

Equality Impact Assessment (supporting guidance available)

Summary

Name of policy or practice	Awarding and Grading for National Courses Policy		
New policy or revision	Revision		
Policy owner (role)	Director of Policy, Analysis and Standards		
Date policy owner confirmed completion	January 2025		
Agreed schedule review date	January 2028	Additional review date (Action review date)	N/A

Action plan

Required actions	Owner	Date	Comment and review
Monitor the implementation of policy and the impact on equality groups (evidence and consultation).	Standards Team	Ongoing	This is an ongoing piece of work.

Identified actions	General equality duty	Owner	Date	Comment and review
Regular engagement with the wider organisation in the preparation for Grade Boundaries 2025, to ensure approach is accurately implemented.	Eliminate unlawful discrimination	Standards Team	Ongoing	N/A
A Children's Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment has been undertaken and will require to be updated based on any new evidence.	Eliminate unlawful discrimination	Standards Team	August 2025	The impact assessment will be published alongside our Equalities Monitoring Report and associated documentation.

Policy aims

What is the rationale for this policy or practice?

Awarding is a core part of SQA's work as an awarding body. We have well-established procedures for awarding that we use every exam diet. In previous years, changes have been made to the approach to applying these procedures that have merited a separate policy. This policy sets out SQA's full return to its established awarding approach.

It also incorporates a second existing policy and provides a single point of reference for all policy regarding awarding and grading.

SQA's approach to awarding for National Courses is that grade boundaries should be set to recognise specific levels of attainment of skills, knowledge and understanding. This approach, in line with the attainment referencing concept, is for subject matter experts to set grade boundaries which take the difficulty of the assessment into account while rewarding candidates appropriately for the quality of work produced. We use a range of qualitative and quantitative information to support the decision-making process. A [video](#) on how SQA set grade boundaries in 2024 is available.

It is an inherent feature of this approach that it applies to every learner regardless of equality group. SQA is committed to ensuring that potential impacts are identified and addressed within the qualification and assessment design process.

SQA is committed to ensuring that all impacts on equality groups are addressed within the qualification design and assessment setting processes. We provide training on equality, diversity and inclusivity and designing inclusive assessments that are available to everyone involved in the process of designing and setting assessments, including SQA staff and appointees. All new qualifications go through an equality review process and all subsequent changes to the qualification are also reviewed. SQA staff have undertaken anti-racist training and Equalities Team members are involved in the planning process for grade boundaries.

Other services which support learners, including those with protected characteristics, with equality of access to assessments are assessment arrangements, the Examination Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service (EECCS) and Appeals service.

These measures do not impact the grade boundaries and awarding process. They are in place to ensure that all potential impacts on learners with protected characteristics are considered along with grade boundaries.

What evidence is there to support the implementation or development of this policy or practice?
Awarding is a core part of SQA's work as an awarding body. Our approach to awarding is broadly aligned to that of other awarding bodies in the UK that have returned to normal pre-pandemic grading arrangements.
What are the aims of this policy or practice?
<p>The aim of this policy is to outline SQA's established awarding and grading approach.</p> <p>The approach applies equally to all learners to ensure consistency. It aims to maximise fairness to all groups of learners, including equality groups. Quantitative and qualitative evidence used before and during awarding meetings (such as statistical outcome data and assessment evidence) corresponds to the cohort as a whole. Grade boundary decisions at upper A, A and C are determined using this process and computed for all other grades. This decision is then applied equally to the entire cohort of learners with no exceptions.</p>
How is the content of these aims relevant to equality groups?
This policy affects all those involved in the grade boundary decision-making process. Additionally, it affects every learner who sits a National Qualification. It also affects all appointees involved in the grade boundary process for National Qualifications.

