



Experiences of the 2021 Alternative Certification Model (ACM)

Publication date: September 2022

Publication code: FE8552

Published by the Scottish Qualifications Authority
The Optima Building, 58 Robertson Street, Glasgow G2 8DQ
Lowden, 24 Wester Shawfair, Dalkeith, EH22 1FD

www.sqa.org.uk

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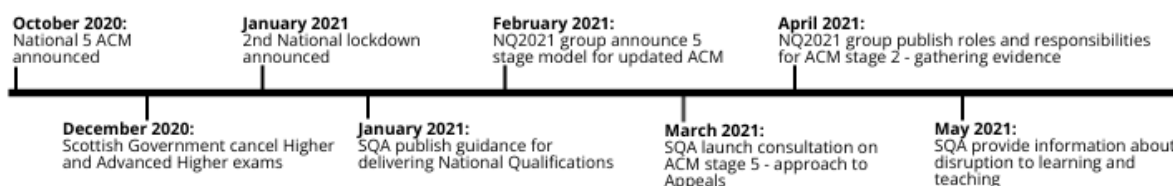
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1 Executive summary

1.1 Context

Development of the 2021 Alternative Certification Model (ACM) was overseen by the National Qualifications 2021 Group (NQ 2021 Group). This group included the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES), Colleges Scotland, Education Scotland, the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), School Leaders Scotland (SLS), the Scottish Council of Independent Schools (SCIS), Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), the Scottish Government, National Parent Forum of Scotland and the Scottish Youth Parliament.

The ACM — originally developed for National 5 courses and latterly adapted to include Higher and Advanced Higher courses — offered a system-wide approach to assessment and certification of National Qualifications that would deliver fair and credible results to learners. It was designed and adopted to support learning, teaching and assessment following the Scottish Government’s decision to cancel exams on public health grounds during the COVID-19 pandemic.



The ACM required learners, teachers, lecturers, centres and local authorities to undertake different tasks from those in any ordinary year, all while balancing significant time pressures against a dynamic backdrop of the pandemic and responsive health measures. Roles and responsibilities for those involved across the education sector were agreed by the NQ 2021 Group and published on SQA’s website. The ACM represented a necessary and substantially different approach to assessment while the country was in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The design of the ACM preceded the second national lockdown in January 2021, and the education system was required to adapt to everchanging circumstances. This placed immense pressure on all parts of our system, which created significant challenges and generated stress and anxiety for teachers, lecturers and learners.

The NQ 2021 Group did not know that another lockdown was imminent when designing the ACM, but the lockdown restrictions had a fundamental impact on its operation, thus impacting learners’ and practitioners’ experiences of it.

Given this context, SQA considered it essential that the ACM was evaluated, and this piece of research is one part of that evaluation. The purpose of this research is to better understand the real impact of the ACM on the learners and practitioners directly affected by it in 2021. This research seeks to develop an understanding of their views and experiences, and therefore help to build an understanding of how the ACM operated in practice.

1.2 Outline of the ACM

Planning, design and implementation

Following the Scottish Government announcement of the cancellation of National 5 exams on 7 October 2020, SQA developed the ACM in partnership with the NQ 2021 Group. This model was introduced on 8 December and when exams were cancelled for Higher and Advanced Higher, it was extended to cover these qualifications. Following the move to remote learning in early January 2021, revisions to the approach were published on 16 February 2021. These revisions were made to give teachers, lecturers and learners the time required to consolidate learning once back in the classroom.

The ACM was based on demonstrated attainment. Teachers and lecturers collected evidence of learning and skills before using their professional judgement to determine provisional grades for their learners. This system introduced as much flexibility around the timing and nature of assessment as possible to ensure learners could undertake and consolidate their learning, while being supported to succeed. Local quality assurance was integral to the ACM model and there was a national quality assurance exercise which preceded the submission of provisional results on 25 June 2021. In recognition of the disruption to learning and teaching, further support was provided to learners and centres in the form of modifications made to course assessment, subject-specific guidance and resources available through SQA's Understanding Standards website.

A brief overview of the key stages of the ACM is provided below. Full details, as well as roles and responsibilities, can be found in the [National Qualifications 2021 Alternative Certification Model \(ACM\) Methodology Report](#).

Stage 1: Ongoing to April 2021

Teachers and lecturers accessed subject-specific guidance, assessment resources and Understanding Standards materials and webinars from SQA.

Stage 2: April and May 2021

School, college and local authority quality assurance continued. During May, SQA requested, reviewed and provided feedback on samples of assessment evidence from each school and college.

Stage 3: End May to 25 June 2021

Schools, colleges, local authorities and SQA worked through final stages of local and national quality assurance and feedback to reach provisional results that were consistent, equitable and fair.

Stage 4: By 25 June 2021

Schools and colleges submitted quality assured provisional results to SQA.

Stage 5: Appeals process for 2020–21

A free appeals service, made available directly to learners for the first time, was the fifth and final stage of the ACM.

The final stage of the ACM (SQA's appeals service), was announced on Wednesday 2 June. For the first time, learners could appeal directly to SQA for free.

1.3 Methodology

This research was split into two separate phases.

Firstly, we surveyed learners and practitioners. The survey was split into sections corresponding to the various parts of the 2021 ACM that learners and practitioners experienced. Survey responses were obtained from schools and colleges across all parts of Scotland.

Secondly, in-depth interviews were carried out with learners, practitioners, and principal assessors, which allowed for a deeper exploration of key topics. Additional topics, that could be understood more effectively by discussing them in greater detail, were also covered in the interviews.

In total, survey responses were received from 1,210 learners and 482 practitioners from schools and colleges across Scotland. A total of 28 in-depth interviews were carried out with learners, practitioners and principal assessors.

1.4 Interpreting the results

It is important to understand what conclusions can and cannot be drawn from this research. The ACM took place in a time of great disruption to Scottish education, and it is difficult to isolate whether views were as a result of inherent characteristics of the ACM, how the ACM was implemented in a time of immense system stress, and/or the direct impacts of the pandemic which caused large amounts of learning loss as well as disruption at an individual level.

SQA did not attempt to critically assess the views of learners, practitioners and principal assessors, or to develop recommendations from their views or experiences. This was a conscious decision for two key reasons:

- ◆ Firstly, we felt that it was valuable to develop an understanding of how learners and practitioners experienced the ACM, and their views of that experience.
- ◆ Secondly, any direct recommendations arising from the evaluation of the 2021 ACM would need to be applicable to a proposed future approach. Given that the 2021 model was extraordinary, we believe that the findings instead have most worth when considered in the wider context of ongoing reform of National Qualifications and assessment.

1.5 Key findings

The remainder of this executive summary attempts to outline some of what we see as the central findings of this research. Due to a need for brevity, considerable detail has been

omitted. Greater nuance, and a more exhaustive approach, can be obtained from reading the summary of findings chapter at the end of the report, or from the full report itself.

1.5.1 How were learners assessed in 2021?

The majority of learners and practitioners felt that disruption due to COVID-19 had a significant impact on their teaching and learning experience in 2020–21 and on their assessment experience.

Most practitioners agreed that the lockdown in early 2021 impacted significantly on how the ACM operated. This happened in several ways, including difficulties in generating usable evidence, learner disengagement, loss of learner confidence, and particular issues with practical subjects. Practitioners also felt that the lockdown reduced opportunities for assessments such as prelims, and that this led to assessments being compressed into the post-Easter period.

Generally, learners felt that their school or college took a comparable approach across their subjects. Around 85% of learners felt that their assessments covered the contents of their courses, and almost two-thirds felt that the assessment and grading process was successful. Most learners had between two and four assessments per subject and were assessed in a variety of ways, including at least one assessment where they were not aware of what would be covered, while significant numbers were assessed using a test or exam with advance knowledge of its content, a portfolio of work, an assignment with no access to textbooks or sources, or an assignment with access to textbooks or sources.

Most practitioners used SQA assessments, either with some centre adaptations or unadapted. Some used their own centre-developed assessments, although generally, practitioners felt that these were similar to SQA assessments. This meant that most evidence was generated through either SQA assessments or similar instruments.

Centres had two main methods of gathering evidence. The first approach was that evidence for all learners was generated using the same assessments. The other commonly used strategy was that evidence for most learners was generated using the same assessments, but, in certain circumstances, additional evidence was drawn on.

1.5.2 What worked well and what did not?

One of the most important areas to understand was what learners and practitioners felt worked well and what did not work well in the ACM. We asked a number of questions looking at these topics. It should be noted that both groups had varied and diverse views on this and as a result some of these responses may appear somewhat contradictory. In short, there was not a singular experience or view.

When asked what worked well in the ACM, learners mentioned:

- ◆ reduced pressure and stress
- ◆ shorter assessments
- ◆ familiar environments
- ◆ preferring continuous assessment to exams
- ◆ specific knowledge of topics to be assessed

- ◆ SQA course modifications
- ◆ the potential option to re-sit assessments
- ◆ receiving grades earlier than would be the case in a normal exam diet

The main areas that some learners felt did not work well were:

- ◆ a perception that end-of-year assessments were final exams
- ◆ lack of notification of assessments
- ◆ over-assessment
- ◆ too many assessments in a short space of time
- ◆ a lack of understanding on the part of learners of evidence requirements
- ◆ the assessment and grading process
- ◆ learning loss due to lockdown
- ◆ concerns about fairness

Some practitioners felt that nothing worked well, while others felt that, apart from excessive workload, the ACM largely functioned well. On more specific issues, a number felt that SQA providing sample question papers worked well, as did the flexibility in the process, the reliance on teacher and lecturer judgement, the quality assurance and moderation processes (especially within centres), and the flexibility that the system allowed to assess candidates with substantial learning loss.

When practitioners were asked what did not work well, the two main themes were around excessive workload and around inconsistencies in approach between centres.

The vast majority of practitioners stated that their workload was much higher than in a year with a normal exam diet, with most of the remainder saying that it was higher than in a normal year. The most common reason for this was the increased marking burden. The quality assurance processes in the ACM also led to substantial additional workload for practitioners. Other workload issues included time spent on developing assessments, running assessments, gathering evidence, and time spent on grading learners.

A substantial number of practitioners raised concerns about perceived inconsistent application of the ACM across the country and the impact that this had on grades and fairness. Practitioners raised concerns about inconsistencies in assessment approach, in grading, and in whether learners could access the contents of papers in advance of assessments.

When we asked learners about stress and workload, around half felt that workload and stress was higher or much higher under the ACM than would have been the case with a normal exam diet. The remainder were split between those who felt levels were similar to a normal year, and those who felt stress and workload was less than in a normal year.

1.5.3 Fairness and satisfaction

When we asked learners and practitioners for their views on the ACM process as a whole, a relatively complex picture emerged.

There was no clear picture on overall satisfaction. Nearly 40% of learners were satisfied with the assessment process in 2021; however, the same percentage were dissatisfied. Over 40% of practitioners were dissatisfied with the overall design of the ACM in 2021, compared to just over a third who were satisfied.

Differing results emerged when fairness was considered at an individual level and overall. On an individual level, around two-thirds of learners felt that the grades they received in 2021 were fair, while around one in six disagreed with this. Just over three-quarters of practitioners agreed that the grades their learners received were fair, while around one in eight disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Conversely, half of learners disagreed or strongly disagreed that the assessment process was fair to all learners, compared to around a third who agreed or strongly agreed. This distinction between the perceived fairness of their own grades, and the perceived fairness to all learners is particularly interesting.

Among those who felt that grades were not fair, the most common theme was that grades were not comparable across centres or subjects. A significant number of respondents raised concerns about the inconsistent application of the ACM across the country and the impact that this had on grades and fairness. Practitioners were more likely to raise concerns about grading across centres than within their own centre.

2 Introduction

Following the announcement of the cancellation of the 2021 examination diet by the Scottish Government in December 2020, the Alternative Certification Model (ACM) was introduced to assess learners who undertook National Qualifications in 2021. These courses had already had their assessed content modified by SQA in recognition of the disruption to teaching and learning.

The 2021 ACM was created in partnership with the National Qualifications 2021 (NQ2021) Group and was based on demonstrated attainment:

- ◆ Schools and colleges assessed learner evidence of demonstrated attainment, carrying out and recording decisions in line with internal quality assurance procedures.
- ◆ Schools and colleges provided feedback to learners on progress, including provisional results based on evidence.
- ◆ Schools and colleges carried out and engaged in quality assurance in line with their procedures and local authority/RIC quality assurance processes.
- ◆ SQA selected courses from each school and college for national quality assurance and provided centre subject-specific feedback for each selection. SQA also provided subject-specific key messages reports to all centres.
- ◆ Schools and colleges developed provisional results based on the available learner evidence and feedback from local and national quality assurance, including checking that results were consistent across the centre and based on learner evidence of demonstrated attainment.
- ◆ Schools and colleges submitted provisional results to SQA.
- ◆ SQA certificated learners in August 2021.

The NQ2021 Group, referred to above, included the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES), Colleges Scotland, Education Scotland, the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), School Leaders Scotland (SLS), the Scottish Council of Independent Schools (SCIS), Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), the Scottish Government, National Parent Forum of Scotland, and the Scottish Youth Parliament.

This piece of research is an attempt to understand more deeply the reality of the ACM in 2021 for learners and practitioners who had direct experience of it. It seeks to develop an understanding of their views of the ACM, and therefore to help build an understanding of how the ACM worked in practice. It is one part of SQA's wider evaluation of the ACM in 2021.

It is essential for policymakers working in assessment to have an understanding not only of how they intend policies to operate, but also how they operate in practice. This research is not intended to make recommendations on any particular aspect of the ACM, but to help to build an evidence base so that future decisions on how best to assess learners are informed as fully as possible by a clear understanding of experiences of the exceptional arrangements put in place under the ACM.

A mixed method approach was developed involving two separate phases of research.

Firstly, a survey of learners and practitioners was carried out. In this, a range of questions were asked which cover the different aspects of the ACM that learners and practitioners experienced directly. This included a wide range of quantitative questions, and a smaller number of qualitative, open questions.

Secondly, depth interviews were carried out with learners, practitioners, and principal assessors, which allowed for a deeper exploration of key topics.

The survey research with learners and practitioners and interviews with principal assessors were carried out by SQA directly. The interviews with learners and practitioners were carried out by SQA staff and a consultant contracted by SQA to work on this topic.

2.1 Survey methodology

Surveys were developed by researchers in SQA's Policy, Analysis and Standards team in the autumn of 2021, and were then piloted with small groups of learners and practitioners in October 2021. Changes were then made, based on the feedback received from those pilot exercises. The survey itself was carried out in November and December 2021. This timescale was chosen as it meant that all aspects of the 2021 ACM were complete, including the appeals process and the incomplete evidence contingency arrangement, while also being sufficiently soon after events that experiences were still relatively fresh in participants' minds.

The survey was primarily distributed through SQA co-ordinators in schools and colleges in Scotland that offered National Qualifications in 2020–21. Co-ordinators were asked to pass on a survey link to learners and practitioners with direct involvement in National Qualifications in 2021, including, where possible, to learners who had left school or college in the summer of 2021 and had completed National Qualifications.

The link for the Evaluation of the ACM survey was sent to half of all schools with National Qualifications entries. The other 50% of schools were sent the survey for a separate but linked piece of work (Perceptions of Assessment Standards in Scotland) led by the Universities of Oxford and Glasgow and carried out in conjunction with SQA. The results of this second survey are being reported separately. Education authority schools were sorted by local authority and then alphabetically within each local authority. Independent schools were sorted alphabetically. Alternate schools were then sent either the Evaluation of the ACM or Perceptions of Assessment Standards in Scotland survey to ensure an even spread of centre type and geographical area for each survey.

This methodology was chosen to minimise the impact on schools at what was still a very busy time. Due to the smaller number of colleges, it was felt necessary to ask colleges to take part in both surveys. SQA would like to take this opportunity to thank SQA co-ordinators for their assistance with these important pieces of research.

The survey was also sent directly to learners and practitioners who had signed up to take part in research with SQA. Again, SQA would like to thank those learners and practitioners who responded and contributed to this research.

In total, responses were received from 1,210 learners and 482 practitioners. These numbers are such that, assuming the respondents were typical of the wider populations of learners and practitioners, there can be a high degree of confidence that the results of these surveys are broadly in line with the views of learners and practitioners.

It is likely, however, that those who chose to respond may have had a particularly strong opinion on the ACM that they wished to share with SQA. It is also possible that the schools and colleges who chose to take part in this research may not have been entirely representative of Scottish schools and colleges as a whole. The more detailed analysis of respondents in Chapter 3 indicates that, while there was a good geographical spread of respondents, and that practitioners taught a wide range of subjects, there was an over-representation of independent school learners and practitioners in the survey respondents, when compared to the proportions of National Qualifications entries that SQA receives from independent schools. Numbers of college learners and practitioners are broadly in line with the proportions of National Qualifications entries that SQA receives from the college sector.

2.2 Qualitative methodology

A number of qualitative questions were included in the survey. Some of these asked participants to outline parts of the ACM process that they felt worked well or did not work well. Others asked for examples of particular issues, or for participants to explain the reasons behind certain opinions. This allows us to develop a greater depth of understanding of the views of learners and practitioners.

However, it does not allow for a full exploration of participants' views. There is no opportunity for a conversation to take place. Hence, a range of interviews took place with learners, practitioners, and principal assessors in late 2021 and early 2022. SQA would like to take this opportunity to thank principal assessors for their assistance with this important research.

There were a number of objectives for these interviews.

The first was to develop a fuller understanding of the lived experiences of learners who sat, and practitioners who taught and assessed, National Qualifications in 2021, and therefore participated in the ACM. It was also felt that principal assessors had a unique and interesting perspective, given that most or all of this group were involved in the implementation of the ACM, in particular the national quality assurance exercise for their subject.

Secondly, the interviews provided an opportunity to explore some of the issues raised in the questionnaire in greater depth. One of the advantages of an interview approach is that it allows for a genuine conversation to take place to fully understand the point of view of the participants.

Lastly, the interviews, especially those with learners and practitioners, gave SQA the opportunity to hear a range of different perspectives directly.

The interviews followed a semi-structured approach which aimed to allow respondents to freely share their experiences without too much direction, while still allowing the interviews to focus on some key points of interest.

2.2.1 Learners and practitioners

A total of nine practitioners and 11 learners were interviewed about their experiences of the ACM in 2021. They had volunteered to be interviewed through leaving their contact details after completing the survey, so were self-selecting. Practitioners that we spoke to taught a wide range of subjects. These interviews were intended to add depth to the survey results and to explore areas that do not lend themselves to survey questions. These were qualitative interviews intended to illustrate a range of perspectives and are not intended to be fully representative of the wider population.

Nonetheless, the establishments provided a range of contexts, schools, and colleges, covering a breadth of situations ranging from those well-resourced, those less well-resourced, those with high-attaining academic performance and those with more varied student cohort/intake.

Initially, more interviews were scheduled to take place, but several did not go ahead. This is likely to have been a result of the pressured circumstances in education during that time, and may mean that the interview sample is biased towards those most able or willing to respond or those who had particular viewpoints they wished to ensure were recorded.

Interviews were recorded and written up but not verbatim transcribed. Some interviews did not always follow the strict order of the questions and some answers were given in different places. As discussed above, questions are grouped into key topic areas, and so the summaries of responses provided through this report have attempted to reorder the evidence into a coherent form without changing the tone or content of the responses. Direct quotes are given in italics.

2.2.2 Principal assessors

Eight principal assessors were interviewed about their experience of the ACM in 2021. The individuals were chosen based on the subject they cover, to ensure that a mixture of subjects could be included in the research. This included high- and low-uptake courses at different levels. The subjects included in this study are: National 5 English, Art and Design, and Practical Cookery; and Higher Mathematics, Physics, Music, History, and French.

The reflections of principal assessors are included throughout the report. The intention is to provide commentary on some key topics and themes from their perspective. This offers an opportunity to compare the findings of the wider learner and practitioner research with the findings from principal assessor interviews. Where examples are used, it is important to remember that this is based on the small sample of evidence submitted for review as part of the national quality assurance exercise. The inclusion of these examples is intended to highlight some of the complexities of the ACM system and support the evaluation.

As with the interviews with learners and practitioners, principal assessor interviews were recorded and written up but not verbatim transcribed. Questions were grouped into key topic areas, using a similar structure to those used in interviews with learners and practitioners. Again, responses have been reordered into a coherent form without changing the tone or content of the responses.

2.3 Analysis and Interpretation of results

2.3.1 Analysis of results

As this research project uses a mixed method approach, it is necessary to analyse different sorts of data in different ways.

Quantitative survey questions, which ask respondents to choose from two or more options or give a rating on a scale, are analysed numerically, with graphs and tables being provided where appropriate. Where there are substantial differences in opinion between different respondent groups, these are discussed.

Qualitative survey questions, which are more open and ask respondents to explain what they think and why, are analysed using an inductive approach. Researchers analyse these qualitative answers by categorising responses and drawing out themes, producing codes that allow analysis across responses. As with any other approach to analysing qualitative data, the results are contingent on how the coding is carried out. While it would be possible to provide some numerical data on these qualitative questions, there are a number of reasons why this would not be as robust as would be the case with quantitative questions.

Firstly, not all respondents choose to respond to open questions. We cannot therefore know that those who chose to respond are representative. Secondly, most respondents focus on one or two main areas in their response. We have no way of knowing what they think about other topics. Thirdly, we cannot quantify the strength of respondents' views in the way that we would in a closed question. Lastly, we are reliant on the coding decisions made earlier in this analysis exercise.

As a result, most analysis of qualitative survey questions will be discursive, and will look to outline the reasons that respondents have provided. In general, the most commonly cited reasons will be discussed first, but the main conclusions that ought to be drawn from this sort of data are that a significant number of respondents take a particular point of view, and then attempt to further understand that point of view.

A similar approach is taken with interview responses. It should be noted that interview participants are not intended to provide a representative sample of learners, practitioners or principal assessors and it would therefore not be appropriate to draw any numerical conclusions from the interviews.

2.3.2 Interpretation of results

It should be borne in mind that the introduction of the ACM in 2021 effectively meant the introduction of a substantially different approach to assessment while the country was in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, the ACM itself was disrupted; plans for the ACM were put in place before the lockdown in early 2021. The NQ 2021 Group, which included SQA and other organisations from across the education system, did not know that another lockdown was imminent when designing the ACM, but lockdown had a fundamental impact on the operation of the ACM;

learners' and practitioners' experience of the ACM would likely have been quite different without it.

As it was, learners were not able to be in the classroom from early January until at least mid-March, and even later — if at all — in the case of some college learners; there were very high rates of absence among both learners and teaching staff due to cases of COVID-19 and the related need to self-isolate; and the academic year 2020–21 was badly disrupted in a range of ways.

In recognition of the disruption to learning and teaching due to the pandemic, SQA had made modifications to the assessment of qualifications for the full academic session, such as removing content or coursework from some course assessments, and restricting what practical subjects could do due to the pandemic. Many of these modifications were designed to maximise the time available for teaching and learning, recognising the need to consolidate learning before assessment. These meant that the qualifications assessed using the ACM were already altered from those in previous years.

It should also be noted that many learners expressing views, be they positive or negative, on how their assessment process compared to a normal exam diet may not have experienced an exam diet before, as both the 2020 and 2021 diets did not take place.

Moreover, in non-COVID circumstances, very few National Qualification subjects are assessed by examination only; marks for other forms of assessment, such as coursework and performance, generally contribute from 20% to 100% towards a learner's grade. Nonetheless, learners without experience of this, and experience of only the 2020 and 2021 certification models, might perceive examination-only to be the normal process and so might have answered on that basis.

When looking at how the ACM operated, it is essential to bear this context in mind. The practical aspects of the system, particularly in terms of timing of and preparations for assessments, were undeniably affected by lockdown. Findings need to be considered taking into account the circumstances discussed above.

Policymakers and others looking at the contents of this report will have to determine the extent to which the issues raised by learners and practitioners were due to the approach adopted in the ACM; the disruption of the ACM itself impacting on opportunities for teaching, learning, and assessment evidence gathering; the wider circumstances that schools and colleges found themselves in throughout the 2020–21 academic year; or some combination of these. They may also wish to consider whether, in future situations, action could be taken to ameliorate or remove negative impacts should similar models be adopted at that time. This research does not attempt to answer such questions, and will only touch on them when reporting the views of participants.

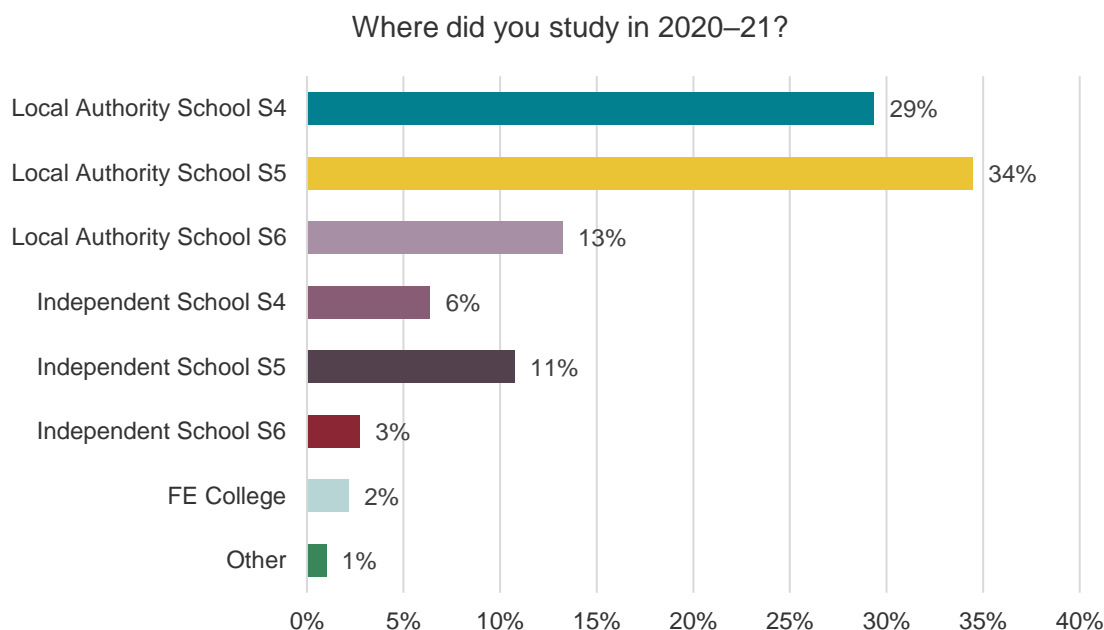
3 Respondent profiles

3.1 Survey respondents

3.1.1 Learners

Learners were asked where they studied in session 2020–21.

Figure 1



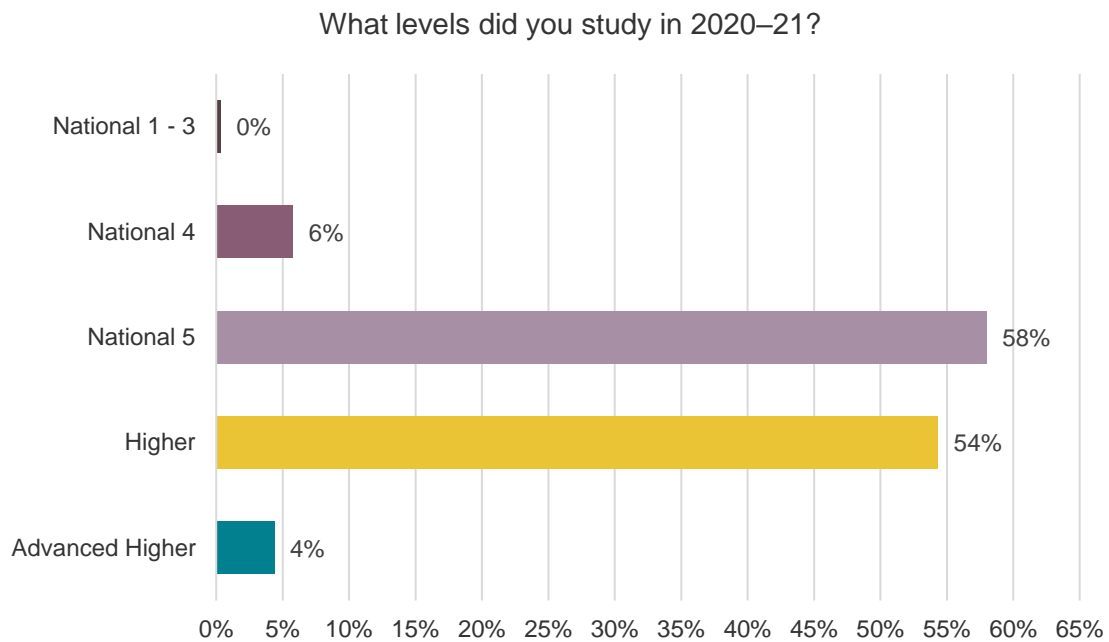
As detailed in Figure 1, 29% of respondents were S4 learners in a local authority school, 34% were S5 learners in a local authority school, and 13% were S6 learners in a local authority school, meaning 76% of respondents studied at a local authority school in 2020–21.

On the other hand, 6% of respondents were S4 learners at an independent school, 11% were S5 learners at an independent school, and 3% were S6 learners at an independent school, meaning 20% of respondents studied at an independent school in 2020–21.

Only 2% of respondents were further education college students, with 1% selecting 'other' as their place of study.

Learners were also asked what level or levels they studied at in 2020–21, with qualifications available to select ranging from National 1–3 to Advanced Higher.

Figure 2



The great majority of respondents were studying either at National 5, Higher, or both during 2020–21: 58% were studying at National 5, and 54% of learners indicated that they were studying at Higher. In addition, 6% indicated they were studying at National 4, and 4% of respondents were Advanced Higher learners. Only four learners indicated they were studying at National 1–3.

Learners were then asked which local authority area their school or college was in. Table 1 lists the question responses in descending order.

Table 1: Which local authority area is your centre based in? (Learners)

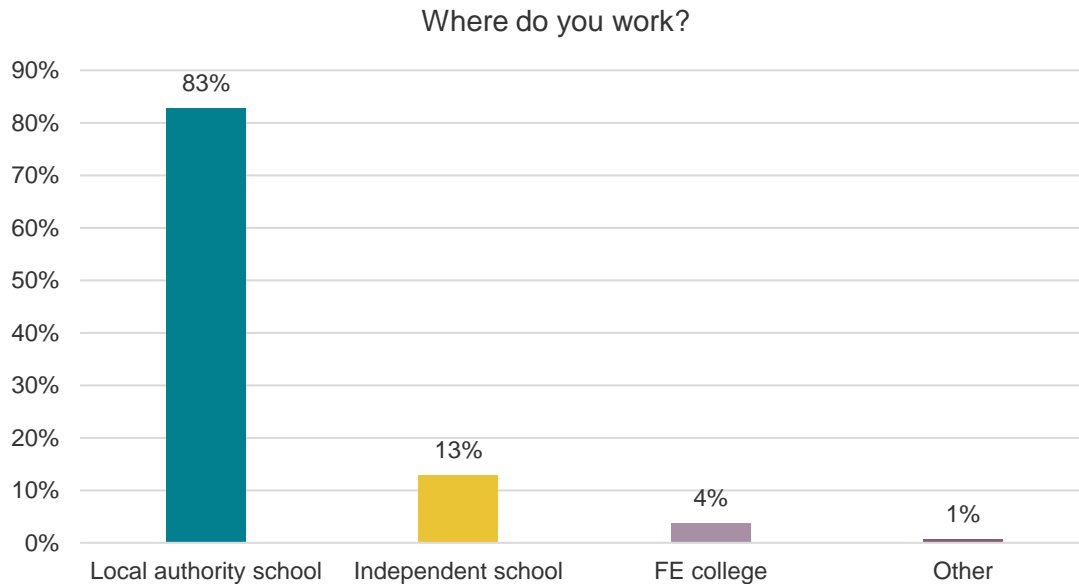
Local authority area	Total number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Glasgow	225	18.7%
Edinburgh	104	8.6%
West Lothian	92	7.6%
Aberdeenshire	87	7.2%
Dundee	70	5.8%
Highland	59	4.9%
Inverclyde	54	4.5%
South Lanarkshire	53	4.4%
Argyll and Bute	46	3.8%
Aberdeen	41	3.4%
Perth and Kinross	40	3.3%
West Dunbartonshire	40	3.3%
Shetland Islands	37	3.1%
Moray	34	2.8%
Fife	31	2.6%
Clackmannanshire	29	2.4%
East Dunbartonshire	29	2.4%
Stirling	28	2.3%
Angus	22	1.8%
East Ayrshire	20	1.7%
North Ayrshire	17	1.4%
Na h-Eileanan Siar (Western Isles)	13	1.1%
Falkirk	11	1.0%
East Renfrewshire	9	1.0%
Renfrewshire	6	0.5%
Dumfries and Galloway	4	0.3%
Midlothian	2	0.2%
North Lanarkshire	1	0.1%
Orkney Islands	1	0.1%
Scottish Borders	1	0.1%
East Lothian	0	0.0%
South Ayrshire	0	0.0%

Learners were from across a total of 30 local authority areas. The largest number of respondents were from the Glasgow area (19%) and from the Edinburgh area (9%).

3.1.2 Practitioners

Practitioners were asked where they worked.

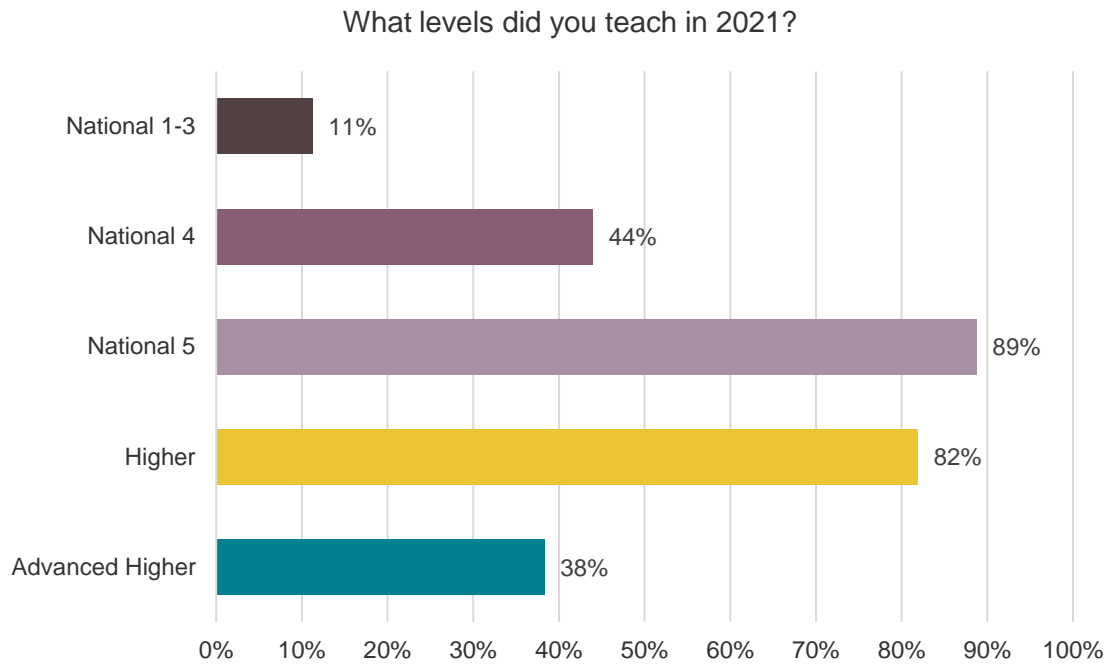
Figure 3



The large majority of respondents indicated that they worked in a local authority school (83%), a smaller percentage (13%) indicated that they worked in an independent school, while 4% of respondents worked in an FE college. Only three respondents selected 'other' in response to this question.

