



Evaluation of the 2023–24 Return to Full Course Assessment

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Publication date: June 2025

Published by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)
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Lowden, 24 Wester Shawfair, Dalkeith, Midlothian EH22 1FD

<http://www.sqa.org.uk>

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Executive summary

Context

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in modifications to most National Qualification (NQ) course assessments before the start of the 2021–22 academic year. These modifications included, for example, more choice for learners, certain parts of courses not being assessed, and practical requirements being changed or removed. The modifications were to account for a loss of learning due to the pandemic and to ensure that courses could be delivered in accordance with public health guidance.

The majority of modifications were removed for the 2023–24 academic year and there was a return to full course assessment.

Methodology

The research was designed to explore the experiences of the return to full course assessment for a range of stakeholders: learners; practitioners; colleges and higher education institutions (HEIs); SQA Operations and Appointee Management colleagues; SQA Qualification Development (QD) colleagues; and senior appointees.

Data collection took place between October and December 2024. Qualitative data collection methods, namely semi-structured focus groups and interviews, were chosen as they provide a greater level of detail than quantitative methods. The dialogue obtained from the focus groups and interviews helped us to fully understand the stakeholder views and experiences.

Advantages of the return to full course assessment

When asked about the advantages of the return to full course assessment in 2023–24, all participant groups reported that it provided a more rounded learning experience for learners, and this was the most significant theme to emerge from the discussions. In particular, participants mentioned that the return to full course assessment gave learners

the chance to develop a broader range of knowledge and skills, and to participate in practical activities that had not been available when modifications were in place.

Both learners and practitioners welcomed the return of assignments because they enable learners to secure marks towards their final grades without being wholly reliant on exams. Some learners highlighted that this increased their confidence and reduced stress, and some practitioners noted that it was beneficial for learners who underperform in exams.

Learners, practitioners and college and HEI participants thought that learners would be better prepared for future study and employment as a result of the return to full course assessment. College and HEI participants also suggested that they would know better what skills to expect from learners.

Disadvantages of the return to full course assessment

The participant groups highlighted disadvantages relating to the return to full course assessment, including increased stress and time constraints for both learners and practitioners. There were also concerns about learner skills gaps due to the COVID-19 pandemic's overall impact on education.

Some learners reported facing difficulties adjusting to the return to full course assessment, particularly when transitioning from National 5 to Higher. They described feeling overwhelmed by the re-introduction of coursework and struggled with balancing assignments and exam preparation. Additionally, some learners felt unprepared for the additional independent learning required.

A small number of practitioners reported struggling with the rapid implementation of the return to full course assessment. They highlighted the challenges of planning, addressing learners' skills gaps and managing increased workloads. They also reported logistical challenges, including delivering all course elements within tight timescales and readjusting to practical components that were stopped during the pandemic.

College and HEI participants, along with senior appointees, noted increased anxiety among some learners, caused by the increased assessment that came with the return to full course assessment.

Experiences

Across the participant groups, three key themes occurred when exploring their experiences of the return to full course assessment. These related to workload, attitudes, and quality assurance.

Learners, practitioners and QD colleagues, in particular, reported increases in their workload as a result of the return to full course assessment. QD colleagues ran more Understanding Standards events and produced more support materials for practitioners. Senior appointees also noted an increase in their workload but tended to view this positively.

Although many learners, practitioners and college and HEI participants welcomed the return to full course assessment, it was apparent that some would have preferred a staggered approach to its implementation. Some learners and practitioners also thought that it could have been communicated more clearly.

Practitioners, college and HEI participants, and senior appointees commented that the return to full course assessment made the assessment process a fairer and more accurate measure of learners' abilities.

Wider impact

In terms of the wider impact of the return to full course assessment, learner progression was discussed by a number of stakeholder groups. Practitioners and senior appointees did not feel that the period of modifications had significantly impacted learners' progression, despite a feeling from many stakeholder groups that there had been a negative impact on learners' knowledge and skills. QD colleagues thought that the modifications had made progression more difficult for learners.

Several stakeholder groups discussed whether the return to full course assessment was in the best interests of learners and there were mixed views. Most learners agreed that full course assessment was a better way of assessing their knowledge and skills compared to the modified course assessment. Practitioners, however, reported that some learners had struggled with the course content following the return to full course assessment, particularly the portfolios and assignments. College and HEI participants noted that full course assessment provided a more rounded experience for learners but highlighted the impact it had on some learners' mental health and anxiety levels, which affected their performance.

Future considerations

Learners, Operations and Appointee Management colleagues, QD colleagues and senior appointees were asked what factors they thought SQA should consider when making future decisions about assessment.

