



# **National Courses: guidance on gathering evidence and producing estimates**

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The Optima Building, 58 Robertson Street, Glasgow G2 8DQ

Lowden, 24 Wester Shawfair, Dalkeith, Midlothian EH22 1FD

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

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# Introduction

This document provides guidance to SQA co-ordinators, department/curriculum leaders, teachers and lecturers in SQA approved centres on gathering evidence to support an estimate, and on determining the appropriate grade and band to estimate for a candidate. This guidance is accompanied by an SQA Academy [resource](#). Subject-specific material on the use of key evidence to support estimates will follow, as appropriate.

Estimates play an important role in SQA awarding processes. They should be submitted for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher course entries in accordance with the key dates. We publish key dates each year on SQA Connect.

We will publish procedural information on submitting estimates to SQA in *Delivering National Qualifications: Guide for SQA Co-ordinators 2020–21*.

## What are estimates and how are they used?

An estimate is a judgement of a final grade and band for a graded National Course across all assessment components. It is based on a holistic review of a candidate's performance as indicated by assessment evidence, gathered at centre level. It is imperative that each estimate is a realistic, evidence-based prediction of a candidate's final attainment in the course assessment.

SQA will use estimates to:

- ◆ help make decisions about certification of the course — estimates indicate the grade distribution nationally that centres anticipate their candidates will attain
- ◆ help to prioritise candidates' scripts for re-consideration during the finalisation stage of awarding procedures
- ◆ check that awarding outcomes are as fair as possible to candidates
- ◆ support the interpretation of evidence for Exceptional Circumstances Consideration requests

Estimates are considered by SQA examiners as part of the evidence review for candidates for whom an Exceptional Circumstances Consideration request is made. Candidates must have had an estimate submitted for you to be able to access the Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service.

## Principles of assessment

SQA must ensure that its qualifications are credible with users, partner organisations and the wider community, and that they provide nationally and internationally recognised standards of attainment. All assessments for SQA qualifications must be:

- ◆ valid
- ◆ reliable

- ◆ practicable
- ◆ equitable and fair

It is important to remember all aspects that are implied by the grade you are estimating for each candidate. Every award carries weight and significance personally, socially, educationally and economically. In other words, a grade or an award has a meaning for the candidate but also a meaning and a value in the wider world. For this reason, it is crucial that all candidates are treated fairly and equitably.

## **Estimates and fairness for all candidates**

There may be a range of factors that impact on candidates' access to learning. When making judgements on estimates, it is important to bear this in mind, especially in the following cases:

- ◆ Candidates who have assessment arrangements or who would have reasonable adjustments in place for a final assessment or exam (for example a reader, or scribe).
- ◆ Where illness or other personal circumstances might have affected performance, meaning that centres should also review candidate performance in alternative assessments of similar demand when making their judgements.
- ◆ Candidates who experience barriers to learning including those who have caring responsibilities, those who are care experienced, and those who may have further interrupted learning due to illness or disability.

For candidates who have assessment arrangements, or who would have reasonable adjustments, estimates must be based on likely achievement with the reasonable adjustments/assessment arrangements in place. When reviewing assessment evidence, you should reflect on whether appropriate support was in place, or whether the assessment was used as a 'baseline' indicator for future support. It is worth emphasising that these candidates may have been unable to access appropriate levels of support in home learning situations.

Some candidates may have their learning supported by peripatetic teachers or support for learning specialists. You may wish to include these staff in estimate discussions.

## **Bias**

Any discussion of fairness must take account of the possibility of bias. When coming to a decision about a candidate's estimate, you must try to base your decision on a candidate's evidence rather than their personal circumstances, so that you are as objective and as consistent in your decisions as possible.

Special mention must be made of what might be called 'implicit bias'. Implicit bias originates from assumptions or stereotypes based on characteristics such as background, gender, disability, race and ethnicity. Research strongly suggests that implicit bias may be a contributing factor to assessment judgements, and it is for this reason that SQA's e-marking procedures includes the suppression of candidates' personal data. You need to think about potential bias in the estimates you provide.

Candidate evidence should be valued for its own worth and merit as an indicator of course attainment, and a conscious effort should be made to consider and avoid the negative impact of potential implicit bias. You should do this as you finalise your estimates by considering the accuracy of the decisions you make alongside candidate data on background, gender, disability, race and ethnicity, at both class and cohort presentation level.

Use of blind or cross marking can decrease the potential for bias in grading decisions, and moderation across departments, learning areas and faculties will ensure fairness for all candidates and that robust standards are maintained.

