

## CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT BOARD – ASSESSMENT OF NATIONAL QUALIFICATION IN 2020/21

**Note: This paper was developed for workstream 3 of the Covid-19 Education Recovery Group**

### Introduction

1. As part of workstream 3: Curriculum and Assessment, there has been consideration of the challenges facing the awarding of National Qualifications in 2020/21, given the current and uncertain future impact of the Coronavirus outbreak. This paper sets out the potential challenges and key considerations which will inform the identification of a potential approach for the diet 2021.

### Context

2. The Coronavirus outbreak necessitated the cancellation of the 2020 exam diet. The awarding of qualifications this year will be facilitated by an Alternative Certification Model, developed by the SQA. This model is based on teachers exercising their professional judgment to produce estimates of grades and ranking for each learner. These estimates have been moderated locally and if required at a national level by SQA. Whilst exams cannot be undertaken, and some coursework was not completed, the timing of the outbreak and the lockdown of schools still allowed for the vast majority of course learning and teaching to have been completed.
3. Since the lockdown of schools, learning has been delivered remotely, and on the re-opening of schools in August will continue via a blended approach of distance learning and in-school learning. It is unknown at this point how long this approach may need to continue as this is subject to public health advice. Additionally, there is an ongoing risk of further Covid 19 disruption during the course of the school session, in terms of both timing and scale.

### Challenges

#### *Course requirements*

4. Currently each National Qualifications course (N4, 5, Higher or Advanced Higher) has a planned 160 hours of programmed learning (120 hours course content and 40 hours consolidation) for a candidate to undertake. On a blended learning model, therefore, there is a significant risk that pupils may not be able to complete the required hours of learning and cover the full course content over the next academic year.
5. Courses with more practical elements may be further restricted under a blended approach and current public health advice around social distancing with potential consequences for the degree of the course which can be delivered.

#### *Risk of further disruption*

6. It is unknown when an exit from the blended learning approach will be possible, schools are planning for an ongoing scenario, and there is a risk of potentially further significant disruption, which would have a greater impact, potentially, on

assessments if it fell around the time of the next exam diet (assuming that a 'normal' diet is planned).

#### *Learner wellbeing and readiness to learn*

7. Pupils are facing a significant disruption to their education and will be doing so with varying levels of support at home. They will also have faced different experiences through lockdown which may impact on their ability to effectively participate in learning this year.

#### *Delivering fairness*

8. Any delivery and assessment model must deliver fairness for all learners. Of key importance will be ensuring that there is equity of support such that all learners can have as close to the same level of support in learning. This will include both ensuring that learners at all schools can access the same amount of teaching, and that any assessment model should not be reliant on additional teaching outside of the school offer. However, it may also be considered that to deliver equity those pupils that require additional support, receive that support.

#### *Technical feasibility and timing*

9. SQA have expended significant efforts in developing and delivering the alternative certification model for Diet 2020, and will continue to do so as estimates are validated and moderated to allow awarding, certification and then developing and delivering an appeals process. This will reduce the amount of resource available for developing an assessment model for next year, unless additional resource is provided. The greater any suggested change from the current approach to assessment will also impact on the prospects for delivery in a timely manner to support the planning of learning for next year. Making such a request of SQA at the same time as delivery of awarding 2020 increases the risk to delivery of certification on 4 August 2020, which risks introducing a value judgement as to prioritising one year's awards over another's.

#### *Messaging/stakeholder support*

10. It is important to be able to deliver a clear message that causes as little disruption to learning plans as possible. In addition to timing there is a question of how to best secure support from parents, students, and teachers, for the planned approach next year. Staff and student are likely to welcome a degree of familiarity, also, as they will already be working in new ways. It will be vitally important to ensure acceptance of universities, colleges and employers such that the results of any assessment solution in 2021 will be accepted for entry requirements.

#### *rUK*

11. Assessment is a completely devolved power; however, there will inevitably be comparisons as to how assessment in 2021 is tackled across the different nations of the UK.