For Operations and Appointee Management colleagues, QD colleagues and senior appointees, standards and processes were among the most important factors. In the event of an increase in internal assessment, these participants noted that logistics, as well as the recruitment and training of markers, verifiers and those designing the assessments, would need to be considered. Additionally, some QD colleagues and senior appointees thought that an increase in internal assessment could make it challenging to maintain standards due to potential inconsistencies with assessment delivery and marking. Learners and Operations and Appointee Management colleagues mentioned that digital assessment methods are worthy of future exploration.

Another key theme focused on workload, especially among Operations and Appointee Management colleagues, QD colleagues and senior appointees. In particular, participants highlighted the potential increase in workload for both SQA and practitioners; stated that roles and responsibilities would need to be clearly defined; and questioned whether sufficient resources would be available to SQA and centres.

Introduction

Acknowledgements

We are extremely grateful to the participants for their assistance with this research. This includes learners, practitioners, college and HEI participants, SQA Operations and Appointee Management colleagues, SQA QD colleagues and senior appointees, as well as the schools that facilitated the in-person learner focus groups.

We are also grateful for the contributions to and support for this research from other SQA colleagues.

Context

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in modifications to most NQ course assessments before the start of the 2021–22 academic year. These modifications included, for example, more choice for learners, certain parts of courses not being assessed, and practical requirements being changed or removed. The modifications were to account for a loss of learning due to the pandemic and to ensure that courses could be delivered in accordance with public health guidance.

The majority of modifications were removed for the 2023–24 academic year and there was a return to full course assessment.

Methodology

The research was designed to explore the experiences of the return to full course assessment for a range of stakeholders.

Qualitative data collection methods, namely focus groups and interviews, were chosen as they provide a greater level of detail than quantitative methods. The dialogue obtained from the focus groups and interviews helped us to fully understand the stakeholder views and experiences.

The focus groups and interviews followed a semi-structured approach to enable participants to share their views and experiences freely, while still allowing the research to focus on important aspects of the return to full course assessment.

Data collection and recruitment

Data collection took place between October and December 2024.

Learners

Six focus groups with learners from S5 and S6 explored how they felt about the return to full course assessment and the impact on them, particularly in relation to areas such as workload and course enjoyment. Learners from S5 and S6 were chosen as they had experience of both modified and non-modified course assessment.

Four focus groups were held online and two in person. The participants for the online focus groups were recruited from the SQA National Qualifications Survey 2024, during which the learners expressed an interest in taking part in a focus group. The in-person focus groups were arranged with schools directly, with support from SQA colleagues.

Practitioners

Nine focus groups with secondary school practitioners explored how they felt about the return to full course assessment, the practicalities of delivery, and the impact on areas such as assessment standards and learner progression.

Practitioners were recruited from the SQA National Qualifications Survey 2024, during which they expressed an interest in taking part in a focus group. Each focus group was made up of practitioners from one subject area: Business, Creative, English, Mathematics, Sciences, Social Sciences, Technology, Other Practical Subjects and Support for Learning. There was an insufficient number of participants to hold a Languages focus group.

Colleges and higher education institutions

Seven interviews with representatives from colleges and HEIs explored how they felt about the return to full course assessment and the impact on their roles and institutions.

HEI representatives were able to reflect on their experiences of receiving learners who had already completed NQ courses and their preparedness for higher education, while college representatives were able to reflect on their experiences of both delivering NQ courses and receiving learners who had already completed NQ courses.

Participants were recruited through direct contact with the institutions, with support from SQA colleagues.

SQA Operations and Appointee Management colleagues

Seven interviews with Operations and Appointee Management colleagues explored the practicalities of delivering full course assessment, including issues relating to marking deadlines, recruitment of appointees, and budget allocation.

Colleagues with the relevant knowledge and experience were contacted directly and invited to participate.

SQA Qualification Development colleagues

Seven interviews with QD colleagues explored the practicalities of delivering full course assessment, including issues relating to their own role and workload, malpractice, quality assurance and standards.

Colleagues were recruited from the SQA National Qualifications Survey 2024, during which they expressed an interest in taking part in an interview.

Senior appointees

Eight interviews with senior appointees explored the practicalities of delivering full course assessment, including issues relating to their own role and workload, malpractice, quality assurance and standards.

Senior appointees were recruited from the SQA National Qualifications Survey 2024, during which they expressed an interest in taking part in an interview.

It should be noted that senior appointees' perceptions are likely to have been influenced both by their appointee role and their role in a centre.

Data analysis

The interviews and focus groups were recorded and non-verbatim transcribed. The data was analysed using an inductive, thematic approach: we analysed the data by categorising responses and drawing out themes, producing codes that allowed analysis across responses.

