

Equality Impact Assessment

2023–24 National Qualifications — Course Modifications

New policy or revision?

The 2023–24 National Qualifications — Course Modifications policy is a new policy relating to National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher course assessments.

This follows on from modifications that were made to National Course assessments between 2021 and 2023 as a mitigating measure due to the impact of the ongoing disruption to teaching and learning.

Name of policy owner

Martyn Ware, Director of Policy, Analysis and Standards.

What is the rationale for this policy or practice?

Modifications were introduced to National Course assessments in 2020 to mitigate against the extreme challenges faced by learners and practitioners at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. A final approach to National Course assessment was taken for the session 2023–24 following feedback from internal and external stakeholders.

More information, with a focus on children’s rights and wellbeing, is available in SQA’s Children’s Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment of 2023–24 National Qualifications — Course Modifications.

What evidence is there to support the implementation or development of this policy or practice?

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

What are the aims of this policy or practice?

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, although some additional support was provided. 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 for the 2022–23 session. However,

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.

it is 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 full course assessments of 2019 is vital for reasons of comparability, not only with the rest of the UK, but also internationally.

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. However, 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.

How is the content of these aims relevant to equality groups?

The public sector equality duty (PSED) requires SQA to have due regard to the need to:

- ◆ eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Equality Act (2010)
- ◆ advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not
- ◆ foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not

In addition, SQA has a responsibility to assess the impact of new or modified policies and practices against these needs and take account of the results of such assessments in developing new policies and practices.

This Equality Impact Assessment examines the approach to National Course assessment in session 2023–24 and identifies potential positive and negative impacts of this approach and how it addresses the requirements of the PSED outlined above.

This Equality Impact Assessment is underpinned by other work SQA takes to meet its PSED. As an awarding body, SQA works with schools, colleges, universities, industry and government to ensure that qualifications, including National Courses, are inclusive and accessible to all, recognising the achievements of learners and providing clear pathways to further learning or employment. The SQA Code of Practice outlines how SQA ensures that its qualifications are of high quality and fit for purpose, and that the assessment of these qualifications is monitored and maintained to a consistently high standard. By doing so, it sets out the framework by which SQA safeguards the integrity of SQA's qualifications and assessment standards and ensures public confidence. The Code of Practice is based on a set of 13 governing principles, which govern how SQA meets its statutory duties and self-regulates its activities. Similar principles apply to SQA qualifications that are regulated by other organisations.

Governing Principle 7 is specifically related to equalities issues and states that:

‘SQA will ensure that all qualifications and assessments are as fair and accessible as possible and that the needs of candidates are met in the administration of its assessments.’

The SQA Equality of Access to SQA Qualifications Policy outlines the organisation’s commitment to promoting and facilitating access to our qualifications. In practice, this means that every reasonable step will be taken to ensure that we:

1. produce qualifications based on national standards, which are as accessible as possible. We will equality review our qualifications to identify any aspects that might adversely impact learners who share protected characteristics. We will aim to remove such adverse impacts, wherever possible, and minimise them where it is not possible to remove them altogether
2. develop methods of assessment and quality assurance, which are sensitive to the needs of all learners, but do not compromise our overarching aims of fairness and consistency
3. provide assessment arrangements to allow disabled learners and/or those with additional support needs to access the assessment without compromising its integrity. For disabled learners, we will make reasonable adjustments in accordance with the requirements of the Equality Act (2010)

What stakeholders have you engaged with in the development of this policy or practice?

The approach to National Course assessment for the session 2023–24 was developed through extensive consultation with internal and external stakeholders and reflected the best balance between a range of competing and highly challenging considerations. The consultation for the approach to National Qualifications course assessment was open to all SQA stakeholders and SQA particularly welcomed the views of learners, parents, carers and practitioners from schools, colleges and training providers. A wide range of comments were received, some of which directly related to the impact of the proposed system on individuals with protected characteristics, while others covered the more general impacts of the proposed appeals system.

As most learners entered for National Qualifications are of school age (between 15 and 18 years of age), it is recognised that these learners would be regarded as children and young people who will most likely be affected by SQA’s decision.

Equality impacts

Modifications were made to the assessment of approximately around 70 courses between 2021 and 2023. The changes were introduced in response to feedback from teachers and lecturers in 2021–22, and were intended to give learners more opportunities to show their knowledge and skills and to help reduce the volume of assessment and ease teachers’, lecturers’ and learners’ workloads. Modifications were designed to mitigate against the impact of disruption and support and help learners to succeed.

Feedback from SQA's 2022 National Qualifications Evaluation research project suggested that a majority of disabled learners and/or those with additional support needs were aware of modifications made to course assessments. Of these, a large proportion responded that they agreed or strongly agreed that they understood the modifications to course assessments that were made, and more than half of the learners who answered this question thought that modifications to courses in session 2021–22 were helpful. These included:

- ◆ removing elements of coursework or exams: this relieved pressure and allowed disabled learners and/or those with additional support needs to focus their revision for the exam
- ◆ advanced notice of topics that were or were not going to be assessed in the exam were found to be helpful, for example, for subjects such as English, Mathematics and Modern Studies

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

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

Course modifications were introduced as a temporary measure to mitigate against the disruption to teaching and learning that teachers, lecturers and learners experienced. SQA recognises that the permanent removal of aspects of course assessment has the potential to disadvantage learners 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 learners 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 learners' progression to further education, employment and/or training opportunities. Reinstating practical components and coursework can be seen to have a positive impact on disabled learners with a range of learning needs, including those who are neurodivergent and learn best through experiential, hands-on, practical tasks.

SQA recognises that the modifications made to some National Qualifications may have had a positive impact on teaching and learning, including on those individuals with a range of protected characteristics. SQA will ensure that there is a consistent approach taken for

similar National Courses to guarantee the integrity of our qualifications, and that national standards for all course assessments are maintained. SQA will collate evidence to demonstrate that we have considered the potential impacts that removing or retaining course modifications will have on learners — particularly on those with protected characteristics. The evidence that we collate will demonstrate the equality considerations we have made for course modifications, and will be reviewed as soon as the process is complete. This process will allow SQA to identify any potential improvements that may be need to our existing internal processes around equality, and will be considered when designing and assessing qualifications in the future.

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 learners, including those with protected characteristics, are not negatively impacted.

Mitigating actions

SQA acknowledges that while the decision to return to full course assessment in the majority of National Qualifications will be welcomed by some teachers, lecturers and learners, others will be disappointed that the course modifications that have been in place between 2021 and 2023 have been removed.

SQA are aware that removing course modifications may have implications for teachers, lecturers and learners, including those with additional support needs, who found it difficult to catch up with lost learning time in the 2022–23 academic year. SQA will ensure that the arrangements for assessments in National Courses are carefully considered so that the decision to remove course modifications does not create any significant additional workload for teachers, lecturers, learners or SQA staff.

It is SQA's intention to inform all teachers, lecturers and learners of the decision to return to full course assessment for National Qualifications in session 2023–24 as soon as possible. This will allow the education system time to prepare for the next academic year commencing in August.