National Courses: guidance on evidence for estimates in session 2021–22

This edition: October 2021, version 1.0

Publication code: BB8283

Contents

Introduction

This document provides guidance to SQA co-ordinators, department/curriculum leaders, teachers and lecturers in SQA approved centres on using assessment evidence to support an estimate, and on determining the appropriate grade and band to estimate for a learner.

In any year, estimates play an important role in SQA awarding processes. They should be submitted for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher course entries in accordance with the key dates. We publish key dates each year on SQA Connect.

For this session, if the SQA examination diet is cancelled, the assessment evidence used to determine estimates will also be used as the basis for generating provisional results. **There are no additional assessment requirements in determining provisional results** over and above those that support learning and subsequently determine estimates, in a normal year.

We will publish procedural information on submitting estimates to SQA in *Delivering National Qualifications: Guide for SQA Co-ordinators 2021–22.*

What are estimates and how are they used?

An estimate is a judgement of a final grade and band for a graded National Course across all assessment components. It is based on a holistic review of a learner's performance as indicated by assessment evidence that is generated at the centre. It is important that each estimate is a realistic, evidence-based prediction of a learner's final attainment in the course assessment.

We will use estimates to:

♦ help to prioritise learners' scripts for re-consideration during the finalisation stage of awarding procedures
♦ check that awarding outcomes are as fair as possible to learners
♦ support the interpretation of evidence for Exceptional Circumstances Consideration requests

Estimates are considered by SQA examiners as part of the evidence review for learners for whom an Exceptional Circumstances Consideration request is made. Learners must have had an estimate submitted to be able to access the Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service.

Understanding course assessment requirements and standards

To make accurate estimates, it is important to have a clear understanding of:

♦ the range of skills, knowledge and understanding covered by the course

- the assessment requirements and the structure of the course
- the components that contribute to the course award, including weightings where appropriate
- the grade descriptions for the course
- the level of demand of the course assessment

Information on these aspects is available for each course from the course specification, specimen question papers, past papers, coursework assessment tasks and Understanding Standards materials. The course specifications for National Courses give detailed information on the purpose of each course component. This includes the mandatory skills, knowledge and understanding that each component assesses, and the structure and broad mark allocations for each component.

Please note that for session 2021–22 the assessment requirements for National Courses have been modified in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Please read the National Course modification summary, which outlines the changes and final requirements for this session, in conjunction with the course specification. You can find these for each National Course on the subject pages of our website, under 'Course Information 2021–22'.

SQA's Understanding Standards resource also provides examples of candidate responses, with commentaries, for most National Courses. This provides a useful benchmark of the level of demand in the subject and can help support teachers and lecturers make accurate assessment judgements.

Estimates and fairness for learners

There may be a range of factors that impact on learners' access to learning. When determining estimates, it is important to bear this in mind, especially in the following cases:

- Where illness, other personal circumstances, or barriers to learning might have affected a learner's performance in an assessment, a review of their performance in alternative assessments of appropriate demand will ensure fairness.

- For learners who have assessment arrangements, or who would have reasonable adjustments, it is appropriate to reflect on whether support was in place, or whether the assessment was used as a 'baseline' indicator for future support. Estimates must be based on demonstrated attainment with the reasonable adjustments/assessment arrangements in place.

Some learners may have their learning supported by peripatetic teachers or support for learning specialists. You may want to include these staff in your estimate discussions.

Bias

Any discussion of fairness must take account of the possibility of bias. Decisions about a learner's estimate should be based on the learner's evidence rather than their personal circumstances, so that decisions are as objective and as consistent as possible.

Special mention must be made of what might be called 'implicit bias'. Implicit bias originates from assumptions or stereotypes based on characteristics such as social background, gender, disability, race and ethnicity. Research strongly suggests that implicit bias may be a contributing factor in assessment judgements, which is why SQA's e-marking procedures include the suppression of candidates' personal data. You, too, should consider how to mitigate the risk of bias when in determining estimates for a group of learners.

Learners' evidence should be valued for its own worth and merit as an indicator of course attainment, and you should make a conscious effort to consider and avoid the negative impact of potential implicit bias. You should finalise estimates by considering the accuracy of your decisions alongside information on background, gender, disability, race and ethnicity, at both class and cohort presentation level.

