



Design of National Courses and Units

Note: This guidance applies to National Courses and Units offered from session 2019–2020.

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1 Introduction

This document describes SQA's approach to the design of National Courses and Units following the completion of the Revised National Courses programme in 2020.

This document outlines the principles which underpin the design of National Courses and Units and gives information about important design aspects. It is primarily aimed at teachers and lecturers in schools and colleges who are delivering and assessing National Courses and Units. It may also be of interest to learners, parents, employers, colleges, universities, and others interested in the National Qualifications.

Information about assessment in National Courses and Units can be found on SQA's website.

2 Design principles

The design principles for National Courses are the blueprint for the National Qualifications. They consist of high-level principles governing the design and assessment of the courses and units.

Many aspects of the courses and units described in this document originate from the design principles.

The following table outlines the key aspects of the current design and assessment of National 1 Units and National 2 to Advanced Higher Courses.

Course structure	SCQF Credit / Level	Design and Assessment
Advanced Higher	32 points at level 7	Assessed through question papers / coursework and no longer unit-based
Higher	24 points at level 6	Assessed through question papers / coursework and no longer unit-based
National 5	24 points at level 5	Assessed through question papers / coursework and no longer unit-based
National 4 Course and Units	24 points at level 4	Internally assessed, unit-based structure with Added Value unit remains
National 3 Course and Units	18 points at level 3	Internally assessed, unit-based structure remains
National 2 Course and Units	18 points at level 2	Internally assessed, unit-based structure remains
National 1 Units	6 points at level 1	National 1 Units are stand-alone and do not form part of a course of study. Internally assessed unit-based structure remains.

3 Equality and inclusion

The design principles require all National Courses and Units to be developed to meet the needs of all learners, and to be as accessible as possible to learners who will achieve in different ways and at different paces.

In addition to the design principles, the Equality Act (2010) places clear statutory duties on SQA to ensure that our qualifications do not discriminate against people who wish to be or who are learners because of their disability, race, age, religion or belief, sex, gender re-assignment, pregnancy and maternity or sexual orientation. These are known as the 'protected characteristics'.

This means that the National Courses and Units:

- ◆ must not be unlawfully discriminatory for any learner on grounds of any of these protected characteristics
- ◆ must give due consideration to the reasonable adjustments which can be made to provide access to the qualification for disabled learners

National Courses and Units have been developed to ensure that they do not include unnecessary barriers to learning. Course and unit support notes for each National Course and Unit provide advice and guidance for practitioners on how to ensure learning, teaching and assessment approaches are inclusive.

More information about equality and inclusion is available on SQA's website.

4 National Courses

The purpose of National Courses is to enable certification and recognition for the programmes of work that learners carry out in the senior phase of secondary education and in colleges. The broad objectives of National Courses are to provide high standards, and breadth and depth of learning for individual learners. National Courses provide a qualifications framework which enables the provision of a formal statement of a learner's achievement against a defined standard. They are a marketable qualification for progression into further study, training and employment.

National Courses, and the units in them, are designed to reflect the values, purposes and principles of Curriculum for Excellence, and to develop skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work. They are skills-based, offer flexibility, provide time for learning and have scope for personalisation.

A range of documents describes the requirements for National Courses. These include course specifications, course support notes, and assessment support documents. Each National Course specification contains mandatory information about the purpose and aims of the course and outlines the national standard. It describes the structure of the course, and the units which make it up (where applicable), and gives information about assessment. The course specification also contains a high-level list of mandatory skills, knowledge and understanding to be developed through the delivery and assessment of the course. The mandatory skills, knowledge and understanding are also reflected in assessment approaches.

Information about the documentation for National Courses and Units can be found in [section 11](#) of this document.

5 National Units

The purpose of National Units is to set standards of learning for individual learners. Units provide learners with the opportunity to demonstrate their acquisition of skills in an organised way and to develop the required skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work. National Units form part of National 2 to National 4 Courses or can be undertaken separately. National Units are certificated as qualifications in their own right.

National Units are ungraded and are internally assessed as pass or fail in centres.

The mandatory information for National Units is found in the unit specification. The unit specification sets out the standards which an individual learner must achieve in order to be awarded the unit. Key parts of this document are the outcomes and assessment standards and evidence requirements. These set the standard required to pass the unit and are what learners' evidence is assessed against. The unit specification is not a teaching syllabus.

Outcomes and assessment standards often have a focus on skills. Outcomes tend to be broad and open and evidence requirements are normally flexible to allow for a wide range of evidence to be used for assessment purposes.

