



# **Evaluation of the Alternative Assessment Approaches for Higher National and Vocational Qualifications: sessions 2020–21 and 2021–22**

Publication date: September 2022

Publication code: CE8542

Published by the Scottish Qualifications Authority  
The Optima Building, 58 Robertson Street, Glasgow G2 8DQ  
Lowden, 24 Wester Shawfair, Dalkeith, EH22 1FD

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

If information in this publication is reproduced, SQA should be clearly acknowledged as the source and this publication should be cited. It must not be reproduced for trade or commercial purposes.

© *Scottish Qualifications Authority*

This document can be produced, on request, in alternative formats, including large type, Braille and numerous community languages. For further details telephone SQA's Customer Contact Centre on 0845 279 1000.

SQA is committed to using plain English. We will try to make our publications as easy and straightforward to understand as we can, and will try to avoid all unnecessary jargon. If there's any language in this document that you feel is hard to understand, or could be improved, please write to Editor, Editorial Team, at the Glasgow address or email: [editor@sqa.org.uk](mailto:editor@sqa.org.uk).

# Contents

<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
Purpose	2
Higher National and Vocational Qualifications	2
Alternative assessment approaches	3
<b>2 Findings on session 2020–21</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1 SQA: qualification development teams, April 2021	6
Activity	6
Findings	6
2.2 External: qualification support teams, April 2021	11
Activity	11
Findings	11
2.3 External: Practitioners at delivering centres, May 2021	11
Activity	11
Findings	12
2.4 External: learners at delivering centres, May 2021	14
Activity	14
Findings	15
<b>3 Findings on session 2021–22</b>	<b>18</b>
3.1 External: practitioners at delivering centres, January 2022	18
Activity	18
Findings	18
3.2 Conclusions January 2022	21
3.3 Foundation Apprenticeships	21
3.4 Next Generation Higher National and Vocational Qualifications	21
<b>4 Summary</b>	<b>22</b>



# Executive summary

This report presents an outline of SQA's engagement with centres that deliver higher national and vocational qualifications (HNVQ) over the last two academic years. This engagement has helped inform the use of Alternative Assessment Approaches in HNVQ products.

The 18–24 months after the first COVID-19 lockdown were a challenge for the entire education sector. SQA needed to move quickly, engaging with stakeholders, and working collaboratively to provide practical solutions in unprecedented times. SQA benefited greatly from being able to use existing stakeholder forums to co-design approaches to assessment and quality assurance, as well as creating new groups to oversee developments.

This report outlines the Alternative Assessment Approaches that were put in place by SQA to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and support delivering centres to continue to ensure the standards of HNVQ awards were maintained for learners.

SQA carried out engagement with delivering centres and learners to gather feedback on the use of the Alternative Assessment Approaches in 2020–21 and to inform decisions about maintaining them for 2021–22. This was done through a series of surveys that were circulated to delivering centres and learners through SQA co-ordinators. The questions asked about the experience of the Alternative Assessment Approaches — did they assist the learner and delivering centres, and did users feel they were of benefit to the learning experience during the pandemic, allowing learning and teaching to continue.

This report focuses on the engagement activity carried out in session 2020–21 and 2021–22. The way SQA employed Alternative Assessment Approaches within HNVQ remained the same in those two academic sessions.

# 1 Introduction

## Purpose

SQA's Higher National and Vocational qualifications (HNVQs) provide learners in Scotland and beyond with an extensive and flexible range of learning opportunities. These qualifications are offered across schools, colleges, training providers and in the workplace. They offer flexibility so that learners can develop the skills and knowledge they require for their next steps in education or employment.

Higher National and Vocational qualifications are developed by SQA with input from a range of stakeholders including learners, centres and employers and universities as end-users of qualifications. The group awards are created by developing units into a learning framework. The units were traditionally developed to be delivered and assessed individually.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to many delivering centres having their teaching time, and therefore learning time, reduced and to much greater use of remote learning. This meant traditional modes of assessment became problematic. To promote as much fairness as possible to all learners SQA, in collaboration with delivering centres, investigated, and provided, alternative approaches to assessment.

This report outlines these approaches and the engagement that was carried out to inform the decisions taken. It also reports on feedback from learners, centres and other stakeholders on the effectiveness of these arrangements and on how this will be reflected in our approach to the assessment of HNVQ in future. The report forms part of a suite of research reports that evaluate the effectiveness of the arrangements put in place to assess all of SQA's qualifications during the COVID pandemic.

## Higher National and Vocational Qualifications

SQA has over 1000 approved centres in Scotland and the rest of the UK and internationally delivering Higher National and Vocational Qualifications to a variety of learners. The vocational qualifications in our portfolio are available from SCQF level 3 through to level 12 and are undertaken by young people and mature learners in schools, colleges, training providers and in the workplace. These qualifications offer a diverse selection of learning through different sectors, and through different qualification structures / products to ensure that the needs and requirements of the learner are met. They offer different pathways into further and higher education, as well as pathways into employment. They also provide opportunities for those in work to gain qualifications or to upskill or reskill to meet the changing needs of employers.

- ◆ SQA offers the following types of vocational qualification:
- ◆ National Certificates (NC)
- ◆ National Progression Awards (NPA)
- ◆ Professional Development Awards (PDA)
- ◆ Higher National Certificates (HNC)

- ◆ Higher National Diplomas (HND)
- ◆ Advanced Certificates (offered out with Scotland)
- ◆ Advanced Diplomas (offered out with Scotland)
- ◆ Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQ)
- ◆ Foundation Apprenticeships
- ◆ Awards
- ◆ NQ free standing units

The majority of learners taking NCs, HNCs and HNDs do so in Scottish colleges, but they are also delivered by training providers, employers and, increasingly by some Scottish schools working in partnership with colleges, training providers and employers.

## Alternative assessment approaches

In response to ongoing public health advice, resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, SQA implemented Alternative Assessments approaches across the Higher National and Vocational Qualifications (HNVQ) provision to support delivering centres and learners.

These alternative approaches were presented in the form of a 'decision tree' (appendix 1) that outlines all the options available to delivering centres.

The decision tree was developed in collaboration with representatives from Scotland's Colleges in 2020. This was developed over a three-week period with a number of meetings to ensure that the alternative approaches being considered were appropriate and fair for the end users. SQA also formed a Vocational Qualification Steering Group comprising representatives from Scottish Government, Scottish Training Federation, Colleges Scotland, Skills Development Scotland, EIS, Scottish Funding Council, National Union of Students and SPARQS (student partnerships in quality Scotland) to oversee the work and provide advice and guidance on the approach.

The following key principles underpinned the development of the Alternative Assessment Approaches:

- ◆ fairness
- ◆ safe and secure certification of our qualifications, while following the latest public health advice
- ◆ maintaining the integrity and credibility of our qualifications system, ensuring that awarding decisions are evidence-based, standards are maintained over time, and a qualification represents a certain level of achievement
- ◆ meeting our public sector equality duties to eliminate discrimination, foster good relations and create equality of opportunity
- ◆ considerations of practicality and operational impact of any approach

The decision tree allows opportunities for the reduction of assessment to increase learning and teaching time; to give a more flexible approach to assessment for learners and to support the blended learning model that has been required over the last two years.

