



Equality Impact Assessment

National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher Alternative Certification Model 2021

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Background and context

COVID-19 and cancellation of the 2021 National Qualifications examination diet

On 7 October 2020, following consideration of the significant and ongoing education disruption experienced by learners as a result of COVID-19, it was determined that there were too many risks to the planned implementation of a full exam diet for SQA graded National Courses in 2021 and that it would therefore be unfair to learners to proceed as intended. Consequently, the Deputy First Minister asked SQA to take an alternative approach to National 5 awarding in 2021, based on two key recommendations by Professor Mark Priestley¹:

- ◆ suspension of the National 5 examinations diet in 2021, with qualifications awarded on the basis of centre estimation based upon validated assessments
- ◆ development of a nationally-recognised, fully transparent and proportionate system for moderation of centre-based assessment

The subsequent decision on 8 November to cancel the 2021 Higher and Advanced Higher examination diet, as disruption to learning and teaching continued to worsen, meant that the alternative certification approach was extended to Higher and Advanced Higher courses.

National Qualifications 2021 Group

The National Qualifications 2021 group was established to co-create and implement an Alternative Certification Model (ACM) for 2021 which would be based on teacher and lecturer judgement supported by assessment resources and quality assurance. The group includes representatives from the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES), Colleges Scotland, Education Scotland, the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), School Leaders Scotland (SLS), the Scottish Council of Independent Schools (SCIS), the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), the Scottish Government, National Parent Forum of Scotland, and the Scottish Youth Parliament.

Alternative Certification Model 2021

The 2021 ACM represents a significant adjustment to SQA's longstanding policy and practice for awarding graded National Courses, as well as a significant change to the ACM developed for use in 2020. This includes the absence of any estimates or results based on statistical analysis. The 2021 ACM is based on teacher and lecturer judgement supported by quality assurance approaches to support them in generating provisional results that will be used for awarding and certification. The principal adjustments from previous approaches and models relate to:

- ◆ the use of teacher and lecturer judgement to determine results
- ◆ required candidate evidence

1 <https://www.gov.scot/publications/rapid-review-national-qualifications-experience-2020/>

- ◆ the quality assurance processes for supporting and verifying valid and reliable evidence and assessment decisions

The model is intended to be positive and to allow SQA to continue to contribute to equality of opportunity in the Scottish education and skills system. It will enable certification in 2021, based on teacher and learner judgement and supported by quality assurance, in a way that meets the three key principles of:

- ◆ fairness to all learners
- ◆ safe and secure certification of qualifications, while following the latest public health advice
- ◆ maintaining the integrity and credibility of the qualifications system, ensuring that standards are maintained over time, in the interest of learners

Public sector equality duty

The public sector equality duty (PSED) requires SQA to have due regard to the need to:

- ◆ eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Equality Act 2010
- ◆ advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not
- ◆ foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not

SQA has a responsibility to assess the impact of new or modified policies and practices against these needs. Accordingly, on behalf of the NQ 2021 group, this report focuses on the Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) of the Alternative Certification Model for graded National Courses in session 2020–21.

SQA also takes several other steps to meet its PSED. As an awarding body, we work with schools, colleges, universities, industry and government, to ensure that qualifications, including National Courses, are inclusive and accessible to all, recognise the achievements of learners, and enable progression to further learning or employment.

The SQA Code of Practice outlines how SQA ensures that its qualifications are of a high quality and fit for purpose, and that the assessment of these qualifications is monitored and maintained to a consistently high standard. It sets out the framework by which we safeguard the integrity of SQA's qualifications and assessment standards and ensures public confidence. The Code of Practice is based on a set of 13 Governing Principles that govern how SQA meets its statutory duties and regulates its activities. Similar principles apply to SQA qualifications that are regulated by other organisations. Governing Principle 7 states:

SQA will ensure that all qualifications and assessments are as fair and accessible as possible and that the needs of candidates are met in the administration of its assessments.

The SQA Equality of Access to SQA Qualifications Policy outlines the organisation's commitment to promoting and facilitating access to our qualifications. In practice, this means that every reasonable step will be taken to ensure we:

- ◆ produce qualifications based on national standards that are as accessible as possible. We equality review our qualifications to identify any aspects that might adversely impact learners who share particular characteristics and we aim to remove any such adverse impacts, wherever possible, and minimise them where it is not possible to remove them altogether.
- ◆ develop methods of assessment and quality assurance that are sensitive to the needs of all candidates, but which do not compromise our overarching aims of fairness and consistency.
- ◆ provide assessment arrangements to allow disabled candidates and/or those with additional support needs to access the assessment without compromising its integrity. For disabled candidates, we will make reasonable adjustments in accordance with the requirements of the Equality Act 2010.

