# 2020 Diet of Examinations at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher : Contingency Arrangements for COVID-19

## Introduction

As part of SQA's contingency arrangements for this year's diet of National Qualifications we have been working with Scottish Government and the inter-agency Qualifications Contingency Group, other examination regulators and UK Awarding Bodies.

COVID-19 is a public health emergency and SQA will act in full accordance with directives from the Scottish and UK governments in measures required to protect the health of citizens.

SQA recognises the position in relation to the measures required to protect public health is fast moving and requires continuous re-assessment by all government agencies.

SQA recognises the requirement to act as appropriate in alignment with other UK awarding bodies and under the direction of the Depute First Minister for Scotland.

The 2020 diet of examinations has effectively commenced with a range of Visiting Assessment underway and the submission for external marking of coursework of National 5 subjects. The majority of coursework for Higher and Advanced Higher is due to be submitted by 23 April with some exceptions in May. The exam timetable is due to commence on 27 April.

Taking account of current government advice SQA presently remains committed to operating to the scheduled examination timetable or as close thereof.

**Should the public health measures become more stringent and restrict the movement of people, SQA will revisit any revised plans for coursework uplift and submission of data.**

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# SQA's COVID-19 Response Objectives

SQA's response to this public health emergency will be governed by the following objectives

1 Seek to minimise uncertainty for stakeholders and the wider public and maintain confidence in the examination system as a whole

2 Ensure that the 2020 cohort of candidates receive fair results in recognition of their learning. On this basis decisions can be properly made on progression to higher education and the workplace.

3 The requirement to protect year on year standards

4 Seek to mitigate as far as possible the potential impact on those candidates who fall ill as a result of COVID-19 infection

5 To avoid as far as possible consequential impacts on the administration of the following year's diet of examinations

6 To administer the 2020 diet examinations in a manner which limits as far as possible contagion of the COVID-19 virus

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## Scenarios

SQA's contingency arrangements are now aligned to working in the context of 3 scenarios.

These are :

| **Scenario 1**<br><br>**Full diet in accordance with timetable, with a range of planned contingencies that we may invoke at any point during the procedural programme** | |
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| **Brief description** | We commit to running the diet as timetabled and to managing disruption through existing BAU processes with planned contingency arrangements potentially invoked for a range of eventualities.<br>Examples of planned contingencies include:<br>• Invigilation cover<br>• Marking and resulting of N5 delayed<br>• Resulting of N4 and below delayed<br>• Greater volume of use of alternative evidence based on Exceptional Circumstances model<br>• Resulting rather than paper certification of H and AH on 4 August (or later in line with any postponement agreed with UCAS)<br>• Potentially later feeds to UCAS (to be agreed nationally)<br>It is not unusual for unexpected issues to be experienced during any diet. There is therefore experience of responding to a range of circumstances. We are potentially at advantage this year as we have undertaken contingency planning for potential issues arising from COVID-19 and have explored our response to a number of alternative sources of disruption. This experience will be supported by further detailed work now on a range of possible COVID-19-related scenarios and our response. |
| **Main benefits** | Clarity for staff, centres, learners and wider stakeholders<br>Lack of disruption to planning process<br>Existing processes for managing limited disruption are tried and tested<br>Precedent – we adopted this approach successfully in 2009 in response to swine flu where the impact was anticipated as being much greater than it was in the event |
| **Main limitations** | Potentially no paper certification on 4 August if required to relieve pressure on procedural programme<br>Potentially H and AH only to be resulted on or around 4 August<br>Post-exam procedures prioritised with focus first on H and AH |
| **Key considerations for delivery – SQA** | Making sure BAU contingencies are robust and appropriate<br>Ensuring COVID-19 specific contingency planning is as robust as possible<br>Make clear to centres and other stakeholders our dependence on all parts of the system performing their role fully effectively, including where necessary in contingency situations.<br>Priority given to H and AH for processing |

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| **Key considerations for delivery – centres** | Making sure BAU contingencies are robust and appropriate<br>Preparedness to act in response to contingencies that emerge during the course of the diet<br>Encourage candidates to sit as many exams as possible |
| **Key considerations for delivery – wider stakeholders** | Potential reputational risk to other stakeholders e.g. SG if approach is not successful<br>Ensuring COVID-19 specific contingency planning is as robust as possible<br>Support for potential system-wide responses e.g. conscription of markers |

