



Assessment in National Courses and Units

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

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Introduction

This document describes SQA’s approach to the assessment of National Courses and Units following the completion of the Revised National Courses programme in 2020. It is primarily aimed at teachers and lecturers in schools and colleges who are delivering and assessing these National Courses and Units. It may also be of interest to learners, parents, employers, colleges, universities and others interested in the National Qualifications.

In SQA qualifications, assessment is defined as the process of evaluating how effectively learning is occurring. It is the process of generating and collecting evidence of a learner’s attainment of knowledge and skills, and judging that evidence against defined standards for formal certification.

Assessment of National Courses and Units has been designed to be appropriate to the subject and level and allows a wide range of approaches to assessment.

Course and unit assessment aligns with the purpose and aims of each course and is designed to support learning and teaching.

Key features of assessment

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.

Assessment of National Courses and Units (where applicable) has been shaped and developed by a coherent policy framework. The flexibility introduced by this policy framework encourages the use of a wide range of assessment methods that will benefit both learners and teachers/lecturers. An extended range of techniques and methodologies for assessment

is encouraged, particularly for unit assessment, ensuring that assessment is fit for purpose for the subject and level, and will support learning and teaching approaches.

The key features of assessment for National Courses and Units are:

Unit assessment

- ◆ National 1–National 4 are assessed through units. Teachers/lecturers will find that they have flexibility to determine the most appropriate methods of assessment for individual learners. Teachers/lecturers can use any appropriate assessment method.
- ◆ They will also be able to make use of their professional judgement and knowledge of their learners in making judgements, ie about whether or not evidence from learners meets the requirements of the outcomes and assessment standards being assessed. This means that each assessment standard should not require to be assessed separately.
- ◆ It is also possible to combine assessment of outcomes and assessment standards across units and to use naturally occurring evidence on which to base unit assessment judgements.
- ◆ National 4 Courses include an Added Value Unit which is assessed internally by centres.

Units from National 1 to National 4 (including the National 4 Added Value Unit) are assessed by teachers and lecturers in schools and colleges and externally verified by SQA.

Course assessment

- ◆ National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher Courses are assessed through a course assessment which may be marked externally by SQA, or internally assessed by teachers/lecturers and externally verified by SQA.

For course assessment and the assessment of the National 4 Added Value Units, there are [seven agreed assessment methods](#) which will give greater consistency to assessment approaches. The majority of courses at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher will be assessed by a combination of question papers and coursework assessments.

Internal verification of evidence

All internal assessments must be internally verified by centres under the conditions specified by SQA. Guidance is provided in the publication [Internal verification: A guide for centres](#).

Unit assessment

- ◆ Unit assessment is based on broad outcomes, flexible and open assessment standards and evidence requirements, and generic assessment criteria.
- ◆ Units are ungraded and are assessed by schools and colleges on a pass/fail basis. This includes the Added Value Unit at National 4.
- ◆ A greater range of techniques and methodologies for assessment is encouraged, ensuring that assessment is fit for purpose for the subject and level, and will support learning and teaching approaches.
- ◆ Assessments can be designed to provide evidence across more than one outcome or unit.

Unit assessment in National Courses has been designed to give assessors the discretion to determine the most appropriate methods of assessment for individual learners. This enables assessors to make use of their professional judgement and knowledge of their learners in deciding whether or not evidence from learners meets the standards in the unit specification.

Approaches to unit assessment

Unit assessment has been designed to provide the flexibility to ensure that approaches used are fit for purpose for the subject and level, and to support learning and teaching. Evidence for outcomes and assessment standards may be at unit level or across units, rather than fragmented across individual outcomes and assessment standards.

In SQA-produced Unit Assessment Support Packs (UASPs), three approaches to assessment may be exemplified — combined, unit-by-unit and portfolio:

- ◆ Combined assessment is the assessment of the outcomes and assessment standards from more than one unit within a course or across courses.
- ◆ A unit-by-unit approach assesses each unit separately, and there is normally one assessment per unit.
- ◆ A portfolio approach focuses on the collection of evidence across individual units and the course.

