

NATIONAL 4, NATIONAL 5, HIGHER AND ADVANCED HIGHER NATIONAL COURSE ASSESSMENT MODIFICATIONS SESSION 2023-2024

BACKGROUND

Context

In response to ongoing public health advice and to support extreme COVID-19 related disruption, SQA implemented modifications to National Course assessments for session 2020-21 that supported:

1. the delivery and assessment of subjects that were constrained by social distancing measures. For example, in practical and performance-based components.
2. increased learning and teaching opportunities, where possible.
3. a more flexible approach to assessment for learners, whilst maintaining the validity of the qualifications.

Modifications to National Course assessments were intended to support the validity of National 4 to Advanced Higher courses, whilst mitigating the challenges of a reduction in programmed teaching at school level 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 be taught in full.

Recognising ongoing 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 develop the appropriate skills, knowledge and understanding to support progression, centres have been advised that they should continue to 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.

Given this divergence, it is important to consider the extent to which and for how long the modifications made to National 4 to Advanced Higher Course assessments should remain in place.

In line with this, SQA must now consider the following options whether:

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

OR

- 2) The full 2019 National course assessment requirements should be reinstated in 2023-2024

OR

- 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.

SQA is currently undertaking a range of engagement with external stakeholders on the position of the National Course modifications in 2023-2024. This engagement is due to fully conclude in early January 2023.

This purpose of this paper is to build on this evidence by providing an outline of the risks and benefits associated with these options based on evidence gathered to date. The paper also poses a number of questions for discussion with Advisory Council members.

UPDATE

In March 2022 engagement on the position of the modifications for 2022-23 was carried out with learners, parents and carers, practitioners, SQA qualification teams, National Qualification Support Teams, SQA's Advisory Council, the NQ2022 Working Group and the NQ2022 Strategic Group. At that time participants were also asked whether the full 2019 course specifications should return in 2023-24 or 2024-25.

Data from engagement with learners, parents and/or carers and practitioners in March 2022 indicated a reluctance to return to the full 2019 course specifications in 2023-24, with the majority of practitioners and learners believing that this should happen in 2024-25. Engagement with National Qualification Support Team Members contradicted this view, indicating there should be a return to the full course requirements in 2023-24 to ensure that the national standard is maintained.

Feedback from SQA's Advisory Council, the NQ2022 Working Group and the NQ2022 Strategic Group emphasised that learners coming through the last stage of the broad general education had suffered greater loss of learning than many of their more senior peers, due to the focus within schools on the senior phase arrangements. It was felt that these learners could be significantly disadvantaged if the 2019 course specifications are reinstated too quickly and that a return to the 2019 course requirements should not be done quickly and should be driven by attainment evidence across years. Conversely, there was a real concern amongst these groups that the continued removal of coursework may be disadvantaging learners.

Data gathered from awarding in 2022 indicated that the impact of the modifications had been variable, not just between subjects, but also between courses in the same subject at different levels.

Feedback from Qualification 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 they 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 qualification teams that highlighted a notable impact on candidate performance across subjects. Although SQA had an expectation that the courses would be delivered in full, it was clear that this was not often the case with evidence that learning and teaching had been narrowed to cover the modified course assessment requirements only. This resulted in issues with synoptic assessment and learner progression through the SCQF levels with candidates at Advanced Higher displaying a reduced performance due to learners not having developed adequate knowledge and skills, prior to Advanced Higher, to the same extent as they would have previously through exposure to the full National 5 and Higher Courses.

Qualification 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 the continued removal of coursework is detrimental to candidates' overall achievement. This was particularly true for those subjects that removed the coursework component. For example, in Geography, History, Physics. This fits closely with concerns raised around the continued removal of coursework by Advisory Council and the NQ2022 groups in March 2022.

To consider the most appropriate option for the future of the National Course assessment modifications, the following risks and benefits have been compiled, based on data gathered from qualification teams at Awarding 2022.

