



National Qualifications 2022

Awarding — Methodology report

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Contents

Introduction	4
1. Context	4
2. Overview of approach to awarding	4
3. Roles and responsibilities	6
3.1 Developing our approach	7
4. 2022 Awarding in the rest of the UK	7
5. Approach to awarding	8
5.1 Balancing disruption with modifications and revision support	9
5.2 Setting grade boundaries in 2022	9
6. Examination Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service	11
7. Appeals	11

Introduction

In 2022, for National Qualifications, Scotland has returned to formal national assessments (exams and coursework). This has been supported by a package of measures including course modifications and revision support, as well as wider support from across the education system at a national, regional, local and school and college level. This report provides details of the approach taken by SQA to awarding National Qualifications in 2022 to deliver fair outcomes for learners while maintaining standards

1. Context

On 17 August 2021, the Scottish Government confirmed a return to formal external assessment for National Qualifications at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher for the first time since 2019. This came after two years of COVID-19 pandemic disruption, which required the introduction of certification models based on alternative approaches to assessment.

The models used in 2020 and 2021 were based on teacher judgement of evidence of demonstrated attainment to determine grades for learners. For this reason, outcomes for these years reflect the different methods of assessment compared to pre-pandemic years. Outcomes in 2019 (and before) reflect the use of SQA assessments, including examinations and coursework, with grade boundaries set with respect to national performance standards based on expert judgement. In 2021, in line with the Alternative Certification Model (ACM), there was more flexibility in the timing, volume and duration of assessments, in the method of marking and quality assurance of assessment, and in the way grade boundaries were determined. (For further discussion of the difference between forms of assessment see: Stobart, G. (2008). *Testing Times: The Uses and Abuses of Assessment* (1st ed.). Routledge; Harlan, W. (2007). *Assessment of Learning*. SAGE Publications; Newton, P. and Shaw, S. (2014). *Validity in Educational and Psychological Assessment*. SAGE Publications.) As the [Chief Examiner's Report in 2021](#) notes, 'Given the exceptional circumstances in which National Courses were awarded in both 2020 and 2021, it is not possible to draw definitive conclusions on any changes in education performance across these two years, or in comparison to 2019.'

Formal assessments have been reintroduced in an environment that has remained challenging and uncertain for learners and for teachers and lecturers. The circumstances of this year posed several challenges for exam boards and awarding bodies in all parts of the UK, in terms of setting and maintaining comparable standards. For this reason, exam boards and awarding bodies have needed to devise and adopt approaches to standard setting in order to account for the unique circumstances of this year.

This methodology report outlines the approach that SQA used in 2022 for awarding and setting grade boundaries. The report aims to provide a public record of SQA's approach, laying out the objectives, principles and methods used. It places these in the context of the wider package of support measures that SQA introduced to support learners, and of the approaches to awarding used elsewhere in the UK in 2021–22.

2. Overview of approach to awarding

SQA worked in close partnership with the National Qualifications 2022 group to develop a significant package of support for learners undertaking National 5, Higher and Advanced

Higher course assessments in the 2021–22 session. This package was multifaceted and designed to help teachers, lecturers and learners address loss of teaching and learning, and to support them during periods of ongoing disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic. The package included a three-scenario model that was designed to deliver assessment and qualifications for learners in a way that was flexible to the changing circumstances:

- ◆ Scenario 1: Exams with modified course assessments
- ◆ Scenario 2: Exams with modified course assessments and additional support for learners
- ◆ Scenario 3: Exams cancelled with awards based on teacher-determined provisional results.

Wider arrangements were put in place to underpin this model:

- ◆ revision support for learners should Scenario 2 be invoked
- ◆ an Alternative Certification Model, should Scenario 3 be invoked
- ◆ a more generous approach to grading than in a normal year to allow for the impact of the pandemic on learners when determining grade boundaries, while maintaining standards and credibility of qualifications
- ◆ an Examination Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service for 2022 that included a new detailed reason to cover COVID-related disruption — for learners who were required to self-isolate or stay at home on the day of the exam in line with public health guidance at the time (see section 6).
- ◆ a free of charge appeals service that allows learners (who are eligible to appeal) or their representatives to appeal directly to SQA, or through their school, college or training provider (centre) (see section 7).