The decision tree provides optional routes for delivering centres who have faced, or who are facing, challenges. These routes have been developed to be used at an individual candidate level with flexibility to allow centres to decide which, if any, approaches they need to utilise for each learner. They support centres to work flexibly in adapting conditions of assessment, where needed, and in combining assessment to reduce duplication, overlap and, wherever possible, to reduce the burden of assessment, thus affording staff and learners valuable additional time for learning, teaching and wider academic support.

The Alternative Assessment Approaches available to delivering centres focus on practicability and adaptations to support staff in centres and learners completing qualifications under the restrictions associated with the COVID pandemic. They have allowed the focus of assessment to be on the key central learning outcomes of the awards. The exercise looked for opportunities to reduce assessment where there was natural duplication across learning outcomes and units.

A critical element of these alternative approaches was that the standard of the qualification would not be compromised in any way. Where appropriate, sector skills council and regulatory bodies were consulted to ensure that any adaptations to assessment were agreed and approved. There was also extensive consultation with our delivering centres and senior subject appointees. The evidence requirements in the Higher National frameworks have, in some cases, been adjusted slightly, and some assessments have been modified to mitigate the impact of COVID restrictions, but the overall content remains unchanged and there is no dilution of the standards.

SQA worked closely with centres, stakeholders and qualification design teams to ensure effective support was available for the implementation of the decision tree approach.

The support available is:

- ◆ the generic guidance document [Supporting the delivery, assessment, and verification of vocational qualifications](#)
- ◆ subject-specific alternative assessment approaches
- ◆ enhanced subject-specific alternative assessment approaches / critical competences guidance
- ◆ guidance on graded units and quality assurance

The following adaptations were also made to quality assurance:

- ◆ Additional pre-verification services, including support for combined assessment and adaptations to existing conditions of assessment
- ◆ The introduction of Internal and External Quality Assurance Panels (I/EQAs) to ensure consistency of approach and standardised judgements when using the lower branches of the decision tree.
- ◆ A move to group award verification and virtual visits, meaning centres have fewer qualification verification activities to prepare for, allowing for more teaching and learning.

The table below describes the Alternative Assessment Approaches available through the decision tree.



<b>Alternative Assessment Approach</b>	<b>Description</b>
Supporting the delivery, assessment and verification of SQA units, session 2021–22: Information for centres	Generic guidance for delivering centres on methods to reduce assessment load.
Optional completion of the assessment for Graded Units with HNC/D	Centres can decide whether to complete the Graded Unit or to gather evidence from across the award to reach a grading decision.
Subject-specific alternative assessment approaches	Subject-level guidance that helps to reduce and combine assessment and refine delivery.
Enhanced Subject specific alternative assessment approaches / critical competences / Group Award aims	This allows delivering centres to assess against group award aims or critical competences, which are enhanced group award aims. This allows centres not to have to complete all the outcome and unit assessments that have been made impossible due to COVID restrictions.

More information on these can be found on the SQA webpage:

<https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/95579.html>

## 2 Findings on session 2020–21

The Alternative Assessment Approaches were developed and delivered in close consultation with centres and wider stakeholders. SQA carried out several engagement activities around the use of the Alternative Assessment Approaches in both 2021 and 2022.

Alongside the SQA/College Quality Focus Group and surveys with Qualification Development Teams, delivering centres and learners, SQA also established working groups with external representatives to collaborate with and support the work. The HNVQ Working Group was established in November 2020 and the HNVQ Steering Group in December 2020 to support and oversee the work. These groups contributed to the development of the Alternative Assessment Approaches and decisions around the retention of them, bringing their sectors perspective to the table and ensuring that all decisions taken were fair to learners.

The following section outlines the engagement and the high-level findings on each.

<b>Group</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Date</b>
SQA: qualification design teams	survey	April 2021
<i>External</i> : qualification support teams	focus groups	April / May 2021
<i>External</i> : practitioners at delivering centres	Survey	May 2021
<i>External</i> : learners at delivering centres	Survey	May 2021
<i>External</i> : practitioners at delivering centres	Survey	January 2022
<i>External</i> : learners at delivering centres	survey	January 2022

### 2.1 SQA: qualification development teams, April 2021

#### Activity

In April 2021, a consultation on proposed continuation of the alternative assessment approaches in Higher National and Vocational Qualifications (HNVQ) for academic session 2021–22 was carried out with SQA Qualification Design Teams. through an online survey. The purpose of the survey was to gather feedback from those involved in the design of the Qualifications and External Verifiers on the alternative assessment approaches put in place for session 2020–21 and their use into 2021–22.

#### Findings

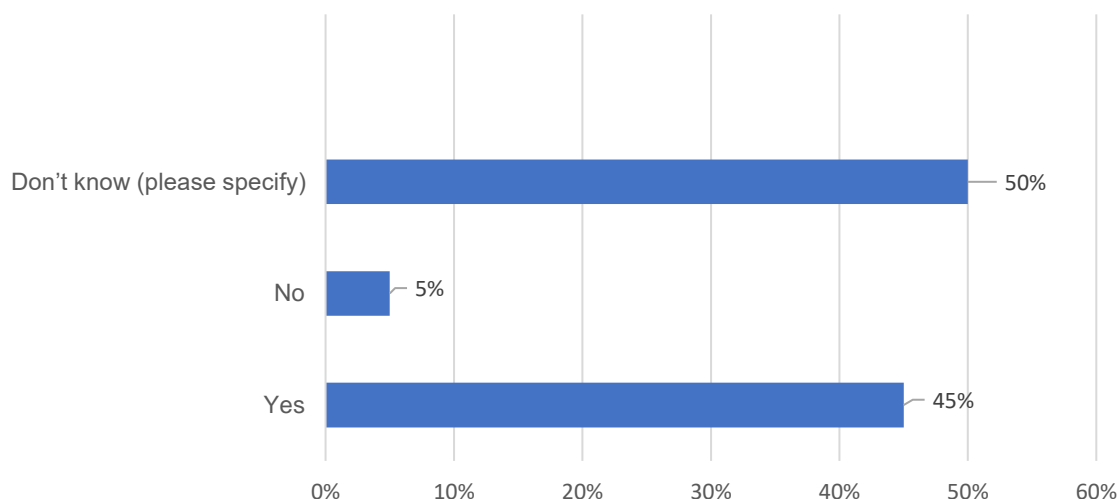
This section presents the responses to the survey. Quantitative responses are presented as graphs, with associated percentages provided. Where the question offered the opportunity to

provide both quantitative and qualitative responses, a summary of the qualitative responses are provided, with the emerging themes identified.

The survey asked if the alternative assessment approaches currently in place are a suitable arrangement for the academic year 2021–22.

**Figure 1:**

In your opinion, are the alternative assessment approaches currently in place a suitable arrangement for the academic year 2021–22?



As Figure 1 shows, 50% of respondents answered that they did not know whether the current arrangements were suitable for academic year 2021–22, 45% answered yes, and 5% answered no.