Scope and development of the equality impact assessment

SQA has a published aim to provide fair, equitable and accessible course assessments that minimise disparity in attainment related to disability, additional support needs, ethnicity, poverty, gender and other equality issues in education which mean that some groups routinely have worse outcomes than others. This is also one of the aims informing the work of the National Qualifications 2021 group.

This EIA considers the potential impact of the 2021 ACM on candidates who share protected characteristics, and how any potential negative impacts identified could be mitigated. Other groups of candidates, such as those who are socio-economically disadvantaged², or who experience other circumstances that present barriers to accessing qualifications, have also been considered wherever possible. Although such groups are not covered specifically by the Equality Act 2010, the NQ 2021 group recognises that a wide range of factors can have an impact on a candidate's ability to achieve qualifications. Furthermore, SQA has a specific Corporate Parenting commitment to ensure its EIA process considers the needs of care-experienced young people, by treating care experience as if it were a protected characteristic covered by the Equality Act.

The EIA has been developed by a process of gathering, considering and acting upon key equalities evidence throughout the finalisation of the 2021 ACM. This process and associated evidence are described below and represent work to date. Additional consultation will be undertaken in relation to the arrangements for appeals under development and further updates may be published as arrangements for the ACM are finalised or adjusted in

² Being socio-economically disadvantaged includes living in less favourable social and economic circumstances than the majority of others in the same society. Socio-economic disadvantage may apply to particular groups such as care experienced young people; disabled people; candidates from the most deprived Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) areas or people from minority ethnic communities.

response to any changing public health advice and arrangements for education and assessment.

Equality evidence

Equality review of qualifications process

As a qualifications body and regulator, SQA has specific duties under Section 96 of the Equality Act 2010 to:

- ◆ minimise the extent to which disabled candidates are disadvantaged in attaining a qualification because of their disabilities
- ◆ ensure that the qualification gives a reliable indication of the knowledge, skills, and understanding of a candidate to whom it is awarded
- ◆ maintain public confidence in the qualification

To meet these duties, SQA carries out an 'equality review of qualifications process' for all National Qualifications, to ensure that there is robust and transparent consideration of equalities during development and ongoing maintenance of qualifications. Considerations are recorded on an Equality Review Form for each qualification, and summaries of these are published on the SQA website³.

This review process ensures that National Qualifications are not unlawfully discriminatory for any learner on grounds of the protected characteristics of disability, race, age, religion or belief, sex, gender re-assignment, pregnancy and maternity, or sexual orientation, and that due consideration is given to the reasonable adjustments that SQA (under Section 96 (6) of the Equality Act 2010) can make to provide access to its qualifications for disabled learners.

Early in session 2020–21, the Scottish Government's *Coronavirus (COVID-19): strategic framework for reopening schools, early learning and childcare provision*⁴ made it clear that a full timetable of SQA exams and coursework was planned at all levels in 2021.

Recognising the continuing impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) on learning and teaching, a decision was taken to modify existing course assessments at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher for session 2020–21. This was in line with the strategic framework, with the intention to support delivery and assessment within the contexts presented by COVID-19 (coronavirus) restrictions, while maintaining the original rationale, purpose and aims of courses.

Qualifications teams and senior appointees considered existing Equality Review Forms as part of the process of developing and finalising proposed modifications. The associated EIA

³ <https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/25339.html>

⁴ Scottish Government (2020) *Coronavirus (COVID-19): strategic framework for reopening schools, early learning and childcare provision* [online]. Available from: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/excellent-equity-during-covid-19-pandemic-strategic-framework-reopening-schools-early-learning-childcare-provision-scotland/pages/6/> [accessed 30 June 2020]

summarised details of how the intended modifications would re-shape course assessments, the potential equality impacts that might result, and the mitigations that could be put in place for any identified disadvantage.

Since the decision to cancel the 2021 exam diet for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher, and in response to continuing challenges across the education system presented by COVID-19 and associated public health measures, the modifications originally proposed have formed the basis of guidance on generating valid and reliable evidence for estimating, quality assuring and finalising centre-generated provisional results for learners. Qualifications teams will continue to consider this guidance and revisit Equality Review Forms as necessary to ensure any further proposed course modification meet equality principles and duties as well as maintaining the integrity of qualifications.

Equalities monitoring, consultation and engagement

SQA works in close partnership with centres, stakeholder groups and education partners to inform an ongoing programme of equality reviews. These address our responsibilities under Section 96 of the Equality Act 2010, supporting the development of SQA's qualifications and assessments. Intelligence gained from this engagement means that we hold and continue to develop a body of knowledge about equalities and learners with protected characteristics, which in turn is used to inform policy on access and inclusion in qualifications.