Conditions remained challenging and uncertain throughout the year — the situation remained unpredictable, and a great deal of flexibility was required to support the delivery of the examination diet. The measures put in place represent the culmination of much internal work at SQA, and reflect, where possible, some of the early feedback received from stakeholders on their experience of the approach used in 2020–21.

The full range of measures was outlined on [18 August 2021](#), following the Scottish Government’s announcement of a return to external assessment. The package of support included modifications to course assessment, building on the approach taken in 2021. Generally, the modifications were designed to help reduce the volume of assessment and ease teacher, lecturer and learner workload, while maintaining the credibility of the qualifications.

This was achieved through a range of measures to best fit with the established assessment approach for each subject, such as increased optionality, the removal of course components in some subjects, reducing the volume of evidence to be submitted in coursework, and providing advanced notice of topics in some areas. Overall, this aimed to increase opportunities and time for learning and teaching with a view to supporting educational recovery.

Examples of some of the modifications (and revision support) adopted at subject level include:

- ◆ Modifying approaches to optionality in some of the question papers to allow centres to focus their available learning and teaching time on a narrower range of topics or content. For example, in a History question paper, instead of mandatory questions, learners could choose one question from two sections of the paper. This supported teachers and lecturers by allowing them to focus on a narrower range of course topics and offered increased opportunities for learning and teaching.
- ◆ The removal of coursework to ensure class time required for planning, organising, and developing an assignment could be used as learning and teaching time for the course. For some subjects (such as sciences) practical or experimental work was removed due to public health restrictions in place at the time.
- ◆ Adjustments to the volume of assessable content. For example, in Higher Art and Design learners could choose to respond to either the Expressive Art Studies or the Design Studies section. This provided learners with choice and teachers and lecturers with more opportunity to focus learning and teaching on one aspect of study, rather than the usual two areas of study.
- ◆ Providing advance notice of topics in the examination. For example, in Higher Economics centres knew the topic and/or subtopic areas of content that would not be directly assessed in session 2021–22. This allowed learners, and teachers and lecturers to focus revision on key areas of study.

Revision support was formally announced on [1 February 2022](#) when SQA moved to Scenario 2 following substantial COVID disruption to learner and teacher attendance at a national level. Details of this revision support were published on [7 March](#). This was produced in tandem with a range of other resources made available to learners ahead of the exams, which included the [SQA website](#), a [‘Your Exams’ Guide](#) and [SQA’s MyStudyPlan app](#) to help learners make the most of their revision time.

In addition to this wide range of measures, SQA also recognised that the ongoing disruption to learning and teaching would require further support and reassurance for learners. The announcement on 1 February also provided details of SQA’s wider package of support, including details of the Examination Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service (EECCS), grading and appeals.

SQA adopted an approach to standard setting that retains the key elements of the well-established awarding procedures, but also aims to provide an extra layer of support to ensure learners are not unfairly disadvantaged by the unique circumstances of 2021–22. This overall approach to awarding and grading sought, where possible, to provide a more generous position in relation to outcomes than in 2019, while retaining the credibility and integrity of qualifications through maintaining performance standards where possible. This approach was informed by engagement with SQA’s own stakeholders and by an awareness of the planned approach elsewhere in the UK. Further details of the consultation and resulting approach are given in the following sections.

3. Roles and responsibilities

SQA has a statutory duty and responsibility to individual learners and to the wider community to ensure that the standard of our qualifications is 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. Essentially, maintaining standards ensures the credibility and ongoing value of qualifications over time for all of those who hold the qualifications.

Setting and maintaining assessment and qualifications standards is a crucial part of any education system, but it sits within a wider system of learning and teaching and curriculum choices at a local and centre level. Through the range of measures outlined in this report, SQA has taken all possible steps to address the widespread disruption to learning and teaching caused by the pandemic. Working with partners we set out the roles and responsibilities involved in ensuring the education system worked collaboratively and effectively.

