

# Supporting the delivery, assessment and verification of SQA awards for session 2020–21: updated guidance, February 2021

## Context

At the start of session 2020–21, SQA acknowledged the collaboration and support of centres in working in partnership to develop alternative assessment arrangements for learners during the unprecedented 2019–20 session. A professionally-informed and evidence-based holistic approach (based on course aims) was employed, and this helped ensure that learners completing in the 2019–20 session were recognised for their hard work and learning, and that appropriate academic standards were maintained throughout. The approach, which was supported by robust quality assurance, took account of the timing in the academic session. At the point at which lockdown occurred, a significant proportion of the learning, teaching and assessment had already been undertaken.

SQA and key stakeholders have worked together to develop a number of changes to assessment, and quality assurance for SQA self-regulated qualifications, to support learners during the current session. The model agreed at the start of session 2020–21 reverted to assessment and verification on the traditional unit basis, with SQA supporting 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. SQA also removed the requirement for completion of Higher National Graded Unit examinations and projects (with exceptions), thus affording staff and learners valuable additional time for learning, teaching and wider academic support.

An increasingly challenging learning environment and social landscape have now resulted in the development of further alternative approaches. These arrangements have been agreed in respect of learners who are scheduled to complete SQA qualifications this academic year, 2020–21. The arrangements cover:

- ◆ Skills for Work
- ◆ Awards
- ◆ National Progression Awards
- ◆ National Certificates
- ◆ Higher National Certificates/Diplomas (including Graded Units)
- ◆ Advanced Certificates/Diplomas
- ◆ Professional Development Awards

They also apply to centre-devised awards or clusters of freestanding National Units. The arrangements do **not** apply to regulated units and group awards, such as Scottish Vocational Qualifications, VQ units etc.

SQA Qualifications staff, working with centre personnel through QSTs, are defining key critical competence requirements in support of course aims for those group awards that are identified as carrying the most significant risk or challenge. This guidance provides support

to assessors in implementing these approaches using a Decision Tree and, where necessary, using professional judgement, to assess candidate evidence relative to course aims and critical competence requirements.

## The decision-making process

**This decision-making process applies to all of the following: group awards, Graded Units and centre-devised awards or clusters of freestanding National Units.**

### Group awards

The decision-making process outlined below is summarised in a Decision Tree (see Appendix 1). This Decision Tree is similar **but not the same** as the model adopted by centres during academic session 2019–20.

Where learners are able to produce sufficient evidence using the traditional unit-by-unit assessment model, assessment should continue as normal and as per unit specifications. Internal verification and processing of results should continue as normal.

Where it is not considered possible to progress with assessment using the traditional unit-by-unit approach in line with unit specification requirements, the course team should consider opportunities to use permitted adaptations in line with SQA's guidance published in August 2020 (combining assessment, adaptations to conditions of assessment — [Supporting the delivery, assessment and verification of HN and vocational qualifications in 2020–21](#)) and candidates should generate assessment evidence for all outcomes for all units with assessment judgements determined on this basis. You can view the recording of a webinar delivered by senior staff at SQA in support of this guidance [on YouTube](#). Assessment is still carried out on a unit-by-unit basis and internal verification and processing of results should continue as normal.

### Subject guidance

SQA published subject guidance for a selection of these awards in September 2020. Some of this guidance is being revised in light of continued restrictions and feedback from centres, including feedback from the consultation with centres in February 2021. It will be important that centres review and apply the subject guidance which will allow many candidates to generate sufficient evidence to meet assessment requirements. Some of the subject guidance will also advise where it will be inappropriate to apply the alternative holistic approach to assessment (eg standard setting agencies/professional registration requirements)

Where conditions mean that a unit-by-unit assessment approach, even with permitted adaptations, cannot progress, the course team must consider the following issues:

### **If the qualification is subject to regulation and/or professional body requirements**

subject guidance will specify where it is not possible to change conditions of assessment.

Where this is the case, it will be necessary to postpone assessment until conditions allow for this to take place.

### **If the qualification is not subject to regulation/professional body requirements**

- ◆ Where this is the case, the course team should use the alternative assessment template for the specific group award where provided by SQA. The template identifies critical competence requirements relative to agreed Course Aims. Please note that, although it may be necessary to implement this approach, centres should continue to gather unit evidence where this is possible and within the public health advice to ensure as much group award coverage as possible. Only where there is no specific SQA guidance for the award, centres will be able to identify critical competence for the award following the SQA model.
- ◆ Assessors will engage in professional discussion with their course teams to review, for each learner, evidence of critical competence for the group award. Assessors will collectively determine the success of individual learners. Individual centres will oversee robust arrangements for confirming the overall learner result relative to the assessment evidence. It is essential that records are kept documenting this process.

