



Evaluation of the 2023 Approach to National Qualifications Assessment

Reflections of Senior Appointees and Qualifications Development

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Contents

Section 1: Introduction	3
1 Executive summary	3
2 Context	4
Maintaining national standards	4
3 Methodology	5
4 Respondent profiles	5
Subject and levels	8
Interviews	9
Section 2: Evaluation themes	11
5 Communication	11
6 Learning and teaching	13
7 Awarding and grading	18
8 Understanding Standards	22
Understanding Standards resources	25
9 Exam Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service (EECCS)	27
10 Appeals	29
11 Equalities	30

Section 1: Introduction

1 Executive summary

This report outlines the results of engagement activities that the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) carried out with senior appointees and qualifications development staff who support the delivery and assessment of National Courses. The group 'Senior appointees' (principal assessors and depute assessors) consists of teaching professionals and are subject specialists who have experience in delivering National Qualifications in schools and colleges. The group 'Qualifications development staff' consists of SQA qualifications staff.

Senior appointees and qualification development work closely together. Their professional input defines and supports the development, assessment and quality assurance of our qualifications. There are 15,000 teaching professionals who support SQA operations annually by undertaking appointee roles.

Respondents for this report are senior appointees and qualifications development, with the exception of the Understanding Standards section, which includes practitioner respondents in addition to senior appointees and qualifications development respondents.

The purpose of this engagement was to contribute to SQA's Evaluation of the 2023 Approach to National Qualifications Assessment. The aim of the evaluation is to understand how the assessment approach worked in practice from the perspective of those most closely involved, and to inform future assessment approach and practices. This report should be read in conjunction with the Learner and Practitioner Experiences reports and the combined Experiences and Reflections evaluation report.

The central findings of this evaluation report represent a cross section of the reflections of senior appointees and qualifications development staff. The report contains their reflections on the approach to National Qualification assessment in 2022–23, and covers several themes including communications, learning and teaching, awarding and grading, understanding of standards, experiences of the exam exceptional circumstances consideration service (EECCS), appeals, and equalities.

This report provides a record of the reflections of participants and will inform SQA's planning, and approach to support National Qualifications assessment. In the context of Scottish education reform, it will also offer considerations for the future of Scotland's qualifications and assessment system in the senior phase.

Senior appointee respondents provided some feedback based on their reflections and experience as teachers or lecturers, and some of their feedback is based on evidence seen through the marking and awarding process, including standardisation and quality assurance.

The following sections outline what respondents felt worked well and did not work so well, while also reflecting on broader issues such as fairness and equity.

2 Context

Due to the global COVID-19 pandemic exams were cancelled in 2020 and 2021 and alternative approaches to certification were introduced. Formal examinations and assessments have been re-introduced over the last two years in an environment that has remained challenging and uncertain for learners, teachers and lecturers.

Throughout 2022–23, SQA worked closely with partners across the education sector to agree the approach to assessment and developed a revised package of support for learners undertaking National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher course assessments in that session. This support was built on the measures that were in place in 2021–22 with the aim of enabling learners to demonstrate what they know, understand and can do. The importance of ensuring fairness to all learners while ensuring qualifications continued to be valued and credible remained at the centre of discussions.

Feedback gathered through [SQA's evaluation of the 2022 approach to assessment of graded National Courses](#) was also essential in helping to develop the approach for 2022–23. Examples of key feedback included evidence that recovery from the disruption caused by the pandemic remained ongoing. Due to the impact of learning-loss in earlier years, some learners sitting National Courses did not have the same foundation of skills, knowledge or exam competence. Participants highlighted that course modifications maximised teaching and learning time, an extremely important factor to stakeholders was fairness, individual fairness where individual learner circumstances, particularly those as a result of the pandemic, should be taken into account.

The revised package of support for 2022–23 session, including the approach to standards included:

- ◆ modifications to course assessment (retained from 2021–22)
- ◆ confirmation of a sensitive approach to grading
- ◆ revised/updated Exam Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service (EECCS)
- ◆ the Appeals 2023 Service — a revised approach compared to 2022, no alternative assessment evidence required, learners could appeal directly to SQA and request a review of SQA marked assessment components (this was a free service for learners)

As in previous years, a range of resources was made available to learners prior to the exams via SQA's website — the Your Exams Guide and My Study Plan app.

Full details of the 2023 approach to awarding are available in the [National Qualifications 2023 Awarding – Methodology Report](#).

Maintaining national standards

SQA has a statutory duty and responsibility to individual learners and to the wider community to ensure that the standards of our qualifications are maintained. Standards are vital in ensuring the credibility and long-term integrity of qualifications, for those who take them and for end-users of qualifications.

To enhance teachers' and lecturers' understanding of the national standards, SQA facilitates an Understanding Standards programme — a series of events, subject-specific, either on-

line or face-to-face, providing practitioners the opportunity, time and focus to contribute to national standard discussions and enhance their understanding of national standards in their subject areas.

However, the 2022 evaluation found that around only half of senior appointee and qualifications development research participants believed that the national standard was consistently understood and interpreted by teachers and lecturers in 2021–22. This was particularly linked to the validity and reliability of some of the alternative evidence submitted for appeals. It is important for SQA to monitor the understanding of the national standard with the aim to improve understanding over time.

Further information on the delivery of National Qualifications and Awards in 2023 is available in the chief examining officer's report, [2023 National Qualifications and Awards Results](#), and in [National Qualifications 2023 Awarding – Methodology Report](#).

3 Methodology

The research for this report was carried out in two separate phases.

The first phase involved distributing an online survey in November 2023 to senior appointees and SQA qualifications development colleagues seeking their feedback and reflections on various areas of the 2023 National Qualifications assessment approach. The survey garnered 74 responses and included questions on the following areas:

- ◆ Communication
- ◆ Learning and teaching
- ◆ Awarding and Grading
- ◆ Standards
- ◆ EECCS – Exam Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service
- ◆ Appeals
- ◆ Equalities

The second phase of the research involved holding structured in-depth interviews with senior appointees and qualifications development colleagues. This allowed for deeper exploration of key topics including Learning and Teaching, Awarding and Grading, Standards and their experience of the EECCS and Appeals processes if applicable. A total of 15 interviews were held using Microsoft Teams, covering a range of subjects and levels. .

Full methodology is available in the separate Technical Appendix.

4 Respondent profiles

The survey was distributed to senior appointees and qualifications development colleagues. This included principal assessors, depute principal assessors, qualifications managers, qualifications officers and subject implementation managers.

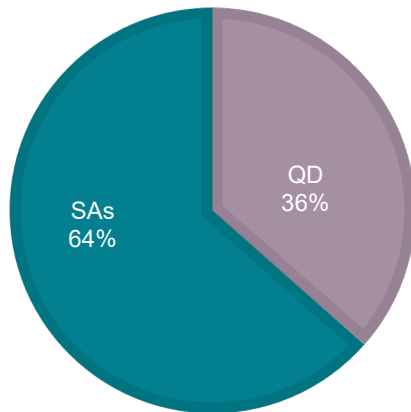
Just under two thirds (64%) of survey respondents were Senior Appointees, and over a third (36%) were from Qualifications Development (see Figure 1).

Almost half (46%) of survey respondents had been in their role for six to 10 years, 28% for two to five years, 18% less than two years, and 8% for more than 10 years (see Figure 2).

Figure 3 shows respondents' length of experience in their current roles which involves assessment methods and practice.

Figure 1

What is your role at SQA? (grouped)



SAs = Senior Appointees

QD = Qualifications Development

Figure 2

What is your role at SQA?

