farming. You can see the full list of NQ Units and Courses on the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) website: [www.sqa.org.uk](http://www.sqa.org.uk). You can also find out what's offered in Scotland's colleges via your local college or the Scottish Further Education Unit (SFEU) website: [www.sfeu.ac.uk](http://www.sfeu.ac.uk).



## Standard Grade

Standard Grades are generally taken over two years of study in third and fourth year at secondary school. Students often take seven or eight subjects including Maths and English. The courses are made up of different parts called 'elements', with an exam at the end.

There are three levels of study: Credit, General and Foundation. Students usually take exams at two levels — Credit and General, or General and Foundation.

This makes sure that students have the best chance of achieving as high a grade as possible. Students who do not achieve a grade 1 – 6, but do complete the course, are awarded a grade 7.

Level	Grade
Credit	1 or 2
General	3 or 4
Foundation	5 or 6
Course completed	7

The coursework for most Standard Grade subjects involves assessments, projects or folios. It is important to put as much effort into these as possible as they often count towards the final mark.

Students' achievements at Standard Grade will often be used to guide course choice in the future; it's always sensible to take the advice offered by the school or college.

### National Courses

#### Access 1, 2 and 3

Access 1 is designed for students who require considerable support with their learning, while Access 2 is designed to meet the needs of students with more moderate support needs. Access 3 is comparable to Standard Grade Foundation level. Students following Access courses can also broaden their experience at the same level and develop valuable life skills.

Learning at Access levels 1, 2 and 3 is assessed by the school or college — it does not involve sitting an exam. Groups of Units built up by students at Access levels 2 and 3 can lead to 'Cluster awards'. A Cluster consists of a number of Units in a particular subject area, such as Home Economics, Computing, or Social Subjects.

#### Intermediate 1 and 2

Intermediate 1 and 2 are challenging but achievable qualifications and may also be a useful step towards Highers.

Intermediate 1 and 2 can be studied at school or college — you don't have to study Standard Grades first.

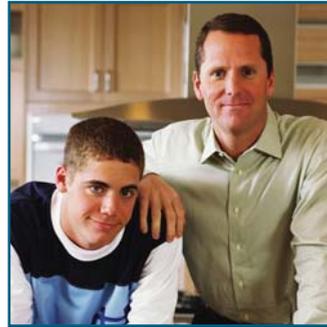
- Both Intermediate 1 and 2 may be suitable for anyone wishing to take up a new subject that they have not previously studied.
- Intermediate 1 may be particularly suitable for students who have passed subjects at Standard Grade Foundation level or who are ready to progress from Access 3 level.
- Intermediate 2 may be particularly suitable for students who have passed subjects at Standard Grade General level, as taking a Higher in just one year after Standard Grade can be very demanding. For some students, Intermediate 2 provides a stepping stone to taking a Higher.
- An increasing number of schools now offer Intermediate Courses and Units instead of, or as well as, Standard Grades in third and fourth year.

It is important that students attempt NQs at the most appropriate level for their needs. Many parents, for example, are keen to encourage their child to attempt Highers, although guidance from the school would suggest that Intermediate 2 level would be more suitable for the child, based on previous achievement.

## Higher

Higher is aimed particularly at students who have passed subjects at Standard Grade Credit level, or who have successfully completed a subject at Intermediate 2. Highers can be studied in school or at college.

Highers are the qualifications normally needed for entry into university or college to study for degrees and Higher National courses (HNCs and HNDs). However adults returning to study may not need previous qualifications for some college courses, and colleges are happy to give advice about this.



## Advanced Higher

Advanced Highers are aimed particularly at students who have passed Highers and are usually taken in sixth year at school, or at college. They extend the skills and knowledge gained at Higher and are additional qualifications that are useful for entry into higher education or the workplace.



## How do NQs relate to other qualifications?

The **Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)** enables students, employers and the general public to understand the full range of Scottish qualifications, and it makes the relationships between levels clearer. As can be seen below, the SCQF has 12 levels, ranging from level 1 (Access 1) to level 12, which is the highest level of university study.