### **Example scenarios**

These scenarios are provided to support centres and course teams in relation to learners who are working towards specific group awards while studying additional units as part of their course:

- ◆ **Scenario 1:** Learner is entered for HNC group award (12 credits). Unit-by-unit evidence is not available, so the assessment judgement is made based on evidence of meeting critical competence requirements. If the learner is assessed as a pass, they should be awarded the HNC and 12 planned credits at SCQF level 7. Any additional units should be considered as a locally-devised cluster of units and addressed in line with the specific guidance below. This would apply equally to a National Certificate group award with additional units included in the wider course framework.
- ◆ **Scenario 2:** Learner is entered for HND group award and, in year 1, is studying units totalling 15 credits. Unit-by-unit evidence is not available, so the assessment judgement is made based on evidence of meeting critical competence requirements for HNC. If the learner is assessed as a pass they should be awarded the 12 planned credits at SCQF level 7 associated with HNC. As above, any additional units should be considered as a locally-devised cluster of units and addressed in line with the specific guidance below. It is possible that, if there is insufficient evidence, the learner may progress to year 2 requiring up to 18 credits to meet HND requirements.
- ◆ **Scenario 3:** Learner is on a locally-devised college course which comprises two National Progression Awards (NPA) and additional SQA units. Each NPA should be considered in line with the Decision Tree and any critical competence requirements. The additional units would be considered as a locally-devised cluster and addressed in line with the guidance below.

## Graded Units

The guidance above applies equally to Graded Units. SQA's guidance in relation to Graded Units for session 2020–21 remains valid. In reviewing approaches to assessment this year, SQA has adjusted the assessment process for identified Graded Units in HNC and HND group awards. Guidance on gathering key evidence to support decisions around grading for Graded Units in session 2020–21 can be found here: [Guidance on gathering key evidence for Higher National Graded Units in session 2020–21](#).

Where the centre or course team has chosen to (or is required to) assess candidates using normal approaches (Graded Unit projects or exams) this should proceed as planned.

Where the course team has elected, in line with SQA communication, not to progress with a traditional assessment approach to Graded Unit this session, but to concentrate on learning, teaching and assessment in the component and mandatory units of the award, candidates should be assessed using the SQA guidance for Graded Units above.

In the event that there is reliance on evidence of critical competence for some or all of the content that is identified as contributing to the Graded Unit alternative grading process, the course team should adopt a broader holistic approach to grading. This should be based on the widest possible range of contributing evidence relative to the aims published in the Graded Unit specification. The grading process and grades awarded at this Decision Tree level must be overseen and quality assured by the internal quality assurance (IQA) panel.

Where only limited evidence meeting course aims and any relevant critical competence is available, it would be acceptable to award a Grade C.

It is important that learners are not disadvantaged on the grounds that a centre/course team has decided not to progress the established assessment approach for Graded Unit in 2020–21.

## Centre-devised awards or clusters of freestanding National Units

The Decision Tree and guidance also apply to centre-devised awards or clusters of freestanding National Units, including any cluster in addition to a group award — see scenarios outlined above.

Where learners are able to produce sufficient evidence using the traditional unit-by-unit assessment model, assessment should continue as normal and as per unit specifications. Internal verification and processing of results should continue as normal.

Where it is not considered possible to progress with assessment using the traditional unit-by-unit approach in line with unit specification requirements, the course team should consider opportunities to use permitted adaptations across the range of units, and candidates should generate assessment evidence for all outcomes for all units with assessment judgements determined on this basis. Internal verification and processing of results should continue as normal.

Where conditions mean that a unit-by-unit assessment approach, even with permitted adaptations, cannot progress, the course team must consider whether there are any regulatory or professional body requirements which specify that it is not possible to change conditions of assessment. Where this is the case, it will be necessary to postpone assessment until conditions allow for this to take place.