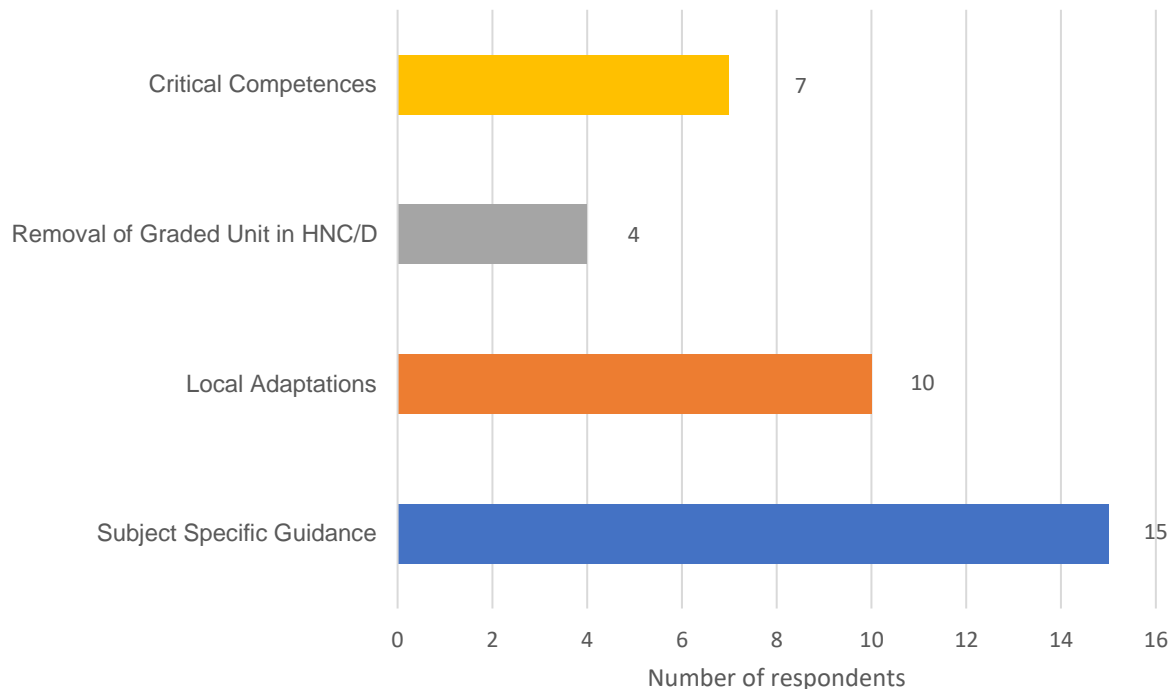
Some of the themes emerging from responses to this question included:

- ◆ Would we want to continue with QA approach?
- ◆ Alternative Assessments approaches align well with SQA's focus on reducing assessment load.
- ◆ Mindful of different approaches across centres.
- ◆ Need time to see the output of the adaptations for 2020–21.
- ◆ Being used across awards – but more so in practical subjects (as expected)

The survey then asked whether all alternative approach should remain or only specific sections. Participants were able to select more than one option.

**Figure 2:**

Should all alternative approaches remain or only specific sections?  
Please specify, by selecting all that should remain?

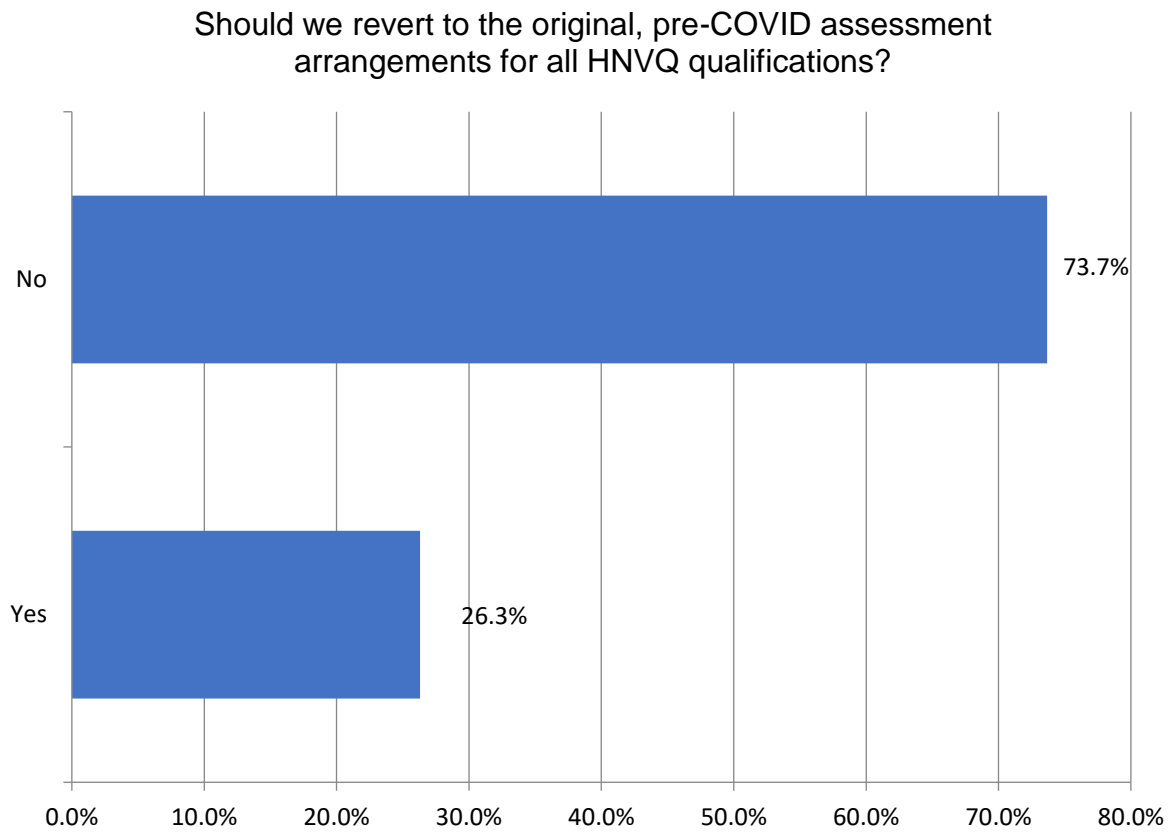


As detailed in Figure 2, of the 16 respondents who answered this question, seven felt that critical competences should remain, four that the removal of the Graded Unit should remain, 10 that local adaptations should remain, and 15 that we should retain subject-specific guidance.

### **How long should the alternative approaches be in place?**

Most respondents stated that the alternative approaches should remain in place for session 2021–22 at least. There were two comments that suggested the alternative approaches should be removed as soon as COVID restrictions were removed. Respondents were asked whether we should revert to the original, pre-COVID assessment arrangements for all HNVQ qualifications.