SCQF level	Schools	Schools and colleges	Colleges and universities	Workplace (Scottish Vocational Qualifications)
12			Doctorate	
11			Masters degree	SVQ 5
10			Honours degree	
9			Ordinary degree	
8			HND/Diploma of Higher Education	SVQ 4
7		<b>Advanced Higher</b>	HNC/Certificate of Higher Education	
6		<b>Higher</b>		SVQ 3
5	<b>Standard Grade — Credit</b>	<b>Intermediate 2</b>		SVQ 2
4	<b>Standard Grade — General</b>	<b>Intermediate 1</b>		SVQ 1
3	<b>Standard Grade — Foundation</b>	<b>Access 3</b>		
2		<b>Access 2</b>		
1		<b>Access 1</b>		

## How do students choose their subjects?

Students select their subjects and levels with help and advice from their teachers, lecturers and the careers service, based on their interests and career hopes. Parents and carers play an important part in helping young people make these decisions. Students in second year at school receive a booklet from Careers Scotland called *Which Way Now?* that includes advice about choosing appropriate NQ subjects.

## What are National Courses and Units, and how are they assessed?

### National Courses

National Courses are available from Intermediate 1 to Advanced Higher. They usually consist of three subject-related National Units, which are assessed by the class teacher/lecturer, plus an external assessment.

Here is an example of a National Course:

Higher Accounting and Finance is made up of three National Units:

- Financial Accounting
- Management Accounting
- Using Accounting Information

plus an exam.

To gain a full Course award, students have to pass all the Unit assessments as well as the exam.

### Grades and Course awards

Grades are awarded on the basis of how well a student does in the external assessment. However, to get a full course award a student must pass all three National Units as well as achieve a grade in the external assessment. Pass grades are awarded at A, B, and C, and a grade D is awarded to a student who just fails to get a grade C.

### What is the external assessment?

External assessment can take many forms. In many subjects it is an exam taken in May/June, but in some subjects it is project work or folios completed during the Course. The assessment should demonstrate the knowledge and understanding students have gained while working towards their qualification. In all cases, the assessments are set and marked by people appointed by SQA, normally teachers and lecturers. Students' performance in the external assessments decides the final Course grades that they will achieve.

External assessments play an important role, too, in ensuring that the rigorous standards of National Qualifications are achieved and so you can be assured that all students are being assessed in the same way across Scotland.

Fourth, fifth and sixth year students receive a booklet from SQA called *Your Exams*, which gives helpful tips on sitting the exams, together with an individual exam timetable. Anyone can get a copy of it from SQA's website: [www.sqa.org.uk](http://www.sqa.org.uk).

## National Units

A major difference from the old system of Highers is the way in which students are assessed — National Units were introduced for this purpose. Each National Unit is a qualification in its own right. It is a block of work which generally takes around 40 hours to cover and is achieved following the successful completion of Unit assessments — see below. Many full-time NQ college courses are made up of groupings of National Units.

As students work through a course, they can judge how they are doing because they are regularly being assessed. They will also gain confidence because the skills and knowledge they are building up, and being assessed in, are the ones that will help them in the external assessment. As a result of this, the Unit assessments encourage students to apply themselves throughout the school year and not just try to cram the information for a few short weeks before the exam.

## What are Unit assessments?

Unit assessments are tasks set and marked by teachers and lecturers to national standards. Before starting a Unit, teaching staff will make sure that students know what has to be learned and what they have to do to pass.

Many assessments are drawn from the national assessment bank. This helps teachers and lecturers ensure that national standards are applied to all Unit assessments. The students will be told in advance when the assessment will take place, and students will be awarded the Unit when they have passed all of the assessments satisfactorily. If they don't pass first time, they can be re-assessed. The Units are marked on a pass/fail basis.

It is important to be aware that passing the Unit assessments does not guarantee that the student will pass the exam.