3.1 Developing our approach

The overall package of support designed for learners, including the approach to standards, was developed in partnership with a range of key stakeholders. Internal and external engagement meetings were held in September and October 2021 to explore the unique challenges awarding bodies faced this year in relation to standards and outcomes. The views of sector stakeholders, including learners, were gathered to help inform SQA's approach for 2022. This feedback was essential in helping to guide the decision-making process around planning for awarding. Several options were explored, and following discussion with stakeholders it was agreed that a balance needed to be achieved between supporting learners through the ongoing disruption to learning and teaching, and ensuring qualifications remained valued and credible. The importance of ensuring fairness to all learners remained at the centre of the discussions.

The overall policy position that was adopted, and is set out later in this report, was informed by the views of stakeholders and learners. It was also discussed with members of the National Qualifications 2022 group, SQA's Advisory Council and Qualifications Committee, before it was endorsed by the SQA Board of Management.

4. 2022 Awarding in the rest of the UK

Despite slightly different approaches to awarding across the UK (see section 5), all systems are transitioning between two very different approaches to assessment — between outcomes and expectations from 2020 and 2021, when grades were determined via alternative means, back towards outcomes as in 2019 and before, with grades being determined by formal assessments including a mix of exams and coursework. As mentioned above, this makes setting and maintaining assessment and qualification standards in 2022 complex.

SQA's adoption of its policy of awarding for 2022 was informed by engagement with other jurisdictions in the UK.

Regulators and awarding bodies across the UK adopted slightly different approaches to modifications and revision support (also referred to as advance information). While different jurisdictions' methods differed in details, the UK has set out a broadly similar approach to outcomes.

In England, Ofqual outlined the approach in [an announcement](#) made on 30 September 2021. Ofqual intends to treat 2022 as a transition year, so that the outcomes will reflect a point close to midway between 2019 and 2021. The aim is to return to results in 2023 that

are in line with those in pre-pandemic years. While Ofqual has highlighted the need to maintain standards and promote public confidence in qualifications, it too is trying to balance the interests of learners in the context of a pandemic recovery year.

Qualifications Wales [announced](#) on 6 October 2021 that its approach to awarding in 2022 would be aligned with England, and included copies of the letters sent to learners, and schools and colleges. Wales outlined its intention to use a similar methodology to England for A level (where prior attainment can be measured through GCSE); and a 'common centres' approach for GCSE. Again, examiner judgement will be important to endorse the performance seen on the grade boundaries selected.

In Northern Ireland, CCEA [announced](#) an intention to set grade boundaries in order to reflect outcomes between 2021 and 2019. There are some additional complexities in Northern Ireland, including the use of optional assessments.

Scotland's qualifications are different from those elsewhere in the UK, as the three other nations have A levels and GCSEs. However, given the very similar experiences and COVID-related disruption, there is a broad alignment of approach across the UK in 2022.

5. Approach to awarding

Setting and maintaining qualification and assessment standards is complex and technical. In jurisdictions across the globe, and indeed in the different nations of the UK, slightly different concepts of standards are adopted or prioritised, and different approaches and methods are used for alignment. In Scotland, the tradition of standards maintenance falls under the banner of 'attainment-referenced'. This means the intention is to maintain performance standards by using expert judgement of assessment performance, supported by the use of statistics. This is different from 'norm-referenced' approaches (which seek to maintain the same overall outcomes regardless of individual performance) or 'criterion-referenced' approaches (which seek to prioritise performance standards through consideration of performances against specified criteria). SQA's approach to standard setting achieves its goal by using a well-established process called 'awarding'. Further details on the awarding process can be found in the [Guide to Setting Grade Boundaries](#), which outlines how the process works — an approach that was retained for this year.

This year, where necessary, SQA has adopted a more generous approach to grading National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses than it would in a normal year, to help ensure fairness for learners while maintaining standards. The key difference this year is that decisions about where the grade boundaries have been set have also been influenced, where necessary and appropriate, by the unique circumstances in 2022. This includes taking into account how the assessments (exams and coursework) have functioned and the impact of course modifications and revision support. As a consequence of this more generous approach, outcomes in 2022 at aggregate level, for Advanced Higher, Higher and National 5, are likely to be between those in 2021 and 2019 — an intermediary position between the two years. If necessary, grade boundaries could be lowered to achieve this, but only insofar as expert judgement on performance standards supported this decision.

