



Changes to assessment of National Courses: Your questions answered

June 2018

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1 Changes to assessment

Why are changes being made to National Courses?

The Deputy First Minister announced in September 2016 that he wanted to reduce workload for candidates and teachers by removing units and unit assessments from **National 5 to Advanced Higher** courses.

Since this announcement, SQA has been making necessary structural changes to the courses and course assessments. We have done this in consultation with our National Qualifications Support Teams (NQSTs) – whose members include teachers and lecturers, and representatives of teaching unions and professional bodies – to consider what the removal of unit assessments means for each subject.

The common goal of everyone involved should be to reduce the volume of assessment, while maintaining the standards and integrity of National Qualifications.

How will candidates be assessed for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses once the units are removed?

Candidates will only be required to complete the course assessment at the end of the course. The course assessment will involve a question paper (exam) or coursework, or both. Candidates will no longer be required to undertake unit assessments as they progress through the course.

Will there be any changes to the course assessments?

Yes. Following the removal of units, we need to strengthen the course assessments to ensure that candidates continue to be assessed on the full content of each course. This will protect the integrity of National Courses and maintain their current value of 24 SCQF credit points.

For each course, we will make one or more of the following changes to the course assessment:

- ◆ extend the existing question paper (exam)
- ◆ extend the existing item of coursework
- ◆ introduce a new question paper (exam) component
- ◆ introduce a new coursework component

Why is it necessary to strengthen the course assessments?

Removing units and unit assessments will reduce the volume of assessment that candidates experience at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher. However, we also need to ensure that the standard of assessment does not change.

Where a course is made up of units and a course assessment, candidates are assessed on their skills, knowledge and understanding as they progress through the course – by completing a unit assessment for each unit. The course assessment, which takes place at the end of the course, assesses candidates on a selection of skills, knowledge and understanding from across the course.

Once the units and unit assessments are removed, we need to extend the course assessments so that they assess candidates on all of the skills, knowledge and understanding from across the course – not just a selection. For example, in some subjects there are certain skills that are currently only assessed through the units. Those skills will now be transferred to the course assessment.

Extending the course assessments will also protect the integrity of National Courses and maintain their current value of 24 SCQF credit points.

When will the changes take effect?

We have already removed units and unit assessments from National 5 courses and the changes to National 5 course assessments were implemented during session 2017-18. Units and unit assessments will be removed from Higher courses from session 2018-19, and the changes to Higher course assessments will be implemented for the 2019 exam diet. We will then remove units and unit assessments from Advanced Higher courses from session 2019-20, and the changes to Advanced Higher course assessments will take effect from the 2020 exam diet.

How does SQA decide on the appropriate assessment changes for each course?

We review each course in consultation with our subject-based National Qualification Support Teams (NQSTs). Our NQSTs include teachers and lecturers, representatives of teaching unions and representatives of professional bodies.

We consider what the removal of unit assessments means for each subject. For example, there might be areas of skills, knowledge and understanding that are currently only assessed through the units or there may be subjects where only a certain number of topics are covered in the course assessment each year.

We review each subject individually and identify the most appropriate ways to extend the course assessment so that the appropriate topics, skills, knowledge and understanding are covered. We also consider feedback we have received from the teaching profession.

Why are some of the Higher exams being split into two separate question papers from session 2018-19, while others are just being extended?

Where we extend a question paper (exam) to cover more content, the number of marks will increase. This may involve adding more questions to the paper or increasing the number of marks available for existing question types so that candidates are required to demonstrate more skills, knowledge and understanding.

By increasing the number of marks, we also need to increase the duration of the exam to give candidates enough time to complete the question paper. However, for subjects where the extended exam would now last more than 2 hours 45 minutes, we have decided to split the exam into two separate question papers to give candidates a break between each one.

How will the changes to assessment impact on disabled candidates or candidates with other protected characteristics?

