

Perceptions of Assessment Standards in Scotland: Employer Survey

Report 4 of 4

Ashmita Randhawa, Thomas Godfrey-Faussett, Jo-Anne Baird, Louise Hayward, Carolyn Hutchinson, Ernest Spencer, Lesley Wiseman-Orr and SQA colleagues

Department of Education, Glasgow University
Department of Education, Oxford University
Scottish Qualifications Authority

September 2022



Contents

1	Executive Summary	1
1.1	About the project.....	1
1.2	This report.....	1
1.3	Data collection.....	1
1.4	Findings.....	1
2	Perceptions of Assessment Standards in Scotland Project	3
2.1	Understanding stakeholder views of qualifications in Scotland.....	3
2.2	Stakeholders' perceptions of assessment standards in Scotland.....	3
2.3	Approach.....	3
3	Methodology	5
3.1	Data collection.....	5
3.2	Ethics.....	6
4	Employer Survey Findings	7
4.1	Respondents.....	7
4.2	Importance of National Qualifications.....	9
4.3	Fairness of qualifications.....	10
4.4	Trust in SQA.....	11
4.5	Future assessment of National Qualifications.....	13
4.6	Understanding of standards.....	14
4.7	Government policy.....	15
4.8	Questions related to National Qualifications.....	17
4.9	Conclusions.....	21
5	References	23

List of Figures

Figure 1	Employer survey respondents' company sizes.....	7
Figure 2	Highest level of qualification held by employer survey respondents.....	8
Figure 3	Local authorities in which employers were based.....	9
Figure 4	Perceived importance of National Qualifications in recruitment.....	9
Figure 5	Employers' views on whether the 2021 National Qualification results were fair.....	10
Figure 6	Employers' rationales for the 2021 National Qualification results being seen as fair.....	11
Figure 7	Employers' trust in SQA's ability to deliver qualifications compared with before 2020.....	12
Figure 8	Reasons for having no change in trust in SQA.....	12
Figure 9	Reasons for trusting SQA less than prior to 2020.....	13
Figure 10	Responses to the question regarding desire for change to National Qualifications.....	13
Figure 11	Views on what changes to National Qualifications employers would like to see.....	14
Figure 12	How employers viewed the term 'standards' in qualifications.....	15
Figure 13	Views on whether basing National Qualifications on teacher grades was the correct policy.....	16
Figure 14	Reasons given for agreeing that teacher assessment was the right policy.....	16
Figure 15	Views on whether qualifications were easier in 2021 than in a normal year.....	17
Figure 16	Views on whether standards were the same across schools in 2021.....	18
Figure 17	Views on whether examinations are the best way to assess learners.....	18
Figure 18	Views on whether student-teacher relationships affected grading.....	19
Figure 19	Views on whether teachers were well prepared to make accurate judgments in 2021.....	20
Figure 20	Views on the effects of lost learning in 2021 on learners' performances to the standards normally required.....	21

1 Executive Summary

1.1 About the project

Following the public reaction to grading of the summer 2020 national qualifications in Scotland, SQA launched a broad research programme to investigate and engage with stakeholders' views regarding qualifications in Scotland. This project forms part of the programme of work. The Perceptions of Assessment Standards in Scotland project specifically investigated stakeholders' views on fairness and standards of qualifications in 2020 and 2021. An empirical study of perceptions of stakeholders and their reports on what influenced their views was conducted through focus groups with 82 stakeholders, a questionnaire with 918 stakeholders and a telephone survey with 103 employers. The aims of the work were to better understand views of qualifications in Scottish society and to use this inform better assessment policy making and communication with stakeholders. The research was conducted by teams from the University of Glasgow, the University of Oxford and SQA.

1.2 This report

Despite efforts to engage employers, few participated in the focus groups and questionnaire studies. Therefore, a separate telephone survey was conducted to involve this important stakeholder group by contacting them directly. Employers are often found to be a difficult group to engage with education matters and they cannot necessarily be expected to be close to the details of education or qualification policy (Wolf and Jenkins, 2005). However, they are important qualification users, some of whom do engage with educational policy for professional reasons and others are aware of current educational policy and practice due to their personal connections. This report focuses on the analysis of the telephone survey with employers and is one of four which looks at stakeholders' perceptions of standards and the qualifications process in Scotland. In addition to an overview report, there are two other reports in the series, which outline the focus groups and the questionnaire findings.

1.3 This research

This telephone survey was led by the University of Oxford and co-designed with SQA. The survey was a subset of the questions asked on the questionnaire with broader stakeholders groups, adapted for use by telephone. It was administered by Ashbrook Research & Consultancy Limited. Data collection took place in December 2021, with a target sample of 200 employers. An achieved sample of just over half of this target was reached. In the research literature on employer views on qualification standards, this represents a comparatively large sample.

1.4 Findings

Of the 103 respondents, the majority of employers (n =70) were from small companies employing 10 to 49 people. Most of the employers were from the Glasgow City region (n=21), however nearly all of the Local Authorities were represented. A common response to survey questions was that employers did not feel that they could respond to the question, as they did not have enough information. This is understandable since their focus is on their business activities and it is in keeping with previous research literature. However, sizeable though this group was, they were not generally in the majority, often representing approximately one third of the sample.

Only ten of the employers surveyed thought that the National Qualification results in 2021 were unfair, with 31 considering them to be fair. Sixty-two of the employers felt that they were not in a position to be able to

comment on the question. Of those employers who believed that the results were fair, 22 believed that the approach that SQA had adopted had been the appropriate response given the circumstances or that SQA had handled the Covid situation well. Additionally, 71 respondents indicated that their trust in SQA was unchanged or that they trusted them more (n=2). A small number of employers reported an erosion of trust (n=9).

Very few employers considered that the policy on use of teacher grades was the wrong choice (n=13), seeing this as the best option under the circumstances (n=26) or indicating that teachers are well placed to grade their students (n=27) and that they were likely to grade accurately (n=57). However, many employers (n=55) considered that the relationship between students and teachers was likely to have affected grading.

The majority of employers (n=84) understood the term standards to mean “a level to be achieved” or “a base level of knowledge”. This terminology suggests that employers saw the qualifications as being criterion-referenced, in which the criteria for the standard are pre-specified in the form of outcome statements. Only approximately one quarter of employers (n=26) considered that the 2021 results were easier than in a normal year, with a substantial number (n=44) feeling that they were not in a position to judge. Many employers (n=44) did not feel that they knew whether standards were equivalent across schools in 2021. Moreover, the majority of respondents (n=63) recognised that lost learning was likely to have affected the capacity for learners to demonstrate normal performance standards in 2021.

Seventy employers considered that National Qualifications were important for recruitment decisions, with this group of employers identifying that the information signalling function for progression to employment and higher education were the most important. However, the other information signalling functions (feedback for learners, comparison with other learners, institutional feedback regarding schools and colleges and educational system monitoring) were also considered to be important. Most respondents did not feel they could comment on whether there was a need for change to the National Qualifications (n=51) and approximately one third of respondents felt that there was no need for change. Examinations were seen by a large number of respondents (n=45) as the best way to assess learners.

2 Perceptions of Assessment Standards in Scotland Project

2.1 Understanding stakeholder views of qualifications in Scotland

The research reported here is part of a programme of work by SQA to engage with stakeholders' perceptions of qualifications in Scotland. Prompted by the systems crisis in the summer of 2020, the impetus for this research programme came from the SQA Executive, charging the research team and the organisation to investigate what qualification users considered the principal issues to be and to use the information to better develop assessment policy. Dips in public confidence occur following systemic crises and it takes several years to regain trust and confidence. In the Rapid Review of the National Qualification Experience conducted in 2020, attention was drawn to a perceived lack of transparency in engagement with stakeholders (Priestley et al., 2020, p4).

This report is one of four which looks at stakeholder perceptions of standards; in this case focusing upon employers' views. The other three in this series are

1. Overview of the Perceptions of Assessment Standards in Scotland Project
2. Perceptions of Assessment Standards in Scotland: Focus Groups with Stakeholders
3. Perceptions of Assessment Standards in Scotland: Questionnaire with Stakeholders

2.2 Stakeholders' perceptions of assessment standards in Scotland

Public confidence in the qualification system is essential to maintain the currency of the certificates for the young people whose life chances depend upon them. It is vital that relevant stakeholder groups are both well-informed and consulted. Surprisingly, how people view standards and what influences their confidence in assessment systems are little-researched topics. We know from research conducted in England that stakeholders' views of reliability and trust in the system go well beyond the standard setting system, to include issues regarding content standards, bias, reliability, validity, and utility of qualifications (He, Boyle and Opposs, 2011; Chamberlain, 2013; Simpson and Baird, 2013). Necessarily, assessment industry insiders have come to define terms in specific ways, but this can make communication between assessment specialists and the wider community less effective.