The following sections outline how SQA used awarding to address some of the specific complexities of setting grade boundaries this year.

5.1 Balancing disruption with modifications and revision support

As a result of the disruption to learning and teaching resulting from the pandemic, it was recognised that learners as a cohort would be coming to the assessments having experienced the impact of COVID disruption in different ways. It was therefore difficult to give an accurate estimate of the impact of the modifications and revision support. Overall, in terms of exam performance, the positive impacts of the revision support and modifications, supported by the education system, were intended to mitigate the negative impact of COVID-19 related disruption to teaching and learning. However, it was expected that there may also be examples where this extra support was not quite sufficient, or where these measures had an impact that was unexpected.

This included occasions when the question paper may still prove too demanding for learners due to the impact of pandemic disruption on the acquisition of knowledge, understanding and skills, or when the absence of external assessment in the previous two years created unexpected challenges for learners.

A summary of COVID-related features and expected impacts can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of COVID-19 specific factors affecting cohort performance in 2022

Factor	Summary detail	Impact	Locus of impact
Disruption to teaching and learning	High levels of COVID-related absence from school/college amongst both learners and teachers/lecturers have created disruption.	Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Command of construct • Performance
Course assessment modifications	Formal assessments have been streamlined, reduced etc in order to reduce assessment burden and allow greater time for teaching and learning.	Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance, primarily
Revision supports	Study guides and advance notice of topics of assessment release to centres in March 2022 to support final stages of preparation for examination assessment.	Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance

5.2 Setting grade boundaries in 2022

In the context of 2022, grade boundary meetings played an important role in ensuring that the circumstances of this year were taken into consideration when evaluating the performance of assessments and setting grade boundaries. In each meeting, the principal assessor and the panel reviewed the performance of the assessment to understand if it had performed as intended. This was done by reviewing a range of qualitative and quantitative

evidence, including feedback from markers and estimates received from schools and colleges, before making a judgement on where to set the C, A and upper A (band 1) grade boundaries.

In summary, the grade boundaries were set in a way that:

- ◆ made sure standards were maintained
- ◆ took into account how the assessments (exams and coursework) performed

If the exam and other assessments for a course performed as intended and an intermediary position between 2019 and 2021 was achieved, no changes to the grade boundaries were made from their notional starting point. Notional grade boundaries are set at 50% of total marks for the course assessment for C, 70% for A and 85% for Upper A. SQA's assessments are developed with these notional or near notional grade boundaries in mind. They are therefore the starting point for discussion of the final grade boundaries for most courses in any year. Any adjustments are made from this starting point. In practice, in 2022 this meant that notional or expected grade boundaries (those that would apply if the assessments had performed as intended) were applied if they achieved these two objectives.

If the exam and other assessments did not perform as intended, and an adjustment was required to deal with any specific issues (eg the performance of particular questions or assessment components), the panel explored any factors that may have impacted on the performance of the assessments and the performance of learners, before agreeing grade boundaries, while protecting standards.

Figure 1 below shows a decision tree diagram to identify the steps and decisions taken to determine grade boundaries, resulting in three categories.