We have a process in place to carry out Equality Impact Assessments of National Qualifications. This ensures that the qualifications are not discriminatory for any learner on the grounds of disability, race, age, religion/belief, sex, gender reassignment, pregnancy/maternity or sexual orientation. Due consideration is also given to the reasonable adjustments that SQA can make to provide access to the qualifications for disabled candidates and candidates with additional support needs.

All current National Qualifications were subject to this process prior to being implemented and, as there is no change to the aims, rationale or content of the courses, the reviews that were carried out remain valid and fit for purpose,

We carried out an Equality Impact Assessment on the specific changes to course assessment at National 5 to consider the potential impact of these changes to learners with protected characteristics – and how our existing arrangements could reduce this. The findings were formally reported to SQA's Qualifications Committee in June 2017.

Our Assessment Arrangements team is monitoring the impact of the changes on candidates to determine if any further actions are required. Equality Impact Assessments will also be built into our processes for revising the course assessments at Higher and Advanced Higher.

Will the changes to assessment have an impact on Insight tariff points?

This is the responsibility of the Scottish Government. The Insight project team will consider any necessary modifications to the Insight tool to ensure it is able to present an accurate and consistent picture of young peoples' attainment. The project team consists of members from the Scottish Government, Education Scotland, SQA, Association of Directors of Education Scotland (ADES), the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), and School Leaders Scotland (SLS).

Are any changes being made to assessment in National 4 courses?

At present, SQA has only been asked to take forward the nationally-agreed revisions to National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher.

The Curriculum and Assessment Board (CAB) is considering the approach to assessment in National 4 courses,

2 Changes to documents and assessment support materials

Will the course documentation change?

Yes. We received feedback from teachers that the number of documents for each course is an area of concern, so we are streamlining our documents.

For each course, we are merging the course specification, course assessment specification and general assessment information documents into one document — a revised course specification. Course support notes will also be added to the revised course specification as an appendix. This will allow teachers and lecturers to quickly and easily access the information they need to deliver their courses. The revised course specifications include introductory information, mandatory course content, details of the revised course assessments and conditions for assessment. They are simpler to use as they are being streamlined to remove duplicate content from the existing documents. Revised course specifications for National 5 and Higher courses are available from our NQ subject pages at www.sqa.org.uk/nqsubjects. Revised course specifications for Advanced Higher will be made available ahead of session 2019-20.

Will new assessment support materials be published?

Yes. For subjects that have a new or extended question paper (exam), we will publish a new or revised specimen question paper that illustrates the requirements.

We will also update all specimen question papers to carry a new document code, including specimen question papers for subjects where there is no change to the exam.

For subjects that have a new or revised coursework component, we will publish a new or revised coursework assessment task. For subjects where the coursework task is issued on an annual basis, we will publish a specimen coursework assessment task instead, to illustrate the requirements.

3 Removing units from National Courses

What will happen to the units once they are removed from the National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses?

Once removed, the units will remain available as freestanding units at SCQF levels 5, 6 and 7. They will no longer contribute to the achievement of a National 5, Higher or Advanced Higher course.

However, learners can be presented for the freestanding units as an alternative to a National Course and this will give centres some flexibility in meeting the needs of individual learners. For example, at National 5 level, some learners might be presented for National 5 courses in some subjects and presented for free-standing SCQF level 5 units and/or National 4 courses in other subjects. For some learners, schools and colleges should consider planning their learning experience over two years.

It is for the school or college to decide which qualifications each learner is entered for and they must ensure they are entered at the most appropriate level. The Scottish Government has published [policy guidance for schools and local authorities](#).

Will courses still cover the content that was previously included in the units?

Yes. Unless otherwise stated, there will be no changes to the content of the courses. Further information on course content will be provided in the Course Content section of the revised course specification document for each subject.

Will National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses be recoded once the units are removed?

Yes. The new course codes will be added to the revised course specifications for each subject. Please note that the new course codes will be valid from session 2017–18 onwards for National 5, 2018–19 for Higher, and 2019–20 for Advanced Higher.

