

**ARRANGEMENTS FOR NATIONAL 4, NATIONAL 5, HIGHER AND ADVANCED HIGHER COURSE ASSESSMENT IN SESSION 2023-2024****BACKGROUND**

NQ2023 Strategic Group is invited to consider the feedback outlined in this paper and agree the proposition that the full 2019 course assessment requirements should be reinstated in 2023-2024 with some minor refinements to National Course assessments in some subjects, by exception, where there is evidence from awarding and engagement activity to support such refinements eg a positive impact from the modifications.

**Context**

Modifications were introduced to National Course assessments in 2020 to mitigate against the extreme challenges faced by learners and practitioners at the height of the Coronavirus pandemic. The purpose of the modifications was to respond to a reduction in programmed learning and teaching in schools by reducing the overall volume of assessment for a single year, rather than introducing wholesale change. Within the modifications there was an expectation that, where possible, the courses would continue to be taught in full.

Recognising ongoing extreme COVI-19 disruption, SQA agreed core principles to support the retention of modifications to course assessments in session 2021-22:

1. Fairness to all learners.
2. Safe and secure certification of qualifications, while following the latest public health advice.
3. Maintaining the integrity and credibility of the qualification system, ensuring that standards are maintained over time, in the interests of learners.

In line with these principles, and in response to stakeholder engagement, SQA announced in April 2022 that modifications to National Course assessments would broadly be retained in session 2022-23 to mitigate against any potential COVID-19 related disruption as Scotland eased out of the pandemic. To ensure that learners developed the appropriate skills, knowledge and understanding to support progression, centres were advised that they should deliver the full course content.

Since SQA's announcement in April 2022, awarding bodies and regulators in the rest of the UK (RoUK) have returned to the assessment of the full course content in 2022-23. The decision to take this position was based on the view that COVID-19 is endemic within the UK. This has resulted in a divergence in approach across the UK.

SQA has carried out a range of engagement with key internal and external stakeholder groups on the position of the National Course modifications in 2023-2024.

The purpose of this paper is to:

- provide feedback on engagement with internal and external stakeholder groups.
- recommend a final approach for the assessment of National Courses in 2023-24.

## UPDATE

### Feedback from stakeholder engagement

A range of stakeholder engagement was carried out between October 2022 and January 2023 with learners; parents and carers; practitioners; SQA qualification teams and their senior examining teams; National Qualification Support Teams; SQA's Advisory Council; SQA's Qualification Committee; the NQ2023 Working Group and the NQ2023 Strategic Group to determine stakeholder views on the position of the modifications for 2023-24 as either:

Option 1: The modifications made to National Course assessments should remain in full in 2023-2024

OR

Option 2: The full 2019 National Course assessment requirements should be reinstated in 2023-2024

OR

Option 3: the full 2019 course assessment requirements should be reinstated in 2023-2024 with some minor refinements to course assessments in some subjects, where there is strong evidence to support such refinements eg a positive outcome from the modifications.

The following information provides the feedback gathered from this engagement.

### Feedback from Qualification Managers and their senior examining teams

Feedback from Qualification Managers and their senior examining teams noted that the modifications had a positive impact on performance in some subjects. For example, in some cases they provided additional time for learning and teaching without substantially affecting learner performance. In others, the modifications refined the course assessment and reduced instances of over assessment. This was particularly true of subjects where a full course component was not removed for example, in English, Media and Art and Design.

However, there were a significant number of examining teams that highlighted a notable impact on candidate performance across subjects. Although SQA had an expectation that the courses would be delivered in full in 2021-22, it was clear that this was not often the case with evidence from awarding in 2022 highlighting that learning and teaching may have been narrowed to cover the modified course assessment requirements only. There was evidence of issues with synoptic assessment and learner progression through the SCQF levels e.g., candidates at Advanced Higher displaying a reduced performance due to their not having developed adequate knowledge and skills, prior to Advanced Higher, as they would have previously through exposure to the full National 5 and Higher Courses.

Examining teams also indicated that often coursework provides learners with the opportunity to personalise their learning, extend their own knowledge and apply skills in practice (including practical skills) and that, for this reason, the continued removal of coursework is detrimental to candidates' overall achievement. This was particularly true for those subjects that removed the coursework component from the assessment. For example, in Geography, History, Physics. Feedback from awarding indicates that the modifications may be creating a knowledge and skills deficit because the full courses are not being delivered equally across schools. This may be perpetuating loss of learning and disadvantaging learners as they progress to their next stage of their learning. In their 2022 course reports, SQA's

Principal Assessors reflected on the impact of COVID-19 on candidate performance and on the consequences of the modifications to assessment where these were a relevant factor.

As COVID-19 is now being regarded as endemic within Scotland and disruption levels are significantly reduced, there is real concern amongst qualification teams that the retention of the course modifications for a further year is likely to seriously impede learner progression. Although it is recognised that there remains existing loss of learning in the system, qualification teams raised concerns over a serious risk that a continued lack of exposure to the full course content may perpetuate and even exacerbate this loss of learning.

In addition, retention of the National Course assessment modifications in 2023-24 will heighten the divergence between the national standard in Scotland and the rest of the UK, which, as noted above, returned to full course requirements in session 2022-23. Qualification teams noted a serious risk that receiving institutions may begin to regard Scotland's National Courses as being less credible in comparison with qualifications from England, Wales, Northern Ireland and internationally. The two risks noted above are in direct conflict with a key principle underpinning the modifications, which states that the modifications must maintain the integrity and credibility of the Scottish qualification system, ensuring that standards are maintained over time, in the interests of learners. Consequently, there is an overarching risk that the retention of the modifications in 2023-2024 may have an undesirable effect on learner achievement moving forward.