As noted in [section 4](#), National Courses contain mandatory skills, knowledge and understanding which must be developed through the course and its units. These are applicable to units, if the units are being delivered as part of the course. If a unit is being delivered on a free-standing basis, practitioners have more flexibility in how they deliver the unit.

Centres have flexibility and a professional responsibility to deliver and assess National Units in a way that suits their learners.

6 SCQF levels and credit values

An important aspect of the design of the National Courses and Units is that they are both the correct level and the correct size. The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) helps to make the relationships between qualifications clearer. It helps to clarify entry and exit points and routes for progression within and across education and training sectors. It also helps to maximise the opportunities for credit transfer. In these ways it will help learners to plan their progress and learning.

Qualifications in the SCQF are compared using two measures: level and credit points. The level of a qualification shows how demanding the learning is. The credit points show the size of the qualification and how much work is involved in achieving that qualification. For example, one learner may study a course at National 4 (SCQF level 4) and another at Higher (SCQF level 6). Each has the same number of SCQF credit points (24 SCQF credit points) but these are at different levels of demand.

SCQF levels

The SCQF levels range from level 1 to level 12. This covers a range of learning from National 1 to a doctorate. All National Courses and Units are benchmarked against the SCQF.

The SCQF level of a National Course is consistent with the SCQF level descriptor for that level. All the units in the course will be at the SCQF level of the course. To achieve this, all courses are written in language that is consistent with the language of the SCQF level descriptors for the level of the course.

More information about the SCQF and the level descriptors is available on SQA's website.

SCQF credit values

Credit values for National Courses are determined by the design principles:

- ◆ units at National 1 are 6 SCQF credit points each — at this level there is no course
- ◆ courses at National 2 and 3 have 18 SCQF credit points — at these levels, the courses are made up of units only
- ◆ courses at National 4 have units totalling 24 SCQF credit points — 6 of these points are for the Added Value unit
- ◆ courses at National 5 and Higher total 24 SCQF credit points
- ◆ courses at Advanced Higher total 32 SCQF credit points

Most units (including those at National 1) have 6 SCQF credit points.

Some units can be bigger (9 or 12 SCQF credit points) or smaller (3 SCQF credit points). Some courses may also include optional units. The structure of a National Course is described in the course specification and the SCQF credit value of a unit can be found in the unit specification.

Notional hours of learning

Course and unit specifications describe the size of a qualification in terms of SCQF credit points. However, to help centres determine the size of a programme of learning, it may be useful to note that 1 SCQF credit point equates to a notional 10 hours of learning.

National 1 Units

National 1 Units are made up of 6 SCQF points or a notional 60 hours of directed learning. There are no specific SCQF level descriptors for SCQF level 1. The SCQF simply states that:

‘SCQF level 1 recognises learning development and achievement that ranges from participation in experiential situations to the achievement of basic tasks, with varying degrees of support.’

- ◆ Learners who do National 1 units require varying degrees of support. Some may take part at an experiential or sensory level where they require full support; some may require frequent direction and support to enable them to take part; while others may take part independently or with intermittent support. Centres have the flexibility to manage the support requirements of each individual learner.

National 2 and 3 Courses

National 2 Courses are notionally based on 180 hours of directed learning and equate to 18 SCQF credit points. National 2 Courses recognise that learners may need additional time in order to complete units and courses, according to their individual needs.

National 3 Courses are notionally based on 180 hours of directed learning and equate to 18 SCQF credit points. National 3 Courses recognise that learners may need an additional half of the time required for directed learning to successfully complete the course.

National 4 Courses

National 4 Courses are notionally based on 160 hours of directed learning and 80 hours of self-directed learning and equate to 24 SCQF credit points. One of the units (6 SCQF credit points) will assess added value; it will require the learner to demonstrate depth of understanding and/or application of skills.

National 5 and Higher

National Courses at National 5 and Higher are notionally based on 160 hours of directed learning and 80 hours of self-directed learning and equate to 24 SCQF credit points.

Advanced Higher

National Courses at Advanced Higher are notionally based on 160 hours of directed learning and 160 hours of self-directed learning and equate to 32 SCQF credit points.

In all cases, when determining learning programmes, centres should consider the size of a course or unit and ensure appropriate time is available for learners undertaking these qualifications.

7 Description of National Courses and Units by SCQF level

As mentioned in [section 6](#), National Courses and Units from National 2 to Advanced Higher and National 1 Units have been designed to align with the corresponding SCQF level descriptors. A description of the courses and units at SCQF levels 1–7 is given below, and this overview may be useful to those interested in the range of provision SQA offers in this area.

