



2019 National Qualifications and Awards Results

On 6 August 2019, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) published the '*Attainment Statistics Report (August)*' of the National Courses and Awards, taken by candidates in schools and colleges across the country.

The '*Attainment Statistics Report (August)*' contains attainment information across the National Courses (National 2 to National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher, and the Scottish Baccalaureate), together with Awards, Skills for Work courses, National Progression Awards, and National Certificates.

This report reflects SQA's observations from all the processes and procedures involved in the delivery of National Qualifications and Awards, and underlines our commitment to the maintenance of national standards over time. I would like to thank my predecessor, Dr Janet Brown, for leading the successful delivery of the 2018-19 session, and for her input into this report.

Revisions to assessment and introduction of non-unitised courses

In September 2016, a decision was made to remove units and unit assessments from National 5 to Advanced Higher courses on a phased basis. Changes to National 5 took place in the 2017-18 session, and to Higher courses in the 2018-19 session. Changes to Advanced Higher will take place in 2019-20. These changes are intended to have a positive impact on both candidate and teacher workload associated with assessment.

As was the case at National 5, changes were made to the assessment approach at Higher, taking account of the nature of the subject and the previous approach to assessment. Changes made included the addition of a new question paper or coursework or revisions to an existing question paper or coursework. In some subjects coursework components are now being externally assessed by SQA. The standard of the qualifications has not changed and course content is also unchanged. Full details of changes to each Higher course are available on the SQA website ([Higher Assessment Changes](#)).

In addition, Grade D has been extended for all Higher courses, from a notional 45–49% to a notional 40–49%. The extension of Grade D is intended to bring it in line with the range available at Grades B and C, and to recognise the achievement of a wider group of candidates at SCQF level 6.

Free standing units at SCQF level 6 remained available.

Experience from Session 2018-19

Schools and colleges have greater flexibility to deliver curriculum models best suited to their local circumstances and the needs of individual candidates. These models provide the opportunity for learners to study a different mix of awards and courses at the most appropriate time for them during their senior phase. This has likely contributed to the changes in entries for National Courses, vocational qualifications and wider achievement awards, over time.

This year, there has been a change in the volume of entries to qualifications, including reductions in the numbers undertaking qualifications at SCQF levels 4, 6 and 7, and increases in numbers undertaking qualifications at SCQF levels 2, 3 and 5.

A number of factors have an impact on the volume of entries. These include the curriculum model, the school roll, and a wider range of options and pathways being available to young people.

The entries and attainment for National 4 reported in the statistical tables include those awarded through the Recognising Positive Achievement (RPA) process. SQA treat National 4 attainment arising through course completion and through RPA attainment as being equivalent.

There has been an increase in National 4 course entries within schools and colleges (excluding entries arising through RPA) compared to those in 2018, by 751. National 4 awards achieved through RPA have decreased by 1,918. With the extension of Grade D in National 5 courses in 2017-18, there continues to be a higher number of candidates obtaining a Grade D result (19,104 in 2017, 34,926 in 2018 and 36,171 in 2019). These candidates are not eligible for the RPA National 4 course award.

It is important to note that 2018-19 is the last year that the RPA process is available. From the 2019-20 session, RPA will be removed. Candidates will only be certificated for the courses and any freestanding units that their school or college has entered and resulted them for, subject to quality assurance.

There has been an increase in the attainment of wider achievement and vocational qualifications at SCQF levels 2 to 6. SQA qualifications are also being taken as part of

Foundation Apprenticeships in a range of subjects, including engineering, financial services, information technology, and social services.

Throughout the awarding process, we monitored the impact that the extension of question papers and changes to course assessment might have had on candidates. No significant impacts were identified. We will continue to monitor the impact of these changes.

Presentation patterns – National 5 courses and units at SCQF level 5

Scottish Government guidance to local authorities continues to advise that the dual presentation of candidates for both National 5 courses and free standing units at SCQF level 5 should only be used in exceptional circumstances.

In the 2017-18 session we received a significant number of late unit entries at SCQF level 5, which had a major impact on our ability to undertake quality assurance. Following this, we undertook a post certification review of a selection of the late entries to gain an understanding of the robustness of the evidence used for the assessment of these units.

As a result of the review findings, we have put in place a number of changes to enhance the way we quality assure National Qualifications. The changes are designed to support the continued implementation of the revisions to assessment in National Courses – ensuring standards are maintained across all our qualifications, including freestanding units at SCQF levels 5 and 6, and course units at all other SCQF levels.

The changes included a review of our information about submitting unit entries and results, including completing units and providing complete evidence for quality assurance. We provided additional understanding standards information for some subjects. We also introduced an additional deadline date (28 February 2019) for final changes to entries for freestanding units at SCQF levels 5 and 6.