The purpose of this research was to investigate what standards mean to practitioners, pupils, parents and to society more broadly. Influences upon stakeholders' confidence in qualifications and their views about assessment reform were also matters of interest. Additionally, the disruptive context of the pandemic raised significant issues upon which stakeholders' views were usefully sought. Concerns regarding assessment standards during the pandemic were an important part of the evidence-gathering. The emerging findings informed SQA's Communications Strategy and through disseminating the findings, contributed to the delivery of that strategy.

2.3 Approach

Research, which was at once independent, well-informed, and integrated with the operational needs of SQA was needed. Additionally, the project needed to gather information that could influence

longer term assessment policy as well as the shorter-term needs for forthcoming assessment series. A participatory research design was adopted, involving collaboration between researchers in the Departments of Education at the Universities of Glasgow and Oxford and colleagues in SQA's research and communications teams. Stakeholders were consulted about the design of the project and the data collection techniques as part of the participatory design. To ensure that the project was open to the views of participants, focus groups with 82 practitioners, lecturers, pupils, students, parents, carers, head practitioners, college principals, employers, university admissions officers and journalists were conducted first. Next, an online questionnaire survey was conducted with 918 complete responses. Finally, a telephone survey of 103 employers was conducted.

As the focus groups were conducted in advance of the 2021 summer assessment series, rapid analyses of the findings by stakeholder group were produced for use by relevant SQA colleagues. Questions were raised by teams across SQA that were addressed in the data collection where possible. Interpretation of the findings benefited from wide discussion across the project team and with colleagues across SQA, but importantly, the voices of stakeholders were deemed central to the purpose of the work throughout.

3 Methodology

A participatory action research project was undertaken, involving participatory methods, dialogue across departments in SQA and rapidly produced interim findings. The rationale for this approach, which produced challenging timescales, was to ensure that the research was useful to SQA and therefore benefited the public. Expertise within the organisation was integrated into the design of the study and the independence of the teams in universities brought wide perspectives to the research design. Data collection techniques involved focus groups with a wide range of stakeholders, a survey of stakeholder views and a separate survey of employers' views. Further information about the participatory methods and the other strands of data collection can be found in the other three reports in this series.

The topic of examination standards is not new in academia. However, recently most of the literature has been focused on media statements and policy documents and reports. There has been limited empirical research exploring stakeholder perceptions of standards and qualifications directly, particularly in Scotland. This is of note, as wide variation exists in perspectives and understanding between assessment bodies like SQA and key stakeholders who engage with the assessment process in a range of different ways.

This study focused on understanding how key stakeholders involved with the assessment and qualifications process understand the notion of standards, and how they assess the fairness in a qualifications process. This research was conducted with stakeholders who engage with the qualification and assessment process at different timepoints and in different ways. Working with these stakeholders allowed us to build a holistic view of how qualifications are understood by the community.

This study used multiple methods to answer the following research questions:

1. What influenced the reactions of different communities to the SQA qualifications processes and results in 2020?
2. What factors influence different communities' perceptions of fairness for all learners in qualifications?
3. How do people in different communities understand the term standards in the context of qualifications? What do they believe matters?
4. What do people in different communities believe can be learnt from experience in 2020 and 2021 in relation to:
 - a. confidence that future qualifications are fair and that standards are dependable?
 - b. actions of individuals and communities to inform public perceptions?

3.1 Data collection

The data collection methods deployed were qualitative and quantitative; data was collected via focus group discussions and surveys. Employers are of course not a completely distinct group; they are likely to engage with the issues in the survey as parents, partners of teachers and so on, depending upon their connections.

The University of Oxford team led the survey of employers strand of the project. A shorter survey was deployed amongst employers in Scotland to assess their current thinking on qualifications and

their opinions on SQA and its role in the administration of qualifications. The survey was designed to be shorter than the stakeholder questionnaire because it was administered by telephone, to ensure higher participation rates amongst a population that is saturated by online surveys. Additionally, it was considered that employers, despite being ‘consumers’ of qualifications are a step removed from the details of the qualifications framework and might not be best placed to provide the same level of details as students, practitioners, and parents (Wolf & Jenkins, 2005).

The survey was designed in partnership with SQA and was administered by Ashbrook Research & Consultancy Limited in December 2021. The survey was piloted by Ashbrook Research & Consultancy Limited, resulting in minor changes to the wording of some questions as well as the removal of some questions which employers had struggled to comment on. This resulted from feedback in the pilot that the survey was too long. The data collected was analysed using SPSS.

3.2 Ethics

This study was conducted in accordance with the guidelines from the British Educational Research Association (BERA). Research ethics approvals were obtained for the study ahead of commencing data collection through the University of Oxford (ED-CIA-21-157) and University of Glasgow (400200142) ethical approval procedures.

4 Employer Survey Findings

4.1 Respondents

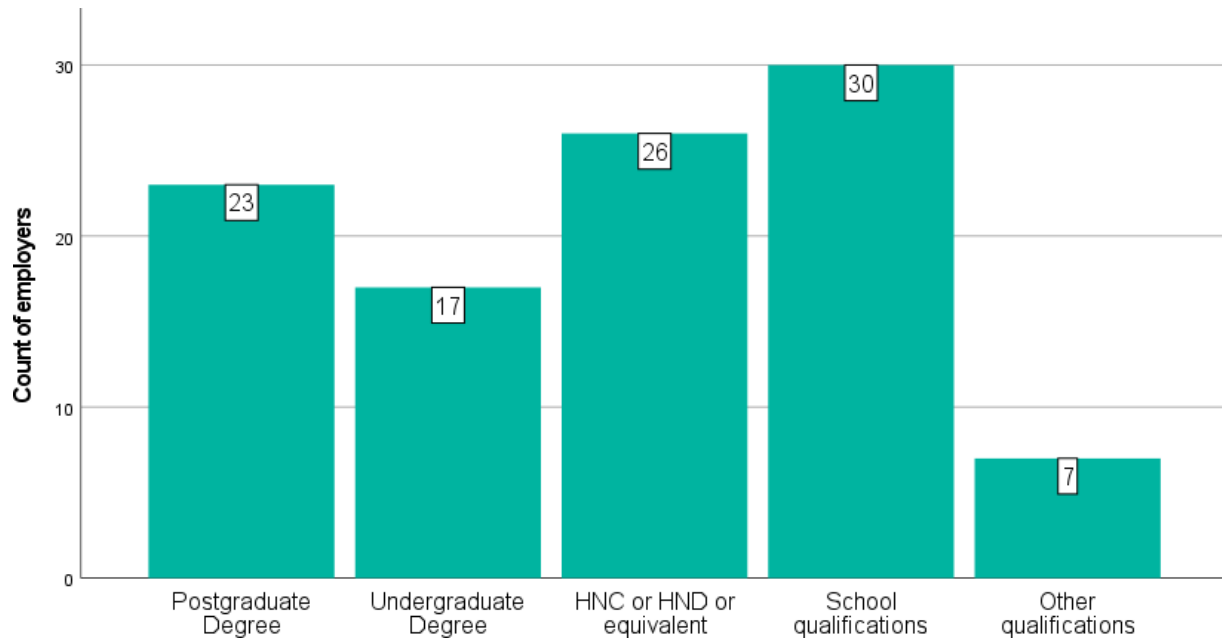
The target recruitment sample was 200 employers but only 103 employers responded to the survey. Difficulties in attracting participants to engage with the survey was notable. The majority of respondents represented small companies employing 10-49 people (Figure 1). Given the numbers of respondents, and the splits across categories across various questions, frequencies, rather than percentages are reported.

