

# 2020 National Qualifications and Awards Results

On 4 August 2020, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) published the *Attainment Statistics Report (August)* for the National Courses and Awards. As a result of the impact of the COVID-19 public health emergency in 2020, assessment for many qualifications was interrupted or adopted a different approach relative to previous years.

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.

The different approaches taken for the different qualification types for which statistics are reported in the *Attainment Statistics (August) 2020*, are summarised below:

## **National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher**

The Deputy First Minister announced the cancellation of national exams on 19 March and asked SQA, as Scotland's national awarding body, to develop an alternative certification model (ACM) for 2020 for the graded National Courses.

The alternative certification model is based on centres' estimates of student grades for a course. The estimates are then subject to moderation by SQA. The full details of the 2020 awarding methodology are provided in the *SQA National Qualifications 2020 Awarding – Methodology Report* available on [SQA's statistics page](#).

## **National 2, National 3, and National 4 Courses, Scottish Baccalaureate, Interdisciplinary Project, and free-standing units at SCQF Levels 5, 6 and 7**

Schools and colleges provided unit results either based on existing evidence from assessments that had already been completed, and/or using their professional judgement of other learner evidence, including their knowledge of learners and their progress and achievements to date. See [approach to quality assurance and certification for National 2, 3 and 4 courses](#) for further details.

## **National Certificates, National Progression Awards, Skills for Work courses and Awards**

The approaches for these courses have been aligned, so all results were based on a holistic assessment decision-making process. See [approach to quality assurance and certification](#)

[for National Certificates, National Progression Awards, Skills for Work courses and Awards](#) for further details.

This report reflects my observations, as Chief Examining Officer for Scotland, from all the processes and procedures involved in the delivery of National Qualifications and Awards in 2020, a truly unprecedented year for everyone living in Scotland and for learners due to complete National Qualifications.

Further supporting information is available across a suite of documents, published at 09:30 on Tuesday 4 August, including:

*SQA Attainment Statistics (August) 2020 Summary*

*SQA Attainment Statistics (August) 2020 Tables*

*SQA Attainment Statistics (August) 2020 Notes*

*SQA National Qualifications 2020 Awarding – Methodology Report*

*2020 Alternative Certification Model: Equality Impact Assessment*

*2020 Alternative Certification Model: Child Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment*

## Context

Exams have been held in the spring of each year in Scotland since 1888, and this year SQA was fully prepared for the delivery of the examination diet, to run from 27 April to 2 June, with 122,465 learners across 129 courses and in 467 centres sitting National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher examinations.

On 19 March, the Deputy First Minister announced the closure of schools and the cancellation of exams, in response to COVID-19. At the same time, he commissioned SQA to develop an alternative certification model for 2020, to ensure that the hard work of young people across Scotland was fully recognised through our qualifications system, as it would be in any year.

## Developing our approach to certification

Since the outset, our approach has been based on three core principles, which reflect both how we work and the circumstances of 2020:

- ◆ Fairness to all learners.
- ◆ Safe and secure certification of our qualifications, while following the latest public health advice.
- ◆ Maintaining the integrity and credibility of our qualifications system, ensuring that standards are maintained over time, in the interests of learners.

Immediately after schools had closed, we had anticipated that coursework, a core element of our qualifications, could be completed and marked. However, due to public health advice, that was not possible, and we announced on 24 March that schools and colleges were not required to submit learner coursework for marking, in Higher and Advanced Higher courses. In addition, all other National 5 coursework, either already uplifted or due to be uplifted in April and May, was not submitted for marking.

On 20 April, I set out the four key stages to our approach: estimates; awarding; results and certification; and appeals.

## **Estimates**

The key input to our alternative certification model has been based on estimated grades. We receive estimates every year from schools and colleges. In 2019, using matched data at candidate level, 48% of grades estimated at National 5 grades were resulted at those grades; at Higher, 44%; and at Advanced Higher, 43%. Detailed guidance and an online course were provided to schools and colleges on 20 April to assist with the estimation process this year. We asked for more detailed estimates — 19 refined bands — and candidate rank order within these refined bands, to provide more differentiated data to inform the awarding process. Teachers, lecturers, and partners from across education helped inform the approach and the guidance.

Professional judgement for assessment is at the heart of Scottish education. Every year, effective judgements take place in schools and colleges and are supported, validated, and enhanced through moderation. Moderation is an important part of SQA's responsibilities every year and seeks to ensure that the assessment outcome is fair, valid, and reliable, providing consistency of assessment judgements and ensuring standards are maintained across Scotland and over time.