In the exam, students have to show that they can use and apply the knowledge and skills gained from the whole course.

**This emphasises the need for revision.**

## What are prelims?

Most schools and colleges will set a prelim at some point during the course. This is a practice run for the exam. Prelims help students find out what exam conditions are like and help to provide schools and colleges with some indication of how their students might perform in the exam.

## What are Core Skills?

Core Skills are the essential skills that help people as they progress through their education, training, work and their lives. The development of Core Skills has always been part of school and college learning, and the National Qualifications system encourages this. There are currently five certificated Core Skills and these are:

• Problem solving
• Communication
• Numeracy
• Information technology (often referred to in schools and colleges as ICT — information and communications technology — which involves using computers and the internet)
• Working with others

Core Skills are built into National Units and Courses so are a normal part of teaching, learning and assessment. The vast majority of students will have their level of Core Skills recognised automatically as they complete Units and courses so they are not required to sit additional assessments for these Core Skills but Core Skills can also be studied as Units in their own right.

To find out more about Core Skills, visit the NQ Online website:

[www.LTScotland.org.uk/NQ](http://www.LTScotland.org.uk/NQ).

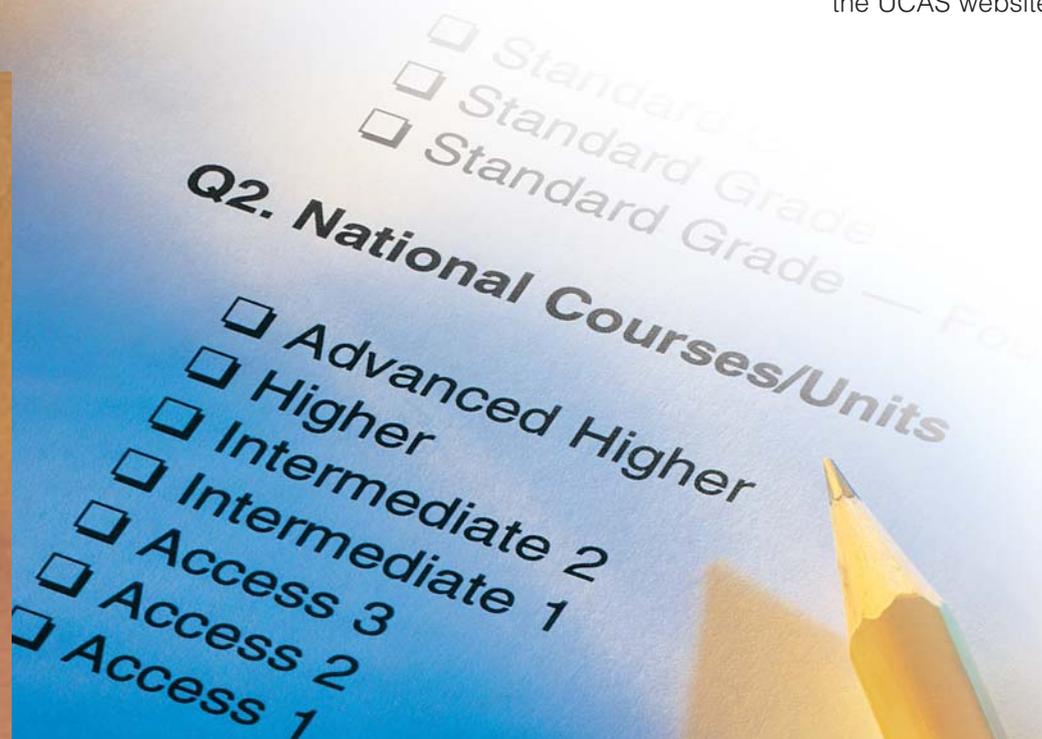


### Admission to university or college

Applications for courses at further education colleges in Scotland are made directly to the college of choice. For admission to university, students should apply through UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service). To find out what courses are offered at Scottish colleges and universities, visit the PlanIT Plus website: [www.planitplus.net](http://www.planitplus.net).

