Supporting the delivery, assessment and verification of vocational qualifications, session 2021–22:

Information and guidance for centres

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Scope

The challenging learning environment during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the development of a number of alternative approaches to assessment. This provided flexibility for centres and learners, while maintaining the integrity of certification as well as public confidence. These approaches remain available to use where the unitised model of assessment is not possible.

This document applies to the following group awards:

- Higher National Certificates/Diplomas (including graded units)
- National Certificates
- National Progression Awards
- Professional Development Awards
- Skills for Work
- Awards
- SQA Advanced Certificates/Diplomas

It also applies to freestanding National Units and centre-devised courses comprising clusters of SQA units.

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

Context

SQA would like to acknowledge the collaboration and support of centres in working together to develop alternative assessment arrangements for learners during the unprecedented circumstances faced in sessions 2019–20 and 2020–21.

We recognise that the learning environment and social landscape remains challenging, with operating models in centres involving more remote and blended learning approaches, and less opportunity for face-to-face delivery and assessment. Delivering centres are encouraged to continue to consider and plan more innovative approaches to assessment, and to seek opportunities to combine assessment where there is commonality or duplication across units of study. Where possible, we will continue to offer flexibility around conditions of assessment, making delivery more accessible for all.

This guidance applies for learners who require certification by end of August 2022 and will apply to units from across the SQA portfolio. However, there may be some subject-specific or unit-type restrictions that will restrict the flexibility that can be offered (for example, health and safety requirements, Licence to Practice and Sector Skills Council requirements). If this is the case, we will provide clear additional guidance.

Core principles

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

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

To support these principles, regardless of circumstances, the first duty for all centres is to deliver high quality learning and teaching, and to assess learners in a way that is valid, reliable, practical, equitable and fair. This guidance seeks to support course teams to deliver in ways that upholds the integrity of qualifications, without unnecessary barriers, acknowledging the need to be flexible and being responsive to conditions that remain unpredictable.

The decision-making process

This decision-making process applies to all of the following: group awards, graded units and centre-devised awards or clusters of freestanding National Units. Where learners can produce sufficient evidence using the traditional unitised assessment model, assessment should continue as normal and as per unit specifications. Internal verification and results processing should continue as normal.

If it is not considered possible to progress with assessment using the unitised approach in line with unit specification requirements, the course team should consider the guidance and approaches that follow.

This section explains the different assessment approaches available to delivering centres working through the 'decision tree' outlined in Appendix 1.

If qualifications are subject to regulated and/or professional body requirements, it may not be possible to complete the assessment, even with the adaptions outlined. The subject guidance will specify where it is not possible to change conditions of assessment. If this is the case, it will be necessary to postpone assessment until conditions allow.

Combining and adapting assessment

Branch one of the decision tree relates to the generic guidance on combining assessment. This guidance supports the most effective ways for learners to generate evidence of competence and for assessors to judge that evidence against unit standards.This may involve alternative approaches where usual approaches are not considered accessible or suitable.

Note: it will be necessary to generate evidence that demonstrates that all outcomes of all units have been met.

Course mapping

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

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

Valuable information can often be found in group award specifications.

Once the mapping exercise has been carried out, course teams may wish to use the 'assessment planning tool' in Appendix 2. This has been designed to support the course team when considering the options available to them and the processes to follow.

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

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

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

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

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

Combining assessment

As with all SQA qualifications, it is not necessary to assess each outcome separately. We encourage a combined approach that allows evidence to be gathered for a range of outcomes or evidence requirements within a unit or across more than one unit. The advantages of this approach are:

- more meaningful for learners
- takes less time
- gives assurances of overall competence
- avoids over-assessment and improve motivation
- facilitates flexible approaches to verification
- benefits learners

Combined assessment can arise from identifying similar assessment requirements within and across units, removing duplication. For example, it may be possible to identify an

overarching task that allows evidence for a range of outcomes within or across more than one unit to be gathered by a single coherent activity.

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

Points to note:

- When you are developing an assessment across units, ensure that the content of the units is sufficiently related to make the assessment coherent and meaningful to learners.
- Some assessment methods lend themselves more easily to combining outcomes and units than others. Try to choose the more obvious opportunities to combine and those that will make the biggest impact in terms of reducing the burden of assessment. Trying to combine more obscure evidence requirements maybe counterproductive and introduce unnecessary barriers.
- When combining assessments, take care to ensure that the assessment task is of the same level of demand for the learner as the original individualassessment requirement.