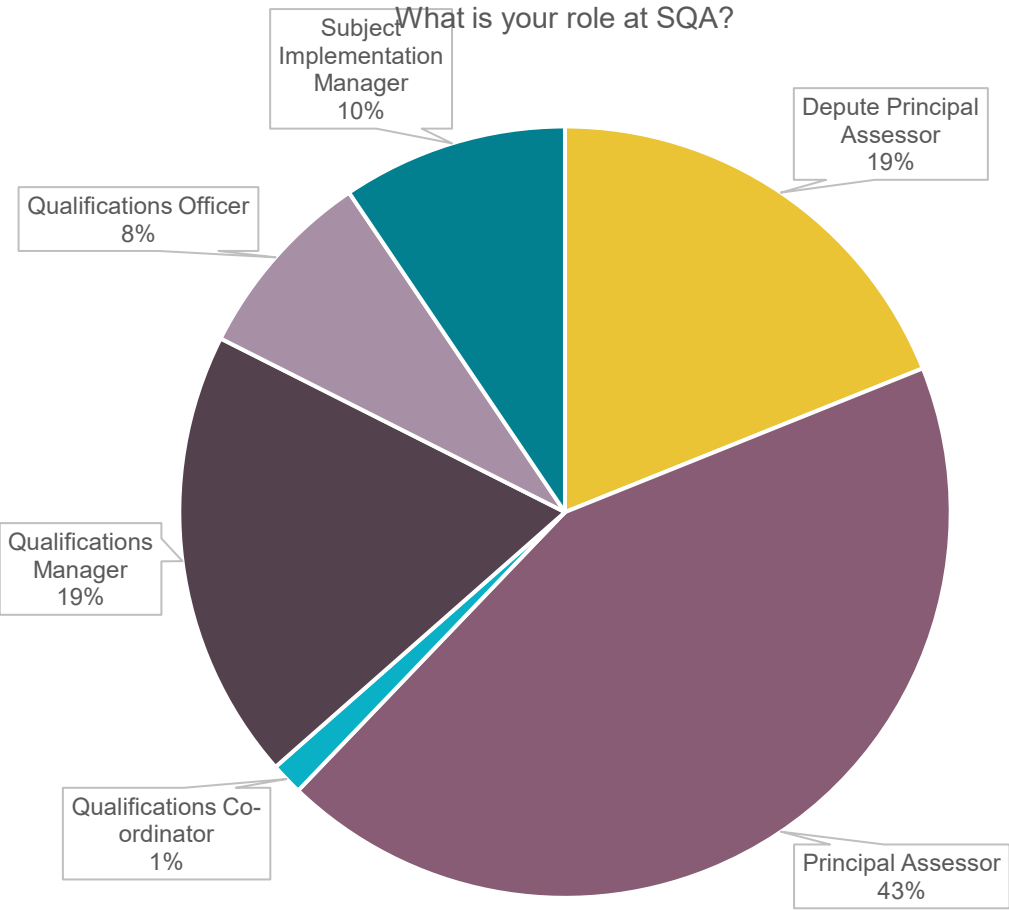
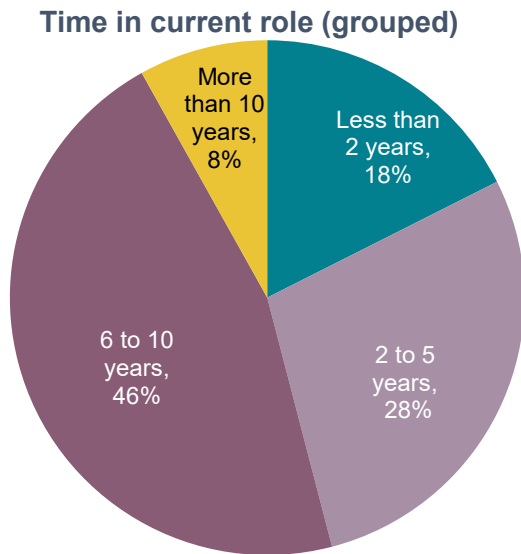


Figure 3



Subject and levels

Survey respondents represented a wide range of subject areas across all levels, National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher (see Figure 4). Respondents' subject categories are shown in Figure 5. To note that respondents were not evenly spread across subject categories and not necessarily proportionate to learner qualification uptake. Therefore, it may be that subject-specific issues impacted on responses to an extent.

Figure 4

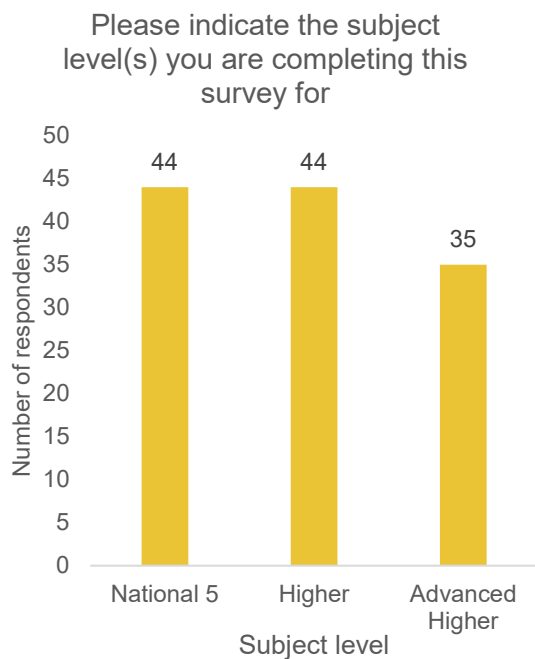
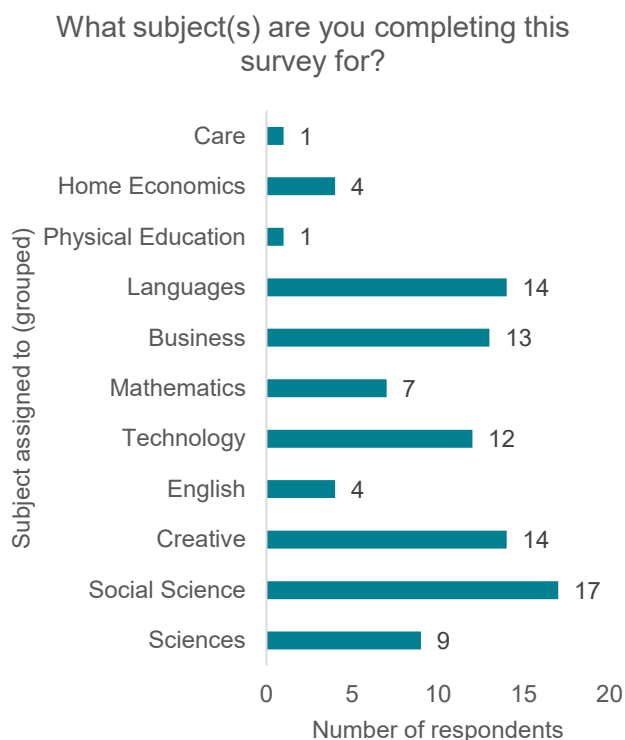


Figure 5



Interviews

All survey respondents were offered the opportunity to participate in a follow-up interview.

A total of 15 in-depth interviews took place during December 2023 and January 2024.

Interviewees included:

- ◆ Senior Appointees (Principal Assessors, Depute Principal Assessor) x 7
- ◆ Qualifications Managers x 6
- ◆ Dual-role – Principal Assessor and Subject Implementation Manager x 2

The in-depth interviews covered the following subjects and levels:

- ◆ Computing Science (National 5, Higher, Advanced Higher)
- ◆ Dance (National 5, Higher, Advanced Higher)
- ◆ Drama (National 5, Higher, Advanced Higher)
- ◆ Economics (National 5)
- ◆ Engineering Science (Advanced Higher)
- ◆ English (National 5, Higher, Advanced Higher)
- ◆ Environmental Science (Higher)
- ◆ Geography (Advanced Higher)
- ◆ Graphic Communication (National 5, Higher, Advanced Higher)
- ◆ Mathematics (National 5, Higher)
- ◆ Media (National 5)

- ◆ Physics (Higher)
- ◆ PE (National 5, Higher, Advanced Higher)
- ◆ Statistics (Advanced Higher)

SQA is extremely grateful to all staff and senior appointees who participated in this research project. A special note of gratitude is extended to senior appointees and qualifications managers who took time out of their busy schedules to participate in interviews.

Section 2: Evaluation themes

This section of the report presents the findings of the research. This is organised to follow the same structure as the survey. Each subsection outlines a summary of the responses to the survey's quantitative questions. Qualitative data is then presented as a number of cross-cutting themes that emerged from the survey responses and interviews.