Practitioners were then asked which level or levels of qualification they taught in 2021 (Figure 4). The majority of practitioners indicated that they taught National 5 or Higher in 2021: 89% teaching National 5 and 82% teaching Higher. Smaller proportions indicated they taught National 4 (44%) and Advanced Higher (38%). A much smaller percentage (11%) indicated they had taught National 1–3 in 2021.

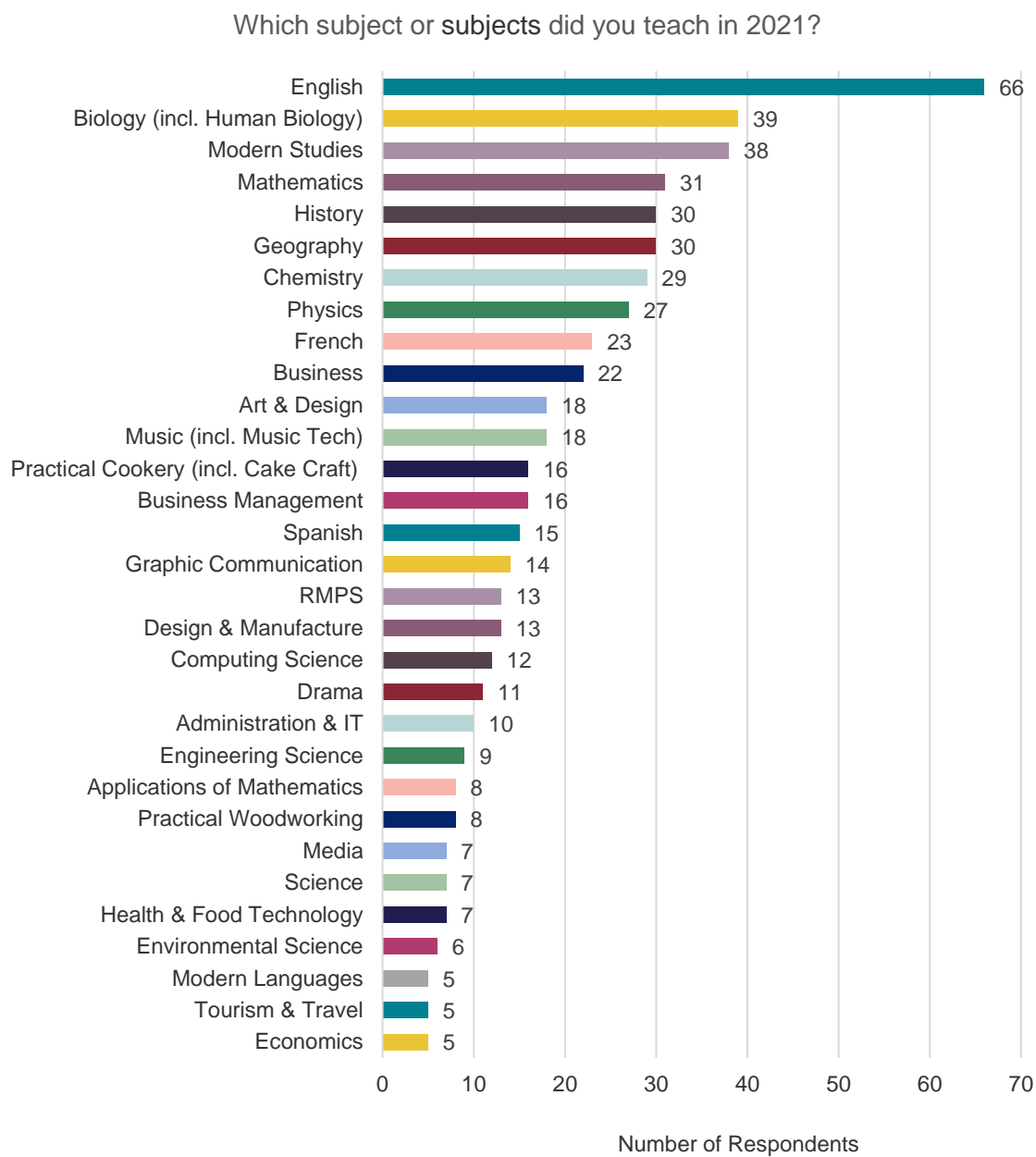
Figure 4



Practitioners were then asked which subject or subjects they taught in 2021. Results are shown in Figure 5.

Where a subject was listed by fewer than five practitioner respondents, this has not been included in the graph above. Such subjects are: Scottish Studies, Politics, Practical Metalworking, German, Accounting, Care (including Childcare), Physical Education, Gaelic, Practical Electronics, Photography, Classical Studies, Philosophy, Italian, Beauty, PC Passport, Enterprise and Employability, ESOL, Fashion and Textiles, Latin, Literacy, Mechanics, Sociology, Statistics, Support for Learning, and Independent Living Skills.

Figure 5



In general terms, the graph shows a wide range of subjects captured by the survey, including those which are not National Courses.

Practitioners were asked which local authority area their centre was based in. Table 2 lists the responses in descending order.

Table 2: Which local authority area is your centre based in? (Practitioners)

Local Authority Area	Total Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Glasgow	52	10.9%
Aberdeenshire	51	10.7%
Edinburgh	33	6.9%
Perth and Kinross	33	6.9%
Highland	28	5.9%
West Lothian	28	5.9%
Fife	25	5.2%
Angus	20	4.2%
Dumfries and Galloway	20	4.2%
Aberdeen	19	4.0%
East Renfrewshire	19	4.0%
South Lanarkshire	16	3.3%
East Lothian	15	3.1%
Argyll and Bute	13	2.7%
Clackmannanshire	13	2.7%
Dundee	11	2.3%
Inverclyde	11	2.3%
East Dunbartonshire	9	1.9%
South Ayrshire	9	1.9%
Shetland Islands	8	1.7%
Stirling	7	1.5%
West Dunbartonshire	7	1.5%
Moray	6	1.3%
North Ayrshire	6	1.3%
Falkirk	5	1.0%
Na h-Eileanan Siar (Western Isles)	5	1.0%
East Ayrshire	4	0.8%
North Lanarkshire	2	0.4%
Renfrewshire	2	0.4%
Midlothian	1	0.2%
Orkney Islands	1	0.2%
Scottish Borders	0	0.0%

As can be seen from the table, practitioners were from across a total of 31 local authority areas. The largest number of respondents were from the Glasgow area (11%) and from the Aberdeenshire area (11%).

Practitioners were also asked if they had been an SQA appointee, such as a marker or a principal assessor, within the past five years. This cut off was chosen to identify those who had been recently involved with SQA's assessment processes; 49% of respondents indicated they had. Throughout this analysis, differences in views between those who have been SQA appointees within the past five years and those who have not are highlighted only where they diverge substantially.

3.2 Qualitative respondents

A range of establishments was identified and approached, and a total of nine practitioners and 11 learners were interviewed in-depth about their experiences of ACM in 2021.

Eight principal assessors were interviewed about their experience of the ACM in 2021. The individuals were chosen based on the subject they cover to ensure that a mixture of subjects could be included in the research. The subjects were: National 5 English, Art and Design, and Practical Cookery; and Higher Mathematics, Physics, Music, History, and French.

4 Engagement and communication

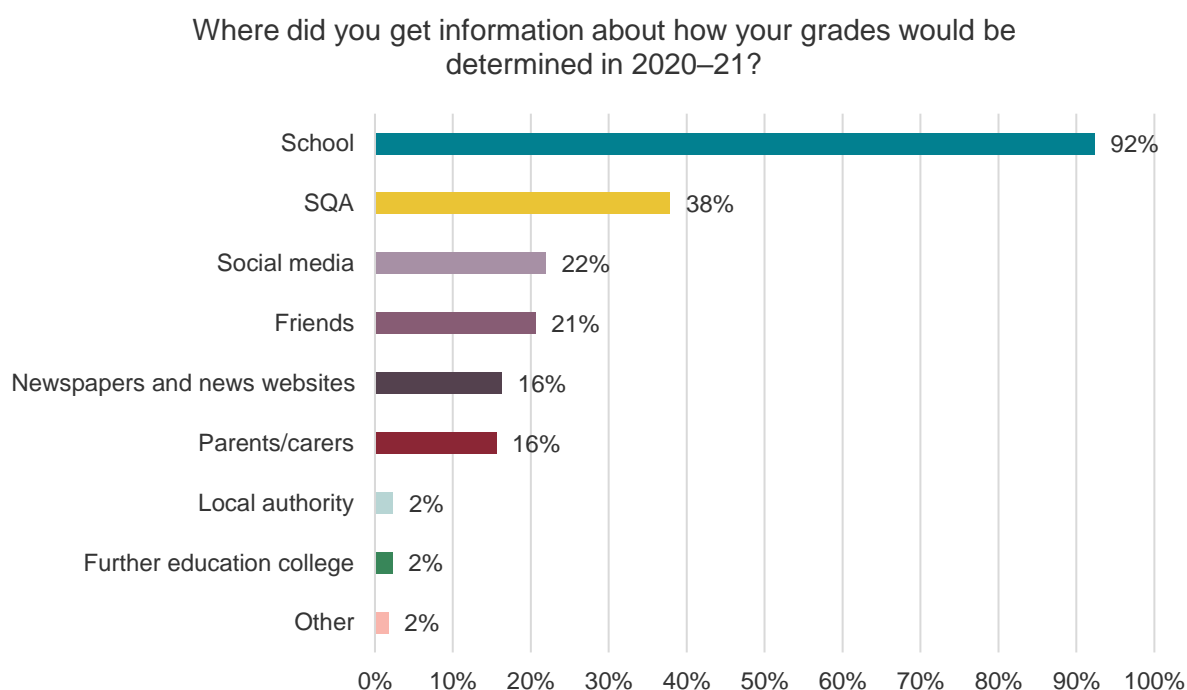
4.1 Information about grades

This section looks at how learners and practitioners obtained information about the grading process in 2021. In particular, respondents were asked about sources of information used, the timing of information received, and how clearly they understood how grades would be determined. Learner views are examined first, followed by those of practitioners.

Learners

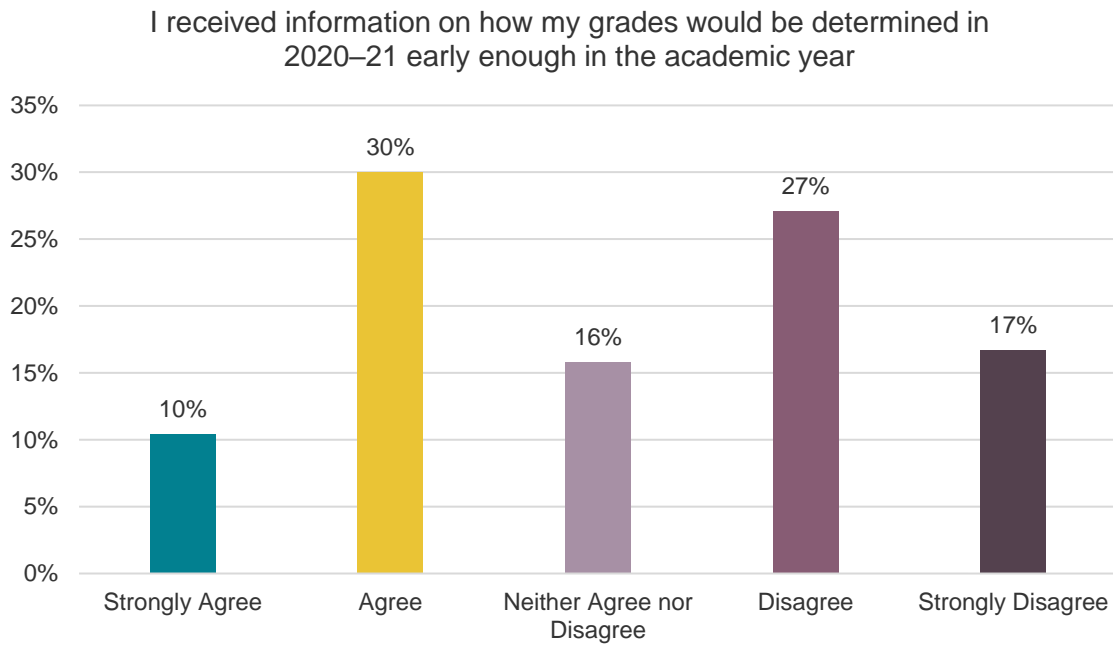
Learners were asked about all the sources of information they used when finding out about how grades would be determined in 2021.

Figure 6



The vast majority (92%) of learners had received information about the grading process from their school, and 38% had received information from SQA. Smaller proportions had received information from social media (22%), friends (21%), newspapers and news websites (16%), and parents/carers (16%). A small number received information from their local authority (2%) and from their college (2%).

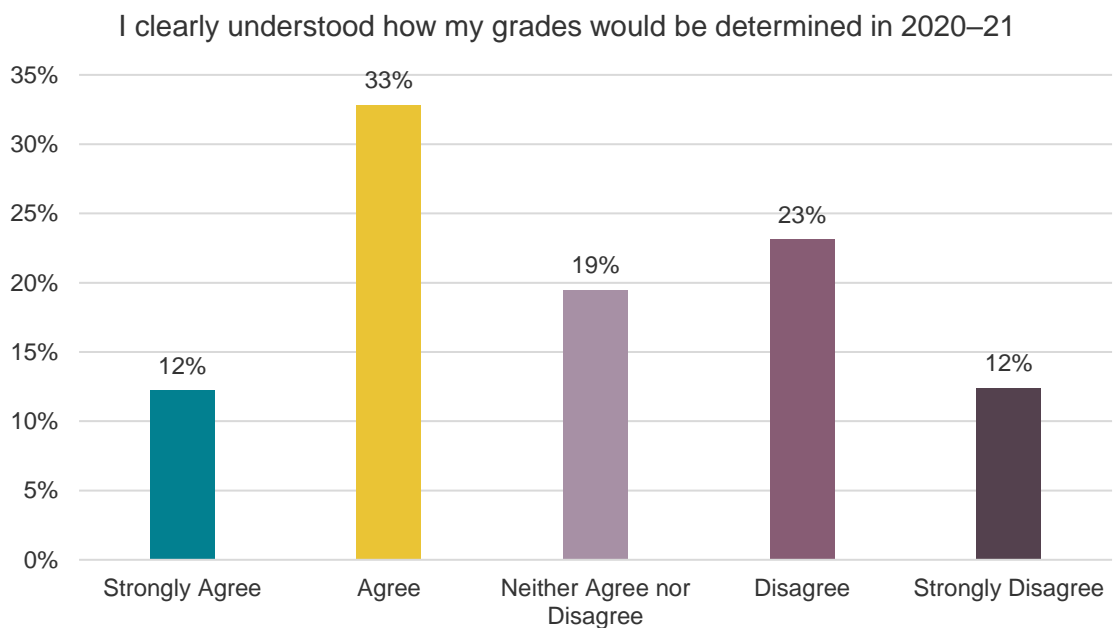
Figure 7



Learners were asked about the timing of information about the ACM. While 40% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had received information on how their grades would be determined early enough in the academic year, 44% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

On the other hand, when asked whether they clearly understood how their grades would be determined, 45% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they did, with 35% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing.

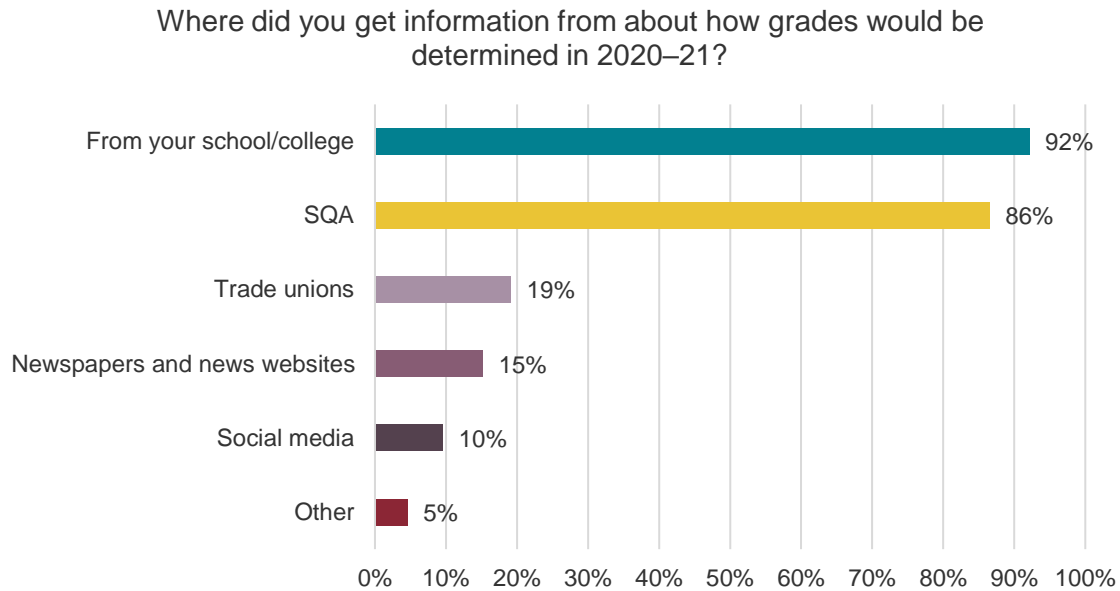
Figure 8



Practitioners

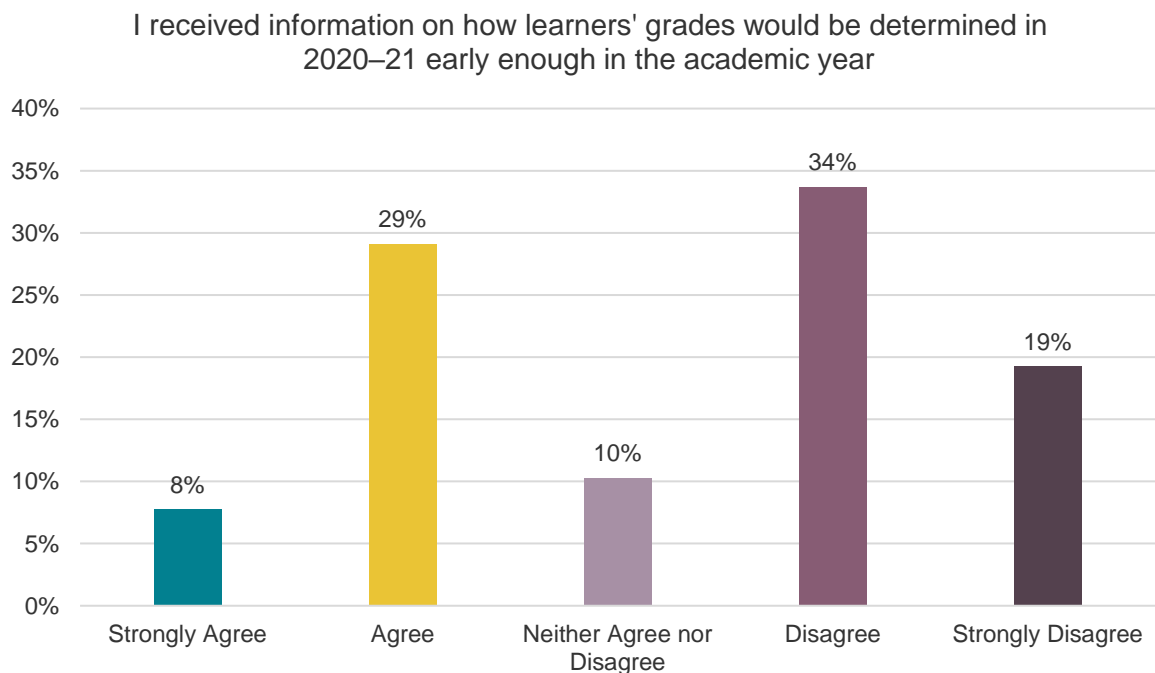
As with learners, practitioners were asked about all the sources of information they used when finding out about how grades would be determined in 2021.

Figure 9



The majority (92%) of respondents had received information from their centre, while 86% had received information from SQA. Smaller numbers of respondents had obtained information from their trade union (19%), the media (15%), and social media (10%). Of those who selected 'other', sources included local authorities, professional bodies and networks, and colleagues.

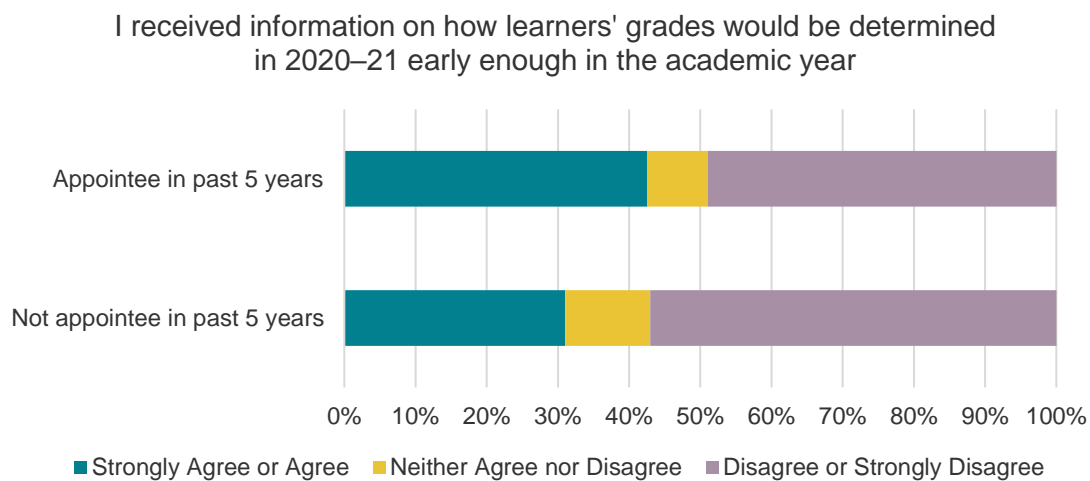
Figure 10



Practitioners were asked about the timing of information on the ACM. While 37% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had received information on how learners' grades would be determined early enough in the academic year, 53% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

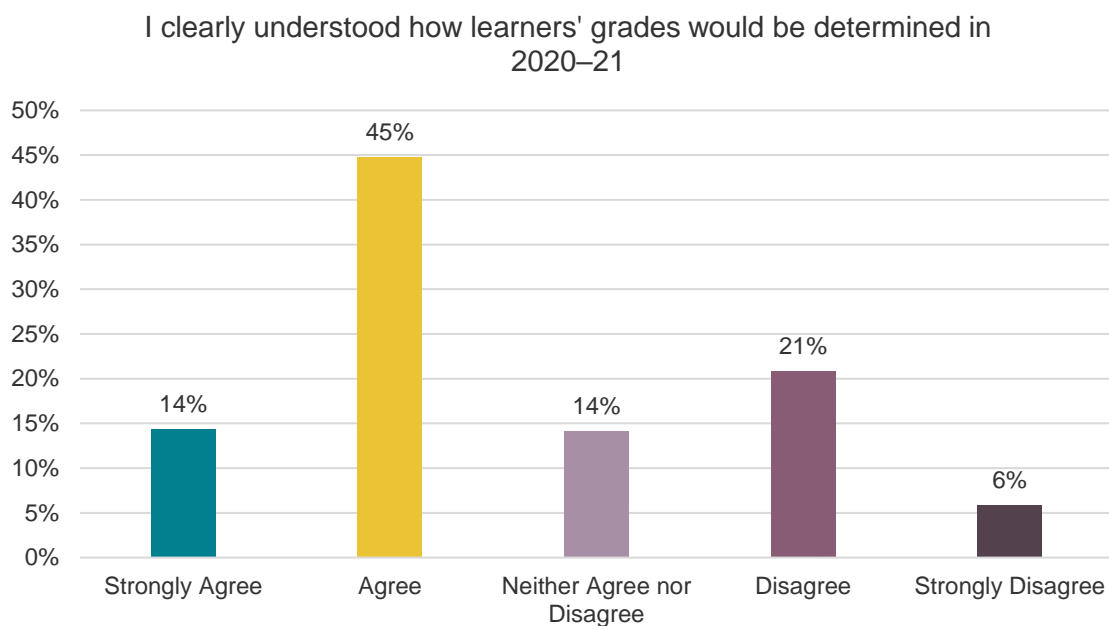
As shown in Figure 11, there were differences in views between those who had been an SQA appointee within the past five years and those who had not. As discussed in section 3.1.2, practitioners were asked whether they had been an appointee in order to identify those who had recently been involved in SQA's assessment processes. Overall, 43% of those who had been an SQA appointee within the past five years strongly agreed or agreed that they had received information on how learners' grades would be determined in 2020–21 early enough in the academic year, compared to 31% of those who had not been an SQA appointee within the past five years.

Figure 11



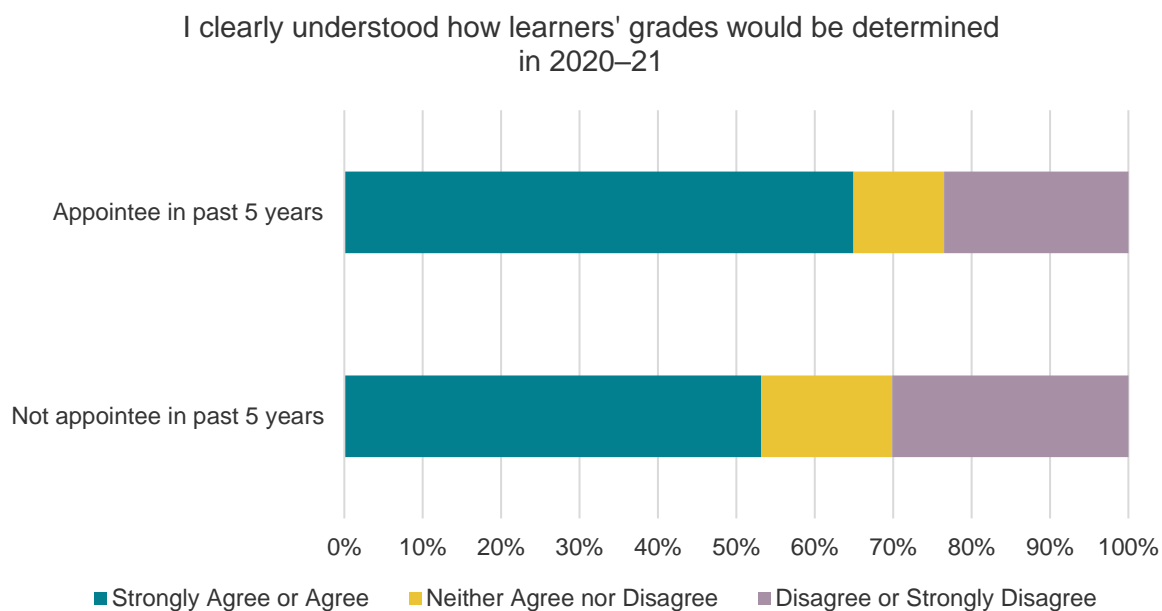
When asked about their understanding of the ACM process, 59% of responding practitioners agreed or strongly agreed that they clearly understood how learners' grades would be determined, with 27% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing.

Figure 12



While 65% of those who had been an SQA appointee, and so involved in SQA's assessment processes, within the past five years strongly agreed or agreed with the statement *I clearly understood how learners' grades would be determined in 2020–21*, this proportion fell to 53% among those who had not been an SQA appointee within the past five years.

Figure 13



4.2 Impact of media and social media

This section looks at the impact of media and social media on both practitioners' and learners' views of the grading process. Again, learner views are examined first, followed by those of practitioners.

It should be noted that a number of the themes that emerged in responses to the questions about media and social media, particularly from learners, did not relate specifically to the media. These responses are covered elsewhere in this paper.

Learners

Learners were asked whether media coverage of the grading process had changed their views of the process, and if so, in what way. Of the 1,204 respondents to this question, 80% felt that media coverage had not changed their views on the ACM, while 20% felt that it had.

Of the minority who felt that the media had changed their view, most felt that it had given them a more negative view of the process. The largely negative media coverage added to feelings of stress, anxiety, and worry.

'It made it more stressful and meant I was confused.'

Some learners felt that media coverage could be misleading, inaccurate, and confusing. Many complained that different and conflicting messages were coming from different sources, leading to widespread confusion around key issues such as whether or not exams were taking place. A related issue that emerged was frustration at the situation appearing to change so frequently and the late or last-minute communications surrounding this.

'[It] made me feel as though there wasn't a clear plan on how I was being graded.'

Another view among learners was that media coverage made results seem less valuable or meaningful.

'I am under the impression my As don't mean as much as they should as so many people got them last year.'

Media coverage had also given rise to a perception that learners in deprived areas had been disadvantaged by the process in comparison to others.

'I believe there was a lot of bias particularly to schools in lower socio-economic areas which had a negative impacts on their grades, based off of the news articles I read.'

Where learner views had changed positively, this manifested in two broad ways. Firstly, the teacher or lecturer judgement model was seen by many respondents as a better approach than the usual exam process, in that they felt it was fairer and less stressful. Secondly, they felt that media coverage had been useful in keeping learners informed about the process, providing clarification, or presenting different perspectives.

Learners were also asked whether social media had changed their views of the grading process. Similar to the question on media more generally, of the 1,199 respondents to this

question, 81% felt that social media coverage had not changed their views while 19% felt that it had. Of those whose views had changed, the reasons for this were also broadly similar to those discussed above.

Practitioners

Practitioners were asked whether media coverage of the grading process had changed their views of the process, and if so, in what way it had changed their views. Of the 481 respondents to this question, the majority (86%) felt that media coverage had not changed their views of the process while 14% felt that it had.

Many practitioners commented on the negativity of media coverage surrounding the process.

'Media coverage was quite negative and made it difficult to maintain a positive attitude towards the process.'

Respondents felt there to be several consequences to this negativity, including:

- ◆ adding to learner anxiety and stress
- ◆ presenting misleading or inaccurate information
- ◆ adding to confusion about the process, especially around whether or not exams were going to take place

Some comments mentioned that the media coverage was not consistent with messages communicated by SQA and other stakeholders, such as whether learners were required to sit exams.

'Media coverage was largely reporting that pupils were not required to do an exam. The SQA guidance for all science subjects was that pupils had to do an exam type paper.'

Some practitioners expressed disappointment at finding out key information from the media first, rather than SQA. It was also felt by a number of respondents that too much blame and accountability was being placed on teachers and lecturers as opposed to SQA or other bodies. Teachers and lecturers felt disheartened and criticised by how their role in the process was portrayed.

'There was a lot of anti-teacher rhetoric, especially from parents, who didn't appreciate the workload involved in delivering the ACM.'

Criticism of teachers in the media was felt to be unfair, and it was felt that the media portrayed education in general in a very negative light.

From an FE perspective, one respondent described the negative consequences for colleges and college learners of what they felt was a media focus on the school sector.

'Yes, the information on the news and media meant that students were getting information about how schools were operating, not how FE were operating. This led to a lot of students feeling that the college wasn't providing the support or information they should be providing.'

It led to a perception that FE was not considered to be as critical a sector as secondary schools. In fact, ALL students should be equally as important.'

Practitioners were also asked whether social media had changed their views of the grading process. Of the 480 respondents to this question, 90% felt that social media coverage had not changed their views while 10% felt it had. The comments by those who felt it had changed their views were similar to those around media more generally, above, and social media coverage was felt by many respondents to have been '*highly negative*' and '*unhelpful*'.

Some additional responses focused on the effect of social media on the security of the assessment process. It was noted that question papers were shared on social media, and this was felt to have '*compromised the validity of some results*'.

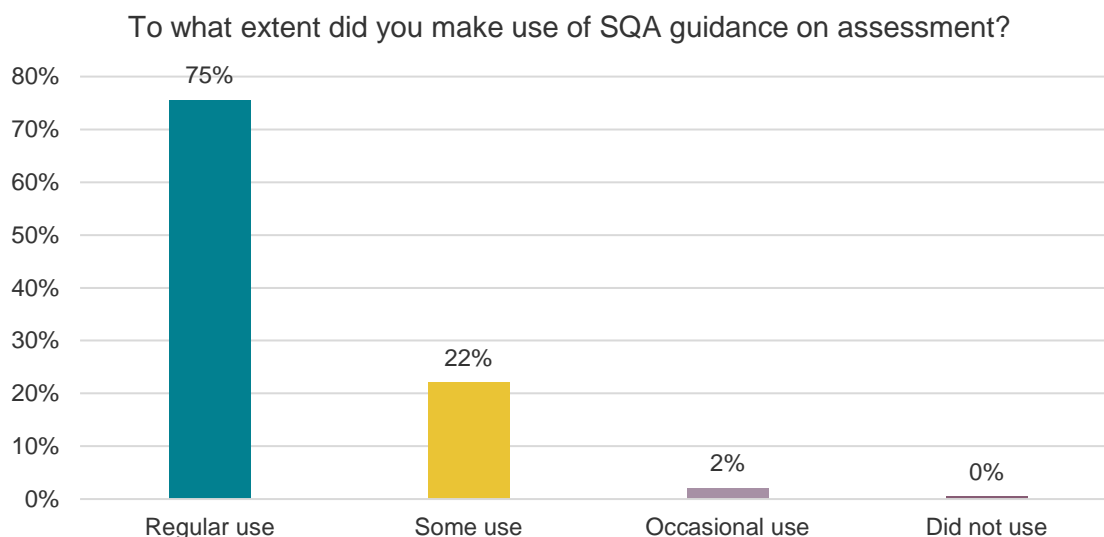
A more positive theme to emerge in a small number of responses was the feeling that social media coverage allowed for discussion and clarification of some areas of the process.

5 Guidance and support

5.1 Resources used

This section looks at the resources used by practitioners. Practitioners were asked about the extent to which they used two different resources.