National 1 (SCQF level 1)

National 1 Units are designed for learners who require additional support for learning. They normally have 6 SCQF credit points and they build on the experiences and outcomes that learners acquire in the broad, general education in S1–S3. Some learners will require more time to achieve the units than the programmed learning time. Also, some learners will require support to allow them to do the units. Learners who achieve one or more National 1 Units may be able to progress to National 2 Units; others may progress to other National 1 Units, or to awards at National 1.

National 2 (SCQF level 2)

National 2 Courses and Units are designed for learners who require additional support for learning. Learners taking National 2 Courses and Units may have progressed from the experiences and outcomes in the broad, general education in S1–S3, or from SQA qualifications at SCQF level 1. National 2 Courses are designed to enable learners to develop skills across a range of learning contexts, as well as providing a basis for developing skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work. A National 2 Course has 18 SCQF credit points. To achieve a National 2 Course, it is necessary to achieve the units in the course: there is no external assessment in National 2 Courses.

Learners who achieve National 2 Courses and Units may progress to other National 2 Courses and Units, to National 3 Courses and Units or to other SQA qualifications at SCQF levels 2 and 3.

National 3 (SCQF level 3)

Learners taking National 3 Courses and Units may have progressed from the experiences and outcomes in the broad, general education in S1–S3 or from SQA qualifications at SCQF level 2. National 3 Courses and Units are designed to enable learners to develop skills, knowledge and understanding in a specific subject area, as well as skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work. A National 3 Course has 18 SCQF credit points. To achieve a National 3 Course, it is necessary to achieve the units in the course: there is no external assessment in National 3 Courses.

Learners who achieve National 3 Courses and Units may progress to National 4 Courses and Units or to other SQA qualifications at SCQF levels 3 and 4.

National 4 (SCQF level 4)

Learners taking National 4 Courses and Units may have progressed from the experiences and outcomes at curriculum level 3 in the broad, general education in S1–S3, or from SQA qualifications at SCQF level 3.

National 4 Courses and Units are designed to enable learners to develop skills, knowledge and understanding in a specific subject area, as well as skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work.

A National 4 Course has 24 SCQF credit points. To achieve a National 4 Course, it is necessary to achieve the units in the course — this includes the Added Value Unit which has 6 SCQF credit points. The Added Value Unit selects from one or more of the other units in the course and is internally assessed in centres as a pass or a fail. There is no external assessment in National 4 Courses.

Learners who achieve National 4 Courses and Units may progress to National 5 Courses, or to other SQA qualifications at SCQF level 5. Some learners will exit secondary education with National 4 Courses and progress to further education, training or employment.

National 5 (SCQF level 5)

Learners taking National 5 Courses may have progressed from SQA qualifications at SCQF level 4 or from the experiences and outcomes at curriculum level 4. National 5 Courses are designed to enable learners to develop skills, knowledge and understanding in a specific subject area, as well as skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work.

A National 5 Course has 24 SCQF credit points. To achieve a National 5 Course, it is necessary to achieve the course assessment. The course assessment samples from across the course content and will often be a question paper and another assessment method such as an assignment. National 5 Courses are graded A–D. The grade for the course is based on the learner's performance across the course assessment.

Learners who achieve National 5 Courses may progress to Higher Courses, or to other SQA qualifications at SCQF level 6. Some learners will exit secondary education with National 5 Courses and progress to further education, training or employment.

Higher (SCQF level 6)

Learners taking Higher Courses may have progressed from SQA qualifications at SCQF level 5.

Higher courses are designed to enable learners to develop more complex and challenging skills, knowledge and understanding in a specific subject area, as well as higher-order skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work. A Higher course has 24 SCQF credit points. To achieve a Higher course, it is necessary to achieve the course assessment. The course assessment samples across the course content and will often be a question paper and another assessment method such as a project. Higher courses are graded A–D. The grade for the course is based on the learner's performance across the course assessment.

Learners who achieve Higher courses may progress to Advanced Higher courses, or to other SQA qualifications at SCQF level 7. Some learners will exit secondary education with Higher courses and progress to further/higher education, training or employment. Highers are the standard entry requirements for higher education in Scotland.

Advanced Higher (SCQF level 7)

Learners taking Advanced Higher courses are likely to have progressed from SQA qualifications at SCQF level 6.

Advanced Higher courses are designed to enable learners to develop more complex and challenging skills, knowledge and understanding in a specific subject area, as well as higher-order skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work. An Advanced Higher course has 32 SCQF credit points. This reflects the greater amount of responsibility that learners will have for their own learning, and also the greater proportion of the course that they will work on independently and with less supervision. To achieve an Advanced Higher course, it is necessary to achieve the course assessment. The course assessment samples from across the course content and will often be a question paper and another assessment method such as a project. Advanced Higher courses are graded A–D. The grade for the course is based on the learner's performance across the course assessment.