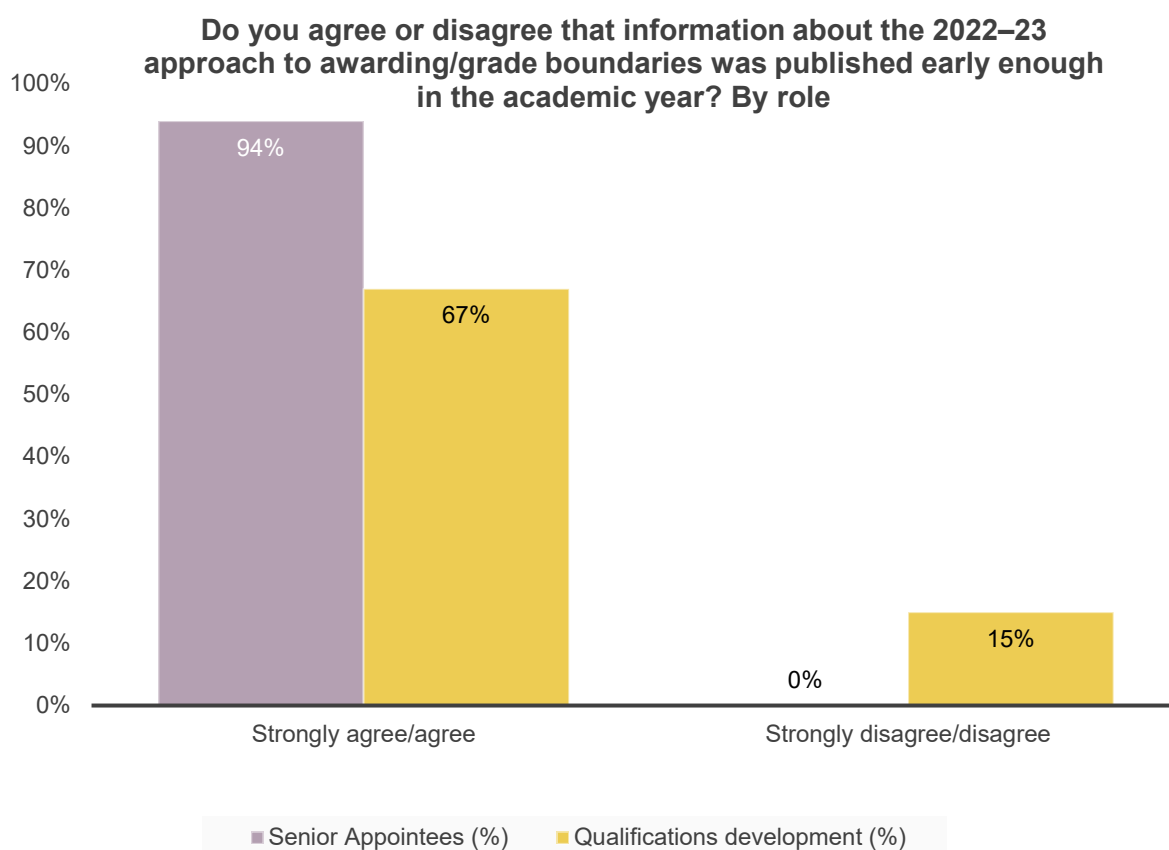
5 Communication

The survey asked senior appointees and members of qualification development a series of questions relating to how published information about the 2022–23 approach to assessment and grading was disseminated to stakeholders. The questions focused on the timing of communications, with information on the approach to assessment published prior to the start of the academic year (published April 2022), ie retained course assessment modifications, and the approach to awarding/grading was published in November 2022, ie sensitive approach to grading due to the ongoing impact of the pandemic.

The majority, 86%, of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that information about the approach to assessment was published early enough in the academic year.

- ◆ The majority, 84%, of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that information about the 2022–23 approach to awarding/grade boundaries was published early enough in the academic year.
- ◆ Senior appointee respondents were more likely to strongly agree or agree than qualifications development respondents that the approach to awarding/grade boundaries was published early enough. Figure 6 illustrates 94% of senior appointee respondents strongly agreed or agreed compared to 67% of qualifications development respondents, in addition 15% of qualifications development strongly disagreed or disagreed compared to 0% of senior appointees.

Figure 6



The qualitative feedback for these questions highlighted the following themes:

- ◆ **Timing of communications:** The majority of respondents felt information about the approach to assessment was published early enough in the session. However, several respondents highlighted the need to communicate the approach to awarding/grade boundaries simultaneously with, or soon after, the approach to assessment. Earlier communication on the approach to assessment was highlighted by some respondents (for instance, centres planning two-year National 5 courses require earlier communications to plan and prepare, with some centres implementing timetable changes as early as May).
- ◆ **Understanding and dissemination of key messages:** Many respondents representing both senior appointees and qualifications development stated that there was a lack of understanding or a partial understanding of the sensitive approach to grading, and that further detail was required for clarity. There was a perception of variation in the dissemination of information on the approach of assessment and grading. Some respondents noted that for some practitioners, information was not as readily available as it was for senior appointees.
- ◆ **Accessibility:** The language used in SQA communications outlining the approach to assessment and awarding continues to be thought by some respondents to be inaccessible, with some respondents reporting a 'corporate language'. This created challenges for some subjects in terms of engagement and generated additional work for qualifications development colleagues who responded to queries from centres to improve understanding about the approach to assessment and awarding.

6 Learning and teaching

Questions in this section aimed to help us understand how the legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic continued to impact learning and teaching during the 2022–23 session in light of the revised support that was available, which included course assessment modifications retained from 2021–22. Resources were also available to learners via SQA’s open website, Your Exams guide and My Study Plan App.

In addition, respondents were asked about evidence of recovery from the pandemic in their subject areas, and how centres ensured that teaching covered the full range of course content during the 2022–23 session.

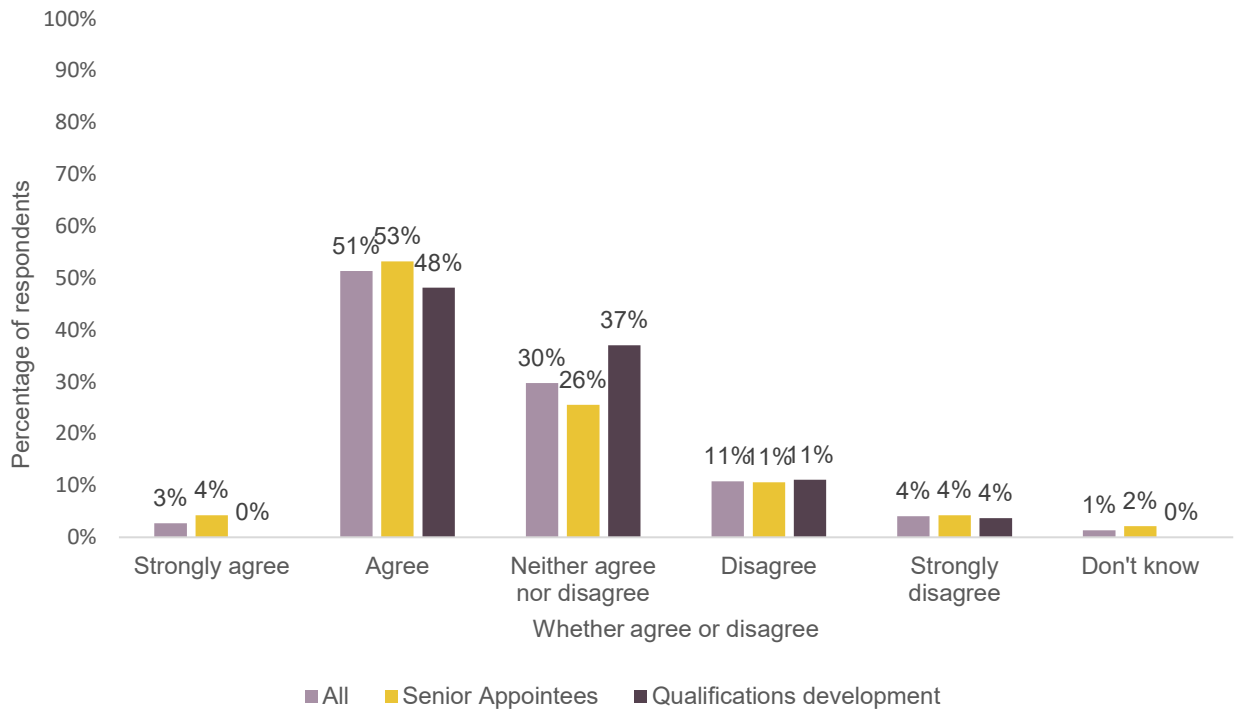
Respondents answered these questions based on their first-hand experience in centres or reflected the views of those they had engaged with in the teaching profession in their roles:

- ◆ 84% of respondents agreed (46%) or strongly agreed (38%) that the legacy of the pandemic continued to have a significant impact on learning and teaching in centres for 2022–23 for *some* learners
- ◆ 49% of respondents agreed (31%) or strongly agreed (18%) that the legacy of the pandemic continued to have a significant impact on learning and teaching in centres for 2022–23 for *all* learners

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed that there was evidence of recovery from the pandemic in 2022–23 compared to 2021–22 in their subject areas. Over half (54%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that there was evidence of recovery compared to the previous academic year, and 15% disagreed or strongly disagreed. A higher proportion of senior appointee respondents agreed or strongly agreed compared to qualifications development respondents — 57% compared with 48% respectively. Figure 7 demonstrates the responses by role.