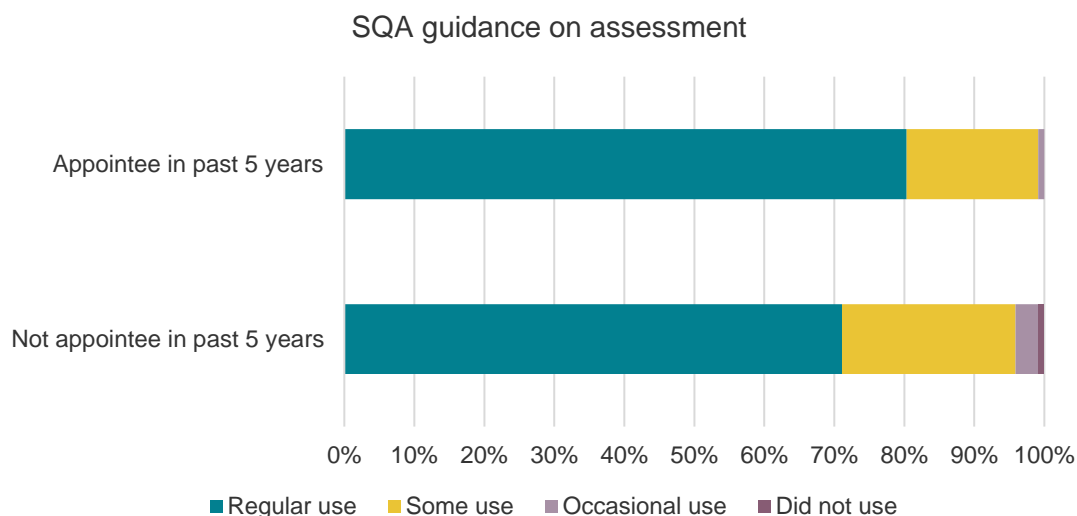
Figure 14



As detailed in Figure 14, 75% of respondents made regular use of SQA guidance on assessment and 22% of respondents made some use of it. Smaller numbers of respondents used the guidance occasionally (2%), while there were only two respondents who did not use the guidance.

More of those respondents who had been an SQA appointee, and so involved in SQA's assessment processes, within the past five years reported making regular use of SQA guidance on assessment than those who had not been SQA appointees within the past five years – 80% compared to 71% (Figure 15).

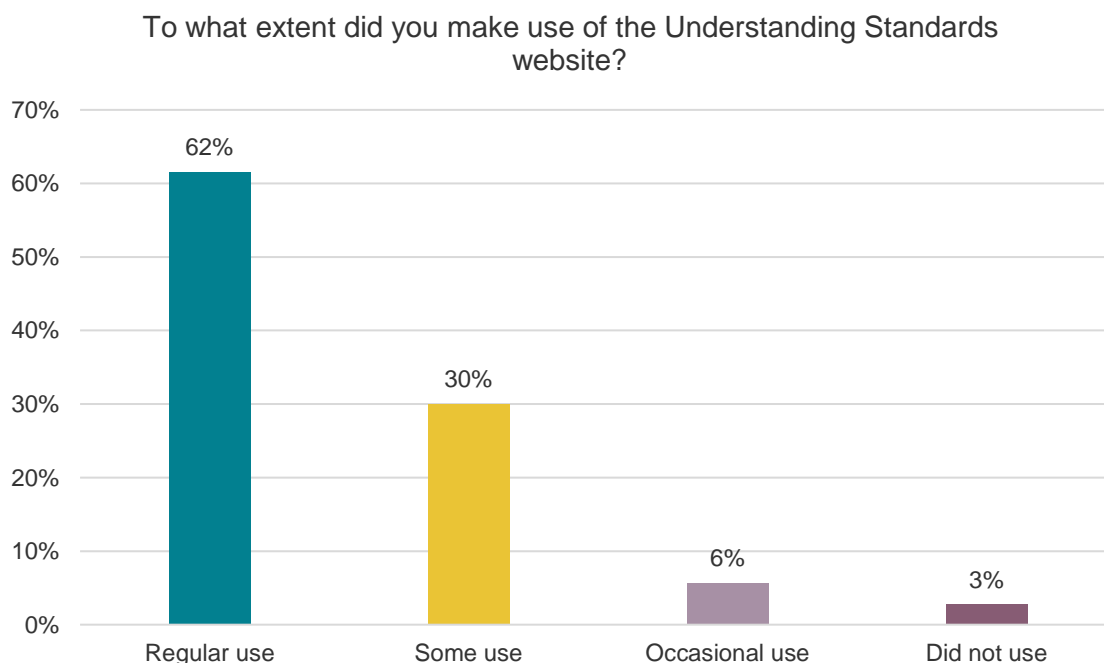
Figure 15



Respondents were also asked about the extent to which they used the Understanding Standards website.

As noted in Figure 16, while 62% of respondents made regular use of the Understanding Standards website, 30% made some use of it, and 6% used it occasionally. Smaller numbers of respondents did not use the Understanding Standards website (3%).

Figure 16



Practitioners were also asked in more detail about the use made of SQA guidance. Responses varied, but most used SQA materials.

Views on the materials seemed to depend on subject and practitioner – some materials were praised, but others were criticised. For example, the availability of good commentary videos around marking schemes was praised in English, but practitioners in some other subjects commented that the mark schemes were hard to understand and needed additional work by practitioners to make them useful.

Those who were experienced SQA appointees, so had been involved in SQA's assessment processes in previous years, or had access to colleagues who were experienced SQA appointees, seem to have found the SQA materials and support more helpful and the Understanding Standards website more useful. Many mentioned the importance of having members of staff who were experienced SQA appointees familiar with how to apply marking and run marking meetings and processes. This was viewed as being critical to making effective and easy use of these materials.

5.2 Support for centres

This section looks at support provided to centres by local authorities and other agencies.

Practitioners from local authority schools were asked about support provided by their local authority.

Generally, it was felt that little support was provided, and that the ACM involved a delegation or decentralisation of responsibility. However, there were mixed views on this. It should be noted that respondents tended to view support in a direct and personal way and so support that was directed via headteachers and senior management might be viewed as coming from them rather than from the local authority or SQA, even though that is where it originated. Similarly, the perception of support and its utility seems to have varied by how well prepared practitioners felt to make use of that support.

Practitioners generally felt that external support had been limited and that they had had to rely more on support from managers and colleagues, as well as professional and personal networks. Several quotes from respondents illustrate these views.

'Any support, it was down to the teachers basically it was up to us to go find another teacher in another school and ask them.'

'Mostly just advice from SQA but the local council never really steered it, I didn't feel there was a lot of direction from the council.'

'No, nothing, it was all internal, I know our qualities team did take some queries to SQA but at the coalface so to speak it all came through the team.'

It may have been that, depending on where in the school hierarchy the respondent was, this support was not visible as it came via more senior staff. At least one authority had set up regular meetings of all the principal teachers, who were then responsible for disseminating information.

'From his [Head of Department's] side that might have come [from the LA] and filtered down from there.'

Respondents were also asked about whether support or guidance from other agencies, such as Education Scotland, was received and used.

Answers to this varied (and often combined with the above question) but mostly practitioners claimed to have not received or utilised other support. There was also some criticism of Education Scotland along the lines of *'they were just sharing teachers' own work so it didn't add anything'*. Some mentioned the importance of subject teacher groups and networks, and the ability to share materials and get advice and reassurance from colleagues in nearby schools seems to have been welcomed.

'We all knew we were in a rubbish situation so just supported each other.'

Principal assessor interviews

Principal assessors were asked about the support provided to centres, and reflected on their role during the ACM process. They noted that practitioner engagement with Understanding Standards resources was very good. Assessment guidance and materials were generally well received and appreciated by centres. Several principal assessors reported that subject teams received requests for additional material, which was provided where possible.

Interactive resources — including webinars, audio/visual materials, SQA Academy modules, and Q&A sessions — seemed to be the most positively received. Attendance at online Understanding Standards events was generally very good, and some principal assessors noted that the removal of space restrictions required for physical events increased engagement, even if the online format was deemed less effective in terms of the quality of interactions with practitioners.

Understanding Standards was considered to be a key resource and helped to support centres define and apply standards. It was noted, however, that some enhancements could be made in key areas. For instance, exemplar material provided on the website is often written by teachers, and it was suggested that examples of real candidate evidence would be preferred. A small number of principal assessors suggested that navigation across the site and between the SQA and Understanding Standards websites should be streamlined for users, and the interface for Understanding Standards pages should be updated and refreshed.

While engagement with resources was generally felt to be good, further data on unique views would support development work by subject teams. In general, improved signposting to resources was also highlighted as an area that required further work, with the guides that have been developed in English given as an example of good practice in this area.

Throughout the ACM process, principal assessors and subject teams worked hard to provide support, reassurance, and guidance to practitioners, and responded to issues or queries as they arose. Some principal assessors noted that it was sometimes more challenging to carry out some aspects of the role remotely using online tools like Teams and Zoom — this made some tasks more cumbersome and complex.

Similarly, principal assessors suggested that holding online Q&A sessions for practitioners felt less personal and interaction was generally more stilted and less conversational due to

perceived technological barriers. This also made responding to more complex issues and questions more challenging. Face-to-face meetings were thought to be more effective when reviewing and discussing candidate evidence, and there was an appetite from some principal assessors for a return to in-person Understanding Standards events.

6 Teaching and learning

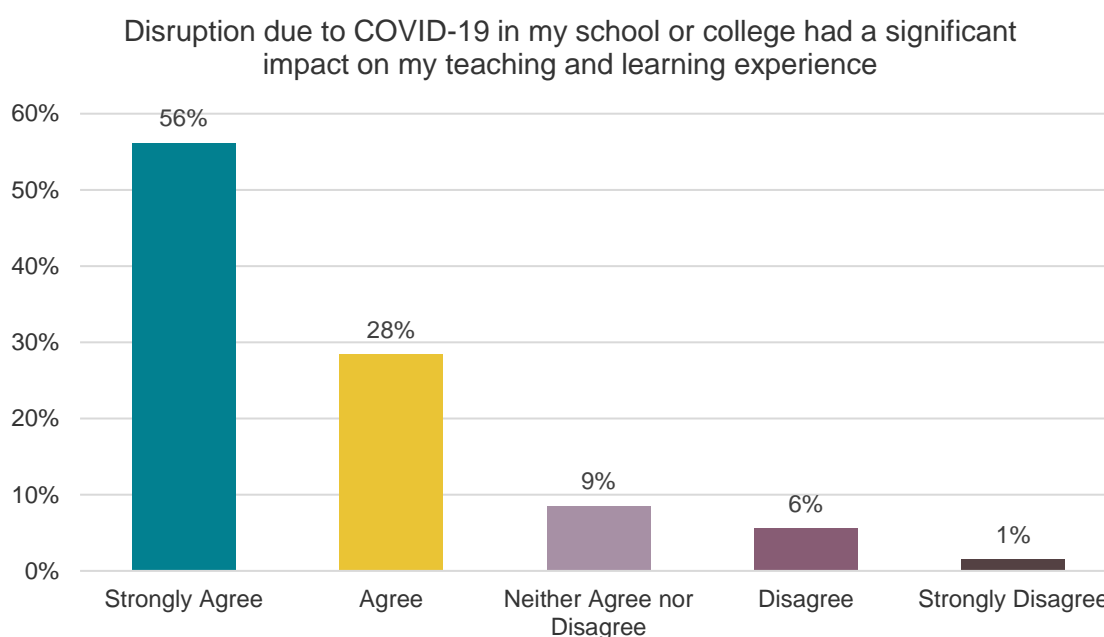
6.1 Disruption

This section looks at feedback from learners and practitioners regarding disruptions caused by COVID-19 and the associated impacts on teaching, learning and assessment. This section also covers feedback from practitioners on how COVID-19 disrupted the way the ACM operated, including practitioner views on how teaching, learning, and assessment experience could have been improved. Additionally, learners were asked if there were any measures put in place by their centre to help those who had missed more learning time than average, due to COVID-19 disruption.

Learners

Learners were asked if they agreed that disruption due to COVID-19 in their school or college had a significant impact on their teaching and learning experience.

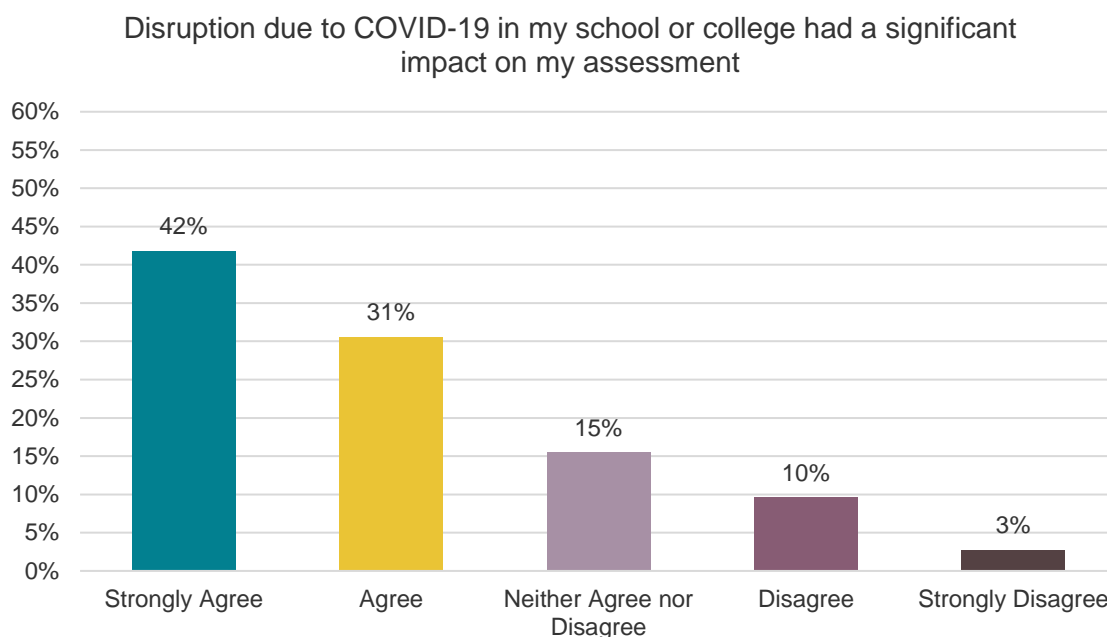
Figure 17



While 84% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that disruption in their centre due to COVID-19 had significantly impacted on their teaching and learning experience, 9% of respondents stated that they neither agreed nor disagreed. However, 7% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that there had been an impact on their teaching and learning experience due to COVID-19 related disruption in their centre.

Learners were also asked if they agreed that disruption due to COVID-19 in their school or college had a significant impact on their assessment.

Figure 18



While 73% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that disruption in their centre due to COVID-19 had significantly impacted on their assessment, 15% stated that they neither agreed nor disagreed. On the other hand, 13% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that there had been an impact on their assessment due to COVID-19 related disruption in their centre.

Learner interviews

During interviews, learners were asked if their school or college did anything to help learners who had missed more learning time than average due to COVID-19. It was suggested to them that such measures could include things like extra teaching time, being able to do assessments later than other learners, or being assessed in different ways.

Many reported their centres laying on additional catch-up session in lunch breaks or after school or college, Teams drop-in sessions, and other forms of support. Some mentioned centres providing additional assessments if needed. Some higher achieving schools seemed to rely more on learners catching up themselves.

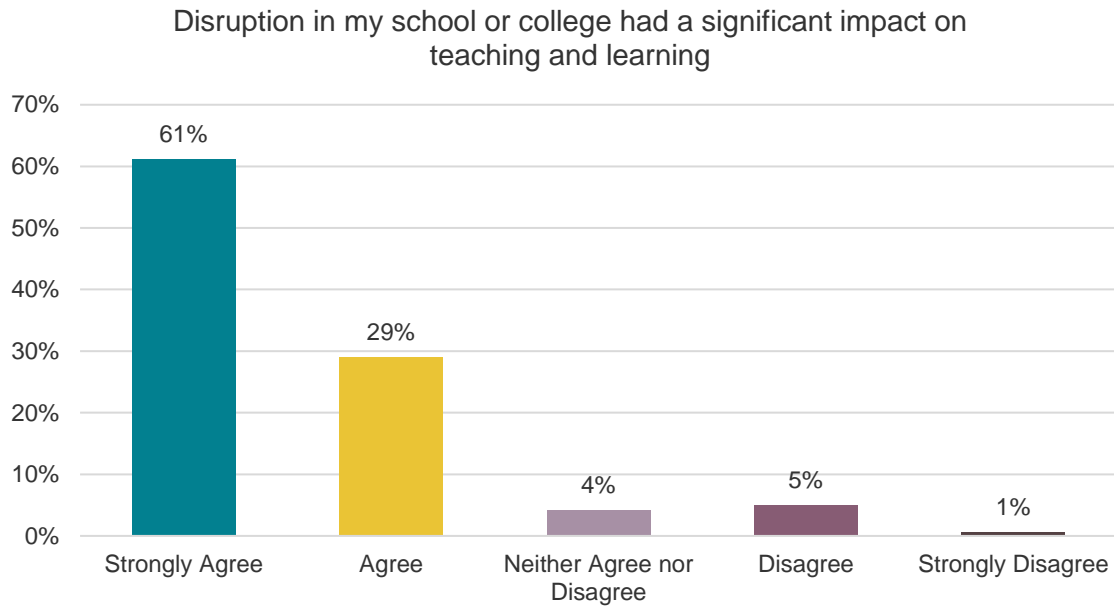
'There was support study which was really good that was like after school, we had the gym so you could just go sit with your friends and go over stuff there was subject support study going on and we had stuff like Teams so you could message teachers.'

'They were flexible with timings of assessments so if you missed more, you could maybe do yours slightly later, or if you personally needed help, they'd go on a Teams chat and give you that help if you were struggling.'

Practitioners

Practitioners were asked the extent to which they agreed disruption in their school or college had a significant impact on teaching and learning.

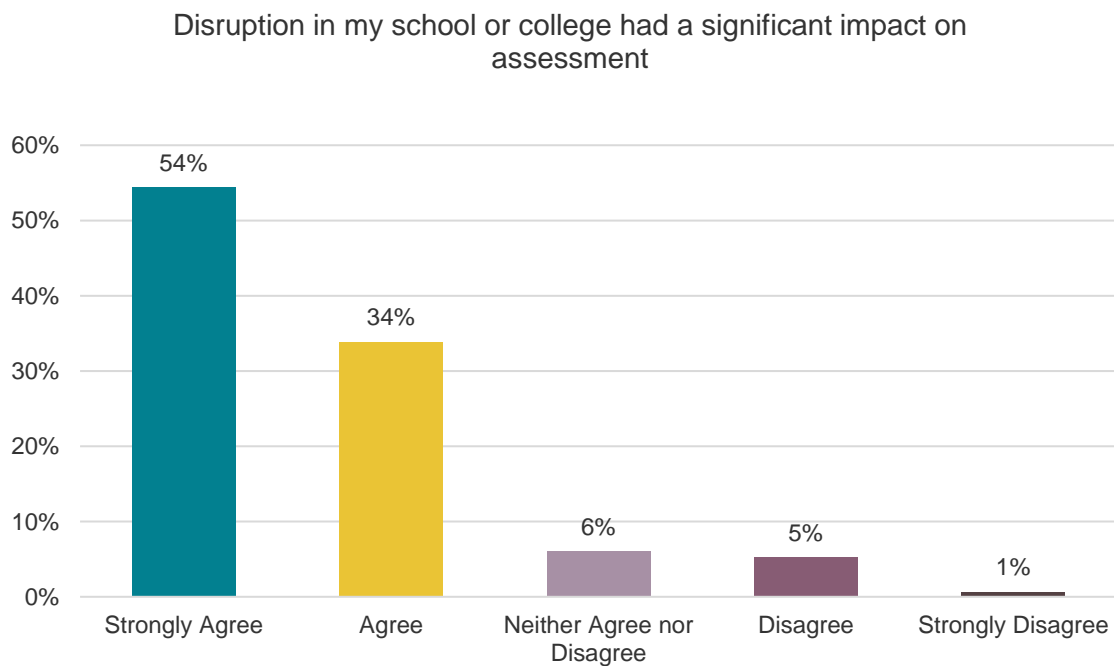
Figure 19



While 90% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that disruption in their centre had significantly impacted on teaching and learning, 4% of respondents stated that they neither agreed nor disagreed. 6% of practitioners disagreed or strongly disagreed that there had been an impact on their teaching and learning due to disruption in their centre.

Practitioners were also asked the extent to which they agreed disruption in their school or college had a significant impact on assessment.

Figure 20

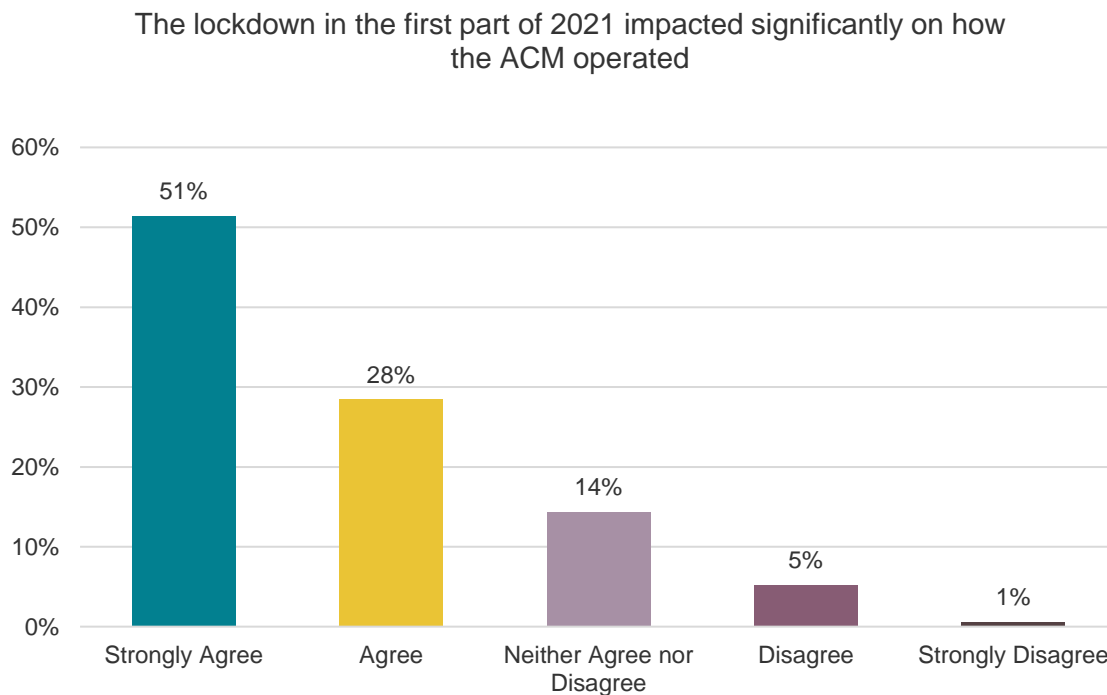


While 88% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that disruption in their centre had significantly impacted on assessment, 6% of respondents stated that they neither agreed nor disagreed, and 6% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed.

6.1.1 Impact of lockdown

Practitioners were asked the extent to which they agreed the lockdown in the first part of 2021 impacted significantly on how the ACM operated.

Figure 21



While 79% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the lockdown in the first part of 2021 impacted significantly on how the ACM operated, 14% of respondents stated that they neither agreed nor disagreed, and 6% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed.

When asked how the 2021 lockdown impacted on the operation of the ACM, 328 practitioners submitted comments.

Teaching and learning

First and foremost, respondents thought that lockdown had greatly affected teaching and learning in 2021. Remote learning was deemed to have been challenging by many and this impacted on both the amount and quality of learning that took place. The lack of face-to-face contact time was considered detrimental by large numbers of respondents. Practitioners had to try and make up for this once centres re-opened.

'It was almost impossible to consider the work done during this time as assessable. This meant that it felt like it was wasted time — and for many pupils this work had to be retaught.'

Related to this, a significant number of respondents highlighted lack of learner engagement as an impact of lockdown. Even some learners who had been performing well before

lockdown became 'lost' during this period. Learners who were difficult to engage were, subsequently, difficult to assess.

'They switched off during lockdown and it was impossible to get them back.'

It was suggested that some learners' confidence and motivation were hit by the move to remote learning. Moreover, there were substantial disparities in the support learners received at home — in terms of both parent or carer support and access to technology and the internet. A number of respondents suggested that such barriers further entrenched the poverty-related attainment gap in 2021. Even when centres re-opened, COVID-related learner absences continued to mean that there was no level playing field.

Those practitioners responsible for practical subjects or subjects with practical elements emphasised how much these were impacted by the effects of lockdown. Respondents said that remote teaching was particularly challenging in these subjects, with negative consequences for the quality of learning, consolidation of knowledge, and preparation for assessment.

Assessment

Overwhelmingly, respondents suggested that lockdown had reduced opportunities to assess learners. Many mentioned that prelims or other planned assessments had had to be cancelled. This meant both that learners had no opportunity to practise assessments in high-stakes conditions before their end-of-year assessments and that centres had no evidence on which to make judgements about performance.

'There was little evidence with high predictive value and pupil grades rested largely on an assessment diet in May which essentially just replaced the SQA exams.'

Although this was very much a minority view, a couple of respondents thought that centres should not have been instructed to focus solely on teaching and learning early in 2021, and instead should have been advised to collect reliable and robust evidence as early as possible.

Large numbers of respondents highlighted the issues they faced in generating and gathering appropriate evidence for their learners. Many stated that this could not be done remotely, and so had had to wait until centres re-opened. Consequently, many respondents said that assessments had to be condensed into a short window; this further curtailed time for teaching and learning that some practitioners thought was very much required after lockdown.

'Emphasis is needed on learning and teaching, not on high stakes assessments.'

A number of respondents thought that the end-of-year assessments were a traditional exam diet in all but name, and that SQA's statements that there would be no exams gave learners and their parents and carers a misleading impression of the situation. Given that these were very often the only opportunity to generate robust, closed-book evidence, these end-of-year assessments became high-stakes.

While a few respondents mentioned that they believed the assessment process had worked well in their centre, more focused on what they saw as the less robust nature of the ACM compared to a traditional exam diet. There were concerns about perceived inconsistencies between centres and subjects, with regards to issues such as re-sits, the interpretation of standards, the quality of marking and moderation, and the timing of assessments.

'It affected the validity of the qualification. There was too much room for differences between each school's approach.'

A small number of respondents noted their experiences of remote assessment, but these were generally thought to be lacking in validity or security.

Pressures

Lockdown and its impacts were considered by many to have been extremely stressful for both learners and practitioners. Many respondents thought that lockdown had made learners anxious; an anxiety compounded by the pressure they felt to perform in so many end-of-year assessments when schools and colleges re-opened. This learner stress had to be managed by teachers and lecturers.

Reported practitioner stress was attributed to several factors. These, detailed by significant numbers of respondents, included the pressures of attempting to continue to teach effectively through lockdown, the increased workload associated with the ACM, pressure from parents and carers, a lack of early guidance from SQA and/or the Scottish Government, uncertainty about the process, a lack of time for both teaching and assessment, and the perception that SQA had sidestepped its responsibilities.

'Schools were placed under pressure from pupils and parents to provide those formal assessment opportunities for pupils to demonstrate their learning. Thus, the SQA's repeated insistence that the additional pressure this placed pupils under was the fault of schools for taking this approach to assessment was disingenuous. It was not possible under the circumstances to manage the massive amount of admin involved in gathering, marking, and moderating the necessary assessment evidence in 'naturally occurring' ways within the very limited timescale.'

How could the experience have been improved?

When asked how the teaching, learning, and assessment experience could have been improved in relation to the ACM, 370 practitioners submitted responses.

While the majority of respondents suggested ways in which they believed the experience could have been improved, a small number thought that most of it had worked well, given the constraints of COVID-19, with no suggestions for improvements noted.

Communication

Around one-third of practitioners who responded to this question mentioned that a well-defined strategy, with earlier and clearer communication to both practitioners and learners from SQA would have improved the teaching, learning, and assessment experience. Similarly, communicating decisions at the beginning of the academic year was, for some,

essential to ensure a positive experience, although there was some awareness of the changeable landscape during the pandemic.

'The ACM model could have been communicated at an early date. Many subjects were left with no clarity from the SQA regarding elements of the course and its assessment until much later on in the process. This meant time was spent on areas that were not required as part of the ACM.'

Several practitioners also noted that clearer messaging to the media from SQA would have improved the experience for learners, some of whom were confused by what they understood as conflicting information from practitioners and the media.

Assessment

By far the greatest number of responses received here were linked to the assessment experience element of the ACM. Practitioners believed that a greater emphasis on standardisation of marking assessments across centres and local authorities would have improved the overall outcome and experience for learners. A small number of practitioners felt that by rigorously following SQA guidance, their own learners had been penalised, noting that there should have been stricter accountability for centres. Suggestions to improve this included increased quality assurance by SQA, sampling of assessment materials from different centres, and stricter national guidelines with more comprehensive marking schemes.

'Many councils and schools took it upon themselves to dictate exactly what should happen which left learners at a disadvantage. For example, in our local council grade boundaries were exactly 70%, 60%, 50% etc, however, other schools were at liberty to give grades outside these boundaries.'

Likewise, a few practitioners suggested that misinformation on grade boundaries and a lack of consistency unnecessarily penalised some learners. Others commented on unconscious bias influencing marks and practitioners attempting to maximise grades by issuing artificially high marks with a disregard for rigour. Stricter guidelines and increased moderation and quality assurance, it was suggested, would have reduced these issues, and strengthened the value of the whole ACM process.

'This process has to be the same across all schools. A child who sat their assessments in another school would quite possibly have got a different predicted grade.'

On a related note, some respondents specifically mentioned that exams should have continued as normal, highlighting that many of the assessments were taken under exam conditions in any case. This, it was suggested, would have mitigated issues related to rigour which arose from the ACM experience.

Conversely, a number of respondents mentioned the importance of practitioner judgement and greater autonomy in the preparation, evidence gathering, and marking of assessments as ways in which the assessment experience could have been further improved. It was suggested that this would have freed up more teaching time and reduced stress and uncertainty for learners.

‘Staff should have been given greater autonomy in generating assessment evidence without the fear of delayed scrutiny. The professionalism of teaching staff should have been appreciated.’

In addition to these suggestions, a smaller number of respondents also proposed the following: reducing the number of assessments for learners, reducing breadth of topic areas being assessed, increasing the use of online assessments, and increasing security of assessment papers by holding assessments on the same day nationwide.

Respondents would like to have had:

- ◆ more training in aspects of delivering and marking assessments
- ◆ clearer guidance on marking including supplementary examples of marking schemes
- ◆ the removal of the burden of appeals from centres

‘Giving much clearer, concrete and subject-specific instructions about how subjects should be gathered, marked, and assessed would have been useful.’

Teaching

Although many of the respondents’ suggestions overlapped with regard to both teaching and assessment, a number were more relevant to the teaching aspect of the ACM experience which, it should be noted, is not within the remit of SQA. Respondents would like to have had:

- ◆ fewer changes at short notice
- ◆ additional support from SQA, Scottish Government, and local authorities
- ◆ additional training in using digital platforms to deliver lessons
- ◆ more direction on which areas of the curriculum to follow
- ◆ more time to undertake all of the additional responsibilities that came along with the ACM

Learning

Respondents noted that the experience of learning varied between centres as well as between individual learners. Adjusting course content to reflect the new home learning environment was suggested by some, alongside reducing the content of subject areas further, specifically those subjects with practical elements such as drama and music. The recurring theme of the need for earlier communication from SQA was mentioned in the context of learning by many of the respondents. It was suggested that learners were often confused and anxious with what were felt to be last minute changes and contradictory information.

Respondents commented that some learners took longer to adjust, required additional support, or did not have the same access to online learning as others. It was suggested that greater flexibility with learners could have mitigated some of these hurdles and provided a more positive experience.

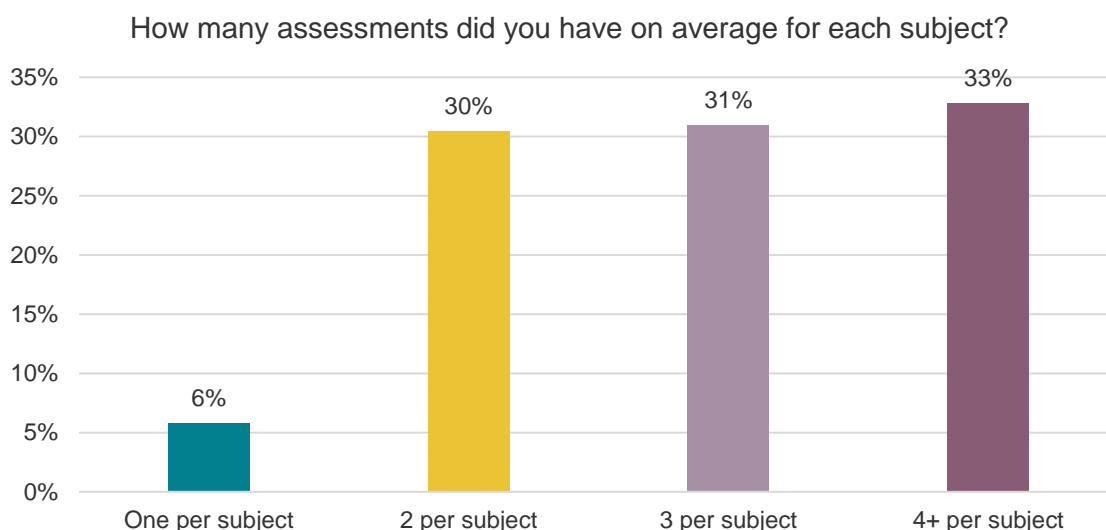
7 Assessment and evidence

This section looks at learners' and practitioners' views on the different approaches to assessment taken across different centres.

7.1 Number and type of assessments

Learners were asked how many assessments they had had for each subject. As shown in Figure 22, only 6% of respondents reported that they had had, on average, one assessment per subject; 30% reported having two per subject, 31% three per subject, and 33% four or more per subject.

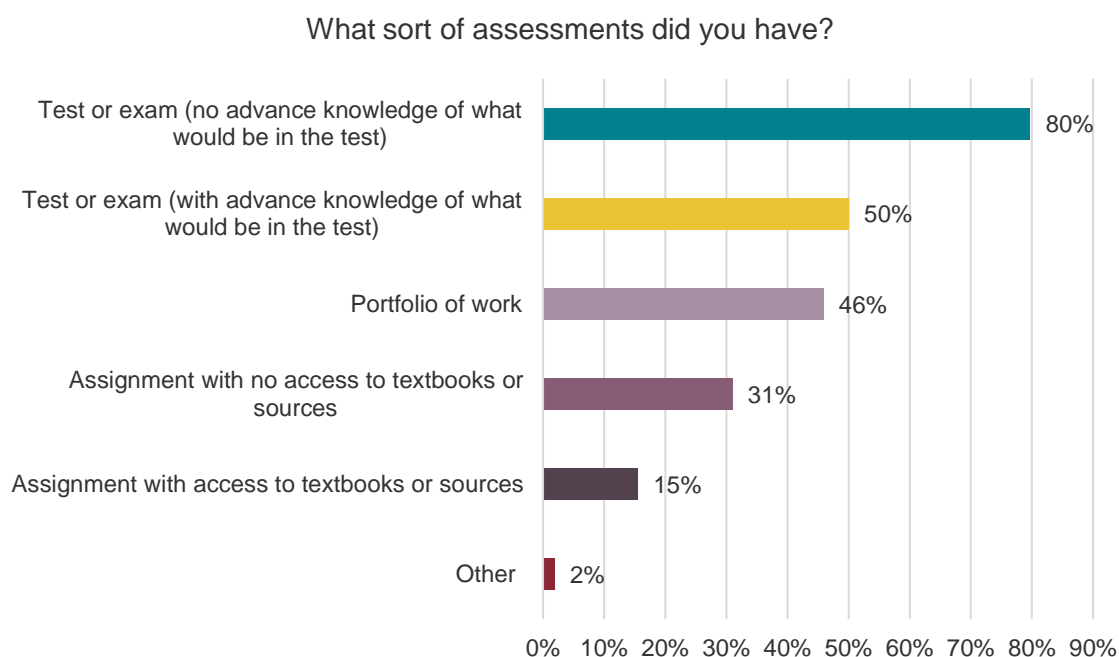
Figure 22



Learner respondents were then asked what sort of assessments they had undertaken. Responses are shown in Figure 23.