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| **Scenario 2**<br><br>**Reschedule entire timetable** | |
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| **Brief description** | Either the all or part of the diet is rescheduled to a later date in the expectation that the impact of COVID-19 will have reduced by that point |
| **Main benefits** | Reduces demand on system at time of peak COVID-19 impact |
| **Main limitations** | Timing of peak impact and degree of impact remains impossible to predict with any accuracy. It is therefore possible that any move may have the effect of coinciding with rather than avoiding the peak impact of COVID-19<br>Any move of large parts of the procedural programme has very significant implications for all parts of the system including SQA, centres, learners, appointees and wider stakeholders e.g. UCAS<br>To justify this disruption we would need to be certain that it is justified: the point in limitations above indicates that there is no way we can guarantee this<br>Numbers involved in procedural programme:<br>Events 1044<br>Venues 29<br>Appointees 6953<br>Travel bookings 2897<br>Accommodation bookings 5286 |
| **Key considerations for delivery - SQA** | Volume of work and risk in unpicking above arrangements and reinstating at a later date<br>Resource contention with preparations for 2021 diet and wider impact on development activity more generally |
| **Key considerations for delivery - centres** | As any wholesale move could only be to after the summer holidays, a large-scale autumn diet would have a very significantly disruptive effect on AY2020/21 |
| **Key considerations for delivery – wider stakeholders** | Significant impact on stakeholders who use our qualifications as entry requirements – would need to find alternatives |

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**Scenario 3 - Minimum Viable Product**

| **Enhanced Estimate-based Decision-making** | |
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| **Brief description** | SQA will develop a statistical model built from the following variables: centre Estimates, prior attainment and marks from Coursework components. An agreed target grade distribution would be used, and only grades would be awarded. |
| **Main benefits** | This would allow grades to be allocated in the absence of a full Diet of examinations. The model could also be used without Coursework marks where Coursework was not able to be marked. Using an agreed target distribution would allow the grade distribution to more closely resemble previous years. |
| **Main limitations** | This is a predictive model based on limited or no actual assessment evidence. Prior attainment is not available across all subjects and not available at National 5. |
| **Key considerations for delivery – SQA** | Develop and quality assurance the model; review previous years centre Estimates to identify any possible change to practice in current year. Need for clear communications. |
| **Key considerations for delivery – centres** | Centres would be required to follow existing approaches to generate Estimates, i.e. as used in previous years. Estimates should be evidence-based, and centres should retain evidence for possible SQA audit activity post-Diet. |
| **Key considerations for delivery – wider stakeholders** | Need to understand why the model is being used and wider issues around its validity. Need for stakeholders to support approach. |

We are currently scoping out the feasibility of a Minimum Viable Product (MPV) Model on which the Chief Examiner would be prepared to certificate in the absence of a 2020 exam diet. This is an *in extremis* option, that we do not want to activate, but it would rely on coursework, grade estimates and prior attainment data, so information received over the next few weeks is critical to any MVP model of certification. The model can be developed and tested in the coming weeks but cannot be operationalised until the variables are available. Over this period there is the risk that our already limited statistical resource is depleted through illness. Initial discussions with Scottish Government analytical colleagues is planned around the development of the model and supporting SQA with statistical analytical resource if required.

Following the issue of results based on this model SQA would implement an Appeals Process based on alternative evidence. This service would only be invoked via the centre on behalf of candidates using validation criteria set by SQA. Further thinking is required on the criteria to access the Appeals Process. Guidance and criteria on this service could include prioritisation to assist centres in making judgements on the urgency and validity of candidate grades to be re-considered.

The service would operate on the clear basis that the review could lead to grades remaining as first determined, going up or down. Invoking this new service will present a number of logistical challenges both to centres and to SQA.

SQA could seek to result on the MVP basis earlier than current published certification date (4 August) and is undertaking analysis to determine if a 7 July date is viable. Further discussions would

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be held with UCAS to determine an appropriate date for clearing results for admissions to Higher Education.

Within any of the three scenarios, we would consider priorities of our portfolio in the following order:

Priority 1 – Higher

Priority 2 - Advanced Higher

Priority 3 – National 5 English and Mathematics

Priority 4 - Remaining National 5

Priority 5 – National 4 and below (non external examination based)

In terms of resulting and notification of results, priority would be for candidates awaiting results for university clearance.