Figure 7

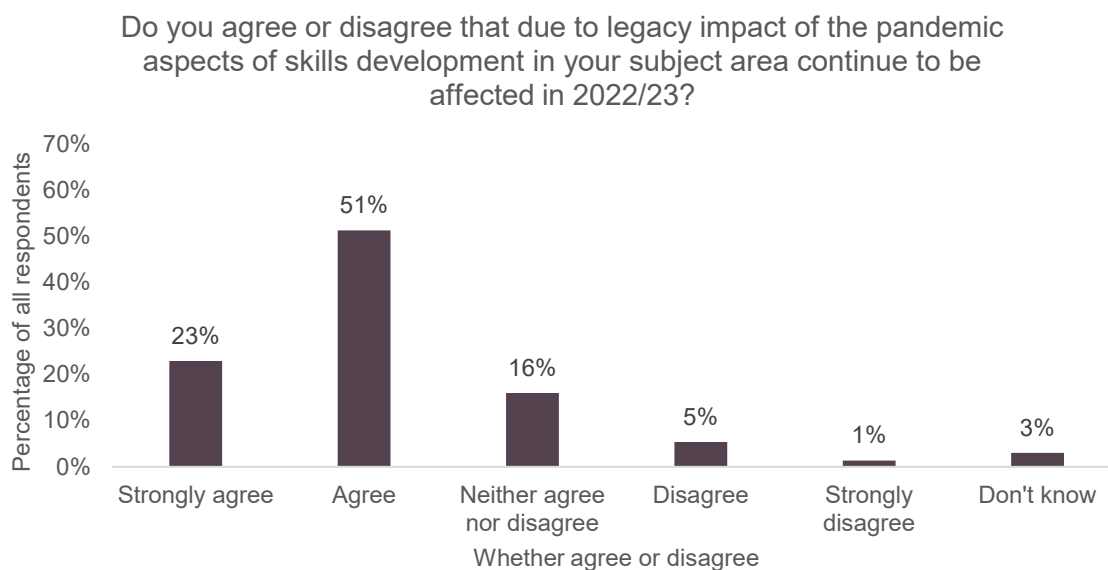
Do you agree or disagree that there was evidence of recovery from the pandemic in 2022–23 compared to 2021–22? By role



Respondents were asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed that due to the legacy impact of the pandemic aspects of skills development in their subject area continued to be affected in 2022–23.

Figure 8 shows 74% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that skills development in their subject area continued to be affected in 2022–23 due to the legacy impact of the pandemic.

Figure 8



Respondents were asked to say whether they agreed or disagreed that in their experience (senior appointees) or via feedback they received (qualifications development) that centres, in general, ensured teaching covered the full range of content during 2022–23 session. Some respondents highlighted that areas of the course that were not going to be assessed due to modifications were not taught, and some respondents, particularly those not directly involved in teaching delivery, explained they would be unable to answer this question.

- ◆ 52% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that in general, centres ensured teaching covered the full range of content during 2022–23 session
- ◆ 28% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that in general, centres ensured teaching covered the full range of content during 2022–23 session

The practitioners' experience evaluation differs slightly to the senior appointee and qualifications development respondents regarding the delivery of course content in 2022–23 session. Practitioner respondents noted that:

- ◆ 41% of practitioner respondents stated that they did not cover content that was not going to be assessed due to modifications to course assessment in 2022–23 session
- ◆ 27% of practitioner respondents stated that they covered briefly the content that was not going to be assessed due to modifications to course assessment in 2022–23 session
- ◆ 12% of practitioner respondents stated that they covered in some detail the content that was not going to be assessed due to modifications to course assessment in 2022–23 session
- ◆ 8% of practitioner respondents stated that they covered in full the content that was not going to be assessed due to modifications to course assessment in 2022–23 session
- ◆ (the question was not applicable to 12% of practitioner respondents)

The qualitative feedback for these questions included responses from senior appointees based on either their experience as teachers or upon evidence seen through the marking and awarding process and qualification development respondents regarding the legacy

impact of the pandemic on learning and teaching, the feedback highlighted the following themes:

- ◆ **Legacy impact of COVID:** The legacy of the pandemic continued to have a significant impact in 2022–23 session for some learners. Many respondents highlighted that due to learners not developing/not having the opportunity to develop specific skills normally developed in earlier academic years, ie S1-S3, gaps in literacy and numeracy skills were evident.
- ◆ **Literacy and Numeracy:** In particular, lower levels of reading, writing, communication and analysis skills were seen in some learners in a range of subjects including English, Languages, Economics, Business Management, Geography, Graphic Communication, Sciences, Art and Design. Respondents highlighted a low level of reading skills attributed to centres significantly narrowing the breadth of reading undertaken and learners accessing shorter texts linked to legacy impact of the pandemic. In addition, poor performance seen in the understanding of command words, ie, explain, justify. Lower standard of numeracy skills was seen in Maths and Graphic Communication, issues with number skills attributed to the loss of teaching in late primary/early secondary, with the strongest impact seen in less competent learners. Several respondents noted the loss of lower-level numeracy skills in Maths impacting on, and anticipated will continue to impact on, Higher and Advanced Higher level learners over the next few academic years.
- ◆ **General skills:** In addition to communication skills (speaking and listening) impacted, respondents highlighted poor performance seen in skills associated with critical thinking and analysis in connection with data and graph analysis and interpretation skills (Sciences). General skills linked to self-management, ie independent thinking/study skills, were noted by respondents as affected due to the legacy impact of the pandemic. Other general skills highlighted by respondents included reduced learner self-esteem and confidence, (Geography). A particular theme noted from respondents was that recovery at Advanced Higher level is dependent on the opportunity for learners to develop skills at National 5 and Higher level, including skills in research, investigation, data collection, evaluation, processing and conclusions (Geography).
- ◆ **Learner attitude:** Learner attitude was highlighted by some respondents (senior appointees teaching experience), mainly poor learner attitude, (poor self-management) linked to legacy impact of the pandemic (English/Media). Learners did not recognise or value the importance of meeting deadlines, did not take ownership, learners expected their teachers to assume responsibility in these areas. These factors contributed to challenges faced by teachers when supporting learner progression and aiming for full content delivery.
- ◆ **IT Skills:** Some respondents highlighted how the legacy of the pandemic continues to significantly impact IT skills, and that some learners did not have the solid foundation required for the level of study (Computer Science). Reduced IT skills was also highlighted in other subject areas which are reliant on competent IT skills, ie Graphic Communication, requiring skills in desk top publishing, graph drawing and 3-D modelling.
- ◆ **Skills development:** Practical skills were highlighted in a range of subject areas as impacted due to the legacy of the pandemic. Many respondents stated that reduced

opportunity for skills development in learners' earlier years due to the pandemic was the main factor with specific examples provided:

- Sciences - poor lab work skills evident due to reduced practical or fieldwork
 - Food, Health and Technology - practical cake craft and cookery skills were not the same standard as before the pandemic
 - Dance and Drama - practical performance was markedly reduced
 - PE - when re-introducing practical assessment poor ball handling skills and reduced experience in group games seen at National 5 level.
 - Engineering Science - respondents highlighted concerns due to no project in previous academic year a lack of practical skills were evident when re-introducing coursework.
 - In Languages, however, respondents noted where coursework had been retained, skills development was not as markedly reduced compared to other subject areas.
- ◆ **Other contributing factors:** Other contributing factors highlighted by respondents which affected learners attributed to the legacy of the pandemic included learners unable to go out on location/undertake fieldwork, (Geography), this reduced the opportunity to develop skills highlighted previously such as research and investigation skills, and processing techniques, in addition to the development of meta-skills such as team working.
- In addition, increased costs to centres was highlighted by respondents as another possible factor preventing the learner with the opportunity to develop skills whilst on location or undertaking fieldwork
 - Consideration should also be given to other possible factors impacting literacy and numeracy skills and not solely attributed to the legacy of the pandemic. Some respondents suggested that lower performance trends were seen in literacy and numeracy skills prior to the pandemic – it is beyond the scope of this research to provide contributing factors impacting literacy and numeracy skills prior to the pandemic, this could perhaps be considered for a future research project including data evidence from: [Programme for International Student Assessment \(PISA 2022\): Scotland's results - highlights - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/resources/consultations-petitions/embedded/PISA2022-Scotland%20results-highlights.pdf)
- ◆ **Attendance:** Poor attendance levels continued to impact teaching and learning in 2022–23. Respondents with teaching experience or from feedback received by teachers highlighted that teachers continued to face the challenge of some learners' poor attendance which affected the delivery of full course content delivery. In addition to poor attendance, depending on the individual learner attitude, learner progression was also impacted, and increased teacher workload as they supported learners with poor attendance. As highlighted previously, the contributing factor of learning loss carried over from previous years, in some subjects, resulted in learners at Higher and Advanced Higher displaying weaker foundation subject knowledge than previous years. In addition, respondents reported some evidence of gaps in general Broad General Education skills, knowledge and understanding carrying through to the senior phase.
- ◆ **Course coverage:** A mixed response from respondents varying between subjects and centres. While some respondents highlighted that only course content for assessment was covered due to modifications this was variable dependent on subject and centre.