**Figure 3:**

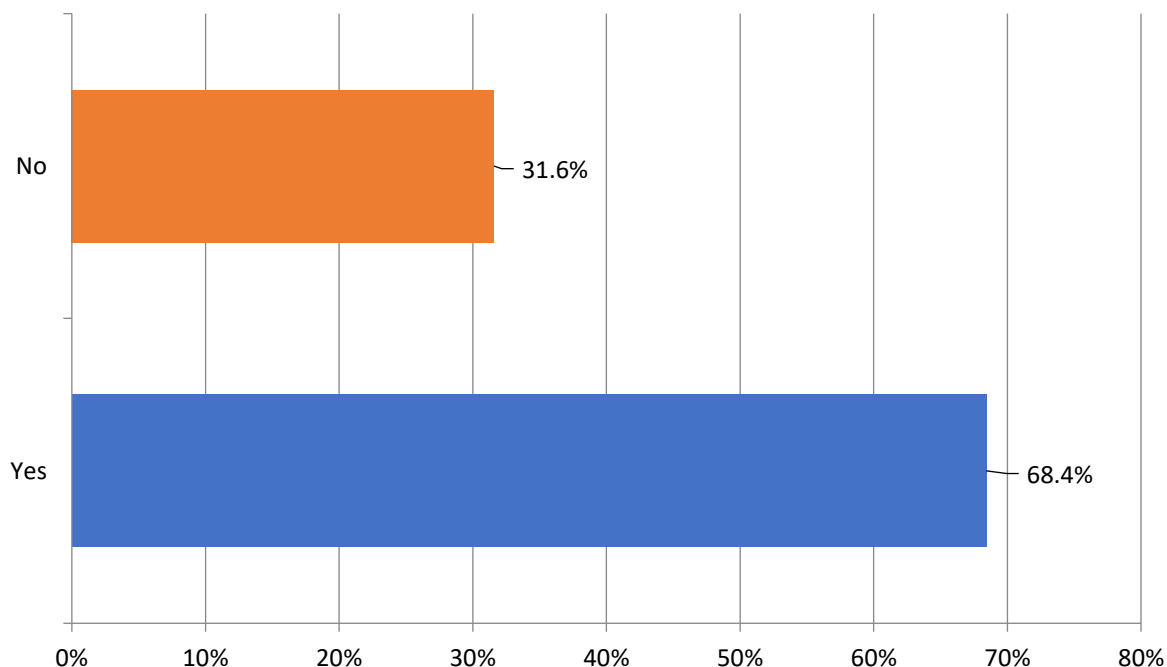


As indicated in Figure 3, 73.3% respondents answered no, we should not revert to the original pre-COVID assessment arrangements for all HNVQ qualifications; 23.3% of respondents thought we should.

Respondents were asked whether there should be a review of the Alternative Assessment Approaches that applied in 20/21 and revisions made to some or all of them to reflect the circumstances of 2021–22.

**Figure 4:**

Should there be a review of the alternative approaches that applied in 2020–21 and revisions made to some or all of them to reflect the circumstances of 2021–22?



As Figure 4 shows, 68.4% of respondents answered yes, there should be a review of the alternative approaches that applied in 2021–22 and revisions made to some or all of them to reflect the circumstances of 2021–22; 31.6% of respondents answered no.

Some of the themes emerging from responses to this question included:

- ◆ Mindful of the implications of more changes for centres and their ability to cope with yet more changes.
- ◆ This should be driven by the needs of delivering centres
- ◆ Difficult to determine without evaluation / feedback from delivering centres on this session's alternative approaches
- ◆ It may be useful to get feedback from verifiers / qualification support teams if the alternative approaches used this year were the best ones to make.
- ◆ Clarifications/simplifications may be able to be made to make them more suitable for the coming year.

The high-level findings indicated that this group was not supportive of a return to normal delivery and assessment in delivering centres for 2021–22. Most respondents felt that, with the possibility of some amendment where required, the Alternative Assessment Approaches in place for session 2020–21 would be suitable for academic session 2021–22. However, it was stated that it is important that there is more engagement with end-users, including subject specialists, delivering centres and learners.

## **2.2 External: qualification support teams, April 2021**

### **Activity**

Starting in April 2021, 18 qualification support team (QST) meetings were held to discuss the use of the decision tree model in session 2020–21 and, in particular, to obtain views on its continued use in session 2021–22. These QSTs consist of current practitioners in delivering centres.

### **Findings**

The groups were unanimous about the need to retain the decision tree model for session 2021–22. They were strongly supportive of the flexibility the decision tree allows and the autonomy given to delivering centres to implement the most appropriate alternative assessment approach for their learners and centres based on their ability to carry out the traditional model of assessment in these challenging circumstances. The majority indicated that their centres will not be moving back to a traditional model of teaching and learning, and that a blended learning model would be used in session 2021–22; online learning would continue with some face-to-face where appropriate.

Feedback indicated that there were different uses of the decision tree, with some delivering centres, for particular subjects, able to implement the traditional assessment approach and not needing to utilise the decision tree at all. Other centres delivering the same course, but in different geographical areas, did need to use the decision tree as the traditional route was not feasible due to local restrictions. The practitioners commented on the fact that the flexibility of the model allowed them to do what was best for the learners and the centre. They saw this as a very positive response that SQA had put in place.

Some comments were made about when the alternative approaches were communicated to centres, and that the decision tree was not presented to centres until early 2021. Respondents did acknowledge that the ongoing uncertainty of the pandemic from August 2020 until January 2021 made it difficult for SQA to plan accordingly. They welcomed the fact that SQA would communicate decisions around Alternative Assessment Approaches in June 2021 for session 2021–22.

## **2.3 External: Practitioners at delivering centres, May 2021**

### **Activity**

A survey was constructed for practitioners in delivering centres. The survey consisted of both qualitative and quantitative questions to gain insight from the users of the alternative assessment approaches. They were asked about their experiences of academic year 2020–21, their use of the alternative assessment approaches, and their expectations for 2021–22.