1) Modifications to National Course assessments should remain in full in 2023-2024

The modifications to National Course assessments were put in place in 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 as an emergency position in direct response to COVID-19 related disruption. They were retained in session 2022-23 to provide support and stability to the system, should COVID related disruption re-occur. 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, there is 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 returned to full course requirements in session 2022-23. There is 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.

2) the full 2019 National course assessment requirements should be reinstated in 2023-2024.

National Courses have been carefully designed to encourage, breadth, depth and challenge in their learning experiences. Experiences from Awarding 2022 indicates that in most subjects a return to the full course assessment requirements is key to ensuring that learners are exposed to the full range of skills, knowledge and understanding to allow them to progress to the next stage in education, employment and/or training. Returning to the full course assessment requirements is the most effective way of ensuring that learners can do this effectively. A return to the full course assessment requirements will also mean that National Courses retain their credibility and comparability nationally and internationally.

The risks associated with a return to the full course assessments in 2023-24 lie predominantly with centre resourcing and the ability of centres to revert back to undertaking the full course assessment requirements quite quickly. There is also a risk that centres who have not been delivering the full courses, may have to undertake remedial work with learners in order for them to have the necessary knowledge, skills and understanding to progress to the next level. The timing of any communication to centres will be key in ensuring that centres have adequate time to prepare, as outlined by the NQ2023 Groups.

In addition, those subjects where the modifications have worked well and have improved learning, teaching and assessment will have to return to 2019 requirements, which may be viewed by practitioners as reductive.

3) return to the full 2019 course assessment requirements 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 that reduces over assessment.

As noted, feedback from Awarding 2022 indicates that, in some subjects, the modifications made to the course assessments have had a positive impact on learning and teaching and have reduced over assessment. This is particularly true in those subjects where the modifications encouraged a refinement of evidence, rather than the removal of a full course component. It is important to note that this is not the case in every subject. Returning to the full course assessment requirements in all subjects, with some minor refinements to course assessments in some subjects (by exception) would allow learners to be exposed to the full range of skills, knowledge and understanding to allow them to progress, whilst preventing unnecessary over assessment. Any minor changes should not be considered as a review, but a set of minor refinements to the existing assessment requirements. It is important to note that these minor refinements will improve SQA's qualification offering in advance of the full qualification reform, meaning that learners will benefit from the changes now, rather than waiting for the output of the reform, which is likely to take a number of years to implement.

The risks associated with this option are similar to those of option 2. However, there is an additional risk that minor changes to course assessments in some subjects may be viewed as an additional burden, particularly if they are not consistent within curriculum areas. In addition, any changes to the full course assessment requirements may be viewed as unnecessary given the current Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessments being led by Professor Louise Hayward. Again, timely communication to centres will be required.

Next steps

SQA has been working with both the NQ2023 Working Group and Strategic Group to discuss the benefits and risks to these options. Although no final decision has been made, both these groups agreed that Option 3 was the most appropriate position but cautioned that any refinements made to the full course assessment requirements should:

- be by exception only
- be based on evidence of a positive impact, at awarding, of modifications to the course assessment
- not introduce anything new, to avoid unnecessary workload at centre level
- be consistent within curriculum areas
- ensure that the national standard is maintained across the National Course suite as a whole
- be clearly communicated to centres as early as possible and no later than the end of March, prior to the Easter break.

Given that the rest of the UK awarding bodies have returned to full course requirements and that National Courses are due to undergo a period of reform, timescales to be confirmed, the following questions are posed within the recommendations. It is anticipated that these will continue to inform the final decision, alongside results from the stakeholder engagement activity, with a view to informing centres of the decision at the end of February 2023.

Recommendations

To further support this evidence gathering, Advisory Council are invited to discuss the following questions:

- ◆ What are the risks and benefits associated with retaining the modifications to course assessment in 2023-24?
- ◆ What are the risks and benefits associated with a return to full course assessment requirements in 2023-2024?
- ◆ What are the risks and benefits associated with a return to the full 2019 course assessment requirements 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?