Some respondents reported no evidence of reduced content, that exams did not indicate gaps in candidates' knowledge, due to full course content knowledge required to answer exam questions. The impact of content for assessment only being covered was particularly seen in some Higher and Advanced Higher level subjects (Maths, English). It was also noted at Advanced Higher level that some centres delivered reduced unit content, ie mandatory unit and only one optional unit.

- ◆ **Challenges:** Respondents highlighted that in some centres, pupil attendance made it extremely challenging to ensure full course content was delivered to all learners. Time restriction due to teacher industrial action and staff absence were also noted as contributing factors in delivering non-assessed content. At Advanced Higher level, in some practical subjects, respondents noted restricted delivery of optional units due to reduced teacher confidence in these specific areas.

7 Awarding and grading

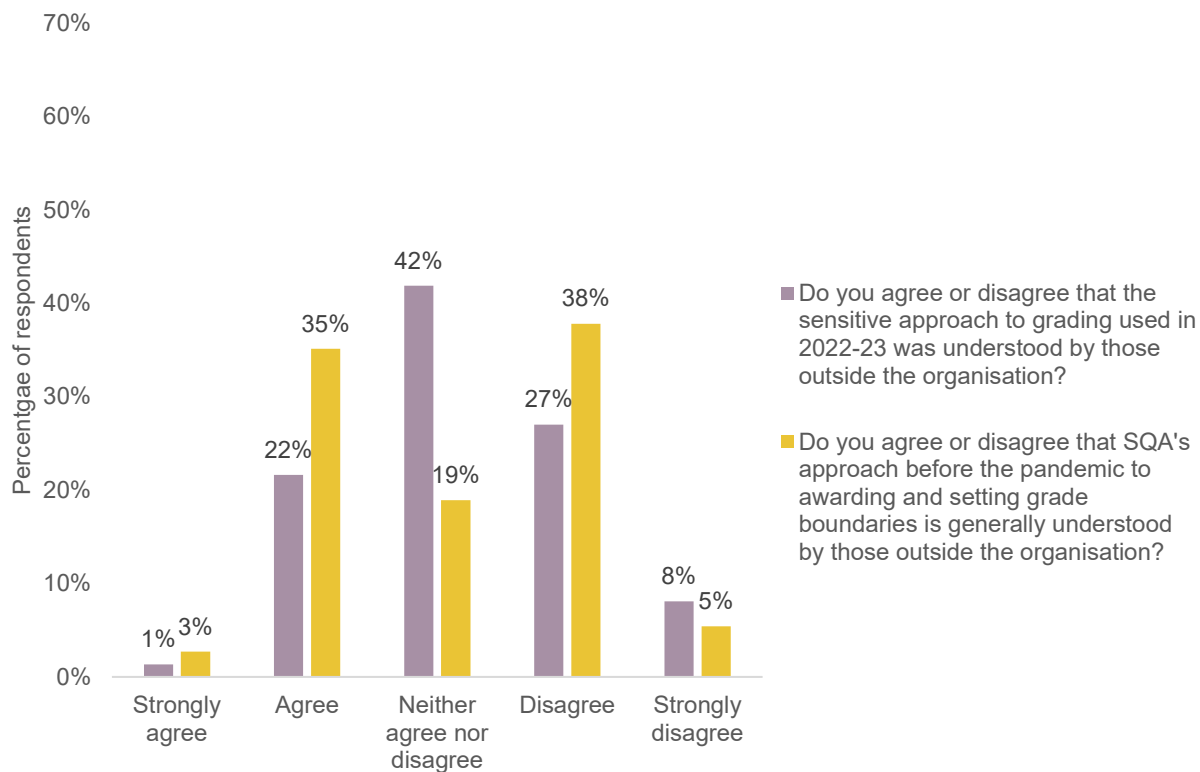
The revised package of support for learners in 2022–23 included a sensitive approach to grading, which was applied during awarding. Awarding takes place each summer following the end of the exam diet which includes a robust quality assured marking process and the setting of individual grade boundaries (upper A, A and C) for each course. Further information about this procedure is available on our [website](#).

In 2022–23, the approach to grading followed SQA's normal awarding procedure, which involves a thorough evaluation of the performance of the course assessments, as far as possible. The approach in 2022–23 continued to consider the impact on learners' performances as a result of COVID-19 disruption and retained modifications from 2021–22. Careful consideration of all contributing factors throughout the decision-making process ensured grade boundary decisions were made with a sensitive approach in cognisance of their impact on performance. All judgements were informed by robust qualitative and quantitative evidence, and the knowledge and expertise of senior appointees (principal assessors and depute assessors) who are also teaching professionals and subject specialists.

The vast majority of respondents (93%) attended awarding meetings in 2022–23. The survey asked several questions regarding how SQA's approach to awarding and setting grade boundaries was understood externally, both prior to the pandemic and in 2022–23 when SQA applied the sensitive approach to grading (see Figure 9).

Figure 9

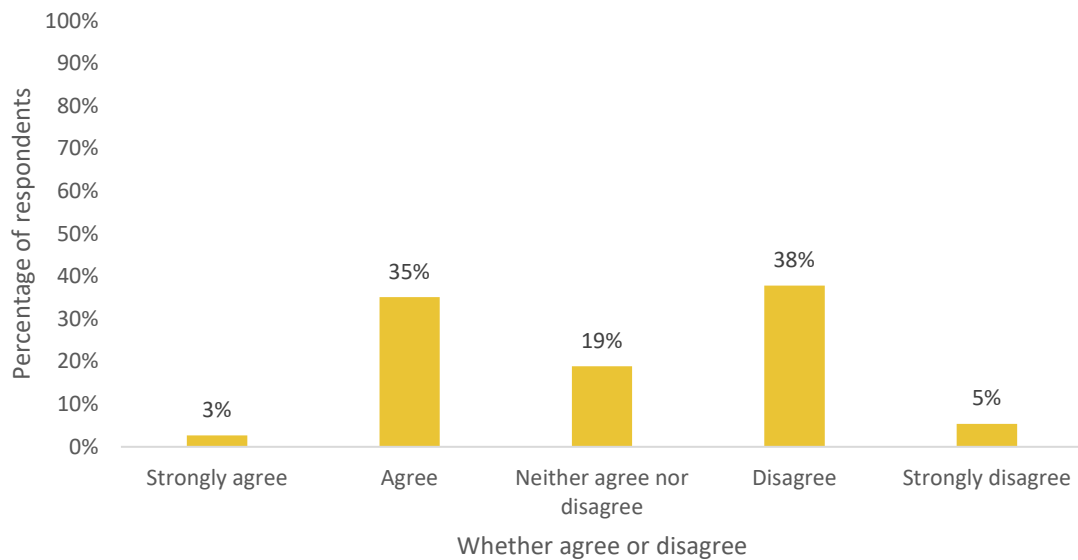
Attitudes in 2023 towards how well SQA's approach to awarding and setting grade boundaries is understood by those outside the organisation before and after the pandemic



Generally, there was a split response regarding external understanding of SQA's approach to grading before the pandemic. 38% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that SQA's approach before the pandemic to awarding and setting grade boundaries was generally understood by those outside the organisation, with a greater proportion (by 5 percentage points) disagreeing or strongly disagreeing (43%) (see Figure 10).

Figure 10

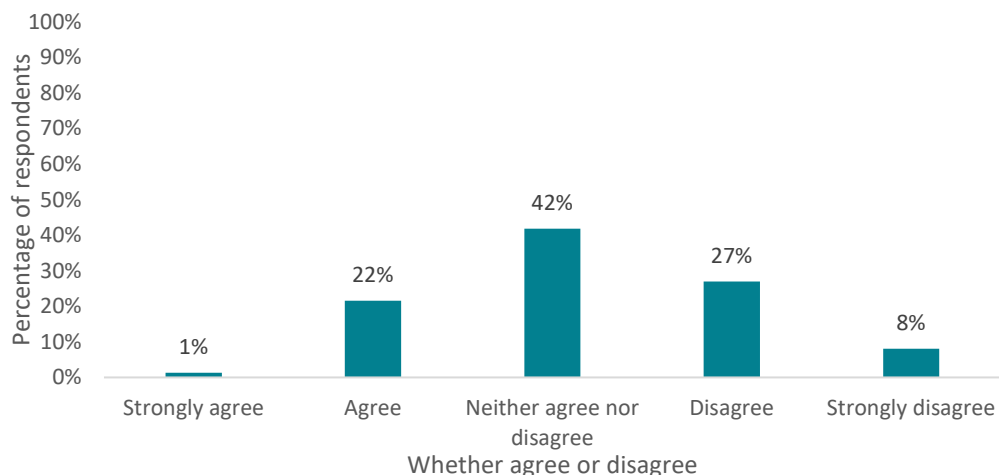
Do you agree or disagree that SQA's approach before the pandemic to awarding and setting grade boundaries is generally understood by those outside the organisation?