Use of blind- or cross-marking can decrease the potential for bias in grading decisions, and moderation across departments and faculties should ensure that all learners are treated fairly and that robust standards are maintained.

It is important to remember the implications of the estimated and actual result for each learner. Every award carries weight and significance personally, socially, educationally, and economically. In other words, a grade or an award has a meaning for the learner but also a meaning and a value in the wider world. For this reason, it is crucial that all learners are treated fairly and equitably.

Reviewing evidence to produce an estimate

An estimate should reflect the learner's demonstrated attainment of the skills, knowledge, and understanding required for the grade and band. Reviewing a range of evidence will help you to build up a picture of the learner's performance as a whole, which will then enable you to determine an estimate.

A starting point to determining estimates should be reviewing the evidence for each learner. Look for instances where learners have applied their learning, or particular aspects of it. This might be at previously identified, planned checkpoints in teaching and learning programmes. These checkpoints might be planned events (eg prelims or mock question papers, assignments, performances) or they might occur naturally.

Learners might reach appropriate assessment points at different stages in their learning. All assessment is valuable in supporting learning, but not all

assessment evidence will be used for determining an estimate. Evidence for estimates is most convincing where the assessment mirrors important aspects of the specific skills, knowledge and understanding requirements of the course. In some subjects, this may be where learners are dealing with integrative and unseen contexts, or applying skills, knowledge and understanding in unfamiliar and complex scenarios. In other subjects, it may be where they are demonstrating the required level of technical competence in their performance or practical activities.

It is not necessary to assess every aspect of the course content. A selection of key tasks and/or questions, covering the required areas of the course and carried out under appropriate conditions, and with an appropriate level of demand, may give a good indication of likely performance in the final course assessment.

Assessment judgements should be cross-checked against national standards as exemplified in SQA Understanding Standards materials. Your judgements can be confirmed by participating in centre-based or local moderation activities.

In considering estimates, you should think about what the evidence suggests compared with the requirements of the course assessment. This could be the consistency of a learner's performance or practical activity, or the depth of a learner's responses to discriminating questions on key concepts.

Determining the weight to be placed on different sources of learner evidence

Judgements about a learner's estimated grade must be based on evidence that demonstrates attainment. When judging evidence, you should consider the value of evidence, both in terms of the individual pieces of evidence and as part of the overall picture for each learner.

A piece of evidence has greater weight in the context of an estimate if a learner who performs well in the task would reasonably be expected to perform equally well in the course assessment. However, pieces of evidence that are deemed to have lower weight should not be discounted altogether. Depending on the nature of the course assessment, such evidence might help supplement or support a reliable overall picture of a learner's attainment.

Some considerations that impact on the weight each piece of evidence should be given in determining an estimate are:

♦ **Course coverage**. Learner evidence that covers a large range of the course content may carry greater weight in determining an estimate than a piece of evidence that only covers a fairly small portion of the course content. When thinking about course coverage and the value of the evidence, it may be useful to think about the contributions of each of the components of the course to ensure that each component contributes appropriately to the overall estimate. The evidence you use to determine estimates does not need to

cover the entire specified content of the course, but where more course content is covered, greater weight can be placed on it.

♦ **Similarity to course assessment**. Evidence that is generated in an assessment that is similar to a course assessment is likely to be given greater weight in determining an estimate than evidence from something that is considerably different from the course assessment, either in terms of structure and content or assessment conditions.

♦ **Nature of evidence**. 'Primary' evidence produced by a learner (for example responses to questions, video of performance) should be accorded greater weight than 'secondary' evidence produced by an assessor (such as assessor commentaries).

♦ **Level of demand**. Assessment evidence used for estimating should be set at a level of demand that matches the course grade descriptions — as exemplified by Understanding Standards materials. Building in in the opportunity for higher-level performance will enable better differentiation of learner estimates.

♦ **Date.** Evidence that was generated earlier in the course of study is likely to carry lower weight than evidence generated later. Further evidence may demonstrate a learner's progression throughout the year.

Type, quantity, and quality of evidence

Not every topic in every area needs to be assessed — a selection of representative questions and tasks, covering the required areas of the course, and set at the appropriate level of demand, can provide a basis for determining an estimate.