In relation to the annual diet of exams, we encourage dialogue with centres regarding the individual needs of their candidates when requesting assessment arrangements or reasonable adjustments. This is a longstanding and ongoing process that allows us to understand the many and varied issues that some of our candidates have, and to identify and deliver appropriate assessment arrangements for the candidates who need them.

With the cancellation of 2021 exams, the SQA Assessment Arrangements Request system closed. However, centres have been advised to follow their normal processes for determining whether a candidate requires assessment arrangements for any internal assessment used to generate evidence for provisional results, and they can get in touch with the Assessment Arrangements team for advice if necessary⁵. Through this we continue to gather equality impact evidence about SQA courses and assessment.

Specific monitoring, consultation and engagement to inform the development and equality impact assessment of the 2021 ACM has included:

- ◆ desk-based review of research, evidence and information published by equality, equity and education stakeholders
- ◆ review of research and reports published in response to 2020 attainment and processes
- ◆ information and reportage provided through SQA's media and parliamentary monitoring service and Liaison Team
- ◆ inbound communication and queries
- ◆ engagement and consultation with equalities stakeholders, learners and education professionals, including teachers, lecturers and senior management within schools and colleges

⁵ <https://www.sqa.org.uk/assessment-arrangements-for-2020-21>

- ◆ focussed workshop with the NQ 2021 group to develop the EIA
- ◆ intelligence from the member organisations represented on the NQ 2021 group and their own stakeholders

The information gathered adds to the evidence reported in the equality impact assessments and child rights and wellbeing impact assessments undertaken in relation to the 2020 ACM, and the modifications to course assessment proposed before cancellation of the 2021 exam diet. The published EIAs and CRWIAs detail this evidence and are available on the SQA website, along with the consultation outcomes report on the modifications to course assessment.

Key evidence

The provisions in the 2021 ACM seek to mitigate where possible the impact of disruption to teaching, learning and assessment provision caused by COVID-19, so that learners can access qualifications and have their attainment recognised through awarding and certification.

Evidence of this impact has been gathered by many organisations and interest groups working with and on behalf of learners, and the issues highlighted in the August 2020 and October 2020 SQA EIAs continue to be relevant. It is widely acknowledged that those facing inequality, disadvantage and deprivation have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 and the associated restrictions, including the closure of schools and increased use of blended learning.

There has been significant impact on those from minority and marginalised groups, and children and young people in these groups are more likely to be in low income families and at greater risk of poorer educational outcomes. Despite the national roll-out of digital devices, they are likely to lack some of the resources that are essential for effecting home learning, including equipment, broadband and suitable environments for studying.

Minority ethnic people remain more likely to be in poverty than the majority White Scottish population, and asylum-seekers and refugees are vulnerable to destitution. Poverty and deprivation, lack of access to technology or connectivity, lack of understanding of the education system, previously disrupted learning, and having English as a second language, present significant challenges to participating in or supporting education at home. Those who have recently arrived in the country or who have moved around a number of different locations will be further disadvantaged, particularly where they are not yet fully registered or immersed in education provision.

Support for learners with additional support needs, including those who are disabled and/or use assistive technology, has been impacted by reduced staffing or altered working practices. For example, in class, support staff may only be able to work in one class bubble and so may not be available to support learners in a different class. Peripatetic staff (for example, qualified teachers of visually impaired or hearing impaired learners) are restricted in terms of the number and frequency of schools and contacts they can visit. Accessing or providing accessible learning and assessment materials is a challenge for some, and devices provided are not always compatible with available resources, assessment platforms or assessment security requirements. It may not be possible to run internal assessments for

National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher for whole year groups because classes are not mixing or because social distancing limits the number of students that can be accommodated in, for example, gym or assembly halls. As a result, assessments are taking place in classes during scheduled teaching time, so the organisation of support for learners and assessment arrangements is a far bigger and more complex task for Additional Support Needs (ASN) and Support for Learning staff and subject teachers.

For these ASN learners, accessing teaching and learning from home can be hugely problematic, especially for those who access teaching and learning through BSL or braille, assistive technology, or other forms of support such as readers, scribes or practical helpers, and specialised software. Additionally, parents and carers may not be able to provide the support normally received by these learners in school or college, particularly if they themselves are not literate or digitally literate.