## Key considerations

12. Given the challenges set out above there will likely need to be difficult value judgments made, and these decisions will inform the suitability of potential solutions. These judgements will be in the following areas

- How do you best deliver equity, both for all pupils taking qualifications next year, and comparing to those of previous and future years?
- Maintaining integrity and credibility of awards – with reduced teaching time impacting on the ability to deliver full course materials, how are standards of qualifications best maintained? How would changing course requirements impact on qualifications standards? If standards and coverage of courses are not maintained then to what degree will learner progression in learning be impacted? Are there any learning options to extend available teaching time?
- Prioritisation/restriction of choice – with reduced teaching time could there be a prioritisation of particular qualifications e.g. focussing on exit qualifications? How would any prioritisation for S4-6 impact on teaching of other year groups?
- Importance of grading awards – from a technical perspective would it potentially be more deliverable to assess qualifications on the basis of pass or fail only? How acceptable would non-grading be? Are some qualifications potentially more amenable to non-grading e.g. N5s?
- Stability of the system – how much change is technically feasible to deliver, and how much change can schools absorb, especially as this will likely happen at pace?
- One size fits all – do different school years and/or levels of qualifications lend themselves to different approaches?
- Permanency of change – are the assessment solutions for 2020 and 2021 a temporary accommodation, or are they an indication of a more permanent change?
- Acceptance of risk – should planning be done on the basis of a quick recovery from the blended approach and no further disruption. The group felt that greater contingency should be built in.

## Workstream views

- There was a broad consensus over the need to limit change to what is necessary, and that there must be confidence that any change can be delivered in the limited time available. In addition, it was also felt that any young people who might leave school at the end of 2021 must leave having had the opportunity to gain qualifications.
- There was general agreement that not having an exam diet for S4 may be a best option to free up time for teaching and learning as approximately 90% of S4 pupils migrate to S5. Accreditation, where required, could be achieved through use of existing Units but essentially S4 students would be starting on a 2 year course. For those leaving school the utilisation of Units would provide accreditation and articulate with leaner journeys to College,

employment, or further training. The absence of an exam diet in S4 produces 10- 12 weeks of additional teaching time, although there would need to be consideration of how this fits with the timing needs of an awarding model needed at the end of the curriculum year.

- There was no consensus on whether young people in S4 needed to have a graded award in National 5, which could be informed by the number of leavers in each year group (in 2017-18 just over 10% of leavers left in by the end of S4), although there may be no certainty that this would be repeated next year given wider circumstances. There was no agreement over any feasible way likely able to deliver a new, externally marked “added value” style assessment, linked to N5 units or whether this was necessary.
- How this would match to S5/6 N5 options was unresolved, also.
- Potentially, the absence of an S4 diet, would allow more time and resource to support a solution for S5 and S6.
- Further, it was agreed that it would be of keen importance that any solution should be accepted by pupils’ onwards destinations, and by extension be comparable to previous and future years’ awards. Additionally decisions made on approach to assessment should be implemented throughout the country to ensure fairness of opportunity. Communications should be robust, timely and include all stakeholders, including parents.
- Discussion, for S5/6, centred around a form of continuous assessment against a national diet of external examinations. The possibility of streamlining courses to a minimum requirement, along with restricting the range of courses offered, was explored as means of mitigating the challenge of delivering adequate teaching time in a blended learning model; however, no conclusion was reached with strong views expressed both for and against, including SQA expressing significant doubt as to the technical feasibility of such an approach and the desirability of it from an integrity of awards approach and knock on impact on learner progression.
- SQA provided a paper (annex A) to support discussion. Key points from this paper are captured in the challenges and considerations above and the solutions outlined below. There was a broad consensus around the desire to make use of what already exists in order to maximise stability through familiarity. The paper reiterates the key role of the SQA in ensuring the integrity of qualifications awarded. To this end without a significant change in direction, the SQA could not endorse and would not deliver a reduction in course content for 2021, driven by its assessment of the need to protect the integrity of awards, the technical challenges involved, and the acceptability from the system of a change of course content at this stage. This stance was contested by others.

- There would also need to be a review of the assessment arrangements of practical and performance-based subjects to understand what is possible within current public health advice.

### **Preferred Solution**

13. As noted above significant value judgements will underline the identification of a preferred solution to delivering assessment in 2020/21. A range of options were considered and assessed for relative strengths and weaknesses and these are included at annex B.
14. Following extensive discussion, the group agreed broad consensus that the following approach to National Qualification 5, Higher and Advanced Higher is the preferred option. The group did so with the recognition that there are some difficult messages with such an approach. However, all options presented important challenges and the outline below was agreed as the more manageable approach in addressing the key considerations on page 2.

