

Children’s Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment

2023–24 National Qualifications — Course Modifications

Section 1: Background and context

Approach to impact assessment

This document summarises the evidence SQA has reviewed for modifications made to assessments for National Courses, specifically looking at the impact on children’s rights and wellbeing. SQA supports lifelong learning, and awards qualifications to learners of all ages, but many learners taking SQA-graded National Courses are aged 15, 16 or 17 and identify as young people.

SQA reviewed the evidence available and used it to inform decision-making regarding modifications to course assessments for National Qualifications .It did so in the context of its duties as the statutory national awarding body in Scotland. These duties are set out in the Education (Scotland) Act 1996, as amended.

In October 2022, the National Qualifications Policy Team carried out engagement activities on the arrangements for the assessment of National Courses in 2023–24 with learners, parents and carers, practitioners, SQA qualifications teams, National Qualification support teams, SQA’s Advisory Council, SQA’s Qualifications Committee, the NQ2023 Working Group and the NQ2023 Strategic Group.¹

We have assessed the effect and consequences that the modifications we made to National Course assessments may have had on children and young people. [Section 4](#) of this Children's Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment sets out our findings in more detail.

More information, with a focus on equality, is available in SQA’s Equality Impact Assessment of 2023–24 National Qualifications — Course Modifications.

Section 2: CRWIA stage 1 screening — key questions

Name the policy and describe its overall aims.

Modifications to course assessments in session 2023–24 is intended to be positive and to allow SQA to continue to contribute to equality of opportunity for all children and young people in the Scottish education and skills system.

¹ The NQ2023 Working Group and NQ2023 Strategic Group included representation from: the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES), Colleges Scotland, Education Scotland, the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), School Leaders Scotland (SLS), the Scottish Council of Independent Schools (SCIS), SQA, the Scottish Government, the National Parent Forum of Scotland, and the Scottish Youth Parliament.

SQA introduced modifications to course assessments as a mitigation in 2021 due to the negative impacts of COVID-19. Modifications to course assessments were removed by other UK awarding bodies for session 2022–23. However, in recognition of the continued disruption to teaching and learning having a negative impact on teachers, lecturers and learners, it was agreed with relevant stakeholders that SQA would retain course modifications in the 2022–23 session. It is further acknowledged that course modifications made to National Qualifications were a temporary arrangement SQA adopted to support teachers, lecturers and learners with the continued disruption to teaching and learning. Reverting to the pre-COVID-19 course assessments of 2019 is vital for reasons of comparability.

Based on the results of stakeholder engagement, SQA’s Advisory Council, SQA’s Qualifications Committee and the NQ2023 Strategic Group recommended that the full 2019 National Course assessment requirements should be reinstated, but where there is evidence from awarding that the modification has had a positive effect on the performance of the course assessment, the modifications will be retained for those courses.

What aspects of the service will affect children and young people up to the age of 18?

Many learners taking SQA-graded National Courses are aged 15, 16 or 17 and identify as young people. Therefore, modifications to course assessments have the potential to affect those young people taking SQA-graded National Courses in session 2023–24.

What likely impact — direct or indirect — will the service have on children and young people?

The arrangements for assessing NQs in 2023–24 will enable young people to complete their selected NQ courses and to be awarded grades that reflect their achievement. They will be able to celebrate their attainment and progress to continued education, training or employment where entry relies on SQA grades.

Which groups of children and young people will be affected?

SQA understands that ‘child’ means everyone under the age of 18 unless ‘under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier’.² We also understand that our corporate parenting responsibilities under the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 not only apply to children who are looked after by local authorities, but also to young people up to the age of 26 who were looked after at age 16 or later.

SQA recognises that any changes made to course assessments for National Qualifications will have an impact on young people entered for National Qualifications courses.

Will this require a CRWIA?

Yes. As above, SQA recognises that any changes made to course assessments for National Qualifications will impact on young people entered for National Qualifications courses.

² Please see Article 1 of the [Convention on the Rights of the Child | OHCHR](#).

Section 3: The CRWIA: United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

SQA considers that the following articles are particularly relevant to modifications to course assessments in session 2023–24:

- ◆ Article 2: non-discrimination
- ◆ Article 3: best interests of the child
- ◆ Article 12: respect for the views of the child
- ◆ Article 17: access to information from the media
- ◆ Article 23: children with a disability
- ◆ Article 28: right to education, and
- ◆ Article 29: goals of education

The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) child-friendly descriptors have been set out below.

Article 2: non-discrimination

Children should not be discriminated against in the enjoyment of their rights. No child should be discriminated against because of the situation or status of their parent/carer(s).

Article 2 also deals with discrimination based on most of the protected characteristics covered by the Equality Act (2010), but it is not identical. For example, it deals with discrimination based on the characteristics and political opinions of a child's parents, carers, and/or guardians and on ‘activities’ and ‘property’.

Article 3: best interests of the child

Every decision and action taken relating to a child must be in their best interests. Governments must take all appropriate legislative and administrative measures to ensure that children have the protection and care necessary for their wellbeing — and that the institutions, services and facilities responsible for their care and protection conform to established standards.

