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Context

On 26 March 2020, SQA and Colleges Scotland issued a joint statement on Higher National certification. This acknowledged the unprecedented times in which the sector is operating and a shared commitment to recognise learner achievement in as fair a way as possible.

SQA and Colleges Scotland have agreed, in principle, to a holistic model for internal assessment decisions which recognises that assessment evidence, for most learners, is incomplete, and acknowledges the need for flexibility in approaches to ongoing assessment (where this is possible and practicable).

Wherever possible, learners should continue to engage remotely in learning, teaching and assessment until the scheduled end of block/semester, or to the point where the course team considers that sufficient evidence is in place to enable a final assessment judgement to be made. It is recognised that the gathering of additional evidence may not be possible for all learners and holistic outcome decisions may need to be based, making use of this guidance, on the assessment evidence currently available.

Where learners have real and significant barriers to learning, assessor judgement may be utilised to a greater extent. This will enable colleges to use their professional judgement to assess a broad range of learner evidence, including formative and summative work completed to date, additional assessment evidence where this can be generated, witnessed work, previous outcomes and part-completed work. Assessment judgements will also be informed by staff knowledge of their learners, their engagement, progress and their achievements to date.

By utilising a professionally informed and evidence-based holistic approach, learners can be recognised for their hard work and learning, and appropriate academic standards can be maintained.

The arrangements that have been agreed strike an appropriate and reasonable balance between recognising and certificating learner attainment and maintaining appropriate standards. Colleges are able to utilise their established internal quality assurance processes and adapt these to support a more holistic approach. Pro-formas have been provided to assist with records, however, colleges many have their own which they would prefer to use.

These arrangements have been agreed in respect of students impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic through to the end of academic year 2019–20 in respect of Higher National Qualifications, NC, NPAs and NQ free-standing units. This **does not include** PDAs, SVQs or other SQA qualifications.

The decision-making process

Where learners have generated sufficient evidence to meet the course aims, and this has been confirmed by internal quality assurance mechanisms, results should be processed as normal.

Where sufficient evidence to meet the course aims has not yet been generated, but there is still opportunity for learners to generate it under normal conditions, assessment should proceed as normal.

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Where this is not possible, course teams should consider whether the normal conditions of assessment can be adapted to allow learners to generate evidence. Where this is possible, you should refer to the guidance in this document to ensure amendments to conditions are in line with SQA requirements. This is particularly important where specific health, safety or competence related issues cannot be inferred.

Where it is not possible for assessment conditions to be adapted, you should consider first whether there are specific health and safety or competence requirements that cannot be inferred. If so, assessment of learners should be deferred until this can be delivered under normal conditions (after the COVID-19 restrictions have been lifted). Where there are no such specialist requirements, assessment may be deferred if it is practical to do so, or you may determine whether the learner has met the course aims by using a range of indicators of competence, such as partial evidence, formative assessments etc (taking into account any tolerances or rules which have been advised on a subject-specific basis). However, where specific health, safety or competence issues cannot be inferred, positive outcomes cannot be determined (see appendix 3 Decision Tree for illustration).

Generating candidate evidence

Where full evidence to satisfy the course aims has not yet been generated, you must consider, and document, alternative learner evidence for the relevant qualification. Staff making assessment judgements based on alternative evidence must consider a range of learner evidence with strong predictive value. You are encouraged **where reasonable and possible** to seek a range of alternative academic evidence for consideration, and not solely a single assessment piece or source. This may result in making professional decisions which infer the learner's competence, where it is safe to do so and where no risk is posed to health or safety. SQA will provide guidance on these areas of concern.

Where sufficient evidence to satisfy the course aims has not been generated, and learners are continuing study with the college on an HND or other course, you should consider deferring assessment to a later stage if it is practical to do so.

Evidence should be pulled together from a variety of sources. It may already have been generated, or may involve assessors providing learners with additional and alternative opportunities to demonstrate their competence, knowledge and understanding through a range of reasonable and practicable alternative activities (eg open-book essay or report writing in lieu of closed-book; assessment by video observation, time-limited assessments; and professional discussion). SQA will provide advice on assessments where alternative methods are not suitable.