There is worsening mental health for young people, a rising proportion of whom report symptoms of anxiety and depression. Adverse effects of the pandemic include traumatic experiences such as loss and bereavement, social isolation, a loss of routine, uncertainty about the future, or a breakdown in formal and informal support structures. Some have challenging home environments, and many are concerned about their ability to study effectively from home. There is increased pressure on young carers, who often spend significant amounts of time caring for a relative in addition to the time they need to spend on education and time for themselves. The mental health of young people already facing social inequalities may be particularly at risk, and those who already receive or now need support for social, emotional, behavioural or mental health needs will likely have had this disrupted, delayed or cancelled.

Care-experienced young people are at more risk of COVID-19 impacting their mental health and educational attainment. The loss of access to schools and colleges, leisure facilities and support networks has been detrimental to all young people, but for care-experienced young people who may be reliant on social services and less likely to have community or family safety nets, this has been especially so. Care-experienced young people are less likely to have adequate access to digital resources, broadband, support and skills for online learning. The disadvantage, discrimination and attainment gap they already experience is exacerbated by the current restrictions.

SQA continues to monitor existing and emerging issues and will provide support to centres and learners through advice on reasonable adjustments, assessment arrangements, and other means where possible.

Equality evidence also contributed to the development of a [Child Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment](#).

Equality impacts

Use of teacher and lecturer judgement to determine results

Aims

In the absence of the scheduled 2021 examination diet, using evidence-based teacher and lecturer judgement to determine results and award qualifications will ensure that candidates are rewarded for their demonstrated learning and can continue to the next stage of their planned education, employment or training. The intention is that this impacts positively on all groups of candidates, including those with protected characteristics.

Quality assurance elements of the ACM will support teachers and lecturers to make fair, accurate, consistent and comparable decision making across centres so that qualifications have the same value wherever they are awarded. This is designed to ensure good relations and equality of opportunity for all, as it is based on candidate evidence of attainment and judged against national standards.

Additionally, guidance and resources have been provided to underpin the work to determine results in centres. This includes:

- ◆ General and subject-specific guidance and an SQA Academy course, designed to support teachers and lecturers throughout the process of gathering evidence and determining the appropriate grade and band to estimate for a candidate. This guidance emphasises fair and equitable treatment of all candidates and includes reference to factors that impact on candidates' access to learning, as well as information on bias.
- ◆ Understanding Standards materials, course documents, past and specimen papers and additional assessment resources for 2021 for each subject and level, illustrating standards and types of assessment tasks that can be used.
- ◆ SQA's Assessment Arrangements resources, which include advice on assessment arrangements that would normally be in place for the diet of scheduled exams and coursework, and should be provided to any candidates who need them because they are disabled or have additional support needs.

All candidates have had and continue to experience interruption to planned teaching, learning and assessment. Some have experienced particularly lengthy or detrimental impacts of disruption, related to factors such as disability, illness, poverty and deprivation, additional support needs, being a carer or being care-experienced, or other contexts.

Flexibility around the generation, collection and assessment of evidence within the timescales provided for submission and finalisation of results enables localised and learner-centred arrangements so that candidates have equal opportunity to access qualifications.

This flexibility can also help to mitigate against the risk of candidates being unwell during planned assessment because of fasting for religious reasons: in 2021, Ramadan falls during the period originally planned for the examination diet. Similarly, candidates who have the protected characteristic of disability, or pregnancy and maternity, and who are absent or

unwell on the day of a planned assessment, can also benefit from flexibility in gathering evidence. Candidates whose mental health needs are exacerbated by the pressure of individual or multiple examination situations in normal years may also benefit from this approach, as might those who experience other personal or socio-economic circumstances that present or exacerbate barriers to accessing qualifications and assessment.

As in normal years, SQA will work with centres on a needs-led, individual basis to consider reasonable adjustments under section 96 of the Equality Act for candidates who are disabled and who consequently cannot meet the arrangements for assessment in session 2020–21.

Potential issues

It may not be possible to provide results for all candidates.

Potential impact on those with protected characteristics of disability, pregnancy and maternity, race; potential impact on assessment-only or home-schooled candidates.

It may not be possible to provide results for some candidates. This may be the case for those who originally intended to sit question paper and coursework assessments without attending a centre for teaching and learning. In a typical year, such candidates are those who are normally home-schooled, which can be due to disability or mental health needs as well as family preference; or entry-only candidates who are resitting or taking a qualification in order to progress to higher education such as initial teacher education. In session 2020–21, this group might also include those whose ability to attend remote or in-centre teaching and learning provision has been significantly impacted by COVID-19 related reasons such as disability, shielding or illness.

It may also be more difficult to provide results for candidates who have moved between centres, including those who are mobile Gypsy or Traveller candidates, or from asylum-seeker, refugee or migrant families who have recently arrived and are not well-established in the education system.