If there are no regulatory or professional body requirements:

- ◆ The course team should develop an alternative assessment template which confirms the aims of the course and identifies critical competence requirements in support of these. The development of such templates for locally-devised awards or clusters of units must be overseen and endorsed by the IQA panel, and should be aligned with any associated group award for which a template has been published. Again, please note that although it may be necessary to implement the critical competence approach, centres should continue to gather unit evidence where this is possible, and following the public health advice, to ensure as much coverage of the course as possible.
- ◆ Assessors will engage in professional discussion with their course teams to review, for each learner, evidence of critical competence for the course/units. Assessors will collectively determine the success of individual learners. Individual centres will oversee robust arrangements for confirming the overall learner result relative to the assessment evidence. It is essential that records are kept documenting this process.

## Internal quality assurance (IQA)

For unit-by-unit approaches (evidence requirements as per unit specifications or with permitted adaptations), normal internal verification procedures apply in centres.

Where assessment approaches are taken relative to identified critical competence requirements, each centre should introduce an internal quality assurance (IQA) panel to support the change from assessment decisions being made by individual assessors to a more collegiate course team approach to decision making.

The IQA panel will:

- ◆ Support, advise, moderate and confirm the work of course teams in line with SQA advice, including the development of templates in relation to locally-devised clusters.
- ◆ Ensure standardisation of course teams within the centre in the interpretation and use of the SQA Decision Tree and supporting guidance to ensure the objectivity, fairness and accuracy of assessment judgements at course level.

The size and organisation of the centre, and the availability of individual staff, will impact on the size of the IQA panel, but the team should include:

- ◆ at least two people
- ◆ experience of delivering the range of qualifications being considered

- ◆ at least one person with experience of quality assuring assessment decisions
- ◆ no-one who is a member of a course team for the course(s) that the panel is overseeing

If the centre cannot provide members of staff to meet these requirements, they must notify SQA before implementing this guidance.

The responsibilities of the IQA panel are:

- ◆ To advise course teams on the implementation of SQA guidance on assessment.
- ◆ To monitor the work of course teams to ensure implementation of SQA guidance on assessment.
- ◆ To ensure that SQA guidance on assessment has been implemented before results are submitted to SQA.

IQA panel arrangements should be appropriate to the context and scale of the centre's assessment activity and should operate with a risk-based focus. The centre should choose a model for the allocation and deployment of an IQA panel that works in its situation and meets SQA's requirements. Whatever model is adopted, it must:

- ◆ be documented
- ◆ be risk-based and proportionate
- ◆ promote a standardised and consistent approach across all course teams
- ◆ confirm validity and reliability in assessment
- ◆ generate and retain evidence of internal quality assurance activities

Records of course team judgements and IQA panel rationale, discussions and decisions should be retained in line with SQA requirements.

## Resulting and certification

Where the assessment approach based on identified critical competence requirements is implemented and decisions have been finalised and endorsed by the IQA panel, candidate results will be submitted to SQA through normal resulting channels. Certification will be undertaken by SQA in line with normal arrangements.

It is recognised that some assessment may have to be postponed. Where, as a result of this, a learner has not achieved the award, details of the postponed assessment should be clearly documented. The candidate entry should be left open and the learner given the opportunity to engage in further learning, teaching and assessment when conditions allow. Subsequent assessment judgements would be made in line with this guidance.

## External verification

SQA will carry out external quality assurance activity in support of local QA processes and this will include, in all centres, external verification of a sample of candidate evidence. SQA will liaise with SQA co-ordinators in centres by the end of March 2021 to determine local

approaches in line with the Decision Tree and determine the subject areas and group awards to be sampled, and to confirm arrangements for the quality assurance activity.