The most common response regarding external understanding of the sensitive approach to grading in 2022–23 was 'neither agree nor disagree' (42%). However, responses suggest slightly that survey participants did not think SQA's sensitive approach to grading in 2022–23 was well understood externally, with 35% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing, compared with 23% agreeing or strongly agreeing the sensitive approach to grading was understood externally (see Figure 11).

Figure 11

Do you agree or disagree that the sensitive approach to grading used in 2022–23 was understood by those outside the organisation?



Survey participants were also asked if the approach used for Awarding 2022–23 ensured all relevant factors were considered when setting grade boundaries and if the approach used

found an appropriate balance between fairness and maintaining the credibility of the qualifications in line with SQA's statutory functions.

- ◆ 95% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the approach used for Awarding 2022–23 ensured all relevant factors were considered when setting grade boundaries.
- ◆ 93% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the approach used for awarding in 2022–23 found an appropriate balance between fairness and maintaining the credibility of the qualifications in line with SQA's statutory function.

Several themes emerged from the qualitative feedback for these questions:

- ◆ **External understanding of awarding prior to the pandemic:** There was a mixed response regarding external understanding of awarding (the process used for setting grade boundaries) prior to the pandemic, with results leaning towards less understanding externally. To improve external understanding of the awarding process, some respondents suggested more engagement by centres to enhance understanding and awareness among practitioners was required. Respondents highlighted that the awarding process is a very fair and robust process, but that the lack of time in centres for practitioners to engage with materials on the grading process contributed significantly to poor understanding. Some suggested that teacher INSET days could be used to enhance external understanding. Respondents also noted the opportunity for enhanced understanding of awarding for school senior leadership team members and local authority representatives.
- ◆ **External understanding of the sensitive approach used in 2022–23:** Respondents conveyed they thought the sensitive approach used in 2022–23 was not understood or only partially understood externally initially and required clarity and more detail when this approach was first confirmed. However, many senior appointee respondents noted that their own enhanced understanding of the sensitive approach became apparent during the awarding process. .

The survey also asked questions regarding awarding meetings, seeking views on what worked well and what did not work well. This covered topics such as access to information before and during awarding meetings, the structure of meetings and the survey provided space for any additional comments. There was also an opportunity for respondents to provide their reflections on accessing contents of the marker reports in preparation of the awarding meetings.

Respondents provided the following comments for these questions, outlining the aspects of awarding that they felt worked well:

- ◆ **Discussions took all factors into consideration:** The majority of respondents felt all relevant factors were considered when setting grade boundaries and that there was a significant amount of discussion before decisions were made. Respondents highlighted the fair and sensitive nature of discussions, within an extremely thorough approach when analysing both quantitative and qualitative data. In particular, respondents thought that all attendees at each awarding meeting had the opportunity to contribute with factors for consideration from both assessment and the legacy impact of the pandemic.

- ◆ **Experience of awarding process/supporting information:** Respondents said the awarding process was a positive experience. They felt it was a smooth process with improved format regarding access to marker reports — these reports are the main mechanism that SQA uses for gathering feedback from appointees who mark external assessments. Positive feedback was also received regarding the online statistics pack, a new approach introduced in 2022, with respondents noting it was well laid out, and easy to understand and refer to marker reports.
- ◆ **Teamwork:** Throughout the whole awarding process respondents experienced good teamwork, collaboration and discussion between principal assessors, subject implementation managers, qualification managers and awarding panel members. All had the same goal — to achieve a fair result for candidates while maintaining qualification standards.
- ◆ **Thorough, robust and consistent approach:** Respondents reflected very positively on the structure of the awarding meetings, highlighting that these were held face-to-face, and were consistently thorough with professional discussions and emphasised the robustness of the decision-making process.
- ◆ **Fairness:** The vast majority of respondents felt the approach used in awarding meetings was a fair process. Grade boundary decisions were based on evidence and judgements made after careful consideration of all relevant factors to ensure a fair result for candidates.

A minority of respondents outlined the aspects of awarding that they felt did not work well or as expected:

- ◆ **Preparation time:** Some respondents felt they needed more time to review the statistical information before the awarding meetings. This was highlighted by a few respondents who had multiple grade boundary meetings in one day, or early meetings resulting in inadequate amount of time to fully engage with the materials prior to the awarding meeting. (The vast majority of senior appointees do not have multiple grade boundary meetings in one day.) In addition, some respondents felt they needed more time to discuss with colleagues before the awarding meeting. Some respondents experienced some difficulty when preparing for awarding meetings due to uncertainty around when supporting information would be received, with the preference for receiving information earlier, which gives more time for considering the evidence.
- ◆ **Timing of issue of materials:** Some respondents reported late issuing of materials including statistics, which reduced preparation time.
- ◆ **Digital packs:** A few senior appointees felt the use of digital packs meant they did not always have the stats in front of them when discussing questions. Some found it difficult to interrogate item analysis data on screen.

8 Understanding Standards

Understanding Standards questions were included in both the senior appointees / qualifications development survey and also in the separate practitioners' survey. Qualitative

feedback was collated from the practitioners' survey and is highlighted later in the themes section.

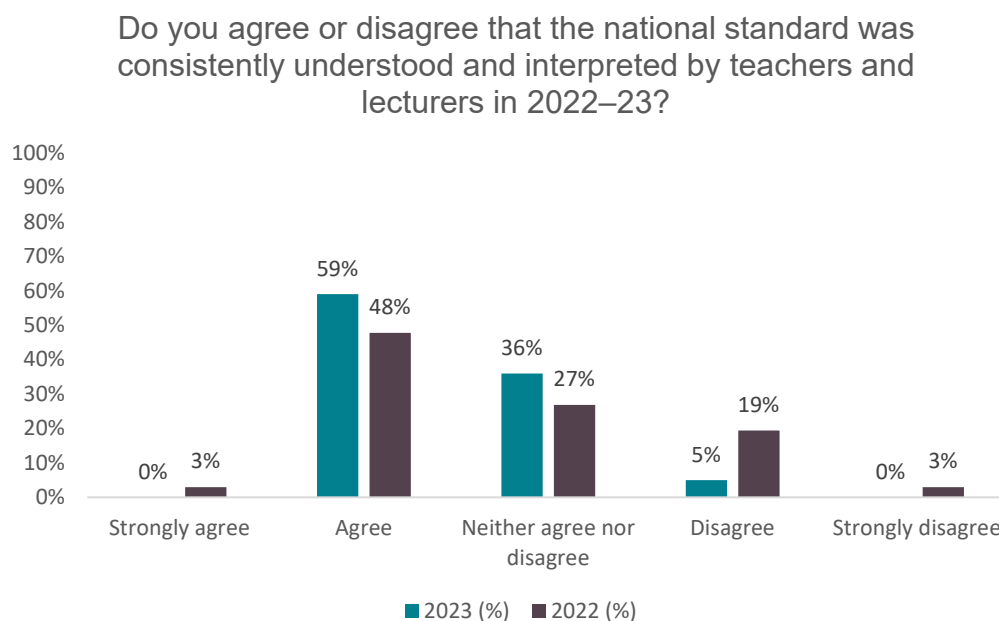
This section of the senior appointees and qualifications development survey included questions on how standards are articulated, understood and applied while also exploring how they have been maintained in the context of academic year 2022–23.

- ◆ 82% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the national standard is articulated clearly in the course specification
- ◆ 87% of senior appointees and 74% qualifications development colleagues agreed or strongly agreed the national standard is articulated clearly in the course specification
- ◆ 59% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the national standard was consistently understood and interpreted by teachers and lecturers in 2022–23

When comparing responses over time there has been an increase in the proportion of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed that the national standard was consistently understood and interpreted by teachers and lecturers (59% in 2023 compared to 51% in 2022). This is alongside a substantial decrease in the proportion of people who disagreed that the national standard was consistently understood and interpreted by teachers and lecturers in 2022–23.

Figure 12 shows that 22% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the national standard was consistently understood and interpreted by teachers and lecturers in 2021–22. In 2022–23 this has reduced to just 5%. The figures in 2022–23 indicate a positive trajectory for the consistent understanding and interpretation of the national standard by teachers and lecturers with caveats linked to the support and resources required.