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

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

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

Flexibility to adapt the assessment requirements

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

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

- **Remote testing** (such as paper based, app based, online, audio and video). This should assess skills, knowledge and understanding, and include sufficient challenge and application to demonstrate the appropriate level of attainment.

- **Professional discussion**. This would be recording a professional discussion between a learner and an assessor. The discussions would focus on, and enhance, evidence already provided or demonstrated by the learner — including real work activities, practical tasks, a case study, project, portfolio or some other form of assessment.

- **Practical assessment**. In some circumstances, evidence may be assessed using remote assessment (such as video, photographic, portfolio and witness testimony), alongside work already demonstrated and assessed.

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

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

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

We will monitor the distribution and use of secure assessment materials. If the security of any national instrument of assessment is compromised, you must report this immediately to SQA via your SQA co-ordinator.

Approaches to external verification

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

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

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

During session 2020–21, we developed a new model of virtual verification. This will allow the capacity to have group award verification for all qualifications that were previously verified on a unit-by-unit basis. The new virtual verification model will remain the SQA default during session 2021–22, however, visiting verification will be used where required. Virtual verification will require more collaboration between SQA, external verifiers and centres during planning for visiting verification. This will help determine whether group award verification is appropriate and, if so, the requirements for verification activity.

We have updated the *Qualification verification: Guidance for centres* with the requirements relating to group award, unit and virtual verification activity.

Subject alternative assessment approaches

You can find guidance for subject alternative assessment approaches for a selection of awards on SQA's website. Centres should review and apply the subject alternative assessment approaches guidance which allows many learners to generate sufficient evidence to meet assessment requirements. Some of the subject guidance also advise where it will be inappropriate to apply the alternative holistic approach to assessment (for example, standard setting agencies and/or professional registration requirements).

Enhanced subject alternative assessment approaches/information on critical competences

To further support centres and learners and with assessment, SQA have produced enhanced subject guidance on assessment. This can be used by centres dealing with the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on teaching and learning, if required. Enhanced subject guidance is at the bottom of the decision tree and are the most extreme alternative assessment approaches. Centres should only use these approaches if they have worked their way through the decision tree and it is not possible to progress with assessments in any other of the ways. You can find the guidance on the subject pages on SQA's website.

Centre-devised awards or clusters of freestanding National Units

We have a 'critical competence template' to help you create critical competencies for group awards that do not have guidance published. You can find the template and guidance in the dropdown menu 'revised subject guidance and critical competence — Mar 2021'.

Only where there is no SQA guidance and there are no regulatory or professional body requirements, centres are able to identify critical competencies for the award following the SQA model.

- The course team should develop an alternative assessment template which confirms the aims of the course and identifies critical competence requirements in support of these. The development of such templates for locally-devised awards or clusters of units must be overseen and endorsed by the IQA panel, and should be aligned with any associated group award for which a template has been published.

  Note: although it may be necessary to implement the critical competence approach, centres should continue to gather unit evidence following the public health advice, to ensure as much coverage of the course as possible.

- Assessors must engage in professional discussion with their course teams to review evidence relative to course aims and any critical competence for the course and/or units for each learner. Assessors must collectively determine the success of individual learners, and individual centres must oversee robust arrangements for confirming the overall learner result relative to the assessment evidence. It is essential that records are kept documenting this process.

Appendix 3 illustrates examples of various scenarios and how centres should approach each.

Graded units

To support centres and learners, the requirement to complete the unit assessment within the graded unit element of the HNC and HND has been removed. Instead centres can choose to gather evidence across mandatory units to come to a grading decision for the graded unit. Further guidance on the approach to graded units can be found in the document Guidance on gathering key evidence for Higher National Graded Units in session 2021–22.

If the centre or course team has chosen to, or is required to, assess learners using normal approaches (such as graded unit projects or examinations), this should go ahead as planned.

In line with SQA communication, the centre or course team can choose not to progress with a traditional assessment approach to graded unit this session. If they decide to concentrate on learning, teaching and assessment in the component and mandatory units of the award, learners should be assessed using the SQA guidance for graded units above.