Evidence, consultation and engagement

What stakeholders have you engaged with in the development of this policy or practice?	
<p>SQA carried out an evaluation of the approach to assessment and awarding used in 2023. This involved surveys and in-depth interviews with learners and practitioners. Survey responses were received from approximately 3,437 learners and 1,237 practitioners, followed by 24 interviews with learners and practitioners. The findings of this research were published on SQA's website.</p> <p>Those involved in the awarding process — senior appointees and qualification teams — provided positive feedback that the final outcomes were fair to learners as all factors impacting on performance had been thoroughly considered during awarding meetings. These findings mirror those from the evaluation carried out in 2022. The current approach to awarding builds on this good practice in relation to the provision of supporting data and documentation, and the management of the awarding meetings.</p> <p>It is an inherent feature of this approach that it applies to every learner regardless of equality group. SQA is committed to ensuring that potential impacts are identified and addressed within the qualification and assessment design process.</p> <p>SQA consulted the Standards and Policy Group. They received an initial draft, rooted in our established awarding procedures. Representatives from across SQA provided feedback on the approach. The policy needs approval by the Qualifications Committee and will be taken to the Board of Management for endorsement.</p>	
What evidence about equality groups do you have to support this assessment?	
Age	<p>This approach applies to graded National Courses in Scotland and only applies to learners taking National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications in schools, colleges and training providers. The age range would normally be 15+ and learners are enrolled in a range of National Courses.</p> <p>A breakdown of the ages of learners who were entered for a National Course in the academic year 2023–24 can be found in SQA's Equalities Monitoring Report 2024. 99.3% of entries at National 5, 99.2% of entries at Higher and 99.6% at Advanced Higher are from candidates aged between 15 and 18.</p> <p>SQA is committed to ensuring that all impacts on equality groups are addressed within the qualification design and assessment setting processes. We provide training on equality, diversity and inclusivity and designing inclusive assessments that are available to everyone involved in the process of designing and setting assessments, including SQA staff and</p>

	appointees. All new qualifications go through an equality review process and all subsequent changes to the qualification are also reviewed. Equalities Team members are involved in the planning process for grade boundaries.																																																				
Disability	<p>A breakdown of the of learners who were entered for a National Course in the academic year 2022–23 by whether they were declared or assessed disabled can be found in SQA’s Equalities Monitoring Report 2024. 34.8% of entries at National 5, 30.1% of entries at Higher and 26.8% at Advanced Higher are from candidates that were declared or assessed as having additional support needs.</p> <p>As part of the SQA’s evaluation of the 2023 exam diet, 3437 learners were surveyed and 450 (13%) reported as either a disabled learner or a learner with additional support needs. These learners were less likely to agree that they received information on how their grades would be determined early enough, and less likely to agree that they understood how their grades would be determined.</p>																																																				
Race	<p>More than 99% of learners undertaking National Courses are between the ages of 15 and 18, so ethnicity information provided in Scottish Government’s Schools in Scotland 2023 is relevant:</p> <table><tr><th>Ethnicity</th><th>Female</th><th>Male</th><th>Total</th></tr><tr><td>Total pupils</td><td>345,698</td><td>359,830</td><td>705,528</td></tr><tr><td>White - Scottish</td><td>252,784</td><td>262,541</td><td>515,325</td></tr><tr><td>White - Other British</td><td>22,408</td><td>23,748</td><td>46,156</td></tr><tr><td>White - Irish</td><td>718</td><td>759</td><td>1,477</td></tr><tr><td>White - Polish</td><td>8,382</td><td>8,787</td><td>17,169</td></tr><tr><td>White - Gypsy/Traveller</td><td>703</td><td>753</td><td>1,456</td></tr><tr><td>White - Other</td><td>12,822</td><td>13,455</td><td>26,277</td></tr><tr><td>Mixed</td><td>6,470</td><td>6,443</td><td>12,913</td></tr><tr><td>Asian - Indian</td><td>4,615</td><td>4,895</td><td>9,510</td></tr><tr><td>Asian - Pakistani</td><td>7,609</td><td>7,803</td><td>15,412</td></tr><tr><td>Asian - Bangladeshi</td><td>754</td><td>762</td><td>1,516</td></tr><tr><td>Asian - Chinese</td><td>2,723</td><td>2,777</td><td>5,500</td></tr></table>	Ethnicity	Female	Male	Total	Total pupils	345,698	359,830	705,528	White - Scottish	252,784	262,541	515,325	White - Other British	22,408	23,748	46,156	White - Irish	718	759	1,477	White - Polish	8,382	8,787	17,169	White - Gypsy/Traveller	703	753	1,456	White - Other	12,822	13,455	26,277	Mixed	6,470	6,443	12,913	Asian - Indian	4,615	4,895	9,510	Asian - Pakistani	7,609	7,803	15,412	Asian - Bangladeshi	754	762	1,516	Asian - Chinese	2,723	2,777	5,500
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	Caribbean/Black - Scottish/British	514	504	1,018
	Caribbean/Black - Other	314	327	641
	African - Scottish/British	4,203	4,143	8,346
	African - Other	4,013	4,116	8,129
	Arab	2,281	2,506	4,787
	Other	2,968	3,174	6,142
	Not known	6,926	7,489	14,415
	Not disclosed	1,668	1,882	3,550
Religion or belief	SQA does not gather data on the religion or beliefs of learners.			
	In Scotland's Census 2022 , the below figures were calculated for the religion of young people aged 15–19:			
	Religion	Percentage		
	Church of Scotland	10.9%		
	Roman Catholic	12.2%		
	Other Christian	4%		
	Buddhist	0.2%		
	Hindu	0.4%		
	Jewish	0.1%		
	Sikh	3.3%		
	Pagan	0.2%		
	Other	0.1%		
No religion	61.4%			
Religion not stated	6.7%			