- ◆ 80% of respondents reported having been assessed with a test or exam with no advance knowledge of its content
- ◆ 50% reported having been assessed with a test or exam with advance knowledge of its content
- ◆ 46% reported having been assessed through a portfolio of work
- ◆ 31% reported having been assessed with an assignment with no access to textbooks or sources
- ◆ 15% reported having been assessed with an assignment with access to textbooks or sources

Figure 23



Less than 2% of respondents reported having been assessed in another way. Of those who commented here, the most common response was around the assessment of practical subjects. Other methods of assessment highlighted included timed essays, formal homework, past papers, and unit assessments.

The qualitative interviews showed that learners seem to have had very varied experiences; even within centres, different approaches seem to have been taken by different departments. These ranged from formal examinations using whole papers sat in exam halls under exam conditions to smaller, split assessments sat under class conditions and some reporting sitting assessments at home.

'They were just exams under different names, that's all I can say about them, they were all in a hall in separate seats all spaced apart invigilated etc not like an alternative assessment.'

'When I say assessment, I mean like timed conditions closed-book but pretty much an exam paper, but an independent part for example in French a listening assessment.'

'I did papers on the internet, the teacher sent it to me, and I had to mail it to him. I might have cheated on one and had my notes taken away, but I was marked down for it.'

Most learners in interview found the question around the number and type of assessments they had undertaken hard to answer with clarity, but it seemed that most sat the equivalent of two or three examination papers per subject (usually a prelim and a main exam) but often split into smaller chunks to fit in with class timetabling.

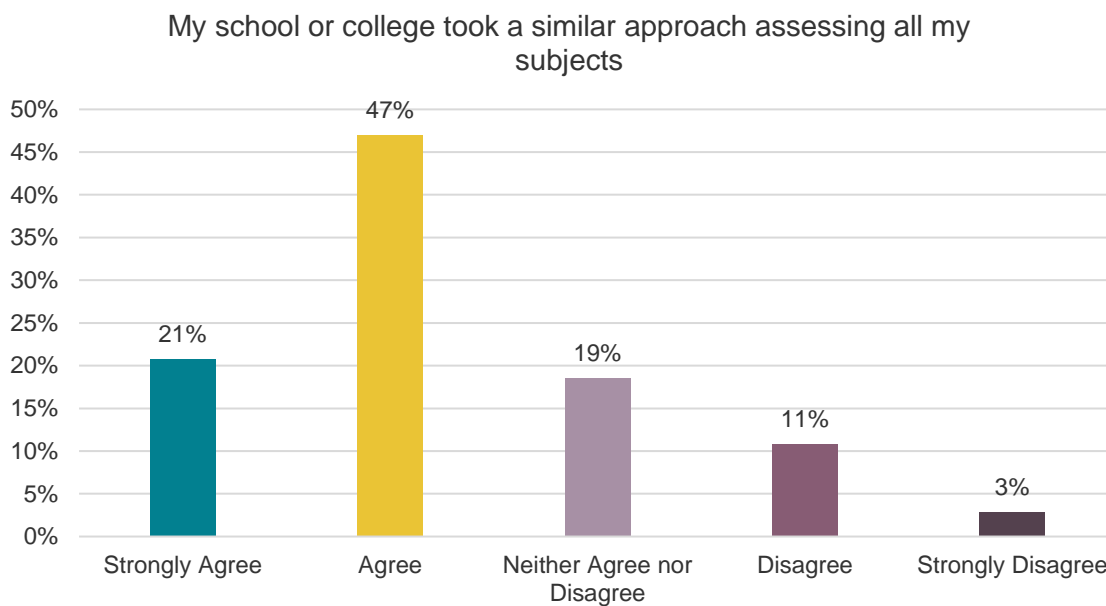
7.2 Assessment approach

Learners

Learner survey respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with a series of statements around the assessment approach taken in their centre.

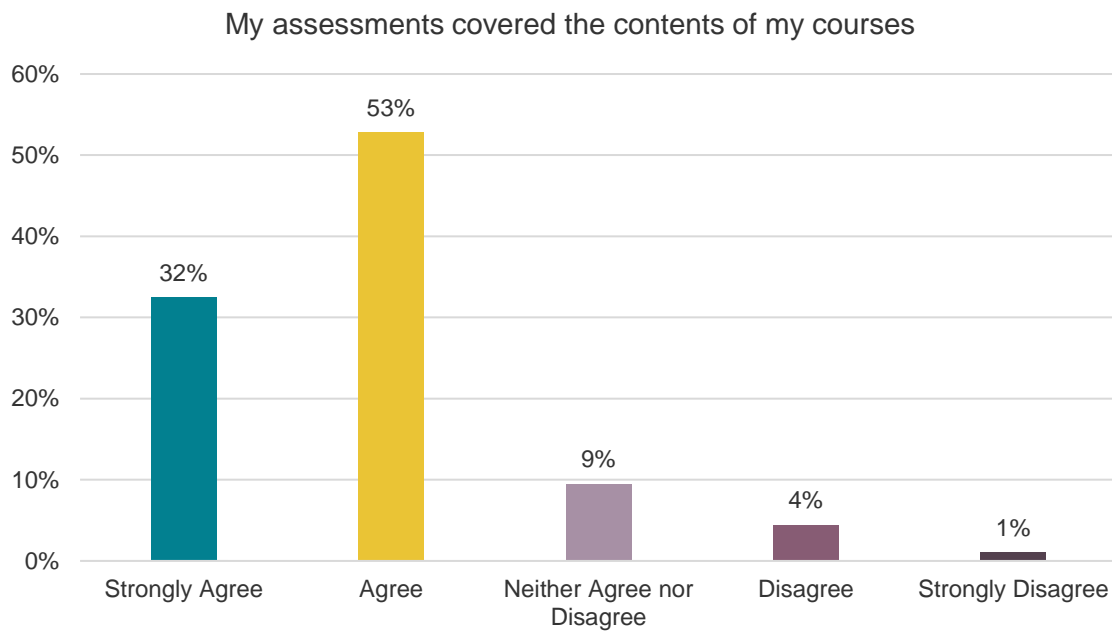
Figure 24 shows that, when asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statement *my school or college took a similar approach assessing all my subjects*, 68% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed. Only 14% disagreed or strongly disagreed and 19% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 24



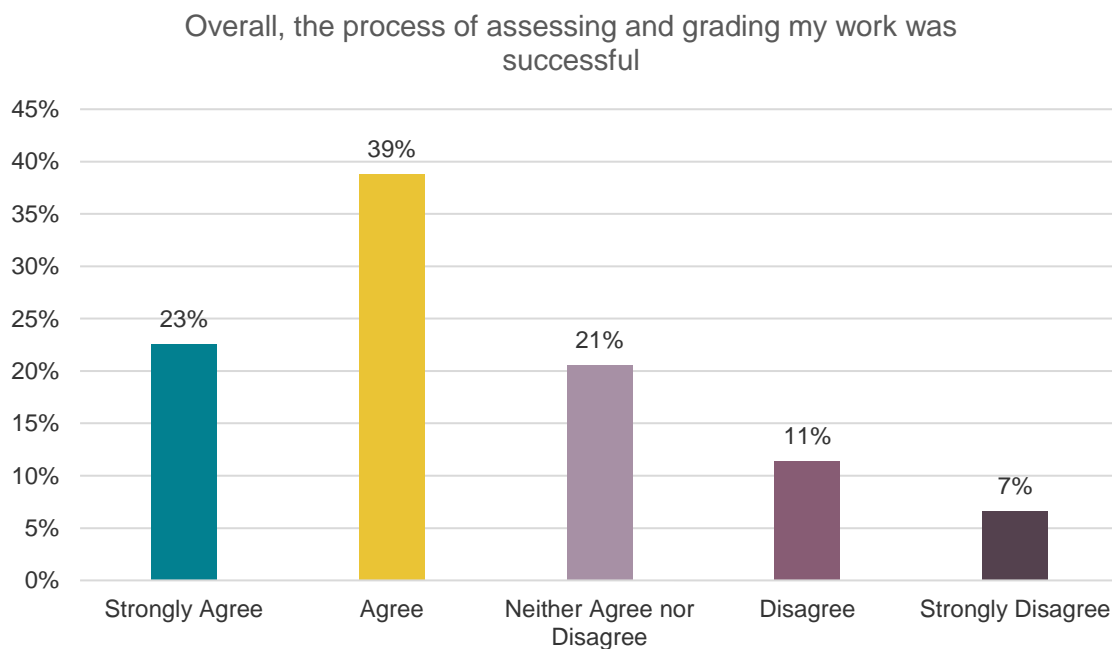
When asked to what extent they agreed with the statement *my assessments covered the contents of my courses*, 83% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed, 9% neither agreed nor disagreed, and only 5% either disagreed or strongly disagreed (Figure 25).

Figure 25



When asked to what extent they agreed with the statement *overall, the process of assessing and grading my work was successful*, 23% of respondents strongly agreed, 39% agreed, 21% neither agreed nor disagreed, 11% disagreed, and 7% strongly disagreed.

Figure 26

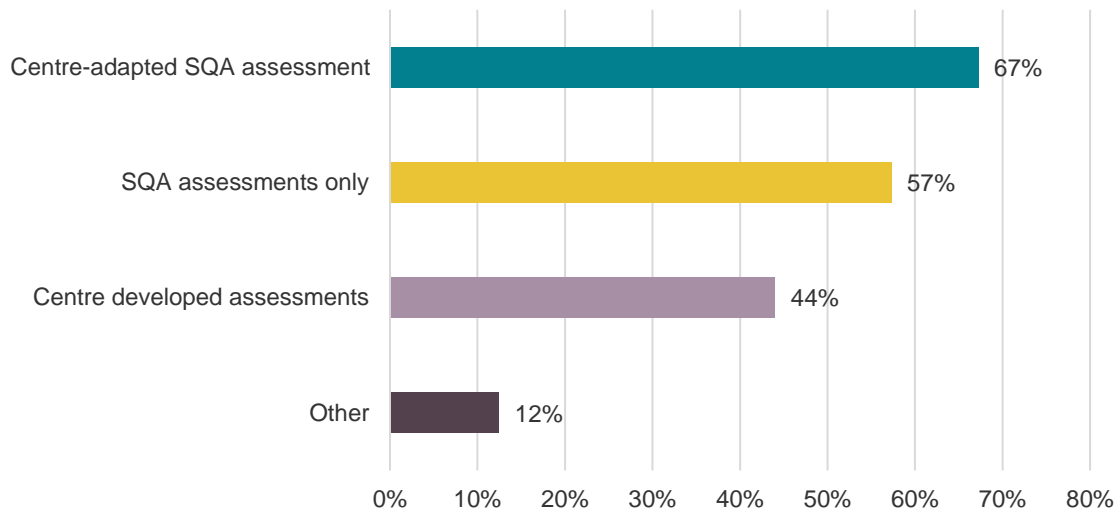


Practitioners

Practitioner survey respondents were asked how their centre had generated the evidence for learners' provisional grades.

Figure 27

How did your centre generate the evidence base for learners' provisional grades?

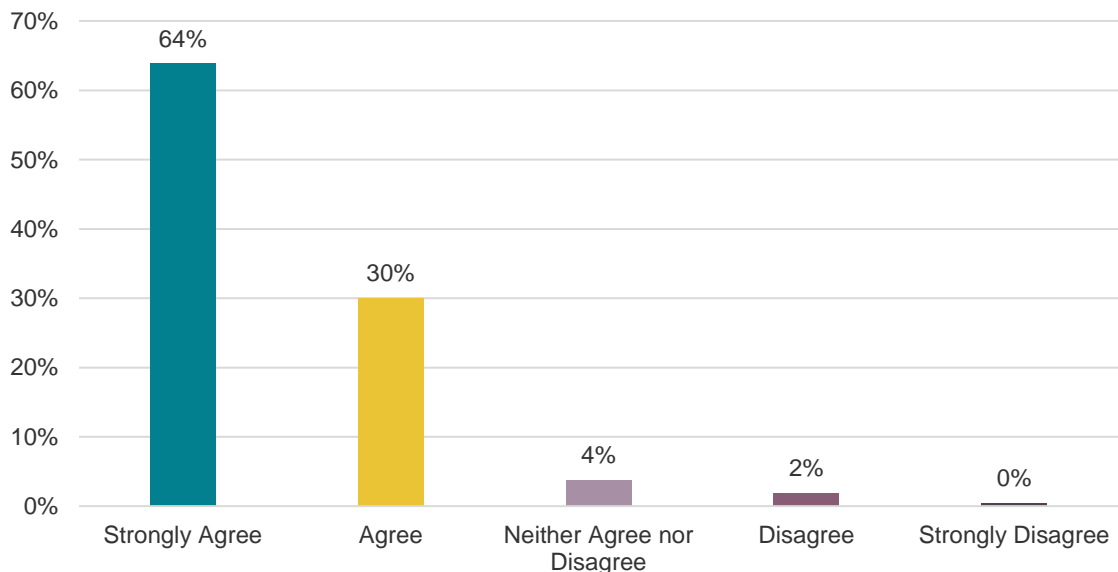


A total of 67% of respondents said that they had generated evidence through centre-adapted SQA assessments; 57% had used SQA assessments; 44% had used centre-developed assessments; and 12% said that they had used other methods.

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement *the centre-developed assessments were similar to the SQA assessments*. A total of 213 responded, with more than 90% either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. Only 2% either disagreed or strongly disagreed and 4% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 28

The centre-developed assessments were similar to the SQA assessments



Further comments were received from 26 respondents, with 18 of these from practitioners who had agreed or strongly agreed that the centre-developed assessments were similar to the SQA assessments. These respondents stated that they had worked hard to ensure that they created resources and assessments that matched SQA standards. Several said that they had used SQA past papers. Some mentioned that they had used SQA assessments but had split them into smaller chunks.

Of the responses from those who had not agreed with the statement, issues raised (generally only by one respondent each) included:

- ◆ Perceived poor quality guidance from SQA or guidance that came too late
- ◆ A variation in the quality of centre-developed assessments
- ◆ Assessments only covering a small section of the course
- ◆ An inappropriate spread of marks across topics
- ◆ A smaller range of skills assessed
- ◆ An unsuitable proportion of grade A and grade C questions
- ◆ Marking schemes not being tight enough
- ◆ A lack of security
- ◆ A lack of exam conditions
- ◆ Revision focused on specific questions

On this last point, a lecturer commented:

'The depth of knowledge that students researched to was far higher than what I would have expected from a closed-book paper.'

Practitioners were asked how their centre handled cases where learners had prolonged absences.

Figure 29

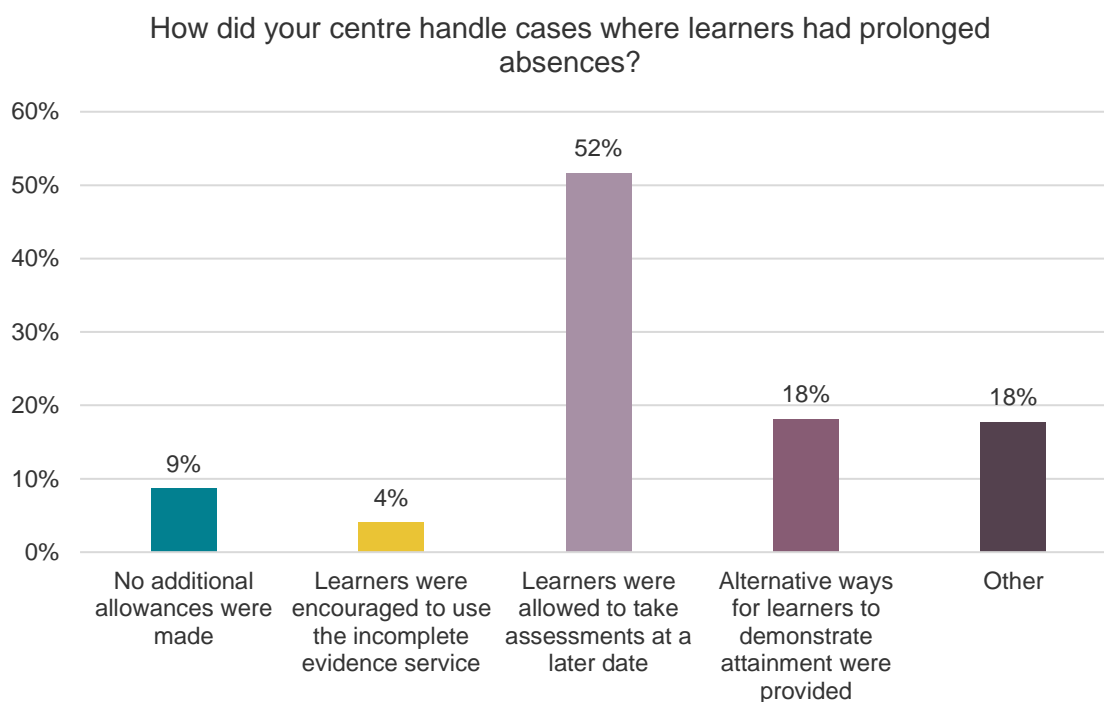


Figure 29 shows that 9% of respondents said that no additional allowances were made, 4% said that learners were encouraged to use the incomplete evidence contingency arrangement, 52% said that learners were allowed to take assessments at a later date, 18% said that alternative ways for learners to demonstrate attainment were provided, and 18% said that they had used other ways to handle this.

Those practitioners who selected ‘other’ were asked to specify the approach their centre took. A significant number of the comments were from respondents who suggested that this question was not applicable to them; they had not experienced prolonged learner absence post-lockdown.

A number of respondents suggested that they had used a combination of the approaches, depending on specific learner circumstances. A few respondents stated that learners who had needed it were offered extra teaching support. Other respondents stated that they worked with the appropriate evidence they had collected throughout the year.

‘Evidence collected at regular stages to ensure students with absence were not disadvantaged.’

While one respondent said that *‘Management made subsequent adjustments to individual grades on basis of exceptional circumstances for pupils that had recorded concerns or absence’* a number of others argued that learners without enough evidence were — or should have been — withdrawn.

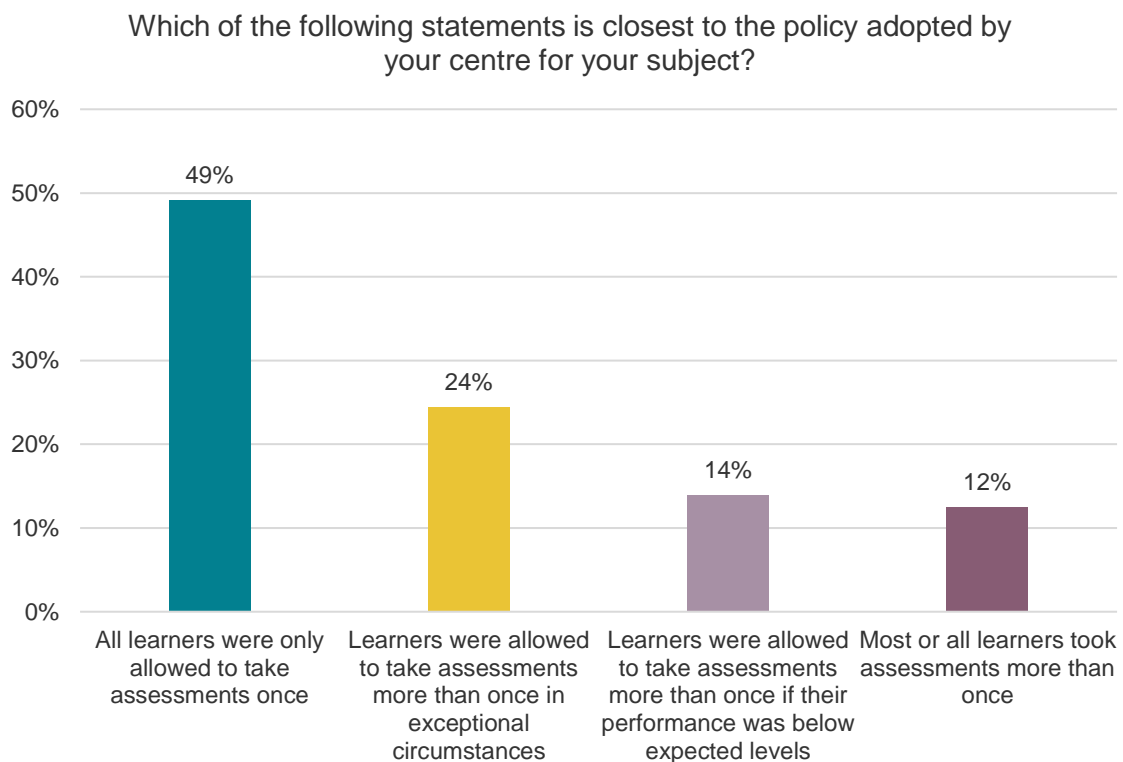
‘If pupils had long periods of absence there is no way that they could demonstrate competence across all the course they have missed out on too much and that would be the same in any SQA year.’

A couple of respondents raised concerns about the progression prospects of learners who could not evidence competence across the entire course.

Practitioners were asked about their centres' policy on the number of times learners could take assessments.

As shown in Figure 30, 49% of respondents said that, in their centre for their subject, learners were only allowed to take assessments once. On the other hand, 24% of respondents said that learners could take assessments more than once in exceptional circumstances; 14% said that learners were allowed to take assessments more than once if their performance was below expected levels; and 12% said that most or all learners took assessments more than once.

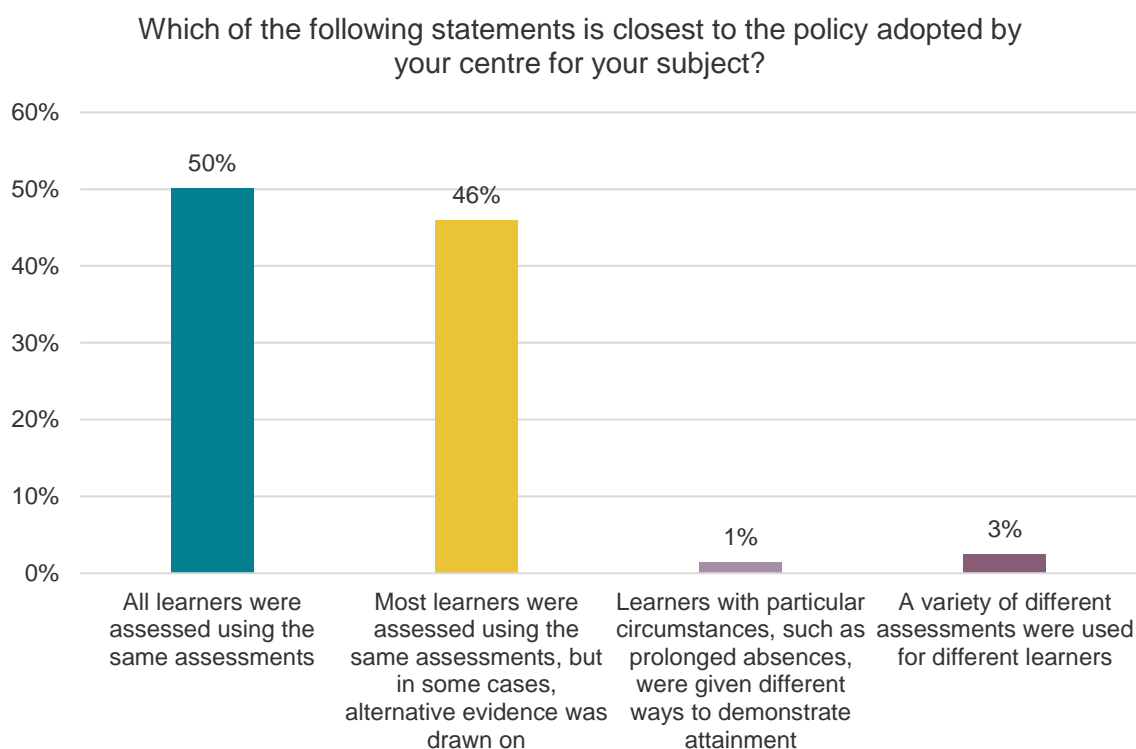
Figure 30



Respondents were asked about their centre's policy on using different types of assessments for different learners. As detailed in Figure 31, 50% of respondents stated that all learners were assessed using the same assessments and 46% said that most learners were assessed using the same assessments, but in some cases alternative evidence was drawn on.

Much smaller proportions said that learners with particular circumstances were given different ways to demonstrate achievement and a variety of different assessments were used for different learners – 1% and 3%, respectively.

Figure 31



Learner interviews

In the qualitative interviews, most learners said that all learners in their courses took the same assessments. However, some took multiple assessments and, in such cases, different assessments may have been used. Others reported taking the same assessments but at different times, and some reported taking different assessments at different times.

Most said that they were not allowed to re-take assessments, but this is confused with the idea of being able to provide multiple pieces of evidence which most did not consider as re-sitting assessments, despite often stating that the best pieces of evidence were selected.

Those who did say that re-sits were allowed gave reasons such as missing assessments or having results that were anomalous with other assessments in the same subject (it was usually implied or stated that the re-sit was allowed if results were lower than expected) but some also said that they were allowed to re-sit if the results were not in line with other evidence or the results did not represent expectations.

'If they maybe weren't feeling well that day... or if scores lower than expected, I mean a lot lower than expected, that was the only reason, I think.'

'Yes, I think you could re-sit once... a few of my friends I spoke to, they'd been doing well all year, so they had the option to redo it if they'd flunked it then they would re-sit if it was unusual for them, they had the option if they'd failed it or got a grade below what they were expecting to. There was one re-sit for each subject.'

Practitioner interviews

In interview, practitioners reported mostly using SQA provided papers, but those that had had to run assessments during classroom sessions tended to split these papers. Many also used prelims and/or made their own papers from past papers. Some used commercially bought papers as additional evidence. Some used unit assessments and other more informal assessments, but these seem to have been used as a last resort when more robust evidence was not available.

Practitioners seem to have been given different information about whether to use a more formal examination approach or wider sources of evidence.

'In science subject we weren't allowed to use class exams, but other subjects were told to use class exams.'

'It felt as if other subjects were allowed more flexibility.'

These differences in guidance seem to depend on different authorities, subject areas, and at different points in the process.

'There seemed to be miscommunication between the council and the government and maybe SQA as well. Even at the Easter holidays we were contacting SQA, and they were still saying an exam was the best evidence even while Nicola Sturgeon was on TV saying no one is sitting exams.'

During the interview, practitioners were asked to what extent teachers or lecturers were engaged in developing the assessment process for 2021 in their school or college and if they felt their thoughts and concerns were taken into account.

Many seem to have been actively engaged, not least in that many had to adapt the SQA papers, either to fit into shorter sessions or to avoid assessing material that had not been taught. Several said that the materials needed a lot of adaptation and extra quality assurance before they could be used in their contexts.

The feeling was often one more of being left to fend for themselves rather than of engagement. Many seemed to feel that decisions had been delegated and decentralised down to them. Those that shared their thoughts and concerns often phrased it in ways such as *'all hands on deck'* or fulfilling edicts passed down from their senior management team or local authority.

When asked about the assessment approach they had adopted, most interview participants said they had used SQA papers as a final exam or assessment, albeit often chunked into smaller pieces or adapted to reflect the content covered.

'We used the SQA [English] papers and we did it on three consecutive weeks because there are three elements to the paper. Other schools did it as two assessments but in terms of workload we thought that too much for us.'

'We had to adapt as it is as an evening class so we couldn't fit in the three hours that is normally ... too long to run in the session we normally run and the college was on restricted

opening. Normally we would have run it during the day on the normal exam diet but because it was exceptional circumstances, we had to run it in our normal class time which was in the evening.'

'There was no way we could do a two-hour paper as we only had 45-minute periods so we had to chunk it together in ways that made sense; there was no way you could just tell them to do part (a) and come back for part (b), it would have just been confusing, so we had to do a lot of adaptation and re-working. But it was a lot of work.'

Where a mixture of assessment materials was used there seemed to be a hierarchy of evidence, with SQA and commercial assessments being viewed as most robust, in-house assessments sat under examination conditions next, and unit tests and other assessment evidence only being used when other forms of evidence were not available.

Many of the interviewees used prelims as backup and some, but not all, used other assessment evidence available. A number were constrained by choices made pre-Christmas, the resources available, and how badly impacted they were by COVID-19. The best prepared and resourced seem to have had the ability to ensure that a raft of good robust evidence was already being collected pre-Christmas, whereas others had to rely on the May window.

'Over the course of the year they [the students] had done other assessments under timed conditions using secure papers so there were a couple of students where we would substitute those results if they'd done better.'

'We run courses that are very skills based so couldn't use the evidence generated before Christmas, [it] wasn't the standard we thought they were capable of so when they got back it was more effective for us and for them to use new generated evidence.'

Some allowed more flexibility, especially those centres in more deprived areas, whose focus seemed to be on ensuring their learners had the best possible chance to certificate.

'It [the exam] was the main one but we'd use assignments as it gave a wider display of their skills and abilities and if it was borderline an A or a B or a C we'd use previous testing...to help decide which way it was and they got pushed up a bit or whatever.'

'We had one student who had to miss the two papers, so we ended up doing a third and because of the timescales we ended up having to do an online invigilation paper as an alternative which we got permission for through our quality team. It was a fair and robust way of doing it, but we had the flexibility in those circumstances to do it for that student.'

'We had to be flexible as many of our students work and have to book off time for exams as holiday which they had done really early on but that all changed so that was an added dynamic we had to work around.'

'Certainly wasn't a one size fits all approach it was quite flexible, and we were able to work it so students who were disadvantaged received the qualifications we thought they deserved.'

Several practitioners noted that providing flexibility, either through more chances to take assessments, extra time, or other support, was particularly challenging due to time and staffing constraints caused by the pandemic.

Whether learners were allowed to re-take assessments varied a lot, depending on the centre. Several allowed no re-sits or re-sits only in exceptional circumstances, for example a learner not being able to attend an assessment. One participant said *'The [local authority] told us we weren't allowed re-sits'*, whereas others seemed to try and provide as many opportunities for learners to demonstrate their true potential as possible.

Several practitioners said re-sits were not possible due to time and resource limitations. As with the learners, most practitioners did not consider having more than one piece of assessment evidence to choose from a form of re-sit. Some allowed re-sits if the final exam result was anomalous with other evidence or replaced it with other evidence. Some allowed it after petition by parents or carers.

Principal assessor interviews

During the interviews, principal assessors reflected on the different approaches to assessment seen in the small sample of evidence they reviewed during the national quality assurance exercise. When SQA assessments were used, the standard was judged to be good and consistent with previous years. Some of the evidence submitted was of a very high quality.

However, when centres decided to use commercially produced papers or devised their own assessments, principal assessors noted a high degree of variability in the standard. It was suggested that some commercially produced papers included questions that were at an inappropriate level of demand. Moreover, some principal assessors highlighted that when SQA papers were adapted, or centres devised their own, the balance of grade A and grade C level questions was not always consistent. An example was noted in Higher Music where one centre assessed learners using a song in a foreign language, which was deemed too challenging even for Advanced Higher level.

Principal assessors also noted evidence of 'chunking' of question papers to ensure centres could timetable assessments during school or lesson times. For example, in Physics the question paper that is normally just over two hours was sometimes split into smaller assessments to ensure it could be accommodated in the timetable. It was noted that the timetabling of assessments created significant logistical challenges for centres when approached in this way.

During the interviews, several principal assessors also reflected on the course modifications and their impacts. For the most part, the modifications were successful in supporting learners by streamlining the approach to assessment and freeing up learning and teaching time.

In subjects with practical or performance elements, including Higher Music, National 5 Art and Design, and National 5 Practical Cookery, centres and candidates were able to make use of the flexibility offered by the modifications while ensuring learners were still able to demonstrate their skills, knowledge, and understanding. In the case of National 5 Art and Design, additional guidance helped to alleviate the workload for centres and learners as they

completed their portfolios. In Practical Cookery and Music, the practical and performance elements were reduced to one instrument and two dishes, respectively, without significantly compromising the validity of the assessment.

However, principal assessors suggested that the modifications did not always have the desired outcome. The removal of assessment components in some subjects impacted learners in different ways.

In Higher Physics, for example, the removal of the assignment means that many candidates will not have any experience of handling apparatus during their senior phase education. Furthermore, some principal assessors thought that the introduction of optionality in question papers did not always have a positive impact for learners in the context of the pandemic. For National 5 Art and Design, it was suggested that optionality introduced flexibility and increased choice for learners. However, in the case of Higher Mathematics, the principal assessor thought that there was some evidence to suggest that the use of optionality decreased choice for some candidates in centres that chose to focus learning and teaching on specific areas, rather than covering the full course. The principal assessor stated that question papers in Mathematics are designed to assess the entire course and the full range of skills, knowledge, and understanding; it was suggested that when centres took a different approach, this resulted in a lack of consistency and a degree of inequity between candidates.

In general, principal assessors believed that most centres did the best they could in extremely challenging circumstances. Ensuring assessments were reliable and fair and carried out in a COVID-safe environment created significant workload for centre staff and placed the whole system under immense pressure. In the small number of instances where an issue was identified, subject teams provided support to the centre when appropriate. In some of these cases, it was due to the centre being new.

7.3 Similarities and differences within and across centres

In interview, learners were asked if their experience was similar to that of friends who had studied different subjects. Responses varied, depending on how different departments approached the ACM.

‘Similar across the board even comparing sciences or arts it was pretty similar.’

Learners were also asked about their experiences compared to friends at different schools or colleges. Again, there was a varied picture here. Learners seemed to think it depended on the resources available to the centre, with some mentioning friends who had either had less support or had not been given as good a chance to demonstrate their ability.

‘They did the exact same thing; some even sat the exact same papers. Friends in other schools, they did things more spread out – like one paper one day and another a week later but it was pretty similar... Some knew more of the course content that would be assessed and others just the paper coming up but pretty similar.’

8 Workload and stress

8.1 Workload and stress for learners

Learner survey respondents were asked about how they thought their workload under the ACM would compare to a regular year with a full exam diet. They were also asked the extent to which the stress levels of the assessment process in 2020–21 would compare to a regular year where a full exam diet ran.