This year, in the absence of external assessment, moderation has been a key part of our approach, both within schools and colleges, using a range of data and discussion, and nationally by SQA. This is to ensure, as far as possible, that the standard of an A in one school or college is the same as the standard of an A in another school or college, and so on. In principle, moderation is symmetric, and grades can stay the same or be moderated up or down.

## **Awarding**

We identified three stages to the delivery of the awarding process:

1. Initial review of centre estimation accuracy
2. Centre level moderation
3. National awarding

Full details are provided in the *SQA National Qualifications 2020 Awarding – Methodology Report*

## Review of centre estimate accuracy

On 29 May, we received estimates from schools and colleges across Scotland, representing 511,070 entries<sup>1</sup> across 129 subjects and 467 centres. This included 19 refined bands and rank orders. I would like to thank every school, college, and training provider in Scotland for providing these estimates — more than 1.5 million data entries in total. Without these, we would not have been able to certificate this year.

At a national level, estimates we received were above previous A to C attainment at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher. This is illustrated by the comparison of estimates with actual results achieved in 2016–19 in Tables 1–3 below.

**Table 1: National 5 attainment rates for 2016–19 and 2020 estimates**

	National 5					
	A	B	C	A to C	D	No Award
<b>2016 Attainment results</b>	36.5%	23.7%	19.2%	79.4%	6.7%	14.0%
<b>2017 Attainment results</b>	37.1%	23.8%	18.6%	79.5%	6.5%	14.0%
<b>2018 Attainment results</b>	35.1%	23.1%	19.3%	77.4%	12.4%	10.2%
<b>2019 Attainment results</b>	35.1%	23.8%	19.2%	78.2%	12.5%	9.3%
<b>2020 Estimates</b>	<b>41.6%</b>	<b>24.6%</b>	<b>22.4%</b>	<b>88.6%</b>	<b>7.3%</b>	<b>4.1%</b>
<b>Percentage point difference from 2019</b>	+6.5	+0.8	+3.1	+10.4	-5.2	-5.2

**Table 2: Higher attainment rates for 2016–19 and 2020 estimates**

	Higher					
	A	B	C	A to C	D	No Award
<b>2016 Attainment results</b>	29.2%	25.2%	22.8%	77.2%	8.5%	14.3%
<b>2017 Attainment results</b>	28.7%	25.5%	22.8%	77.0%	8.4%	14.5%
<b>2018 Attainment results</b>	28.4%	25.3%	23.0%	76.8%	8.8%	14.4%
<b>2019 Attainment results</b>	28.3%	24.1%	22.4%	74.8%	15.2%	10.1%
<b>2020 Estimates</b>	<b>39.3%</b>	<b>26.9%</b>	<b>22.6%</b>	<b>88.8%</b>	<b>7.2%</b>	<b>4.1%</b>
<b>Percentage point difference from 2019</b>	+11.0	+2.9	+0.1	+14.0	-8.0	-6.0

<sup>1</sup> Figures for entries have been adjusted slightly, to 509,758 since estimates were submitted.

**Table 3: Advanced Higher attainment rates for 2016–19 and 2020 estimates**

	A	B	C	A to C	D	No Award
<b>2016 Attainment results</b>	33.5%	25.8%	22.4%	81.7%	7.5%	10.8%
<b>2017 Attainment results</b>	31.7%	25.5%	22.8%	80.0%	8.1%	11.9%
<b>2018 Attainment results</b>	32.3%	25.9%	22.3%	80.5%	8.0%	11.5%
<b>2019 Attainment results</b>	31.8%	24.9%	22.7%	79.4%	8.4%	12.2%
<b>2020 Estimates</b>	<b>45.2%</b>	<b>28.4%</b>	<b>19.2%</b>	<b>92.8%</b>	<b>4.8%</b>	<b>2.4%</b>
<b>Percentage point difference from 2019</b>	+13.4	+3.5	-3.5	+13.4	-3.5	-9.8

These tables show that estimated A to C attainment rates were 10.4 percentage points higher at National 5, 14.0 percentage points higher at Higher and 13.4 percentage points higher at Advanced Higher than results in 2019. The table also highlights that the level of estimation at A grade contributed most to higher A–C estimated grades, particularly at Higher and Advanced Higher level.

There may be several reasons why estimates were above historic attainment, which has been relatively stable over time. Some teachers and lecturers may have been optimistic, given the circumstances of this year, or may have believed, correctly or incorrectly, that this cohort of candidates may have achieved better grades due to a range of factors. It is not possible to draw definitive conclusions.