SQA course assessment features breadth, challenge and/or application — this is known as the 'added value' of the course. Estimates that are based on performance in tasks that also assess this added value are much more likely to give an accurate prediction of a learner's final attainment in the course assessment. Questions and tasks that are suitable for course assessment are exemplified in the specimen question papers, past papers and coursework assessment task for each course.

The following types of assessment evidence may also be helpful, depending on the make-up and weighting of the National Course. However, it is important to reiterate that it is not the **quantity**, but the **quality** of evidence that will support you in the estimation process.

♦ **Prelims or mock exams**: These are likely to be the most reliable indicator of performance in a question paper component. The most convincing examples of these will accurately predict attainment in the skills, knowledge, and understanding assessed by the question paper. They will be clearly aligned to

the course specification, content, level of demand, and assessment conditions as exemplified in the specimen question papers and past papers.

Note: SQA specimen or past papers are in the public domain and can be readily accessed by learners. They should not be used in their entirety as the only evidence for determining estimates. However, elements of these can be incorporated into prelims, mock exams or class tests. Alternatively, centres may devise their own questions or use commercially-produced materials. Guidance on producing assessments is available through SQA Understanding Standards.

♦ **Completed or partially-completed coursework tasks:** A review of a learner's performance in coursework tasks will inform an estimate, if such coursework is an integral part of the assessment of the course. Coursework that is incomplete at the point of submitting the estimate may provide a picture of a learner's strengths, although you should take care when basing an estimate on an incomplete piece of work.

♦ **Performance evidence:** An ongoing review of a learner's practical performances will inform a final estimate. The best evidence to support assessment of performance is a live recording — either video or audio, as appropriate. This is preferable to photographic or written records, as it will allow you to analyse a learner's performance fully and effectively. Regular recording of learners' performances will ensure you have sufficient high-quality evidence to support estimates.

♦ **End-of-topic assessments:** End-of-topic tests are valuable assessments to check progress and inform next steps in teaching and learning. However, on their own they may lack sufficient integration, challenge, or application to form the basis of a robust estimate, although you could use class tests as supplementary evidence. For some National Courses, an integrative class test that samples skills, knowledge and understanding that are not covered in an early prelim can provide a useful formative exercise for learners, as well as additional evidence to inform an estimate.

♦ **Classwork:** This may consist of a variety of naturally-occurring evidence types, produced under conditions that are different from those required for course assessment. Evidence of this kind is unlikely to form a strong evidence base on its own, but may supplement other evidence.

Professional judgement

Teachers and lecturers know their learners well — their achievements, their strengths and areas for development. When determining an estimate, you will have a good idea of how your learners are likely to perform in the final course assessment. This will come from a detailed knowledge and tracked progress of a learner's work and may also come from experience of previous cohorts.

You should take a holistic approach when determining an estimate. It is a learner's whole attainment across all components that should be the focus. One aspect of a learner's attainment should not necessarily dominate thinking (even where the strongest or most evidence lies in this area) — consider learners' strengths and weaknesses in the key aspects of the entire course assessment in balance.

Questions and doubts will inevitably follow. For example, 'Does evidence have to be generated from a tightly monitored assessment event, such as a prelim, or integrated class test?' Of course, while these sources will provide strong pieces of evidence, you can also look at other occasions where learners have demonstrated their skills, knowledge and understanding — for instance, marks in a record book or spreadsheet, or comments in a learner's profile accompanied by video evidence of a performance. These might help to build up a wider picture of a learner's demonstrated attainment, and further confirm your estimate decisions.

It is important that centres are comfortable with the authenticity of the evidence used. Do exercise caution where learners have completed work outside of a controlled school/college environment. In many cases, the work is likely to reflect the circumstances and context in which it was done. You can find more details on authenticating learner evidence for coursework in course specifications and SQA's guidance on conditions of assessment for coursework.

All these factors will be significant as you also draw on knowledge from teaching, learning and assessment activities from this session to reach holistic decisions.

Relative and absolute attainment

When determining estimates, it is important to be confident about both relative attainment (which of your learners have stronger or weaker attainment) and absolute attainment (what grade a learner is likely to achieve). Relative attainment is based on comparing your learners' performance in the tasks you have provided during the course. Absolute attainment is linking that evidence to a specific grade, and can be more difficult — consider learners from previous cohorts whose performance has been consistent with estimates and those whose performance has not. What qualities were common to the work of learners who achieved the different grades?