SQA does not collect candidate information other than sex and age, so cannot identify such candidates from course entry data. However, this information should normally be known at centre level. For those candidates who are entry-only or normally home-schooled, it is usually the case that there will be an established relationship with a presenting centre so that centre-generated coursework or internally-assessed components of course assessment can be undertaken and authenticated as the candidate's own work.

Mitigation

Flexibility around the process of generating evidence is designed into the 2021 ACM to allow teacher/lecturer judgements to be made by as late a date as possible. This means that localised, candidate-centred arrangements, including reasonable adjustments for disabled candidates, can continue to be made in the vast majority of cases. However, it is acknowledged that despite these provisions, there may still be some candidates for whom barriers remain.

To preserve the integrity of a qualification, demonstrated attainment is required for certification, and there may be a small minority of candidates for whom no reasonable adjustments or alternative arrangements can be made to enable this. While there is a great deal of flexibility in the way evidence is collected, candidates who are unable to access the course and demonstrate achievement may need to be deferred or seek alternative certification, for example at unit level rather than full award.

Bias may affect some assessment decisions

Potential impact on all candidates, including those with protected characteristics.

The use of teacher estimates to award grades carries a recognised risk of inaccurate application of national standards and the possibility of unconscious bias. This may negatively affect the outcome for any candidate, including those with protected characteristics, as described in the EIA.

The risks may be higher than those presented by business-as-usual assessment and quality assurance procedures, which use national question paper and coursework items assessed and/or quality assured by markers and appointed examiners. The use of e-marking for the majority of subjects and papers also helps to reduce the risk of bias through suppression of centre and candidate information, and random allocation of individual scripts rather than in centre batches. To mitigate against the risk in 2021, guidance on bias was central to training materials provided to centres to support them in estimating candidate provisional grades.

As part of its work to understand both accuracy- and bias-related risks, SQA compared estimates and awarding data from historic data, which revealed that on average, only 45% of estimated grades matched the actual grades. This reflects other research findings from across the UK, which show similar levels of accuracy and over- or under-estimation, and some evidence of differential estimation by protected characteristics.

SQA worked with the Scottish Government to analyse 2019 and 2020 estimates and attainment data to identify any variance that may indicate systemic bias or discrimination in terms of protected characteristics or other equity factors. This analysis did not show any identifiable disadvantage to any group of candidates. In summary:

- ◆ Sex: there was no evidence of differential estimation by sex.
- ◆ Additional support needs: similarly, entries for candidates with and without support needs saw comparable estimation.
- ◆ Race: around 90% of candidate entries were either 'White – British' or 'White – Other', with the largest other ethnicity (Asian – Pakistani) being 2.5%. Thus, each non-white ethnicity is a small dataset — and small datasets are difficult to analyse and draw firm conclusions from, as the data tends to be variable. This means it is often not possible to distinguish the natural variation found in small datasets from meaningful signals.
- ◆ Socioeconomic: SIMD data showed a higher number of estimates were received at National 5 than for Higher for candidates from the most deprived postcodes, decreasing again for Advanced Higher. It is not possible to tell from the data whether this is a function of the number of entries or a function of the number of estimates received.

Additional Scottish Government analysis of 2020 attainment data to gather equality impact evidence reported in *Coronavirus (COVID-19) teacher and lecturer estimates - 2020 results: EQIA*⁶ did not find any direct or indirect discrimination as a result of awarding estimated grades:

- ◆ Across National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher and for all equality characteristics the 2020 pass rate was higher than the average pass rate amongst candidates between 2016 and 2019.
- ◆ The size of this increase differed between different groups, ranging from 6.0 to 13.9 percentage points at National 5, between 7.4 and 17.3 percentage points at Higher and between 5.7 and 18.2 percentage points at Advanced Higher.
- ◆ In general, where one group has outperformed another historically this remained the case in 2020. For example in 2020, as in previous years, the pass rate was greater for:
 - ◆ females
 - ◆ those with no additional support needs
 - ◆ those for whom English was their main language
 - ◆ Asian – Chinese pupils
 - ◆ those who were not declared or assessed disabled, and those from less deprived areas.
- ◆ However, the increase in pass rate between 2020 and the 2016–19 average tended to be greater amongst those groups where historic attainment was lower. For example, at National 5 the 2020 pass rate amongst pupils from the most deprived areas was 13.9 percentage points higher than the average for 2016–19, while for those from the least deprived areas the difference was 6.7 percentage points.

SQA 2020 results services made provision for appeals under grounds of ‘Centre Discrimination’ where the head of centre, or their nominated representative, believed that discrimination or other conduct contrary to the Equality Act 2010, and relating to protected characteristics, led to the provision of estimate information to SQA that did not accurately reflect the centre’s view following their internal investigation of the circumstances. From a total of 510,481 course entries for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher, 97 such appeals were received and 55 accepted.