Article 12: respect for the views of the child

Children have the right to give their opinions freely on issues that affect them. Adults should listen and take children seriously.

Article 17: right to information

Every child has access to information and material from a diverse range of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of their social, spiritual and moral wellbeing and physical and mental health. The article is principally about the mass media, but SQA recognises that the information it produces contributes to the fulfilment of article 17.

Article 23: children with disabilities

Every child with a disability should enjoy the best possible life in society. Governments should remove all obstacles for children with disabilities to become independent and to participate actively in the community.

Article 28: right to education

Every child has the right to education no matter who they are: regardless of race, gender, or disability; if they are in detention; or if they are a refugee. While SQA does not determine the right to education in Scotland, it does have a responsibility to provide assessment and certification of SQA qualifications for learners.

Article 29: aims of education

Children's education should help them fully develop their personalities, talents and abilities. It should teach them to understand their own rights, and to respect other people's rights, cultures and differences. It should help them to live peacefully and protect the environment.

Section 4: Assessment of impact and mitigations

Key elements

This part of the impact assessment further examines the key elements of modifications to National Qualifications course assessments in session 2022–23 in line with the relevant UNCRC Articles, as outlined in section 3.2.2, and considers:

- ◆ whether the arrangements may have different impacts on different groups of children and young people
- ◆ what mitigating actions might be adopted if a potential negative impact was identified for any area of rights or any group of children and young people
- ◆ where the arrangements for modifications to course assessments for National Qualifications in session 2023–24 can contribute to the wellbeing of children and young people in Scotland

Potential impacts on children and young people

Feedback from SQA's 2022 National Qualifications Evaluation research project suggested that the majority of young people who responded had a good understanding of the modifications made to assessments in their National Courses. A large proportion of young people responded that they thought course modifications in session 2021–22 were helpful and that modified assessments were a reliable test of their skills and knowledge. Examples of modifications that worked well included:

- ◆ removing elements of coursework or exams relieved pressure which allowed them to focus their revision for the exams
- ◆ advanced notice of topics that were or were not going to be assessed in the exam were found to be helpful, for example, in subjects such as English, Mathematics and Modern Studies

In SQA's 2022 National Qualifications Evaluation research project, the majority of young people felt that modifications to course assessment should remain in place for the 2023–24 academic year. However, a smaller number of young people felt that full course assessment should be reinstated. Some disabled young people and/or those with additional support needs provided feedback that useful topic areas were removed from their courses and that they felt less knowledgeable across the breadth of content taught in the course (for example, vectors in National 5 Mathematics). Some young people also commented that the removal of projects and dissertations from certain National 5 and Higher courses removed the opportunity for them to gain crucial skills, and that they felt less prepared to progress to Higher and Advanced Higher courses.

This feedback from young people who responded to SQA's 2022 National Qualifications Evaluation research was considered in determining the approach to National Qualifications assessments in 2023–24 (Article 12). The decision to return to full course assessment takes into account the negative impact of removing course components on essential skills and experiences learners would have otherwise gained. It is an important consideration for SQA to ensure that National Qualifications are assessed against national standards, and that these are comparable to qualifications of a similar level offered by other awarding bodies, nationally and internationally (Article 29).

SQA recognises that the permanent removal of aspects of course assessment has the potential to disadvantage young people who may not have been given the same opportunity to develop the full range of appropriate skills, knowledge and understanding as their peers who completed the qualification pre-pandemic. The effect of not allowing young people time in teaching and learning to develop these essential skills, knowledge and understanding due to the removal or modification of National Course assessments can have a longer-term negative impact on their progression to further education, employment and/or training opportunities (Articles 3, 28 and 29). Reinstating practical components and coursework can be seen to have a positive impact on disabled young people with a range of learning needs, including those who are neurodivergent and learn best through experiential, hands-on, practical tasks (Articles 2, 3 and 23).

SQA recognises that course modifications made to a small number of National Qualifications have had a positive impact on teaching and learning (Articles 3, 12, 23 and 29). SQA must ensure that there is a consistent approach taken for similar National Courses to ensure the integrity of its qualifications, and national standards of all course assessments, is maintained.

A review is currently being carried out by Professor Louise Hayward on the reform of National Qualifications. To ensure the stability of SQA's qualifications system and national assessment standards, SQA will make small changes to its qualifications to ensure all young people, including those with protected characteristics, are not negatively impacted (Articles 3 and 29).

Steps taken by SQA to mitigate impacts

SQA acknowledges that while the decision to return to full course assessment in the majority of National Qualifications will be welcomed by some young people, others will be

disappointed that course modifications that have been in place between 2021 and 2023 have been removed for the session 2023–24.

SQA is aware that removing course modifications may have implications for young people, including those with a disability, who found it difficult to catch up with lost learning time in the 2022–23 academic year. SQA will ensure that the course assessments in National Courses are carefully considered to ensure that the decision to remove course modifications does not create any significant additional workload for young people (Articles 3, 12 and 29).

It is SQA's intention to inform young people of the decision to return to full course assessment for National Qualifications in the session 2023–24 as soon as possible to allow them, and the wider education system, time to prepare for the next academic year commencing in August (Article 17).