Some departments may use common tasks across a course and keep a small bank of exemplar responses that teachers have agreed on as typifying performance at particular grades, as informed by Understanding Standards activity. In addition, SQA's Understanding Standards materials often include grade-specific exemplars that may be helpful.

Arriving at the final band estimate

A learner's final estimate must be based on evidence of demonstrated attainment.

Decisions should be made in relation to the consistency of a learner's performance across responses, performances and practical outcomes, all measured against key aspects of the skills, knowledge and understanding of the course.

Having arrived at the final band and grade, it is important to look again at the evidence base. Learners' evidence should be valued for its own worth as an indicator of performance in course assessment, and you should consider any potential implicit bias and whether any adjustments to estimates are required as a result.

You will have ongoing conversations with learners regarding their progress in the course. However, caution is required when referencing working grades — most early formative feedback will not focus on the requirements for full course grades.

National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher bands

You are strongly advised to focus on making holistic professional judgements when determining the estimated band for each learner, and not to over-focus on the notional percentage/range.

Band	Estimated performance	Notional % range
1	Grade A (upper)	85 – 100
2	Grade A (lower)	70 – 84
3	Grade B (upper)	65 – 69
4	Grade B (lower)	60 – 64
5	Grade C (upper)	55 – 59
6	Grade C (lower)	50 – 54
7	Grade D	40 – 49
8	No Award	30 – 39
9	No Award	0 – 29

Moderating estimates

Estimates are based on demonstrated applications of the skills, knowledge and understanding of the course. They are informed by assessment judgements

made by teachers and lecturers throughout the delivery of the course. These judgements will be moderated to ensure that estimates are well founded.

Moderating estimates within a department or faculty enhances a shared understanding of standards and expectations. Centres and curriculum areas will have moderation practices and quality assurance policies that will provide suitable and workable frameworks for this activity.

Good practice, such as the use of moderation 'partners,' where teachers or lecturers work in pairs or groups to confirm each other's assessment decisions and to moderate evidence over a period of time, can be an effective way to reinforce assessment standards. Comparing evidence with the assessment criteria in the relevant Course Specifications (and exemplified by SQA Understanding Standards materials) will help ensure that your estimates are in line with national standards.

Moderation across departments and faculties will ensure fairness for all learners and ensure that robust standards are maintained. It is good practice to extend moderation activity beyond the centre to a local or regional level, where possible. As a sense check, you can consider looking at estimates alongside information from previous cohorts of learners who undertook SQA assessment — both their estimates and their awarded grades.

With sound moderation of assessment judgements in place, you can approach the task of producing estimates for your learners with confidence.

Further information on moderation and some examples are provided on the SQA Academycourse *Quality Assurance of Estimates for National Courses.*

Scenario planning for session 2021–22

For session 2021–22, if the COVID-19 pandemic gets worse to the point where large physical gatherings are restricted at the time of the exams in April and May, the SQA exam diet will be cancelled. If this happens, the focus for schools, colleges and training providers will continue to be learning and teaching, with assessment to support that process.

With this in mind, you should continue to use the type, quantity and quality of learner assessment evidence — matched to the skills, knowledge and understanding of each course and set at the appropriate level of demand — to support quality assured estimates in any 'normal' year. This will also serve as the basis of the evidence needed to support the submission of provisional results, should this be required.

In other words, should examinations be cancelled, **there are no additional assessment requirements in determining provisional results** over and above those that support learning, and subsequently determine estimates, in a normal year.

Further information and support

Further information to support determining estimates is available in the following sources:

♦ *Quality Assurance of Estimates for National Courses*
  https://www.sqaacademy.org.uk/estimateqa
♦ *Guide to Assessment:*
  https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files_ccc/Guide_To_Assessment.pdf
♦ *Assessment Arrangements Explained: Information for Centres:*
  https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files_ccc/AssessmentArrangementsExplained.pdf
♦ *Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service: Guide for Centres*
  [published on SQA Connect]
♦ *SQA Co-ordinator Guide* [published on SQA Connect]
♦ *Key Dates* [published on SQA Connect]
♦ *Internal Verification: A Guide for Centres:*
  https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files_ccc/InternalVerificationGuideforCentres.pdf
♦ *Internal Verification Toolkit:* https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/74671.6221.html