



Supporting the delivery, assessment and verification of vocational qualifications for session 2020–21

Note: This guidance does not apply to National Courses or Scottish Vocational Qualifications which are often included in apprenticeship programmes.

This guidance is directed at schools which have pupils working towards completing vocational qualifications this year. The increasingly challenging learning environment has resulted in the development of alternative approaches to the assessment of some of these qualifications. These arrangements have been agreed for learners who are scheduled to complete SQA vocational qualifications this academic year, 2020–21, and cover:

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

The decision-making process associated with the assessment of these awards is summarised in a Decision Tree (see [Appendix 1](#)), which should be approached from the top, downwards.

An increasing number of schools are delivering these awards independently and this guidance is highly relevant to those schools. Similar guidance has been sent to colleges and we encourage schools that are working in partnership to deliver vocational qualifications — for example, working in partnership with a local college — to contact your partner to discuss how this guidance will be applied. It should be noted that colleges are especially familiar with the approaches outlined in this guidance, having been heavily involved in its original development.

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

Whenever it is considered not possible to progress with or complete assessments 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 — [Supporting the delivery, assessment and verification of HN and vocational qualifications in 2020–21](#). Following the guidance, learners should generate assessment evidence for all outcomes for all units, and assessment judgements should be determined on the basis of the generated evidence. Assessment is still carried out to meet the



requirements of the units in an award, and internal verification and processing of results should continue as normal.

Whenever it is considered not possible to complete assessments to meet the outcomes of units in an award, it will be possible for centres to carry out holistic assessments to meet the aims of many of these awards and any critical competences for that award which have been published by SQA.

Subject guidance

SQA published subject-specific guidance for a selection of vocational awards in September 2020. Some of this guidance has been revised in light of continued COVID-19 restrictions and feedback from centres, including feedback from the February 2021 consultation with centres. The following link takes readers to the page where generic and subject-specific information can be found: <https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/96759.html>.

It is important that centres review and apply the subject guidance, which will allow many learners to generate sufficient evidence to meet assessment requirements. Some of the subject guidance will also advise when it will be inappropriate to apply the alternative holistic approach to assessment (for example, due to regulatory or professional body requirements) and the aims of some awards will be strengthened by critical competences.

When conditions mean that a unit-by-unit assessment approach cannot progress, even with permitted adaptations, the course team must bear in mind that if the qualification is subject to regulation and/or professional body requirements, and/or if the assessment conditions cannot be met, it will be necessary to postpone assessment until it is possible for it to take place.

In all other cases:

- ◆ Centres should continue to gather evidence when possible and conform to the current public health advice to ensure as much group award coverage as possible.
- ◆ Assessors should engage in professional discussion with their course teams to review evidence for the group award for each learner. Assessors will collectively determine the success of individual learners. Individual centres will oversee robust arrangements for confirming each learner's overall result against the assessment evidence. It is essential that records are kept, documenting this process for internal verification purposes and to meet SQA's external quality assurance processes.

Resulting and certification

Whenever the assessment is complete and decisions have been finalised and endorsed by the course team, learners' results will be submitted to SQA through normal resulting channels. Certification will be undertaken by SQA in line with normal arrangements.

We recognise that some assessments may have to be postponed. When, as a result of this, a learner has not achieved the award, details of the postponed assessment should be clearly



documented. The learner's entry should be left open, and the learner should be given the opportunity to engage in further learning, teaching and assessment when conditions allow. Subsequent assessment judgements will be made in line with this guidance.

External verification

SQA will carry out external quality assurance activity in support of local quality assurance processes. 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 can be extended if necessary.