On the basis of this body of information, it is reasonable to conclude that although analysis of estimates and results for SQA graded National Courses has not revealed any systemic discrimination on the grounds of protected characteristics, other research suggests that this is still a possibility.

Mitigation

The 2021 ACM includes additional and significant quality assurance elements to mitigate against this risk, however small, including:

- ◆ the provision of training materials that include guidance and expectations about conscious and unconscious bias
- ◆ the requirement for candidate evidence in order to corroborate provisional and finalised results

⁶ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-equality-impact-assessment-2020-results-using-teacher-lecturer-estimates/>

- ◆ moderation measures across departments, centres and local authorities or other consortia to ensure the validity and reliability of evidence and assessment decisions
- ◆ supportive quality assurance activities by SQA

Additionally, an appeals policy is under development which will allow challenges to grades awarded where there is evidence of unlawful discrimination under the terms of the Equality Act.

Use of candidate evidence

Aims

The type and volume of candidate evidence required to estimate and award results has been significantly modified for 2021, in comparison with a normal awarding year. Instead of performance in nationally-set question papers and coursework tasks, results will be estimated and finalised using two to four recommended pieces of evidence that are devised and assessed in centres. A number of associated quality assurance activities will be used to ensure the validity and reliability of the evidence and its assessment. The focus is on the quality of evidence, rather than the quantity. The subject-specific guidance provided specifies key pieces of evidence that have good predictive value.

The original rationale, purpose and aim of each course has been maintained. Course content remains unchanged to maintain the integrity of qualifications. Recommended assessment evidence will continue to sample across the mandatory skills, knowledge and understanding of each course, while introducing reductions in quantity and sampling requirements designed to support centres to work within the constraints of current and potential COVID-19 restrictions, including:

- ◆ less time for teaching and learning
- ◆ self-isolation
- ◆ local and national lockdowns
- ◆ increased use of blended learning
- ◆ restrictions for practical subjects that require interaction with others, group work, use and sharing of specialist equipment and/or instruments, fieldwork and other requirements

The aim is to ensure that every candidate has equal opportunity to access qualifications and be rewarded for their attainment, despite the impact that COVID-19 has had on teaching and learning. Additionally, the emphasis on basing results on evidence of attainment aims to ensure that national standards are maintained and awards are credible.

Qualifications teams reconsidered previously produced Equality Review Forms for their subjects to ensure that, wherever possible, the recommended evidence does not discriminate against those with protected characteristics or present barriers for those with additional support needs that cannot be mitigated by use of assessment arrangements. The development work also considered the additional and disproportionate inequity some groups may be experiencing as a result of their protected characteristics or other personal and socio-economic circumstances.

The recommended assessment evidence is based on the course assessment modifications planned for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher before the decision to cancel the 2021 exam diet. It is equivalent to question paper items, coursework tasks or a mixture of the two.

The selection of recommended evidence for each course is intended to have a number of positive impacts, including:

- ◆ facilitating best use of more limited teaching, learning and preparation time
- ◆ allowing for restrictions or prohibitions on accessing or using normally required facilities or equipment
- ◆ working with social distancing
- ◆ increasing opportunities for flexible delivery and completion

Evidence can be generated at any suitable point, and often over a number of occasions. This will have a benefit for those who have difficulties in sustaining concentration for longer periods of time due to disability, learning difficulties or additional support needs, and for those with mental health difficulties who find normal exam-type situations very stressful. Those who need extra time and other assessment arrangements such as rest periods, signing, use of a reader, scribe, ICT or other support may also find a benefit in shorter periods of assessment.

In some subjects there is a potential for increased optionality through assessing a choice of one or more themes or areas of content, where previously these may have been mandatory or sampled. This means that individuals will be better able to work to their strengths/specific areas of interest or to use the learning they have been able to focus on most during COVID-19 situations, experiences and restrictions, both personal and centre-based.

The decision not to include question paper type items is being taken in some subjects where the principal focus is on the acquisition of practical skills. This is intended to give centres greater opportunity and flexibility to concentrate on the practical aspects of the course that are fundamental to its validity, while following guidance on social distancing and use of equipment.

However, for other subjects, COVID-19 restrictions make it problematic to complete coursework-type tasks. Time, safety, resources and individual circumstances that present additional barriers to demonstrating ability through coursework have led to the decision not to require this type of evidence in some courses. This will mean that less class time is required for planning, researching, and developing assignments or other types of coursework, and more time will be available for learning and teaching across course content and question paper-type components of course assessment. The difficulty candidates may have in accessing resources for research, preparation, or other aspects of coursework, under COVID-19 restrictions will be mitigated.