Some Advanced Higher courses contribute to Scottish Baccalaureates. Scottish Baccalaureates consist of coherent groups of subjects at Higher and Advanced Higher level. Each award consists of two Advanced Highers, one Higher, and an interdisciplinary project which adds breadth and value and helps learners to develop generic skills, attitudes and confidence that will help them make the transition into higher education or employment.

Learners who achieve Advanced Higher courses may progress to other SQA qualifications at SCQF level 8. They may also progress to further/higher education, training or employment. As Advanced Higher courses require learners to work independently, they provide good preparation for learners progressing to further and higher education. Advanced Higher courses may also allow 'advanced standing' or partial credit towards the first year of study of a degree programme.

8 Progression and hierarchies

Progression into and from the National Courses and Units is an important aspect of their design and development.

Progression into National Courses and Units

The National Courses and Units have been designed to provide progression from the experiences and outcomes of the broad, general education. They have also been designed to enable progression between levels within specific subjects.

Although entry to a course is always at the discretion of the centre, course specifications and course support notes provide specific information and guidance on recommended entry for each course. This is normally in terms of the course at the level below. However, there may also be information in the course support notes about transition to courses on the basis of the experiences and outcomes. It is important to note that it is only at curriculum level 4 that we have a broad match with SCQF level 4, and this is in terms of level of demand. There is generally no simple one-to-one relationship between qualifications and experiences and outcomes, as qualifications at SCQF level 4 and beyond will be more specific to allow for more specialist study of subjects.

It is the responsibility of centres to ensure that learners are entered for the appropriate level of qualification. Entries should normally be submitted early in the session. However, centres may change an entry for a learner up to 31 March in the session¹. This gives centres time to decide the most appropriate level of course based on their first-hand experience of the learner.

For example, learners taking a National 5 Course should be secure in the relevant curriculum level 4 experiences and outcomes and/or the relevant National 4 Course. Learners who are not secure at curriculum level 4 experiences and outcomes, and/or in the course at the level below, would require a teaching and learning programme to meet their needs and to enable them to progress to a National 5 Course.

Progression from National Courses and Units

Course and unit support notes may also describe, for example, other qualifications or training, further/higher education, and employment opportunities that a National Course or Unit could lead to.

While the main progression opportunities have been briefly described in the National Courses and Units, learners can also progress to a range of qualifications in SQA's portfolio. These could include Skills for Work courses, Awards, National Progression Awards and National Qualification Group Awards.

Hierarchies

Hierarchical structures have been used in National Courses and Units (where applicable) to support smooth progression through the levels of qualifications. 'Hierarchy' is the term used

¹ Please refer to operational guidance for centres on registrations, entries and results, available on SQA's website.

to describe courses and units which form a structured progression involving two or more SCQF levels. Courses which are in a hierarchy will normally have a common set of skills, knowledge and understanding to be developed which are appropriate for the course and its level — this is a design feature which allows progression through the levels.

Hierarchies enable learners to be given recognition for their best achievement. For example, if units are designed in a hierarchy, learners may be able to achieve (and be certificated for) a unit at the level above the level of the course they are doing.

Most, but not all, National Courses are in hierarchies. Courses are in a hierarchy if they share the same course subject title at different levels. If they do not share the same title, then SQA will specifically indicate that a course relationship exists across levels — we call this a 'corresponding course'.

9 Skills for Learning, Skills for Life and Skills for Work

National Courses and Units have a focus on skills. Subject-specific skills will continue to be developed. In addition, the design principles require National Courses and Units (where applicable) to support the development of generic skills, called 'Skills for Learning, Skills for Life and Skills for Work' (SfLLW).

SfLLW are derived from *Building the Curriculum 4*. These generic skills sit alongside knowledge, understanding and subject-based skills.

These skills are in five broad areas:

- ◆ literacy
- ◆ numeracy
- ◆ health and wellbeing
- ◆ employability, enterprise and citizenship
- ◆ thinking skills

SfLLW are not assessed or certificated by SQA. However, the development of these skills is important, and is the responsibility of all practitioners. Many of the opportunities to develop the skills will be naturally occurring, through learning and teaching activities.

Each National Course and Unit highlights which of these skills are likely to be developed during the delivery of the qualification. Course and unit support notes give advice and guidance to practitioners on how these skills could be developed.

A full version of the SfLLW framework is available on SQA's website.