Figure 1 Employer survey respondents' company sizes



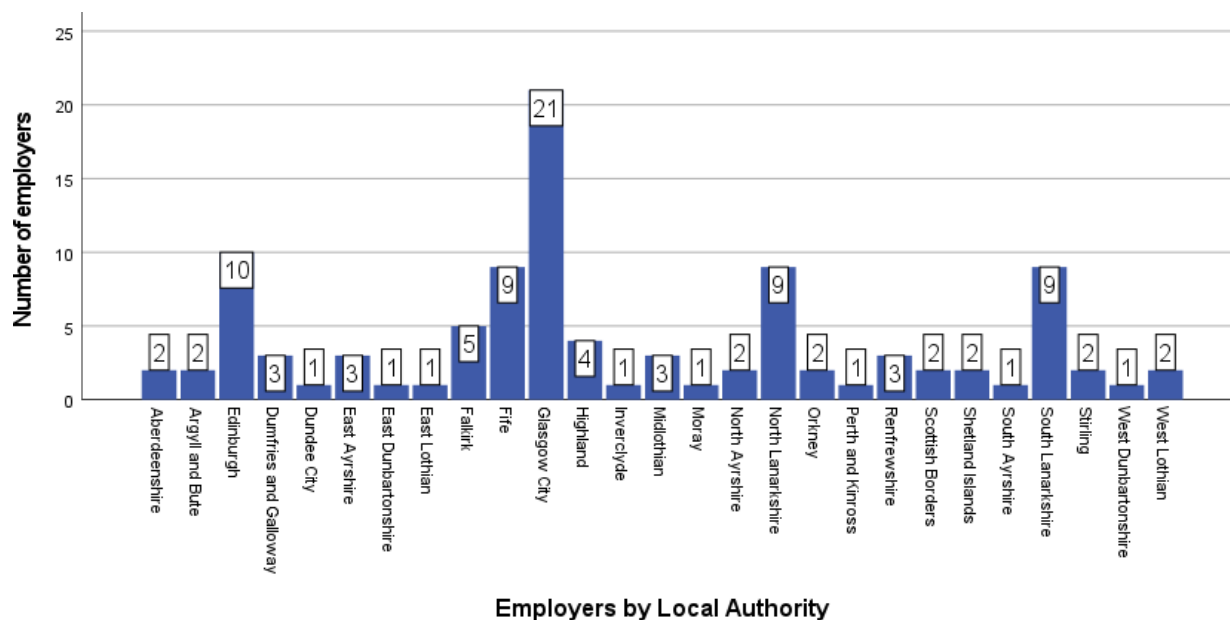
Of the 103 employers, the majority of respondents (n = 56) held school level qualifications or an HNC or HND or equivalent, though many also had a university education (n=40) (Figure 2).

Figure 2 Highest level of qualification held by employer survey respondents



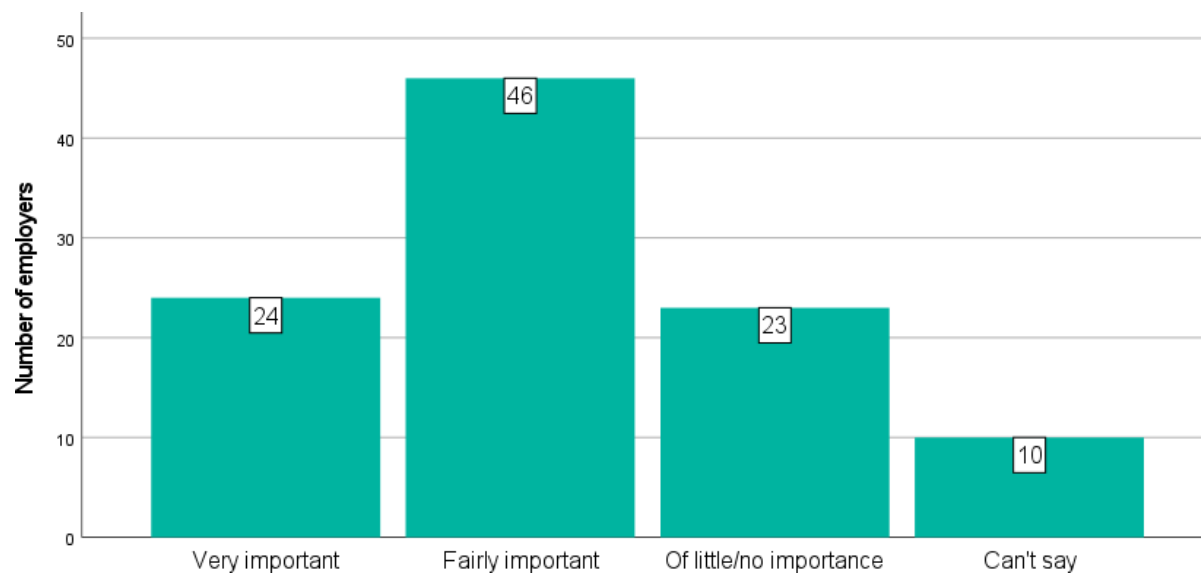
As evidenced in Figure 3, the employers who participated in the survey represented the majority of Local Authorities in Scotland with the largest group of employers (n=21) from the Glasgow city region. Unfortunately, we were not able to recruit employers from the Aberdeen City, Angus, Clackmannanshire, East Renfrewshire, and Eilean Siar regions.

Figure 3 Local authorities in which employers were based



Employers were asked how important they felt National Qualifications were for use in their recruitment processes. The majority of employers (n=70) believed that National Qualifications were either ‘Fairly Important’ or ‘Very Important’ (Figure 4).

Figure 4 Perceived importance of National Qualifications in recruitment



Employers were further asked to rate, on a scale of 1 to 10, how important National Qualifications are in providing the following information:

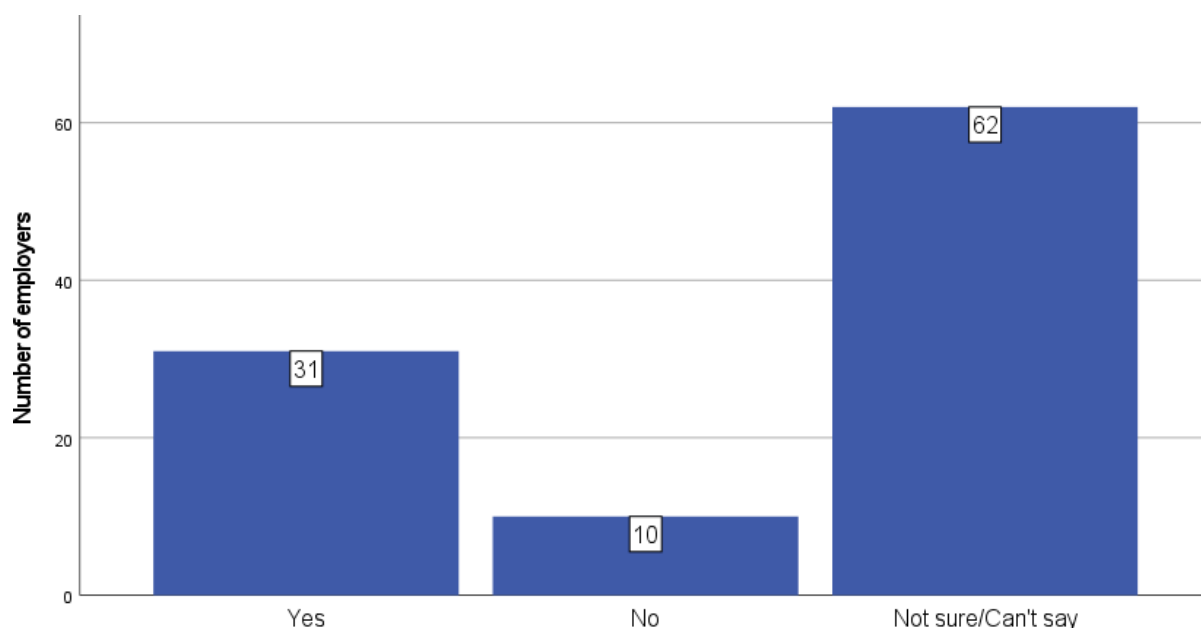
- Information for learners about what they know and can do
- How a learner compares with others who have taken the qualification
- How well schools and colleges are teaching
- Information about how the education system compares with previous years
- Information for employers about what learners know and can do
- Information for institutions – such as colleges and universities – to use to select students for further study

For most of the questions, the most common response category was that that they could not say or did not have any enough information to answer the questions. The mean values of the responses were calculated by removing the number of employers who did not respond. Employers considered that national qualifications were valuable information for the first four categories above, rating them at approximately 6.5. However, employers generally considered the last two categories to be more important, rating them at an average of over 7 on the ten-point scale. Thus, employers considered that National Qualifications were important information for progression to employment and higher education.