Potential issues

Potential impact on those with protected characteristics of disability; potential impact on those who require additional support for learning or with mental health needs; potential impact on those with SIMD and other equity-related factors

Reliance on coursework-type tasks only

Where some courses rely fully on the completion of coursework-type tasks, this may present an issue for some who have absence due to disability, either on the day of a coursework assessment event, for several days/periods, or on a longer-term basis.

Some candidates may have a reduced ability to complete coursework at home (where this is permitted) due to reduced or no access to necessary resources, technology, or additional support for learning because of a disability, visual or hearing impairment, poverty or deprivation, or other factors such as being care-experienced or having caring responsibilities.

Mitigation

Coursework and associated conditions of assessment are flexible in many subjects and allow the gathering of evidence at any suitable time prior to submission of provisional results. It may be possible to reorganise scheduled assessment dates, and centres can work with the unique circumstances of candidates to support them in completing coursework.

Time and location flexibility can help to mitigate issues for those candidates who have difficulty completing work at home. Centres can work with individual candidates to support them with access to resources and specialist staff, and any assessment arrangements or reasonable adjustments that have been agreed.

Assessment arrangements can be made in centre, and reasonable adjustments can be discussed and agreed with SQA where appropriate.

Reliance on question-paper type tasks only

Where such assessments are lengthy, candidates with physical and severe visual difficulties may have problems in maintaining stamina. Candidates who have difficulty concentrating for extended periods may have problems in maintaining focus and have difficulties in demonstrating their attainment during question-paper type tasks. Other disabled candidates such as those with mental health difficulties or emotional and behavioural difficulties may find the assessment experience overly stressful, leading to increased anxiety that could negatively impact on their ability to demonstrate their attainment.

Mitigation

Where disability or mental health factors affect the ability of candidates to demonstrate their attainment, centres can provide a range of assessment arrangements/reasonable adjustments, including, for example, the consideration of extra time, using ICT and/or assistive technologies or the inclusion of rest breaks to mitigate the negative impact.

Additionally, it is intended that on balance the overall reduction in required evidence will reduce the stress that candidates may have in generating attainment evidence during COVID-19 restrictions and experiences. Assessments can also be carried out across several occasions, reducing the demands of each occasion.

Quality assurance processes

Aims

A range of quality assurance resources and activities underpin the 2021 ACM. These are designed to be used at department, centre, local authority and national level to ensure valid and reliable assessment, based on candidate evidence.

The key aim is that these processes ensure trust and consistency across the country so that a qualification awarded in one area is of the same standard as one awarded in another, irrespective of context. The quality assurance model requires all stakeholders, at all stages, to be fully involved and to work in partnership. In this way, learners will have the best chance of securing the outcomes that their efforts deserve.

Combined support from SQA, local authorities, colleges, independent schools and Education Scotland aims to enhance teachers' and lecturers' understanding of the consistent application of the national standard and to assist them in making accurate judgements. Schools and colleges can also ask SQA for further support and advice regarding the national standard, should they find it helpful.

This supportive quality assurance, both locally and nationally, is being provided in advance of schools and colleges submitting their provisional results. This up-front quality assurance will support the consistent implementation of national standards when assessing learner evidence while teaching and learning is ongoing, enabling candidates to produce evidence of attainment that can be reliably mapped to course assessment requirements and grades.

The more certain the understanding of the national standard, the more objectively it can be applied, thereby reducing the likelihood of inferred attainment, which could represent an increased risk of bias on the basis of protected characteristics or individual contexts.

Quality assurance resources include:

- ◆ Subject-specific guidance and assessment resources.
- ◆ Understanding Standards materials, course documents, past and specimen papers and additional assessment resources for 2021 for each graded National Course, illustrating standards and types of assessment tasks that should be applied. These can also be used by Communities of Practice as a focus for professional dialogue in relation to each course and its assessment.
- ◆ A programme of new webinars and newly-created materials for subjects that have identified the need for additional support. Additional webinars and materials may be added depending on teacher and lecturer needs. Recordings are made available on SQA's website for anyone who is unable to attend a live webinar.
- ◆ SQA Academy course and general guidance on producing estimates, updated for 2021. This is designed to support teachers and lecturers throughout the process of gathering evidence and determining the appropriate evidence-based grade and band to estimate for a candidate. The guidance emphasises fair and equitable treatment of all candidates and includes reference to factors that impact on candidates' access to learning as well as information on bias.