If any updates are made to the courses over time, will the freestanding units also be updated?

No. The freestanding units will be separate from National Courses and will not be subject to the same updates. Some of the freestanding units are also part of National Qualification Group Awards (eg National Certificates and Professional Development Awards), so these units may be subject to updates if the group awards are revised.

4 Delivering freestanding units

Where can I access unit specifications for the freestanding units?

There is now a 'Freestanding units' web page for each subject, where you can download the unit specifications. You can access the freestanding units page from each subject landing page at www.sqa.org.uk/nqsubjects or you can also access them from our [NQ unit search](#).

Where can I access unit assessment support packs for the freestanding units?

Unit assessment support packs will continue to be available from the National Qualifications section of the SQA secure website until further notice. We will update them in due course to remove all references to National Courses.

Do the freestanding units still have thresholds?

For subjects where we previously introduced unit thresholds to reduce the need for reassessment, those thresholds can still be applied to the freestanding units. Please read the unit assessment support packs in conjunction with the 'Understanding the Next Steps for

session 2016-17' document for each subject, which details the thresholds that can be applied. These documents are available from the NQ subject pages of our website at www.sqa.org.uk/ngsubjects.

5 Implications for Awards, National Qualification Group Awards and Skills for Work Courses

Will removing unit assessments from National 5 and Higher courses have any impact on National Qualification Group Awards, such as National Certificates?

We recognise that the decision to remove units and unit assessments from National Courses has implications for other SQA product types. There are some National Certificates and National Progression Awards, in which one or more National Courses (at National 5 or Higher level) contribute to the award. This will remain unchanged.

Previously, candidates were required to achieve one or more units from the National 5 or Higher course and, in some instances, the external course assessment. Following the removal of units from National 5 and Higher courses, the requirements will be as follows:

- **Courses that previously contributed up to 24 SCQF credit points to the National Certificate or National Progression Award through a combination of units and the course assessment:**
National 5 and Higher courses will continue to be worth 24 SCQF credit points, following the removal of units. Previously, the SCQF credit points were split between the course assessment and each of the units. Now, the revised course assessments are worth 24 SCQF credit points in total.
Centres will still be required to enter candidates for the relevant freestanding units at SCQF level 5 or 6 —including units that previously formed part of the National 5 or Higher course — as per the requirements of the National Certificate or National Progression Award. However, in this instance, we will accept the achievement of grades A to C in the course assessment as evidence of the successful attainment of those units.
- **Courses where one or more units contributed to the achievement of a National Certificate or National Progression Award:**
Candidates who are entered for the National 5 or Higher course will also need to be entered for the specified units. In this instance, we will accept the achievement of grades A to C in the course assessment as evidence of the successful attainment of those units.
Candidates also have the option to do the units on a freestanding basis — they do not need to be entered for the National 5 or Higher course.

Please note that these arrangements will only be possible for candidates entered for National 5 or Higher courses that contribute to a National Certificate or a National Progression Award. In all other instances, candidates entered for freestanding units at SCQF level 5 or 6 will be required to complete a unit assessment for each unit.

In each of the above scenarios, centres may wish to consider undertaking unit assessments in the event of a candidate not achieving grade A to C in the course assessment.

Some courses previously contained units with a Scottish context, which could be used as evidence for the Scottish Studies Award. Will the achievement of

these courses still contribute to the Scottish Studies Award once the units are removed?

No. Candidates undertaking Scottish Studies Awards must complete the component units of the award. This may include freestanding units with a Scottish context, which were previously part of National Courses. The achievement of a National Course (such as National 5 History or Geography) will not provide evidence of achievement of these units.

Are units being removed from Skills for Work courses?

No. The changes do not apply to Skills for Work courses, which will continue to feature units and unit assessments.

6 Entry requirements and presentation decisions

What are the entry requirements for National 5 courses?