	<p>Although useful as a representation, the data does not specify if someone is sitting an SQA qualification and the census is often completed as a household for young people and may not have been directly completed by them.</p>
Sex	<p>Data on the difference between female and male attainment can be found in SQA's Equalities Monitoring Report 2024:</p> <p><u>National 5 distribution by sex</u></p> <p>‘Female candidates had higher A to C and A attainment rates than male candidates at National 5 for entries in each year in the period 2019 to 2023. This remains the case in 2024.</p> <p>In 2024, the A attainment rate for entries from female candidates was 42.6%. This was an increase of 0.1 percentage points on the previous year.</p> <p>Entries from male candidates saw a decrease in the 2024 A attainment rate from 2023, a value of 1.5 percentage points. The difference in A attainment between entries from female candidates and male candidates in 2024 was 9.2 percentage points. This is an increase on the 2023 value of 7.6 percentage points.</p> <p>In 2024, the A to C attainment rate for entries from female candidates was 79.4%. This was a decrease of 1.2 percentage points on the previous year. The A to C attainment rate for entries from male candidates was 75.1%. This was a decrease of 1.8 percentage points on the previous year.</p> <p>The difference in A to C attainment between entries from female candidates and male candidates in 2024 was 4.3 percentage points. This is an increase on the 2023 value of 3.7 percentage points.’</p> <p><u>Higher grade distribution by sex</u></p> <p>‘Entries from female candidates had higher A to C and A attainment rates than male candidates at Higher for each year in the period 2019 to 2023. This remains the case in 2024.</p> <p>The A attainment rate at Higher in 2024 has decreased compared to 2023 for entries from both female candidates and male candidates: 2.2 and 2.9 percentage points, respectively.</p>