Limitations

The focus groups and interviews were intended to illustrate a range of perspectives and not to be representative of the wider population.

Most participants would have experienced various arrangements during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. At times participants may have spoken about earlier arrangements, such as the 2020–21 Alternative Certification Model, and compared this to the return to full course assessment.

It is possible that those who chose to participate were motivated to do so by having particularly strong opinions that they wished to share with SQA.

As with any approach to the analysis of qualitative data, the results are subject to researcher interpretation.

Findings

Learners

Advantages of the return to full course assessment

Learner focus group participants were asked to consider the advantages of the return to full course assessment in 2023–24. All focus groups identified at least one advantage.

Learners reported that the return to full course assessment gave them a more rounded learning experience and reduced gaps in learning, with opportunities to develop a broader range of knowledge and skills. A small number of learners found that this made the courses more interesting or enjoyable. Some learners noted that the learning experience also offered better preparation for the future, in terms of further study and employment.

Learners were pleased that the return to full course assessment enabled them to secure marks towards their final grades by completing assignments during the year, rather than relying solely on the final exams. This helped to reduce stress and increase confidence going into the final exams for some.

I liked having the coursework as it gave us more of a chance to get a better mark. It helped us to learn more.

One learner mentioned that the return to full course assessment was fairer than having modifications in place.

Disadvantages of the return to full course assessment

When considering the disadvantages of the return to full course assessment in 2023–24, all learner focus groups highlighted challenges.

Some learners felt the removal of modifications was overwhelming and they experienced issues managing expectations, particularly those learners transitioning from National 5 to Higher level in 2023–24.

I think that for our year group specifically was a bit like getting thrown in the deep end because we hadn't done it in Nat 5 and obviously it was a bit of a step up, so there's a few people I know that had said that the assignment pulled them down because they hadn't been able to do the work.

Several learners offered comments specific to their own subject areas and the negative impact of the return to full course assessment.

Never having done them before, it was hard to jump back in. For example, Music was such an intricate and detailed subject that it was a huge jump from no coursework to having it all brought back at once.

In Graphic Communication, the assignment was so different to the exam. Practical elements in the assignment and written elements of the exam, was hard to handle both and it made it more of a challenge.

Another common theme expressed by learners was the challenge of managing coursework and exam preparation simultaneously.

Doing the full coursework requirement at Higher was a massive jump from Nat 5, and a heavy workload.

There was so much coursework, and you needed a solid month, month and a half taken out for assignment stuff.

Similarly, timing was viewed as an issue for some learners. A lack of time allocated to assignments was mentioned, along with assignment deadlines being scheduled too close to prelims and during key study periods, which impacted on exam preparation.

You had less time because of your assignments to prepare for your final exam. Whereas before you had a lot more months to prepare for your final exam

A number of learners reported that the return to full course assessment increased stress and anxiety levels in 2023–24. The additional workload of preparing for assignments as well as exams, coupled with the new academic experience, were perceived by some learners to have had a negative impact on their learning experience and enjoyment of their studies. Learners also highlighted that full course assessment required independent learning and they felt they had to 'figure things out on your own for the first time' which some had found challenging.

I think there was added stress, because obviously it's a lot more work and you don't get more time. So, I feel like to fit in your coursework and like your assignment work in, like doesn't really work that well as it's obviously so crammed.

And added to the stress and worry of it all. It was a new experience for all of us which added to the stress.

Several learners thought that they were negatively impacted by both limited guidance and insufficient feedback from their practitioners in 2023–24.

It wasn't explained as clearly as it could have been what was expected compared to before.

Only limited feedback, so hard to gauge how you had done in the coursework. You have very little to know how you had done. So, you had no idea how much you had to study for the exam.

However, it should be noted that learners would not usually receive feedback on coursework as it is externally assessed.

Experience of the return to full course assessment

To find out more about learners' experiences in 2023–24, learners were asked to what extent they had enjoyed their courses, how they found the overall workload, and how they felt about the re-introduction of full course assessment at all levels at the same time.

Preparedness

Learners expressed a range of attitudes towards the return to full course assessment in 2023–24. Some learners expressed that the inclusion of assignments helped them feel well-prepared for exams, which increased their enjoyment of the courses. In addition to building foundational skills and better setting them up for future success, these learners also noted that assignments helped boost grades.

... [course assignments] gave a chance to get a few more marks [or] a better grade so I feel like it was actually a good thing coming back to the full course.

