



HNVQ optional assessment guidance: session 2023–24

Information and guidance for centres

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Scope

The approaches suggested in this document are optional.

The experience of recent years has resulted in the development of some alternative approaches to delivery and assessment. The opportunity to explore different approaches has led to lots of good practice across centres and this is something to foster.

This guidance document aims to support practitioners in centres to consider ways to reduce assessment. It also complements the group award and unit specifications. Where any individual subject specific guidance has been published for 2023–24 it should be used.

This document applies to the following group awards:

- ◆ Higher National Certificates and/or Diplomas (including graded units)
- ◆ National Certificates
- ◆ National Progression Awards
- ◆ Professional Development Awards
- ◆ Skills for Work
- ◆ Awards
- ◆ SQA Advanced Certificates and/or Diplomas

It also applies to freestanding National Units and centre-devised courses comprising clusters of SQA units.

It **does not** apply to regulated units and group awards, such as Scottish Vocational Qualifications and VQ Units.

Context

This guidance is for candidates who require certification of units from across SQA's portfolio. However, there may be some subject-specific or unit-type requirements that restrict the flexibility that we can offer (for example, stand-alone National Qualification Units, health and safety requirements, licence to practice, and Sector Skills Council requirements).

It may also be useful to refer to the [Guide to Assessment](#) document on SQA's website.

Combining and adapting assessment

To help reduce assessment in Higher National and Vocational Qualifications, centres have the flexibility to combine and adapt assessments.

The following sections outline the most effective ways for candidates to generate evidence of competence and for assessors to judge that evidence against unit standards. It is necessary to generate evidence that demonstrates that candidates have met all the outcomes of all units.

Course mapping

The starting point is for the course team to carry out (or re-visit) a mapping exercise to collectively review outcomes and all the associated assessment activities across all the units of study. This is key to identifying:

- ◆ potentially compatible outcomes and evidence requirements, and opportunities to combine assessment
- ◆ any potential to adjust or reduce the evidence required
- ◆ any considerations around established assessment requirements

Useful information is often available in group award specifications.

Once you have carried out the mapping exercise, you may wish to use the 'assessment planning tool' in [Appendix 1](#). This is designed to support you when considering the options available and the processes to follow.

While you may carry out this process at centre level, we encourage you to take opportunities for collaborative working and sharing best practice through established or new subject networks.

Quality teams within centres can help identify opportunities for cross-sector collaboration. Equally, you should keep quality teams informed of any collaborative activities that you may initiate or join.

You must ensure that robust internal quality assurance processes are in place to support, advise and guide; you must also ensure that appropriate protocols are followed to maintain the standards, integrity and credibility of qualifications. We require centres to demonstrate that all assessors and internal verifiers have a common understanding of the standards required; there should also be evidence of how you have checked the assessment instruments for validity (currency and fitness for purpose).

The result should be a carefully considered and cohesive assessment plan that is agreed and supported by the whole course team and endorsed by the centre.

As centres or clusters develop new or modified assessment approaches, we will highlight good practice examples through our website subject pages, and signpost any newly

developed instruments of assessment, published on our secure site. You can request access to these materials via your SQA co-ordinator or quality team.

Combining assessment

As with all SQA qualifications, it is not necessary to assess each outcome separately. We encourage a combined approach that allows evidence to be gathered for a range of outcomes or evidence requirements within a unit or across multiple units. There are several advantages of this approach:

- ◆ The assessment is more meaningful to candidates.
- ◆ It takes less time.
- ◆ It gives assurances of overall competence.
- ◆ It avoids over-assessment and improves motivation.
- ◆ It facilitates flexible approaches to verification.
- ◆ It benefits candidates.

Combined assessment can arise from identifying similar assessment requirements within and across units, removing duplication. For example, it may be possible to identify an overarching task or a single coherent activity that gathers evidence for a range of outcomes within a unit or across multiple units.

In many HNC, HND, and Advanced Certificate and/or Diploma frameworks, there are opportunities to generate evidence through a single task that may satisfy requirements across multiple units. For example, producing a newsletter could provide evidence to meet the requirements of an IT Applications Software unit and a Communication unit.

There are some points to note:

- ◆ When you are developing an assessment across units, ensure that the content of the units is sufficiently related to make the assessment coherent and meaningful to candidates.
- ◆ Some assessment methods lend themselves more easily to combining outcomes and units than others. Try to choose the more obvious opportunities to combine assessments and those that make the biggest impact in terms of reducing assessment. Trying to combine more complex evidence requirements may be counterproductive and introduce unnecessary barriers.
- ◆ When combining assessments, ensure that the assessment task is of the same level of demand for the candidate as the original individual assessment requirement.

You should use your own experience, expertise, and qualification and subject knowledge to identify the most obvious opportunities to combine assessment, avoiding any risk to the standard of the qualification. If there is any doubt, you should seek further expert guidance and support.

The activities of a combined assessment should be included in an assessment plan and cross-referenced back to the outcomes (the course mapping). This helps to ensure that all outcomes of all the units are achieved.

If you develop a combined assessment approach, assessors must also consider how to deal with any need for candidate remediation and re-assessment. This should be in line with the centre's policy for remediation and re-assessment.

You can find further information on [prior verification](#) of assessments on SQA's website.

Sampling

Sampling can help to reduce the volume of assessment for candidates, particularly as assessing all the knowledge and/or skills would require a large volume of evidence. Some units may require candidates to demonstrate total competence across all the evidence requirements but, for most units, it is possible to infer competence through sampling. There is no minimum size for a sample, but if you select a small sample, then the evidence generated may not be enough to show that the candidate is competent across the unit. SQA advises that a sample of between 50% and 60% of the knowledge and/or skills would allow for strong inference of competence.