Figure 12



As noted above, Understanding Standards questions were incorporated into the surveys for both senior appointees and qualifications development as well as the practitioners' survey, to

gather qualitative feedback on how standards were articulated, understood and applied in academic year 2022–23 . Both surveys highlighted several themes:

- ◆ **Defining the national standard:** The majority of all respondents felt the course specification provides a good overview of the national standard. However, it was also felt that the course specification should not be relied on solely to articulate the national standard. For effective articulation additional materials should be read in conjunction with the course specification, including grade descriptors, marking instructions, exemplar material and course reports. Some senior appointee and qualifications development respondents noted that some Understanding Standards documents can be open to interpretation, and that this highlighted a need for clearer articulation of the standard across the specification and Understanding Standards materials. Some subjects, including National 5 English, noted that significant development work had been undertaken in recent years to ensure the specification clearly articulated the standard. Most respondents felt further work at a national and local level is required to increase understanding of the national standard through Understanding Standards.
- ◆ **Established and effectively-led teams:** Practitioners reflected on the importance of transparency and accessibility, whilst also requesting more information on SQA's Understanding Standards web page. There was extremely positive feedback regarding face-to-face Understanding Standards events, describing them as effective and valuable workshops that facilitated enhanced understanding of the national standard. Respondents from all groups highlighted that face-to-face Understanding Standards events provided opportunities for discussion, including group discussions on marking and networking opportunities to establish strong subject teams confident in applying a consistent standard. Several practitioners report the ineffectiveness of cascading information as a method of facilitating understanding, with a preference for face-to-face dissemination, which enabled clear communication, discussion, clarity, confidence and excellent support.
- ◆ **Development of qualifications:** Some senior appointees highlighted the ongoing impact on standards in relation to previous long-term changes to courses and course assessment introduced before the pandemic. For example, changes introduced under Revised National Qualifications and changes to question paper structures. These factors should also be considered within the long-term context of the impact on standards.
- ◆ **Building confidence/raising standard awareness among practitioners is essential for both practitioners and learners:** Senior appointees and qualifications teams reflected on the importance of Understanding Standards events, in particular face-to-face workshop type events. It was noted that Understanding Standards events and resources are vital in supporting the standard to the teaching profession and that support was needed to build confidence. This was evident not just for those new to the teaching profession, also for experienced practitioners who were delivering new subject areas and may need tailored resources and/or targeted support. Also applicable to experienced practitioners was the opportunity at workshops for facilitators to demonstrate examples of recognised current accepted responses, thus supporting teachers to convey the acceptable standard to candidates, providing opportunity for an enhanced understanding from teaching and learning perspectives.

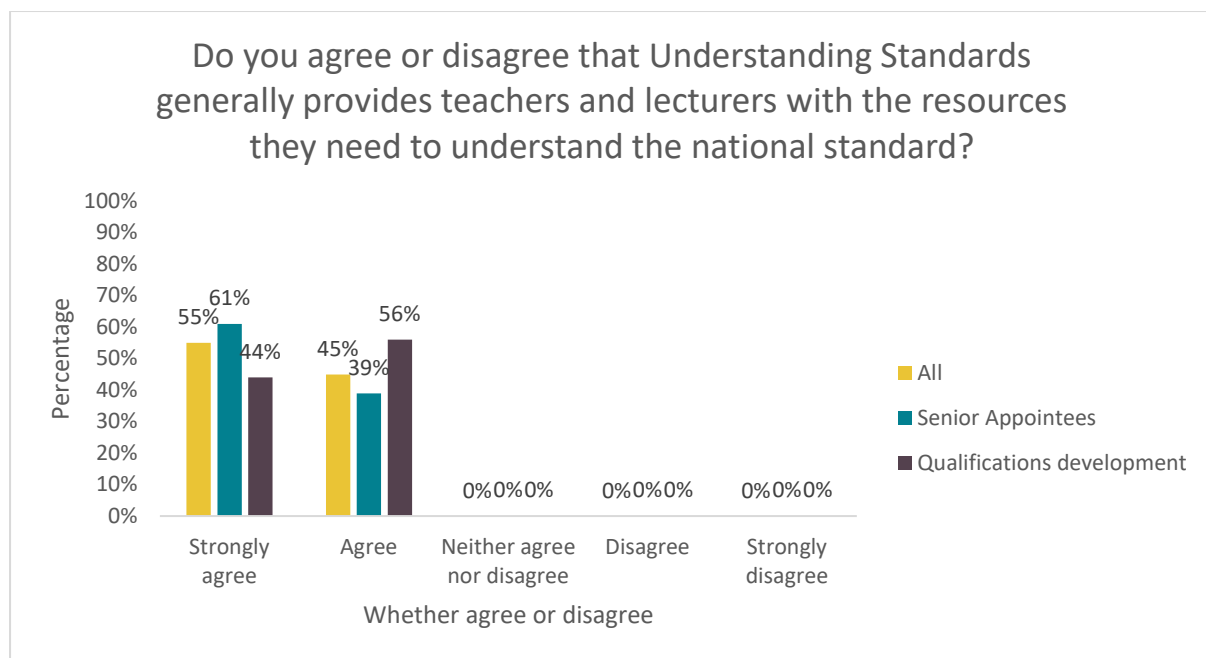
Understanding Standards resources

Understanding Standards resources are developed by SQA to support practitioners in interpreting and applying the national standard for each course. The survey asked senior appointees, qualifications development and practitioners about the currency and effectiveness of these resources:

- ◆ 55% of senior appointees and qualifications development respondents strongly agreed and 45% agreed that Understanding Standards generally provides teachers and lecturers with the resources they need to understand the national standard.
- ◆ 45% of teachers and lecturers agreed and 17% strongly agreed that Understanding Standards provides teachers and lecturers with the resources they need to understand the national standard.

Dependent on role (senior appointee and qualifications development) there were significant differences in response to this question. Figure 13 shows 61% of senior appointees, and 44% of qualifications development colleagues, strongly agreeing that Understanding Standards resources generally provides teachers and lecturers with the resources they need to understand the national standard. (No respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed.)

Figure 13



From practitioners' perspective, 447 practitioners submitted comments in relation to having a good understanding of the national standard:

- ◆ 78% of practitioners agreed or strongly agreed that they have a good understanding of the national standard

However:

- ◆ Only 52% of practitioner respondents strongly agreed or agreed that teachers and lecturers are given the opportunity to engage with Understanding Standards to enable a strong understanding of the national standard

Qualitative feedback from senior appointees, qualifications development and practitioners is reflected in the themes below. Of particular note, qualitative feedback included many senior appointees and practitioners highlighting that their experience as a marker greatly enhanced their understanding of standards.

The qualitative feedback highlighted the following themes:

Resources could be more accessible: Many respondents felt that there are a range of Understanding Standards resources that are good and useful for their subject, and some respondents felt there are still challenges with access and engagement. Some felt that content and guidance is written in a very corporate way, resulting in inconsistencies and leaving materials open to interpretation. Some respondents, who are involved in developing resources, highlighted restrictions including the templates used, leading to challenges with the information included, and the general presentation, which alters the clarity of information.

Some senior appointees are keen to see more workshop materials made available on the website to increase accessibility, particularly for practitioners who are unable to attend the Understanding Standards events. However, many respondents, particularly practitioners, report that the Understanding Standards website was extremely challenging to navigate and locate resources on. Enhanced accessibility and awareness of course reports was also highlighted by several respondents, in particular increased awareness/accessibility to promote practitioner engagement with course reports would, respondents felt, enhance practitioner understanding of the standard.

Development of resources: Some respondents highlighted the need for further Understanding Standards resources to be developed — in particular, guidance and support on writing prelim assessments, and new teacher guidance to improve practitioners' understanding of the national standard.

In-person versus online events: The majority of respondents' preference is for in-person events, which resulted in more beneficial professional dialogue, group discussions, and establishing networks. Although several recognise that online events were helpful due to location, time resource and recorded. However, they also recognised that online events are restrictive and not as effective from opportunity for discussion perspective. Challenges regarding accessing Understanding Standards in-person events were highlighted by some respondents — in particular, the inability to book onto events due to (for example) over-subscription, SQA criteria to book a place, lack of time, finances (linked to travel or childcare) or geographical factors. Some practitioners also highlighted that Understanding Standards events were held too late in the academic year, preferring dates at the start of the academic year.

New teachers and those in single person departments: Respondents highlighted newly qualified teachers, teachers delivering new subject areas, and those in smaller / remote

departments as requiring focused Understanding Standards resources and additional support in interpreting and applying the national standard. Examples of good practice in supporting new teachers included qualification managers facilitating Understanding Standards events at university — on teacher training programmes. This enabled soon-to-be-qualified teachers to become familiar with course specifications, Understanding Standards resources and was an opportunity to demonstrate SQA website resources.