However, it should be noted that some learners who expressed these views had not experienced graded national courses before this year. Additionally, some learners who had experienced National 5 when modifications were in place reported feeling less prepared at Higher level when full course assessment was re-introduced. These learners reported struggling in the run up to exams and felt that it was difficult to fit the assignments in. One Higher English learner thought that there was not enough preparation to account for loss of learning before the return:

I don't think there was enough preparation. It was just — you're kind of thrown into it. Like we all missed a lot of stuff in second and third year because of COVID and that was what your kind of building blocks are for Reading, Understanding, Analysing and Evaluation (RUAЕ) and stuff, so I think a lot of people in my year struggled, with RUAЕ in particular.

Workload

As mentioned earlier, some learners reported that the added workload associated with the return to full course assessment had increased stress.

For some learners who were at Higher or Advanced Higher level, the workload was reportedly particularly intense in comparison to the previous year. For others, workload was described as 'reasonable' or 'somewhat manageable', depending on the subject. It should be noted that those who had just sat National 5s felt they were unable to comment on whether workload was impacted by the return to full course assessment, as this was their first year of certificated qualifications. Additionally, some learners commented that it was difficult to tell whether the stress they felt was directly related to the return to full course assessment (the learners who stated this indicated that they put a lot of pressure on themselves).

The workload was somewhat manageable. It varied between classes.

Attitudes towards the implementation of the return to full course assessment

While a small number of learners noted that the return to full course assessment provided structure and a sense that 'things were back in place' or 'settled down', most learners felt that a staggered approach, or a gradual increase in the value of coursework to the overall assessment, would have been preferable.

It should have been a stepped or staggered approach from National 5s first, then the following year back to full course assessment for Highers and then the following year for Advanced Highers.

I think it would have been good if there was a gradual build-up of different parts ... and eventually they build it up to what it was before.

Some learners also stated that they felt they were made aware of the return too late or that it was not clearly explained.

We weren't let known of it until the year of, so then we didn't have much time to prepare ... but we managed to cope with it.

A small number of learners said that the impact of the return to full course assessment was not as bad as anticipated or had no impact. Some who viewed the full re-introduction as 'necessary' or 'fairer' had not sat NQs the previous year and acknowledged that the return may have been 'a bigger jump' for those who had experienced NQs with modifications.

Wider impact of the return to full course assessment

To explore the wider impact, learners were asked if they thought full course assessment was a better or worse way to assess their knowledge and skills compared to the modified course assessment, and if they thought the return had impacted some subjects more than others.

Attitudes towards full course assessment

Most of the learners agreed that full course assessment was a better method of assessing their knowledge and skills, compared to the modified course assessment. Some reported that it was a better means of assessing the full breadth of subject knowledge and skills they had developed, and that multiple forms of assessment provided variety. Others felt it was preferable because they were able to earn a percentage of their grade from assignments before the exam, which increased their confidence and decreased their anxiety. One learner found it useful as an exercise in thinking about different ways to answer a question.

Some learners were uncertain which approach was best at assessing their knowledge and skills. Two learners thought they might have a better understanding of the full breadth of the course content and might perform better in assessments due to full

course assessment. However, they also felt that assignments took up time that could otherwise be spent learning and consolidating.

For example, in Chemistry, when it says using your chemistry knowledge, it's quite hard to do that when you haven't done the full course ... but at the same time, if you do the full course, you'd be leaving it to like the last minute.

The assignment may cut off your time to be able to learn the full course ... but ... you'll be able to gain marks off ... the assignment but if you learn the full course and then done the exam on the full course, you'll probably be able to do better in the exam.

Another learner stated that they preferred the modified course assessment because it was what they knew but acknowledged that perhaps they just needed time to adjust to full course assessment.

Impact on different subjects

Learners generally reported that the return to full course assessment impacted some subjects more than others. Some learners welcomed the return to full course assessment in subjects like Modern Studies, however, others noted that subjects like Biology and Human Biology were more difficult due to the assignment component. They felt that there were not enough resources in place to support them with the assignments, which they had no previous experience of.

I feel like there wasn't any resources online for the assignment, especially. but I think it was also ... the teacher, like being unable to help you. It was ... quite difficult, because ... it was like the first time you'd ever done stuff like that, and it was like a science like subject.

I think... like Modern Studies, the assignment I think that's what pulled my grade up. Whereas I think ... like Human Biology, it's not something that you do essays or anything in? So the assignment actually probably dropped my grade down. I find it a lot harder.

Some learners reported finding the return to full course assessment more difficult in some subjects. For instance, one learner stated that in English and Mathematics, they struggled more because ‘they missed a lot during COVID-19’, which meant that they found the full course more difficult. Another learner said that English was more difficult because they had to do their work in class and not on a computer. They thought this may have been to prevent the usage of artificial intelligence (AI) but, nonetheless, found it more difficult than subjects like Business Management, where they were able to work on a computer.