At local level, academic teams must consider and decide on approaches to generate new evidence focused on the outcomes of learning that underpin a qualification. Where possible, this should also reflect the evidence requirements outlined within the unit specification for Graded Units, but flexibility around this will be necessary, and staff must ensure that they are acting reasonably and consistently in the circumstances in adopting alternative approaches of evidence gathering.

Note that the Decision Tree (Appendix 3) should be used for approaches to both course work and for Graded Units.

It is important to note that, while flexibility around conditions of assessment may allow open-book activities to replace established closed-book practice, you should use your centre-devised instruments of

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assessment in the first instance. SQA will provide colleges with alternative instruments of assessments where possible. SQA secure material should not be used without the prior agreement of SQA. Normal college reporting arrangements should be followed should it be felt that the security of any national instrument of assessment has been compromised. SQA will provide subject-specific guidance where it is not possible to change conditions of assessment.

Examples of learner evidence

Below are examples of the types of learner materials that could be considered to generate evidence for key outcomes of learning. Course teams will need to consider the validity and weighting of each and this consideration will contribute to the assessment decisions they reach.

- ◆ **Existing evidence already fully completed** in line with existing summative assessment arrangements.
- ◆ **Existing evidence partially completed** in line with existing assessment arrangements.
- ◆ **Cross-assessing with other units:** evidence gathered from assessment in other units undertaken by learners is likely to include content which can be used to contribute more widely to underpin holistic decision making and/or meet assessment criteria elsewhere.
- ◆ **New assessments covering the learning outcomes using normal approaches to assessment.**
- ◆ **New assessments covering the learning outcomes using modified assessment arrangements —** for example:
 - **Remote testing** (this could be paper based, app based, online, audio, video): This should contain content to assess skills, knowledge and understanding, and should include sufficient challenge and application to demonstrate the appropriate level of attainment.
 - **Professional Discussion:** using and recording professional discussion between a candidate and an assessor focusing on, and enhancing, evidence already provided or demonstrated by the learner — 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 (video, photographic, portfolio, witness testimony), alongside work already demonstrated and assessed.

SQA will provide guidance on areas where alternative approaches are not suitable.

- ◆ **Formative coursework:** This may have been completed in a developmental way without time constraints and with some peer or tutor support.

The best prediction will be based on comprehensive assessment information covering (where possible) all areas assessed. This does not necessarily mean that every topic in every area needs to be assessed exhaustively. A selection of important and representative questions can give a good indication of likely performance on a holistic basis across the full group award.

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The examples above relate equally to **Graded Units**. Where these are incomplete and where further progress is not possible colleges should refer to the Decision Tree to determine next steps. In some cases, a grade may be determined, alongside other learner evidence, based on progress and achievement to date, providing there is sufficient evidence in line with the grading criteria to meet course aims.

Assessment of evidence

Assessors will engage in professional discussion with their course teams in reviewing outcomes of learning across the qualification to identify, and assess, for each learner, whether these outcomes have been met. This should be done on a holistic basis for the group award, and assessors will determine each individual learner's success holistically. Individual colleges will oversee robust arrangements for agreeing the learner's overall result relative to the assessment evidence available. It is essential that records are kept to document this process.

Each college should review its current internal quality assurance (IQA) processes to support, advise, moderate and confirm the work of course teams in line with SQA advice, guidance and rules in relation to making effective assessment decisions (MEAD). This will support the change from assessment decisions being made by individual assessors to a more holistic, course team approach to decision making. Colleges will adopt an internal quality assurance panel model to complement and strengthen the course team model.

The college's IQA panel would ensure standardisation of course teams' interpretation and use of the SQA Decision Tree (**Appendix 3**) and supporting guidance. This will ensure the objectivity, fairness and accuracy of assessment judgements at course level. IQA panel arrangements should be appropriate to the context and scale of the college's assessment activity, and should operate with a risk-based focus. Records of course team judgements and IQA panel rationale, discussions and decisions should be retained until December 2020. This date may be extended if required.