In all three, assessment evidence may be collected as part of the day-to-day learning and teaching process; this is referred to as naturally occurring evidence.

Unit Assessment Support Packs set out possible approaches, which are in line with the outcomes and assessment standards that must be met. They are designed to be as open and flexible as possible. They can be used by teachers/lecturers to:

- ◆ assess learners
- ◆ adapt for their own assessment programmes
- ◆ develop their own assessments

Teachers/lecturers must use their professional judgement, subject knowledge, experience, and understanding of learners to decide the most appropriate ways to generate evidence,

and the conditions and contexts in which they are used. Unit Assessment Support Packs provide examples of how this can be done, but it is not mandatory to use the tasks in the provided assessments. This also applies to the National 4 Added Value Unit.

Conditions of assessment

For assessment of National 1–National 4, other than the National 4 Added Value Units, there are few restrictions on the conditions of assessment—although in some instances the evidence requirements for the unit will state the conditions required for unit assessment. These could be:

- ◆ whether or not learners may have access to materials such as reference books during the assessment (sometimes referred to as ‘open-/closed-book’). If the assessment carried out is a test of knowledge and understanding, you may wish to specify that it will be carried out under closed-book conditions. However, if it is based on, for example, learner research or investigation, you may wish to specify that it is open-book.
- ◆ any other resources which learners may have access to during the assessment
- ◆ the amount of time for the assessment task
- ◆ the approximate number of words, if appropriate (for example for essays or assignments)
- ◆ the amount of support that learners may expect from their assessors
- ◆ whether the assessment (or any parts of it) should be carried out under supervision

If the evidence requirements for the unit do not state specific conditions, then teachers/lecturers can use their professional judgement to decide which assessment conditions are most appropriate for individual learners.

Re-assessment

If learners have been unsuccessful in demonstrating their attainment of a unit, they can be re-assessed. Some units may stipulate the conditions in which re-assessment can be carried out and it is important to abide by these. If there are no such requirements, there should normally be only one, or in exceptional circumstances two, re-assessment opportunities. The decision of what constitutes an exceptional circumstance rests with the professional judgement of the assessor. With any re-assessment, assessors should consider if it should adhere to the same conditions and instructions as the original assessment and give advice on that.

In all cases of re-assessment, the re-assessment must be of equal demand to the original assessment.

Schools, colleges and local authorities will have developed policies on this issue to ensure fairness to candidates.

Unit Assessment Support Packs

Unit Assessment Support Packs have been published for every course, from National 1 to National 4, to help teachers/lecturers deliver and assess National Qualifications.

Unit assessment support has been designed to meet the requirements of unit outcomes and assessment standards and sets out **possible** assessment approaches that meet the assessment standards.

Unit assessment support also exemplifies:

- ◆ approaches to generating evidence
- ◆ how the evidence that is gathered can be judged against the unit outcomes and assessment standards
- ◆ recording documentation
- ◆ information for learners

Unit Assessment Support Packs can only be accessed via SQA's secure site. Teachers/lecturers can arrange access to these confidential documents through their SQA co-ordinator.

Use of the Unit Assessment Support Packs is not mandatory. Teachers/lecturers are free to develop their own assessments and can use a variety of means to gather and judge evidence against the outcomes and assessment standards. Teachers/lecturers may also adapt the SQA packs as a basis to develop their own assessments. Further information on developing your own unit assessment can be found on SQA's website page [About National Qualifications](#).

All unit assessments must be internally verified by centres.

Prior verification

Centres may use SQA's Unit Assessment Support Packs or develop their own. If a centre decides to develop its own unit assessments, SQA will continue to offer a prior verification service. Here a centre's assessment is scrutinised by an SQA Appointee, normally the Principal Verifier for the subject area. This service gives a centre confidence that its proposed assessment is fit for purpose. SQA's experience of prior verification clearly shows that it can prevent problems arising at a later date, when a centre's assessment is externally verified. **SQA strongly recommends that any centre wishing to develop its own assessments should use this service before the assessment is used with candidates.**

Methods to assess breadth, challenge and application

Courses at National 4, National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher assess breadth, challenge and application of skills, knowledge, and understanding from across the course. Breadth, challenge and application is what makes the course more than the sum of its parts.