### **No exam diet for National 5 Qualifications**

- Assessment would take place via completion of units – these units are already used across schools and colleges as stand-alone units and are shown on candidates' certificates.
- SQA see significant challenges in the development of an Added Value Unit (AVU), but will investigate further the feasibility and resourcing requirements of it. An AVU would be externally assessed and may provide graded certification. It would be intended that such a unit would be sat towards the end of a course and so would need to be available by around April 2021.
  - This AVU would help recognise the attainment of those pupils sitting N5s in the approximately 10% of leavers who leave after S4, who would otherwise leave with an ungraded award. However, there is reassurance that colleges already focus on units achieved when considering applicants, so the lack of a graded award may not hinder college entry. The AVU would also help address equity issues with those learners receiving grades for National Qualification 5 awards this year.
- Workstream 3 considered the option of making N5 examinations available to S5/S6 learners who required 'exit' qualifications. However, it was recognised that this could lead to equity issues with S4 learners and pressures on schools and practitioners to cover sufficient learning with S4 learners in limited time in order to enable them to sit the examination. The availability of the AVU may address this issue if sufficient learning can take place. However, if an AVU is not possible, the group recommends on balance that no N5 examination diet takes place and assessment is unit based only, whilst recognising the challenges that such an approach may face including the reaction of some learners. Although agreement to no grading was not universally accepted. Learners would move on through their pathway to a

higher level of study and examinations in 2022, or use the units as their 'exit' point.

#### Higher and Advanced Higher

- At Higher and Advanced Higher, with no National Qualification 5 exams taking place, the examinations diet for could be delayed to June, potentially, to allow more time for course material to be delivered for H/AH. SQA will need to give consideration to the operational feasibility of this, and any impact on being able to deliver certification by Results Day on August 10<sup>th</sup> 2021.
- SQA will also investigate the feasibility of reducing course content in H/AH courses to help mitigate the effect of reduced teaching time.
  - SQA note that different approaches to reducing content will be required for different subjects, and a general percentage of content reduction across courses would not be possible.
  - Timescales mean that SQA would not be able to undertake its usual extensive engagement with practitioners and stakeholders. Strong support from national and local leaders will be required for SQA's approach and timescales.
  - Reduced course content presents risks concerning the integrity of the awards, fairness to learners who may already have studied parts of the course that may be removed, and progression issues for future studies. SQA will require time and resource to undertake the feasibility study and are aiming to complete this during August 2020, which may also impact on the delivery of the awards in 2020. Any substantial delay in this work may impact on the planning for teaching in the 2020/21 academic year.
- There would be an agreement to evaluate circumstances halfway through the year to understand progress in delivering course material, and public health advice on prospects for holding an examination diet. Were any concerns to arise then contingency options could be considered. Equally, if more progress was being made in delivering teaching then there may be a push to reinstate N5 exams, which would have significant operational challenges, and deliver uncertainty for the system.

15. The group is clear that there would need to be support from the system for these changes for it to be successful.

#### Conclusion

16. As the paper sets out there are significant challenges to delivering assessment in 2021. In progressing towards a solution there has to be a clear view taken on some of the key considerations discussed and primary among these is the issue of available teaching time and the impact on the ability to cover all course materials. This paper focusses on the approach to assessment, but any actions to expand teaching time should also be considered for how they may interact with assessment choices. The preferred solution as set out above may be an option to

resolve the challenges of assessment next year, or act as a prompt for further discussions.

## Annex A

### Proposed approach for session 2020/21

#### 1 Context for Session 2020-21

We have been unable to complete the national qualification exam diet this year and as a result teacher professional judgment will be a significant factor in determining pupil overall grades, through teacher estimates. Teachers will provide this judgement from a range of evidence that they have collated throughout the year. However, this will be predominantly from assessment methodology developed in their own school.

It is anticipated that Schools will re-open on 11 of August, but that because of the impact of public health advice around social distancing this will result in less face to face teaching time, supplemented with online delivery. At this stage as there is no definitive timescale of when schools will return to what we understand as normal, there is a need to develop an approach to both curriculum delivery models and assessment of National Qualifications for next session which seeks to safeguard the system from all eventualities while delivering national qualifications which have integrity and remain credible.

#### 2 Courses, Units and Assessment

It is important at this time of uncertainty that we retain stability in the system and make use of the courses, units, and related assessments already available as teachers know and understand them. SQA have considered the practicalities and risks related to developing new assessments but advise against this approach as it is not practicable within the time available, whilst concurrently delivering the Alternative Certification Model (ACM) for 2020. This would subsequently create uncertainty within the system about standards and change at a time when people need stability and to maximise time focusing on teaching and learning. Key dates, deadlines, MI systems and routines should remain unchanged wherever possible.

We must also remember that the standards of the courses remain unchanged and that this is key to maintaining the integrity and credibility of the Courses for young people and their next steps in life, education and work.

