



Evaluation of the 2021 Alternative Certification Model: Summary Report

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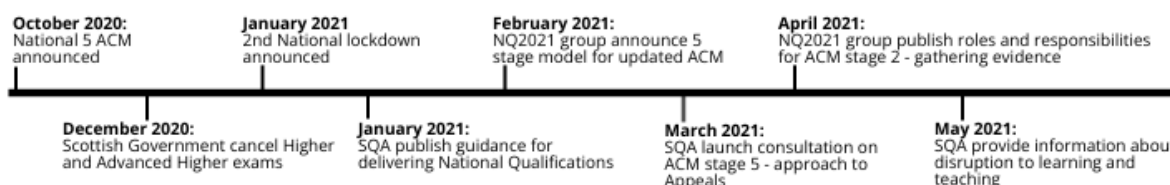
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Introduction

Development of the 2021 Alternative Certification Model (ACM) was overseen by the National Qualifications 2021 Group. This 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.

SQA would like to take this opportunity to thank the many learners and practitioners, including SQA appointees, who contributed to this research and whose feedback shaped this evaluation. As is noted in the individual reports, this evaluation does not attempt to interpret the views expressed by participants and for that reason, SQA has not sought to develop recommendations. The primary aim was to understand how learners, practitioners and SQA appointees perceived the ACM, which hopefully provides a valuable research contribution.

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 model required learners, teachers and 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 National Qualifications 2021 Group and published on the SQA website.

Reflecting on the challenges and evaluating the impact of the ACM is critical to understanding the experiences of the teachers, lecturers and learners involved. Conducting an evaluation helps to identify what worked well and what did not work so well: highlighting areas of success and understanding what lessons can be learned from the experience of the ACM that can help inform future thinking about education in Scotland.

To support this, SQA has carried out a programme of evaluation work to examine how the ACM operated in practice. An important aspect of this is capturing a range of perspectives on the arrangements, including from learners, parents, teachers and lecturers, senior school and college leaders, HEIs and other key parts of the education system. Understanding the benefits and challenges of different arrangements is of vital importance and creates a record and evidence-base to support continued dialogue as Scotland embarks on a period of education reform.

This report summarises the full range of evaluation activity carried out by SQA since the conclusion of the 2020–21 session. Initial research from this evaluation work informed preparations for the 2021–22 session. This ensured that the reflections of key system partners, and particularly learners and practitioners, were integrated into early planning when possible. For example, the contingency arrangements in case of cancellation of examinations carefully considered the workload for practitioners and the likely assessment burden for learners. Communications were also shaped with their feedback in mind. It is hoped that the evaluation work will prove a useful addition to the research literature about professional judgement of learner work and performance while providing insightful accounts for future generations of assessment experts, researchers and policy makers to understand how, and how well, the qualifications system responded in these unusual times.

Alternative Certification Model: Overview

Planning, design and implementation

Following the Scottish Government announcement of the cancellation of National 5 exams on 7 October 2020, SQA developed the Alternative Certification Model (ACM) in partnership with the National Qualifications 2021 (NQ 2021) Group. This model was introduced on 8 December and was extended to assess all learners who undertook National Qualifications in 2021, when exams were cancelled for Higher and Advanced Higher. 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 made available through SQA's Understanding Standards website.

A brief overview is provided below outlining the key stages of the ACM. Full details and 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