The revised course specifications state that 'learners should have achieved the curriculum level 4 or the National 4 course or equivalent qualifications and/or experience prior to starting the course'. This ensures that learners have a reasonable chance of success at National 5, given sufficient time for delivery and assessment.

How long does it take to complete a National 5 course?

National 5 courses consist of 24 SCQF credit points and this includes additional time for preparing for course assessment.

For a candidate who meets the minimum recommended entry requirements, the notional length of time for a learner to complete a National 5 course is 160 hours. If a candidate does not meet the minimum entry requirements, more time would be required for learning than the 160 hours.

When should candidate entries be submitted by?

Centres are required to provide SQA with an accurate indication of their presentation patterns for the upcoming exam diet. Entry information for courses and/or units is required in **November for schools** and by the **end of January for colleges**. Course entries determine which question papers and exam stationery will be sent to each centre, so it is vital that entry information is as accurate as possible at this date.

Centres have until **31 March** to withdraw or change the level of their candidate entries, however these later changes may not be reflected in the completion reports, forms or coursework materials issued in early April. Any changes made after 31 March, including late entries for National 4 to Advanced Higher, will incur a charge.

We will advise centres of the specific dates for session 2018-19.

Can candidates be entered for both the National 5 course and the free-standing SCQF level 5 units for the same subject?

In its [policy statement on the changes to National Courses](#), the Scottish Government states that 'the removal of mandatory unit assessments has the distinct purpose of reducing the amount of assessment experienced by young people taking National Qualifications and the teacher workload created as a result of administering the units'. It goes on to state that 'schools should therefore decide whether learners are entered for units or for the full course award'.

Following the Deputy First Minister's decision to retain the current mechanism of Recognising Positive Achievement for an **interim period only**, learners can be entered for both the units and the National 5 course. However, the Scottish Government states that 'given the agreed need to reduce assessment-related workload, this pathway should only be used in a very limited number of exceptional circumstances, where the view of the teacher and head teacher, in discussion with parents and young people, is that it is in the interests of specific individual learners'.

Is there an option for dual-entry at National 4 and National 5, like there was with Standard Grade?

No. The design of the current qualifications system does not allow for dual-entry.

Can candidates be entered for freestanding SCQF level 5 units in addition to a National 4 course?

Yes, where it is identified that this is an appropriate pathway for individual candidates and will not lead to unnecessary workload. The Scottish Government has included advice on learner pathways in its [policy statement on the changes to National Courses](#).

What progression is there for candidates who have achieved National 4 but are not ready for the National 5 course assessment?

The achievement of a National 4 course provides candidates with a number of progression routes, including Skills for Work courses, National Certificates and Modern Apprenticeships. Candidates who wish to progress to the National 5 course, but are not yet performing at the level required for the course assessment, could be entered for the free-standing SCQF level 5 units as an alternative. They will be certificated for the units, and this may also prepare them for entering the National 5 course in future — for example, as part of a two-year course.

Which qualifications a candidate is entered for is a decision for the school or college. It is important that candidates are entered for the appropriate level of qualification, and the Scottish Government has published guidance on this. Its [policy statement on the changes to National Courses](#) states that 'decisions about learning pathways will require discussion with young people and their parents/carers about their longer-term aspirations. Reliable assessment information should be used to inform these discussions, for example on whether a young person has achieved the third or fourth curriculum level by the end of S3. This will inform the decision on whether a learner should embark on a course leading to National 4, National 5 or Higher, whether that be a one year or two year pathway, or pursue other qualifications pathways.'

If a candidate does not achieve the National 5 course award, and resits the course assessment during the following session, do they have the option to re-sit the exam only and carry over the marks they previously achieved for the coursework component?

No. Both course assessment components must be completed in the same session. Therefore the candidate must complete and submit a new item of coursework during the same session that they are re-sitting the exam. For some coursework components, such as projects/investigations, it may be possible for a candidate to use their previous research or stimulus material, however in all cases a new coursework assessment must be completed and submitted to SQA.