One learner felt that there was substantially more impact on written subjects compared to practical subjects, and another learner felt unprepared in some of their subjects.

One focus group did not believe the return to full course assessment had impacted subjects differently. The learners noted that when assignments were re-introduced, practitioners ensured the learners were appropriately prepared and the work felt more meaningful.

Future considerations

Learners were asked what was important for SQA to consider when making future decisions about assessment.

Communication

Many learners expressed that they need a better understanding of what is expected in assignments and that this requires clearer communication and guidance, particularly in terms of what has changed with courses compared to previous years.

Opportunities for feedback

Some learners stressed the importance of having opportunities to share feedback in the future.

I think giving feedback on things [is] quite important because sometimes I'm not quite happy with the way ... the way the course is, and I'm like, what's a

good way to give feedback? That's why when I saw the opportunity, I was like, this is great ... to move forward and to try and make things better.

Review of assessment process

Some learners called for a review of the exam structure and were in support of internal assessment.

And it might be good, I think it would help a lot of people prepare more, [if] all or some of the qualifications were based on unit assessments. Maybe SQA, assessors or whoever [or] invigilators could come in for all your different unit assessments. So you don't have to worry about one exam that might not do as well as you're hoping.

In particular, learners were in favour of reducing the amount of content to revise and/or memorise before exams, stating that exams only cover a small portion of what they prepare for.

For example, in English we had poems and if you weren't confident on a poem then it could give like, unnecessary stress in that, what if that poem comes up out of the six that I have to know, which is a slim chance, but still a chance.

It's quite a lot of memorisation. And you're only needing a select amount of information in your actual exam ... puts a lot of pressure on people.

Digital planning

A learner recommended that, in the event of another disruption to learning like the COVID-19 pandemic, it would be beneficial for learners to be able to complete assessments online, with ample time given and a system in place for monitoring malpractice.

If you get to another pandemic ... possibly for assessments, maybe give them a bit longer in the Zoom calls if you're doing assessments [online] with them ...

try and find a way to make sure, you know, they aren't going to cheat on the assessments.

Transparency in the appeals process

A small number of learners called for greater transparency in the appeals process and suggested that prior evidence be considered.

... they just recount marks and I don't think markers are making mistakes of miscounting the marks in the first place. They're usually always right with counting the marks. Maybe it's just that they need to keep taking into consideration that they've done well in their prelim but not so well in their exam and they could accept evidence ...

Support for learners with additional support needs

Several recommended better support for learners with additional support needs.

Maybe another thing to think about is some people might struggle a bit more ... I guess some people who are [not] neurotypical might struggle a bit more with certain aspects of the exam and appropriate support could be put in place during the exam; it might be to do with reducing stress or it could be something academically that they can get support with.

Practitioners

Advantages of the return to full course assessment

Practitioner focus group participants were asked to consider the advantages of the return to full course assessment in 2023–24. There was a fairly equal split of practitioners who supported the return to full course assessment and those who did not, with some of the opposing practitioners stating it was hard to think of advantages.

Practitioners reported that it was beneficial for learners to be able to secure marks from assignments towards their final grades, following the return to full course assessment,

and that exams should not be the only method of assessment. They believed the assignments to be particularly useful as preparation for future work or study and for learners who underperform in exams.

Some practitioners thought that the return to full course assessment offered learners a broader, more holistic learning experience, with opportunities to develop knowledge and skills that had not been possible with the modifications in place.

A small number of practitioners highlighted general benefits of delivering the full course content and assessment: it was easier for practitioners to deliver; it was easier and more equitable for learners; the course was more cohesive; and the qualification was considered to be more robust. It is important to note that SQA guidance recommended that full course content continued to be taught wherever possible despite modified course assessment; however, previous research has indicated that schools took different approaches towards course delivery when modifications were in place.

One practitioner reported that their learners had welcomed the opportunity to complete the full course assessment.

... the young people, especially when they get to Advanced Higher level, they liked to be judged holistically ... they preferred to be able to measure their skills as it should have been.

The few Support for Learning practitioners who participated in the study found it difficult to think of advantages of the return to full course assessment. Instead, they highlighted some of the broader challenges facing education and the need for wider change in response to these challenges.

Good to start emotionally moving on from COVID and to try getting back to normal, but that is me trying to find a positive answer. I do feel that learners are so different now (not just due to COVID, but social media etc) and the additional needs in the classroom are so wide that it's hard to get back to the depth of learning we had before. Covering the amount you need at the depth you need and finding the time to 'drag' them through the bits they don't want to

do is a real challenge. Trying to go back to normal is so much more than COVID. We need to build back better as it's not fit for purpose anymore.