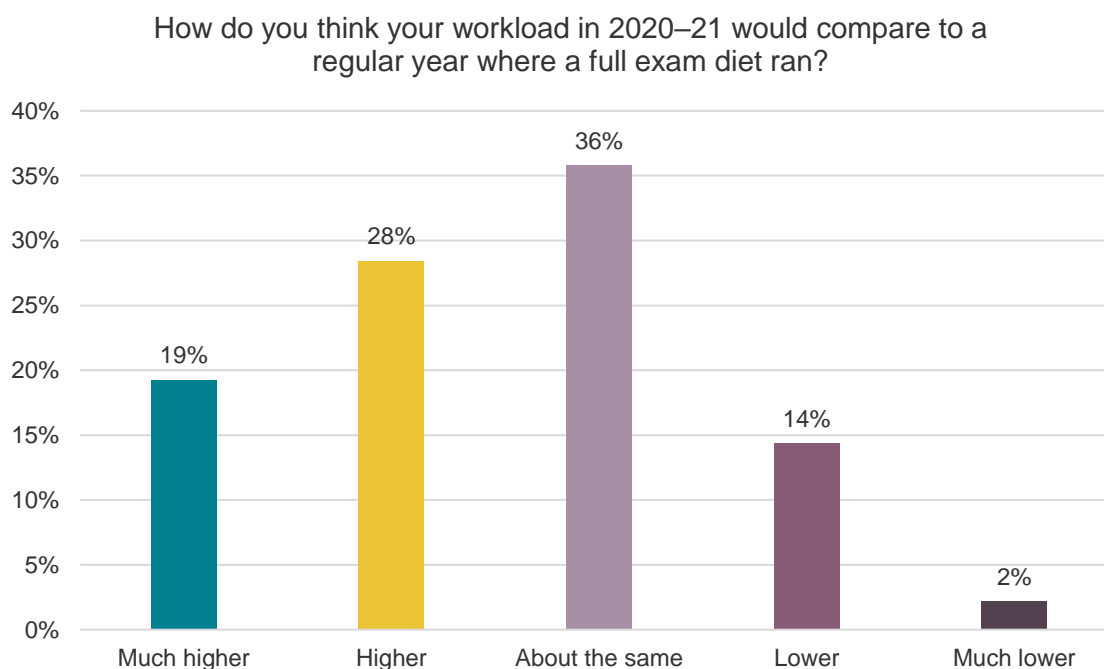
As mentioned in the introduction, it should be borne in mind that many learners expressing views on how their assessment process compared to a normal exam diet may not have experienced such an exam diet before, as both the 2020 and 2021 diets were disrupted, and so will have answered on their perceptions of an SQA exam diet, rather than their experience of it, necessarily.

Moreover, in questions about workload and stress, it can be difficult to separate out the distinct elements that influence respondents' answers. It is likely that the wider effects of the pandemic, the experience of lockdown, the assessment process of the ACM, and the differing demand of qualifications at different levels are all contributing factors, to some degree.

Workload

Learner survey respondents were asked the extent to which they felt their workload in 2020–21 would have compared to a regular year where a full exam diet ran. They were also asked to provide examples. Though learners in S4 and S5 would be unlikely to have had experience of a full exam diet, their results were not markedly different from those in S6 for this question.

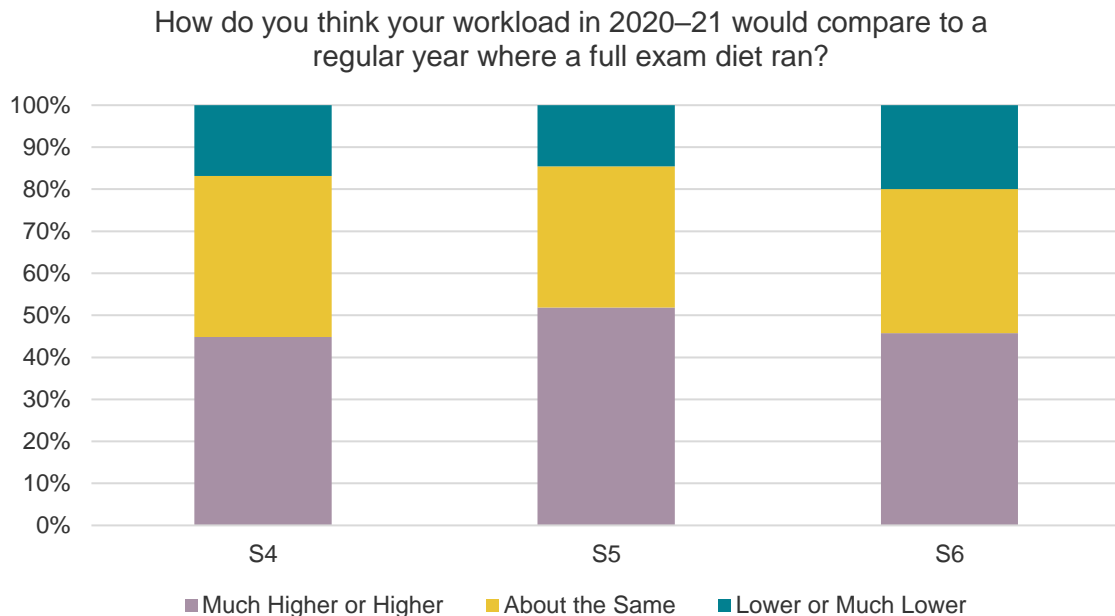
Figure 32



Of the 1,199 respondents who answered this question, 47% said their workload was either much higher or higher than a regular year, 36% felt it was about the same, and 16% said it was lower or much lower.

Responses to this question from school learners were then further analysed by the respondents' school stage. This is shown in Figure 33.

Figure 33



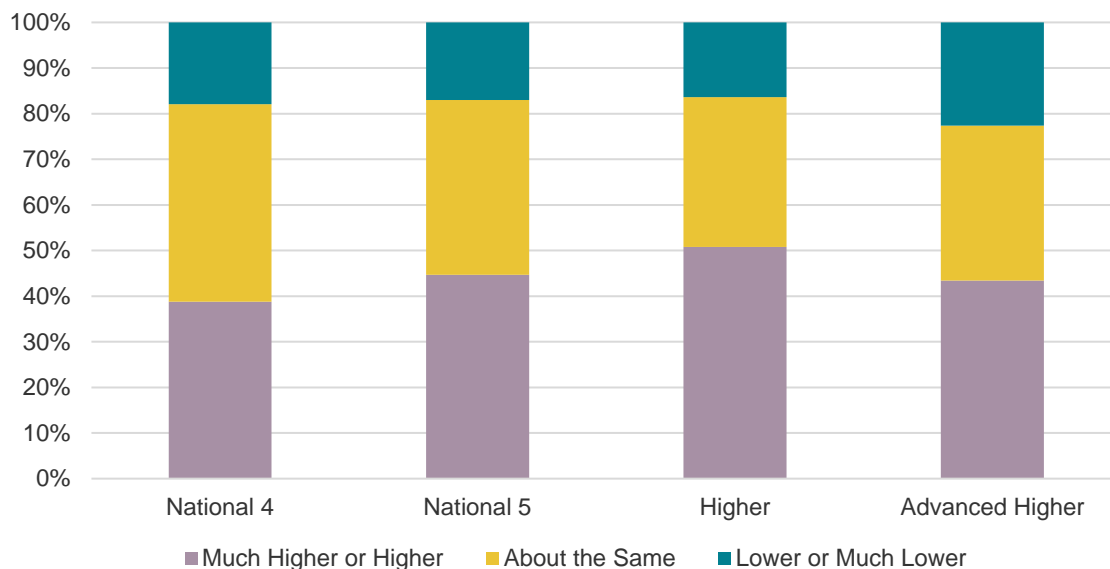
There were few differences in respondents' views depending on their school stage.

- ◆ 45% of S4 learners thought that the ACM workload was higher or much higher than in a regular year, while 52% of S5 learners and 46% of S6 learners thought the same
- ◆ 38% of S4 learners thought the ACM workload was about the same as in a regular year and 34% each of S5 learners and S6 learners thought the same
- ◆ 17% of S4 learners thought the ACM workload was lower or much lower than in a regular year, compared to 15% of S5 learners and 20% of S6 learners

Responses were also analysed by the qualification level that learners studied at in 2020–21. These are shown in Figure 34.

Figure 34

How do you think your workload in 2020–21 would compare to a regular year where a full exam diet ran?



39% of those taking National 4 thought that their 2020–21 workload was higher or much higher than in a regular year, as did 45% of those taking National 5, 50% of those taking Higher, and 43% of those taking Advanced Higher.

43% of those taking National 4 thought that their 2020–21 workload was about the same as in a regular year, as did 38% of those taking National 5, 33% of those taking Higher, and 34% of those taking Advanced Higher.

18% of those taking National 4 thought that their 2020–21 workload was lower or much lower than in a regular year, as did 17% of those taking National 5, 16% of those taking Higher, and 23% of those taking Advanced Higher.

Over 300 respondents provided examples relating to their perception that the workload in 2020–21 was higher or much higher than in a regular year. A small number of respondents who thought the workload was 'about the same' also provided comments and these were included in the analysis too.

The main themes emerging from the comments were:

- ◆ Respondents reported a high and stressful workload.
- ◆ Learners felt that teaching was rushed and courses were not always covered sufficiently.
- ◆ Respondents complained about the number of assessments throughout the year and the perceived unnecessary stress these caused.
- ◆ There was uncertainty surrounding the assessment arrangements.
- ◆ Respondents had a range of concerns about the scheduling of assessments.
- ◆ Learners did not have enough time to study, particularly as there was no study leave.

- ◆ Learners felt that they had to teach themselves large parts of their course, due to the impact of lockdown.
- ◆ Online learning was challenging for many respondents.

A number of respondents reported an extremely high workload made up of coursework, homework, revision, and constant assessments throughout the year. This was on top of attending classes, in person or online, and undertaking end-of-year assessments.

Many respondents found that courses were crammed into a short period of time and were covered at a fast pace, so they were always trying to catch up with work. This was often due to having lots of assessments to prepare for, being given short notice of assessments, and disrupted learning as a result of lockdown or other COVID-19-related reasons.

Learners reported having to revisit course content covered during lockdown, when there was no face-to-face teaching, because some found it difficult to learn at home or did not feel the content had been covered sufficiently. A number of respondents also stated that the workload given to them during lockdown was greater than if they had been attending their centre.

Many learners experienced stress due to workload, frequent assessments, and assessment uncertainties. Some highlighted the negative impact on their mental health, physical health, or lifestyle.

'I had a at least one test per day for the whole of May except for two days and most of these days I had two or three assessments. This was far too much work and stress and resulted in me becoming ill and even losing 5kg of weight.'

Many learners complained about the number of assessments they had to complete throughout the year, and felt under pressure to revise and perform at a consistently high level due to uncertainty about the timing and approach to assessments.

'Work was consistently pressured throughout the year, as we had no idea which assessments would be used as evidence, or when exams would actually take place, and how many exams we would have to sit in each subject.'

However, a small number of respondents made positive comments about the ongoing assessments, particularly in terms of the beneficial impact on their study habits and grades.

The scheduling of assessments was criticised by many learners. Responses often did not differentiate between ongoing assessments and end-of-year assessments; however, several issues were raised:

- ◆ there were too many assessments, especially having end-of-year assessments after other assessments throughout the year
- ◆ there was short notice of assessments, leaving little time to prepare
- ◆ assessments were too close together which meant having to prepare for them at the same time
- ◆ assessments took place during lesson time

- ◆ some learners had more than one assessment on the same day

Learners commented on not having enough study time due to the number and scheduling of end-of-year assessments, while some respondents were still learning the course content right up until the end-of-year assessments. In addition, there was no designated study leave, which is available in regular years, so learners were completing end-of-year assessments while also attending lessons.

Many respondents conveyed difficulties and dissatisfaction with the nature of the teaching and learning process, particularly during periods of online learning due to lockdown or other COVID-19-related reasons. One of the notable responses was that learners had to teach themselves large parts of their course. They found it harder and more time consuming to complete work at home, with minimal face-to-face teacher or lecturer support. Some learners commented that the online teaching and support they received was insufficient and inconsistent, and the workload issued was too high.

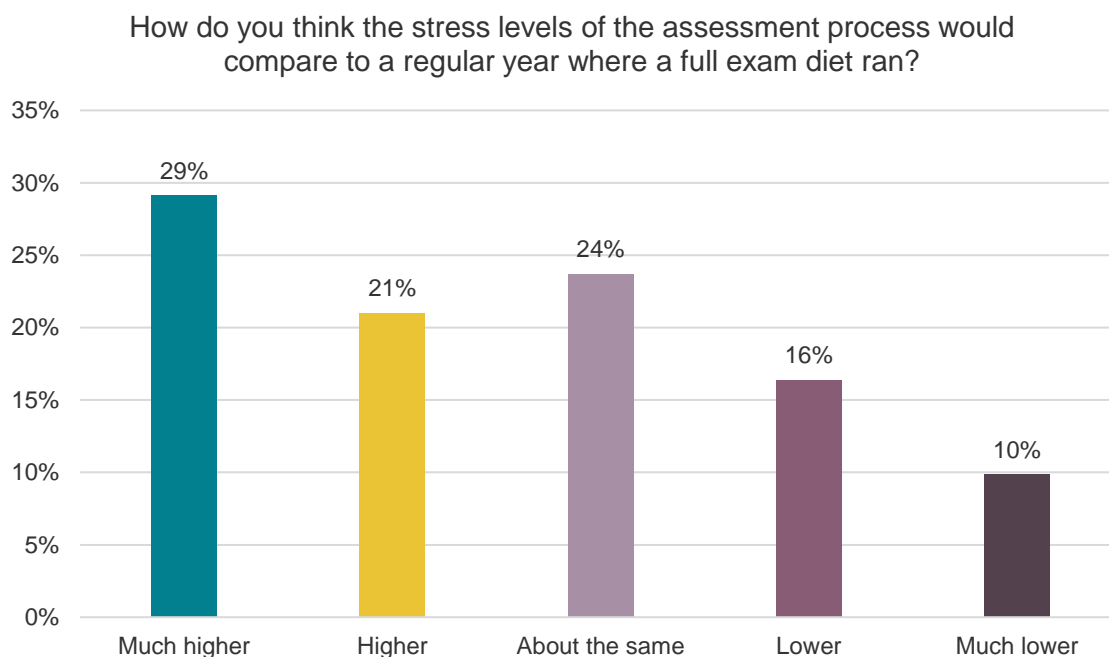
'Face-to-face video lessons were a rarity during my home learning, and while teachers were accessible via email, reading a worksheet/slideshow as opposed to having someone explain the work to you meant that the time spent to fully grasp each topic was considerably longer.'

A number of learners were critical of the teaching they experienced in general, stating that the course was rushed, they were not taught all the course content required to prepare them for the assessments, and, again, the workload was too high.

Stress

Learner survey respondents were asked the extent to which they felt stress levels in the assessment process in 2020–21 would have compared to a regular year with a full exam diet. They were also asked to provide examples. S4 learners, who had had least exposure to a regular exam diet, were more likely than S5 and S6 learners to think that the 2021 ACM was a less stressful experience than they imagined a full exam diet to be. Both S5 and S6 learners were much more likely to feel that stress levels were higher during the ACM.

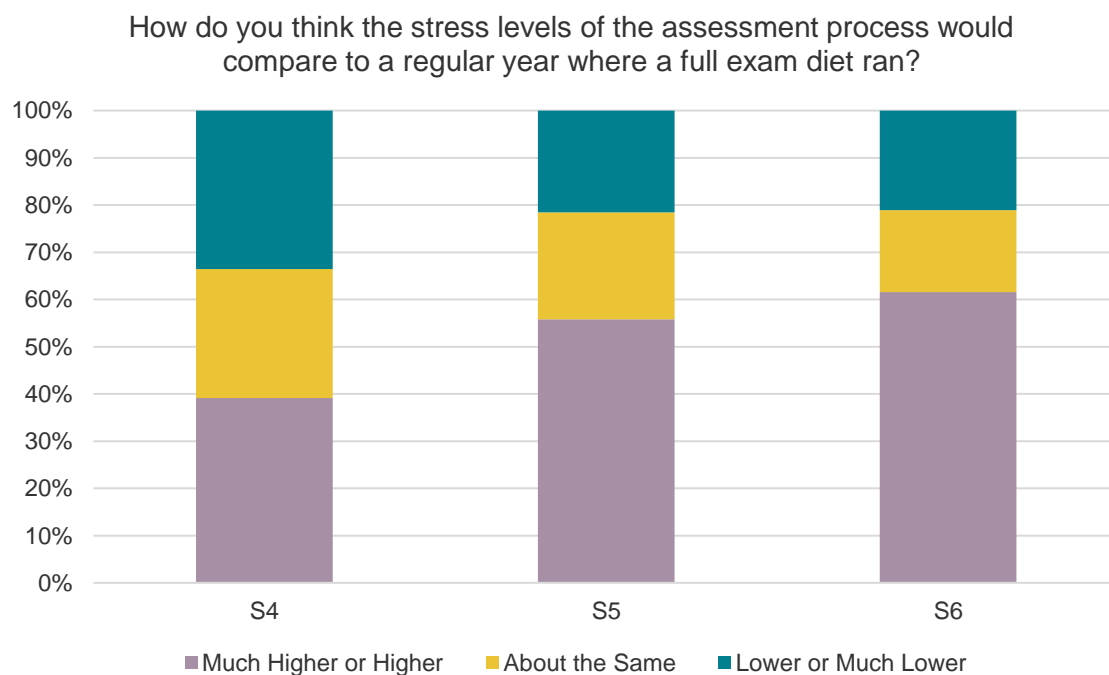
Figure 35



Of the 1,199 respondents who answered this question, 50% said their stress levels were either much higher or higher than in a regular year, 24% felt stress levels were about the same, and 26% felt they were either lower or much lower.

Responses to this question from school learners were then further analysed by the respondents' school stage. This is shown in Figure 36.

Figure 36

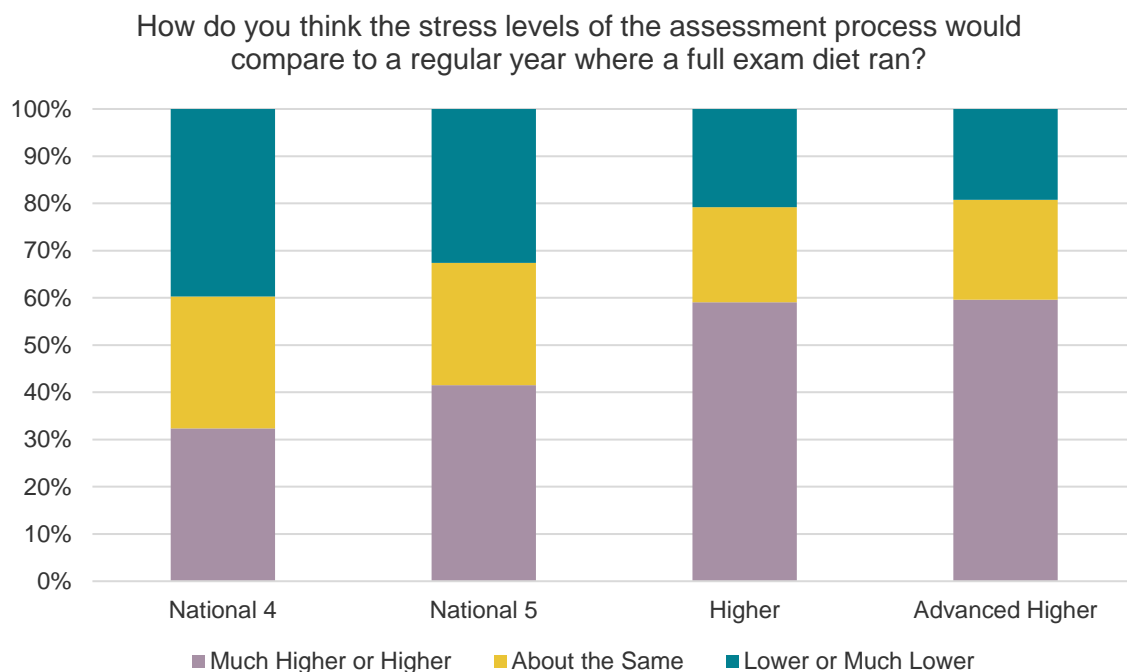


There were differences here with how stressful learners perceived the ACM assessment process to be compared to a regular year, depending on their school year.

- ◆ While 39% of S4 learners suggested that the stress levels of the 2021 assessment process were higher or much higher than in a regular year, this rose to 56% of S5 learners and 62% of S6 learners.
- ◆ On the other hand, 34% of S4 learners thought that the stress levels associated with the 2021 assessment process were lower or much lower than in a regular year, compared to 22% of S5 learners and 21% of S6 learners.
- ◆ 27% of S4 learners thought the stress levels of the ACM process were about the same as in a regular year, compared to 23% of S5 learners and only 17% of S6 learners.

Responses related to perceived stress compared to a regular year where a full exam diet ran were also analysed by the qualification level that learners studied at in 2020–21. These are shown in Figure 37.

Figure 37



There are differences in how stressful learners perceived the ACM assessment process to be compared to a regular year, depending on their level of study.

- ◆ While 32% of those taking National 4 thought stress levels were higher or much higher in 2021 compared to in a regular year, this rose to 41% of those taking National 5, 59% of those taking Higher, and 60% of those taking Advanced Higher.
- ◆ Conversely, 40% of those taking National 4 thought stress levels were lower or much lower in 2021 compared to a regular year, falling to 33% of those taking National 5, 21% of those taking Higher, and 19% of those taking Advanced Higher.
- ◆ While 28% of those taking National 4 thought that the stress levels of the assessment process in 2021 were about the same as in a regular year and 27% of those taking

National 5 thought the same, this fell to 20% of those taking Higher and 21% of those taking Advanced Higher.

Nearly 400 respondents provided examples relating to their perception that the stress levels of the assessment process in 2020–21 were higher or much higher than in a regular year. A small number of respondents who thought stress levels were 'about the same' also provided comments and these were included in the analysis too.

Many of the issues raised here were similar to those relating to workload, above. However, the main themes emerging from the question about stress related to uncertainty:

- ◆ Respondents reported significant uncertainty surrounding the assessment process generally and more specifically regarding the scheduling of assessments, grading, and evidence.
- ◆ Information about the assessment process was thought to be constantly changing and often perceived to be provided at the last minute.
- ◆ Respondents complained about the number of assessments throughout the year and the constant pressure they were under to perform well in these assessments.
- ◆ Assessments were scheduled at short notice and too closely together, leaving little study time.
- ◆ Online learning and the lack of face-to-face teaching was challenging for many respondents.

Many respondents reported a great deal of uncertainty surrounding the assessment process, which caused high levels of stress. Some learners were uncertain about the process generally, often stating that nobody knew what was happening or the information from different sources was contradictory. SQA in particular was criticised for not providing clear and consistent information.

More specifically, learners complained that they did not know if or when assessments were taking place, how grades would be calculated, or what evidence would be counted. In terms of the arrangements, respondents reported that information tended to be provided at the last minute and plans were constantly changing.

'The general vagueness surrounding when and how we would be assessed left me feeling anxious and uncertain about whether I would be able to achieve my full potential.'

The high workload was another significant source of stress for respondents, particularly the volume of assessments which learners stated were constant. Some also highlighted time pressures, specifically a lack of time to process course content or prepare for assessments.

'In 9 weeks I did over 17 assessments or exams giving little time to study for more than the assessment that would come the following day.'

Respondents felt under constant pressure to perform well given their perception that assessments could inform final grades.

'Constant pressure to do well in all unit tests from the beginning became overwhelming, as you felt you had no breaks.'

Besides the volume of assessments, learners also frequently complained about assessments being scheduled at short notice and too closely together, with some having more than one assessment on the same day. This left little time to study effectively, and learners felt consumed by the process, particularly as there was no study leave.

'My school ran an exam block of prelims (2-3 assessments per subject) and then exams (2-3 assessments per subject) within the space of just over a month without exam leave so our entire lives were consumed by either sitting assessments or studying for them.'

Some learners reported stress as a result of the teaching and learning process, due to difficulties associated with online learning and a lack of face-to-face teaching and support.

'I felt lost as the online work wasn't as effective as it would have been face-to-face.'

Several respondents mentioned concerns about fairness in terms of differences between centres. It was noted that assessment conditions, assessment dates, and clarity of information differed between centres.

Other factors were mentioned by a few respondents as contributing to high levels of stress. Some related to COVID-19 such as missing learning due to isolation periods or general stress due to the pandemic. Fearing failure, feeling isolated, and not having opportunities to relax were also cited.

Learner interviews

In interview, learners were asked the extent to which they felt the assessment process had been more or less stressful than sitting a normal exam diet. They were asked to expand on their answer and asked if the process had had any impact of their mental health.

Most thought that the ACM approach was less stressful as it took the focus away from a single high-stakes exam, which they perceived to be the alternative. Many thought a single, high-stakes examination unfair and not always a fair reflection on their ability. Those who thought the ACM was a fairer approach gave reasons such as it allowed more focused revision for smaller chunks and gave reassurance that they had other results to fall back on. That said, they also said that, although overall stress was less, it lasted longer, which was an issue. Some said that the lack of clarity and general uncertainty of what was happening led to additional stress.

'We were told it was going to be like a class unit test or whatever, then it was going to be in a double slot like an exam, do half in one double period then the second in another double period, and it's like that's fine then in April it changed and we were told it was going to be done a different way and none of us had any clue how things would be done, when it was happening how it was happening what was being sent away.'

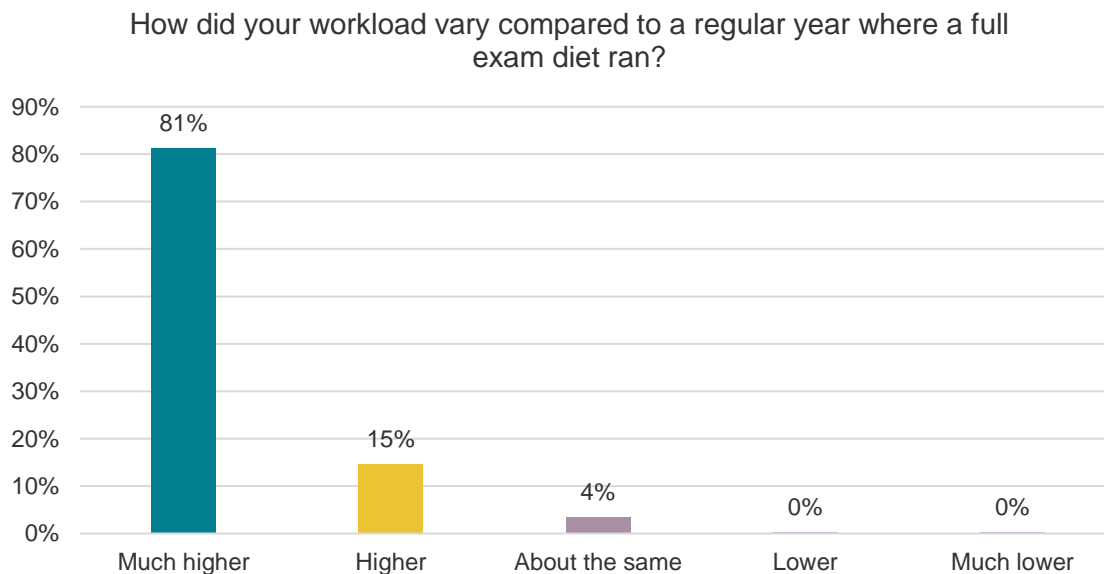
'I personally did enjoy it as for me it took off a lot of the stress of having this one specific exam that determined everything. It gave me a sense of ease that I probably hadn't had

previously. it gave me a chance to relax and not totally stress out and almost ruin my mental health. It helped keep me on track and stabilise me through a hard time with COVID and everything.'

8.2 Workload for practitioners

Practitioner survey respondents were asked the extent to which their workload had varied compared to a regular year when a full exam diet ran.

Figure 38



A total of 481 respondents rated whether, in 2021, their workload was much lower, lower, about the same, higher, or much higher than in a year with a regular exam diet. Overwhelmingly, (81%) respondents suggested that their workload in 2021 was much higher than usual. While 15% thought it was higher and 4% about the same, only one respondent each thought that their workload was lower or much lower than in a regular year. Some 330 respondents submitted further comments on workload. More than two-thirds of those mentioned the marking burden of the ACM. The point was repeatedly made that while teachers and lecturers would ordinarily mark prelims and other assessments, the significant increase in marking associated with the ACM was due to assessments that would have been externally marked being marked internally instead.

'The level of marking required was much, much, much higher and took much longer and I spent much more time going over each answer and paper to ensure that I was completely happy that standards were applied as these were going to decide the actual grade.'

Furthermore, a large majority of respondents also mentioned the various quality assurance procedures of the ACM as contributing to a much higher workload. This quality assurance included cross-marking, verification, and moderation, both internally within centres and externally across centres and local authorities. Some respondents also mentioned SQA selections for quality assurance.

The increased quality assurance load was deemed useful – while onerous – to some respondents, but excessive to others. There was a feeling that the in-service days set aside for the purposes of quality assurance, while essential, were not adequate to cover the work required.

A large number of respondents stated that development of assessments increased workload substantially and took up a great deal of time. Practitioners spent time generating assessments by either creating new ones or adapting existing ones, including splitting up SQA assessments into smaller ones that could be accommodated in class time.

'Assessments had to be made or adapted and then checked several times. Multiple assessment models had to be devised to meet circumstances that changed daily.'

Accompanying the creation and development of assessments, several respondents mentioned the work and processes required on agreeing grade boundaries and cut-off scores, followed by the allocation of grades. Equally, a few respondents specifically mentioned workload related to marking schemes, with a couple stating that SQA's marking instructions required further fleshing out.

Respondents also noted the time taken up with the scheduling and running of assessments, particularly in centres where prelims and end-of-year assessments took place back-to-back. Similarly, a number of respondents mentioned the time taken up invigilating assessments.

Another common theme was the extra workload associated with gathering evidence. In general, throughout the year, there was more emphasis on generating evidence and ensuring that this was robust.

'You have to keep assessing to gather evidence and that's what we did, over and over again, instead of just once.'

A few respondents also highlighted that they had spent much more time in 2021 providing feedback to learners.

Several respondents pointed out that there was no study leave in 2021. This meant that a full timetable was still in place and there was no reduction in contact time. This increased workload was then felt to have had a knock-on effect, both in terms of practitioners needing to complete development work in their own time and holidays and the negative impact on broad general education (BGE) learners.

'We lost out on crucial departmental development time because of this and our BGE pupils suffered greatly.'

Many respondents called attention to the wider challenges to learning and teaching during COVID-19 lockdowns. Remote and blended learning, particularly the creation of suitable online resources, were deemed to have been resource intensive and difficult. Moreover, many respondents had had to provide extra support to learners who had been absent at different stages.

A few respondents mentioned issues with staffing causing extra work, be this the need to support more inexperienced staff or problems caused by staff absences.

The administration of the ACM was linked to increased workload by several respondents. This included: the many extra meetings that respondents had to attend; the required training and reading of guidance and documentation; reviewing historical data; drawing up various processes; increased paperwork; and processing data. A number of respondents also suggested that they had spent more time dealing with enquiries from parents and carers.

It was repeatedly pointed out that the extra work that practitioners were required to do as part of the 2021 ACM would normally have been undertaken by SQA. Practitioners, who had no desire to become markers and had not received SQA training, were now responsible for all aspects of the assessment process.

'In a regular year the SQA pay markers to fully mark and moderate the scripts of candidates. They also pay people to input and record these results and then distribute these results to candidates.'

Related to this, several respondents suggested that the £400 compensation that they had received was derisory and would amount to substantially less than minimum wage when compared to the extra work the ACM had incurred for practitioners.

A good number of respondents argued that the significantly increased workload in 2021 was difficult and stressful (*'almost unmanageable'*, *'virtually unworkable'*) and expressed the hope that the system would not be used again. Indeed, more than one stated that the experience had made them question their continued involvement in the teaching profession.

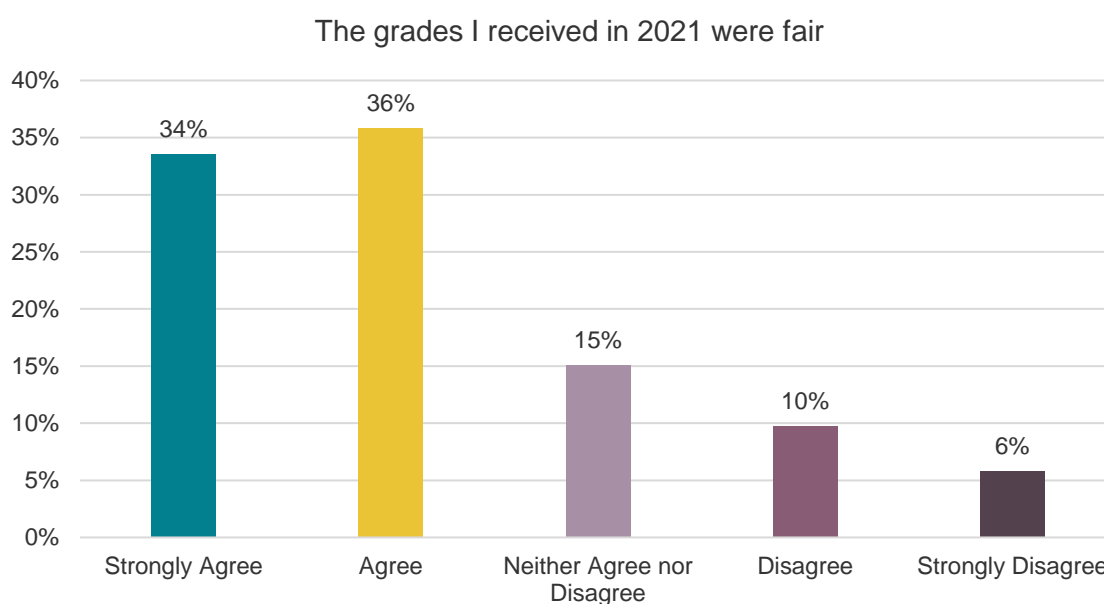
9 Grading

9.1 Fairness

Learners

Learner survey respondents were asked to what extent they agreed that the grades they received in 2021 were fair.

Figure 39



Of the 1,209 respondents to this question, 69% of learners agreed or strongly agreed that the grades they received in 2021 were fair, 16% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were fair, and 15% neither agreed nor disagreed.

A number of themes emerged in the responses to this question, many of which are interconnected.

The issue highlighted most frequently by respondents related to the local implementation of summative assessments in centres. Concerns were raised about the timings of these assessments with a large number of respondents commenting that they felt these assessments were rushed, often arranged back-to-back, and implemented at short notice, leaving little time to prepare.

Some respondents stated that they had been initially informed by their school or college that there would be no exams and so were completely unprepared when their centre subsequently implemented assessments which they felt were simply '*exams by another name*'.

Some learners commented directly that they had received no prelims and/or study leave, leading to a lack of revision which negatively impacted their performance, resulting in grades which were not an accurate reflection of their true ability.

'I was given 1 sometimes 2 exams a day for two weeks where I was given only two weeks' notice for. The exams that took place this year were an extremely unfair reflection of my capabilities.'

With regard to the administration of end-of-year assessments, a number of respondents commented that they faced distractions which unfairly impacted on their performance, such as talking in the classroom during assessments.

