

An update from the National Qualifications 2021 Group: Support and guidance for Higher and Advanced Higher in session 2020–21

Wednesday 16 December

On 8 December, the Deputy First Minister announced that there will be no external assessment of Higher and Advanced Higher courses in session 2020–21, and that the 2021 exam diet has been cancelled. We understand that teachers and lecturers, learners, parents, and carers will all want to know what this means for them.

The National Qualifications 2021 Group* is continuing to meet weekly and, prior to the Deputy First Minister's announcement, work was well underway to finalise contingency arrangements for Higher and Advanced Higher.

The Group is now working through the finer details of the 2021 awarding model for Higher and Advanced Higher courses. It will broadly follow the [model we recently announced for National 5 results](#), with teachers and lecturers using their professional judgement of learner evidence to determine a provisional result. We appreciate that you may be concerned about the workload implications of this. Discussions about workload pressures are ongoing between the Scottish Government, professional associations and employers. These cover approaches to lessen these pressures, including further details about the one-off payment for teachers and lecturers announced by the Deputy First Minister last week. More details about this will be provided early in the new year.

Subject-specific guidance and resources

SQA will provide the following for Higher and Advanced Higher subjects:

- subject-specific guidance on gathering evidence
- assessment resources, ie question papers and marking instructions, and where appropriate coursework assessment tasks
- Understanding Standards support materials

Subject-specific guidance for teachers and lecturers will be published by SQA for all subjects, on a rolling basis, throughout January 2021. This will advise on the types of evidence that can be used to determine a provisional result for each learner.

The focus remains on the quality of evidence, rather than the quantity. Where possible, the guidance will specify key pieces of evidence that have good predictive value, for each subject. It will also reflect the modifications that SQA have made to Higher and Advanced Higher course assessments for session 2020–21.

SQA is currently finalising the Higher and Advanced Higher question papers and marking instructions which will be published on their secure site during January and February 2021. Teachers and lecturers will have the option to use the question papers as internal

assessments for gathering learner evidence. Question papers can be split to support assessments which are carried out during class time. Other types of evidence can also be used when producing learners' provisional results.

We understand that some schools and colleges may have already run prelims or have plans in place to run a formal prelim diet for Higher and Advanced Higher courses early in 2021. While the decision to hold prelims is one for schools and colleges to make, it is important that learning and teaching time is maximised, and it should be noted that there is no requirement for schools and colleges to hold prelims. However, results from prelims which have already been carried out or which are planned can contribute to learner evidence.

As we highlighted in relation to the assessment approach at National 5, SQA's generic guidance on gathering evidence for the purpose of estimation outlines that candidate evidence should be gathered at the later stages of their learning. Gathering and judging different types of key evidence from across the course, means that the provisional results submitted by teachers and lecturers are more likely to be a realistic reflection of a candidate's attainment across the course.

While recognising that many assessments will take place in the later stages of the 2020-21 session, schools and colleges will need to plan accordingly to give all learners appropriate time to prepare for each subject. This will help to avoid learners being overloaded with multiple assessments at any one time. For example, some subjects may lend themselves to earlier evidence gathering which can still demonstrate optimum candidate performance, whereas other subjects require integration of knowledge understanding and skills from across the course and in which case would benefit from later evidence gathering.

In addition, it will be important to plan assessment early to allow quality assurance procedures to take place in a way which does not make workload unmanageable prior to the provisional results being submitted.

There is also a broad range of subject-specific Understanding Standards materials for Higher and Advanced Higher courses. These are available to help teachers and lecturers in their understanding of the standards that should be applied when assessing learner evidence. They include webinars, audio presentations, and candidate evidence and commentary materials. Understanding Standards materials are available from SQA's [NQ subject pages](#) and their [Understanding Standards website](#).

To stay up to date on National Qualifications in 2021, visit www.sqa.org.uk/NQ2021.

The National Qualifications 2021 Group

**The National Qualifications 2021 Group is represented by the Association of Directors of Education Scotland (ADES), Colleges Scotland, Education Scotland, the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), School Leaders Scotland (SLS), the Scottish Council of Independent Schools (SCIS), Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), the Scottish Government, National Parent Forum of Scotland, and the Scottish Youth Parliament.*

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