## Findings

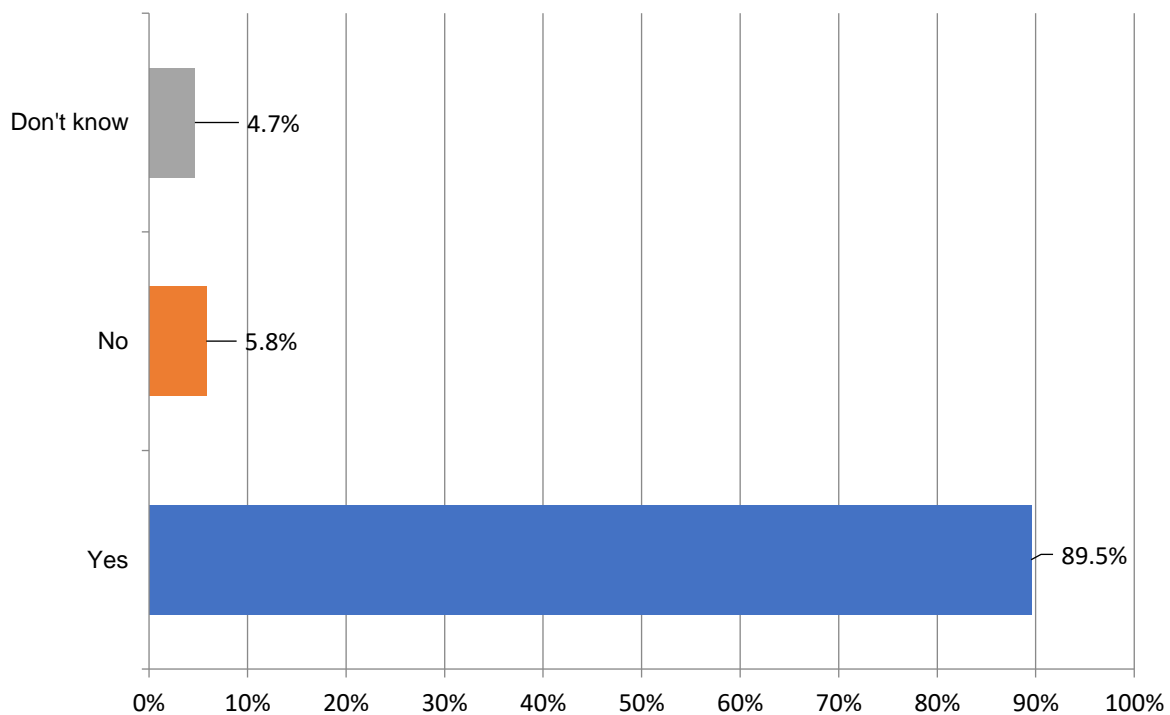
A survey was circulated to delivering centres via SQA co-ordinators. It was also circulated to employers and training providers (ETPs) via the Scottish Training Federation. This survey was completed either by individual practitioners or by a course team. The survey was available for completion from 13 May until 23 May 2021.

We received over 160 responses, with 86 complete responses.

Practitioners were asked if they had used any of the Alternative Assessment Approaches for SQA self-regulated qualifications in session 2020–21.

**Figure 5:**

Have you used any of the alternative assessment approaches for SQA self-regulated qualifications in session 2020–21?



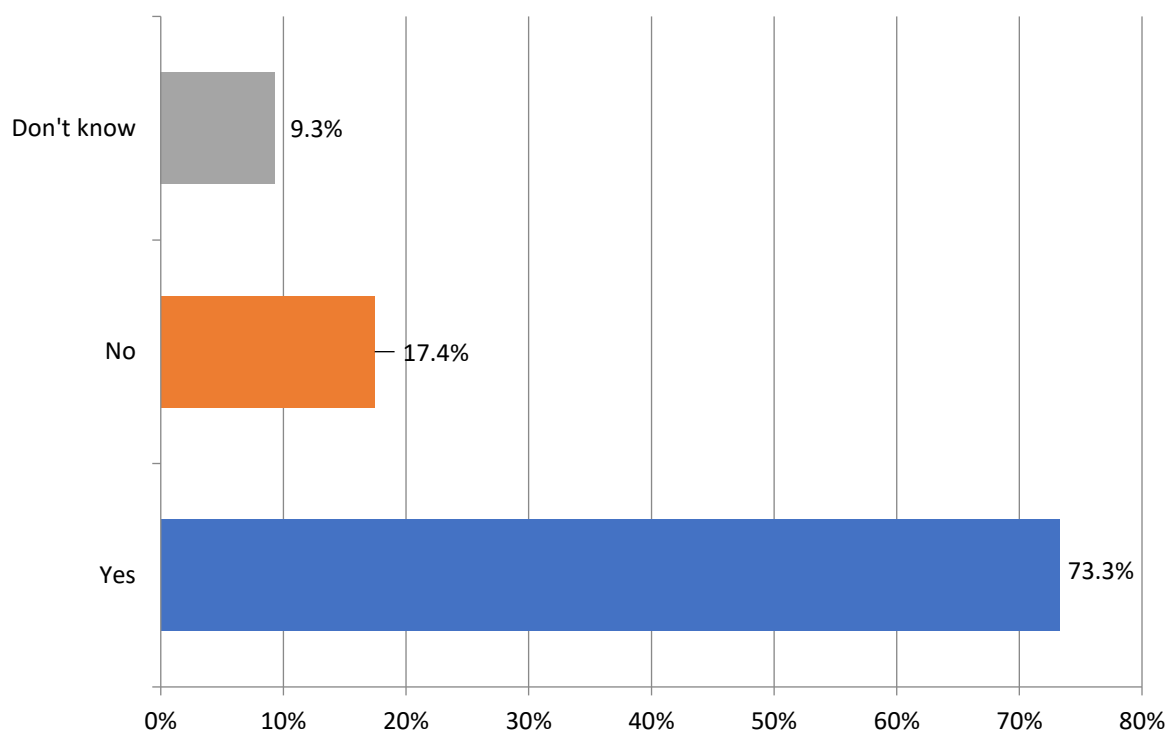
As Figure 5 shows, of those who responded to the survey, 90% (77) had used the alternative assessment approaches that were in place for 2020–21; 5.8% answered no, they had not used any of the alternative assessment approaches in session 2020–21; and 4.7% answered they did not know.

We asked practitioners about their potential continued use in session 2021–22.



**Figure 6:**

In your opinion, should the alternative assessment approaches be kept for the academic year 2021–22?



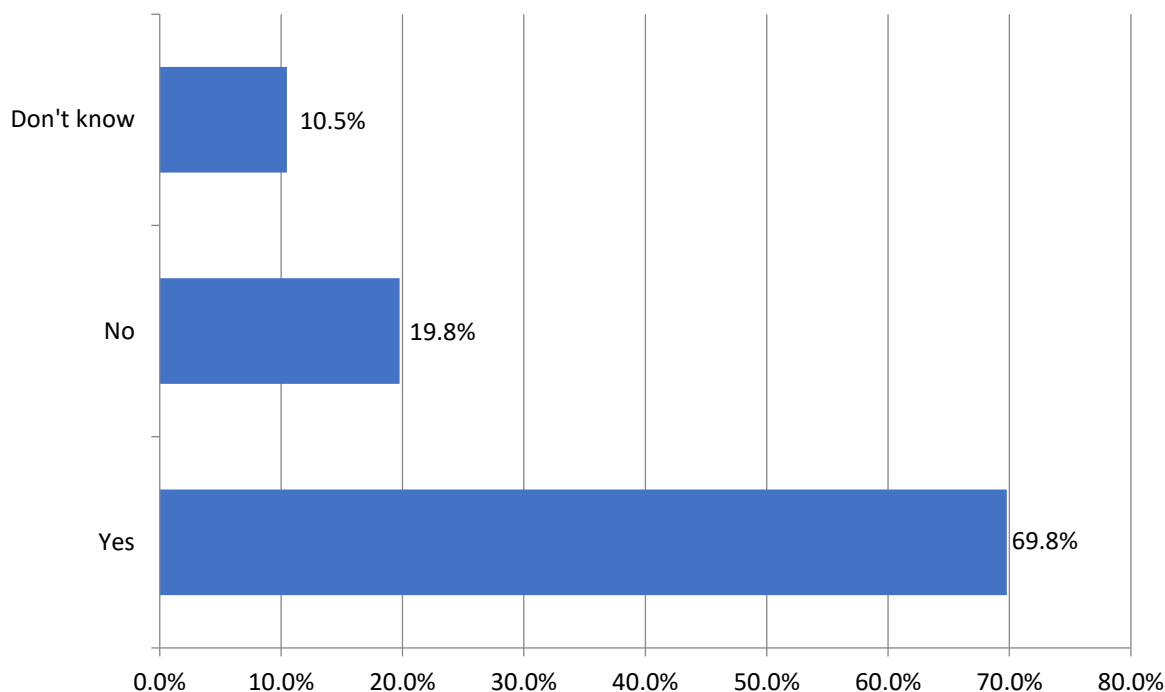
As indicated by Figure 6, 73.3% said that they would welcome the decision tree being available if required; 9.3% were not sure; and 17.4% said the decision tree should not be available for use.