	<p>The difference in A attainment between entries from female candidates and male candidates in 2024 was 6.3 percentage points. This is an increase on the 2023 value of 5.6 percentage points.</p> <p>In 2024, the A to C attainment rate for entries from female candidates was 77.7%. This was a decrease of 1.8 percentage points on the previous year. Similarly, entries from male candidates also saw a decrease in the A to C attainment rate for 2024 from 2023, with decreasing from 74.3% to 71.5%, a value of 2.8 percentage points.</p> <p>The difference in A to C attainment between entries from female candidates and male candidates in 2024 was 6.2 percentage points. This is an increase on the 2023 value of 5.2 percentage points.'</p> <p><u>Advanced Higher grade distribution by sex</u></p> <p>'Entries from female candidates had higher A to C and A attainment rates than entries from male candidates at Advanced Higher for each year in the period 2019 to 2023. This remains the case in 2024.</p> <p>The A attainment rate at Advanced Higher in 2024 has decreased compared to 2023 for entries from both female candidates and male candidates, 3.6 and 2.2 percentage points, respectively.</p> <p>The difference in A attainment between entries from female candidates and male candidates in 2024 was 0.6 percentage points. This is a decrease on the 2023 value of 1.9 percentage points.</p> <p>In 2024, the A to C attainment rate for entries from female candidates was 78.1%. This was a decrease of 4.2 percentage points on the previous year. Similarly, entries from male candidates also saw a decrease in the A to C attainment rate for 2024 from 2023, decreasing from 76.8% to 71.8%, a value of 5 percentage points.</p> <p>The difference in A to C attainment between entries from female candidates and male candidates in 2024 was 6.2 percentage points. This is an increase on the 2023 value of 5.4 percentage points.'</p>
Sexual orientation	<p>SQA does not gather data on the sexual orientation of learners.</p> <p>In Scotland's Census 2022, the below figures were calculated for the sexual orientation of young people aged 15–19:</p>

	Sexual orientation	Percentage
	Heterosexual/Straight	81.3%
	Gay or Lesbian	2.6%
	Bisexual	5.5%
	Other sexual orientation	1.3%
	Not answered	9.2%
	Although useful as a representation, the data does not specify if someone is sitting an SQA qualification and the census is often completed as a household for young people and may not have been directly completed by them.	
Gender re-assignment (gender identity and transgender)	SQA does not gather data on the gender identity or trans status of learners.	
Marriage or civil partnership	<p>SQA does not gather data on the marriage or civil partnership of learners.</p> <p>As more than 99% of learners undertaking National Courses are between the ages of 15 and 18, it is unlikely that many learners will be married or in a civil partnership.</p> <p>National Records of Scotland statistics show that in 2023, 38 males and 78 females between 16 and 19 got married, including same-sex marriage. In a journal article from the Law Society of Scotland, a freedom of information request was submitted to National Records of Scotland which showed that in 2021, there were just 2 marriages where both were under 18 and 14 where one was under 18. Due to these low numbers, it is unlikely that many learners will be covered by this protected characteristic.</p>	

Pregnancy or maternity	<p>SQA does not gather data on the pregnancy or maternity status of learners.</p> <p>The National Records for Scotland report that the fertility rate for women aged 15–19 was at a historic low in 2022 and remains the age group with the lowest birth rate. Due to this, and the fact that more than 99% of learners undertaking National Courses are aged between 15 and 18, it is unlikely that many learners will be covered by this protected characteristic.</p>
Care experience (where relevant)	<p>SQA does not gather data on the care experience of learners.</p>