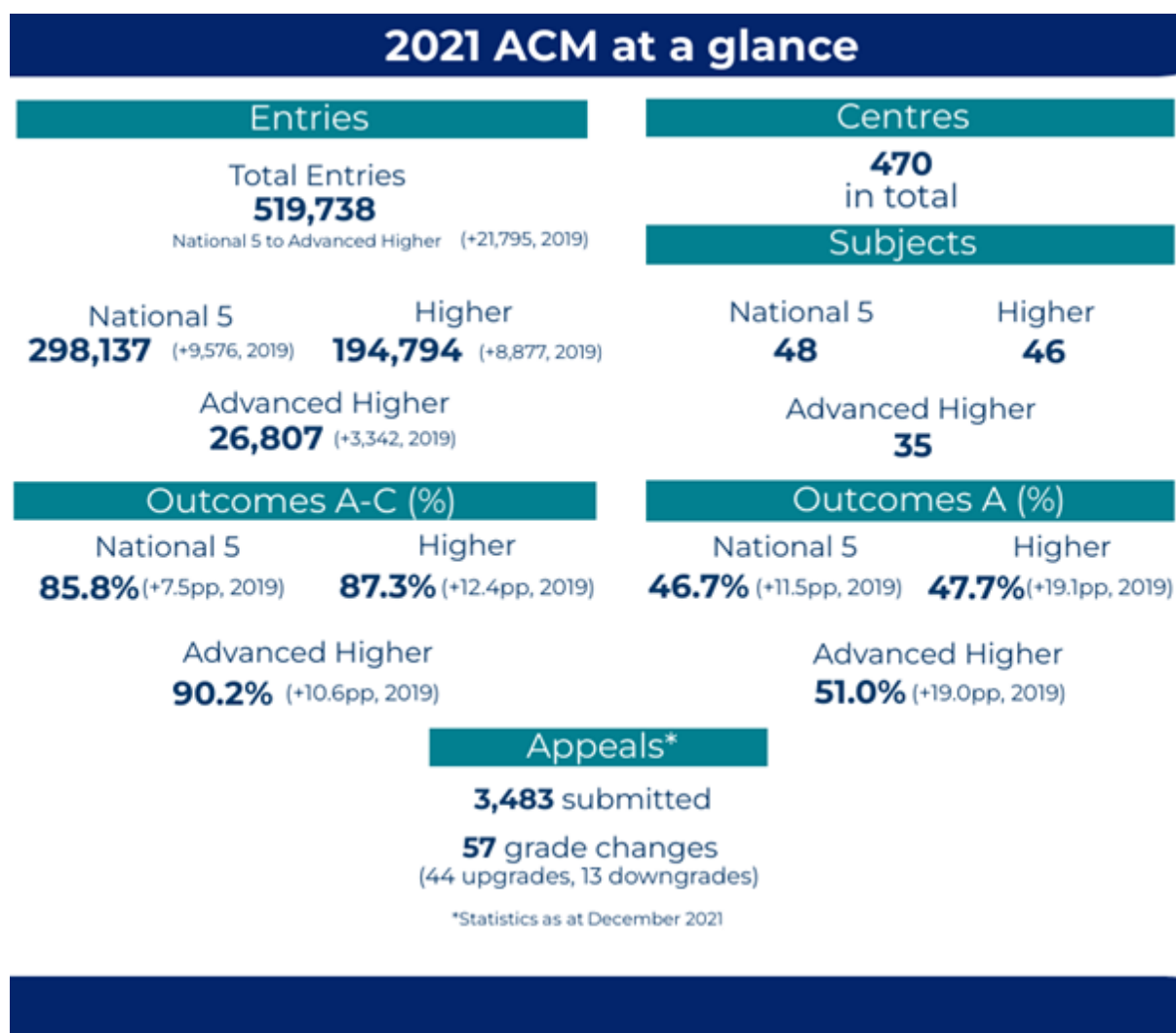
- ◆ A free appeals service, available directly to learners for the first time, was the fifth and final stage of the Alternative Certification Model.

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

Results and statistics

The following section includes the headline statistics and results from the 2020–21 session when the ACM was in place.

It is important to note that the model uses a fundamentally different approach to assessment, grading and certification to that used in 2020 and prior to the pandemic. Therefore, care should be taken when comparing results for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher across years.



The figures above are taken from statistical data published in December 2021. The inclusion of 2019 data is designed to help contextualise the outcomes from the ACM. This comparison is provided because 2020 was a particularly unusual year. On this basis, the comparison is made with 2019 outcome data for reference. Changes in outcomes from 2019 are given in percentage points (pp) and changes in entries are overall numerical changes. The number of subjects includes grouped subjects.

Evaluation: approach and methodology

Evaluation of the ACM was split into several project strands. A range of different research methods were used to understand a complex event — including primary research, desk research and statistical analysis. It is good practice to include multiple research methods and various sources of evidence to enhance insight and triangulation. Some aspects of the evaluation were highly collaborative.

2021 ACM project strands

Experiences of the 2021 ACM

Perceptions of Assessment Standards in Scotland

Approaches to 2021 Certification in Scotland and other Jurisdictions

Summary of Feedback on HNVQ Alternative Arrangements

Centre Variability Analysis

SQA Statistics and Commentary

Experiences of the 2021 ACM

A detailed research study that aims to understand the experience of the ACM from the perspective of learners and practitioners, helping to build a more complete picture of how the ACM worked in practice. The research involved two stages — a survey of 1,210 learners and 482 practitioners, followed by a series of in-depth interviews with a smaller group of learners, practitioners and Principal Assessors. Learners, teachers and lecturers were surveyed, interviewed and participated in focus groups to help understand their experiences of the ACM. A separate study used the expertise of principal assessors to explore the experience of the ACM from their perspective. The findings from these two studies were brought together in a single report.

Perceptions of assessment standards in Scotland

SQA worked jointly with the University of Glasgow and the University of Oxford to carry out in-depth research into public perceptions of standards. This detailed research study used participatory research methods, including focus groups, questionnaires and surveys, to understand how key stakeholders involved in the assessment and qualifications process, and the wider community, understand the notion of standards and fairness in Scottish education.

Approaches to 2021 certification in Scotland and other jurisdictions

In order to place Scotland's response to the pandemic in a wider context, a detailed piece of desk-based research was carried out exploring how assessment and certification in 2020 and 2021 were undertaken in a range of jurisdictions as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These jurisdictions include, but are not limited to, those that featured in the OECD's *Upper secondary education student assessment in Scotland: A comparative perspective* published in August 2021. The research explores the link between national approaches to summative assessment and how effectively those systems functioned during the pandemic.