Further, we asked which of the alternative assessment approaches within the decision tree they would want to see retained (they were able to select as many as appropriate). There were 79 responses: 58 said the subject-specific guidance (published in September 2020), 57 said the local adaptations (ongoing throughout the year), 34 indicated they would want to see the optional removal of the traditional approach to the Graded Unit retained, and 41 felt the enhanced subject guidance / Group Awards Aims/ critical competences should be retained for session 2021–22.

Via both the practitioner survey and the discussions at QSTs, it was highlighted that there may be opportunities to revisit the enhanced subject guidance / Group Awards Aims / critical competences (lower end of decision tree). This guidance, in parts, was developed and refined with the Scottish Government Public Health Advice in mind. As this is potentially relaxed over the coming months, the alternative assessments approaches should be altered in line with this.

**Figure 7:**

Do you agree that the alternative approaches available in session 2020–21 protect the integrity of the qualifications and ensure that standards are maintained?



As you can see from Figure 7, 70% of respondents to the survey felt that the alternative approaches available in session 2020–21 protected the integrity of the qualifications and helped ensure that standards are maintained; 10% did not know; and 20% said that they did not.

Further comments related to the timings of the communications around the different assessment approaches. They indicated a need for more guidance from SQA on what suitable assessment methods are, guidance on adapting evidence requirements on implementing alternative assessment arrangements and more guidance and support on project-based units in regard to restrictions. Another recurring theme was the need to provide additional guidance on the mapping of the evidence requirements for the Graded Unit if this is not carried out in the original manner.

## **2.4 External: learners at delivering centres, May 2021**

### **Activity**

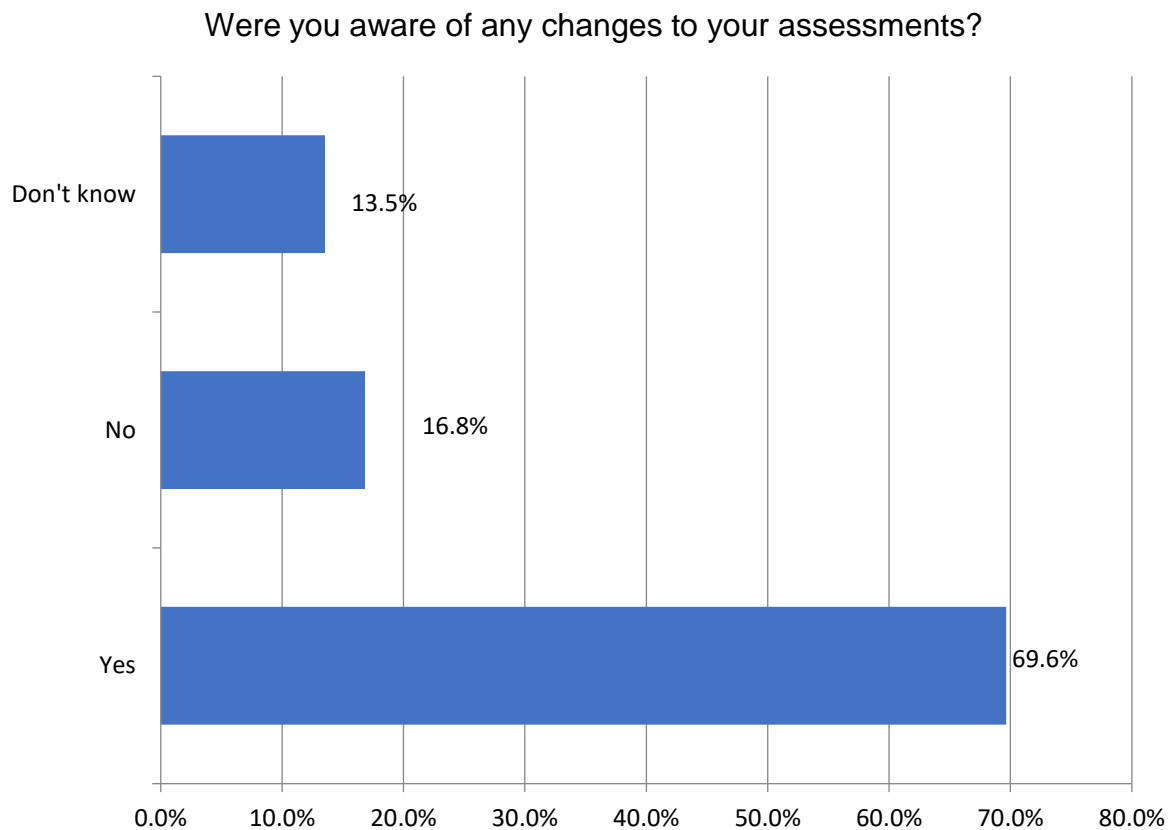
A survey was constructed for learners who have experienced the use of the alternative assessment approaches in 2020–21. They were asked for feedback on their experience.

## Findings

A survey was circulated to learners via SQA co-ordinators. The survey was available for completion from 17 May until 26 May 2021. We received 485 responses, with 392 complete responses.

Learners were asked if they were aware that any changes had been made to their assessments.