10 Core Skills

As noted in [section 9](#), qualifications developed to support Curriculum for Excellence include SfLLW. Those delivering National Courses and Units can use the associated toolkit to identify and promote development of these generic skills.

Most National Courses and Units do not have embedded core skills. However, in a small number of National Courses and National Units, core skills have been embedded. Learners who achieve any of these courses and units will have the relevant core skills recorded in the 'Core Skills Profile' section of their Scottish Qualifications Certificate.

Course and unit specifications for National Courses and Units indicate where there are embedded core skills, and course and unit support notes give advice and guidance to practitioners about how to develop these skills through learning and teaching.

Core skill units are also available and can be used to certificate generic skills, should learners want or need them recognised in this way.

More information about core skills is available on SQA's website.

11 National Courses and Units: a guide to documentation

There is a range of documentation for National Courses and Units — some of which is mandatory, some is advice and guidance, and some is support.

The following table explains the purpose of each document, describes the content, and highlights which are mandatory and which are for advice, guidance or support. The table can be used as a reference for those involved or interested in National Courses and Units.

Specifications	Advice and guidance	Assessment support
<p>Course specifications</p> <p>National 2 to Advanced Higher This gives mandatory information about the course, including the rationale for the course; its aims and structure; the high-level skills, knowledge and understanding that will be covered; and high-level information about the units in the course (where applicable) and assessment. It also lists the skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work that should be developed by the course, and gives information and advice relating to core skills embedded in the course, if applicable.</p> <p>National 5 to Advanced Higher The course specification also describes the structure of the course assessment and its coverage; the skills, knowledge and understanding; and the aspects of breadth, challenge and application that will be assessed. It also includes the balance of marks across the course assessment, and states the conditions of assessment for the coursework task.</p>	<p>Course support notes</p> <p>National 2 to Advanced Higher These non-mandatory documents provide advice and guidance for teachers/lecturers on delivering courses. The documents include advice on, for example, learning and teaching approaches; building in approaches to equality and inclusion; skills, knowledge and understanding for the course; subject hierarchies; approaches to assessment and preparation for course assessment where applicable; high-level information regarding skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work; and useful reference materials and resources.</p> <p>National 5 to Advanced Higher The course support notes are presented as an appendix to the course specification.</p>	<p>National 5 to Advanced Higher</p> <p>Specimen and exemplar question papers and marking Instructions These illustrate the standard, structure and requirements of the question papers learners will sit from session 2013–14. These also include marking instructions, which detail how the questions in the specimen paper should be marked, and outlines the marking principles that will be used.</p> <p>Coursework information Instructions for coursework are found in the coursework assessment task.</p> <p>The coursework assessment task document provides instructions for the conduct of coursework, an overview of the assessment task, evidence to be gathered, and general marking instructions that will be applied to the assessment task.</p> <p>It also provides specific marking instructions and instruction for candidates. This document contains the live assessment tasks for the coursework components of course assessment. Teachers/lecturers can access this document through their SQA co-ordinator.</p>

Unit specifications	Unit support notes	Unit assessment support materials
<p>National 1 to National 4 This defines the mandatory outcomes, assessment standards and evidence requirements for the unit. It also lists the skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work that should be developed by the unit, and gives information and advice relating to core skills embedded in the unit, if applicable.</p>	<p>National 1 to National 4 These non-mandatory documents provide advice and guidance for teachers/lecturers on delivering units. The documents include advice on, for example, learning and teaching approaches; building in approaches to equality and inclusion; approaches to assessment and gathering evidence; suggestions and examples for building in skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work; and useful reference materials and resources.</p>	<p>National 1 to National 4 These documents show approaches to generating evidence for a unit and how the evidence that is gathered can be judged against the unit outcomes and assessment standards. Where appropriate, the documents provide examples of an assessment task or tasks for the unit.</p> <p>Unit assessment support materials can be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ used to assess candidates ◆ adapted to suit different assessment programmes ◆ used to help develop new assessments <p>Teachers/lecturers can access these confidential documents through their SQA co-ordinator. It is not mandatory to use these unit assessments.</p>
<p>National 4 Added Value unit specification The National 4 Added Value unit specification defines the mandatory outcomes, assessment standards and evidence requirements for the Added Value unit. It also includes the further mandatory information on course coverage for the National 4 Course and includes information on the assessment method and conditions of assessment.</p>		<p>National 4 Added Value unit assessment This provides details of the assessment task or tasks for the National 4 Added Value unit. It shows approaches to generating evidence and how the evidence that is gathered can be judged against the unit outcomes and assessment standards. Teachers/lecturers can access these confidential documents through their SQA co-ordinator.</p>