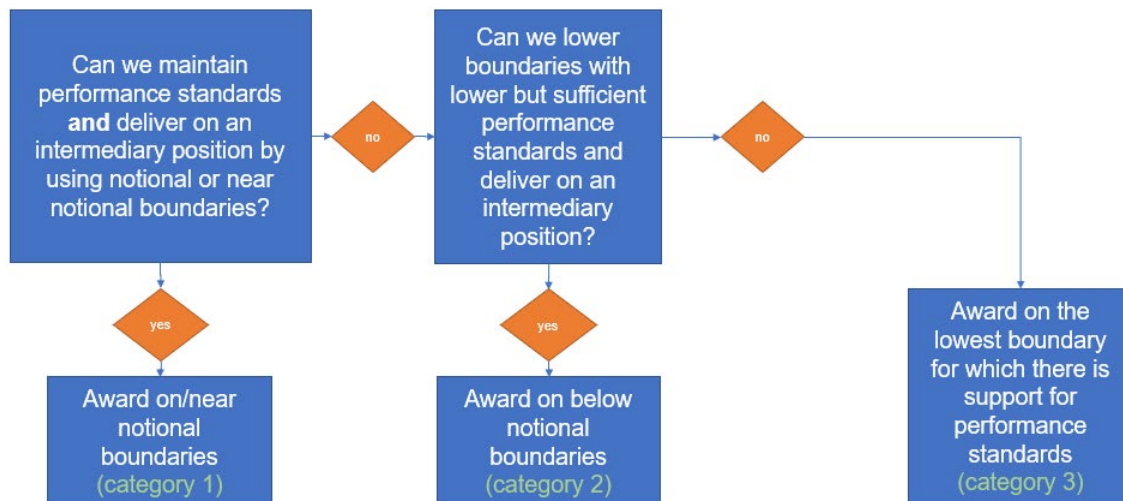


Figure 1: The 'stepwise' approach to setting grade boundaries in 2022

Overall, this approach sought, where possible, to provide a more generous set of outcomes. If necessary, grade boundaries were lowered to achieve this, but only insofar as expert judgement on performance standards was able to support this.

The following three principles underpinned the approach to awarding in 2022:

1. Overall, on aggregate for each level (National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher), deliver an 'intermediary position'.
2. Qualification awards do have to mean something to end users and help learners progress.
3. Where possible, across individual courses, maintain performance standards while delivering an 'intermediary position'.

The implication of these three principles is that of 'sufficiency of performance' — where the principal assessor's expert judgement and other evidence supported lower grade boundaries — a lower mark to achieve a particular grade — than might be normally considered to achieve an intermediary position, while still retaining the credibility and integrity of qualifications by maintaining performance standards. Final grades are only based on learners' demonstrated attainment as reflected in their performance in exams and other assessments, as measured against the national standard set in SQA's assessments.

Full details of the outcomes of the awarding process can be found at the [SQA Statistics](#) section of the SQA website, where the outcomes for the 2021–22 session are published. The SQA website also includes details of how SQA met its statutory duty to consider the equalities impacts of its awarding activities in 2022. This includes the Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) of this year's approach and an Equalities Monitoring Report.

The Chief Examiner's Report provides further detail on some of the themes that emerged from Awarding 2022. Further details of themes at course level will be made available in the course reports produced for each NQ subject, published from September 2022 on the [SQA website](#).

6. Examination Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service

As part of the wider package of SQA support, an Examination Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service (EECCS) was made available for learners who were unable to attend an exam due to a reason beyond their control, such as a medical condition (including COVID-19 related absence) or bereavement, or who were affected by disruption on the day of the exam as reported by the chief invigilator.

The EECCS involved SQA appointees — practising teachers and lecturers — reviewing alternative assessment evidence that learners had generated through the year. Schools, colleges and training providers sent the evidence to SQA. This evidence was then reviewed by SQA appointees against the national standard.

7. Appeals

The 2022 Appeals service provides learners and centres with the opportunity to have a review by SQA appointees of alternative assessment evidence for an SQA National Course whenever the grade achieved by a learner in their SQA assessments is lower than the estimate submitted by their centre. As such the appeals service forms another integral part of SQA's support for learners in 2022.

Appeals must be based on valid and reliable evidence of demonstrated attainment, reviewed against national standards. This evidence will be reviewed by SQA senior appointees — practising teachers and lecturers.

The evidence must have been authentically generated through planned assessment prior to SQA's exam and will have been used to inform the estimates submitted to SQA. Appeals 2022 is free of charge and will be open for learners or their representatives to appeal directly to SQA, or through their school, college or training provider (centre) from Tuesday 9 August 2022.

Learners will be awarded the higher of two grades, based on either:

- ◆ a clerical check of their SQA assessments — exam script and/or coursework, or
- ◆ a review by SQA senior appointees of the assessment evidence submitted by their centre, also taking into account their performance in any required coursework

Grades are likely to stay the same or go up. There is a chance that a grade could also go down, but this would only be in the event of a clerical check identifying an error that reduces the original certificated grade, and the centre evidence not supporting the original certificated grade.

Further information about [Appeals 2022](#) has been provided on the SQA website and in information sent directly to every candidate this year.