At National 4, breadth, challenge and application are assessed by the Added Value Unit. At National 5 and above, added value is assessed by the course assessment.

Breadth, challenge and application at all levels is assessed using one or two of seven broad methods. For the National 4 Added Value Unit, normally only one method is used. Courses from National 5 to Advanced Higher will normally be assessed by two methods, most often a question paper and one other method. The seven methods are:

1 Assignment

An assignment is a problem-solving task with clear guidelines and structure. It is less open-ended and more structured than a project. It differs from practical activities in that it does not conform to a prescribed procedure and is not concerned exclusively with technical skills.

2 Case study

A case study consists of a description of an event that concerns a realistic situation. It is designed to provide opportunities to demonstrate problem-solving and decision-making skills. It requires learners to analyse a situation, draw conclusions and make decisions or propose a course of action.

3 Practical activity

A practical activity is any activity that allows learners to demonstrate their practical skills. It usually involves producing, making or building something. The assessment may be based on the end result of the activity (the product), carrying-out the activity (the process), or a combination of both.

4 Performance

Performance is used to assess the practical demonstration of learners' skills. It is particularly suitable for assessing creative arts such as music and drama. It can also be used to assess physical or spoken activities.

5 Portfolio

A portfolio is a representative collection of a learner's work, usually assembled over the period of learning. It demonstrates or provides examples to prove that the learner has met the requirements of the qualification. Portfolios can be produced in a range of media.

6 Project

Projects are used to assess analysis, synthesis and evaluation skills.

A project requires learners to carry out an open-ended task, often involving investigative or research skills. It can involve a significant part of the work being carried out without close supervision, although the assessor may provide guidance and support. Projects can allow personalisation and choice for the learner — for example, they may be able to choose the area/topic for investigation.

7 Question paper/test of knowledge and understanding (exam)

Question papers are primarily used to assess knowledge, understanding and cognitive skills such as reasoning, analysing and evaluating. In course assessment, a question paper is used to assess whether the learner can retain and consolidate the knowledge and skills gained across the course.

Units may also be assessed using these methods or any other methods.

Comparison of the assessment of breadth, challenge and application

The table below sums up the differences between the assessment of breadth, challenge and application in National 4 Added Value Units and in National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher Courses.

National 4	National 5/Higher/Advanced Higher
Assessed in a unit (performs same function as course assessment)	Assessed in course assessment
Pass/fail — the unit has been designed to be assessed on a pass/fail basis	Graded A to D — the course assessment has been designed to cover the full range of grades
Selects from the other units of the course (does not have to sample across all of the other units)	Samples across all of the units of the course, confirming attainment of the course

Controlled assessment

Each National 4 Added Value unit specification and each National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher course specification describes the agreed arrangements for:

- ◆ developing the assessment (setting)
- ◆ the conditions of assessment (conducting)
- ◆ marking/judging the assessment (marking)

These arrangements are called 'controlled assessment'. SQA has introduced controlled assessment to ensure that:

- ◆ assessment is valid, reliable and fair
- ◆ assessment is manageable for all involved — learners, teachers and centres
- ◆ assessment methods are consistently applied for all learners

In each National Course, the controlled assessment arrangements describe a level of control for each of the three stages of an assessment (setting, conducting and marking). The levels of control are:

- ◆ SQA-led activity
- ◆ shared responsibility between SQA and centres
- ◆ centre-led

For the National 4 Added Value Unit, setting, conducting and marking are shared responsibilities between SQA and centres. This means that SQA provides exemplification of assessment, specific requirements for assessment conditions, and gives instructions on how to judge/mark evidence. Centres conduct and mark the assessment using the National 4 Added Value Unit assessments provided by SQA.