4.3 Fairness of qualifications

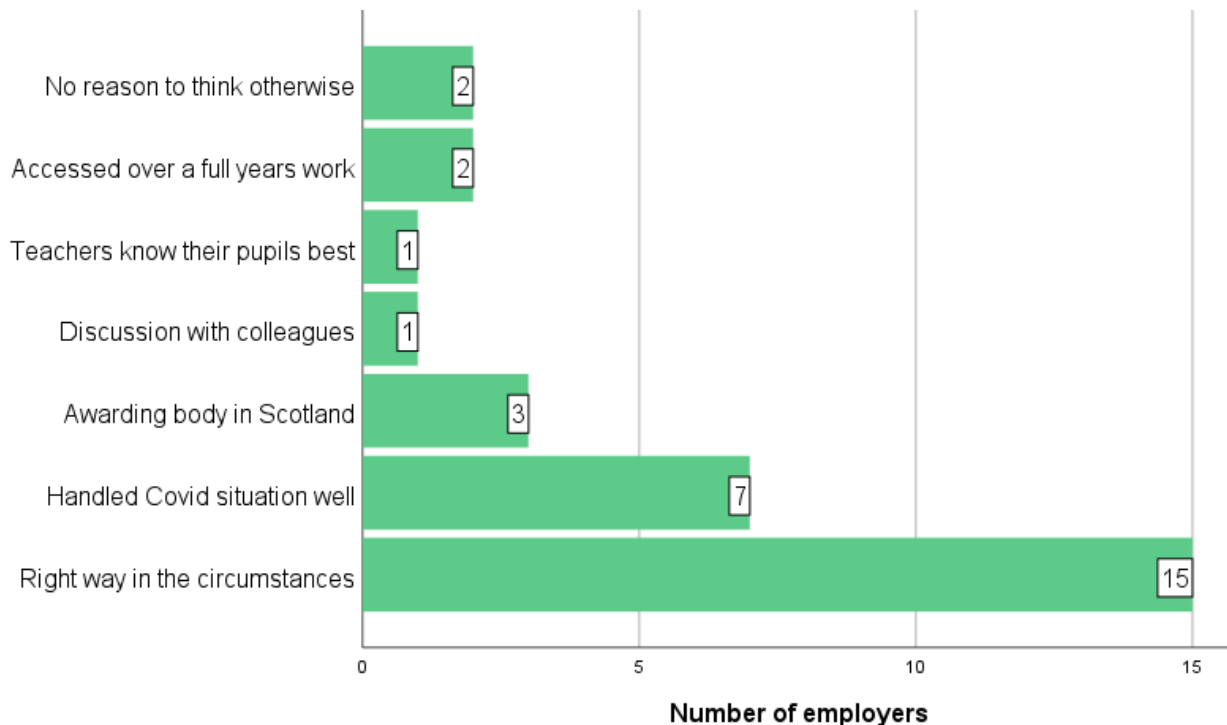
Thirty-one of the surveyed employers felt that the results awarded by SQA for National Qualifications in 2021 were fair, although it is to be noted that 62 of the employers felt that were not in a position to be able to comment on the question (Figure 5).

Figure 5 Employers' views on whether the 2021 National Qualification results were fair



Of the employers who felt that the results were fair (Figure 6), 15 believed that the approach taken by SQA in awarding qualifications was the right way in the circumstances. Only a handful of the employers (n=3) had thoughts on substantial details over the qualifications and process of awarding in their recognition of practitioners knowing their pupils best (n=1), or that the awarded results were representative of an entire year’s worth of work (n = 2).

Figure 6 Employers’ rationales for the 2021 National Qualification results being seen as fair



4.4 Trust in SQA

The majority of employers (n=69) indicated that there had not been any change in their trust in SQA’s ability to deliver qualifications now compared to before 2020 (Figure 7). The two employers who stated that they had more trust in SQA now versus before 2020 stated that this was because the organisation had ‘Dealt well with COVID’, and that the ‘Gradings are well done’.

Those who stated that their trust had not changed (n=69) provided a range of reasons, including that their thoughts on SQA had not changed during the pandemic (Figure 8). The majority of these employers (n=20) felt that SQA had done a good job and had done ‘their best in difficult circumstances’. Of the nine employers who stated that they trusted SQA less, four indicated that awards should be based on examinations rather than practitioner assessment (Figure 9).

Figure 7 Employers' trust in SQA's ability to deliver qualifications compared with before 2020