However, as the national awarding body, with responsibility for maintaining the integrity and credibility of our qualifications system, and ensuring that standards are maintained over time, the estimates highlight a clear case for moderation this year. Further, there were differences between estimates and historic attainment across most subjects. Overall, there was variation, but not uniform variation, between historic attainment and 2020 estimates across subjects, levels, and centres.

We developed national Starting Point Distributions (SPDs) for each course, which set the expected parameters for each grade and for A to C attainment in 2020, drawing on historic attainment, prior attainment data (where available), and feedback from SQA Qualifications teams and Principal Assessors. The SPDs included 90% confidence intervals for each grade. The tolerances reflected in these confidence intervals were based on the variability of historical attainment in each course. Where attainment was more stable — usually for higher-uptake subjects — tolerances are typically smaller. Smaller-uptake subjects, with greater year on year variability in results, typically have higher tolerances. These SPDs provided further evidence that moderation was required. Across 129 courses, 99 breached the A to C SPD upper tolerance at a national level.

## Centre level moderation

### Context

National Qualifications in Scotland are characterised by high- and low-uptake qualifications and new, returning, or very low-uptake centres:

- ◆ Nationally in 2020, entry figures varied across National 5 from 87 (Urdu) to 46,626 (English); across Higher from 62 (Gaelic (Learners)) to 36,205 (English); and across Advanced Higher from 11 (Gaelic (Learners)) to 3,635 (Mathematics).
- ◆ At a centre level, even for large entry subjects, entry levels can vary. In 2020, the largest number of entries at centre level for National 5 was for Mathematics, but entry levels ranged across centres from 1 to 337 (average 97). For Higher, the largest number of entries at centre level was for English, ranging across centres from 1 to 317 (average 88). For Advanced Higher, the largest number of entries at centre level was for Mathematics, with a range across centres from 1 to 70 (average 11).
- ◆ In 2020, 6,549 entries were from centres that had no prior history (since 2016) of attainment in that course.

Small numbers of candidates distributed across many centres has therefore made it challenging to moderate estimates in some subjects.

### The moderation approach

The moderation process was undertaken at centre level, per course, and by grade. For each centre, the proportion of entries achieving each grade on a given course was assessed for each of the past four years. Some variability in grade attainment is to be expected each year, particularly for small-uptake subjects and/or where entry patterns have changed, and we did not therefore constrain centres to relative historic attainment over the past four years, but allowed additional flexibility before setting a course and grade constraint.

Where a centre's estimates were outside the constraint range for that course, estimates were adjusted. Rank order was to be preserved, so relativities across the grade distribution and based on the estimates were maintained. Overall, we sought to minimise the number of grade movements from the estimated grade to meet both the grade constraints at a centre level and, at a national level, the tolerances of the starting point distribution.

For centres which had no historic attainment data for a course, estimates were accepted without moderation as there was no fair or evidential basis on which they could be adjusted.

We considered very carefully whether to conduct a professional dialogue with schools and colleges as part of the moderation process. It was concluded that it would not be possible to include engagement with centres. The reasons for this are twofold:

- ◆ The difficulty of operating a dialogue that was fair and consistent in its treatment of all centres and candidates.
- ◆ The time that would be required in what was already a very tight schedule for certification.

Our post-certification review (appeals) process will provide for further, evidence-based consideration of grades if schools and colleges do not think awarded grades fairly reflect candidate performance. This goes live today, 4 August.

## **Equalities Considerations**

Throughout the development of the model we have had equalities at the heart of our thinking, and have developed and refined an Equality Impact Assessment and a Child Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment to inform our approaches and decisions, as well as to demonstrate our compliance with our statutory obligations. In developing these assessments, we have had due regard to the potential equalities impacts of our processes and have sought to ensure that our guidance to centres on equalities in the estimation process assisted them in fulfilling their equalities' responsibilities. Whilst the moderation process involved the use of pseudonymised data, we have ensured that the arrangements we have in place for post-certification review and exceptional consideration arrangements are also designed to address any cases of discrimination in original estimation by centres.

Our statistical analysis of available data (contained in the Equality Impact Assessment) from 2016 onwards demonstrates that, after moderation, learners in the most deprived SIMD bandings saw attainment levels for grades A to C higher than both 2019 results and the average result for 2016-2019 as well as a narrowing of the attainment gap between those in the most deprived and least deprived SIMD bandings over the same periods. We have also engaged with the Scottish Government to undertake further statistical analysis on protected characteristics, the data for which is held by them.