7 Grading and Recognising Positive Achievement

Is grade D being extended?

Yes. Grade D will be extended from a notional 45–49% to a notional 40–49%.

This move is intended to recognise the achievement of candidates who are aspiring to attain a National 5 course, but who do not perform as well as predicted in the course assessment. It will provide opportunities for candidates who do not achieve grades A to C to have their achievement recognised and to be certificated for the level of qualification for which they were entered. This will give teachers and lecturers greater certainty that learners can attain an award at the appropriate level. This new 10 per cent range also brings grade D into line with the ranges for grades B and C.

This change will apply to National 5 from 2017–18 onwards, Higher from 2018–19 onwards and Advanced Higher from 2019–20 onwards. There will be no change to the standards required to achieve grades A to C.

Will a grade E be introduced?

No. National 5 to Advanced Higher courses will continue to be graded A to D or 'no award'.

Can Recognising Positive Achievement or 'fallback' still be used if a candidate does not achieve the National 5 course assessment?

The Scottish Government has made it clear in its [policy statement on the changes to National Courses](#) (Annex B) that the current mechanism of fallback to National 4 'will remain available for an interim period only' and that this pathway ***'should only be used in a very limited number of exceptional circumstances where the view of the teacher and head teacher, in discussion with parents and learners, is that it is in the interests of specific individual learners'***.

We have published guidance on Recognising Positive Achievement arrangements for session 2017-18, which is available from www.sqa.org.uk/rpa

8 Results

What will the Scottish Qualifications Certificate (SQC) look like if candidates have achieved the National 5, Higher or Advanced Higher course with the units removed?

National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses will continue to appear on the candidate's summary of attainment, along with the grade achieved. They will also be listed in the detailed record of attainment section of the certificate pack.

If a candidate has been entered for, and has achieved, the freestanding units at SCQF level 5, 6 or 7, these will also be listed on their detailed record of attainment, under the National Unit section.

[View information on the Scottish Qualifications Certificate \(SQC\).](#)

9 Literacy and Numeracy

How will candidates' literacy and numeracy skills be certificated?

Certification of literacy and numeracy is available through the literacy and numeracy units at SCQF levels 3, 4 and 5. To achieve literacy and/or numeracy units, centres must gather appropriate assessment evidence to show that the candidate has met the requirements of these units. Candidates can also achieve the five Core Skills of Communication, Numeracy, Problem Solving, Working with Others, and Communication and Information Technology (ICT), at specific SCQF levels. These appear on the Core Skills profile that is included in the candidate's Scottish Qualifications Certificate (SQC) pack.

How will candidates be certificated for the Core Skill of Numeracy at SCQF level 5?

Candidates will be automatically certificated for the Core Skill of Numeracy if they achieve either:

- Grade A to D in the National 5 Mathematics course or the National 5 Applications of Mathematics course

Or

- The freestanding Numeracy unit at SCQF level 5

If a borderline candidate does not achieve the National 5 Mathematics course but they achieve the National 4 Added Value Unit, plus the freestanding SCQF level 5 units that used to be part of the National 5 course, will the candidate be certificated for the Core Skill of Numeracy at SCQF level 5?

No. Candidates will only be certificated for the Core Skill of Numeracy at SCQF level 5 if they achieve the National 5 Mathematics course or the freestanding Numeracy unit at SCQF level 5 (which was not previously part of the National 5 Mathematics course).

If a borderline candidate does not achieve the National 5 Mathematics course, how can the centre ensure that the candidate achieves the National 4 course instead – as well as the Core Skill of Numeracy at SCQF level 4 or 5?