## **Gathering evidence to produce an estimate**

An estimate is a holistic professional judgement based on evidence of a candidate's attainment in all aspects of the course (ie all course components) and should reflect the candidate's demonstrated attainment of the required skills, knowledge and understanding for the estimated grade and band. Reviewing a range of evidence will help to build up a picture of the candidate's performance as a whole, which will then enable you to decide on an estimate.

When determining estimates, you should start by gathering, and then reviewing, the evidence you have for each candidate. Look for instances where candidates have applied their learning, or particular aspects of it. This might be at previously identified, planned checkpoints in teaching and learning programmes. These checkpoints might be planned events (eg prelims or mock question papers, assignments, performances, etc), or they might be naturally occurring.

Appropriate assessment points might be reached by candidates at different stages in their learning. Convincing evidence may be found where candidates have applied their learning in unseen contexts. This 'added value' might have high predictive value if it mirrors important aspects of course assessment.

It is not necessary to assess every aspect of the course exhaustively. A selection of key tasks and/or questions carried out under appropriate conditions and with an appropriate level of demand will give a good indication of likely performance in the final course assessment. Your marking should be cross-checked against national standards as exemplified in SQA Understanding Standards materials, and confirmed by participating in centre-based or local moderation activities.

You should focus on the predictive value of the evidence you have gathered — looking at what the evidence can tell you as measured against the requirements of the course assessment. For example, this could be the consistency of a candidate's performance or practical activity, or the depth of a candidate's responses in relation to discriminating questions on key concepts.

## Predictive value

Your judgements about a candidate's estimated grade must be based on evidence that demonstrates achievement. When judging evidence, you should consider the predictive value of evidence, both in terms of the individual pieces of evidence and as part of the overall picture for each candidate.

A piece of evidence has high predictive value if a candidate who performs well in the task would reasonably be expected to perform equally well in the course assessment.

Some considerations that impact on the predictive value of evidence are:

- ◆ **Course coverage.** If a piece of evidence covers a fairly small portion of the course content, it is unlikely to be a good predictor for the full course. It may be useful to think in terms of the weightings of certain components. A piece of evidence that covers course components worth 70% of the course award, such as a prelim, may be a better predictor of a candidate's achievement in course assessment than a piece with a smaller weighting. Evidence does not need to cover the entire course specification, but the more course content that is covered, the better the predictive value is likely to be.
- ◆ **Similarity to course assessment.** Evidence that is similar to a course assessment will have stronger predictive value than evidence that is considerably different from the course assessment, either in terms of structure and content or assessment arrangements. If evidence is generated under less strict conditions than a course assessment, its predictive value is weaker than a piece generated under similar conditions.
- ◆ **Nature of evidence.** 'Primary' evidence produced by a candidate (for example responses to questions, video of performance) enables stronger predictions about their achievement than 'secondary' evidence produced by an assessor (such as assessor commentaries).
- ◆ **Level of demand.** You should gather evidence that supports the band and grade you are estimating. This means that the evidence you gather must be set at an appropriate level of demand for it to be a good predictor of candidate achievement.
- ◆ **Skills correlations.** Evidence for certain aspects of a course may be strongly linked and have good predictive value. For example, in Modern Languages courses, evidence indicating effective Listening skills could be a good predictor of strong performance in Reading. In other areas, it may be difficult to draw a strong inference from one piece of evidence to a different aspect of the course.
- ◆ **Date.** Evidence that was generated earlier in the course of study may have lower predictive value than evidence generated later. Multiple pieces of evidence may demonstrate a candidate's progression throughout the year.

Pieces of evidence that have low predictive value should not necessarily be discounted altogether, but should be viewed with caution. Several pieces with a lower predictive value



may combine to produce a reliable overall picture of a candidate's achievements, depending on the nature of the course assessment.

## Type and quality of evidence

Not every topic in every area needs to be assessed exhaustively — a selection of representative questions and tasks evidenced under the appropriate conditions can represent good predictive value. It is important that you focus on gathering high-quality predictive evidence that clearly demonstrates a candidate's attainment.

Course assessment may feature breadth, challenge and/or application, since it assesses the added value of the course. Estimates that are based on performance in tasks that are similar to those used for course assessment are much more likely to give an accurate prediction of a candidate's final attainment in the course assessment. Questions and tasks that are suitable for course assessment are exemplified in the specimen question papers, past papers and coursework assessment task for each course.