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# Assessment of SQA's System Capability - Summary

In determining the current capability to respond to the disruption arising from COVID-19, SQA is making its assessment using the following framework.

## Rating of Probability

| Rating | Probability | Criteria |
|---|---|---|
| 5 | Very High | Almost certainly will occur |
| 4 | High | More than likely will occur |
| 3 | Medium | Fairly likely to occur |
| 2 | Low | Unlikely to occur |
| 1 | Very Low | Rare |

## Rating of Contingency

| Rating | Contingency Assessment | Criteria |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Full | The contingency plan contains current capability that will address all identified issues |
| 2 | Adequate | The plan contains current capability that will address almost all issues but a number of required adjustments may be required within the scope of the overall plan |
| 3 | Partial | The plan contains current capability that will address almost all issues but a number of adjustments may be required outside of the scope of the overall plan |
| 4 | Weak | The current capability is unable to address many issues identified in the plan |
| 5 | Unsustainable | Many issues identified in the plan will only be resolved through new approaches and policy changes |

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SQA has considered the probability of disruption and our capability to respond to that disruption across a number of key areas as follow:

| Area | Probability | | Current Capability Assessment | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Exams and School Closures | Very High | 5 | Weak | 4 |
| Marking and Associated QA | High | 4 | Weak | 4 |
| Candidate Absence and EC Service | Very High | 5 | Unsustainable | 5 |
| System Processing and Results | High | 4 | Weak | 4 |
| Legal, Contractual and Management | Medium | 3 | Partial | 3 |
| Use of Predictive Statistical Data | High | 4 | Partial | 3 |

## Overall Assessment

| Area | Probability | | Contingency Assessment | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Disruption to Delivery | Very High | 5 | Weak | 4 |

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# Assessment of SQA's System Capability - Detailed

| Area | Probability | | Current Capability Assessment | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Exams and School Closures | Very High | 5 | Weak | 4 |

The responsibility for determining whether it is safe and appropriate for a centre to be open normally lies with the Head Teacher of the centre. However with the introduction of the emergency legislation this may transfer to the Depute First Minister.

COVID-19 nationally imposed measures are very likely to lead to widespread school closures for a considerable period. There remains the possibility that centres could remain open as assessment centres to allow examinations to take place in as close to the published timetable as possible but we now consider that the possibility of this has diminished considerably.

In the, now unlikely, event that centres do remain open as examination centres during the published timetable SQA is proceeding with plans to introduce contingency days at the end of the timetable and to have 2nd papers available in key subjects on these days.

Under certain sets of circumstances we would seek the support of Education Authorities and Centres to invoke their contingency plans to allow candidates to sit their examinations at alternative centres the widespread impact of COVID-19 will mean this option is no longer feasible.

Dependent upon the precise nature of school closures there is a high probability that it will impact on SQA's ability to collect a complete set of information and materials in support of the MVP contingency. SQA must now expedite arrangements for the collection of the supporting information underpinning MVP.

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| Area | Probability | | Current Capability Assessment | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Marking and Associated QA | High | 4 | Weak | 4 |

If substantial numbers of candidates were able to sit their examinations in accordance with the published or adjusted timetable COVID-19 could significantly affect the availability of the currently contracted markers.

In certain subjects any reduction to the marking pool would have serious consequences as SQA presently operates with limited reserves.

Additionally the arrangements for the setting of marking standards, conveying these to markers and the monitoring of these standards are presently underpinned by a programme of Quality Assurance related meetings, often involving travel and accommodation. SQA expects significant disruption to this planned arrangement.

SQA is working on a set of contingency arrangements which seek to ensure that the required collaborative approach to QA can continue remotely using digital solutions that allows SQA to make awards without compromise to marking standards. This scale of such a shift to the operating model is unprecedented and untested.

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| Area | Probability | | Current Capability Assessment | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Candidate Absence and Exceptional Circumstance Service | Very High | 5 | Unsustainable | 5 |

If examinations proceed according to, or as close to as possible, the published timetable on the advice of the Depute First Minister SQA expects the volume of requests for its Exceptional Circumstance service to be unprecedented.

The Exceptional Service currently requires submission by the centre of alternative evidence which in turn is reviewed by marking experts to determine a final award. Both the submission and review elements of this service on this project ted scale have never been tested.