Disadvantages of the return to full course assessment

In general practitioners reported that the return to full course assessment posed some challenges. Feedback from the focus groups included issues with insufficient planning, learner skills gaps, and logistical difficulties, which highlighted a perceived need for a more gradual and collaborative approach.

Practitioners reported frustration with what they felt was a rapid return to full course assessment without adequate consultation or planning. A small number noted the lingering impacts of COVID-related disruption to learning that, they believed, had not been accounted for when returning to full course assessment in 2023–24.

A key disadvantage to the return to full course assessment was the speed at which it was rolled out, and the lack of buy-in from practitioners ahead of the roll out.

Similarly, practitioners highlighted a seeming lack of consideration for the different needs of learners, particularly those with gaps in their skills and experience.

Current fifth- and sixth-year students, who missed critical National 5 coursework during the pandemic, struggled to adapt to portfolio and assignment requirements at Higher and Advanced Higher levels.

The Support for Learning practitioners reflected similar views, with one noting:

My main observation from my own practice, I think, would have been that the year groups who sat their exams this summer and who will be sitting their exams in 2025, have in a way been just as disadvantaged as their predecessors who sat — or did not sit — exams in 2020–23, because they too lost out on full-quality in-person teaching time at secondary level; yet they have not had the benefit of exam mitigations.

Practitioners identified a lack of resilience and confidence amongst many learners, which further impacted their ability to adapt to the requirements of full course assessment.

Many practitioners spoke about concerns around workload and time constraints following the return to full course assessment for both them and their learners. The return to full course assessment in some subjects posed a particular challenge. A small number of practitioners struggled to deliver all elements of the course while preparing learners for assignments and exams, noting the compressed timescales for many subjects.

The amount of time to cover everything in a full-sized class, especially with prelims in December was a problem. I had to rush to go over all content before Christmas.

I found it to be far more difficult to deliver the course in 2023–2024 due to the increased course content, which limited the amount of time we were able to spend on each element of the course.

Again, it should be noted that SQA guidance recommended that full course content continued to be taught wherever possible despite modified course assessment.

Practitioners across various practical subject areas mentioned that some of the practical components of their courses, which had to stop during COVID-19, were a challenge to re-introduce. Some practitioners felt unprepared for the changes in course requirements or assessments that accompanied the return to full course assessment.

The biggest disadvantage was that a lot of centres stopped doing practical work during the COVID pandemic. As a result, there was a steep learning curve for teachers. It was the teachers who were under stress.

A further concern with the return to full course assessment was the perceived lack of meaningful consultation and clear communication from SQA. Some practitioners noted

a sense of exclusion from the decision-making process, with frustration over the absence of clear reasoning behind SQA's decisions.

Practitioners were not consulted, and decisions seemed rushed without considering classroom realities.

Experience of the return to full course assessment

To find out more about practitioners' experiences in 2023–24, practitioners were asked about the practicalities of delivering course assessment in 2023–24 compared to the previous three years, and to what extent they were happy with the way in which the return to full course assessment was implemented.

Workload

Many practitioners reported that delivering full courses in 2023–24 was a challenging experience, largely due to the volume of content there was to cover within the given timeframe. Other factors, such as learner absenteeism and a perceived lack of learner resilience added to the challenge. Many practitioners also noted that they had to find time to address skills gaps, such as learners' test-taking abilities. For practical subjects, such as Practical Cookery, addressing skills gaps while covering both theoretical and practical elements of the course was particularly time-consuming.

I feel there's a lot they have to do when you're trying to teach some skills to cook, you're teaching them skills to write the time plan ... but, you know, also having to teach them skills and the theory to [do] the question paper as well.

Practitioners noted that more learners needed additional support. Mathematics practitioners spoke of running additional study sessions and the impact this had on their workloads.

Yes, it did increase workloads ... we ran a lot of supportive studies for those who wanted to come in after school to try and get caught up.

... the kids simply wouldn't have got through without it [extra study sessions].

Some practitioners felt that the additional time needed to cover assignments that had previously been removed due to COVID-19 took away from the time they could give learners to explore and engage more meaningfully with topics of interest (this view was also expressed by college and HEI participants).

We finally had, not quite enough time, but more time to deliver the rest of the course in an exciting, engaging way where you had time to take kids' questions, you had time to go beyond the course and actually grab that interest and we had to take all that back out again.

There was a view supported by most Technology practitioners that added value units (AVUs) were 'unsustainable', particularly for those learners taking multiple courses within a subject area. Practitioners highlighted the disparity between their AVUs in comparison to AVUs in other subjects.