SQA's Understanding Standards resource also provides examples of candidate responses with associated commentaries for most National Courses. This can be a useful benchmark of the level of demand in the subject, and will allow you to gather evidence that differentiates between A and C performances. This will support you as you determine your estimated grades and bands.

The following types of evidence may also be helpful. However, it is important to reiterate that it is not the **quantity** of evidence, but the **quality** of evidence that will support you in the estimation process.

- ◆ **Prelims or mock exams:** These are likely to be the most reliable indicator of performance in a question paper, particularly if they are undertaken in the same conditions as the question paper. The most convincing examples of these will accurately predict attainment in the skills, knowledge, and understanding assessed by the question paper. They will be clearly aligned to the course specification, content, and level of demand as exemplified in the specimen question papers and past papers.
- ◆ **SQA specimen question papers or past papers:** These assessments are in the public domain and can be readily accessed by candidates. In their entirety they do not form suitable evidence. However, elements of these can be incorporated into prelims, mock exams or class tests. Alternatively, centres may devise their own prelims or use commercially produced materials.
- ◆ **Commercially-produced question papers/assessments:** These may provide suitable evidence of performance in a question paper. They do not have to be the most recent version, although you should ensure that they meet the demands of the course specification and have an appropriate level of demand.
- ◆ **Class tests:** You could use a series of marked class tests as supplementary evidence to the evidence types listed above. Such tests should sample the key aspects of the course, and the conditions of assessment should be consistent with those of the external

assessment. If the class tests do not contain sufficient integration, challenge and/or application, additional evidence will be required to demonstrate this.

- ◆ **Classwork:** This may consist of a variety of naturally-occurring evidence types, produced under different conditions than those set for course assessment. Evidence of this kind is unlikely to form a strong evidence base on its own, but may supplement other evidence types.
- ◆ **Completed or partially-completed coursework:** It may be possible to gauge candidate performance from a review of coursework. You do not need to apply a mark to coursework materials, but using your knowledge of previous cohorts and drawing on Understanding Standards materials, you should be able to determine the most likely grade for this work. For many pieces of coursework the marking instructions do change significantly from year to year; however, when they do change, you should look for commonality with previous years to make a judgement.

Coursework that is incomplete may provide a picture of a candidate's strengths, although you should take care when basing an estimate on an incomplete piece of work.

- ◆ **Performance evidence:** The best evidence to support performance activities is a live recording — either video or audio, as appropriate. This is preferable to photographic or written records, as it will allow you to analyse a candidate's performance fully and effectively. Regular recording of candidate performances will ensure you have sufficient high-quality evidence to support estimates.

## Judging evidence and estimating the grade and band

To make accurate estimates, you must have a clear understanding of:

- ◆ the range of skills, knowledge and understanding covered by the course
- ◆ the assessment requirements and the structure of the course
- ◆ the components that contribute to the course award, including weightings where appropriate
- ◆ the grade descriptions for the course
- ◆ the level of demand of the course assessment

You can find information on these aspects for each course from the course specification, specimen question papers, past papers, and coursework assessment tasks. The course specifications for National Courses give detailed information on the purpose of each course component. This includes the mandatory skills, knowledge and understanding that each component assesses, and the structure and broad mark allocations for each component.

## Professional judgement

Teachers and lecturers know their candidates well — their achievements, their strengths and areas for development. When making an estimate, you will have a good idea of how your candidates are likely to perform in the final course assessment. This will come from a detailed knowledge and tracked progress of a candidate's work, and may also come from experience of previous cohorts.

You need to take a holistic approach when determining an estimated grade. It is a candidate's whole attainment across all components that should be the focus. One aspect of a candidate's attainment should not necessarily dominate your thinking (even if this is where you feel you have the strongest or the most evidence). You should look at a candidate's strengths and weaknesses in the key aspects of the entire course assessment.

Questions and doubts will inevitably follow. For example, 'Does evidence have to be generated from a tightly monitored assessment event, such as a prelim, integrated assessment or an end of topic test?' Of course, these sources will provide strong pieces of evidence, but you will likely have to look beyond these to other occasions where candidates have demonstrated their skills, knowledge and understanding. For instance, you might have entered marks in a record book or spreadsheet, or have entered comments in a candidate's profile judgements accompanied by video evidence of a performance. These might help to build up a wider picture of a candidate's demonstrated achievement, and further confirm estimate decisions.

You should exercise caution where candidates have completed work outside of a controlled school/college environment. In many cases, it is likely to reflect the circumstances and context in which the work was done.