SQA is currently examining the viability of statistical modelling to support this service but this requires further analysis.

The current Exceptional Circumstance service does include a process whereby SQA's determination of awards can be contested and SQA should review the legal basis in respect of this in the light of potential volumes using this service.

SQA is presently undertaking an impact analysis on the maximum capacity to undertake a service based on alternative evidence.

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| Area | Probability | | Current Capability Assessment | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| IT System Processing and Results | High | 4 | Weak | 4 |

SQA is currently making determinations on the prioritisation of results and is commencing impact analysis on the implications of the capability of key IT systems to successfully cope and manage with the adjustments to the core operating model.

Awards could be communicated in alternative formats, and at to be determined dates, affording additional time for any required processing adjustments.

While analysis and modelling can commence presently any required programming adjustments may come at the peak of COVID-19 infection and impact on key staff within the organisation itself.

The current operating model for processing of materials, data and providing a range of helplines is dependent upon the recruitment of agency staff and the peak of this activity is likely to coincide with the projected peak of COVID-19 infection.

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| Area | Probability | | Current Capability Assessment | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Legal, Contractual and Management | Medium | 3 | Partial | 3 |

SQA's operating model involves key partnerships with external suppliers across our delivery platforms. These will be contractual, service level based partnerships involving private sector companies operating on a commercial basis. Widespread disruption to the nature and timing of the services provided will require a period of re-negotiation which will commence with consideration of the viability of the options on changes to SQA's operating model for the 2020 examination.

Key suppliers include those for script scanning, e-marking, script carriage, agency staff, providers of results by text and e-mail and certificate printing.

Beyond re-negotiation suppliers themselves are likely to be impacted by COVID-19 and while SQA has reached out for their Business Continuity Plans the evolving nature and magnitude of the COVID-19 emergency is likely to impact greatly on their current plans.

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| Area | Probability | | Current Capability Assessment | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Use of Predictive Statistical Data | High | 4 | Partial | 3 |

The technical awarding route will be informed by three components:

- **Coursework evidence** will be provided by schools and colleges and the marks awarded by SQA markers will inform the data set for the awarding process
- **Estimate data** will be available
- **Prior attainment data** will be available though it should be noted this does not exist for candidates at National 5 sitting exams for the first time

Assumptions:

- Candidates can complete the coursework by due dates
- There are no barriers preventing the completion of coursework evidence, for example resources or conditions of coursework assessment.
- Estimate data will be complete, has been arrived at in the normal way and available by the due date
- Where coursework and estimate is outstanding, schools and colleges will have access to buildings to source and present evidence and data as required.
- Courier supplier and SQA are able to maintain levels of service required to uplift and handle coursework evidence.

Incomplete/missing data – examples include candidates have been unable to complete coursework evidence and schools unable to submit this evidence to SQA for marking, estimate data not provided by centres.

In the event that SQA invokes a technical statistical approach to awarding grades, the marking of coursework evidence and estimate data are considered essential components of the data set upon which decisions will be made.

It should be noted that not all courses have coursework, for example Higher Mathematics, but at it stands nor do all courses have exams, for example Adv Higher Art & Design.

It should be highlighted that although there is a requirement of the Exceptional Circumstances pre-certification service to submit estimates, not all centres submit such data for their candidates. This should be strongly encouraged.

Whilst a significant amount of material for Nat 5 will be uplifted on 18 March, a number of schools have closed and asked for extensions to the uplift dates.

All other coursework and a volume of estimate data is outstanding. Uplifts or materials sent by centres will depend on postal services operating as normal.

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**CONCLUSION**

The current COVID-19 crisis has presented a number of challenges of an unprecedented nature to SQA.

Once a clear decision has been taken on the preferred scenario and contingency, SQA can focus efforts on operationalising the proposed contingencies in support of that option. A number of contingencies require us to move quickly and take decisive action to maximise time to collect coursework evidence and data to mitigate risk.

For all options, there is a range of dependencies, particularly the capability and capacity of centres to provide coursework evidence, data and appointees to support any option within current and/or revised timelines. There also dependencies on suppliers to support revised arrangements.

It should noted that any changes of this nature and scale carry significant operational risk – some known but also unknown – and time will be required to consider unintended consequences for SQA and the wider system.

The crisis has challenged our current thinking about our operating model and there may be opportunities to build in greater resilience and flexibility to delivery going forward.

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