This particular theme relates to a perception of inequity in assessment practice across different centres, which, it was felt, led to unfairness. Responses indicate that in some centres, learners were granted multiple attempts at assessments via re-sits, while in other centres this practice did not occur. In addition, some learners stated they had been given only closed-book assessments but were aware that learners in other centres were sitting open-book assessments, resulting in an inconsistency in assessment conditions, giving some learners an unfair advantage.

'The grading was not consistent as pupils in other areas had an unfair advantage because they were allowed to have more than one go at each type of paper and to submit the best results. We are now all competing for places at university and we have all had different approaches to grading and this is unfair when it is supposed to be a national system of grading.'

With regard to unfairness, many respondents commented specifically on the secure assessment resources produced by SQA that were leaked and shared on social media. This was felt to be particularly unfair as such 'cheating' gave some students an unfair advantage over others.

'The lack of cheat prevention meant a large group of people went into their assessments with prior knowledge of the test.'

This inequality in assessment practice impacted most on those respondents that commented that the results of their end-of-year assessments were unfairly used by their centre as the sole basis for determining their grade, which contradicted what they had previously been told, namely that the evidence they produced throughout the year would be used to estimate their grade. This was felt by many to be particularly unfair.

'Was told there would not be a final exam and that if there was a final exam my grades would not be determined by it, but by work throughout the year. This didn't happen and I was given grades from the final exam which were an unfair reflection of the work I did throughout the year.'

Related specifically to estimated grades, some respondents made comments regarding perceptions of unfair teacher or lecturer bias and overly harsh marking, resulting in inconsistency and inequality across subjects and learners.

Many respondents who felt that the grades they were awarded were unfair felt that they were not a true representation of their ability. A number of reasons were presented for this, some related to those aspects of inequality and variations in assessment practice already discussed above and others related directly to the content of the assessments, the course coverage taught, loss of learning, and lack of face-to-face teaching time.

'I didn't get the correct teaching to be able to pass the exam.'

'I feel the grades that I received wasn't fair as I feel that the course didn't cover enough information for the tests and exam.'

A lack of face-to-face teaching was highlighted by a number of respondents who commented particularly on the issues they faced with online learning. Issues associated with online learning included negative impacts on motivation, difficulties adjusting to online learning and self-directed study, a lack of online resources, distractions in the home environment, a lack of teacher or lecturer support, inadequate course coverage, and increased stress. Some learners studying practical subjects found online learning particularly challenging, given the nature of these subjects and the associated knowledge and skills required.

'Everything was taught at home and considering we have lived by a schedule for most of our life at school being shoved into self-planning my day and teaching myself content was extremely difficult, especially when I was coping with self-isolation and many of my peers felt the same.'

Increased stress was also a factor highlighted by many respondents relating to the health and mental health impacts of COVID-19, such as depression, increased isolation, illness, increased learner and practitioner absences, and family related disruption at home. Many respondents commented that the end-of-year assessments were also a significant source of increased stress.

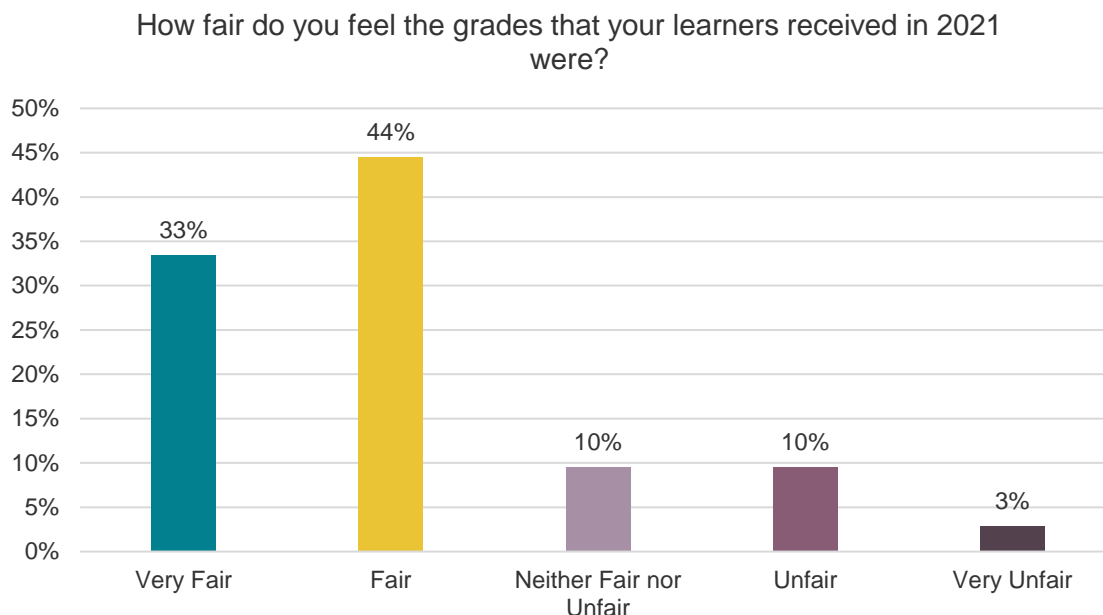
'Being sent home for 4 plus weeks and then having to teach myself half of the course was just stressful and unfair. Online school was terrible, and I was not confident about any of my subjects all year neither did I get the support I needed. I was put in a place where I had to do everything by myself with my mental health going downhill more and more.'

It should be noted that, additionally, a small number of respondents identified the appeals process as a source of unfairness, either because they were discouraged from submitting appeals by their centre or did not receive a grade change as the result of an appeal submitted on their behalf, due to a lack of sufficient evidence.

Practitioners

As with learners, practitioner survey respondents were asked how fair they felt the grades their learners received in 2021 were.

Figure 40



Of the 481 respondents to this question, 77% thought that the grades that their learners received in 2021 were either very fair or fair. On the other hand, 13% thought that the grades were unfair or very unfair. 10% thought that they were neither fair nor unfair.

More than a hundred comments were submitted here. Several respondents re-iterated that they believed their learners' grades had been fair and stated that they had worked hard to ensure this.

'I feel strongly that our pupils achieved very close to the same marks they would have in a normal assessment year.'

'I feel that our assessments overall in our own school were fair. We worked hard to ensure that pupils earned the grades that they deserved from the evidence produced.'

However, even some of those who thought that their learners' grades had been fair emphasised that this was within the context of 2021; the process was not comparable to previous years and results were not comparable to previous cohorts' results.

While there was a recognition that some learners had benefitted from the ACM and the opportunity to demonstrate their best evidence, there were also concerns that some learners in particular had been disadvantaged through the process, and by lockdown especially. This included those who lacked support at home or those undertaking practical subjects.

Other respondents suggested that grades were unfair because there had not been enough time available, either for teaching and learning or assessment, or that SQA's guidance was not clear enough.

'There were different perceptions and interpretations of SQA guidance and requirements across the course teams.'

This leads on to what was by far the most common theme of the respondent comments here, that grades were not comparable across centres or subjects. A significant number of respondents raised concerns about the inconsistent application of the ACM across the country and the effect that this had on grades and, ultimately, fairness.

Even when practitioners believed that their own learners had received fair grades, there were strong feelings that this was not necessarily true for all learners across Scotland. Respondents expressed their frustration with what they perceived as less robust processes in other subjects or other centres.

Concerns raised here include malpractice, the leaking of assessment papers, lenient marking, parental pressure, learners re-sitting assessments several times, learners knowing what would be in the assessment, a lack of rigour in quality assurance processes, and grade inflation.

'Exams/assessment lose credibility when there is no central marking. Consistency goes and centres unfortunately inflate results.'

'Too many differences in assessments and conditions. Grades were too high overall. Emotions and parental pressure played a part in deciding grades. In other schools, pupils were given assessment after assessment until they achieved their desired grade.'

Learner interviews

In interviews, learners were asked if they thought they were treated fairly, why they thought that and which groups of learners, if any, had not been treated fairly.

There were many reported concerns about exam materials being openly available online and several learners reported that having students in the same (or nearby) centre sitting the same assessments on different days being unfair. Some learners mentioned teachers or lecturers giving extra support targeted at the assessment content or making learners aware of what was coming up in assessments.

'Some people got more than me or got As across the board who shouldn't have got that but nobody would appeal an A!'

'Some found the whole lockdown learning stressful and they didn't get that extra help they needed.'

Practitioner interviews

In interviews, practitioners were asked whether the grades given by their centre were fair, if those given across the local authority were fair, and if grades across the country were fair – and if not, why not.

Most felt that their grades were fair and that they had done everything possible to ensure that their learners got the grades they deserved.

‘Within my school I was more or less happy with what they got, 99% got what I’d expect them to get... and any grade they got we had the evidence to say, “this is fair”.’

The interpretation of what fair meant seemed to vary somewhat, some looking at it from the learner’s perspective and others from a wider perspective. Some practitioners raised concerns about the grades in other subjects within their centres and those involved in cross-marking with other centres raised concerns about the quality of marking in other centres. There were concerns that moderation suggestions were not acted upon and that there was no mechanism or time to ensure that this moderation was effective.

‘As a marker if I don’t make that marker meeting, I don’t get to mark but this year everyone just marked, it would have been better if someone like the principal marker or whoever just made a video and sat down and said this is what I expect for this sort of question or even better this is not what to expect ...’

Some mentioned the issue of lack of security in other centres, assessments being taken at different times, the leaking of materials, and the different approaches to standards and evidence, and grade inflation.

‘Exams were leaked, I had kids showing me ‘look this is what it is for maths’, some people weren’t as professional as they should have been.’

‘We made sure we were in line with previous years so it was fair, but my view is that it has been inconsistent across the authority. This impacts on the credibility of the subject.’

‘I fear some schools didn’t teach the whole syllabus and then assessed on only some aspects of it, I know my students when they went on nursing or midwifery had been taught all the syllabus for my course and been assessed on it but my concern is others hadn’t and had had to adapt to what they needed, and we’re seeing that in students coming into the college, they have gaps and things they haven’t been taught at all.’

Some mentioned concerns that they knew of other centres where practitioners had insufficient support and struggled to apply the standard. This presumably depends on the centre involved as many practitioners, including the probationer teacher interviewed, seem to have been well supported throughout the process.

Several mentioned the concern over wider unfairness around loss of learning opportunities if learners had had COVID-19 or been in a centre that was more heavily impacted by the pandemic.

Principal assessor interviews

Principal assessors were also asked if they thought the way grades were awarded to learners was fair. Most felt that they could not make a definitive judgement on fairness based on such a small sample of assessment evidence. Some believed that, overall, the ACM was not fair to all learners because some learners were advantaged by the process over others. However, this perceived unfairness was not seen as being due to assessment specifically, but as a result of other factors, as explored below.

In general, principal assessors thought that the ACM was more generous than a traditional diet, and they thought that this was apparent in grade distributions. Some principal assessors felt that while the profile of A-C grades was acceptable, there were signs of inflation at the A grade. At the same time, principal assessors cautioned against making inferences from the results from two very challenging and unique years.

Principal assessors thought that practitioners did their best to be as fair as possible. Within that, however, learners were sometimes given the benefit of the doubt by practitioners, which some principal assessors felt was understandable considering the challenging circumstances of the last two years. Fairness often came down to local conditions or the experiences of individual learners and practitioners; they were faced with an unprecedented situation. There were disparities in the learning and teaching experience (for example, variations in terms of access to high quality learning environment, technology, support, and learning loss) and some principal assessors felt deeply concerned about those learners most affected by the pandemic.

Most principal assessors raised concerns about a perceived lack of consistency regarding the approach to determining grade boundaries. Principal assessors found that different approaches were used in different local authorities – while some determined grade boundaries in a methodical and consistent way, others calculated boundaries using an average across previous years using course reports or set low grade boundaries without a clear rationale for doing so. Principal assessors felt this may have created inconsistency between local authorities.

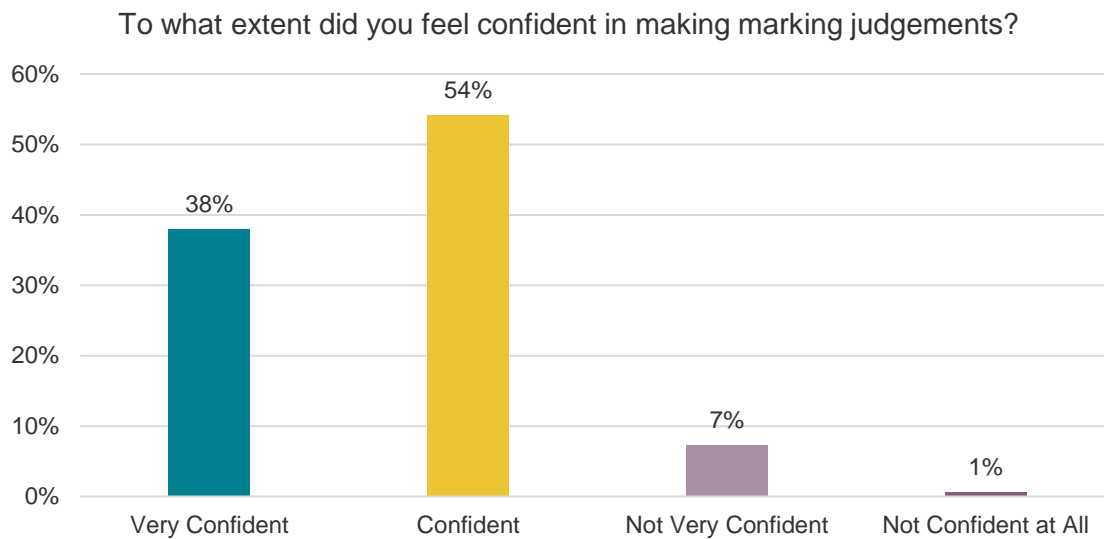
One Principal assessor suggested that in hindsight marks could have been submitted to SQA and grade boundaries determined nationally. Another principal assessor thought that notional grade boundaries should have been used across the board.

9.2 Judgements

Practitioners

Practitioner survey respondents were asked to what extent they felt confident in making marking judgements.

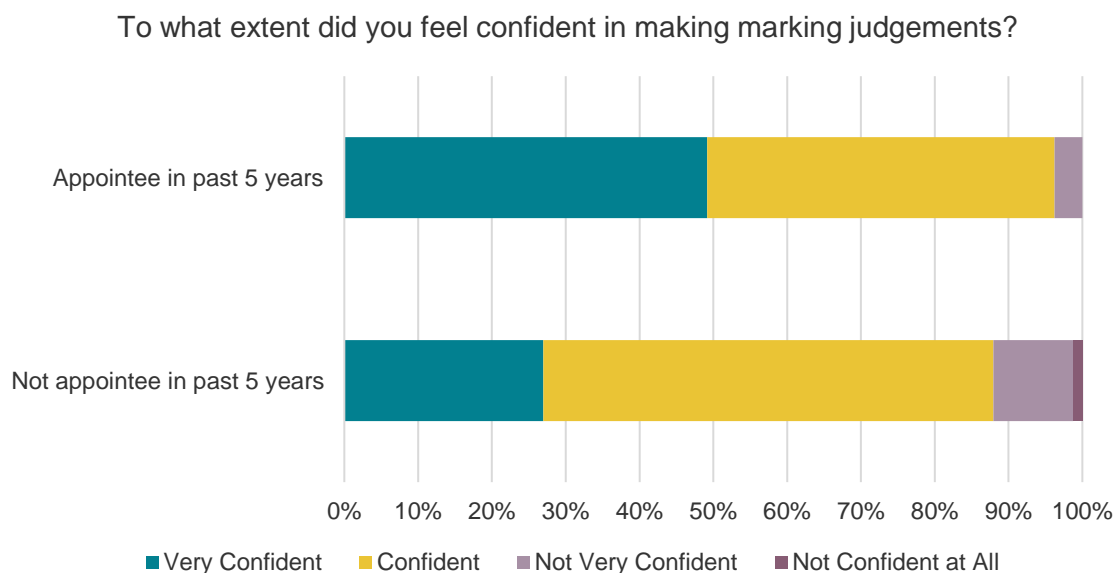
Figure 41



A total of 92% of respondents felt very confident or confident in making marking judgements. On the other hand, 7% did not feel very confident and 1% of respondents felt not at all confident in making marking judgements.

While 49% of those respondents who had been an SQA appointee, and so involved in SQA's assessment processes, within the past five years felt very confident making marking judgements, the proportion fell to 27% of those respondents who had not been an SQA appointee within the past five years.

Figure 42



Learner interviews

In qualitative interviews, learners were asked about their awareness of the extent to which their teachers or lecturers had decided their grades and if the process had been explained clearly to them. They were also asked if they received feedback on their performance.

Most were not sure and generally the process was not explained. Although some practitioners seem to have made an effort to explain how evidence was being submitted and which grades were being given, learners interviewed felt that many staff had either not had the time or the ability to explain how the process was working.

The transparency of the process seems to have varied between both between subjects and centres, with some providing clear breakdowns of submitted grades in June and others finding out their results from SQA in August.

Schools' and colleges' communications with learners seems to have been very varied and to vary within a centre depending on departments. Some learners were given good feedback on what results would be submitted and updated throughout the process, others only given an indication of what grade had been submitted to SQA with the proviso it might change, and some only to have been informed when the official certificate arrived.

'[One teacher] sorted out what they were going to send away to SQA. He said we're going to do loads of assessment throughout the year and see which is your best one and which is your worst one and send the best one away.'

Few of the learners were given a clear indication of how grades were calculated, and many seemed confused by the whole process, especially early on as the approaches were developing. Several mentioned that either they or their friends had sat assessments and not realised they would be counting towards their final result.

'I don't think even the teachers knew themselves. Just before we went away we got a letter saying what our results were and saying they might change but mine didn't. Just like a little school letter. Just this is what you got take it or leave it.'

Practitioner interviews

In interview, practitioners were also asked about the grade awarding process. They were asked to share how decisions on which grades to award were decided. They were also asked how the assessment process worked, what use was made of Understanding Standards website, how grade boundaries were decided, and how they came to a collective judgement across a number of pieces of work.

Most used some internal cross-marking, usually on a sampled basis although one mentioned this varied according to how subjective the marking criteria were.

'There were two parts to the paper, for the first ten marks I marked all of those but queried any I wasn't sure of, but for the final question that was double marked as that is quite a difficult question to do.'

Many used an internal quality assurance or moderation exercise using an experienced third marker or the head of department adjudicating discrepancies.

'We internally verified the usual 20% but then any at borderline we double marked so we double marked much more than usual. And we then had a third meeting with a third member of staff who teaches our daytime students and is an SQA marker and a question setter...'

Use and appreciation of the Understanding Standards website varied. Some thought it very useful and the information helpful, others thought it unhelpful, lacking useful detail or out of date. Some wished it had given more information about the lower end of the attainment range and the criteria that distinguished pass/fail to help them make difficult decisions.

Mostly grades seemed to be based on either a single piece of evidence or averaged and the boundaries were the perceived standard SQA boundaries of 70/60/50. However, some practitioners did look at boundaries from previous years and made a decision based on these and others adapted boundaries to match what they perceived to be issues with the papers.

'We based it on the standard grade boundaries 70% for an A, 60 for a B and 50, 40 because we thought that was what we felt fair.'

'There were a couple of questions that didn't seem to work and hadn't been standardised as the paper had never been used so we removed those and adjusted the grade boundaries which is standard SQA practice.'

Principal assessor interviews

Principal assessors were asked for their thoughts on the approach to marking and collective judgement, based on the evidence they reviewed as part of SQA's national quality assurance exercise.

Support was provided to centres in the form of marking or analysis grids, marking instructions, SQA modules, and other Understanding Standards resources (exemplar material, for instance). In Higher Music, an interactive SQA Academy module was used to support markers to assess candidates performing on different instruments. This was well received by practitioners, and the subject team felt it helped to achieve greater consistency in marking.

Principal assessors thought that, in general, the marking process worked as effectively as it could in the circumstances. It was suggested that consistency in marking tended to be better in high-uptake subjects where a greater number of SQA trained markers were based in centres — National 5 English and Higher History, for example. Principal assessors from both subjects felt there was a good awareness of the standard among practitioners, but centres seemed to benefit from the extra support and reassurance experienced markers brought to the process.

The principal assessors suggested that marking instructions were not always clear or were sometimes applied too leniently, too harshly, or inconsistently. Again, this varied across centres and between local authorities. Principal assessors judged that there was some evidence that marking instructions were amended to allow for greater generosity, or that methods for awarding marks were not consistent. In Higher Physics, for example, there were instances of 'A' questions being removed from question papers, or marking instructions being amended to remove the requirement to justify an answer. In Higher Mathematics,

there were examples where additional marks were awarded for lower-order skills or when answers were marked as correct without checking the learner's working.

Some principal assessors noted that the lower degree of anonymity may have created some unintentional bias in marking, where learners were often given the benefit of the doubt by practitioners. On the other hand, one principal assessor believed more experienced markers may have marked more harshly.

In some instances, principal assessors thought it was clear that the assessment evidence submitted had been selected to gain advantage. While principal assessors noted that centres were entitled to choose the most suitable evidence, they suggested there was a noticeable difference in the normal fluctuation in performance across different assessment components from some learners. This, some principal assessors thought, suggested that the best pieces of evidence had been selected and submitted to support the strongest grade possible.

9.3 Moderation

In qualitative interviews, practitioners were asked about the moderation process in their own school or college, how it was supposed to work, and how it actually worked in practice.

Most practitioners combined discussion of marking with moderation as it seemed a single activity from their point of view. Many used some form of moderation with a partner centre to ensure some external moderation. Most felt that within their department it worked well and those who had access to experienced SQA markers cited the importance of this in the process.

All practitioners reported various models of internal moderation. These models usually involved staff discussing the marking scheme, marking a small sample and comparing results, then some form of internal quality assurance, either by cross-marking within the department or by the head of department or experienced colleague. Some maximised this cross-marking on the most difficult or subjective areas of the paper or subject. Where there were difficulties in finding an internal subject specialist for cross-marking, some used colleagues in other departments with similar domains. Most felt their approach had been effective. Those who had experienced SQA markers noted this as a benefit and allowed for more effective and accurate marking to be done.

Cross-centre moderation varied both by local authority and by local availability. Many teachers mentioned cross-school marking exercises being set up or advised by the local authority. This was done usually as a twinning or trio of schools cross-marking a small sample of learners' work. The moderation of work at A, B, and C grades was most commonly mentioned, although others said they thought it random selection.

Some concerns about this cross-marking were raised. Firstly, if the partner practitioner was a new or probationary teacher, the quality of moderation was thought to be of limited value. Secondly, the late scheduling of this exercise, usually in the week before results had to be submitted, meant that some practitioners felt this was a tick-box exercise with little opportunity or mandate for recommended changes to be made.

Several practitioners mentioned the importance of personal networks in setting up these cross-marking exercises, either through personal contacts or through subject societies or forums. Local authorities seemed to only become actively involved in small entry subjects, where local colleagues might not be easily available and some regional co-ordination seems to have been available for these subjects.

'The process came from the Head of Department: you should be marking and cross-marking with another teacher and then we'll cross-mark with different schools.'

Some used extra checks on learners around boundaries or where questions were thought to be more subjective (see marking above).

'We would then focus on those close to grade boundaries and moderate them a third time within the department. Some ended up being marked four times.'

During interview, practitioners were asked the extent to which the local authority and national moderation and quality assurance operated in their particular context.

This seemed to vary greatly. For some practitioners the local authority seemed to have made an effort to support and create links, for others it seemed to only be that they said that practitioners should look at the Understanding Standards website, delegating responsibility. Mostly this moderation seems to have happened through teacher and subject networks of teachers making links and creating their own cross-moderation processes.

'It was arranged by us through a teacher who used to work at our school, we've often had collaborations on building resources and things like that. So we sorted it out between us. Different departments went with different schools depending on who they had contacts with.'

One mentioned that in small entry subjects the local authority had been useful in establishing links where no local teachers were available in the subject area. Several mentioned that the moderation exercise seemed to be more a tick-box exercise in that it had happened too late for many schools to re-mark before submission deadlines, with moderation results being more suggestions than required actions.

'To be honest our school wanted grades in the day after the we had in-service day [to conduct between school moderation] so there was not much we could do after that.'

'[Within our partner school] we felt some scripts had been marked too leniently but they were unkeen to change their marking which we found a bit difficult... re-marking seemed more advisory. Partly it was very late in the process so there was maybe no time for them to re-mark.'

Some practitioners mentioned verification of standards by SQA, sometimes negatively either because previously their results had been downgraded so they had had to be extra cautious, or because they perceived that the feedback they got from verification was not useful.

'It wasn't constructive or useful as it was not clear and needed a lot of interpreting.'

Principal assessor interviews

The interviews with principal assessors also explored moderation and national quality assurance. Generally, moderation processes were found to be robust and well documented in centres that submitted evidence. Examples of cross-centre marking and moderation were found, as were a range of internal quality assurance systems and checks. Detailed documentation was submitted by some centres, showing effective team working to reach consensus with robust discussion. The systems used largely depended on the size of the centre and how much resource could be devoted to developing these systems, therefore it varied considerably between centres and local authorities.

One principal assessor felt that the evidence submitted to them from colleges (and individual lecturers) suggested that they may have been more isolated from the networks of support available to schools, and that college learners may have been more severely impacted by the pandemic in terms of access to learning spaces and support.

While the workload was significant for centres throughout the ACM, principal assessors found evidence staff were able to set up effective systems and processes to support moderation in a short space of time. Some felt that the national quality assurance system initially generated a degree of anxiety amongst practitioners but that this improved with time.

Some principal assessors noted that while some moderation arrangements were in place before 2020–21, there was evidence to suggest that the ACM helped to develop and formalise these systems. It was suggested that smaller centres would have benefitted from additional support as they were sometimes isolated from networks – it was suggested that a mechanism for sharing examples of good practice from more experienced centres would be valuable.

‘Engagement with the ACM varied from centre to centre and across local authorities – some examples where they really tried their best in difficult circumstances to provide the full range of candidate evidence and engage with the ACM process with internal moderation, cross authority moderation and a fairly detailed report of how their decision had been reached to the other extreme where the engagement wasn’t as complete as you’d like.’

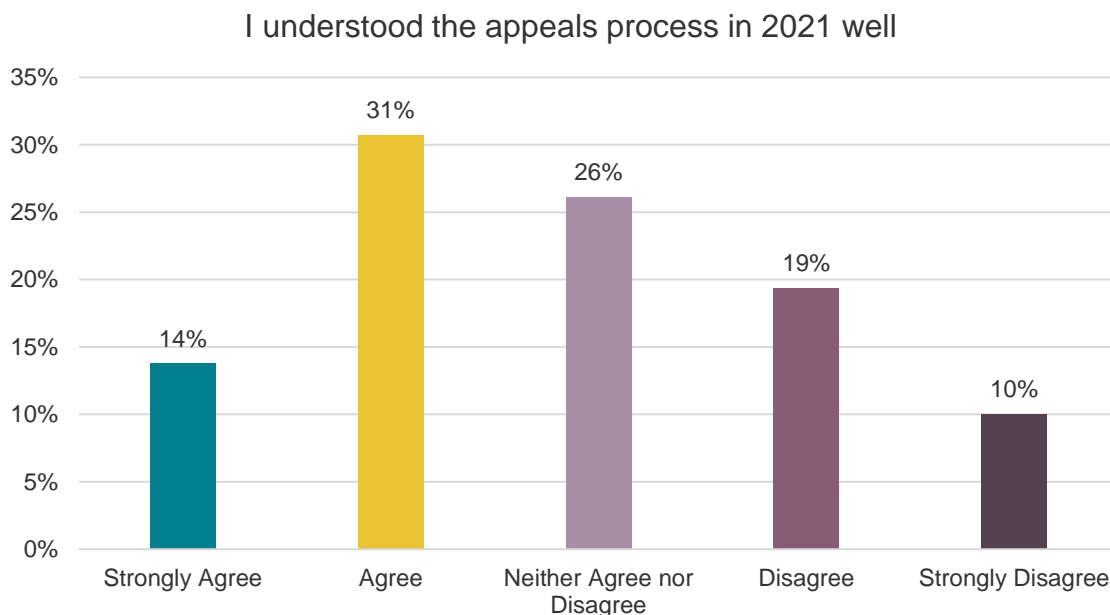
10 Appeals and incomplete evidence

10.1 Appeals

Learner survey respondents were asked if they had made any appeals against their grades in 2021; 7% had and 93% had not.

Learners were also asked the extent to which they agreed with the statement *I understood the appeals process in 2021 well*. More than a quarter (26%) of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement, 14% strongly agreed, 31% agreed, 19% disagreed, and 10% strongly disagreed.

Figure 43

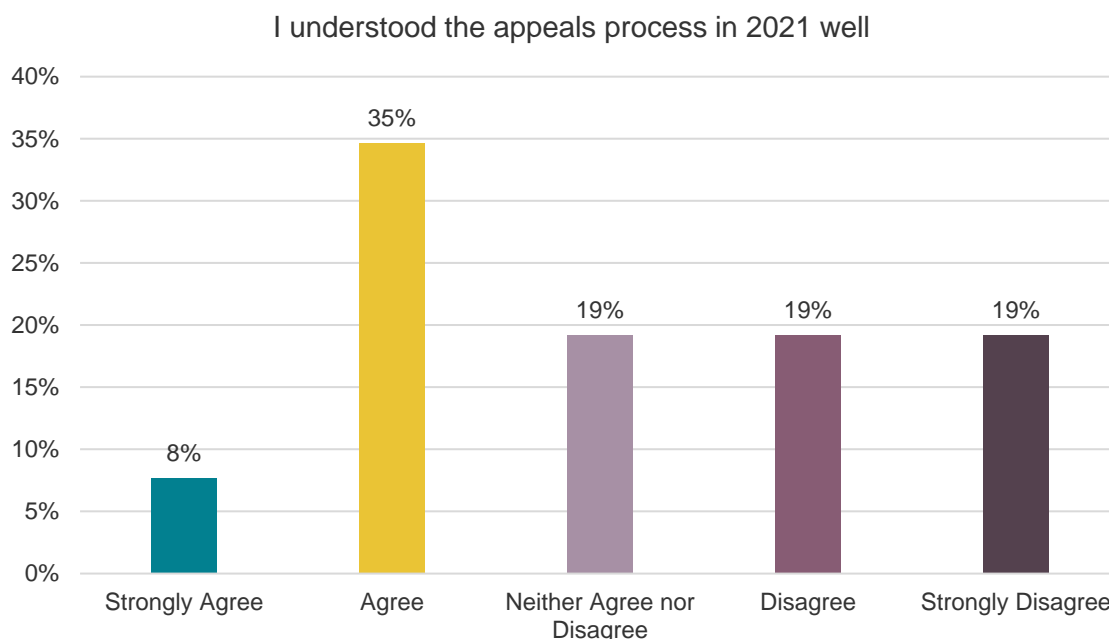


10.1.1 Learner did appeal

Learners who had submitted an appeal were asked if they had received the results of it. Of the 78 respondents, 62 (79%) said yes and 16 (21%) said no.

Those learners who had made an appeal were then asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with a series of statements. Please note that Figures 44–46 are based on responses from the 78 learners who had submitted an appeal.

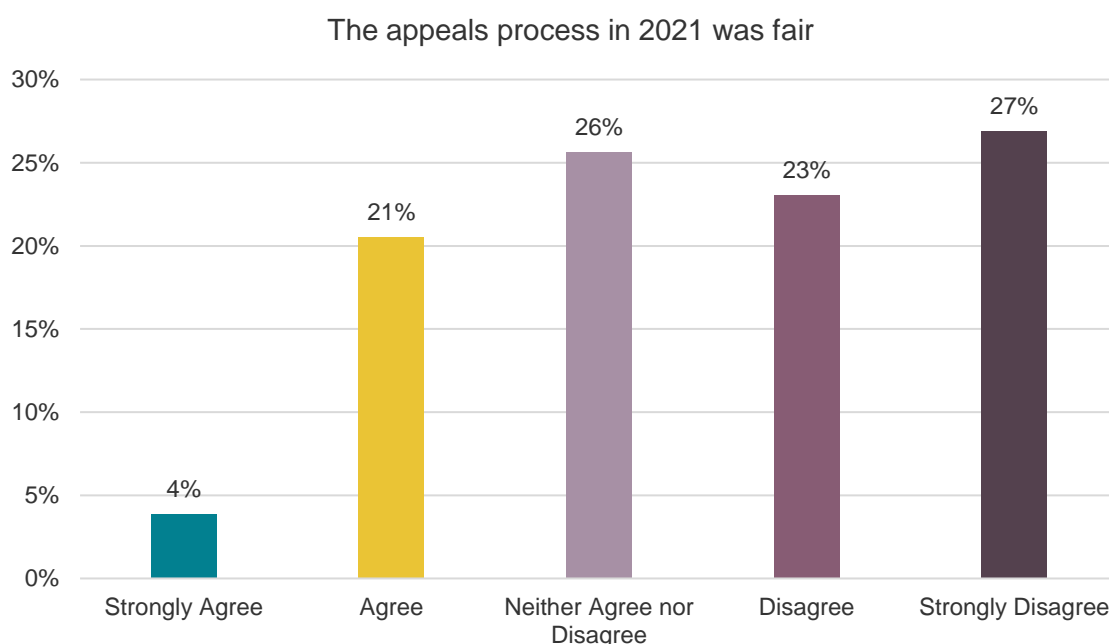
Figure 44



As shown in Figure 44, 42% of those who had made an appeal said that they either agreed or strongly agreed that they understood the appeals process well. On the other hand, 38% disagreed or strongly disagreed. A further 19% neither agreed nor disagreed.

While 4% of respondents who had appealed in 2021 strongly agreed that the appeals process was fair and 21% agreed, 23% disagreed and 27% strongly disagreed. A further 26% neither agreed nor disagreed.

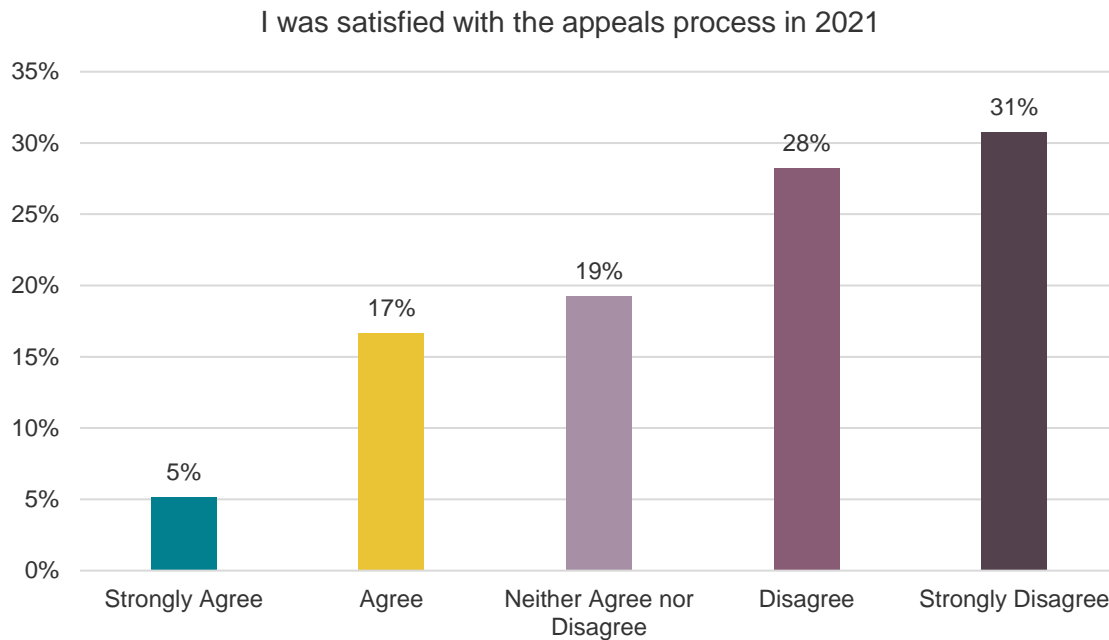
Figure 45



As detailed in Figure 46, only 22% of those respondents who had appealed agreed or strongly agreed with the statement *I was satisfied with the appeals process in 2021*.