Summary of feedback on HNVQ alternative arrangements

A report outlining the alternative assessment approaches that were put in place for Higher National and Vocational Qualifications (HNVQ) to mitigate against the COVID-19 pandemic. The report also includes feedback from learners, centres and other stakeholders on the effectiveness of these arrangements and outlines how this feedback will be reflected in SQA's approach to the assessment of HNVQ in future.

Centre variability analysis

This report explores centre-level changes in the distribution of A and A–C outcomes for two high-uptake subjects: English and Mathematics (National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher). The analysis is carried out for pairs of consecutive years in the period 2017 to 2021, and also for variability between 2021 from 2019.

SQA statistics and commentary

An analysis of attainment statistics published on results day (August 2021) and post-appeals (December 2021) with the accompanying statistical commentary. These provide an overview of entries and results for National Courses (National 2 to National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher) as well as Skills for Work, Awards, National Progression Awards, and National Certificates, and include a selection of breakdowns by subject, sex and centre type.

Key themes

While each project strand explored a different aspect of the ACM, several common themes emerged.

Themes	Findings
Disruption to learning and teaching	There are challenges with how an assessment and qualifications system operates fairly in the context of widespread and uneven disruption to teaching and learning. Understanding how this disruption impacted learner achievement and education systems globally will take time. For example, access to high quality technology, support and an appropriate learning environment during lockdown varied not only between different countries and regions but also impacted individual schools and learners unevenly.
Communication and collaboration	Poorly timed or disseminated communications generated frustration and reduced trust, confidence and credibility in many education systems. Feedback provided to SQA from learners and practitioners, in the early part of 2021, suggests there was a general lack of information about the timing and nature of assessment and the way grades would be awarded, although this seemed to improve with time.
Continuous assessment and exams	Grades determined using continuous assessment and traditional exams were considered to have both strengths and weaknesses. Feedback from learners on teacher and lecturer determined grades was mixed in relation to perceptions of fairness and equity. Inconsistencies in the approach to assessment, particularly between schools/colleges and subjects, was highlighted as an area of concern. Globally, no education systems — whether they used external assessment or locally determined grades — were immune to severe disruption during the pandemic.
Increased workload and time pressure	Teachers and lecturers reflected positively on the additional flexibility available in the ACM. However, they also felt workload increased significantly as a result of the compressed timescales to carry out assessment, the additional marking loads, and involvement in organising and implementing local moderation and quality assurance processes.
Impact on learners	Learners provided a spectrum of views and experiences. Some learners reflected positively on the use of shorter, more frequent assessments and the fact assessments took place in a familiar environment rather than exam halls. However, others reported feeling stress about the volume and timing of assessment. Some felt anxious due to initial uncertainty about how grades would be determined.

Themes	Findings
Marking and moderation	There was evidence that SQA-trained markers felt more confident than colleagues in interpreting and applying standards. There was also evidence of centres utilising the experience of those staff members to develop local approaches to quality assurance using SQA support materials. In addition, evidence of strong and robust locally-developed approaches to moderation were found, including effective cross-marking and standardisation processes.
Standards	National standards were interpreted and applied more consistently when SQA assessments were used. Understanding Standards resources were used widely by many centre staff, with interactive resources proving particularly popular. Several enhancements were suggested in key areas, with requests for further support and training in the areas of assessment literacy and understanding of standards.
Grade boundaries	When grade boundaries were determined at a regional level, the methods and approaches used were not always consistent. This may have created inconsistencies in maintaining the same standard between different centres and/or regions.
Developing networks and sharing practice	Developing strong and effective partnerships and local or regional networks of support were fundamental to the successful implementation of the ACM. Not all centres were able to utilise this type of support, and there is some evidence that colleges were unable to benefit from the networks of support available to schools. Some centres in geographically remote parts of the country were unable to access the same support available to urban centres.
Fairness	The majority of learners (two thirds) and practitioners (three quarters) felt that their grades were fair. However, there was a general acceptance that the application of the ACM was not consistent. Learners raised concerns about inequities in the system and perceived unfairness in the approach taken between schools.

Thinking ahead

There is little doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic created an unprecedented challenge for education and qualification systems around the world. The Scottish education system developed the ACM as an emergency response to deal with those challenges in a rapidly evolving situation to ensure learners and other system partners were supported and awarded fair and credible qualifications.

This evaluation is designed to provide the system with a record of how the model operated in practice, drawing on the experiences of those who were involved at different stages and levels. Perhaps most importantly, the reflections of learners, teachers, lecturers and other partners in the sector raise further questions. These should help to generate discussion about certain key topics, including (but not limited to):

- ◆ The strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to assessment (eg continuous assessment versus external assessment and exams).
- ◆ How we enhance communication across the education sector.
- ◆ How we find ways of strengthening partnerships through collaboration and develop networks for sharing practice.
- ◆ What we can do to develop a shared understanding of standards.

SQA hopes that the findings contained in the evaluation can contribute to future work and research in this area and will help support the review work being led by Professor Louise Hayward.