Opportunities for practitioner professional dialogue to enhance understanding of standards: Understanding Standards workshops provide opportunity for practitioner discussions and network opportunities. Practitioner and senior appointee respondents highlighted that in some centres there is rarely opportunity to meet internally or externally to discuss standards, for marking experience or professional dialogue to share ideas and assessment practice. Further opportunities to do so through SQA events would be welcomed. Also highlighted was the challenge experienced in some centres regarding the reliance on one person to cascade information, resulting in a variation in the information and guidance being disseminated. Senior appointee respondents also highlighted that the guidance, resources and support provided at Understanding Standards events enhances practitioners' understanding of standards, including their understanding of assessment requirements in relation to permitted resources and reasonable assistance.

Dedicated CPD time for standards needed: Some respondents said more development time was needed to engage with Understanding Standards materials, in addition to increased time to enable attendance at Understanding Standards events. Several senior appointee and qualifications team respondents noted that practitioners are rarely allocated time for engaging with Understanding Standards materials or events — some felt that this should be a national educational priority if national standards were to be understood and applied consistently.

9 Exam Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service (EECCS)

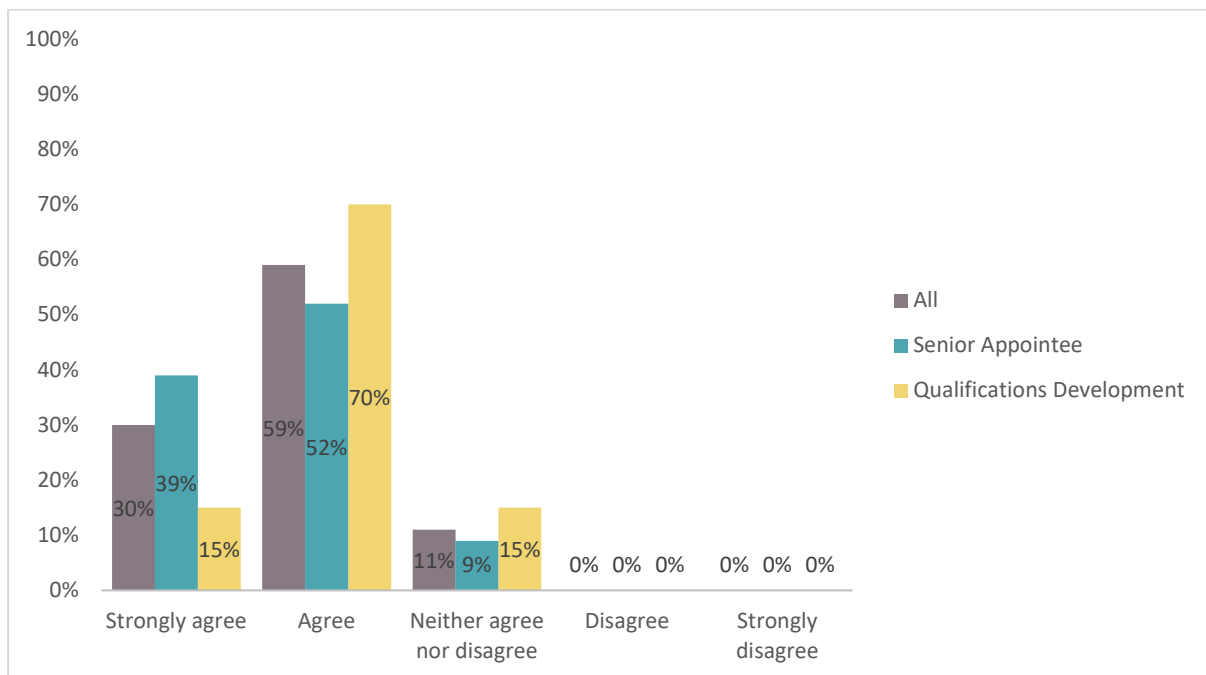
The Exam Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service (EECCS) in 2022 continued to be available in 2023. This service enabled learners' evidence to be reviewed should a learner be unable to attend an exam or if exam performance was affected by personal circumstance, or an unplanned incident on the day beyond their control. All available assessment evidence including alternative assessment was reviewed by an SQA appointed subject specialist. Guidance and information on the EECCS was communicated to centres in February 2023. Further communication regarding the EECCS 2023 was made available to learners, parents and carers via SQA's website.

Respondents, back to senior appointees and qualifications development respondents only, were asked how they and teachers and lecturers understood the EECCS process in 2022–23. Respondents were also asked if the EECCS process in 2022–23 found an appropriate balance between fairness and maintaining the credibility of the qualifications in line with SQA's statutory functions for learners, including disabled learners and/or learners with additional support needs.

- ◆ 96% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they understood the EECCS process in 2023
- ◆ 66% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that teachers and lecturers understood the EECCS process.
- ◆ 89% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the EECCS process in 2023 found an appropriate balance between fairness and maintaining the credibility of the qualifications in line with our statutory functions for learners, including disabled learners and/or learners with additional support needs.

Figure 14 demonstrates analyses of responses to this question by role with a higher proportion of senior appointees strongly agreeing, 39% in comparison to 15% of qualifications development colleagues.

Figure 14: Do you agree or disagree that the EECCS 2023 process found an appropriate balance between fairness and maintaining the credibility of the qualifications in line with our statutory functions for learners, including disabled learners and / or learners with additional support needs? By role



Qualitative feedback provided the following themes:

- ◆ **Centre understanding / Evidence submitted:** Some respondents highlighted that some centres required improved understanding of the EECCS process. They stated the EECCS process was not always clear to centres, resulting in confusion by some regarding the awarding process being based on demonstrated attainment. There was variable interpretation of the EECCS by centres, and a misconception that there is a compensated element to the process which centres may convey to learners. Another particular concern by respondents was the quality of evidence submitted by some centres.
- ◆ **Operational aspect:** Some respondents highlighted the EECCS was well organised, good teamwork was evident and enabled focus for the marking team. Feedback from

respondents included that some centres understood the EECCS process via information disseminated by their SQA Co-ordinator.

10 Appeals

The Appeals service in 2023 was different to the service in 2022 and more aligned to the service used prior to the pandemic. No alternative assessment was required, learners were able to request a review of their SQA marked assessment components. This was a free service where learners could appeal directly to SQA.

The survey asked respondents several questions on the Appeals service used in 2023 with opportunity to add further comment.

- ◆ 79% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that information about the Appeals 2022–23 service was published early enough in the academic year
- ◆ A strong majority of 86% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the Appeals 2022–23 process was a fair process for learners, including disabled learners and/or learners with additional support needs.

Qualitative feedback on these questions highlighted the following themes:

- ◆ **Name:** Some respondents highlighted the name 'Appeals 2023' was confusing and misleading for many, that it was not appeals, and that a more appropriate name would be 'Marking Review 2023'.
- ◆ **Fairness:** Respondents believed the process used by SQA was fair to all candidates. Respondents highlighted the enhanced reliability of appeals decisions due to being based solely on quality assured SQA assessments rather than alternative evidence, which ensured that the same assessment evidence was being reviewed for all candidates and therefore fair to all candidates.

Some respondents also highlighted that centres and learners should not be allowed to submit appeals after the deadline.

- ◆ **Appropriate evidence:** Some respondents highlighted the need to raise awareness of appropriate evidence with centres. One example that was provided linked to appropriate practical evidence, ie no recording or appropriate evidence available for practical element (Dance/Drama). Clarification was required for some centres with subject-specific guidance to provide additional support to practitioners.
- ◆ **Challenges linked to timescale of process:** Despite many respondents highlighting a straightforward process a small number of respondents experienced an extremely lengthy and challenging process. One challenging example included the experience of a lengthy process due to the type of appeal not being recognised in the data system, — an appeal from A band 2 to A band 1, which was linked to a university application with a short deadline.

11 Equalities

The final section of the survey asked respondents several questions focused on assessment arrangements and equalities.

- ◆ A strong majority (84%) agreed or strongly agreed that learners with assessment arrangements in place were provided with an equal opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding and skills whilst balancing credibility of the qualifications.
- ◆ 76% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that assessment arrangements were provided for disabled learners and/or those with additional support needs without compromising the integrity of the qualification. (14% of respondents opted for 'don't know'.)

Qualitative feedback on these questions highlighted the following themes:

- ◆ **Communication and collaboration:** Some respondents highlighted the effective communication and collaboration between centres and SQA colleagues in the assessment arrangements, policy and qualifications teams to ensure fair adjustment, and individualised for the candidate. Many respondents also highlighted effective collaboration with SQA colleagues and consideration of protected characteristics when writing question papers.
- ◆ **Centre resource challenges:** Some respondents highlighted challenges faced by centres due to the increase in candidates requiring assessment arrangements. Some respondents noted that teachers reported that the number of candidates now requiring additional support needs as becoming unsustainable. Specifically, some centres were unable to put assessment arrangements in place due to lack of resources. An example that was given had teachers indicating that they can have as many candidates requiring separate accommodation as there are in the main exam hall.