



Alternative Certification Model 2020–21: National QA Exercise Key Messages

Subject	Biology
Level	Higher

This report provides information on themes emerging from the national quality assurance exercise, which is part of the Alternative Certification Model for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses.

A sample of candidates' assessed work from selected centres was reviewed to determine whether assessment was in line with the national standard. The evidence submitted may have been partial or incomplete and is unlikely to have represented all of the evidence that will be gathered to allow the centre to determine a provisional result.

The centres selected for review in this subject and at this level have been provided with specific feedback on the evidence that they submitted. The comments below highlight key points about the assessment approaches and instruments used and the sampled centres' assessment judgements, for all centres delivering the subject at this level to reflect upon and make any appropriate adjustments.

Section 1: Comments on approach to assessment

Most centres submitted partial evidence in a variety of forms. Most centres indicated that they would use the SQA 2021 paper as the main evidence to determine candidates' provisional results. Some centres submitted the SQA 2021 paper as complete evidence.

Centre-devised assessments mainly consisted of a mixture of SQA past paper questions and commercially produced questions. Some centres used a commercially produced paper in its entirety. Many centres showed good practice in amending and modifying the associated marking instructions in line with national standards. Modifications were often clearly annotated following professional dialogue between colleagues within centres and local authorities.

Some evidence submitted covered most or all of the course content and skills. The assessments closely mirrored SQA papers in format and style of questions and were in line with national standards. Some centres documented the course coverage and the balance of demonstrating knowledge, applying knowledge, skills and grade A marks. It is good practice to do this when producing an assessment. The assessment should meet the criteria in the SQA question paper brief.

In some cases, the marking instructions were used unaltered. Where they were modified, these modifications were appropriate and did not affect the demand of the assessment.

It is the responsibility of centres to ensure that any centre-devised or commercially produced papers meet the SQA question paper brief and are in line with the information in the current course specification. Centres should ensure that their assessments have the correct balance and level of demand, and appropriate cut-off scores.

In some evidence, there were issues with the questions and/or marking instructions, for example:

- ◆ The same content was assessed in more than one question — in some cases in several questions.
- ◆ There was an insufficient number of grade A marks.
- ◆ There were too few applying knowledge questions.
- ◆ There was an insufficient number of skills questions, or some of the skills were not assessed. This was usually due to the lack of a large data handling and/or experimental design question.
- ◆ Some questions assessed knowledge no longer in the Higher Biology course.
- ◆ The assessment was split over several sessions and the questions were not randomised. This increased predictability of the content of each paper. It also meant that candidates could not demonstrate their ability in integrated questions or show retention of knowledge across the whole course.
- ◆ Marking instructions were modified, reducing the demand of the assessment.

Centres should take into account the level of demand of the assessment(s) to determine appropriate cut-off scores.

Most centres should be commended on their detailed effective moderation procedures, which included standardising marking instructions, cross-marking and collaborating with colleagues in other centres and local authorities. Some centres provided moderation policy documents that detailed clearly the steps taken to sample, cross-mark and moderate evidence. This is excellent practice.

Section 2: Comments on assessment judgements

In most centres, assessment judgements were valid, consistent, reliable and in line with national standards. Only a few centres applied the marking instructions leniently. Some centres provided useful annotations, explaining how judgements were reached. There was evidence of robust and supportive moderation procedures.

Many centres showed good practice when marking extended-response questions by using annotated numbered ticks to indicate which marks had been awarded. This makes it easier to check that the same mark has not been awarded twice. It also avoids over-allocating marks where questions are subdivided and have a maximum number of marks for each section.

Centres should note that provisional results must be based on demonstrated attainment across the entire course.