... it can be quite frustrating when you hear about what other subjects have to do and how they can do their added value unit. It's very easy but ours is a bit more to it. I mean, the Woodwork ones are [a] full project ... it's not fair across all subjects.

Additionally, Social Sciences practitioners spoke of the need to teach research skills in their courses, which impacted on course delivery following the return to full course assessment.

You know, because of the way psychology works, you have to teach research methods, so you're effectively adding a fifth topic in when you're already under pressure.

Quality assurance and standards

A number of practitioners felt that quality assurance processes were improved with the return to full course assessment, which they believed provided a better measure of learners' skills and abilities.

In terms of standards, they noted that not all practitioners were able to attend Understanding Standards events, which they felt ultimately disadvantaged some learners.

Support for Learning

The Support for Learning practitioners reported that learners' confidence levels had been negatively impacted by online learning. Additional time was needed to support learners' exam-taking skills, as well as other skills gaps.

... the difference when it comes to just the fundamentals of being able to approach even things like the wording of an SQA exam ... where those kids with the modifications ... they didn't even understand how to answer, like what is the question asking me? Because it's phrasing that you have to learn to comprehend.

The gaps in learning took a long time ... well, the gaps in social skills, getting back to this is how we learn in a classroom.

In terms of quality assurance, the Support for Learning practitioners spoke of pairing up with other schools to create cross-marking groups when the modifications were in place. The process of moderating in this way reportedly helped to increase confidence and was deemed preferable to the usual process that returned with full course assessment.

It was as if [quality assurance] took on so much more importance. There was such an onus on us ... there was an acceptance of giving time and encouraging time, for everyone to review and understand and then adjust materials and implementation ... that professional dialogue [was] really useful, that whole process was working really nicely and then it just went straight back.

The Support for Learning practitioners also mentioned feeling frustrated by a perceived need to 'teach to the exam'. There was a sense that this resulted in a 'dumbing down' of what learners are capable of in terms of their writing.

I'm asking them to actually dumb down what they're capable of expressing just because I know that the way they might phrase that or the way that they might piece that together, if it's not together right there [in the exam], then it won't get the mark.

The Support for Learning practitioners noted that while practical folios help to increase engagement, the exam structure overall impacts negatively on learner mood and motivation.

You can make all of that [work that gets put into folios] so relevant to them and it really helps with engagement. And it helps to keep them stimulated. But when it comes to exam structures across the board, you can see at prelim time the mood just hits the floor. The motivation goes.

Finally, Support for Learning practitioners stated that the return to full course assessment had 'a massive impact' on their workload.

Attitudes towards the implementation of the return to full course assessment

The practitioners' views towards the return to full course assessment were similar to those reported by the learners. While many welcomed the return to full course assessment, practitioners generally would have preferred a staged implementation and believed that a gradual return would have eased the transition for both learners and practitioners. They thought this was particularly important for Higher and Advanced Higher learners, and learners with assignments requiring independent study or skills not developed when modifications were in place.

I wish it had been staggered. I think it was unfair to students in their sixth year to throw back in the full course when they hadn't had any of those elements in National 5 and Higher.

Some practitioners also felt that the return was poorly communicated, particularly to anyone who was not involved with marking. While practitioners were mainly in support

of assessments going 'back to normal', some suggested that more flexibility in exam time limits would have eased the transition for learners.

Possibly we could have given the kids just a little bit more time in the actual examination. An extra 5 or 10 minutes, depending on which paper, to allow them more thinking time rather than holding them to the exact same standards.

A number of practitioners also felt that the return to full course assessment was a missed opportunity to update course content and make the national graded courses more accessible overall.

... it was the perfect time to make changes in the courses and it was missed and they [SQA] just went back to what it was before.

Wider impact of the return to full course assessment

To explore the wider impact, practitioners were asked if they thought the return to full course assessment was in the best interests of learners, had any impact on learner performance, and if they were aware of any impact on learner progression when the modifications were in place.

Impact on learners

Several practitioners felt that the return to full course assessment led to learners struggling more with their courses. Mathematics practitioners stated that the 2023–24 course was particularly challenging for learners. This led to what one practitioner termed a 'bimodal distribution' of learners, where there were two groups of learners — one that was more able and one that was substantially less able. Most of the mathematics practitioners would have preferred a phased return to full course assessment. Despite this, one practitioner believed that future cohorts of learners would handle the full course better as they would have some prior experience of it.