These changes have allowed us to carry out sufficient levels of quality assurance of freestanding unit entries and results, and at a more appropriate stage and time in the assessment process, before August certification. Schools and colleges have, on the whole, adhered to the new guidelines, and as a result we have not received a significant number of late entries for freestanding units at SCQF level 5.

We will continue to review our approach to quality assurance to ensure the ongoing credibility of certification.

Assessments

Overall, the assessments have performed to standard.

National 5 and Higher courses have been assessed through a mix of externally assessed coursework, question papers, and internally assessed course assessments, as appropriate to each subject. Advanced Highers were assessed through units and externally and internally assessed course assessments.

In order to allow candidates to demonstrate breadth, depth and application of skills and knowledge, the course assessment for the majority of National Courses include both final exams and coursework. Candidates tend to perform slightly better in coursework than in their final exams as this work enables them some personalisation and choice in what topic they focus on, and the work is carried out through the school year. The final course grade is a combination of both coursework and exam, which gives a true picture of candidates' ability to demonstrate their skills, knowledge and understanding.

Coursework is carried out within schools and colleges, normally under controlled conditions. The conditions of assessment are clearly set out in the course specification documents, and compliance with these is necessary to ensure the reliability of assessment decisions across the country. In the revised National 5 course documents for session 2017-18 and for Higher in 2018-19, SQA provided further clarity upon the conditions of assessment for coursework that must be applied.

Through the 2018-19 session, we recognise that there have been improvements in this area. We continue to analyse coursework and exam performance, and work with schools and colleges where there is a variation which is markedly different from the national pattern. This is to ensure equity and fairness across all candidates and all schools and colleges.

As a result of the changes to the assessment of Higher courses, some coursework components are now being externally assessed by SQA, having previously been assessed in schools and colleges. This change has ensured that the national standards are applied consistently and fairly across all schools and colleges.

It is important that candidates are well prepared in the full range of course content, as the amount of course content that is sampled in the question papers, for some subjects, has increased due to the removal of units. Any gaps in knowledge and understanding will have an impact on individual attainment.

Ensuring fairness of assessment is fundamental to SQA's purpose and is the cornerstone of the qualifications system on which learners depend. Our approach includes preventing and addressing any malpractice in the design and delivery of SQA qualifications and assessments. We also follow up with centres where malpractice is found to support them and ensure that they are clear about the national conditions of assessment.

We communicate our *Malpractice: Information for Centres* guidance document widely with centres. We know that the vast majority of teachers follow the published guidance, to ensure that all students are given the same opportunities to succeed, but unfortunately malpractice does occasionally happen. When we recognise that it has happened, it is necessary to raise awareness of the processes in place to address it.

Internal assessment is still the most appropriate approach for many qualifications and for the learners that undertake them and they have high credibility in further and higher education and in the work environment. However, it is important that a robust national quality assurance approach is applied.

Attainment

Some variation of attainment is to be expected between subjects and over time.

In 2019, there has been an increase in attainment at National 5 (78.2%, an increase of 0.7 percentage points compared to 2018), and a decrease in attainment at Higher (74.8%, a decrease of 2.0 percentage points compared to 2018) and Advanced Higher (79.4%, a decrease of 1.1 percentage points compared to 2018).

During the course of the marking of each subject, feedback on the performance of candidates is collated and each year SQA publishes a course report on its website. These course reports provides commentary from the subject's principal assessor on how the candidates have performed in the assessments, what worked appropriately, and areas in which future candidates could improve. This allows teachers and lecturers to reflect on the approaches being taken in delivering the courses (see example of the 2018 course report of National 5 English – [Course Report 2018 National 5 English](#)). SQA offers a range of support for schools and colleges around understanding standards, which are well received by teachers and lecturers.

Final Remarks

In 2018-19, there has been an increase in the numbers completing qualifications at SCQF levels 2, 3 and 5, and a decrease at SCQF levels 4, 6 and 7.

Vocational qualifications – Awards, Skills for Work courses, National Progression Awards and National Certificates – develop and provide evidence of specific skills that will help

learners in the world of work and everyday life.

Examples which have shown an increase include Cyber Security, Social Services: Children and Young People, Make-up Skills, Digital Media, Scottish Studies, and Mental Health and Wellbeing.

The new assessment approach for National 5 and Higher courses has worked well, and continues to ensure that the credibility and standards of Scotland's qualifications remain high.

High quality learning and teaching remains a fundamental component for the successful delivery of qualifications, to ensure candidates are well prepared across all aspects of every course they undertake.

SQA will continue to work with teachers and lecturers, schools and colleges, to support them in the delivery of our qualifications for the benefit of young people across Scotland. We will identify any additions to our programme of continuous professional development for teachers and lecturers.

I hope this is a helpful summary of SQA's observations of the 2018-19 session, which will be of benefit to everyone involved in Scotland's education system.

Fiona Robertson

Scotland's Chief Examining Officer