UCAS operates a tariff system to report the achievement of applicants for entry to university education. It helps provide comparisons between applicants with different achievements. It covers National Qualifications (as well as other awards) and provides a basis on which universities can compare different types and number of qualifications that applicants have. However, admission to UK universities is at the discretion of the institutions concerned.

More information, along with details regarding which qualifications are covered by the tariff, can be found on the UCAS website: [www.ucas.ac.uk](http://www.ucas.ac.uk).



## Frequently asked questions about National Qualifications

### 1. Are National Qualifications only offered in schools?

No. They are offered in colleges too, and there is often a huge choice of subjects available — vocational as well as academic. These can be studied as evening classes, as daytime classes or as part of full-time programmes of study.

### 2. What is a NAB?

This is the term often used by teachers/students to refer to the Unit assessments drawn from the national assessment bank.

### 3. Are the Unit assessments important or should the student concentrate only on the exams?

The Unit assessments are very important. Students have to pass all the Unit assessments as well as the exam to be awarded the Course.

### 4. If a student fails one of the Unit assessments does that mean they can't get the Course award?

SQA recommends that there should be one other opportunity per session for re-assessment if a student fails first time. If they fail the re-assessment, normally they would be unable to achieve the award in that session. They could try to complete the award in the next session.

### 5. If a student fails one of the Unit assessments can they still take the exam?

Yes — they can take the exam. If they pass the exam, they will still not be awarded the full course until they pass all of the Unit assessments making up the Course.

### 6. What happens if a student passes all the Unit assessments but fails the exam?

They will get a Scottish Qualifications Certificate (SQC) listing the Units passed. The student can then re-take the Course exam in a later year, without the need to re-take the Units. In some instances the school or college may decide to appeal — see question 11.

### 7. What happens if a student starts off at one level in a given subject but struggles with the Unit assessments? Can they move to the level below, providing one exists?

This should be discussed with the subject teacher or lecturer who will be in the best position to advise if a change is necessary or possible. It will depend on the subject and how far into the session it is.

### 8. Conversely, if they do one level and find this too easy, can they move up a level?

Again, they should seek guidance from the subject teacher or lecturer. However, it would be more difficult for the student to move up a level because they would have missed part of the teaching for the Unit assessments at that level and it would be difficult to catch up.

**9. When is the earliest a student can sit a National Course or Unit?**

Schools can submit entries for students to do National Units (except Advanced Higher) and Access Clusters in third year. Students will not normally complete full National Courses, with examinations, before fourth year. For further guidance, refer to your school or college.

**10. How long does it take to do a Course or a Cluster?**

That will depend on the individual student. Some students will take a Course/Cluster in one year, while other students might take two years to complete it. Because there is no time limit, students can complete Courses even after they leave school, perhaps in a further education establishment.

**11. If a student or parent disagrees with exam results, can they appeal?**

No. Only the school or college can appeal to SQA on behalf of the student and they will only do that if the student failed to achieve the grade they were expected to attain. Around April, schools and colleges send estimates to SQA of the grades they think their students are likely to achieve in the exams, based on how well they have done during the year. However, sometimes students don't perform as well on the day as they have previously demonstrated they were capable of.

In exceptional circumstances, the school or college may appeal to improve a student's grade — but only if it has strong evidence to support this. The evidence is usually based on performance in prelims and Unit assessments carried out after the prelim. This is a good reason for preparing well for prelims!

Sometimes schools are put under pressure by parents to submit an unjustifiable appeal. This is costly, time-consuming and never successful.

If you require more information, SQA produces a guide *Appeals: how the system works*, available from the website or Customer Contact Centre.

**12. How do students receive their results?**

SQA issues all students with an information pack and a certificate listing the National Qualifications they have achieved. There is also a profile of Core Skills achievement.

The certificate is updated every time a student achieves a new qualification, so that it is a lifelong record of achievements to show an employer or college/university.