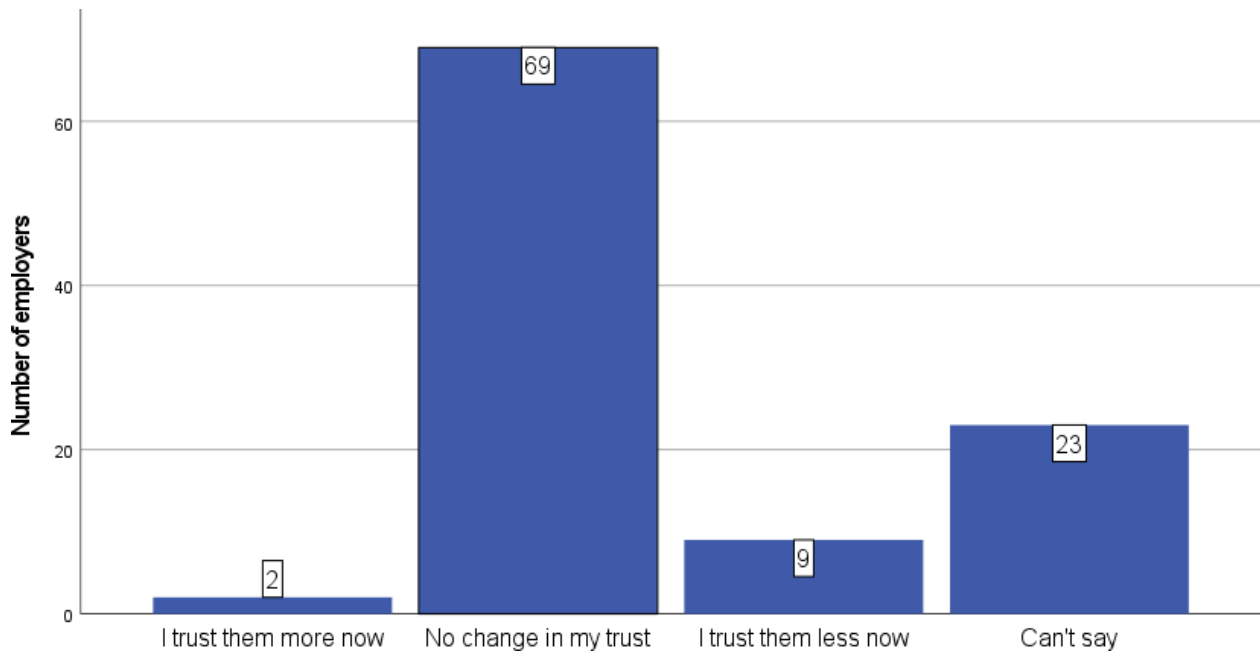


Figure 8 Reasons for having no change in trust in SQA

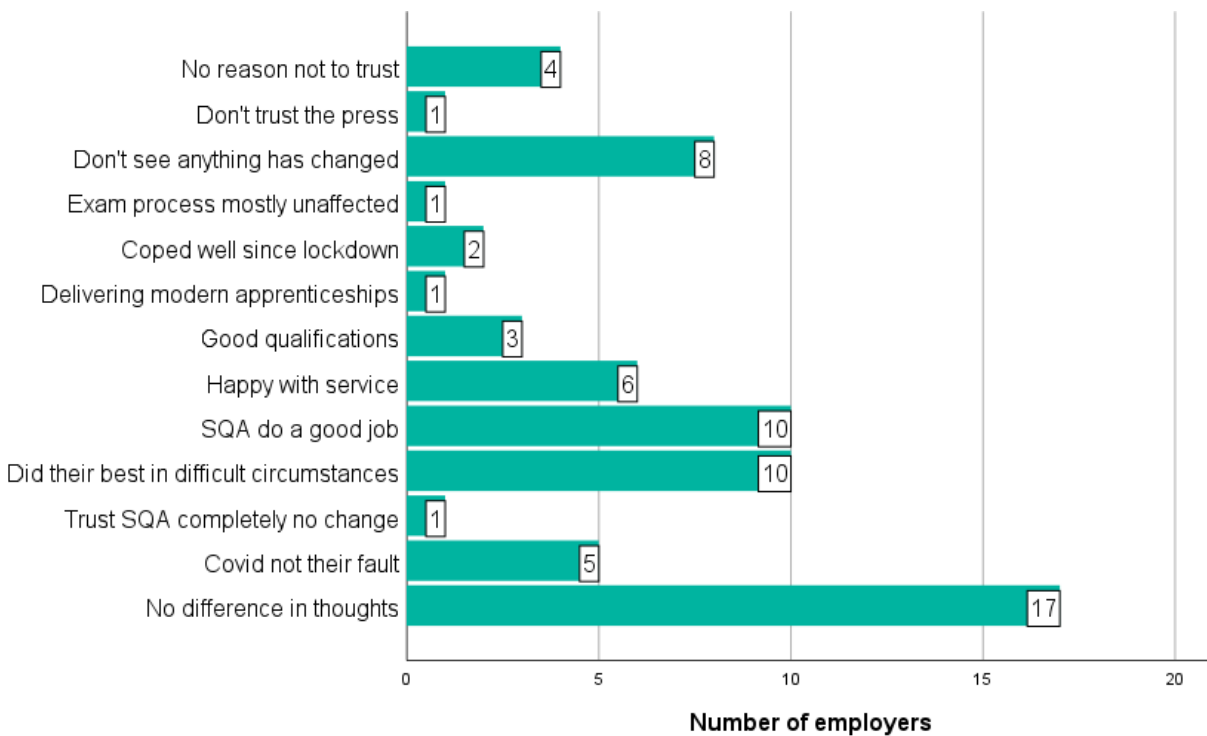
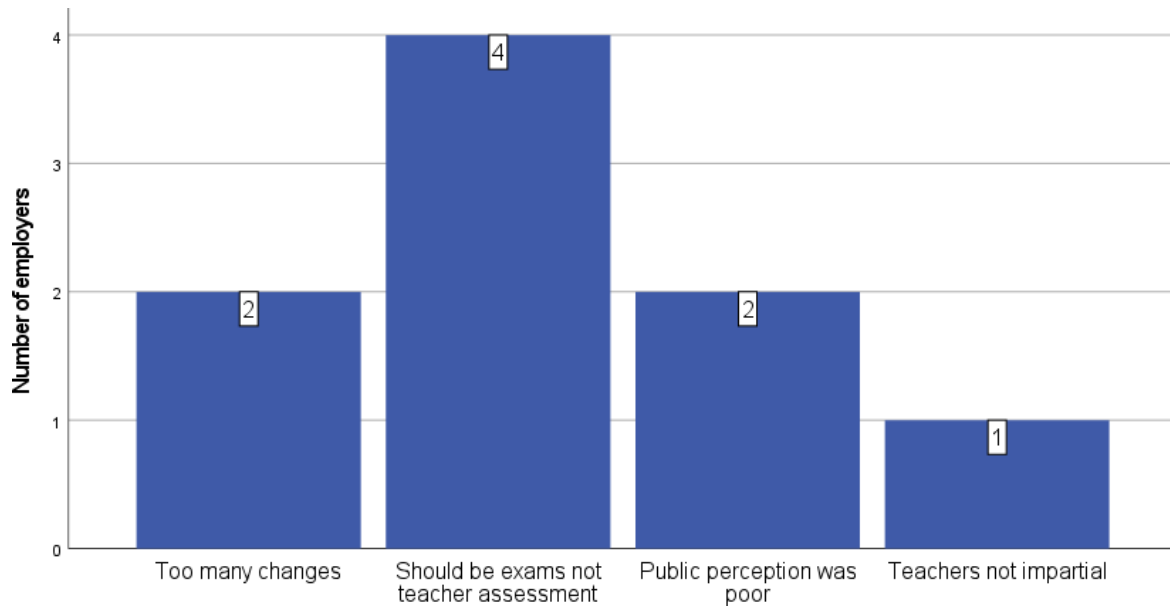
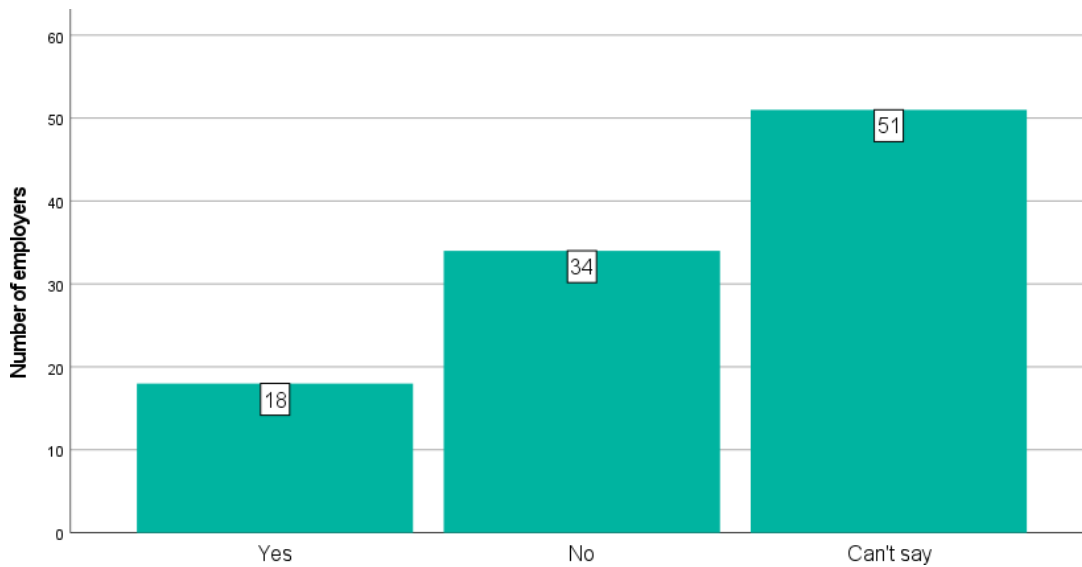


Figure 9 Reasons for trusting SQA less than prior to 2020



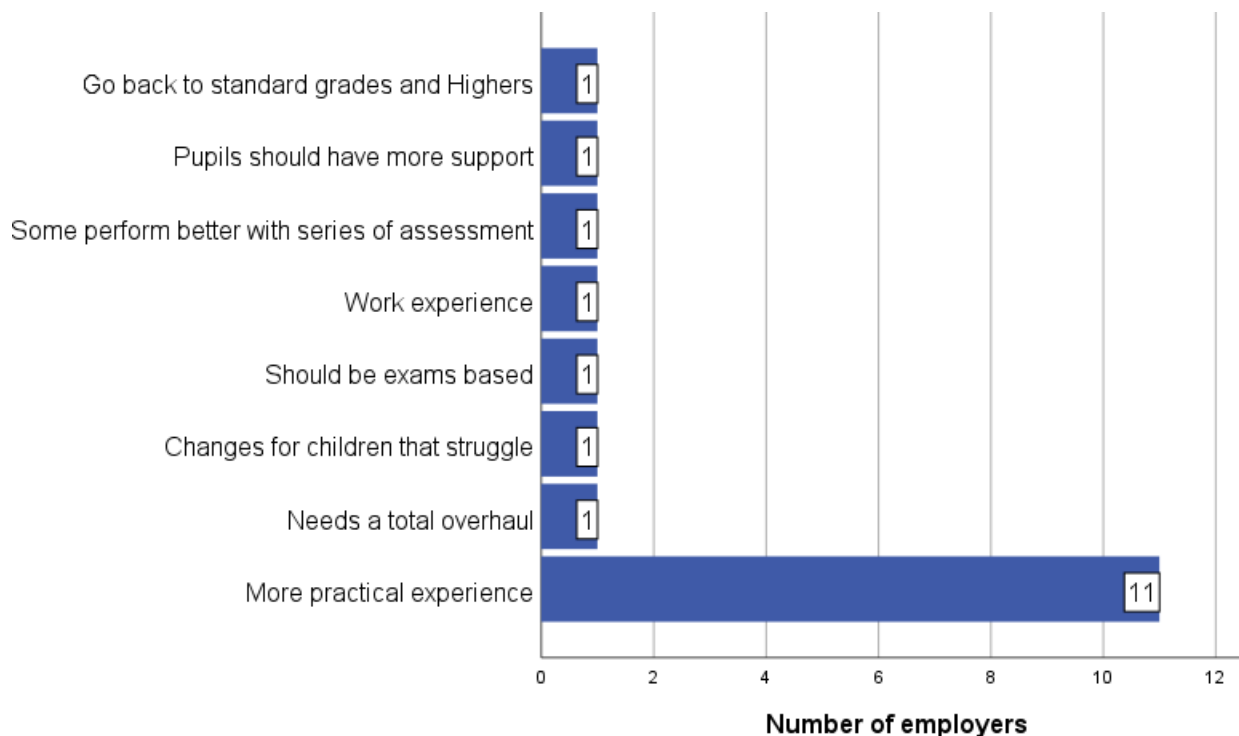
Thirty-four of the employers who responded to the survey indicated that would not like to see changes in the assessment of national qualifications and 18 indicated that they would (Figure 10). Again, a large number of respondents (n=51) were unable to say whether they would like to see changes to the qualifications.

Figure 10 Responses to the question regarding desire for change to National Qualifications



Of those employers who suggested that there should be changes (n=18), the majority (n=11) suggested that National Qualifications needed more practical experience built into the framework (Figure 11). Other than this, there was no consensus on the changes that were viewed, as necessary.