Impact and opportunities for action

Protected characteristic	General equality duty
Age	Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct that is prohibited by the Equality Act 2010
	It is an inherent feature of this approach that it applies to every learner without any unlawful discrimination, harassment or victimisation. The aims of this approach do not have a negative impact on this equality group and SQA does not feel that there is potential to discriminate.
	Advance equality of opportunity
	It is an inherent feature of this approach that it applies to every learner, which promotes equality of opportunity between all learners. Regardless of age, grade boundaries are set in line with the intended demand of the assessment and are adjusted appropriately if the assessment did not function as intended — they are not affected by the performance of individual candidates or groups. The approach applies equally to all learners to ensure consistency.
	Foster good relations
	It is an inherent feature of this approach that it applies to every learner, which fosters good relations between all learners by ensuring that the standard of our qualifications is set appropriately and maintained over time and across courses.
Disability	Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct that is prohibited by the Equality Act 2010
	It is an inherent feature of this approach that it applies to every learner without any unlawful discrimination, harassment or victimisation. The aims of this approach do not have a negative impact on this equality group and SQA does not feel that there is potential to discriminate. SQA provides services such as Appeals, the Examination Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service (EECCS), and assessment arrangements to support disabled learners but this does not impact on the awarding and grade boundary process.
	Advance equality of opportunity
	It is an inherent feature of this approach that it applies to every learner, which promotes equality of opportunity between all learners. Regardless of disability, grade boundaries are set in line with the intended demand of the

Protected characteristic	General equality duty
	assessment and are adjusted appropriately if the assessment did not function as intended — they are not affected by the performance of individual candidates or groups. The approach applies equally to all learners to ensure consistency.
	Foster good relations
	It is an inherent feature of this approach that it applies to every learner, which fosters good relations between all learners by ensuring that the standard of our qualifications is set appropriately and maintained over time and across courses.
Race	Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct that is prohibited by the Equality Act 2010
	It is an inherent feature of this approach that it applies to every learner without any unlawful discrimination, harassment or victimisation. The aims of this approach do not have a negative impact on this equality group and SQA does not feel that there is potential to discriminate.
	Advance equality of opportunity
	It is an inherent feature of this approach that it applies to every learner, which promotes equality of opportunity between all learners. Regardless of race, grade boundaries are set in line with the intended demand of the assessment and are adjusted appropriately if the assessment did not function as intended — they are not affected by the performance of individual candidates or groups. The approach applies equally to all learners to ensure consistency.
	Foster good relations
	It is an inherent feature of this approach that it applies to every learner, which fosters good relations between all learners by ensuring that the standard of our qualifications is set appropriately and maintained over time and across courses.
Religion or belief	Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct that is prohibited by the Equality Act 2010
	It is an inherent feature of this approach that it applies to every learner without any unlawful discrimination, harassment or victimisation. The aims of this approach do not have a negative impact on this equality group and SQA does not feel that there is potential to discriminate.

Protected characteristic	General equality duty
	Advance equality of opportunity
	It is an inherent feature of this approach that it applies to every learner, which promotes equality of opportunity between all learners. Regardless of religion or belief, grade boundaries are set in line with the intended demand of the assessment and are adjusted appropriately if the assessment did not function as intended — they are not affected by the performance of individual candidates or groups. The approach applies equally to all learners to ensure consistency.
	Foster good relations
	It is an inherent feature of this approach that it applies to every learner, which fosters good relations between all learners by ensuring that the standard of our qualifications is set appropriately and maintained over time and across courses.
Sex	Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct that is prohibited by the Equality Act 2010
	It is an inherent feature of this approach that it applies to every learner without any unlawful discrimination, harassment or victimisation. The aims of this approach do not have a negative impact on this equality group and SQA does not feel that there is potential to discriminate.
	Advance equality of opportunity
	It is an inherent feature of this approach that it applies to every learner, which promotes equality of opportunity between all learners. Regardless of sex, grade boundaries are set in line with the intended demand of the assessment and are adjusted appropriately if the assessment did not function as intended — they are not affected by the performance of individual candidates or groups. The approach applies equally to all learners to ensure consistency.
	Foster good relations
	It is an inherent feature of this approach that it applies to every learner, which fosters good relations between all learners by ensuring that the standard of our qualifications is set appropriately and maintained over time and across courses.