#### 3 Delivery/Curriculum models

From a delivery/curriculum model perspective centres can decide to offer:

- one-year courses (potentially delivering a smaller number of subjects than normal to maximise learning and teaching time)

- two-year courses (delivering similar number of courses to the norm but doing over two years to maximise learning and teaching time)
- use units and their assessments (that were previously part of courses prior to their recent removal) as part of one- or two-year courses or on their own. This will provide –
  - certification of individual units
  - formative and summative assessment opportunities to national standards at the appropriate SCQF level
  - evidence if we have to operate an alternative certification model based upon teacher estimates, similar to 2020.

Centres would make decisions about delivery/curriculum models based on estimated learning and teaching time and the suitability of the curriculum models for specific cohorts of young people, as options for S4/5 will clearly be different to those in S6 or in college.

This paper sets out a proposed approach for diet 2021 with a series of contingencies and we would need to decide from our critical path for 2021 where the key decision points are. In considering approaches for 2021 we need to consider the following principles:

- Fairness to learners
- Safe and secure certification
- Integrity and credibility of qualifications for learners
- Making use of what we already have

#### **4 Assumptions**

Our assumptions are –

- Course content and standards do not change as this is key to ensuring integrity and credibility of qualifications for learners
- We need to make use of what we have already (units and their assessments previously part of National Courses, existing course assessments - exams and coursework, ACM model for 2020)
- Delivery patterns/curriculum models may change in centres with the combination of reduced face to face and online learning and teaching which may continue to evolve over time
- Approach must be feasible for SQA to deliver concurrently with ACM for 2020
- Approach to assessment and certification must be feasible for centres over one- or two-year delivery/curriculum approaches
- Our approach in Scotland needs to be comparable and as credible as approaches in other parts of UK

## 5 Proposed approach

The approach suggested for Diet 2021 is a set of contingencies similar to the approach that SQA was asked to adopt by the DFM in 2020. This moved through –

- offering full diet and coursework;
- then run exam diet with some disruption;
- then no exam diet but it will be possible to submit and mark coursework
- the ACM model based on teacher estimates

The movement through these contingencies was led by changing public health advice at each point in time when we agreed a change of approach.

### Courses

Therefore, our starting position is that a full diet of examinations and coursework is **available** at all levels in 2021. Note that we must however make an early system level decision on how to deliver practical and performance subjects in line with public health advice.

### Units

Additionally, there is a full range of units (c.430) that were previously part of the National 5, Higher and Advanced Highers that are available for centres to use. This could be helpful where centres decided to offer two-year courses with units being used to certificate learners in year 1.

There are a small number of subjects where units are now significantly different from the current course and these should be revised to match the current course. This is likely to be in Computing and Psychology – to be confirmed.

Units would also provide a good source of evidence if we need to move to an alternative certification model during the academic year due to prevailing public health advice at any point in time.

### Coursework

To mitigate the risk of not being able to submit and the distribute coursework for marking SQA will explore the feasibility of providing arrangements for digital coursework for 2021.

### Delivery models

Local Authorities and Centres would determine the delivery model that best suits their local needs.

## Potential contingency arrangements could be invoked, as follows:

### Contingency 1

Restrict the length of the exam diet by offering exams only for candidates exiting schools - for Higher and Advanced Higher and National 5 in English and Maths. The Exam diet could start later giving more time for learning and teaching.

**Contingency 2**

It is not possible to run the exam diet in 2021, so run the ACM model in 2021, based on teacher estimates and other data utilised in 2020, but include coursework data for each candidate, assuming that completed and can be marked.

**Contingency 3**

It is not possible to run the exam diet in 2021 and it is not possible to mark coursework, so run ACM model in 2021, based on teacher estimates and other data utilised in 2020.

**Next Steps**

Communication to the wider system from CERG and then in early June from SQA and other partners including –

- How assessment arrangements integrate with Education Scotland's advice to schools regarding senior phase blended approaches and curriculum models
- Further guidance on gathering and retention of evidence and how practical subjects and adaptations to assessments and conditions of assessment can be made to fit with public health advice
- As approaches in other parts of the UK are confirmed SQA will ensure our approach in Scotland remains comparable and credible