If a student does not perform satisfactorily in the final exam or only completes part of a Course, the Units successfully completed are listed, so that the student has full credit for what they have achieved.

## Useful sources of information

### Association of Scottish Colleges (ASCOL)

Web: [www.ascol.org.uk](http://www.ascol.org.uk)

*Information about all Scotland's further education (FE) colleges.*

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### Careers Scotland

Tel: 0845 8 502 502

Web: [www.careers-scotland.org.uk](http://www.careers-scotland.org.uk)

*Careers information, advice and support for young people, parents and adults.*

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### Continuing Education Gateway (CEG)

PlanIT Plus

Web: [www.planitplus.net](http://www.planitplus.net)

*Information about subject choices, careers, learning and work in Scotland.*

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### learndirect Scotland

Free helpline: 0808 100 9000

Web: [www.learndirectscotland.com](http://www.learndirectscotland.com)

*Information about thousands of learning opportunities for adults throughout Scotland, plus advice about funding.*

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### ParentZone

Web: [www.parentzonescotland.gov.uk](http://www.parentzonescotland.gov.uk)

*Information for parents, carers and others responsible for school age children.*

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### Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)

Web: [www.scqf.org.uk](http://www.scqf.org.uk)

*Scotland's map for comparing qualifications.*

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### Scottish Schools Online

Web: [www.scottishschoolsonline.gov.uk](http://www.scottishschoolsonline.gov.uk)

*A directory of all schools in Scotland, with information and facts about each school.*

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### Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS)

Web: [www.ucas.ac.uk](http://www.ucas.ac.uk)

*The central organisation that processes applications for full-time undergraduate courses at UK universities and colleges.*

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### Which Way Now?

Tel: 0131-479 3129

Web: [www.careers-scotland.org.uk](http://www.careers-scotland.org.uk)

*Advice for school students on choosing NQ subjects.*

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## Where can I find more information?

The following organisations can give you advice over the telephone and send you booklets and fact-sheets. If you have access to the internet, visit their websites to find out more about the topics mentioned in this guide. You can also contact your school, local college or public library for more information.

## Partner organisations



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### Scottish Qualifications Authority

Tel: Customer Contact Centre on 0845 279 1000

E-mail: [customer@sqa.org.uk](mailto:customer@sqa.org.uk)

Web: [www.sqa.org.uk](http://www.sqa.org.uk)

*The national body in Scotland responsible for the development, accreditation, assessment and certification of qualifications other than degrees.*

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### Learning and Teaching Scotland

Tel: Customer Enquiries on 08700 100297

E-mail: [enquiries@LTScotland.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@LTScotland.org.uk)

Web: [www.LTScotland.org.uk/NQ](http://www.LTScotland.org.uk/NQ)

*A national organisation which supports teachers in their work by developing guidelines and producing teaching materials and educational websites. LT Scotland also manages a range of educational initiatives from early years through to lifelong learning.*

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### Scottish Further Education Unit

Tel: 01786 892000

E-mail: [sfeu@sfeu.ac.uk](mailto:sfeu@sfeu.ac.uk)

Web: [www.sfeu.ac.uk](http://www.sfeu.ac.uk)

*SFEU works in partnership with FE colleges to support the provision of high quality post-school education.*

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SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

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### Scottish Executive Education Department

Tel: 0131-556 8400 or 0845 774 1741

E-mail: [ceu@scotland.gov.uk](mailto:ceu@scotland.gov.uk)

Web: [www.scotland.gov.uk](http://www.scotland.gov.uk)

*SEED is responsible for administering policy on pre-school and school education, as well as a number of other areas. As part of this, the department provides the overall policy framework for National Qualifications including the school curriculum and assessment structure.*

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Your comments and feedback on this guide are welcome. Please contact one of the four partner organisations listed above using the contact details provided. This guide is also available online from the above websites.

Further copies of this publication (code BD2088) or a shortened version (code BD2072) can be obtained by calling the SQA's Customer Contact Centre on 0845 279 1000. The shortened version can also be made available in community languages and alternative formats.