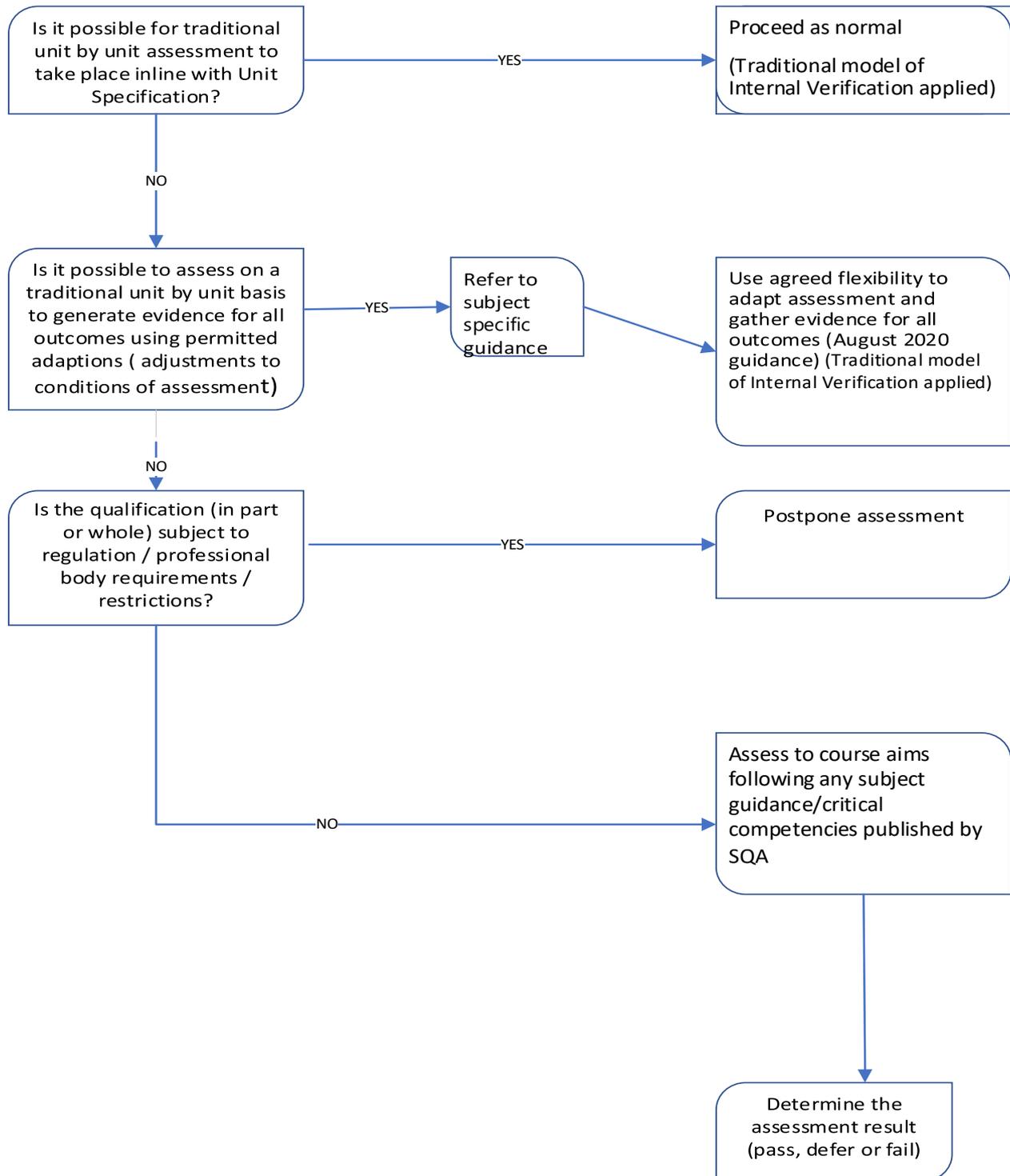
Evidence of all assessment outcomes should be retained until 31 December 2021. SQA will retain the right to undertake further sampling retrospectively using a risk-based approach. The retention date would be extended if necessary.

## **Academic appeals**

The centre's established academic appeals process should be followed for any learner who feels that the assessment outcome does not accurately reflect their achievement.

# Appendix 1: The decision-making process

## HNVQ ASSESSMENT DECISION TREE (COVID 19 SESSION 2020-21)



## Appendix 2: Frequently Asked Questions

### **Q: Is this the same decision tree we used in session 2019–20?**

**A:** No, the model is similar but there are some important differences. A key difference is that all assessment decisions must be based on demonstrated evidence of attainment. SQA is working with centres to identify the awards that are causing the most significant challenge, and will publish critical competence requirements to mitigate those conditions and restrictions, wherever possible, reducing the burden of assessment whilst still retaining national standards.

The 2019–20 decision tree model was appropriate as lockdown occurred in March 2020 when a significant proportion of learning, teaching and assessment had already been undertaken. It is no longer appropriate to use the 2019–20 decision tree model or associated guidance or documentation.

### **Q: How do we use the 2021 Decision Tree?**

**A:** As before, it is important still to try and follow the process at the top of the Decision Tree wherever possible. Where it is necessary to move to the lowest branch, it is vital that you follow the detailed guidance and/or seek support through IQA panel arrangements to ensure that you are complying with the agreed process.