## Annex B

**Alternative options considered**

<b>Description</b>	<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
Standard coursework and exam diet available	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintains integrity of awards</li> <li>• Offers personalisation and choice</li> <li>• Provides stability to teachers and learners, as opposed to any change</li> <li>• Session can start with broad expectation of working towards exam at the end as learners are entered Nov-March when the position will be clearer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very unlikely to be sufficient teaching time available to deliver full course content, where learners are looking to take a full complement of qualifications</li> <li>• Vulnerable to any further disruption at time of exam diet</li> </ul>
Run standard coursework and exam diet – with reduced grade boundaries to reflect course content covered, or the range of assessment would be adjusted	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allows the awarding of qualifications</li> <li>• Offers personalisation and choice</li> <li>• Provides stability to teachers and learners, as opposed to any change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Potential to undermine integrity of awards</li> <li>• Vulnerable to any further disruption at time of exam diet</li> </ul>
No S4 diet – no grading of awards (use of unit qualifications to accredit learning)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Would create additional teaching time for S4, in preparation for S5</li> <li>• Would potentially free time for S5/S6 teaching time by delaying the diet to later in the year</li> <li>• Likely to include fewer exit qualifications</li> <li>• Utilises familiar assessments (to most teachers) and the continuous nature of such assessment provides flexible safeguard against future Covid 19 disruption</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• S4 leavers would leave without the opportunity of sitting a graded exam</li> </ul>
No S4 diet – grading of awards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• N5 model, potentially applicable in S5/6 also – greater safeguard against future disruption</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires new assessment approach to N5</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Candidates would have the opportunity to be graded</li> <li>• Would potentially free time for S5/S6 teaching time by delaying the diet to later in the year</li> <li>• The system is familiar with the units and coursework and how to engage with them, depending on how the graded units operated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The development and content of the unit would need consultation with and input from teachers – who are needed to focus on teaching.</li> <li>• The new graded units would be developed and delivered in a very short timescale and unlikely to be welcomed by teachers</li> <li>• Challenge of potentially 2 different pathways to N5 if exam exists in S5/6</li> <li>• The resulting course may not be comparable with current N5 or prepare learners to progress</li> </ul>
Reduce course content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allows the delivery of full subject choice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Risks undermining the integrity of awards (although contrast to options being considered in rUK)</li> <li>• Technically unlikely to be able to be delivered in the timescale available</li> <li>• Potentially adverse effect on progression</li> </ul>
Prioritisation of exit qualifications – awarding via reduced diet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater chance of maintaining the ability for most learners to gain awards needed to progress to next stage of learner journey or employment.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerable to further disruption of learning, and potentially sitting of exams</li> <li>• Equity issue for those learners who would not be seen as a priority</li> </ul>
Prioritisation of exit qualifications – awarding via certification model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater chance of maintaining the ability for most learners to gain awards needed to progress to next stage of learner journey or employment.</li> <li>• Less vulnerable to disruption of exam diet</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerable to further disruption of learning</li> <li>• Equity issue for those learners who would not be seen as a priority</li> </ul>
Continuous assessment in place of exam diet – grading of awards (option to consider)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greatest insurance against potential disruption to exam diet</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grading highly unlikely to be able to be delivered to the timescale required</li> <li>• Potential risk to integrity of awards given the scale of change</li> </ul>

separately as continuous assessment for Nat 5 and Higher or alternatively continuous assessment for Nat 5, but maintaining exam diet for Higher and Advanced Higher).		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Likely large impact on the system with significant change required</li> </ul>
Plan qualifications across two-year courses beginning with next year's S4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Greater chance of delivering full course content</li> <li>Reduce chance of disruption to exams if taken in 2022</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Likely reduces number of qualifications able to be taken</li> <li>Equity issue compared to previous years if two-year course is only option</li> <li>Not an option for many S5 pupils who need qualification at first sitting</li> <li>Not an option for S6 pupils.</li> <li>Pressure on learners in 2022 with their first exams being at Higher grade</li> </ul>
Use of unit and course assessments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Likely greater ability to deliver completed qualifications either via assessment or on teacher judgement</li> <li>May facilitate a wider range of subject choice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Likely delivering a lower tariff qualification</li> <li>Mixed challenge to implement in a timely manner – most units remain fit for purpose, but some would need revision</li> </ul>
Repeat Certification Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Infrastructure exists to support this approach</li> <li>Allows for awarding of graded qualifications if evidence exists</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>If course content unlikely to be delivered in full then integrity, and possibly feasibility, of awards under Certification Model would be questioned (depending on number of courses studied). However, lack of exams could extend teaching time, although this would need to be balanced against time needed to apply Certification Model.</li> </ul>

Offer a digital exam diet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reduces vulnerability to exam diet disruption</li><li>• Allows awarding of qualifications</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Technically unfeasible in the timescale</li><li>• Doesn't add any additional teaching time</li></ul>
Introduce digital submission for coursework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Would provide greater resilience for submitting coursework</li><li>• Provides more evidence to base any teacher estimates on if required</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Technical challenges to be overcome</li><li>• Of itself does not solve overall certification issue</li></ul>