Refining course assessments in some subjects where there is evidence from awarding that the modification has had a positive impact on the performance of the course will allow learners to be exposed to the full range of skills, knowledge and understanding and better prepare them for progression, whilst preventing unnecessary over assessment. On this basis Qualification Managers and examining teams believe that Option 3 is the most appropriate for session 2023-24.

### **Feedback from senior committees**

Feedback gathered from the NQ2023 Strategic Group, NQ2023 Working Group, SQA's Qualification Committee and SQA's Advisory Council supported Option 3 as the most appropriate position for 2023-2024. This decision was reinforced by the need for SQA to reflect on the experiences of awarding by keeping those modifications that have worked well, whilst recognising that retaining the modifications across all subjects was likely to be detrimental for learners in terms of progression. All groups emphasised that there was still significant impact from loss of learning within schools and colleges but recognised that retaining the modifications was likely to perpetuate this, particularly with the continued removal of coursework in most subjects. The return of coursework was considered to be of key importance.

Consideration was given to whether a phased return might be possible, but on balance, concerns were expressed that this position lacked clarity, may be difficult to implement in schools (particularly in bi-level classes) and may result in substantial work for teachers, which was to be avoided. However, members were clear that any additional workload for teachers, that relates specifically to the retention of modifications in some subjects, should be minimised and that no new modifications should be made. Senior external groups also noted that communication to centres should be at the earliest point possible, before the Easter Break.

## **Feedback from National Qualification Support Teams**

Feedback from National Qualification Support Teams indicated support for Option 3.

In a similar way to SQA's senior committees, a significant number of respondents highlighted, learners continue to suffer the effects of the pandemic and will likely do so for some time to come. While some respondents intimated that the reduction in coursework assessments had been beneficial for teaching and learning, others felt that these should be reinstated as soon as possible to protect qualifications' integrity and credibility and give learners the opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills. Feedback also indicated that the retention of the modifications was likely to perpetuate loss of learning, particularly where the full courses were not being taught in schools and that this was not in the best interest of learners.

## **Survey results and interviews with learners, parents and carers and practitioners**

In October 2022 SQA began an evaluation of the arrangements for National Courses in 2022-23 – the full results of which will be published in March 2023. This evaluation involved an initial survey, followed by a set of scheduled interviews.

The primary objective of the evaluation questions on modifications was to understand how the modifications to assessment had impacted on learners and practitioners. As those groups worked directly with the modifications, they were given the opportunity to feedback their views both qualitatively and quantitatively with a view to gathering their lived experiences.

As mentioned above, the main aim of these evaluation questions was to understand the impact of modifications. This information was largely gathered through qualitative questions asking what worked well and what did not. This gave us a range of helpful feedback. We also chose to ask a quantitative question asking for respondents' views on whether we should keep or remove modifications. It should be noted that at the time of the survey, SQA had not considered Option 3 and as a consequence, respondents were only given two options:

- Should the modifications to National Course assessments be retained in 2023-24
- Should the modifications to National Course assessments be removed in 2023-24

The quantitative data gives us an indication of the initial views of key stakeholders but does not give us detailed information around what those stakeholders believe SQA should do if there is evidence from awarding that modifications are not in the best interests of learners.

As parents and carers did not share the day to day lived experiences of being in the classroom while courses were being taught, they were asked to provide their views quantitatively only. The information below outlines a summary of the findings from this engagement:

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**Conclusion**

We understand that schools and colleges are still recovering from the after-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and that there is residual loss of learning included as part of that journey. However, modifications to National Courses were put in place to mitigate extreme disruption, specifically related to the COVID-19 pandemic and we know that this extreme disruption has now ended.

Evidence gathered from awarding indicates that to retain the modifications in all subjects will continue to result in a skills and knowledge deficit that is damaging for learners as they progress to the next stage of education, employment and/or training. We also know that this prolonged skills and knowledge deficit potentially presents a comparability risk when learners are compared with other learners from across the rest of the UK and internationally for selection purposes.

The continued removal of coursework also perpetuates the current position of high stakes examinations over a blend of examination and coursework, something that National Courses were never designed to do. This concern was raised by both practitioners and learners during the engagement process. SQA staff and appointees and, all of the senior external committees have considered the position of the modifications and believe that National Courses should return to the full 2019 course assessment requirements in 2023-24 with minor refinements in some subjects (by exception) where there is evidence from awarding

that the modification has had a positive impact on the performance of the course assessment, as Option 3.

Qualitative feedback from engagement with learners, practitioners, parents and carers also indicates that this hybrid approach may be the most appropriate course of action by retaining those modifications that have worked well, whilst removing those that may be detrimental for the purposes of progression or the development of the full range of skills and knowledge in any course.

Option 3 aligns with the principles designed to support the modifications to National Course assessments because it is fairest to all learners and maintains the integrity and credibility of the qualification system, ensuring that standards are maintained over time, in the interests of learners.

### **Recommendation**

NQ2023 Strategic Group are invited to consider the feedback received and agree the proposition that the full 2019 course assessment requirements should be reinstated in 2023-2024 with some minor refinements to course assessments in some subjects, by exception, where there is evidence from awarding to support such refinements eg a positive impact from the modifications (as Option 3)