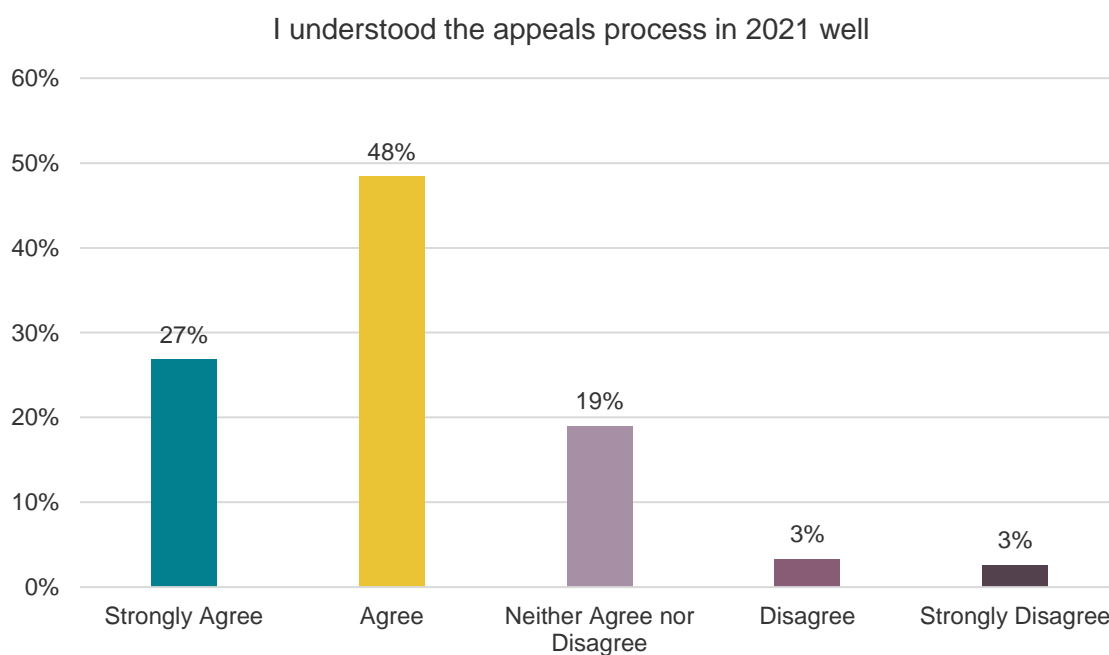
Conversely, 59% disagreed or strongly disagreed. The remaining 19% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 46



When practitioner survey respondents were asked, 68% said that their learners had not made any appeals in 2021, but 32% said that they had. Of those whose learners had made appeals, 97% said that their learners had received the results of their appeal.

Figure 47

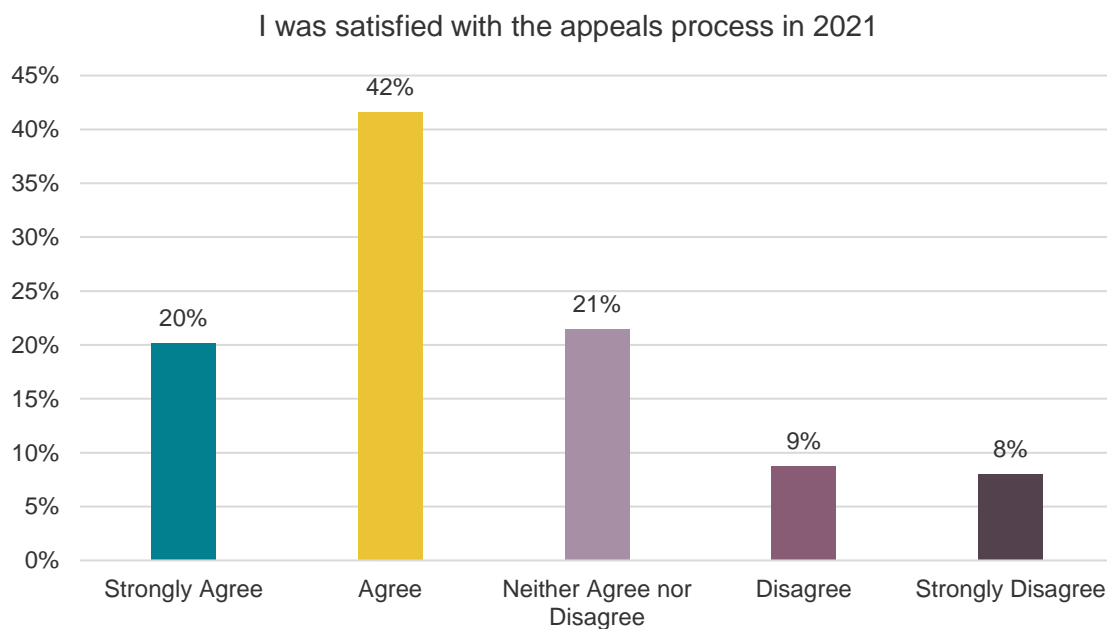


Those practitioners who said that their learners had made an appeal in 2021 were then asked the extent to which they agreed with the statements *I understood the appeals process in 2021 well* and *I was satisfied with the appeals process in 2021*.

As detailed in Figure 47, practitioners who had had learners who submitted appeals generally thought that they understood the process well in 2021: 27% strongly agreed with the statement *I understood the appeals process in 2021 well* and 48% agreed. Only 6% disagreed or strongly disagreed, with 19% neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

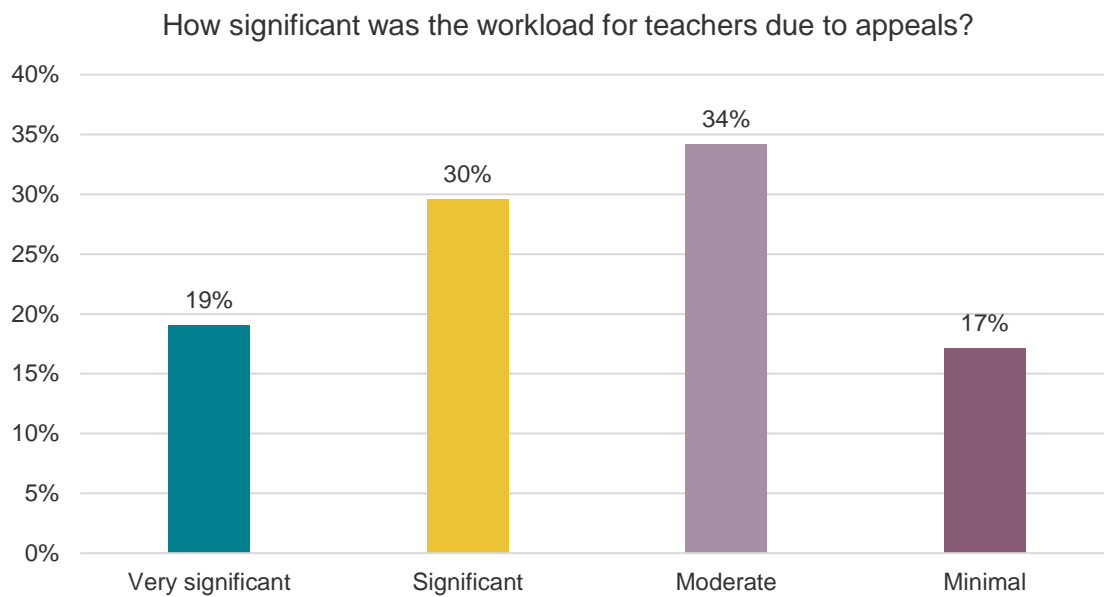
Likewise, most of the practitioners who had learners who submitted appeals were satisfied with the process. When asked the extent to which they agreed with the statement *I was satisfied with the appeals process in 2021*, 20% strongly agreed, 42% agreed, 9% disagreed, and 8% strongly disagreed. The remaining 21% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 48



Practitioners' views on the workload due to appeals were divided. As shown in Figure 49, 19% of respondents thought the workload due to appeals was very significant, 30% thought it significant, 34% thought it moderate, and 17% thought it minimal.

Figure 49

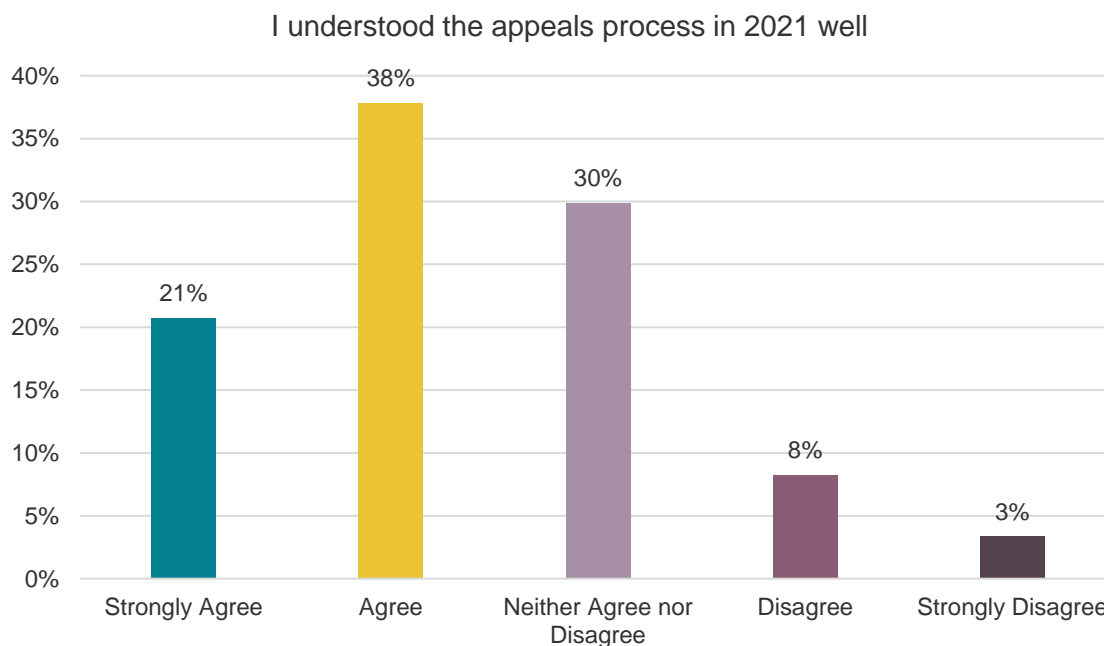


10.1.2 Learner did not appeal

Learners who had not appealed were asked if they were aware that they could have appealed against their results if they were not satisfied. While 84% said yes, they were aware they could appeal, 16% stated that they were not aware.

Practitioners who did not have any learners who appealed their results were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement *I understood the appeals process in 2021 well*.

Figure 50



- ◆ 21% of respondents strongly agreed that they understood the appeals process well
- ◆ 38% agreed
- ◆ 30% neither agreed nor disagreed
- ◆ 8% disagreed
- ◆ 3% strongly disagreed

10.2 Incomplete evidence

Of the learner survey respondents, 92% were not aware of the incomplete evidence contingency arrangement. Only 3% of learner respondents said that they had considered using the service and only 12 respondents reported actually using it.

Respondents who had used the service were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statement *I was satisfied with the incomplete evidence service*. Three strongly agreed, three agreed, and six neither agreed nor disagreed. No one disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Table 3: *I was satisfied with the incomplete evidence service (Learners)*

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
3	3	6	0	0

Seventeen respondents commented when asked why they had decided not to use the service. The most common response, from nine learners, was that they had not been aware of it. Three respondents also replied that they had not needed to use the service.

All of the other reasons were identified by one respondent each and were: it was too much hassle; it would have meant working over the summer; it would have meant studying for both Higher and Advanced Higher at the beginning of the new term; it was unlikely to have changed anything; it may have resulted in a downgrade; and the learner was too ill.

Of the practitioner survey respondents, 36% stated that they were aware of the incomplete evidence contingency arrangement, but 64% were not.

Practitioners were asked if learners had faced any barriers in using the service. There were responses from 168 practitioners, with 91% saying there were no barriers, but 9% saying there were.

A couple of respondents thought that those learners who had secured positive destinations, or those who were trying to, were unable to return to school or college to generate further evidence. It was suggested that using the service delayed learners' applications to university, for example, or reduced their chances of acceptance. One lecturer stated that it would have been helpful for the Scottish Government to fund activity over the summer allowing learners to generate evidence.

Some respondents thought that those learners most in need of the service, those who had exceptional circumstances, were still facing challenging circumstances after the summer period, particularly as they had not been in school or college receiving practitioner support in those weeks. To include additional work at the beginning of a new academic year was considered unfeasible in some cases.

Other perceived barriers mentioned by one respondent each were: continued learner absence; learner anxiety; issues with practical subjects; school's decision not to proceed; a lack of knowledge about the service; and a lack of clarity from SQA on requirements.

When practitioners were asked if any of their learners had used the service, a total of 175 respondents answered, with 92% saying that none of their learners had used the service.

Respondents who had learners who had used the service were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement *I was satisfied with the incomplete evidence service*.

Fourteen responses were received, with nine strongly agreeing or agreeing, four neither agreeing nor disagreeing, and one strongly disagreeing.

Table 4: *I was satisfied with the incomplete evidence service* (Practitioners)

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
4	5	4	0	1

11 Overall experiences of the ACM

11.1 What worked well and what did not

Learners and practitioners were asked to give open responses to questions asking about the ACM as a whole. Learners were asked which parts of the assessment process they liked and did not like, while practitioners were asked which parts of the ACM process worked well and did not work well in practice. Many of the responses echoed those of the closed questions discussed in other sections, but they allowed respondents to make clear what was most important to them.

The open nature of the questions in this section, and the qualitative, descriptive nature of the answers, means that detailed quantification is largely not appropriate, particularly as many responses touched on several different topics. Responses have been analysed thematically, with an emphasis on understanding what mattered most to learners and practitioners about their experience of the 2021 ACM and why they felt that way about these issues.

What learners liked

Learner survey respondents were asked which parts of the assessment process they had liked.

There were almost 870 written responses. Some liked '*all of it*' but gave little detail as to why, while 190 responses were negative. Most of the negative responses provided no detail and suggested that they liked '*nothing*' or '*none of it*', with a small number citing the stress of the ACM as the reason that they had not liked any part of it.

What was clear from the comments overall was that learners were answering on the ACM process that they had experienced, but that assessments could be different between centres and subjects. There was also variation at an individual level, with some learners suggesting that they liked the ACM because it was '*like actual exams*,' while a greater number liked it because it was not, or even because there were '*no exams*.'

The main themes that emerged from the learners' responses were:

- ◆ The ACM process reduced pressure and stress in comparison to what learners expect from a traditional assessment diet.
- ◆ The assessment environment helped reduce pressure, as assessments were often classroom-based rather than taken in a large examination hall.
- ◆ Assessments in many subjects were shorter and split into two or (often) multiple assessments which many learners felt were well spaced out.
- ◆ Respondents liked that their grade would be determined by a number of assessments or by continuous assessment, rather than (as they perceived) by a single exam.
- ◆ Respondents commented that they had knowledge of the topics to be assessed in advance, and that the content for individual assessments was reduced. This made revising easier for respondents.
- ◆ Some respondents commented on SQA's modifications/reductions to courses as being one of the things they liked most about the ACM process.

- ◆ A number of respondents cited the ability to re-sit assessments to gain a higher grade, as something that they liked. It appears that this practice was used across multiple centres and local authorities.
- ◆ Receiving grades earlier than in the usual certification process was also seen as a positive feature of the ACM.

General effect and impressions

A reduction in stress and pressure was the main theme that emerged around learners' perceptions of the whole experience of the ACM. Around 150 learners mentioned this specifically, though it could be seen as implicit in some other responses.

'I liked how we were able to showcase our skills through the year. Not as much pressure to do well on exam day and less chance of you having an off day and failing.'

Conversely, a small number of learners replied that they felt that the ACM had been very stressful, reflecting differences in individual experiences of the model.

A relatively low number of respondents explicitly mentioned fairness in their replies around what they liked about the ACM, and most who did so felt that it was fairer than the traditional assessment model.

Arrangements for assessments

Over 300 respondents felt that some aspect of the arrangements for assessment had been positive for them. Many respondents were positive about the assessments themselves, as they felt they were different from typical examinations in several ways, and this reduced the pressure that they were under. From the responses, it is apparent that there was a significant amount of variation in the types of assessment that learners experienced during the ACM. This is unsurprising, given the range of subjects involved and the flexibility of the model across different schools, colleges, and local authorities.

Some learners had experienced assessments that they felt were similar to 'normal' exams, and felt positively about this.

'I liked that our school still did end-of-year exams.'

This certainly varied though, with other learners clearly stating that they liked having done no exams. Other school learners liked subject-specific and practical arrangements, while some college learners described conditions of assessment that included open-book assessments.

'It being open-book rather than relying on how well memory serves me on the day!'

Almost 125 of these learners particularly liked the increased number and reduced length of assessments that they had taken as part of the ACM. These varied from two assessments for a subject instead of one, to multiple assessments with each covering specific topics within the subject.

'I liked the idea of the assessments being split up over multiple assessments instead of one. I also liked having an understanding of what particular topics were going to be in the assessment.'

A smaller number of learners also commented that they especially liked the scheduling of assessments at a centre level.

'I liked the space between subjects and assessments, it took the pressure off the tests especially for people like myself who find it hard to deal with large amounts of pressure.'

Most comments described assessments that had been well spaced out but a few, conversely, mentioned assessments being taken over a short period of time.

Almost 70 learners felt that one of the parts that they most liked about the ACM was being allowed to sit assessments in a familiar venue, particularly their classrooms. Many equated a large exam hall with stress and anxiety and felt that being in class helped to mitigate this.

'I liked how the exams were done in class because I was used to the environment so felt more comfortable and was able to relax and focus better.'

Content of assessments

Around 100 respondents mentioned aspects of the content of assessments as something that they liked about the ACM process.

A number of respondents commented that they had been given knowledge of the topics to be assessed in advance of assessments, and often that the course coverage for individual assessments was reduced. This made it easier for learners to prepare for their assessments.

'The topics were split so gave us extra time to study each topic.'

A smaller number of respondents commented on reductions to the content of SQA's courses as being one of the things that they liked about the ACM process.

'[I liked] that the course was cut down a bit to make covering the course easier, especially due to the lockdown.'

Grading process

Around 250 respondents commented positively on an aspect of the ACM grading process. These responses focused on the grades themselves, and the process of awarding them, rather than the process of sitting assessments.

Respondents generally liked that their grade would be determined by a number of assessments. There was a common misperception that otherwise all grades would have been awarded by a single examination held on one day.

'[I liked] the ability to trust that my final marks were not based on one individual assessment.'

The process of continuous assessment was considered by many respondents to be beneficial. This was often in conjunction with the gathering of evidence of learners' work throughout the academic year as part of the ACM process.

'I welcomed the fact that there wasn't just 1 exam which would determine my grades. My grades were determined based on my course work throughout the academic year, with holistic assessments also taken into account. I really thought that this was a very fair way to score me my grades.'

Over 50 respondents liked having multiple attempts at assessments to gain a higher grade. It appears that this practice was used across multiple centres and local authorities. In many cases, subsequent assessments would have simply provided additional grading evidence, but some respondents seemed clear that they had been offered re-sits.

'Sitting more than one assessment with the opportunity to re-sit took some pressure off during the exam season.'

Learners also felt that receiving grades earlier than in the usual certification process from their centre was a positive feature of the ACM.

'[I liked] how multiple teachers have marked them and therefore being able to see my results before the summer holidays and it lowered the stress of waiting for said results.'

What learners did not like

Almost 900 learner survey respondents commented when asked which parts of the ACM assessment process they did not like. However, a substantial number of the respondents stated that there was nothing about the process they had not liked, and that they preferred the ACM to traditional exams. On the other hand, a larger number simply responded to this question with *'everything'* or *'all of it'*.

The main themes emerging from responses to this question were:

- ◆ Many respondents believed their end-of-year assessments were exams in all but name.
- ◆ Respondents thought that they had not been told early enough about end-of-year assessments and had not had enough time to revise.
- ◆ Many felt that they were over-assessed throughout the year.
- ◆ They disliked having to undertake so many assessments in a short space of time.
- ◆ There were issues around understanding what evidence would be required and what the assessment and grading processes would be.
- ◆ Some learners believed that their learning had been negatively impacted by lockdown.
- ◆ Many learners found the ACM experience stressful and found clear information lacking.
- ◆ Respondents had a range of concerns around fairness.

Assessment

Substantial numbers of respondents stated that, despite what they had been told, their assessments were exams in all but name.

'They were being called assessments. They were exams.'

This caused frustration for several reasons, including that learners were not prepared for what they saw as exams, that they were told about these assessments only a month beforehand, and the perception that all previous assessments and coursework now counted for nothing because it was decided late on that end-of-year assessments would take place.

There were frequent comments which suggested that learners had been assessed throughout the year to build up potential evidence before it was decided to hold end-of-year assessments in exam conditions.

'Every assessment counted so I was constantly stressed as the assessments were all at different times throughout the year.'

Several respondents suggested that this constant programme of assessment had caused anxiety and had been overwhelming at times. Another source of stress was the uncertainty around assessment and grading processes, particularly earlier on in the year.

When it came to the end-of-year assessments, a frequently cited concern was the sheer volume of assessments; many respondents highlighted the number that they had had to undertake over a relatively short time period. Several respondents stated that they would have preferred just one exam per subject, rather than end-of-year assessments being split into two or more.

A number of respondents did not like the fact that the end-of-year assessments had been undertaken in class and said that they would have preferred full exam conditions in an exam hall. Similarly, others would have liked the experience of sitting a full exam and wondered how this would impact them as they progressed.

Scheduling

Because end-of-year assessments were generally taken in class time, and there was no exam timetable, several respondents thought that they were poorly scheduled. A great many respondents complained that their assessments were too compressed, concentrated in a short period; learners often highlighted that they had had several assessments a week and, not uncommonly, more than one in a day.

On the other hand, a smaller number of respondents thought that their assessment period had gone on too long – while a traditional exam programme might stretch over several weeks, some learners had had end-of-year assessments stretching over eight.

Many respondents thought that the decision to hold end-of-year assessments had been communicated to them very late, with several saying that they only had two- or three-weeks' notice to prepare for what they thought of as exams.

Evidence

Several comments suggested that there had been confusion on what could or would be used as evidence to determine grades. Many learners had thought throughout the year that their

classwork or continuing assessments would be used as evidence, only to find out relatively late on that this was not the case. This caused resentment and upset amongst respondents.

'...the stressful assessments sat throughout the year were irrelevant as the grade was still determined by the final assessment we did; the only difference was we didn't have it held in an exam hall.'

Learning and teaching

A considerable number of respondents disliked the fact that they did not have study leave prior to their end-of-year assessments, despite their perception that these assessments were on a par with traditional exams.

The issue of COVID-affected learning and teaching elicited responses from several learners. Respondents suggested that remote or blended learning and a lack of face-to-face teaching and support had had a detrimental impact on learning, making assessment on content covered during lockdown more difficult.

A few respondents also suggested that they were unhappy with some of the modifications to courses, specifically that assignments had been removed.

'Why did you remove the section of the qualification which could be done at home and with less support?'

Uncertainty

Many respondents stated that they had disliked the uncertainty surrounding the ACM and felt it was disorganised. There was a perception that decisions were taken at short notice with little communication or guidance given to learners.

'The entire process was uncertain and confusing, it felt like nobody understood what was happening throughout.'

On a related note, a considerable number of respondents thought that the process had been stressful. While many respondents just responded here that they had not liked the 'stress' or 'pressure', others detailed the reasons for this, including general confusion and uncertainty around the process and constant assessment throughout the year.

Equitability

A number of respondents had concerns about the fairness of the ACM. Many of these concerns centred on inconsistencies in assessment, both between centres and between subjects in the same centre.

Several respondents thought that all candidates should have taken the same assessment in the same conditions on the same day. It was argued that the lack of consistency meant that there was not a level playing field. Similarly, there were a few comments around re-sits and that while these had been allowed for some, there was not a general policy on them that applied to all.

There were several concerns around leaked assessment papers with respondents suggesting that those who had taken their end-of-year assessments later had an unfair advantage.

'Those who sat exams later were at an advantage as paper contents and answers were shared online in social media groups.'

Finally, a number of respondents cited grade inflation and thought that some candidates had achieved higher grades through the ACM than they would have otherwise. It was suggested that this would devalue everyone's grades and make it more difficult for those applying for further or higher education or employment.

Practitioners — what worked well in practice

When asked about which parts of the ACM process had worked well, 327 practitioners submitted responses. While a considerable number of respondents suggested that they could not find anything positive to report about the process, there were others who thought that most of it had worked well, albeit with a higher workload than usual. A few respondents felt it was a positive that assessment had happened at all in 2021, in contrast to 2020, and that was the key benefit of the ACM.

Assessment

A large number of respondents thought that SQA providing question papers worked well. While there were a couple of comments highlighting issues with the security of these, many more respondents found them an invaluable resource in ensuring a level of consistency across the country and in showcasing the national standard.

'The provision of a question paper by SQA ensured that schools had the opportunity to use an assessment tool that was undeniably of the correct length and difficulty and covered the correct content with the correct balance of grade C and grade A/B questions.'

Nevertheless, a number of respondents appreciated that they could adapt assessments or create their own.

Respondents also commended the general flexibility of the ACM process, particularly in terms of practitioners being able to decide when the assessments would take place and the ability to assess candidates at different times. Similarly, there were a number of comments supportive of the option to break down assessments into smaller chunks; this was thought to be useful both in terms of learners being able to focus their revision more effectively and in terms of assessments aligning with centre timescales and timetables. A number of respondents suggested that the removal of assessed course content or assignments had been beneficial.

Other respondents were appreciative that the ACM allowed re-sit or re-assessment opportunities, suggesting that this gave learners the opportunity to demonstrate their potential.

'Pupils were given opportunities to improve their evidence though further assessments.'

Moreover, the ability to draw on a range of sources of evidence from throughout the year, particularly for learners who had had significant absences, was seen as valuable.

Several respondents mentioned the centrality of teacher or lecturer judgement in the ACM as something that worked well; practitioners felt that the ACM recognised and made use of their professional skills and experience.

'Teacher judgement really came in to its own. This method should be the method used in future assessments, then externally moderated.'

Quality assurance

A key theme to emerge from practitioners in response to what had worked well was quality assurance. Cross-marking, verification, and moderation activities, both within and across centres, was widely perceived to have been a constructive and worthwhile aspect of the ACM process.

'In-house moderation of standards forced us to come together more often to agree on what is to be taught and then assessed.'

'It was helpful to have authority wide moderation - this aspect of communication between schools was great.'

Indeed, several respondents suggested that they would appreciate being able to retain some features of ACM quality assurance in future years.

On a related note, some respondents specifically mentioned the collegiate discussion aspects of the ACM, stating that the opportunity to discuss standards within their centre, across their local authority, and within subject networks was beneficial. Similarly, a number of respondents thought that the experience of the ACM and its effect on professional development would inform future practice.

'I now have a better understanding of how to mark and assess pupil work.'

Some respondents acknowledged the value of the guidance provided by SQA, with several highlighting Understanding Standards materials as especially useful.

Other aspects

A considerable number of respondents thought that the ACM had been fairer than a traditional exam diet, particularly in its pastoral care aspects and for those who had been absent for long periods. One respondent specifically referred to the UNCRC's article 3 – the best interests of the child. On the other hand, a smaller number of respondents thought that the ACM had been unfair in that centres adopted different approaches and, possibly, different quality standards.

Nonetheless, a few respondents mentioned that they believed the ACM to have been less stressful for learners, allowing those who would be anxious about traditional exams to perform to their full ability.

Other positive aspects of the ACM mentioned by a few respondents each were: the submission of results process; the fact that assessments could take place later to allow for more teaching and learning; that learners received their provisional results before the holidays; and that their centre's own procedures and processes had worked well.

Finally, a couple of respondents acknowledged that the ACM style of assessment – internal, continuous, smaller – were much closer to how centres normally assess their learners and a college lecturer suggested that this had better prepared learners to progress on to Higher National courses.

Practitioners — what did not work well in practice

There were almost 350 written responses to the question of what practitioners did not feel worked well in the ACM process. A relatively small number of responses simply mentioned 'all', 'most', or 'none' of it, without giving additional details, but many comments discussed several aspects of the ACM.

The two areas that generated the most responses were on inconsistencies between centres and across Scotland and around excessive workload for practitioners during the ACM process.

Effect on practitioners and learners

A considerable number of respondents commented on the excessive workload that practitioners were required to undertake as a result of the ACM process. The overall timescale of the ACM was felt by some to be rushed. Some noted the pressure that this caused and the impact on practitioners.

This was noted by FE lecturers as well as schoolteachers, with learners requiring additional support due to the pandemic alongside the workload demands of the ACM.

'The perception that teaching staff have the time to do everything was not sustainable and did not work well in practice [...] In addition to the teaching time, students all expect additional support by phone call and emails (outwith the class time) which lecturers are accommodating because they recognise this is a tough time for students.'

Some practitioners noted that this high workload had a knock-on effect on their teaching practice, and sometimes on learners who were already falling behind due to the circumstances of the pandemic.

'The verification procedures, though necessary, were onerous and resulted in other year groups being neglected as staff clambered for time to complete the process.'

Fairness and standards

A substantial number of respondents felt that, in practice, the ACM had issues around standards, consistency, and fairness.

Many of these respondents felt that there was a lack of consistency in how departments, centres, and local authorities had applied the ACM process. This included different

conditions of assessment, different marking practices and levels of marking experience between practitioners, and inconsistency across and within centres and local authorities.

'Not all schools followed same procedures and many asked students to repeat assessment if score lower.'

'All schools are doing different assessments with different levels of support. I am confident that the majority of my pupils would have received the same grade had there been an exam. I am not convinced that the same could be said across other establishments, etc.'

'Moderation between schools... In some cases, I awarded a D grade and their own school awarded an A. As an SQA marker I know that this would not have been the grade awarded. Pupils disadvantaged across the country as many authorities did different things.'

The leaking and sharing online of materials provided to assist centres with ACM assessment was noted by some respondents as causing some learners to gain an unfair advantage. Furthermore, the grades achieved by learners across the country as a result of the ACM process were described by a number of respondents as 'inflated', and some felt that standards had been compromised as a result.

'The huge variety in generation of grades by schools which caused such grade inflation.'

Assessment process

Considerable numbers of respondents commented on some aspect of the process of sitting assessments. In these comments, there were frequent suggestions that learners had been over-assessed or forced to fit too many assessments into too small a timeframe.

The nature and delivery of the assessments was also seen as inconsistent between centres, echoing the themes noted in the fairness and standards section, above.

'Too many differences in delivery ie reassessments for some not others, some sat assessments in spaced out conditions in hall, other in classrooms jammed together. Basically, we all should have been told to do the same process, even if not given the same actual assessments.'

Grading and moderation

The processes involved in marking, grading and moderating learners' assessments were mentioned by a considerable number of respondents. In many cases these comments again reflected concerns around consistency.

The workload involved in marking was seen as particularly onerous by some respondents. Moreover, marking and grading practices were felt by some to differ depending on the level of experience of the practitioner involved.

'Not all teachers are markers. Some are more lenient than others. Moderation showed that others didn't use the mark scheme effectively and were very generous.'

Determining grades based on the assessment evidence, without a wider process or available data, was also an issue for some practitioners.

The process of setting up and co-ordinating external moderation with other centres could add further to practitioner workload and stress. The quality and consistency of some moderation practices were also questioned by some respondents.

Communication and guidance

Several respondents commented on some aspect of SQA's communication, support, or materials. A number felt that information and guidance should have been provided earlier.

While SQA's Understanding Standards and assessment materials had been used by practitioners to support their practice during the ACM, some felt that more guidance was necessary, with a focus on clarity and consistency.

'Guidance was confusing, open-ended, and allowed for multiple interpretations.'

Others would have liked more SQA material to use for assessment.

Learner interviews

When asked what parts of the assessment process had worked well, the suggestion of the opportunity for multiple chances to provide evidence and the shorter assessments came up frequently. Those who sat assessments in class said they liked these as the setting was more familiar and it was less intimidating to be invigilated by their teacher or lecturer in familiar surroundings.

'We did [English] in classroom and I liked that, every other subject was in the hall, but English was in the class like normal, we felt more comfortable and you're with your friends and not spread out and all that, way more familiar environment and I liked that.'

'I really liked that it didn't feel that it was all reliant on the exam, as soon as we heard that it was like two pieces of evidence it was a breath of fresh air, so it didn't all come down to this one exam. It felt like I had more control over what my grade could represent like if I'd had a bad day and you could perform more consistently.'

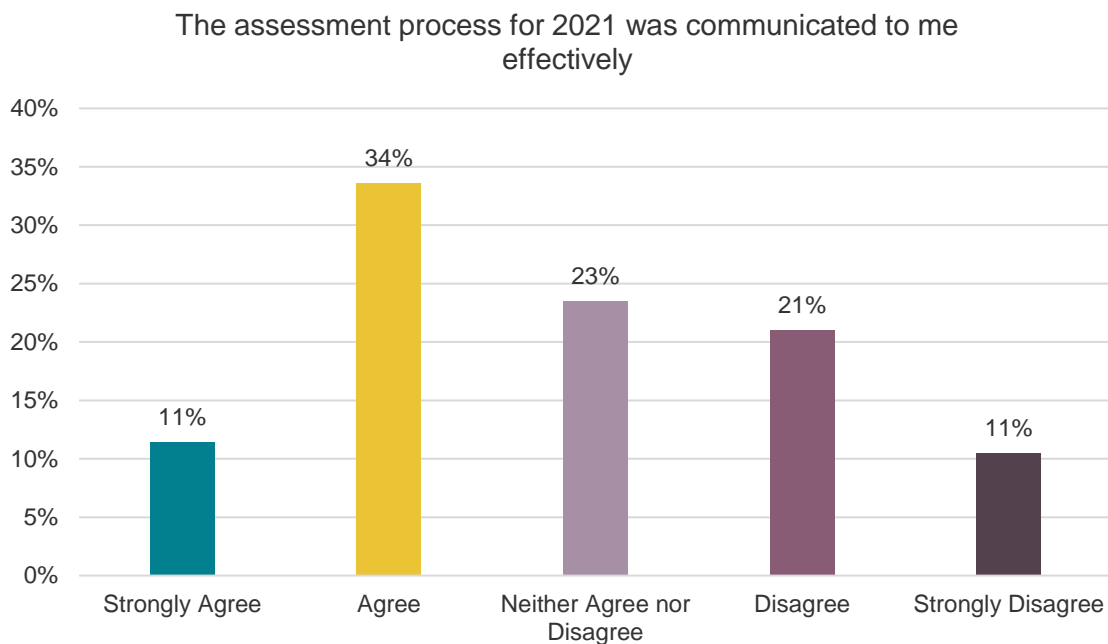
When asked about which parts of the assessment process did not work well, learner interview participants frequently mentioned the difficulties of learning, and some said that they were disappointed that the ACM was more like a traditional exam than they were expecting. Other commonly raised issues were confusing information, expectations around the ACM, and not being sure what to expect.

