



Changes to assessment of National courses: Your questions answered

January 2017

1. Why are changes being made to the National courses?

The Deputy First Minister (DFM) announced in September that he wanted to reduce workload for pupils and teachers by removing units and unit assessment from the National courses. Since this announcement, SQA has been planning the necessary structural changes to the courses and course assessment as requested by the DFM. Our common goal should be to reduce workload for candidates and staff, while maintaining the standards and integrity of the qualifications.

2. What are the changes to National courses?

In order to address workload concerns for teachers and candidates, SQA was asked to remove units and unit assessments from National courses. The current course assessment approach requires candidates to complete internally assessed National units and a course assessment, which is normally an examination question paper and/or coursework. Removing the units and unit assessments means that we need to strengthen the course assessments to maintain 24 SCQF credit points and protect the integrity of National courses.

The changes to course assessment will result in one or more of the following:

- ◆ extension of the existing question paper
- ◆ extension of the existing item of coursework
- ◆ a new question paper
- ◆ a new item of coursework

Please note that there will be no change to the aims, rationale or content of the courses. Only the assessment arrangements will change, along with clarification on content.

3. When will the changes take effect?

Units and unit assessments will be removed from National courses as follows:

- ◆ National 5 from 2017–18
- ◆ Higher from 2018–2019
- ◆ Advanced Higher from 2019–20

Further subject-specific information about the enhanced course assessment for National 5 will be made available at the end of January 2017.

4. Will the course documentation change?

The removal of units from courses gives SQA the opportunity to streamline existing course documentation – identified as an area of concern for teachers earlier in the year. The revised course documentation will include introductory information, mandatory content and information about course assessment. It will also address issues identified in the subject review reports which were published in May 2016.

The revised documents will be published in line with the changes to National courses:

- ◆ 2017–18 for National 5
- ◆ 2018–19 for Higher
- ◆ 2019–20 for Advanced Higher

The revised course specification for each National 5 subject will be available at the end of April 2017. This will include mandatory content for delivering and assessing the course. Additional materials, including further support and administration information, will follow between the end of May and the end of September 2017. These revisions will provide teachers with all the information they need to deliver their National 5 course.

In many courses we will extend the existing question paper and/or coursework to ensure breadth of course coverage, due to the removal of units. In a smaller number of courses we will introduce a new question paper or coursework. This is required where a significant aspect of the course is currently only assessed in the units. For example, practical subjects which are currently assessed by coursework alone may be modified by the addition of a new question paper to assess knowledge and understanding. Similarly, in a small number of subjects some significant skills are currently only assessed within units and this may require the addition of coursework to assess these skills.

5. Can Recognising Positive Achievement or ‘fallback’ still be used?

Recognising Positive Achievement (RPA) currently supports candidates who have been unsuccessful at National 5 by enabling them to achieve National 4 retrospectively. This arrangement will no longer operate from session 2017–18 onwards as the removal of units from National 5 courses means that the unitised model – on which RPA is based – will no longer exist.

The units that are being removed from National 5 courses will still be available as free-standing units for schools to use as appropriate, as many schools and colleges use the units as component parts of other awards. Free-standing units will be subject to normal SQA verification to ensure the ongoing credibility of national standards.

6. Are the grades changing?

As reported in our *Centre News* newsletter on 10 November, the Assessment and National Qualifications (ANQ) group is discussing the possibility of extending the current grade scale below grade C in order to recognise a broader range of learner achievements. We will communicate more information once the change has been finalised.

There has been recent press coverage about extension of the grade scale and its impact on standards. Please be reassured that the standard required to pass a National 5 at Grades A to C will not change. SQA will still calculate pass rates based on those candidates who achieve Grades A to C.

7. Are National 4 courses changing?

There are currently no planned changes to National 4 courses; however, discussions continue at the ANQ group. Courses will remain internally assessed on a pass or fail basis and be subject to our published external verification arrangements.

SQA is undertaking a second round of fieldwork with schools. We are gathering the views of learners who are doing National 4, or a combination of National 4 and National 5, to feed into the ANQ group discussion, alongside advice from all stakeholders represented on the group.

8. Are there operational implications?

SQA is working through the significant IT and operational implications of these changes. We are also in discussion with management information system (MIS) providers to ensure they understand the potential changes required to their systems. Discussions are also ongoing with the Scottish Government's Insight Team who will communicate changes in due course.

9. Is there support available?

We are grateful for the ongoing working partnership with schools and colleges across Scotland. Our common goal is to reduce workload for teachers and candidates.

SQA is able to support schools in making the right decisions regarding the changes to National courses. Our Liaison Managers are available to visit each authority in assisting school leaders make the right decisions for their school. Please contact your local [Liaison Manager](#) or mycentre@sqa.org.uk for further details.

10. What are the entry requirements for National 5 courses?

Entry to National 5 courses is at the discretion of the school or college. However SQA designed the courses on the basis that learners would achieve the relevant curriculum level 4, the National 4 course or equivalent qualifications and/or experience prior to starting National 5.

11. How long does it take to complete a National 5 course?

National 5 courses consist of 24 SCQF credit points. This includes time for preparation for course assessment. The notional length of time for a learner to complete National 5 is 160 hours, assuming they meet the minimum recommended entry requirements.