Protected characteristic	General equality duty
Sexual orientation	Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct that is prohibited by the Equality Act 2010
	It is an inherent feature of this approach that it applies to every learner without any unlawful discrimination, harassment or victimisation. The aims of this approach do not have a negative impact on this equality group and SQA does not feel that there is potential to discriminate.
	Advance equality of opportunity
	It is an inherent feature of this approach that it applies to every learner, which promotes equality of opportunity between all learners. Regardless of sexual orientation, grade boundaries are set in line with the intended demand of the assessment and are adjusted appropriately if the assessment did not function as intended — they are not affected by the performance of individual candidates or groups. The approach applies equally to all learners to ensure consistency.
	Foster good relations
	It is an inherent feature of this approach that it applies to every learner, which fosters good relations between all learners by ensuring that the standard of our qualifications is set appropriately and maintained over time and across courses.
Gender re-assignment (gender identity and transgender)	Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct that is prohibited by the Equality Act 2010
	It is an inherent feature of this approach that it applies to every learner without any unlawful discrimination, harassment or victimisation. The aims of this approach do not have a negative impact on this equality group and SQA does not feel that there is potential to discriminate.
	Advance equality of opportunity
	It is an inherent feature of this approach that it applies to every learner, which promotes equality of opportunity between all learners. Regardless of gender identity or trans status, grade boundaries are set in line with the intended demand of the assessment and are adjusted appropriately if the assessment did not function as intended — they are not affected by the performance of individual candidates or groups. The approach applies equally to all learners to ensure consistency.

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	Foster good relations
	It is an inherent feature of this approach that it applies to every learner, which fosters good relations between all learners by ensuring that the standard of our qualifications is set appropriately and maintained over time and across courses.
Marriage or civil partnership	Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct that is prohibited by the Equality Act 2010
	It is an inherent feature of this approach that it applies to every learner without any unlawful discrimination, harassment or victimisation. The aims of this approach do not have a negative impact on this equality group and SQA does not feel that there is potential to discriminate.
	Advance equality of opportunity
	Not a relevant protected characteristic for this need.
	Foster good relations
	Not a relevant protected characteristic for this need.
Pregnancy or maternity	Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct that is prohibited by the Equality Act 2010
	It is an inherent feature of this approach that it applies to every learner without any unlawful discrimination, harassment or victimisation. The aims of this approach do not have a negative impact on this equality group and SQA does not feel that there is potential to discriminate.
	Advance equality of opportunity
	It is an inherent feature of this approach that it applies to every learner, which promotes equality of opportunity between all learners. Regardless of pregnancy or maternal status, grade boundaries are set in line with the intended demand of the assessment and are adjusted appropriately if the assessment did not function as intended — they are not affected by the performance of individual candidates or groups. The approach applies equally to all learners to ensure consistency.

Protected characteristic	General equality duty
	Foster good relations
	It is an inherent feature of this approach that it applies to every learner, which fosters good relations between all learners by ensuring that the standard of our qualifications is set appropriately and maintained over time and across courses.
Considered by SQA: care experience (where relevant)	Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct that is prohibited by the Equality Act 2010
	It is an inherent feature of this approach that it applies to every learner without any unlawful discrimination, harassment or victimisation. The aims of this approach do not have a negative impact on this equality group and SQA does not feel that there is potential to discriminate.
	Advance equality of opportunity
	It is an inherent feature of this approach that it applies to every learner, which promotes equality of opportunity between all learners. Regardless of care experience, grade boundaries are set in line with the intended demand of the assessment and are adjusted appropriately if the assessment did not function as intended — they are not affected by the performance of individual candidates or groups. The approach applies equally to all learners to ensure consistency. Although the data does point to an attainment gap based on the learner's experience of care, it is not considered as a characteristic during the awarding and grade boundary process and the approach does not address this.
	Foster good relations
	It is an inherent feature of this approach that it applies to every learner, which fosters good relations between all learners by ensuring that the standard of our qualifications is set appropriately and maintained over time and across courses.

Rationale

If you are proceeding with a decision that may have a negative impact and are not putting in place actions to mitigate against this, please explain how this is objectively justified.
No negative impacts were identified.