It is recognised that not all learners will pass. Where a learner has not achieved the award **and this is considered a direct result of the impact of cessation of face-to-face teaching and college closure**, it is important that consideration be given to keeping the candidate's entry open and allowing the learner the opportunity to engage in further learning, teaching and assessment when conditions allow. This may arise (for example) where a learner has undertaken only a small proportion of the qualification, where there are substantial new subject areas within the group award that the learner has not undertaken (resulting in some course aims not being achieved), or where changes to assessment method are not possible — for example, in respect of health and safety concerns.

Resulting and certification

Once holistic assessment decisions have been finalised, candidate results for the planned units within the group award will be submitted to SQA through normal resulting channels, where possible. Certification will be undertaken by SQA in line with normal arrangements (where possible). Any change to this will be communicated to centres.

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External verification

Normal external verification activities (with a small number of exceptions in respect of previously identified issues of malpractice or previous serious non-compliance) will be suspended for the remainder of academic session 2019–20.

Colleges' own quality systems and processes are robust and should be used to verify the appropriateness of assessment outcomes and certification.

Evidence of holistic assessment outcomes should be retained until 31 December 2020. SQA will retain the right to undertake a risk-based approach to sampling retrospectively (eg if pass rates seem to have changed significantly). The retention date would be extended if necessary.

Academic appeals

The Centre's established academic appeals process should be followed for any learner who feels that the assessment outcome reached does not accurately reflect their achievement. Given the unusual circumstances and revised arrangements, an increase in appeals may be expected and Centres must have robust plans in place to deal with appeals timeously.

References

You are required to maintain robust records in support of all assessment decisions. A number of pro forma have been developed to support this (these, or your own documentation may be used):

- ◆ Record of Achievement Form
- ◆ Evidence Gathering Form
- ◆ Professional Discussion Record (and Professional Discussion Guideline)
- ◆ Candidate Outcome Record (Session 2019–20)
- ◆ SQA-provided subject-specific guidance

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Appendix 1: Frequently Asked Questions – Staff

Q: How can we ensure standardisation in assessment judgements across the sector?

A: The guidance supports standardisation of approach across the sector. These are truly exceptional circumstances and, in light of timescales and logistics, it will not be possible to moderate assessment judgements sector wide. SQA have acknowledged that colleges are experienced, trusted and trustworthy institutions that are able to utilise and apply professional judgement and evidence to deliver fair and reasonable outcomes for our students.

Q: How do we quality assure?

A: Internal Quality Assurance will be strengthened within each college to support, advise, moderate and confirm the work of course teams in line with SQA guidance. This will support the change from assessment decisions being made by individual assessors to a more holistic, course team approach to decision making.

Q: Can we share resources and approaches across the sector?

A: SQA will support with guidance and resources wherever possible. Colleges may use existing networks for sharing of resources where possible and practicable. However, approaches for supporting students in generating assessment evidence are dependent on a wide range of local factors, including the stage to which assessment has already been achieved, access to equipment and resources, and remote communication networks. Therefore, assessment approaches and conditions will be based on professional judgement at local level.

Q: Can we use open-book assessment in lieu of closed-book?

A: Yes, this would be a suitable alternative approach in some cases, in agreement with SQA. For example, it may be desirable to set this as a timed assessment. Whilst flexibility around conditions of assessment may allow open-book activities to replace established closed-book practice, care must be taken not to compromise existing secure assessment materials.

Q: Will staff be able to devise and implement alternative assessment instruments without having these prior verified?

A: The approaches to alternative assessment and the development of any additional instruments of assessment would be entrusted in these exceptional circumstances to the professional judgment of the course team, and subject to normal internal verification arrangements.

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Q: How will all of this apply to students with additional support needs?

A: Staff should choose the most appropriate assessment methodology to make the assessment accessible. This will be in partnership with college student support services. This could include, for example, the use of professional discussion as an alternative to written evidence if a scribe is usually required

Q: What about SVQ? Can we apply the same guidance?

A: No, SVQs are subject to regulatory requirements, and separate guidance will be issued in respect of these.

Q: How can we apply a grade to a Graded Unit where this cannot be completed and may even be the weakest element of available evidence?