The introduction of critical competence requirements strengthens the course aims and provides a defined national standard with which we must all comply. This model gives greater clarity to staff and learners around the evidence required to demonstrate attainment.

### **Q: What do we mean by critical competence?**

**A:** Critical competences are abilities that a learner must show evidence of in order for the minimum requirements for the group award to be met. These will enhance the group award aims set out in the group award specification.

### **Q: How can we ensure standardisation in assessment judgements across the sector?**

**A:** The combination of course aims and critical competence requirements for group awards will support course teams in centres in using the Decision Tree and in applying professional judgement to make assessment decisions in line with a national standard.

SQA has acknowledged that centres are experienced, trusted and trustworthy institutions that are able to utilise and apply professional judgement and evidence to deliver fair and reasonable outcomes for our students. Course teams will work collaboratively to ensure consistency in judgements. At local level, IQA panels will ensure consistency between course teams and, at a national level, SQA will operate a risk-based model of external verification to ensure standardisation across the sector.

### **Q: SQA will be producing guidance on critical competence requirements for a number of group awards. If there is no specific guidance from SQA for my award, can I identify critical competence requirements myself?**

**A:** Not all group award will require additional flexibility for assessment. You will have been given the opportunity to notify SQA through your quality team of any award that presents

significant challenge, identifying the specific assessment challenges, and identifying potential solutions.

SQA will have to prioritise and may not provide templates defining critical competences for all awards. If there is no SQA template for your award in place or planned, you should complete the proforma (Appendix C).

**Q: Many of the courses we deliver do not contain group awards but are clusters of SQA units. We are unable to assess for all outcomes for all units due to restrictions. Can we use this guidance and the Decision Tree?**

**A:** Yes. Local IQA panels will oversee arrangements for assessment on courses such as this. Robust course aims and key critical competence requirements will need to be agreed and documented in line with the SQA template and aligned with any associated group award for which a template has been published.

**Q: What about SVQs? Can we apply the same guidance?**

**A:** No. SVQs are regulated qualifications. As with all regulated qualifications, they are not within the scope of this guidance. The qualifications covered by this guidance (HNC/D, PDA, NC, NPA, ACD and Skills for Work) are self-regulated by SQA (awarding body).

**Q: How does this apply to Graded Units? The course team has already taken the decision not to proceed with the Graded Unit project/exam following the earlier guidance.**

**A:** Guidance on use of the Decision Tree and approaches for the assessment of Graded Units is covered in the main guidance document. The Graded Unit may be assessed as normal, or by using SQA's guidance on gathering key evidence to support decisions around grading for the Graded Unit in session 2020–21 which can be found here: [Guidance on gathering key evidence for Higher National Graded Units in session 2020–21](#).

Where there is reliance on evidence of critical competence for some or all of the content identified as contributing to the Graded Unit alternative grading process, the course team should adopt a broader holistic approach to grading based on the widest possible range of contributing evidence relative to the aims published in the Graded Unit specification. The grading process and grades awarded at this Decision Tree level must be overseen and quality assured by the IQA panel.

**Q: We deliver qualifications that are subject to regulation (or professional body requirements). What does this mean in practice for our students?**

**A:** SQA (awarding body) cannot offer flexibility in assessment which has not been agreed by the regulator. Where conditions mean that the required assessment cannot take place, that assessment activity would have to be postponed until conditions allow it to proceed. This may be within the current session if and when restrictions are eased, or it may be deferred to next session.

**Q: How do I make a judgement on a unit/units that may not be covered by the critical competence requirements for the group award? The group award is the main aim of the course.**

**A:** Any units on a course which are in addition to those contained in the group award must be considered as a separate, locally-devised, cluster of units. Assessment should follow the appropriate section of the guidance, along with the Decision Tree.

For any locally-devised cluster, it is important that an alternative assessment template is completed, confirming the aims of the cluster of units and identifying critical competence requirements in support of these.

**Q: How do we quality assure?**

**A:** As shown in the guidance, centres will use traditional models of quality assurance and internal verification where assessment evidence is gathered and assessed on the traditional unit-by-unit basis, including where adaptations to conditions of assessment are applied.

In addition, internal quality assurance (IQA) panels will operate within each centre to support, advise, moderate and confirm the work of course teams in line with SQA guidance. This will support the change, where needed, on the lower branch of the Decision Tree, from assessment decisions being made by individual assessors to a more collegiate, course team approach to decision making.