**Figure 8:**

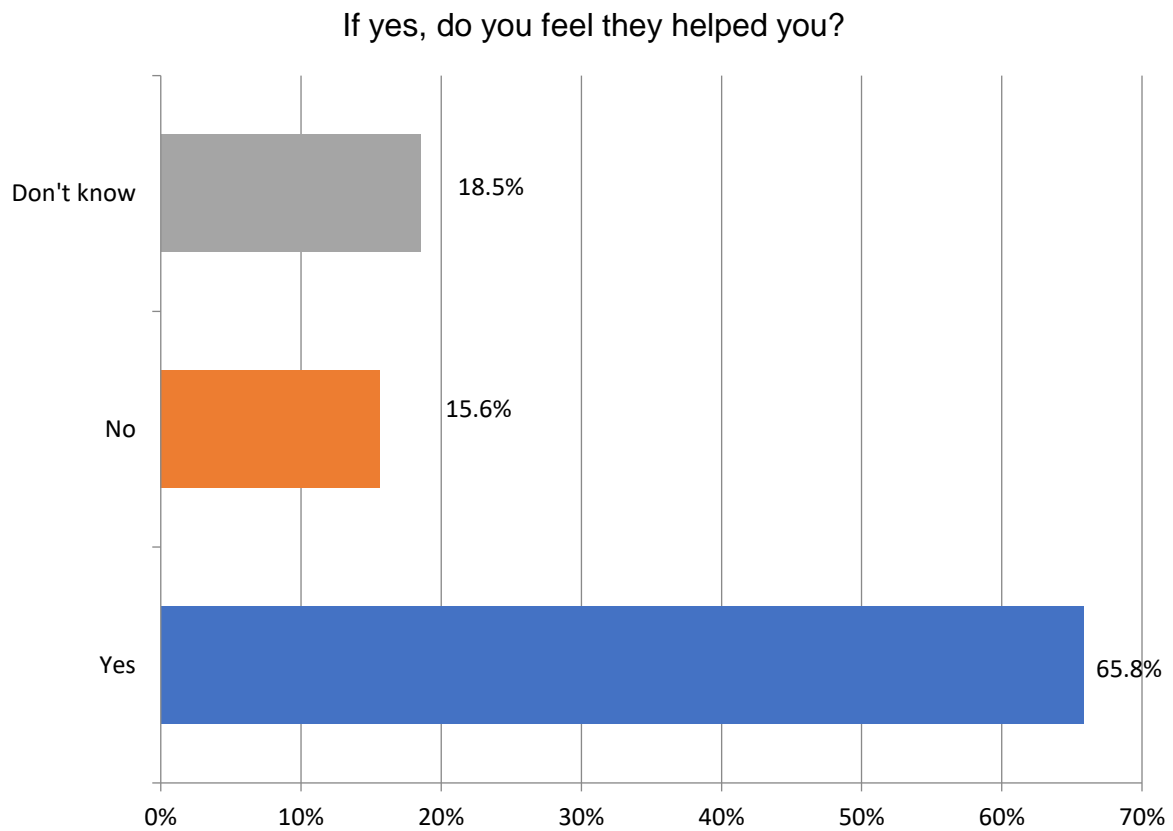


Of those who responded to the survey 69.3% (273) were made aware of the use of the alternative assessment approaches for their assessments for 2020–21; 13.5% (53) were unaware of any changes; and 16.8% (66) said that there were no changes, to their knowledge.

70 respondents indicated that they had fewer assessments than they would have had in previous years: 119 learners had some of their closed-book assessments changed to open-book; 63 indicated that they did not complete the Graded Unit within their HNC/D in the traditional way.

We asked if they felt that the alternative assessments approaches had helped them.

**Figure 9:**

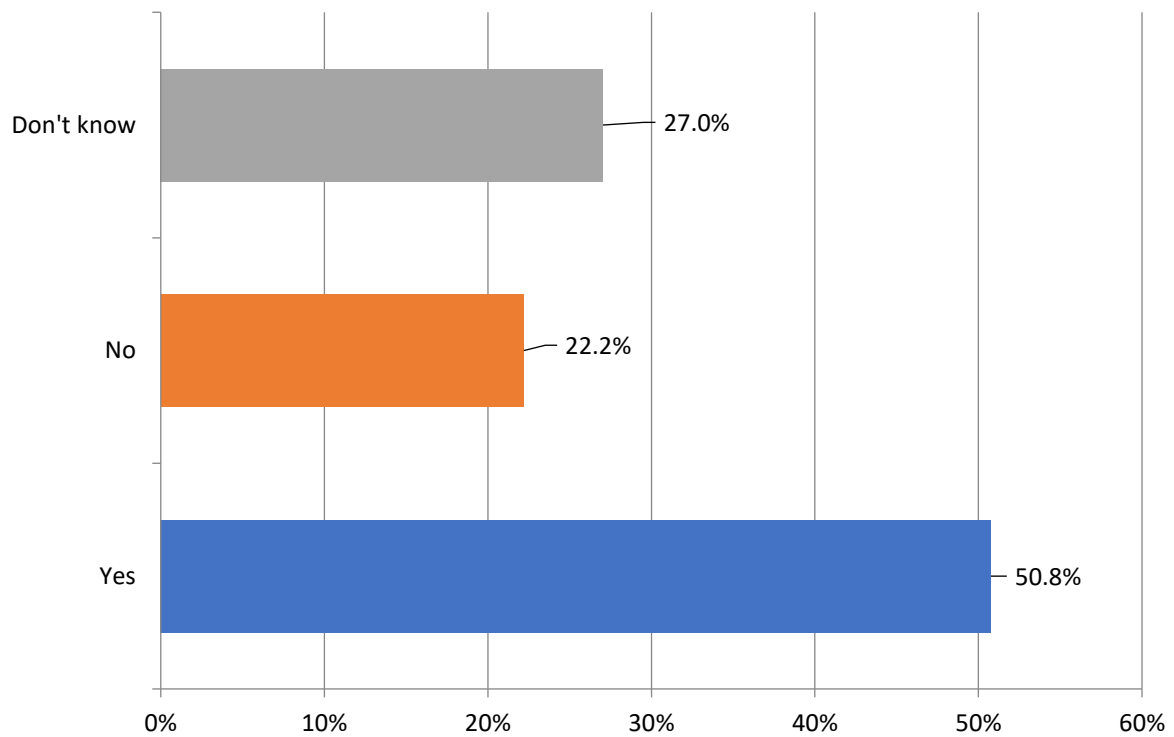


As shown in Figure 9, 275 answered and, of those, 65.8% (181) said they had, 15.6% (43) said they hadn't, and 18.5% (51) were not sure.

Finally, learners were asked if they felt the changes that were in place should be kept for 2021–22.

**Figure 10:**

In your opinion, should the changes that are in place this year be kept for the next year 2021–22?



As Figure 10 shows, 392 responded: 50.8% (199) said yes, they should; 22.2% (87) said they shouldn't remain; and 27% (106) were not sure either way.

## **3 Findings on session 2021–22**

The high-level findings from the focus groups and surveys carried out in April / May 2021 indicated that a return to normal delivery and assessment in delivering centres for session 2021–22 would not be appropriate. The majority of respondents felt that the Alternative Assessment Approaches in place for session 2020/21 would be suitable for academic session 2021–22.

### **3.1 External: practitioners at delivering centres, January 2022**

#### **Activity**

In January 2022, with the emerging COVID public health situation, SQA produced a survey that was sent to all HNVQ delivering centres to gather their feedback on the use of the Alternative Assessment Approaches and to ascertain if any further support or guidance would be required by centres to support deliver and assessment of HNVQ in session 2021–22. This survey asked them to consider the current position and their experience over the academic session to date. This was purely to inform if the decision tree was supporting centres in the way it was intended to. The survey was opened for 2 weeks, open between 24 February and 8 March 2022. There were almost 200 respondents to the survey. The survey contained five questions in total and three allowed both quantitative and qualitative responses.