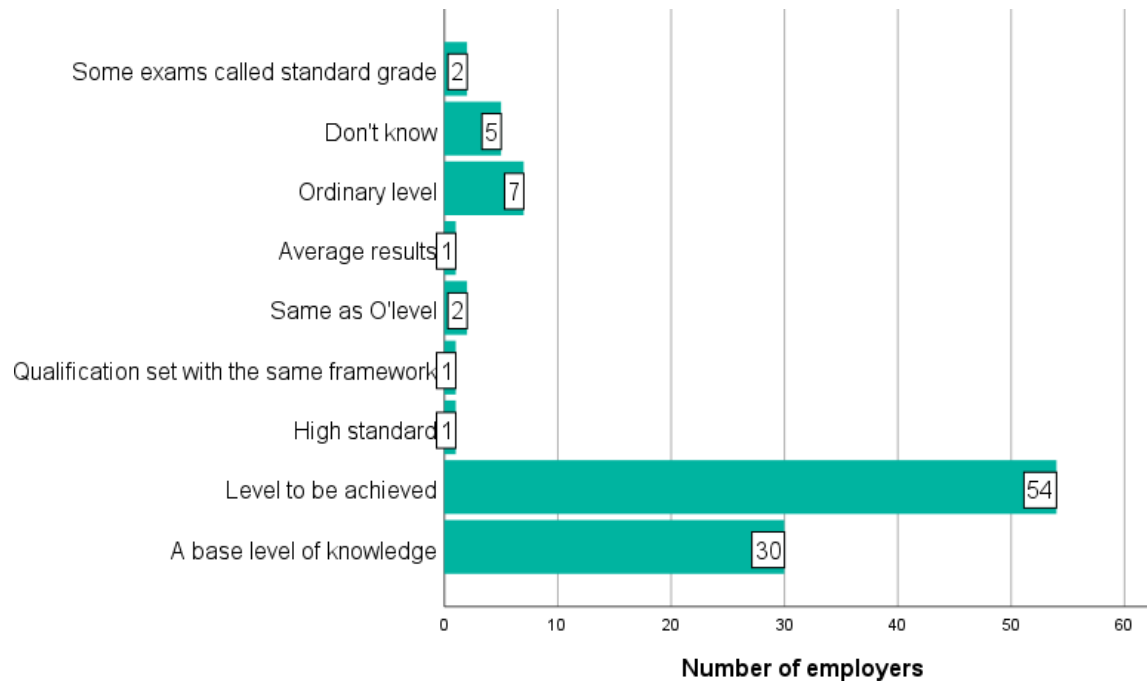
Figure 11 Views on what changes to National Qualifications employers would like to see



4.6 Understanding of standards

Many of the employers in this survey (n=54) indicated (Figure 12) that Standards are a ‘level to be achieved’ and are representative of a base level of knowledge that all students must have at the end of their qualifications (n=30).

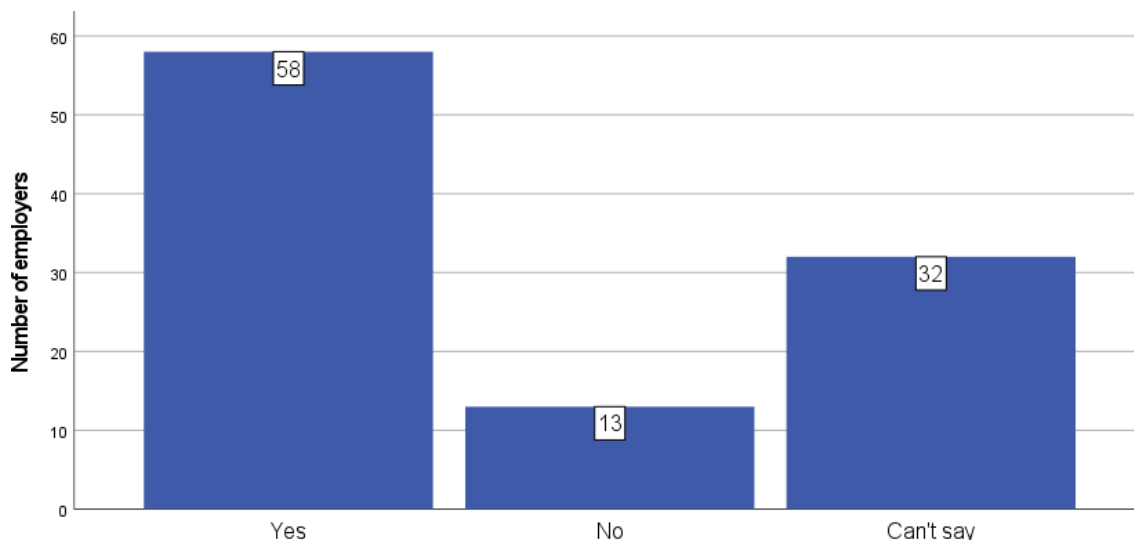
Figure 12 How employers viewed the term 'standards' in qualifications



4.7 Government policy

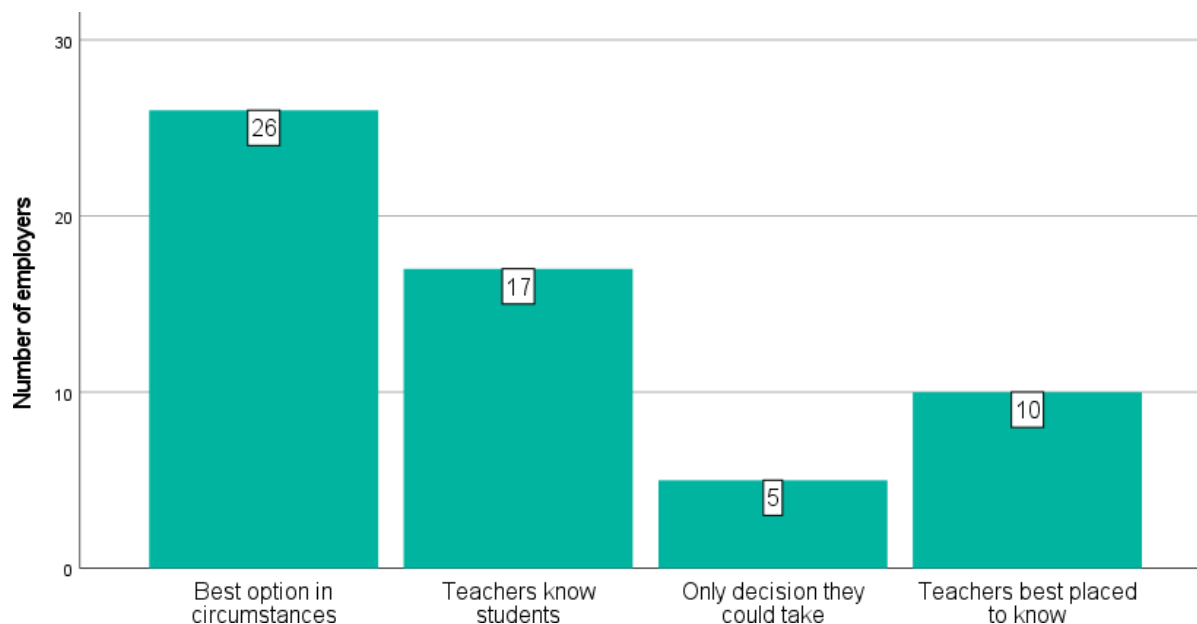
The surveyed employers were asked if they believed that the Scottish government's decision to base results for National Qualifications on practitioner grades with SQA guidance was the right one. Fifty-eight of the 103 respondents indicated that they believed this was the right decision, with only 13 indicating that they did not think so (Figure 13). Again, almost one third of the respondents (n=32) said that they could not say whether this was the correct policy.

Figure 13 Views on whether basing National Qualifications on teacher grades was the correct policy



As can be seen in Figure 14, of the 58 respondents who indicated that the government decision was the right one, 26 indicated this was the best option that under the circumstances, with 27 indicating that practitioners knew their students well or were best placed to know how to grade the learners.

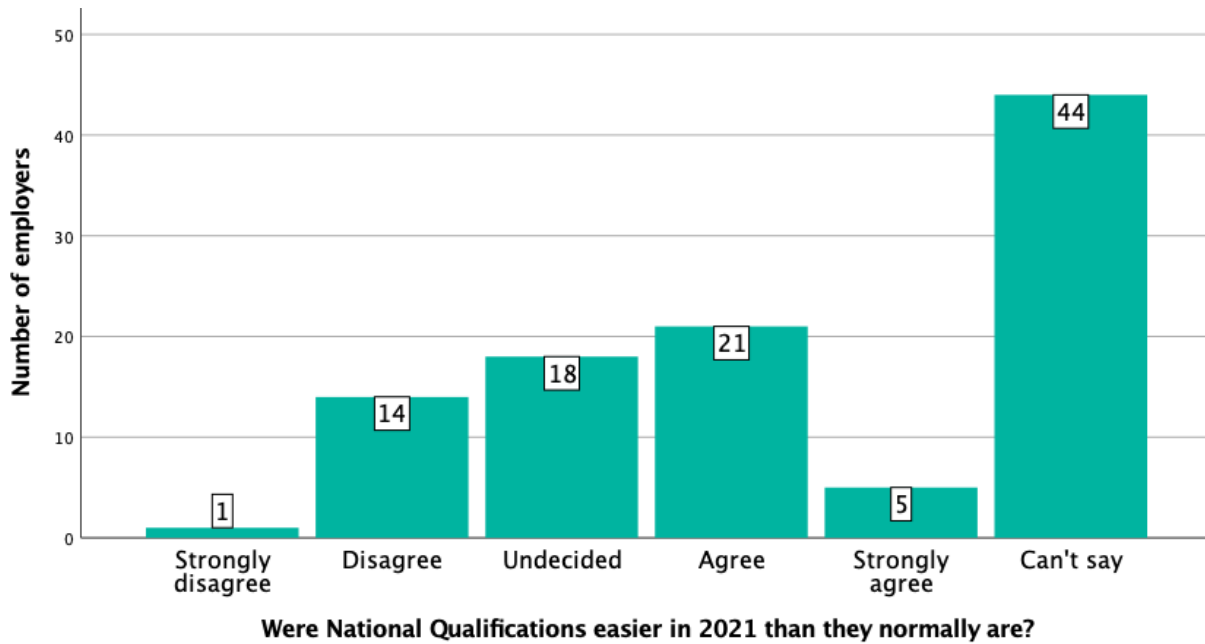
Figure 14 Reasons given for agreeing that teacher assessment was the right policy