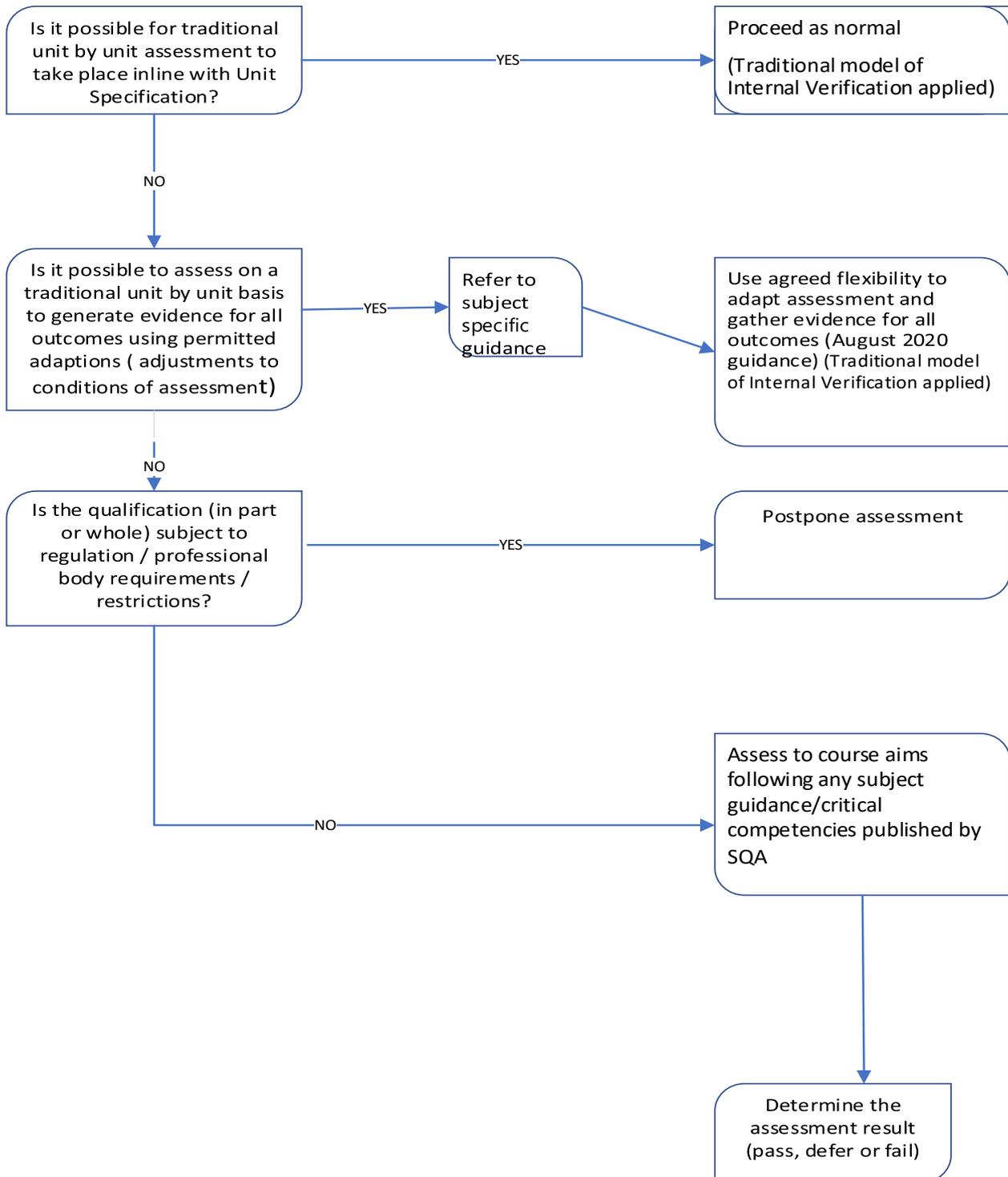
Academic appeals

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.

See [Appendix 2](#) for a list of frequently asked questions which relate to and support this guidance.

Appendix 1: The decision-making process

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





Appendix 2: Frequently asked questions

Q: How do we use the 2021 Decision Tree?

A: It is important to try and follow the process at the top of the Decision Tree wherever possible. When it is necessary to move to the lowest branch, it is vital that you follow the detailed guidance and/or seek support through course team arrangements to ensure that you are complying with the agreed process.

Q: What do we mean by critical competence?

A: Critical competences are the abilities that a learner must show evidence of for the minimum requirements of the group award to be met. The introduction of critical competence requirements for some awards strengthens the course aims and provides a defined national standard with which we must all comply. Information about critical competence is signposted in the spreadsheet on SQA's website and can be found either within the subject guidance for an award or within a separate document. This model gives greater clarity to staff and learners around the evidence required to demonstrate attainment when assessing to course aims.

Q: How can we ensure standardisation in assessment judgements?

A: The combination of course aims and critical competence requirements for some 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 use 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. SQA will operate a risk-based model of external verification to ensure standardisation across the sector.

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

A: SQA (as an awarding body) cannot offer flexibility in assessment that has not been agreed by the regulator. When 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 COVID-19 restrictions are eased, or it may be deferred to next session.

Q: How do we quality assure?

A: As shown in the guidance, centres will use traditional models of quality assurance and internal verification, including whenever adaptations to conditions of assessment are applied.



Q: I deliver a qualification in partnership with another organisation. Will this impact my decisions on assessment?

A: You should discuss the appropriate route for the learner with the other delivery centre. It may be possible for you to review responsibilities which gives the learner the best opportunities for teaching, learning and assessment.

Q: What should teachers do if there isn't a course team for their subject?

A: The term 'course team' refers to groups of teachers working together to support each other with assessment-related decisions. If there is only one teacher teaching a subject in the centre, it will be appropriate to seek support from a line manager in the centre to ensure the appropriateness of the approach to assessment and any assessment-related decisions.

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

A: SQA will publish information on its website that will specify critical competencies for a small number of awards. SQA will, in addition, support with guidance and resources where this is thought to be helpful to centres and candidates.

Centres are encouraged to use existing networks for sharing resources whenever 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 at which assessment has already been carried out, 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 adaptation to conditions of assessment. Whenever 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 any specified critical 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 critical 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.

Learners may achieve individual units when sufficient evidence exists.

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

A: Yes. The [guidance](#) published in August 2020/February 2021 gives centres flexibility to adapt conditions of assessment whenever the stated conditions were proving impractical for some awards. Subject guidance published by SQA advises when assessments should be undertaken under closed-book conditions.

In many centres, staff are already using adapted conditions of assessment and have developed new instruments of assessment to support this. While 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: Does the guidance apply to all learners?

A: So long as the guidance and approach apply to an award, they apply to all learners who are enrolled on the award. We acknowledge that one size does not necessarily fit all, and teachers/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-19-related circumstances.