A: The Graded Unit is the summation and application of the candidate's understanding of mandatory units in the HN to meet the course aims. The course team, through a professional discussion, review the quality and sufficiency of candidate evidence, in addition to any work submitted for the Graded Unit, to determine a grade.

Q: What about other awarding bodies? Can we apply the same guidance?

A: No, each awarding body will establish its own arrangements, and separate guidance will be issued in respect of these.

Q: Does there need to be evidence for all outcomes?

A: The course team, using professional discussion and judgement, will reach an outcome decision, where possible, based on **holistic review of all available candidate evidence**, as well as staff knowledge of their candidates, their engagement, progress and their achievements to date. This may include areas where the available evidence is used to infer competence or predict an outcome that is reasonable and justifiable in respect of the wider evidence base available. Staff should refer to the Decision Tree (Appendix 3) for guidance.

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Appendix 2: Frequently Asked Questions – Learners

Q: Why do I need to still undertake assessments?

A: Although face-to-face learning and teaching has stopped, arrangements have been made in many areas for learning to continue remotely to enable you to complete your course successfully despite the very challenging conditions we are all experiencing currently. Continuing to engage in assessment opportunities will ensure that you have comprehensive assessment evidence. Staff will review this to decide on a result for you.

Q: Shouldn't all students just pass the course? It isn't our fault we can't continue as normal.

A: It is vital that any award made is supported by a rigorous and **fair** assessment process. The college recognises the challenge and frustration experienced by our students and is working hard to support you and to ensure that your hard work and achievement is rewarded.

Q: How will my course result be determined?

A: Experienced college assessors will review all the available assessment evidence to assess whether you have met the course aims. Using this evidence, and their knowledge of your engagement and progress, they will holistically estimate your individual success.

Q: I have additional support needs. What does all of this mean for me?

A: Staff will use the most appropriate assessment methodology to make the assessment accessible for you. This will be in partnership with college student support services. This could include, for example, the use of professional discussion instead of a written exercise if you normally require a scribe.

Q: I have a conditional offer from university and my Graded Units will be impossible to complete.

A: Where it is not possible to complete the Graded Unit (for example because you have no access to necessary resources or equipment), staff will use any Graded Unit work completed to date plus a range of other assessment evidence to predict and award a grade, where it is possible to do so. This will depend on the quality and sufficiency of evidence available.

Q: I haven't been able to fully achieve my course because my assessment evidence was insufficient. How and when will I be able to complete any units that I did not get awarded?

A: Where you have not achieved your award and this is considered a direct result of the impact of college closure, your entry can be left open and you should be given the opportunity to engage in further learning,

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teaching and assessment when conditions allow. Colleges are seeking to ensure that there is no detriment to learner funding entitlements in these situations.

Q: What if I don't get the grade I expected?

A: If you feel that the assessment outcome reached does not accurately reflect your achievement you will be able to submit an appeal follow the college's academic appeals process

Q: I don't have computer access to my college. How will my assessment decision be determined?

A: We recognise that, for some students, there are particular barriers to continuing to engage with learning, teaching and assessment. If there is already a significant amount of evidence in place, it may be possible for staff to use this to predict a grade. However, there may simply be insufficient evidence. If this is the case your entry can be left open and you should be given the opportunity to engage in further learning, teaching and assessment when conditions allow. Colleges are seeking to ensure that there is no detriment to learner funding entitlements in these situations.

Q: I have caring responsibilities and haven't been able to engage with ongoing opportunities for assessment.

A: We recognise that, for some learners, there are particular barriers to continuing to engage with learning, teaching and assessment. If there is already a significant amount of evidence in place, it may be possible for staff to use this to predict your grade. However, there may simply be insufficient evidence. If this is the case, your entry can be left open and you should be given the opportunity to engage in further learning, teaching and assessment when conditions allow. Colleges are seeking to ensure that there is no detriment to learner funding entitlements in these situations.

Q: Will universities recognise my grades?

A: Yes. Your result and grade will result from a rigorous evidence-based assessment process. This will be a valid result that reflects your achievement throughout your course.

Q: Can I progress within college with an incomplete result?

A: This will depend on your individual progress. Staff would discuss with you the available options.

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Appendix 3: The decision-making process