If there is reliance on evidence of critical competence for some or all of the content that is identified as contributing to the graded unit alternative grading process, the course team should adopt a broader holistic approach to grading. This should be based on the widest possible range of contributing evidence relative to the aims published in the graded unit specification. The grading process and grades awarded at this decision tree level must be overseen and quality assured by the internal quality assurance (IQA) panel.

If there is only limited evidence meeting course aims and any relevant critical competence available, it would be acceptable to award a Grade C.

It is important that learners are not disadvantaged because the centre and/or course team has decided not to progress the established assessment approach for graded unit in session 2021–22.

Internal quality assurance

For unit-by-unit approaches where evidence requirements are as per unit specifications or with permitted adaptions, normal internal verification procedures apply in centres.

Where assessment approaches are taken relative to course aims and any identified critical competence requirements, each centre should introduce an IQA panel to support the change from assessment decisions being made by individual assessors to a more collegiate course team approach to decision making.

The IQA panel will:

- support, advise, moderate and confirm the work of course teams in line with SQA advice, including the development of templates in relation to locally-devised clusters
- ensure standardisation of course teams within the centre in interpretating and using the SQA decision tree and supporting guidance to ensure the objectivity, fairness and accuracy of assessment judgements at course level

The size and organisation of the centre, and the availability of individual staff, will impact on the size of the IQA panel, but the team should include:

- at least two people
- experience of delivering the range of qualifications being considered
- at least one person with experience of quality assuring assessment decisions
- no-one who is a member of a course team for the course(s) that the panel is overseeing

If the centre cannot provide members of staff to meet these requirements, they must notify operationshnvq@sqa.org.uk before implementing this guidance.

The responsibilities of the IQA panel are to:

- advise course teams on how to implement SQA guidance on assessment
- monitor the work of course teams to ensure SQA guidance on assessment is implemented
- ensure that SQA guidance on assessment has been implemented before results are submitted to SQA

IQA panel arrangements should be appropriate to the context and scale of the centre's assessment activity, and should operate with a risk-based focus. The centre should choose a model for the allocation and deployment of an IQA panel that works in its situation and meets SQA's requirements. Whichever model is adopted, it must:

- be documented
- be risk-based and proportionate
- promote a standardised and consistent approach across all course teams
- confirm validity and reliability in assessment
- generate and retain evidence of IQA activities

Records of course team judgements and IQA panel rationale, discussions and decisions should be retained in line with SQA requirements.

Resulting and certification

When assessment is complete, and decisions have been finalised and endorsed by the course team and IQA, if appropriate, learners' results must be submitted to SQA through normal resulting channels.

Certification will be carried out by SQA in line with normal arrangements.

We recognise that some assessments may have to be postponed. If this happens and the learner does not achieve the award, details of the postponed assessment should be clearly documented. The learner's entry should be left open, and the learner should be given the opportunity to engage in further learning, teaching and assessment when conditions allow. Subsequent assessment judgements will be made in line with this guidance.

External verification

External verification activity will be carried out, with selections being released to centres from October 2022 onwards.

QA activity will remain in a virtual platform, with group award verification taking place for all qualifications, where logistically possible. Unit verification will take place if group award verification is not possible.