Quality assurance activities include:

- ◆ Support from local and national subject networks.
- ◆ Ongoing school and college quality assurance.
- ◆ Local authorities (where applicable) quality assurance.
- ◆ Dialogue between schools, colleges or local authorities and SQA where further support is required.
- ◆ SQA review of a selection of assessment evidence from schools and colleges, to determine the extent to which the national standards are being applied consistently. This is a no-detriment exercise to either centres or candidates whose evidence is reviewed — it is wholly supportive. Further detail is provided in the published [Alternative Certification Model](#).
- ◆ SQA post-submission data checks. If issues are identified, these will be checked with schools and colleges and, if appropriate, local authorities. It is anticipated that this will be by exception and relate mainly to administrative errors.

Potential issues

There are no discernible negative equality impacts on any candidates, but the quality assurance approach cannot monitor or discover any differences in application of national standards that relate to protected characteristics.

As discussed, previous work to analyse estimates and results did not reveal discrimination against any group. The quality assurance measures in the 2021 ACM should ensure that this remains the case by strengthening good practice to apply national standards consistently across all candidates, irrespective of context and personal characteristics, and based on demonstrated evidence.

SQA's Results Service will continue to permit appeals where centre discrimination or other conduct contrary to the Equality Act 2010 is perceived. The appeals process will be the subject of a separate consultation exercise.

Summary

Potential impact	Candidates	Mitigating actions
<p>It may not be possible to provide results for all candidates.</p>	<p>Potential impact on those with protected characteristics of disability, pregnancy and maternity, race; potential impact on assessment-only or home-schooled candidates.</p>	<p>Flexibility provides as many opportunities as possible to generate evidence.</p> <p>Options to defer or match evidence against other qualifications.</p>
<p>Bias may affect some assessment decisions.</p>	<p>Potential impact on all candidates including those with protected characteristics.</p>	<p>Significant quality assurance elements to mitigate against this risk, including training material, moderation activities, evidence-based results.</p> <p>Appeals policy will include results challenge on evidence of unlawful discrimination.</p>
<p>Some candidates may have difficulty in demonstrating attainment through coursework-type tasks due to absence, disrupted learning support or inadequate resources.</p> <p>Some candidates may have difficulty in demonstrating attainment through question-paper type tasks due to issues with stamina, concentration, stress or anxiety.</p>	<p>Potential impact on those with protected characteristics of disability; potential impact on those who require additional support for learning or with mental health needs; potential impact on those with SIMD and other equity-related factors.</p>	<p>Flexibility provides as many opportunities as possible to generate evidence and localise arrangements for individual candidates.</p> <p>Assessment arrangements can be provided in centre; reasonable adjustments can be agreed with SQA.</p> <p>Recommended evidence represents reduction in assessment load which can reduce stress.</p> <p>Assessments can be carried out across several occasions, reducing the demands of each occasion.</p>

Conclusions and next steps

The 2021 ACM is necessary to respond to changed and changing circumstances brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been developed to continue to provide accessible and inclusive qualifications and assessment that minimise potential barriers to entry and achievement. It has been co-created by SQA and the NQ 2021 group, representing all key stakeholders in Scottish education, with the aim of ensuring that the final model has the support of the system and ensures public confidence in the results.

The model is designed to be implemented in a consistent way across centres to ensure the continued integrity of courses and maintain public confidence in the qualifications. Inbuilt flexibility also allows for subject-specific and local arrangements to meet the needs and circumstances of candidates and to allow them to gain recognition for their learning, which in turn will provide opportunities for progression to further planned education, employment and training.

The EIA did find that the 2021 ACM may have a potential negative impact on some candidates with protected characteristics because of the unknown but possible risk of bias in assessment decisions. There is also a potential negative impact on some candidates, where COVID-19 or other circumstances mean they are unable to generate the required evidence to demonstrate their ability. The flexibility of the ACM means that, in most cases, centres will be able to take actions to mitigate these impacts.

SQA, schools, colleges and local authorities will continue to provide arrangements and services to mitigate negative impacts when they occur. Advice on the provision of appropriate assessment arrangements and other supportive practices are designed to help mitigate the adverse impact for many disabled candidates, and SQA will also continue to ensure that individual requests for reasonable adjustments are considered, where appropriate.

In session 2020–21, SQA and the NQ 2021 group will continue to monitor the impact of the ACM on candidates to determine if any further actions are required, and to ensure clarity over emerging issues, roles and responsibilities. Requests for advice submitted to the SQA Assessment Arrangements team and Customer Contact Centre will be monitored, and there will be targeted consultation with different equality stakeholder groups (for example through local authority learning support and disability networks) to allow consideration of any issues or concerns.