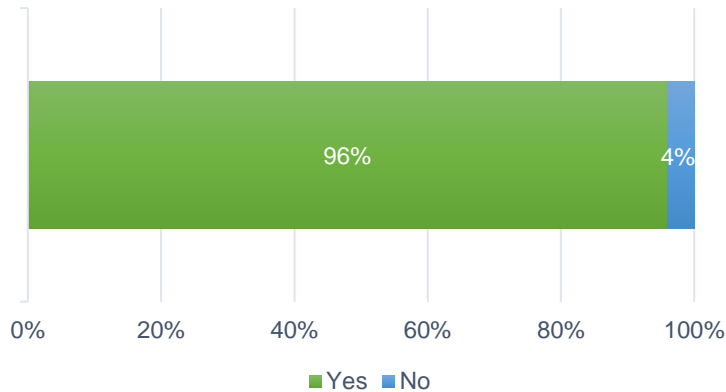
#### **Findings**

Key highlights from the survey show that many respondents were aware of the decision tree and knew how to use it.

Questions asked are detailed below with some of the qualitative responses.

## Has the decision tree allowed you to deliver and assess your qualifications in a way best suited to your learners and centre?

Figure 11:



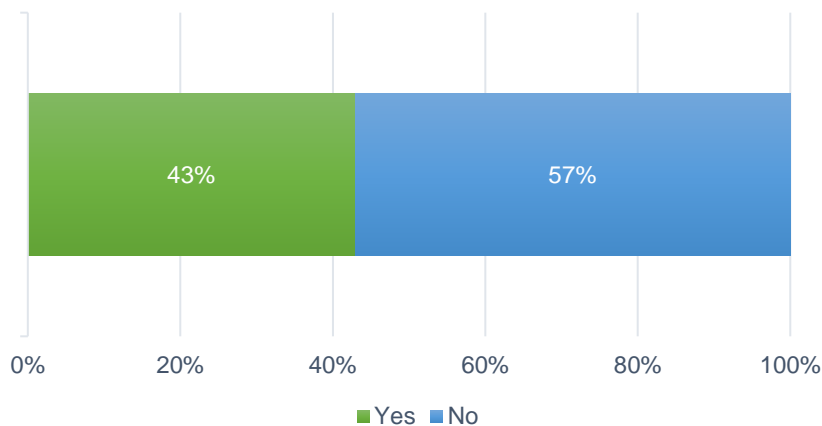
Almost half of all respondents did not answer this question, while, as shown in Figure 11, 96 respondents said the decision tree had allowed them to deliver and assess their qualifications in a way best suited to their learners and centres. Only four respondents said it did not.

Positively, delivering centres are, in the main (96%), confident that the Decision Tree has allowed them to assess and deliver the qualifications in the best way for learners and centres.

SQA were keen to understand if delivering centres have experienced any additional challenges to delivery over the last year. The following question was asked to capture their views.

## Have you had any additional challenges to delivery this session?

Figure 12:



As shown in Figure 12, while the greatest number of respondents said they had not had any additional challenges to delivery in the 2021–2022 session, 67 respondents said they had, and 40 respondents did not answer the question.

A total of 61 individuals commented on additional challenges they have encountered this session. Many respondents commented on continued poor learner attendance both in class and for assessment, as a result of illness or isolating due to COVID-19.

A number of respondents also commented on COVID-related staff absences causing disruption to teaching and impacting on the learning experience.

Respondents commented on access to technology, which varies amongst learners, impacting on the learning experience. In a similar vein, issues with learner engagement have been exacerbated not only by technical challenges, but also by online learning and lack of face-to-face contact. A small number of respondents commented on the difficulty of monitoring learner progress as a result of both online learning and learner absences.

Several respondents commented on the issues around delivering qualifications and assessments, particularly for learners undertaking courses of study with practical elements, such as hairdressing, hospitality, and nursing.

Although these points cannot be directly solved by SQA, it is useful for us to be aware of them as plans and decisions are made for future.

The final questions asked if there was anything additional that SQA could provide to support centres.

**Is there anything else that SQA could provide to support you in your delivery, assessment, and QA processes this year?**

Respondents were asked if there was anything else that SQA could provide to support them in their delivery, assessment and QA process this year. A total of 25 individuals submitted comments. This was a free-text response, so there was a range of suggestions.

Four respondents made requests to keep the decision tree, finding it useful in supporting learning and teaching. One respondent suggested a further use of the decision tree going forward.

*While it may be an onerous task I think the option of a way to share the diverse ways centres have assessed different course programmes using the decision tree would enhance staff confidence and ideas.*

Three respondents requested continued sharing between centres to promote collegiate working.

*Please continue with the collegiate partnership working. The transparency and level of communication is welcomed.*



## **3.2 Conclusions January 2022**

The survey responses have allowed SQA to ensure that delivering centres are utilising the decision tree in the correct way as they require. The qualitative responses have provided opportunities for further discussions on the points raised going into the academic session 2022–23.

## **3.3 Foundation Apprenticeships**

In response to ongoing public health advice related to the COVID pandemic, SQA and Skills Development Scotland (SDS) entered discussions in 2020 to determine how to provide appropriate opportunities for candidates to be assessed and certificated for their Foundation Apprenticeship (FA).

After discussion and engagement with sector skills councils and delivering centres, led by Skills Development Scotland, the inclusion of Customised Units in Foundation Apprenticeships was introduced as an expedient and interim solution to delivery challenges because of the COVID-19 restrictions for session 2020–21. They were intended to enable providers to use a range of approaches to delivery and assessment.

SQA produced guidance to help delivering centres understand the flexibility these Customised Units were intended to introduce. In particular, they reflect the fact that FA learners may be unable to gain direct access to a physical workplace and/or close face-to-face contact between assessors and FA learners may not be possible. Where a qualification from the HNVQ portfolio forms part of these frameworks, the HNVQ assessment arrangements, including use of the decision tree, also apply.

## **3.4 Next Generation Higher National and Vocational Qualifications**

The Alternative Assessment Approaches that have been utilised through the decision tree have allowed centres to reduce the amount of assessment the learners have to do to show competence in the award. This integration of assessment is a key aspect of the Next Generation Higher National project, which is well underway.

Feedback to date suggests that the guidance we have provided supports delivery and assessment in a positive way reducing assessment load and ensuring learners to generate sufficient evidence to meet assessment requirements. The approach aligns well with the ethos of Next Generation Qualification and could act as a bridge between current and Next Generation mainstreaming. It is a feature SQA will look to develop over the next year or two through further engagement with delivering centres and learners.

## 4 Summary

The engagement activity that SQA has done over the last two years has allowed the model of delivery and assessment to be shaped to best suit learners and delivering centres. The feedback we have received has indicated strong support for the Alternative Assessment models and a desire to explore their continued use, in some form, in the coming years.

Ongoing engagement with delivering centres and learners is at the forefront of how SQA wants to work, ensuring that the products and services provided are aligned with the needs of the users.

SQA will look to work with users of the products to ensure that the good practice that has been exemplified over the last two years is encouraged to continue and to be utilised, where appropriate.

SQA will look at the experiences of centres delivering vocational qualifications during the pandemic, and build upon these as the products move into the Next Generation phase.