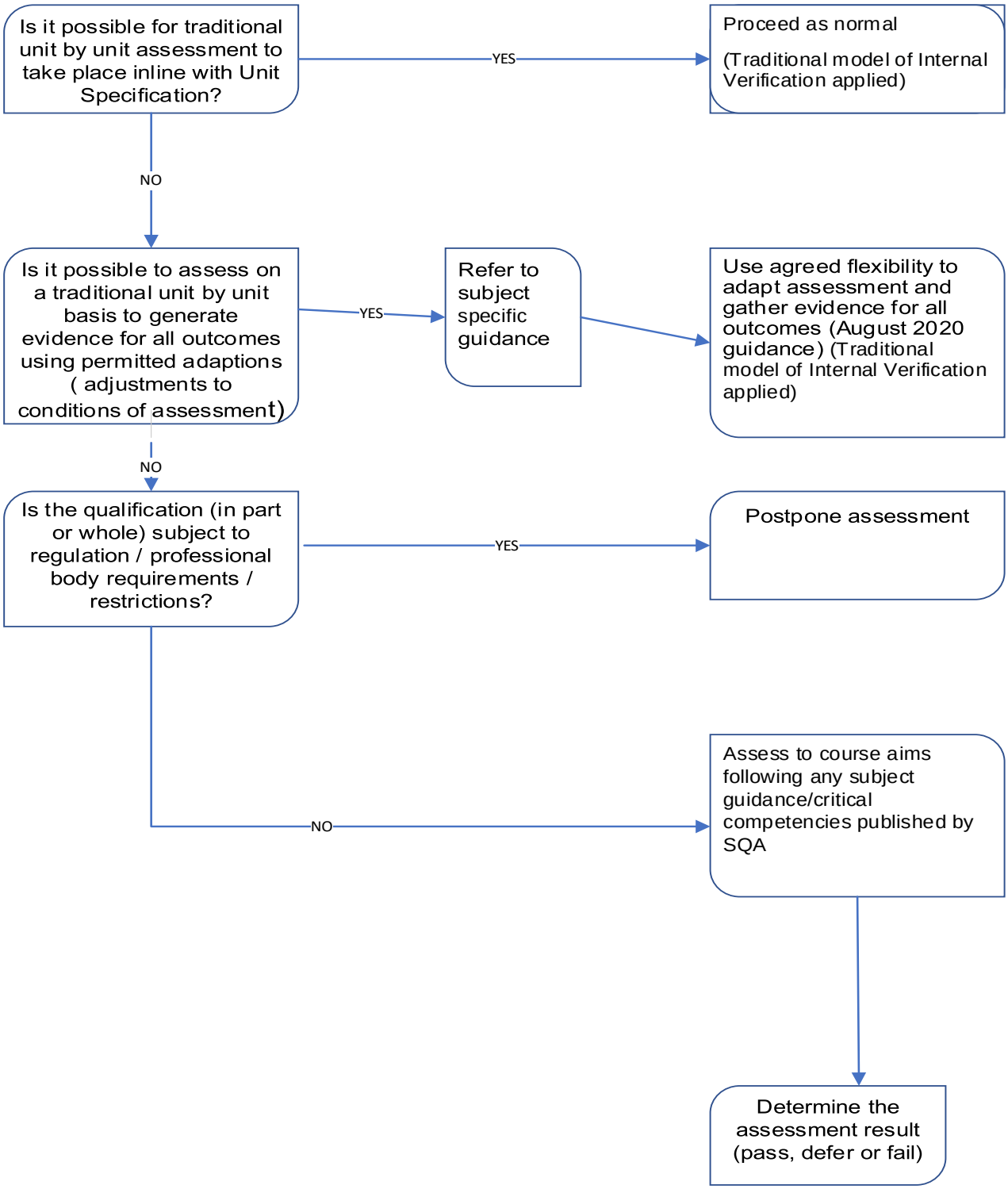
It is essential that you retain evidence of your assessment judgements, as you may be asked for this during external verification activity.