## **Moderation outcomes**

Of 511,070 entries that we received and moderated across National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher, we accepted 377,308 (73.8%) estimated grades and 133,762 (26.2%) estimated grades were adjusted.

Given the profile of estimates, most of the adjustments — 124,564 or 93.1% — were moderated down, and 9,198 entries (6.9%) were moderated up. Of the total 133,762 adjustments, 128,508 or 96.1% were adjusted by one grade. 45,454 entries (8.9%) were adjusted down from grades A–C to grade D or to No Award. Of these, 43,423 (95.5%) were originally estimated to be grade C. A number of entries (1,719 or 0.3%) were moderated from a grade D or No Award to grades A to C.

Further information on the moderation outcomes for each of the 129 courses across National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher is available on SQA's [NQ subject pages](#).

## Attainment

The distribution of 2020 attainment by grade is summarised below. Further statistical information about 2020 results are available on [SQA's statistics page](#).

**Table 4: 2020 August attainment rates**

Award level	Candidates awarded						Total
	A	B	C	A to C	D	No Award	
National 5	112,596	74,732	56,244	243,572	34,401	22,371	300,344
Higher	58,458	48,960	39,225	146,643	25,346	13,855	185,844
Advanced Higher	9,045	6,518	4,447	20,010	2,268	1,292	23,570

Award level	Grade awarded					
	A	B	C	A to C	D	No Award
National 5	37.5%	24.9%	18.7%	81.1%	11.5%	7.4%
Higher	31.5%	26.3%	21.1%	78.9%	13.6%	7.5%
Advanced Higher	38.4%	27.7%	18.9%	84.9%	9.6%	5.5%

A to C attainment in 2020 at National 5 is 243,572 or 81.1% (225,594 or 78.2% in 2019). At Higher it is 146,643 or 78.9% (138,972 or 74.8% in 2019). At Advanced Higher it is 20,010 or 84.9% (18,627 or 79.4% in 2019).

Some variation in attainment is to be expected between courses and over time. This year, the absence of external assessment information and the moderation process has led to more movements in attainment than we would see in a normal year.

## Wider issues

### National Courses

Grade D has been extended for all Advanced Higher courses this year, 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 7. Freestanding units at SCQF level 7 remained available. The extension of grade D at Advanced Higher completes the process of similar extensions introduced to National 5 and Highers in 2018 and 2019, respectively.



This year's National 4 attainment statistics do not include awards previously made under Recognising Positive Achievement, meaning that learners who achieved less than a grade D at National 5 were not awarded a National 4 qualification. This year, learners have only been certificated for the courses and any freestanding units that their school or college have entered and resulted them for, subject to quality assurance where this has been possible. We have noted that 10,266 candidates were dual entered for both National 4 and National 5. These dual entries are 5,100 more than in 2019.

## Foundation Apprenticeships

Together with [Colleges Scotland](#), [Skills Development Scotland](#) and [Universities Scotland](#), we are committed to safeguarding the outcomes of Foundation Apprenticeships that young people were due to complete in 2020 but could not do so due to the COVID-19 restrictions to work placements. To ensure these young people were not disadvantaged, colleges and universities will formally recognise young people's achievements, safeguarding progression and admission for Foundation Apprentices who were on track to achieve a full Foundation Apprenticeship Award.

This year has seen 1,260 Foundation Apprenticeships achieved, either in full or by Letter of Recognition. These are fully recognised by colleges and universities for course admissions and progression to Further Education and Higher Education.

## Final remarks

This has been a very challenging year for everyone involved in Scottish education. I am very grateful, as Scotland's Chief Examining Officer, to all Scotland's thousands of teachers and lecturers, SQA co-ordinators, school and college staff, local authorities, professional associations and national organisations who have worked with us in the most difficult circumstances to deliver for learners. Without teacher and lecturer estimates, we would not have been able to certificate this year.

I am also grateful for the patience of Scotland's learners who, together with their families, have been worried about what this might mean for them. The results young people across Scotland receive today should reflect their achievements and allow them to progress to further study or employment.

To conclude, we have:

- ◆ Delivered fairness to learners, through a consistent, evidence-based approach to awarding, supported by an Equalities Impact Assessment and a Child Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment.
- ◆ Ensured safe and secure certification of our qualifications, taking difficult decisions when needed, following public health advice.

- ◆ Maintained the integrity and credibility of our qualifications system, ensuring that standards are maintained over time, in the interests of learners, through judicious moderation of grades.

**Fiona Robertson**

Scotland's Chief Examining Officer

4 August 2020