The candidate could be eligible to achieve the course award for National 4 Mathematics through our Recognising Positive Achievement arrangements, which are still available for an interim period only. To do this, the candidate would need to be entered for, and pass, each of the following:

- The National 4 Added Value Unit
- The freestanding SCQF level 5 units that used to be part of the National 5 course
- The National 4 Numeracy Unit **or** the freestanding Numeracy unit at SCQF level 5

However, it is important to note that the Deputy First Minister announced the removal of units and unit assessments from National 5 courses to reduce the volume of assessment that candidates experience at this level. To enter a candidate for the National 5 course, the freestanding SCQF level 5 units, a Numeracy unit and the National 4 Added Value Unit would dramatically *increase* the volume of assessment that the candidate experiences.

Can evidence from the freestanding SCQF level 5 units, which was part of the National 5 Mathematics course, be used towards the freestanding Numeracy unit?

Yes. To achieve the Numeracy unit, the centre must enter the candidate for the unit and map the assessment evidence from the freestanding SCQF level 5 Mathematics units. However,

they will also need to provide any missing evidence that has not been captured in the other units, eg probability and measurement.

How will candidates be certificated for the Core Skill of Communication at SCQF level 5?

Candidates will be automatically certificated for the Core Skill of Communication if they achieve either:

- Grade A to D in the National 5 English or National 5 Gàidhlig course

Or

- The freestanding Literacy unit at SCQF level 5.

If a borderline candidate does not achieve the National 5 English course but instead achieves the National 4 Added Value Unit plus the freestanding SCQF level 5 units that used to be part of the National 5 course, will the candidate be certificated for the Core Skill of Communication at SCQF level 5?

No. Candidates will only be certificated for the Core Skill of Communication if they achieve the National 5 English course or the freestanding Literacy unit at SCQF level 5 (which was not previously part of the National 5 course).

If the candidate does not achieve the National 5 course, how can the centre ensure that the candidate achieves the National 4 course award instead – as well as the Core Skill of Communication at SCQF level 4 or 5?

The candidate could be eligible to achieve the course award for National 4 English through our Recognising Positive Achievement arrangements, which are still available for an interim period only. To do this, the candidate would need to achieve:

- The National 4 Added Value Unit
- The freestanding SCQF level 5 units that were previously part of the National 5 English course
- The National 4 Literacy unit **or** the freestanding Literacy unit at SCQF level 5.

However, it is important to note that the Deputy First Minister announced the removal of units and unit assessments from National 5 courses to reduce the volume of assessment that candidates experience at this level. To enter a candidate for the National 5 course, the freestanding SCQF level 5 units, a Literacy unit and the National 4 Added Value Unit would dramatically *increase* the volume of assessment that the candidate experiences.

Can evidence from the freestanding SCQF level 5 units, which was part of the National 5 English course, be used towards the freestanding Literacy unit at SCQF level 5?

Yes. To achieve the freestanding Literacy unit, the centre must enter the candidate for the unit and map the assessment evidence from the freestanding SCQF level 5 English units. They will also need to provide the missing evidence for reading and listening that has not been captured in the other units. Alternatively, they could use the revised English for Literacy unit assessment support packs, which meet the requirements of the Literacy unit.

Where can I find more information on school measures for literacy and numeracy within Insight?

The following guide from the Scottish Government gives more information on which achievements can count towards the school measures for literacy and numeracy within Insight:

<http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0044/00449947.pdf>

10 Support for schools and colleges

What support is being given to teachers and lecturers to help them prepare for the changes to assessment?

In preparation for the changes to assessment at each level, we will provide a programme of subject-specific webinars, audio presentations and face-to-face events. The events, webinars and audio presentations will focus on the requirements of the revised course assessments, and will look at what has changed and what remains the same.

What support is being provided to SQA co-ordinators?

In addition to the subject-specific support for teachers and lecturers, we are continuing to run our series of conferences for SQA co-ordinators in schools and colleges. The conferences will provide SQA co-ordinators with support and guidance in preparation for the changes to assessment.

Is support available for heads of centre?

Our Liaison Managers are available to visit each local authority in assisting school leaders make the right decisions for their school. Please contact your local [Liaison Manager](#) or e-mail mycentre@sqa.org.uk.