The majority of coursework assessment at National 5 and Higher is set and marked by SQA, except where it is more appropriate for the subject to have shared responsibility in setting, conducting and/or marking. For example, the National 5 Physical Education performance and the Higher Design and Manufacture assignment will be conducted and marked in centres using the assessments provided by SQA.

In the Physical Education course, this assessment gives candidates the opportunity to plan, prepare and evaluate their performance as they would for real sporting activities. In fact, the assessment can be of a real sporting activity. Similarly, in the Design and Manufacture course, the assignment is designed to assess the ability to generate and develop ideas, use and apply techniques, and evaluate and justify decisions in a realistic context.

At Advanced Higher — because there is greater emphasis on learner autonomy — a greater degree of flexibility is needed, so more coursework is likely to be set, conducted and marked as a shared responsibility between SQA and centres. For example, the Advanced Higher Computing Science project will be set by centres within SQA guidelines and conducted and internally marked in centres. This is because centres are best-placed to assess learners'

skills in different programming languages and environments, as well as independent study and process skills.

National 4 Added Value Unit assessment

The Added Value Unit, like all units, is not graded and is internally assessed and externally verified. However, because the Added Value Unit assessment performs the same function as a course assessment for courses at National 5 and above, the Added Value Unit assessment is qualitatively different from the assessment of other units.

The key differences are as follows:

- ◆ In Added Value Units, the unit title normally specifies the assessment method — one of the seven agreed methods — which must be used. The unit outline focuses on assessment. The evidence requirements specify detailed requirements for:
 - setting
 - conducting
 - marking
 - re-assessment

The Added Value Unit also contains a 'Further mandatory information on course coverage' section and permissible contexts for assessment (where appropriate). This provides mandatory information about the skills, knowledge and understanding to be covered in the units of the National 4 course.

Most of the published National 4 Added Value Unit assessments allow considerable flexibility in the choice of context for the assessment, while describing what learners must do. Some others provide a context that centres can change, for example by replacing the given topic or brief for a specified task; selecting a different passage while using similar questions; or using alternative sources with the same level of demand. Any such opportunities for change are described in the relevant Added Value Unit assessment document. Like all SQA-produced unit assessments, Added Value Unit assessments must be internally verified by centres.

Re-assessment of National 4 Added Value Units

Like other units, if learners have been unsuccessful in demonstrating their attainment of a National 4 Added Value Unit, they can be re-assessed. Some units may stipulate the conditions in which re-assessment can be carried out, and it is important to abide by these. If there are no such requirements, there should normally be only one, or in exceptional circumstances two, re-assessment opportunities. The decision of what constitutes an exceptional circumstance rests with the professional judgement of the assessor. With any re-assessment, assessors should consider if it should adhere to the same conditions and instructions as the original assessment and give advice on that.

In all cases of re-assessment, the re-assessment must be of equal demand to the original assessment and comply with the information given in the National 4 Added Value Unit specification about controlled assessment.

Schools, colleges and local authorities will have developed policies on this issue to ensure fairness to candidates.

Course assessment: National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher

Course assessment assesses breadth, challenge and application. This is done, for example, by assessing aspects such as depth of understanding and application of skills from across the course, in more complex or less familiar contexts. Such assessments are designed to be appropriate for the level of the course. For example, a performance at Advanced Higher has different demands from a performance at National 5.

Almost all courses from National 5 to Advanced Higher are assessed by a combination of a question paper and another method. These are known as 'components of course assessment'.

Courses are graded A, B, C or D. To gain the award of the course, the learner must pass the course assessment. Grades for National Courses are based on the total marks for all the components of the course assessment, for example a question paper and assignment.

Requirements for course assessment are set out in a course specification. The course specification describes the structure of the course assessment and the skills, knowledge and understanding that will be assessed, as well as which aspects of breadth, challenge and application will be assessed. The course specification gives the balance of marks across the course assessment, the structure of course assessment, and its coverage. It also states the conditions of assessment.