4.8 Questions related to National Qualifications

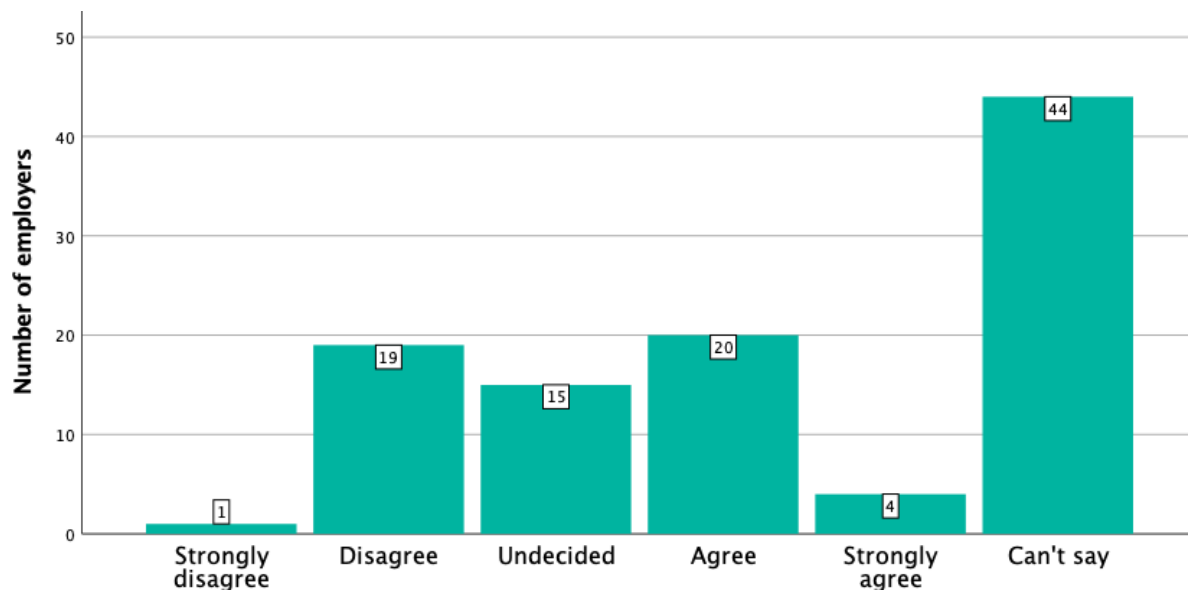
It is interesting to note that of the 103 employers surveyed, 27 either ‘Agreed’(n=21) or ‘Strongly agreed’(n=5) that the qualifications in 2021 were easier than they normally are, although 44 of the respondents felt that they were not best placed to answer this question (Figure 15).

Figure 15 Views on whether qualifications were easier in 2021 than in a normal year



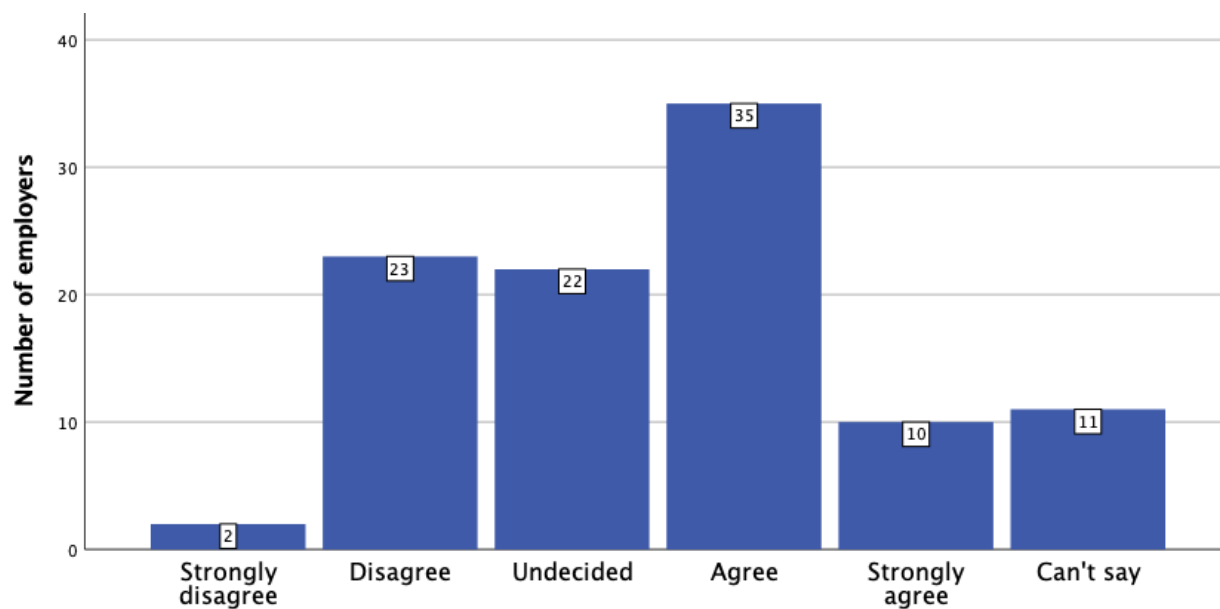
Similarly, the most common response among employers (n=44) was that they were unable to say if they felt that standards had been equivalent across schools in 2021 (Figure 16). This figure also shows that 20 of the employers in fact ‘agreed’ that Standards had been maintained.

Figure 16 Views on whether standards were the same across schools in 2021



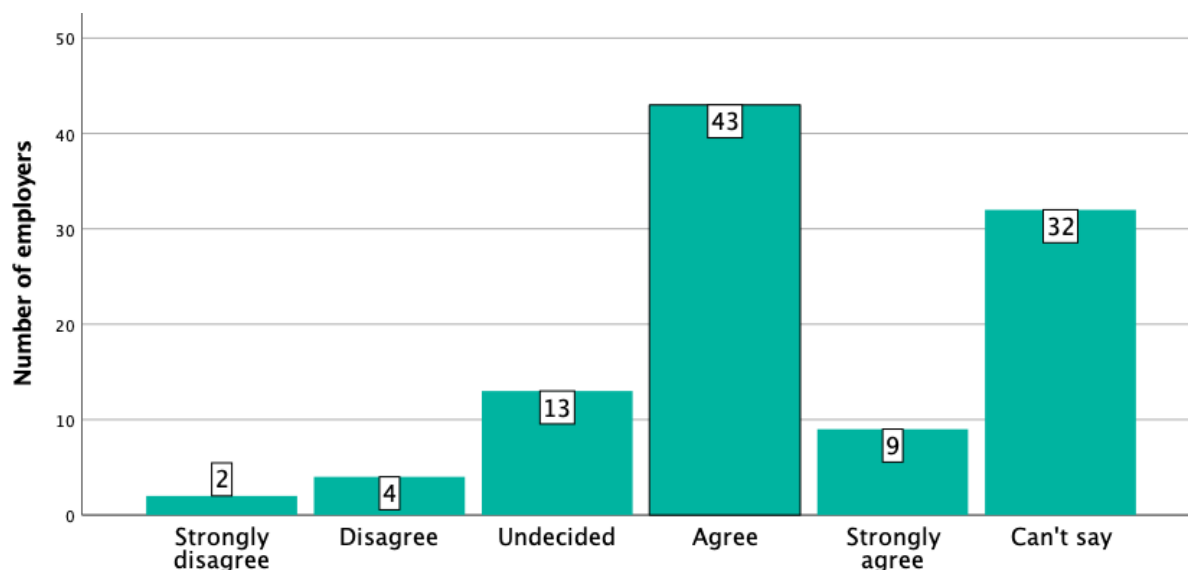
Many employers surveyed (n=45) agreed that examinations were the best way to assess learners more generally (Figure 17). On this question, approximately one third of employers (n=33) were unable to express a view or undecided.