Many qualifications have scaling applied to the components of the course and you may find it useful to use the [scaling calculator](#) as an aid to calculating the total mark for National 5, Higher or Advanced Higher courses that have scaled components.

All these factors will be significant. You will have to draw on all your knowledge from teaching, learning and assessment activities from this session and come to holistic decisions.

## Relative and absolute attainment

Research is clear that teachers are much better at determining relative attainment (which candidate has stronger or weaker attainment) than absolute attainment (which grade a candidate is likely to achieve). When determining estimates it is important to be confident about both relative and absolute attainment. Relative attainment is based on the evidence you have of candidate performance on the tasks you have provided during the course. Absolute attainment is more difficult, but experience of previous cohorts can be very helpful.

Consider candidates whose performance has been consistent with your estimate and those whose performance has not. What qualities were common to the work of candidates who achieved the different grades? Some departments may use common tasks across a course and keep a small bank of exemplar responses that teachers have agreed on as typifying

performance at particular grades. In addition, SQA’s Understanding Materials often include grade-specific exemplars that may be helpful.

## Arriving at the final band estimate

A candidate’s final estimate must be realistic and based on the evidence you possess of demonstrated attainment.

The evidence you consider should have a high predictive value; this means that it should be measured against the requirements of the course assessment, and should replicate it, as far as possible. Your decisions should be made in relation to the consistency of a candidate’s performance across responses, performances and practical outcomes, all measured against key aspects of the course assessment.

Having arrived at the final band and grade, look again at the evidence you have. Remember, candidate evidence should be valued for its own worth as an indicator of performance in course assessment, and you should make a conscious effort to consider and avoid the negative impact of potential implicit bias.

## National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher bands

You are strongly advised to focus on making holistic professional judgements when determining the band for each candidate and to not over-focus on the notional percentage range.

Band	Estimated performance	Notional % range
1	Grade A (upper)	85 – 100
2	Grade A (lower)	70 – 84
3	Grade B (upper)	65 – 69
4	Grade B (lower)	60 – 64
5	Grade C (upper)	55 – 59
6	Grade C (lower)	50 – 54
7	Grade D	40 – 49
8	No Award	30 – 39
9	No Award	0 – 29

## Moderating estimates

Estimates are based on demonstrated applications of the skills, knowledge and understanding of the course. They are informed by assessment judgements made by teachers and lecturers throughout the delivery of the course. These judgements must be moderated to ensure that estimates are realistic. The process of moderating estimates begins with the moderation of assessment judgements.

Moderation develops a shared understanding of standards and expectations. It is a collaborative activity, best done within a department or faculty where teachers and lecturers are familiar with course specifications and approaches to assessment. Centres and curriculum areas will have moderation and quality assurance policies that will provide suitable and workable frameworks for this activity.

Moderation 'partners,' where teachers or lecturers work in pairs or groups to confirm each other's assessment decisions and to moderate evidence over a period of time, can be an effective way to reinforce assessment standards. Comparing evidence with the assessment criteria stated in the relevant Course Specifications and exemplified by SQA Understanding Standards materials will help you to estimate in line with national standards.

Moderation across departments, learning areas and faculties will ensure fairness for all candidates and ensure that robust standards are maintained. It is good practice to extend moderation activity beyond the centre to a local or regional level, where possible. It is important to also consider your estimates alongside data from previous cohorts — both their estimates and their awarded grades. If there are discrepancies, consider what may have caused this, and whether you should adjust any estimates accordingly. Grades awarded in 2020 should not be included in these comparisons as they were not generated by the usual awarding process.

With sound moderation of assessment judgements in place, the task of producing candidate estimates can be approached with confidence.

Further information on moderation and some examples are provided on the SQA Academy course *Quality Assurance of Estimates for National Courses*.

## Further information and support

Further information is available in the following sources to support estimation:

- ◆ *Quality Assurance of Estimates for National Courses*  
<https://www.sqaacademy.org.uk/estimate>
- ◆ *Guide to Assessment:* [https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files\\_ccc/Guide\\_To\\_Assessment.pdf](https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files_ccc/Guide_To_Assessment.pdf)
- ◆ *Assessment Arrangements Explained: Information for Centres:*  
[https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files\\_ccc/AssessmentArrangementsExplained.pdf](https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files_ccc/AssessmentArrangementsExplained.pdf)
- ◆ *Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service: Guide for Centres*  
[published on SQA Connect]

- ◆ *SQA Co-ordinator Guide*  
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