11.2 Overall views

Learners

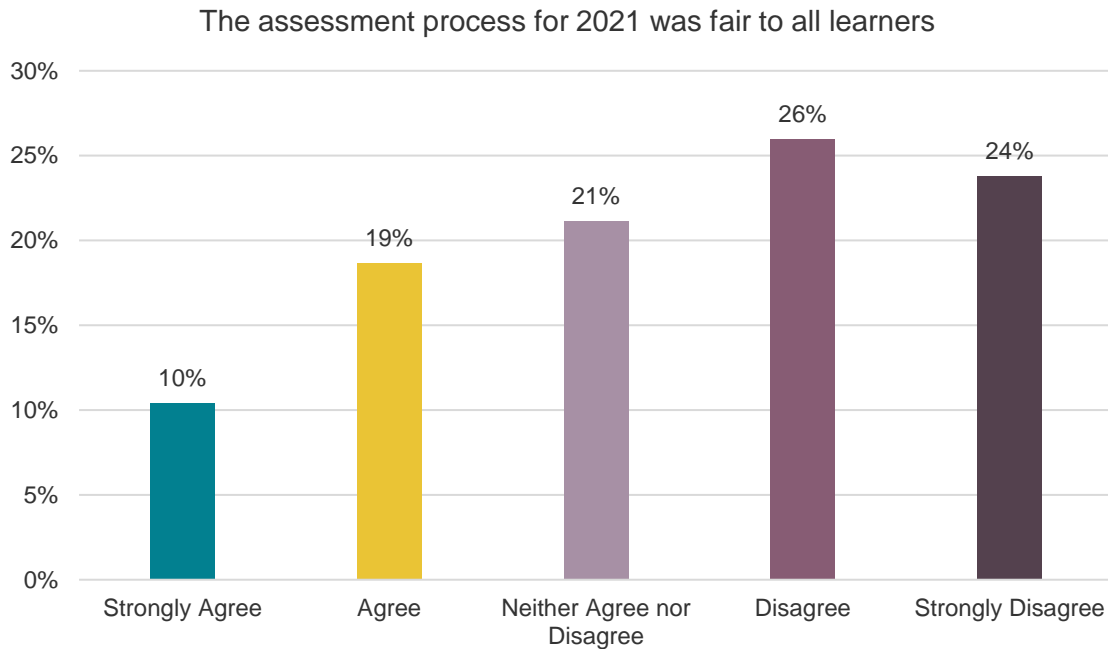
As demonstrated in Figure 51, 11% of learner survey respondents strongly agreed that the assessment process for 2021 was communicated to them effectively; 34% agreed; 23% neither agreed nor disagreed; 21% disagreed; and 11% strongly disagreed.

Figure 51



While 29% of learners either strongly agreed or agreed that the assessment process for 2021 was fair to all learners, 50% either disagreed or strongly disagreed. The remaining 21% neither agreed nor disagreed.

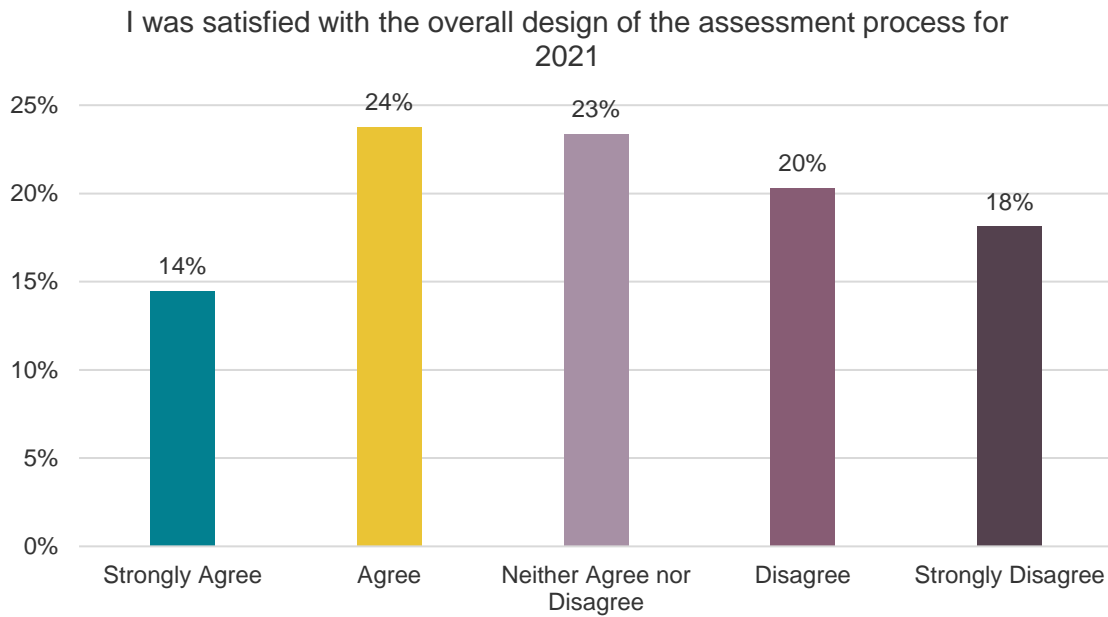
Figure 52



As shown in Figure 53, when it came to satisfaction with the overall design of the assessment process for 2021, responses were split.

- ◆ 14% of learners strongly agreed with the statement I was satisfied with the overall design of the assessment process for 2021
- ◆ 24% of learners agreed
- ◆ 23% neither agreed nor disagreed
- ◆ 20% disagreed
- ◆ 18% strongly disagreed

Figure 53

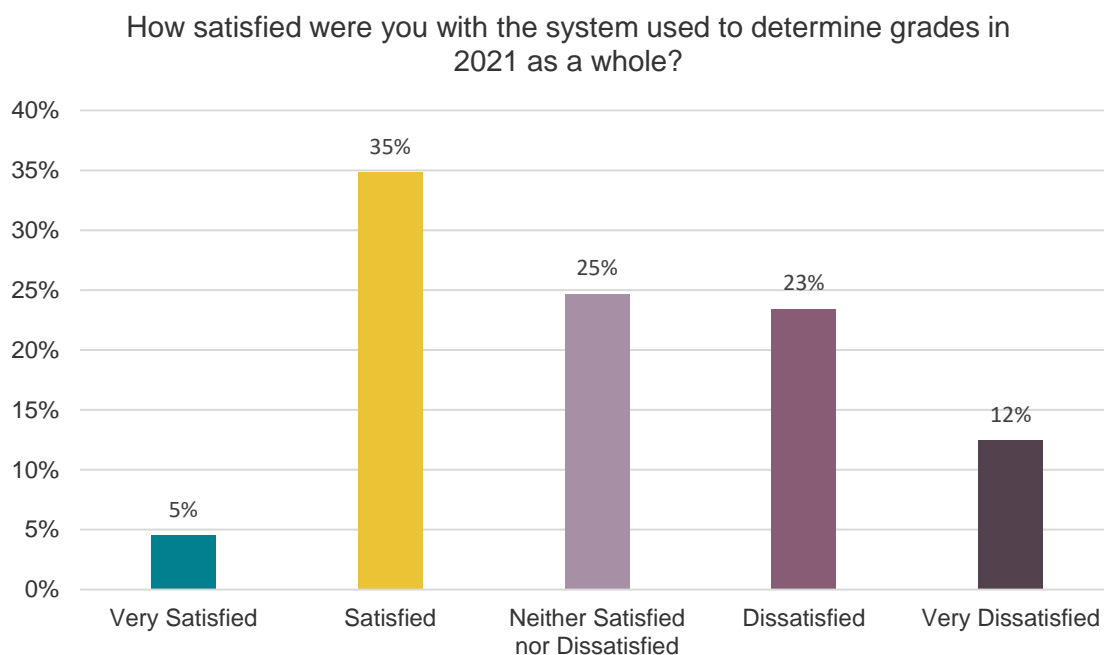


Practitioners

Practitioner survey respondents were asked how satisfied they were with the system used to determine grades in 2021 as a whole.

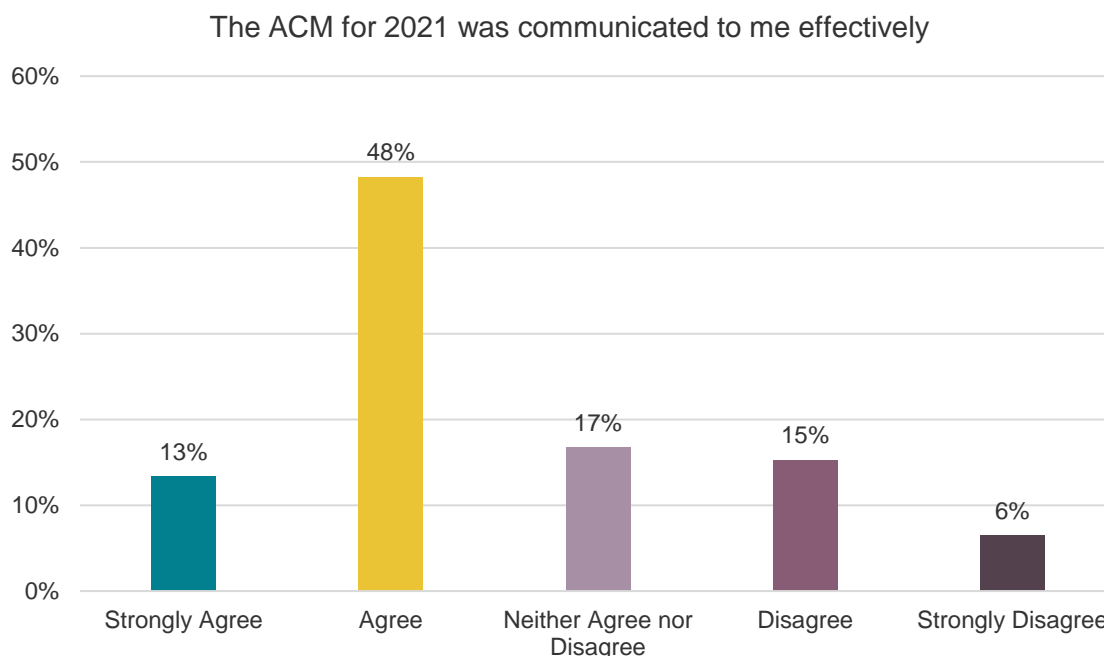
As demonstrated in Figure 54, while 5% of practitioners were very satisfied and 35% satisfied, 23% were dissatisfied and 12% very dissatisfied. A quarter of respondents were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

Figure 54



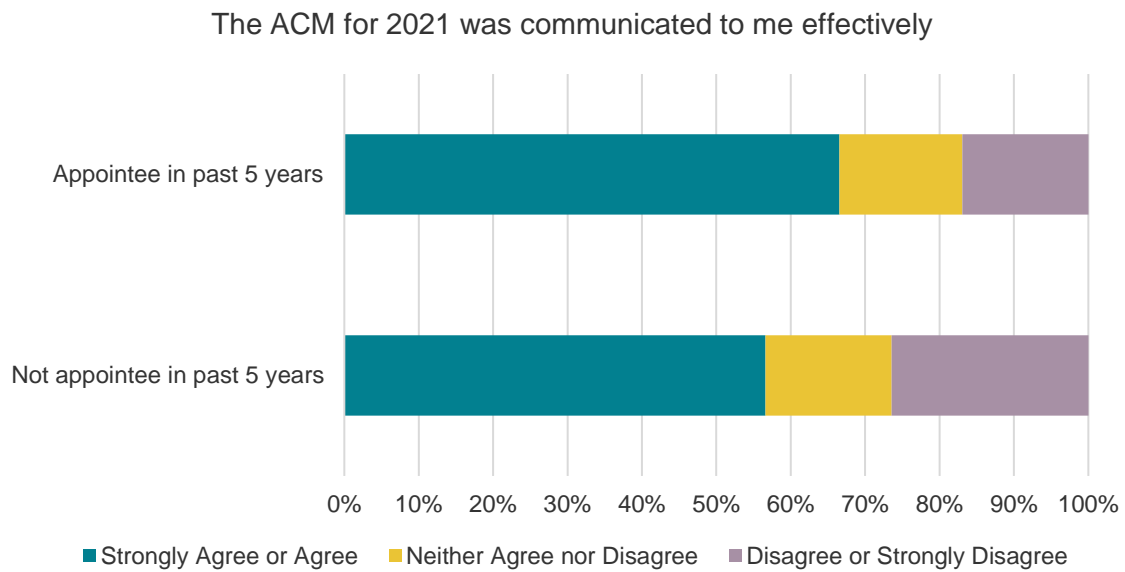
When asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statement *The ACM for 2021 was communicated to me effectively*, the majority of practitioner respondents agreed: 13% strongly agreed and 48% agreed. Meanwhile, 17% neither agreed nor disagreed, 15% disagreed, and 6% strongly disagreed.

Figure 55



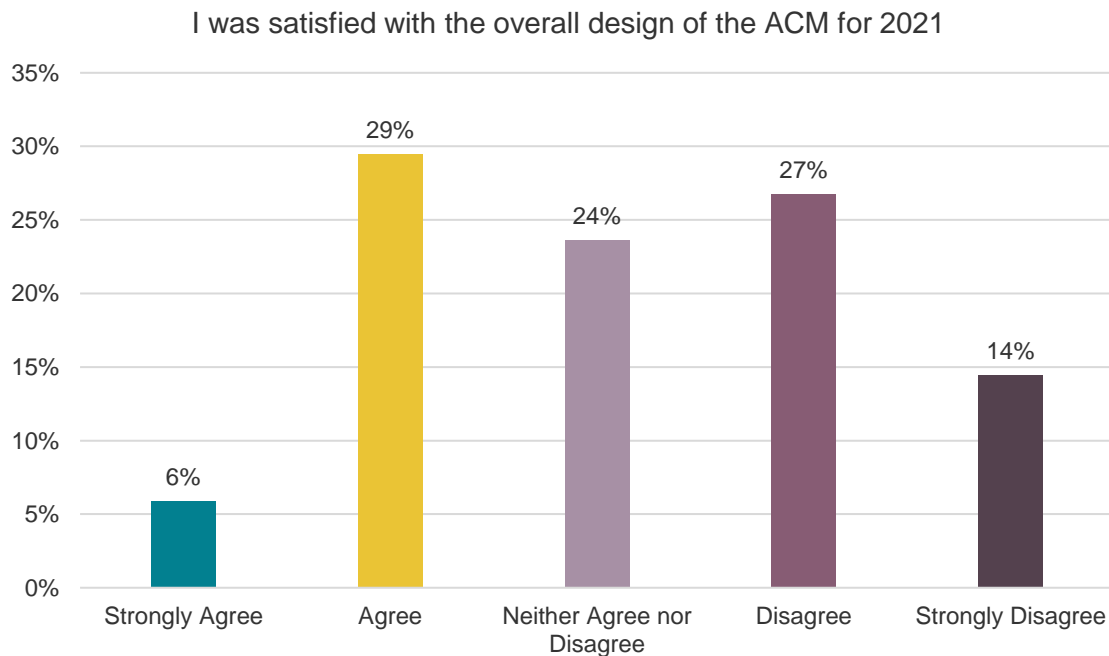
Those respondents who had been an SQA appointee, and so involved in SQA’s assessment processes, within the past five years were more likely than others to agree that the ACM was communicated to them effectively; 67% strongly agreed or agreed, compared to 57% of those who had not been an SQA appointee within the past five years.

Figure 56



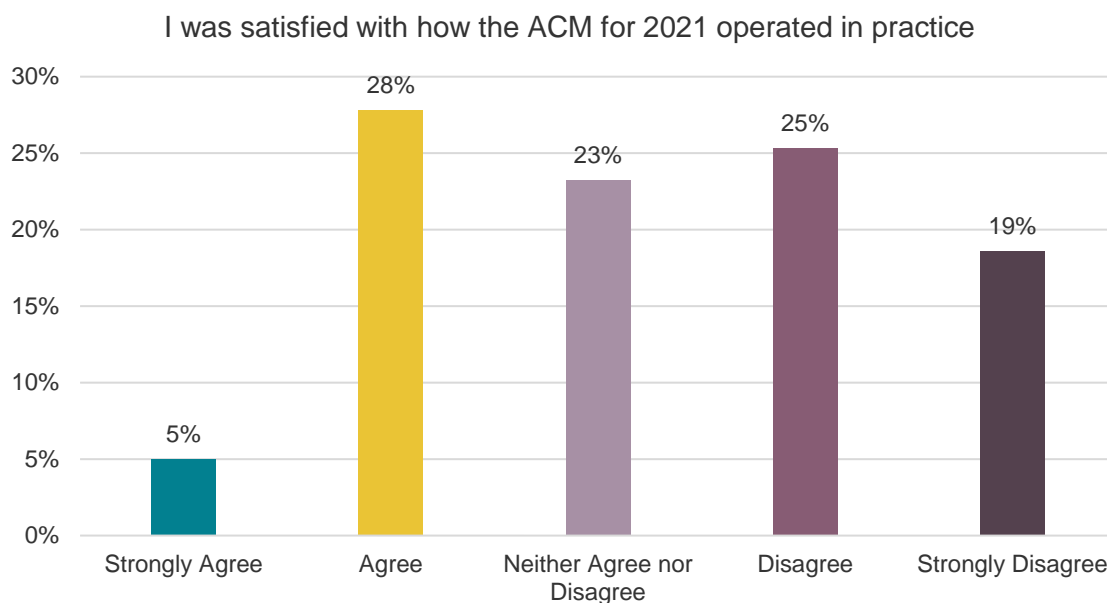
When asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statement *I was satisfied with the overall design of the ACM for 2021*, 6% of respondents strongly agreed, 29% agreed, 27% disagreed, and 14% strongly disagreed. The remaining 24% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 57



The proportions of respondents who agreed or disagreed with the statement *I was satisfied with how the ACM for 2021 operated in practice* were similar: 5% strongly agreed, 28% agreed, 23% neither agreed nor disagreed, 25% disagreed, and 19% strongly disagreed.

Figure 58



Learner interviews

In interview, setting aside the issues more generally caused by COVID-19, most learners seemed generally supportive of the ACM, though some mentioned the additional assessment load and a pressured time preparing for a large number of assessments.

When asked whether and why they felt the system used in 2021 was better or worse than a normal exam diet, most learners seemed to view the ACM as being fairer and less stressful, often citing their perception that the alternative was a single high-stakes exam. However, some interviewees caveated this by suggesting that they felt that the process in 2021 was not well organised or well implemented. This depended very much on the experience of the learner — it varied by centre and subject and how the ACM had been implemented, managed, and communicated to the learners.

'I don't think things should rely on one exam at the end of the year, cause what if you're not feeling your best that day, I know of people who haven't had the greatest time and they go into the exam and they're like 'I can't do this I'm too tired' and just end up staring out the window. [ACM] If you aren't feeling great one day it's fine you've got another one to lean back on.'

'[Assessment] In the classroom with your normal people. With our teachers as invigilators, we didn't have people we didn't know, and I think that was a lot better as I don't like people watching me as I do exams.'

'I really missed that most of my subjects which would have had a project or coursework or research piece...especially preparing now most subjects have a dissertation or project so feel like I've been thrown in at the deep end without having any real previous experience of doing independent research or compiling a paper ... so I feel that was quite missing.'

'In all honesty it was probably worse, because it was so put together last minute ... getting that email and knowing we're actually having them [exams] that was a real shock to the system because we'd been told that it wasn't going to happen and probably be based on coursework. It was all just ... not clearcut, nothing seemed set.'

12 Summary of findings

Engagement and communication

- ◆ Learners primarily found out how their grades would be awarded from their school or college. SQA, social media, friends, news, media, and parents/carers were also sources for significant numbers of learners. Practitioners mainly found out from their school or college and from SQA.
- ◆ Overall, the majority of learners and practitioners felt they did not have information on how grades would be awarded early enough in the academic year. However, around two-fifths of learners and practitioners took the alternative view.
- ◆ Those practitioners who had been SQA appointees within the past five years, and so recently involved in SQA's assessment processes, were more likely than others to agree or strongly agree that they received information on how grades would be awarded early enough in the academic year.
- ◆ The majority of learners and practitioners felt that they understood how grades would be awarded. Around one in three learners and one in four practitioners took the alternative view.
- ◆ Those practitioners who had been SQA appointees within the past five years were more likely than others to agree or strongly agree that they understood how grades would be awarded.
- ◆ Most respondents felt that media and social media coverage of the ACM did not change their views of the process.

Guidance and support

- ◆ Around three-quarters of practitioners made regular use of SQA guidance on assessment. Most of the remainder made some use of the guidance.
- ◆ More of those respondents who had been an SQA appointee, and so involved in SQA's assessment processes, within the past five years reported making regular use of SQA guidance on assessment than those who had not.
- ◆ Over 60% of practitioners made regular use of the Understanding Standards website, with a further 30% making some use of it.
- ◆ Most support from teachers came from within their own schools and from informal networks.

Teaching and learning

- ◆ More than 80% of learners agreed (and over half strongly agreed) that disruption due to COVID-19 had a significant impact on their teaching and learning experience in the 2020–21 academic year.
- ◆ Around three-quarters of learners agreed (and slightly over 40% strongly agreed) that disruption due to COVID-19 had a significant impact on their assessment experience.
- ◆ Learners reported that schools took a variety of measures to help those who had missed more time than average. These included additional catch-up sessions during lunch breaks or after school, Microsoft Teams drop-in sessions, and other forms of support. Some mentioned schools providing additional assessments if needed.

- ◆ 90% of practitioners agreed (and 60% strongly agreed) that disruption in their school or college had a significant impact on learning and teaching.
- ◆ Almost 90% of practitioners agreed (and slightly over half strongly agreed) that disruption in their school or college had a significant impact on assessment.
- ◆ Almost 80% of practitioners agreed (and half strongly agreed) that the lockdown in early 2021 impacted significantly on how the ACM operated.
- ◆ Practitioners cited a number of ways in which the lockdown impacted the ACM, including difficulties in generating usable evidence, learner disengagement, loss of learner confidence, and particular issues with practical subjects.
- ◆ Practitioners also felt that the lockdown had reduced opportunities for assessments, such as prelims, and felt that this had led to assessments being compressed into the post-Easter period.
- ◆ Practitioners suggested a range of things which would have improved the ACM. As there was a variety of views, some of these suggestions may appear contradictory. They suggested that better communication from SQA, more rigorous quality assurance and a more uniform approach to marking across schools and local authorities would have been beneficial. Conversely, some practitioners felt that greater autonomy would have been helpful.

Assessment and evidence

- ◆ A third of learners reported having an average of four or more assessments per subject, and just under a third each reported having three assessments per subject and two assessments per subject.
- ◆ Learners indicated that they were assessed in a variety of ways. Four in five learners had at least one assessment where they were not aware of what would be covered, while around half were assessed using a test or exam with advance knowledge of its content. A similar number were assessed using a portfolio of work, while smaller numbers were assessed using either an assignment with no access to textbooks or sources, or an assignment with access to textbooks or sources.
- ◆ In general, learners felt that their school or college took a similar approach to assessing all their subjects.
- ◆ Around 85% of learners felt that their assessments covered the contents of their courses, and almost two-thirds felt that the assessment and grading process was successful.
- ◆ Two-thirds of practitioners said that they had generated evidence through centre-adapted SQA assessments, while 57% used SQA assessments without adapting them, and 44% had used centre-developed assessments. Around 12% said that they had used other methods.
- ◆ Where schools or colleges developed their own assessments, a majority of practitioners felt that these were similar to SQA assessments, suggesting that most evidence was generated through either SQA assessments or similar instruments.
- ◆ Where learners suffered significantly more learning loss than average, the most common centre accommodations were allowing them to take assessments at a later date and allowing alternative evidence to be generated.
- ◆ Around half of schools and colleges only allowed learners to take a particular assessment once. Of those who took a more flexible approach, around half said that they allowed learners to repeat assessments under exceptional circumstances; a quarter

said that this was allowed where performance was lower than expected; and the remainder said that most or all learners re-took assessments.

- ◆ In general, schools and colleges took two approaches to gathering evidence. Around half of all practitioners said that evidence for all learners was generated using the same assessments, while most of the remainder said that evidence for most learners was generated using the same assessments, but, in certain circumstances, additional evidence was drawn on.

Workload and stress

- ◆ Almost half of learners felt that their workload was higher or much higher under the ACM than they imagined would be the case in a year with a normal exam diet. Just over a third thought that it was much the same, and around 16% felt that it was less or much less. It is important to recognise that S4 and S5 learners had generally not participated in a typical exam diet.
- ◆ Among those who felt that their workload was likely to be higher than in a year with a normal exam diet, the volume and scheduling of assessment, difficulties caused by lockdown and remote learning, and a lack of study leave were cited as contributing factors.
- ◆ Half of learners felt that the stress levels experienced under the ACM were higher or much higher than they thought would be the case with a normal exam diet. Around a quarter felt they were about the same, while a quarter felt that they were lower or much lower.
- ◆ Among those who felt that stress levels were higher than they would be in a year with a normal exam diet, the uncertainty around how and when learners would be assessed, the number and schedule of assessments, a constant pressure to perform in assessments, and the added difficulties of online learning were commonly mentioned as reasons for this.
- ◆ A substantial number of learners felt, however, that the lack of a single high-stakes examination made the ACM model less stressful than a normal exam diet was likely to be.
- ◆ Over 80% of practitioners stated that their workload was much higher than in a year with a normal exam diet and 15% stated that their workload was higher than in a normal year.
- ◆ The most commonly cited reason for this was the increased marking burden for practitioners, as assessments which would normally be marked externally had to be marked by school or college staff instead. The quality assurance processes in the ACM also led to substantial additional workload for practitioners.
- ◆ Other workload issues for practitioners included time spent on developing assessments, running assessments, gathering evidence, and time spent on grading learners. The lack of study leave also meant that there was a requirement for teachers to continue running a full timetable for those who would ordinarily not be in school.

Grading

- ◆ Slightly over two-thirds of learners either agreed or strongly agreed that the grades they received in 2021 were fair. Around 16% disagreed or strongly disagreed.
- ◆ Those who felt that the grades were not fair cited concerns around the volume and scheduling of assessment, loss of learning, the lack of study leave, and a perception that exams had been cancelled which led to a lack of revision. Some learners also noted that

practices were not the same across the country, which gave rise to a perception of unfairness.

- ◆ Other concerns raised by considerable numbers of learners were around the leaking of SQA papers, learners sitting the same assessments on different days, and teachers and lecturers providing targeted support on the contents of assessments.
- ◆ Just over three-quarters of practitioners either agreed or strongly agreed that the grades their learners received were fair. Around 13% disagreed or strongly disagreed.
- ◆ Among those who felt that grades were not fair, the most common theme was that grades were not comparable across centres or subjects. A substantial number of respondents raised concerns about the inconsistent application of the ACM across the country and the impact that this had on grades and fairness.
- ◆ Practitioners were more likely to raise concerns about grading across centres than within their own centre. These concerns related to a lack of effective moderation, cases where some schools had inexperienced staff, a lack of security for assessment materials, and differing approaches to standards, evidence, and assessment.
- ◆ Over 90% of practitioners felt confident or very confident in making marking judgements.
- ◆ More of those practitioners who had been SQA appointees within the past five years felt very confident making marking judgements compared to those who had not.
- ◆ Learners were largely not aware of the details of the marking and grading process. Communications from different centres on these issues varied.
- ◆ Practitioners described differing grading processes in different centres. While most had some form of internal moderation, the approaches varied from centre to centre. Some scrutinised borderline candidates more closely, while others double marked all scripts, and some sampled scripts.
- ◆ Some practitioners felt that moderation across their local authority did not work effectively, as there was not always sufficient time to take action on any results of this exercise, the process was seen as advisory, and it was felt to be of less value where practitioners at the other centre or centres participating were less experienced.

Appeals and incomplete evidence

- ◆ 7% of learners submitted an appeal. Of these, over 79% had received the result of their appeal at the time the survey was conducted. Due to the small sample size, results of questions about appeals are therefore indicative at best.
- ◆ Learners' views on whether they understood the appeals process well were broadly evenly split. More learners felt the process was not fair than felt it was fair, and more learners who appealed were dissatisfied with the process than were satisfied.
- ◆ Just over 30% of practitioners had at least one learner who had appealed. Again, results of appeals questions are therefore only indicative.
- ◆ Most practitioners felt that they understood the appeals process well. More practitioners were satisfied with the appeals process than were dissatisfied. There was no clear consensus on the added workload due to appeals.
- ◆ Around 90% of learners were not aware of the incomplete evidence contingency arrangement.
- ◆ 64% of practitioners were not aware of the incomplete evidence contingency arrangement.

- ◆ Around 90% of practitioners said that none of their learners had used the service. A similar number said, however, that there were no barriers to learners using the service.

Overall experiences of the ACM

- ◆ When asked what worked well in the ACM, learners mentioned reduced pressure and stress, shorter assessments in familiar environments, preferring continuous assessment to exams, knowledge of topics to be assessed, SQA course modifications, the potential to re-sit assessments, and receiving grades earlier than would be the case in a normal exam diet.
- ◆ Learners felt that a range of aspects of the ACM did not work well. The main issues raised were a perception that end-of-year assessments were exams in all but name, lack of notification of assessments, over-assessment, too many assessments in a short space of time, a lack of understanding on the part of learners of evidence requirements, the assessment and grading process, learning loss due to lockdown, and concerns about fairness.
- ◆ Practitioners gave a range of responses when asked what parts of the process worked well. Some felt that nothing worked well, while others felt that, apart from the excessive workload, things generally functioned well. Respondents felt that SQA providing sample question papers worked well, as did the flexibility in the process, and the reliance on teacher judgement.
- ◆ Other areas that practitioners felt worked well included the moderation processes, especially within centres, and the flexibility that the system allowed to assess candidates with substantial learning loss.
- ◆ When practitioners were asked what did not work well, the two main themes were around excessive workload and around inconsistencies in approach between centres.
- ◆ Workload was raised by both school and college practitioners, and even parts of the process which were seen as being valuable, such as moderation, caused significant additional work for practitioners.
- ◆ Practitioners raised concerns about inconsistencies in assessment approach, in grading, and in whether learners could access the contents of papers in advance of assessments.
- ◆ Learners had mixed views on whether the assessment process for 2021 was communicated to them effectively, with slightly more either agreeing or strongly agreeing that it had been than disagreeing or strongly disagreeing.
- ◆ Half of learners disagreed or strongly disagreed that the assessment process was fair to all learners, compared to around a third who agreed or strongly agreed.
- ◆ Around 38% of learners agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the assessment process in 2021. However, the same proportion disagreed or strongly disagreed.
- ◆ 40% of practitioners felt that the assessment process was communicated to them effectively, with just over 20% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing.
- ◆ Those respondents who had been an SQA appointee, and so involved in SQA's assessment processes, within the past five years were more likely than others to agree that the ACM was communicated to them effectively.
- ◆ Over 40% of practitioners were dissatisfied with the overall design of the ACM in 2021, compared to just over a third who were satisfied. When asked about how the ACM had operated in practice, views were very similar.

13 Concluding remarks

As noted earlier, the purpose of this research is to develop an understanding of the views and experiences of learners and practitioners. As with any such piece of research, there are several methodological caveats that ought to be considered.

SQA had to rely upon schools and colleges across Scotland to make the survey available to both learners and practitioners, and, once again, we would like to express our gratitude for that assistance. We were also reliant on learners and practitioners taking the time to complete the survey, and there is, as a result, a degree of self-selection involved in participating in this research.

Similarly, the number of qualitative interviews carried out was relatively small, and interviewees came from survey participants who volunteered to take part — potentially creating some self-selection issues. The research would have benefitted from more interviews and from a wider range of perspectives, although we tried to ensure that participants covered a range of areas, subjects, roles and settings.

Nonetheless, as discussed more fully in Chapter 2 of this report, we believe that the results obtained are broadly representative of the views of Scotland's learners and practitioners. We consider that the interviews have provided much useful data and have provided the greater detail that we had hoped for when planning this research.

One of the difficulties in analysing the ACM in 2021 is in differentiating between those effects that are an inherent part of the ACM, those effects that are a result of the way in which the ACM was implemented, and those effects that were a result of the pandemic and the learning loss that it caused. Our research does not attempt to separate out these effects, interlinked as they are, but policymakers in future must consider lessons learned from the 2021 ACM in the context that it operated. It is hoped that, as Scotland introduces reforms to the way we assess young people, they are not introduced during a period of immense stress, such as was the case in 2021. Hence, those involved in developing and implementing such changes will need to consider which lessons from 2021 apply and which do not.

One of the important things that this research revealed was the range of views — both between learners, practitioners and principal assessors, and within each group. In summary, there was no singular view or experience. This was particularly apparent when looking at the volume of assessment, where some learners felt that there were too many assessments, and others felt that an advantage of the ACM was that there were multiple opportunities to demonstrate their abilities. There was a related tension around stress, where a considerable proportion of learners felt that the ACM was more stressful than a normal exam diet, and others felt that having multiple opportunities to demonstrate their ability was less stressful than a single high-stakes exam. However, it is important to recognise the role of perception here: many of these learners had not taken part in a normal exam diet, and most National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications are assessed in a variety of ways, not simply by an exam.

Similarly, there was a tension expressed by both learners and practitioners around the divergences of approach between different centres. Many felt that this led to unfairness as

they perceived that not all learners were being assessed on the same basis, while others felt that this allowed schools and colleges to assess learners in the most appropriate manner. This could be considered a useful reminder that all systems and ways of assessing learners have their own strengths and weaknesses, and that these ought to be borne in mind when future decisions are made.

Another interesting finding was the distinction between perceptions of how the process worked in a learner or practitioner's own centre, and how it worked across the country. Most learners and practitioners felt that their grades, or the grades of their learners, were fair. However, half of all learners felt that the process was not fair to all learners. Both learners and practitioners expressed concerns about differences in approaches to grading and assessment across different centres.

We have reported earlier in this paper what we perceive as the key findings from this research, and there is no value in repeating these here. It is important to note once again, however, that we made a conscious choice not to attempt to interpret the views expressed by participants and not to develop recommendations from them. Instead, we feel that there is value in understanding how learners, practitioners and principal assessors perceived the ACM and that this is, in itself, a valuable contribution to the research around the ACM.