Figure 17 Views on whether examinations are the best way to assess learners



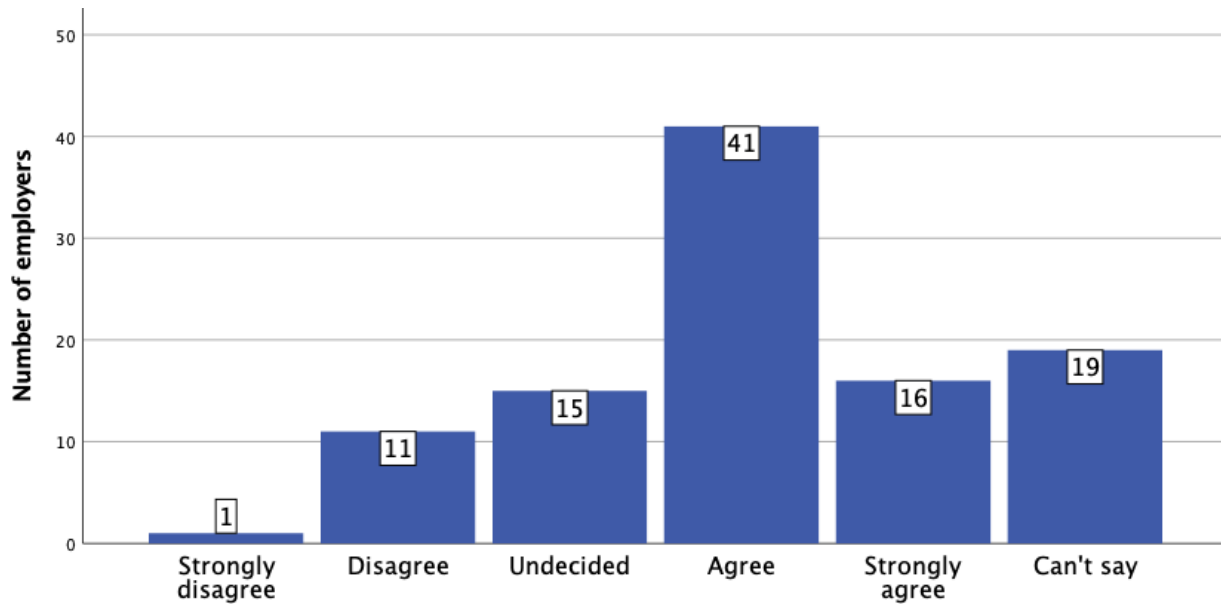
Interestingly, as can be seen from the Figure 18 below, many employers (n=52) ‘strongly agreed’ or ‘agreed’ that the results received by students in the 2021 qualifications process had been affected by the relationship between learners and practitioners. This finding contradicts the views expressed by those employers who believed that practitioners could remain impartial and were therefore best placed to make decisions about student’s grades in 2020 (Figure 14).

Figure 18 Views on whether student-teacher relationships affected grading



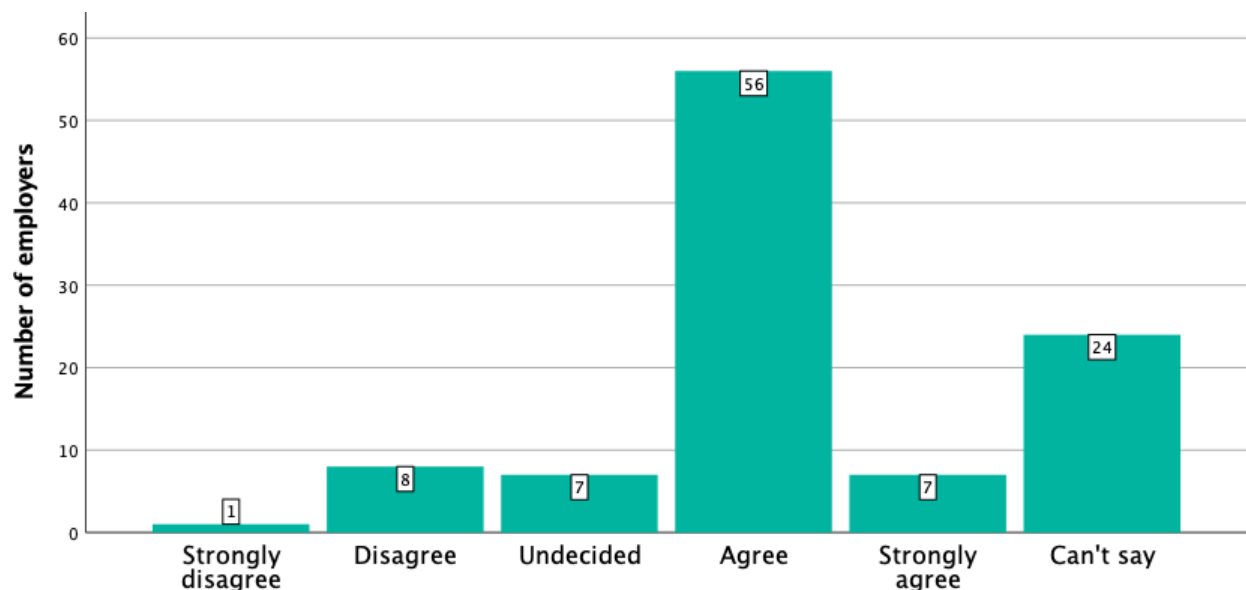
Despite many of the respondents indicating that they felt that the 2021 results had been influenced by teacher – student relationships (Figure 18), the majority of employers (n=67) agreed that practitioners were well prepared to make accurate judgement of their learner’s work (Figure 19). Only 19 respondents did not feel they could respond to this question.

Figure 19 Views on whether teachers were well prepared to make accurate judgments in 2021



Most of the employers surveyed felt that they were not in a position to comment about their belief that the grading in 2021 was not impacted by parental pressure. Lastly, it is important to note that the majority of employers (n=63) were cognisant of the difficulties experienced by students through the pandemic and recognised that the lost learning time the students had experiences would have made it impossible to perform at the standards normally required for the grades (Figure 20).

Figure 20 Views on the effects of lost learning in 2021 on learners' performances to the standards normally required



4.9 Conclusions

Whilst this telephone survey of 103 employers represents a fairly large sample for research of this kind with employers, it is clearly still a small sample of employers in Scotland. Therefore, the findings must be interpreted with this limitation in mind. The data shows that most employers had at least a nascent level of engagement of understanding of the nuances and vagaries of the 2021 qualifications process. There was a degree of understanding of the difficulty experienced by students in performing their best due to lost learning time. Many employers in this survey felt that examinations were the best way to assess students, though this could simply be a matter of employers' own experiences of qualifications and assessments. Importantly, an exceedingly small number of respondents felt that the National Qualification results were unfair in 2021 or that their trust in SQA had deteriorated. There was not a groundswell of support for changes to National Qualifications.

The majority of those who felt they could answer questions on fairness, indicated that the 2021 awarding process felt fair and that SQA and the wider system had done the best they could under difficult circumstances. Although many respondents considered that teachers were well-placed and well-prepared to grade learners, there was also a view that teacher-student relationships could affect grades. A small minority of employers felt that the 2021 results were easier than in a normal year.

Many employers had a criterion-referenced definition of standards in mind, in which criteria for the grades are pre-specified and learners must demonstrate performance to the satisfaction of examiner judges. Statistical views of standards were not mentioned.

The findings from this survey also indicate that it is important to keep engaging with employers on assessment and standards and what it means for young people, as many of them still believe National Qualifications to be extremely important in their recruitment processes. It is also important that employers remain part of the conversation so that they feel like they have a say in the future of assessment of National qualifications and can therefore have a more informed opinion.

5 References

- Chamberlain, S. (2013) Qualification users' perceptions and experiences of assessment reliability, *Research Papers in Education*, 28:1, 118-133, DOI: [10.1080/02671522.2012.754231](https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2012.754231)
- He, Q. Boyle, A. & Opposs, D. (2011) Public perceptions of reliability in examination results in England. *Evaluation & Research in Education*, 24:4, 255-283, DOI: 10.1080/09500790.2011.629722
- Priestley, M., Shapira, M., Priestley, A., Ritchie, M. and Barnett, C. (2020). *Rapid Review of National Qualifications Experience 2020*. Final Report. September. Scottish Government. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/rapid-review-national-qualifications-experience-2020/>
- Simpson, L. and Baird, J. (2013) Perceptions of trust in public examinations. *Oxford Review of Education*, 39:1, 17-35, DOI: [10.1080/03054985.2012.760264](https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2012.760264)
- Wolf, A., & Jenkins, A. (2005). Employers' selection decisions: the role of qualifications and tests. In *What's the Good of Education? The Economics of Education in the UK* (pp. 147 - 168). Princeton University Press.