Academic appeals

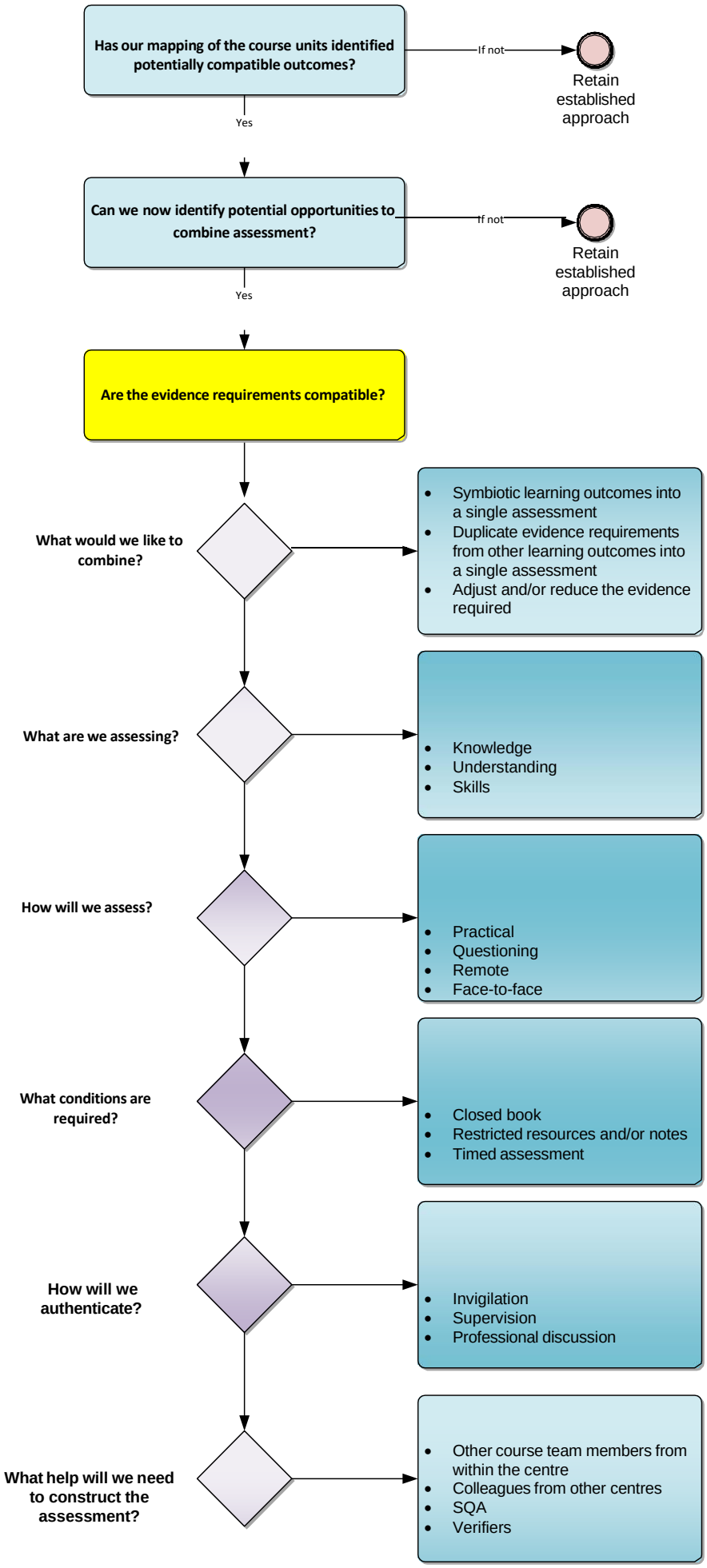
The centre’s established academic appeals process should be followed for any learner who feels that the assessment outcome does not accurately reflect their achievement.

Appendix 1: The decision-making process

HNVQ ASSESSMENT DECISION TREE (COVID 19 SESSION 2021-22)



Appendix 2: Assessment planning tool



Appendix 3: Example scenarios

The following scenarios support centres and course teams with learners who are working towards specific group awards, while studying additional units as part of their course:

- **Scenario 1:** A learner is entered for the HNC Group Award (12 credits). Unit-by-unit evidence is not available, so the assessment judgement is made based on evidence of meeting course aims and any relevant and critical competences requirements. If the learner is assessed as a pass, they should be awarded the HNC and 12 planned credits at SCQF level 7. Any additional units should be considered as a locally-devised cluster of units and addressed in line with the specific guidance below. This would apply equally to a National Certificate Group Award with additional units included in the wider course framework.

- **Scenario 2**: A learner is entered for the HND Group Award and, in year 1, is studying units totalling 15 credits. Unit-by-unit evidence is not available, so the assessment judgementis made based on evidence of meeting course aims and any relevant and critical competences requirements for the HNC. If the learner is assessed as a pass, they should be awarded the 12 planned credits at SCQF level 7 associated with the HNC. As above, any additional units should be considered as a locally-devised cluster of units and addressed in line with the specific guidance below. It is possible that, if there is insufficient evidence, the learner may progress to year 2, requiring up to 18 credits to meet the HND requirements.

- **Scenario 3**: A learner is on a locally-devised college course which comprises two National Progression Awards (NPA) and additional SQA units. Each NPA should be considered in line with the decision tree and any critical competence requirements. The additional units would be considered as a locally-devised cluster and addressed in line with the guidance outlined.