The sample should reflect the competence stated in the unit title and the information provided in the unit purpose. It should focus on the most important knowledge and/or skills, and identify the required level of demand to produce a valid assessment.

When creating an assessment using sampling, you should include a statement such as:

Where evidence requirements are assessed on a sample basis, all content in the 'Knowledge and/or skills' section must be taught and available for assessment. Candidates should not know in advance the items being assessed, and a different sample must be used in each assessment occasion.

You should also consider whether using a pass mark or threshold score would allow sufficient inference of competence across the knowledge and/or skills of the unit. Most SQA units do not require candidates to achieve full marks or meet every technical skill in full. The requirement is that a candidate demonstrates that they have met the standard for the unit. SQA considers that a pass mark of at least 60% in an assessment involving written or oral questioning allows sufficient inference that the candidate has met the evidence requirements. The pass mark may be higher than 60% if this is necessary to allow sufficient inference of competence.

If reassessing, you can pull the sampled content from some of the same knowledge and/or skills section covered in the original assessment. The assessment cannot be identical; however you can reassess content with previously unused content. For example, you could assess some of the same knowledge and/or skills from the first assessment, and some from previously unassessed knowledge and/or skills. The candidate must not know what you are going to assess, to ensure the validity of the assessment.

A pass mark may not be applicable to other methods of assessment such as practical activities, but you should consider the expected performance levels and/or the acceptable technical tolerances against the standard to allow sufficient inference of competence.

Flexibility to adapt the assessment requirements

Alongside combined assessment and sampling, centres have the flexibility to adapt assessment requirements to reduce reliance on face-to-face assessment. We will identify (and communicate) specific qualifications or subject areas where health and safety, licence to practice or other particular limitations mean that it is not possible to offer flexibility.

For all other qualifications, you should use your professional judgement in collaboration with the wider course team and internal verifiers to provide additional and alternative opportunities for candidates to demonstrate their competence, knowledge and understanding. This can be a range of reasonable and practicable alternative activities. Some examples are:

- ◆ **Remote testing (such as paper-based, app-based, online, audio and video assessment):** This should assess skills, knowledge and understanding, and include sufficient challenge and application to demonstrate the appropriate level of attainment. (Additional guidance on [remote assessment](#) is available on SQA's website).
- ◆ **Professional discussion:** This would be recording a professional discussion between a candidate and an assessor. The discussions would focus on, and enhance, evidence already provided or demonstrated by the candidate — including real work activities, practical tasks, a case study, project, portfolio, or some other form of assessment.
- ◆ **Practical assessment:** In some circumstances, evidence may be assessed using remote assessment (such as video, photographic work, portfolio and witness testimony), alongside work already demonstrated and assessed.

If assessment requirements are adapted, you should consider any additional action necessary, on a risk-assessed basis, to confirm the authenticity of the candidate's work. You must ensure that the evidence for the assessment decision belongs solely to the candidate being assessed — you can only make accurate assessment decisions if this is the case.

The security of SQA's closed-book assessments must not be compromised. You can alter the conditions of assessment from closed book to open book for centre-devised assessments. However, you should not do this for secure SQA closed-book assessments. SQA closed-book assessments cannot be used for open-book assessment.

If you intend to adapt a centre-devised instrument of assessment that has previously been submitted to SQA for prior verification, and is shared on the secure site, you must notify SQA by email at qvprior@sqa.org.uk.

We monitor the distribution and use of secure assessment materials. If the security of any national instrument of assessment is compromised, you must report this immediately to SQA through your SQA co-ordinator.

Approaches to external verification

You can find out [information and request support](#) in the early stages of the development of combined assessment approaches, and we encourage you to engage in developmental activity (ideally on a sector or cluster basis).

Discussion around the course mapping and agreed approaches to assessment relative to outcomes, evidence and assessment requirements is an important element of verification activity.

During session 2020–21, we developed a new model of virtual verification. Virtual verification requires more collaboration between SQA, external verifiers and centres when planning for visiting verification. This helps determine whether group award verification is appropriate and, if so, the requirements for the verification activity.

We have updated the document ['Qualification verification: Guidance for centres'](#) with the requirements relating to all Qualification Verification activity.

External verification activity will be carried out, with selections being released to centres from October 2023 onwards.

Stand-alone National Qualification Units will follow the approved NQ verification model. For more information, please see [National Qualifications: Overview of Quality Assurance](#) on SQA's website.

You must retain evidence of your assessment judgements, as you may be asked for this during external verification activity.

Subject alternative assessment approaches

You can find optional approaches to delivery and assessment for some qualifications on [SQA's website](#).

You should review and apply the 'Optional assessment guidance 2023–24', which allows candidates to generate sufficient evidence to meet assessment requirements.

Some subject guidance also advises where it is inappropriate to apply the alternative holistic approach to assessment (for example, standard setting agencies and/or professional registration requirements).

Graded units

You should assess graded units as outlined in the unit specifications. You may find it useful to refer to the guidance document [‘Guidance on the Implementation of Graded Units in Higher National Certificates and Diplomas’](#) on SQA’s website.

Resulting and certification

When assessment is complete, and decisions finalised and endorsed by the course team, if appropriate, you must submit candidates' results to SQA through the normal resulting channels.

Certification is carried out by SQA in line with normal arrangements.

Academic appeals

Centres should follow their established academic appeals process for any candidate who feels that the assessment outcome does not accurately reflect their achievement.

Appendix 1: assessment planning tool