**Q: Can we continue to share resources and approaches across the sector?**

**A:** SQA will provide, and publish on its website, templates that will specify the critical competence requirements for a range of group awards, identified by centres as those causing the most significant challenge in terms of assessment volume and requirements. SQA will, in addition, support with guidance and resources wherever possible.

Centres are encouraged to use existing networks for sharing resources where possible and practicable. However, approaches for supporting students in generating assessment evidence depend on a wide range of local factors, including different regional restrictions, the stage to which assessment has already been achieved, access to equipment and resources, and remote communication networks. Therefore, assessment approaches and conditions, in line with the guidance, will be based on professional judgement at local level.

**Q: Does there need to be evidence for all outcomes?**

**A:** Wherever possible, learners should produce assessment evidence for all outcomes for all units — either as specified in the unit specification or with allowed adaption to conditions of assessment. Where the course team judges that this is not possible, due to restrictions, evidence-based assessment judgements may be made using the lower branch of the Decision Tree and in line with specified key competence requirements.

**Q: Will it be possible to infer that critical competence requirements have been met?**

**A:** If there is insufficient assessment evidence available to satisfy the key competence requirements, it will not be possible for the learner to pass and be certificated. If possible, assessment should be postponed until conditions allow for this to proceed. If this is not

possible or practical then, unfortunately, the student will fail to achieve the qualification. They may achieve individual units where sufficient evidence exists.

**Q: Can we use open-book assessment in lieu of closed-book?**

**A:** Yes, the [guidance](#) published in August 2020 gave centres flexibility to adapt condition of assessment where stated conditions were proving impractical. The new guidance specifically addresses group awards where existing adaption still offers insufficient flexibility.

In many centres, staff are already using adapted conditions of assessment and have developed new instruments of assessment to support this. Whilst flexibility around conditions of assessment allows open-book activities to replace established closed-book practice, extreme care must be taken not to compromise existing secure assessment materials. You can find more information on ensuring the security of remote assessment at:

[Using Technology To Support Remote Assessment \(Dec2020\).pdf](#)

**Q: Will staff be able to devise and implement alternative assessment instruments without having these prior-verified?**

**A:** Prior verification is never mandatory but is a supportive service offered by SQA. Adaptions to conditions of assessment and the development of any additional instruments of assessment should be subject to normal internal verification arrangements. Prior verification services (at no cost to centres in session 2020–21) are available and can be used by any centre wishing to use them.

**Q: What about other awarding bodies? Can we apply the same guidance?**

**A:** No, each awarding body will establish its own arrangements, and separate guidance will be issued in respect of these.

**Q: Unfortunately, there are still some learners from session 2019–20 who had assessment postponed and it has not yet been possible to complete. What is the alternative assessment guidance that applies to these learners?**

**A:** The 2019–20 guidance would normally apply to these learners. The deferred assessment activity identified as part of these arrangements will have been documented, and still applies. Any proposal to apply the new guidance for these learners should be raised with the IQA panel at the earliest possible opportunity.

**Q: Does the guidance apply to all learners?**

**A:** So long as the guidance and approach apply to a course/group award, they apply to all learners who are enrolled on the course/award. It is acknowledged that one size does not necessarily fit all, and lecturers and course teams should use the Decision Tree to guide them through the assessment process and may consider an individual learner or number of learners on a different branch due to varying COVID-related circumstances.

**Q: How do Essential Skills units fit with this guidance?**

**A:** Lecturers and course teams should use the Decision Tree to inform the assessment decision-making process. On the upper levels of the Decision Tree, for all units, evidence

(including that generated under adapted conditions of assessment) should be assessed for all outcomes. On the lower branch of the Decision Tree, learner evidence is assessed relative to critical competence requirements.

Where the course team collectively judges that a learner meets these requirements, they should be awarded the planned units/credits that are part of the group award or the agreed cluster. This includes any planned Essential Skills units.

**Q: We have been approached by learners from a previous year wishing to re-sit the Graded Unit with the aim of upgrading their original result. How should we approach this?**

A: Any assessment judgement must be evidence-based in line with SQA's principles of assessment (valid, reliable, practicable, equitable and fair). If there is no reasonable opportunity for a learner to generate such evidence, in the current circumstances, it may not be possible for the centre to offer upgrading this session. The IQA panel can provide advice.