Practitioners of creative subjects, including Art & Design and Music, also highlighted learner difficulties. Those who taught Art & Design noted that their learners struggled across the course but particularly with the enormity of the portfolio, and that learners who were already struggling were further disadvantaged.

Returning to full course assessment in Art & Design at national level ... with the full exam coming back, it was even more difficult for those kids who struggled with that element and whose folios were kind of borderline.

Sciences practitioners reported that assignments were a particular issue for learners and that it was difficult to watch learners struggle knowing that they were unable to help.

They sat there saying 'there's nothing' and I am sat here frustrated because I can't say anything. So I just had to say, 'sorry I can't help you' and that was awful.

To make the process better, the SQA should say, here are five experiments you can pick from. You can do one of these five. SQA can do the legwork to say that there is definitely some data available on the web. We had some kids wasting time and had a similar problem to [another participant] ... where it was almost impossible to find data and we can't do anything to help.

Several participants felt that, despite the challenges, the return to full course assessment was broadly a positive development for learners. Practitioners from business subjects stated that it allowed learners to experience the full range of topics for a particular course. This meant that learners did not need to have as deep an understanding of a small number of specific topics and could instead have a less in-depth knowledge of many topics. In addition, they said that the return gave learners experience of undertaking an assignment, which was positive.

English practitioners reported that the return to full course assessment had made it necessary for learners to become more familiar with the speaking and listening aspects of assessment, which they thought was a positive move in the long term.

One participant highlighted that the return to full course assessment was beneficial for learners as they felt that employers had looked upon NQs with a degree of scepticism when they were modified.

Practitioners were particularly positive about the return to full course assessment in Advanced Higher courses.

Advanced Higher projects, it's one of the best experiences for kids and it bridges the gap between school and university ... In Chemistry, where all the way up to Advanced Higher you have a protocol, you know the experiment is going to work and then ... you do your own and it doesn't work ... that skill is brilliant, keep the Advanced Higher project the way it is.

Learner progression

The majority of practitioners were not aware of the modifications having any impact on learners' progression within the senior phase or to HEIs, colleges or employment; however, some identified issues relating to knowledge and skills.

Practitioners from Technology subject areas reported that progression within the senior phase was difficult for learners as they had not been taught certain course components when the modifications were in place. This meant that learners had to do a lot of catching up when they moved to the next level.

A Mathematics practitioner stated that they had many conversations with parents about the 'real ability' of learners who had passed National 4. The practitioner felt that, during the period of modifications, some learners were awarded qualifications that they should not have been given, leaving them unprepared for further study in the senior phase.

A practitioner from the Sciences thought that while the modifications did not necessarily impact learners' ability to gain employment or secure a place in HEIs or colleges, there was an impact on their knowledge and skills. This, in turn, widened the gap in expectations between secondary school and university. The participant did not believe the modified National 5 and Higher courses prepared students for university and felt

there was still a sizeable gap between Advanced Higher courses and university. Therefore, the practitioner thought that the full course prepared learners better for higher education.

Standards

There were mixed views from practitioners regarding the impact of the return to full course assessment on learner performance. Several practitioners felt that learners were unable to meet the standard and there were issues with attainment. However, other practitioners did not think the return to full course assessment had any impact on attainment.

Grade boundaries

Some Support for Learning and Sciences practitioners reported concerns about SQA's grade boundary system and perceived that the process may not be in the best interests of learners.

I understand the need for the grade boundary system, but it does raise some problems if we are saying there is a standardised exam to reflect individuals' ability to pass at a certain level and then we go and change what the level is. When we are shifting about the assessment models, it has a major impact and I'm not sure it's always the best idea to go with boundary grades. It's problematic when we're trying to focus on individual learners and then you are just shoving them in that big functioning machine that is the boundary grade exam.

You adjust the difficulty of the test to get the percentage of students you want to pass. It is trying to get a percentage pass for the sake of employment not for an educated next generation.

... the only goal seems to be that the same proportion of kids get an A, B and a C. The normalisation curve is the important part to SQA. Students aren't

trying to get above 70% but rather the top 25% of students. How can they improve year on year if the grade boundaries are fixed?

These practitioner views highlight the need to work towards a shared understanding of SQA's grade boundary system, the details of which can be found on [SQA's website](#).

Colleges and higher education institutions

Advantages of the return to full course assessment

College and HEI representatives who participated in the interviews were asked to consider the advantages of the return to full course assessment in 2023–24. All were able to identify at least one advantage.

Participants reported that the return to full course assessment had given learners a broader, more rounded and richer learning experience, when compared to learning with modifications in place. Learners were able to participate in practical activities, develop soft skills, develop a better understanding of the subject areas, and have choice over their learning and assessments. A small number of participants noted the positive effect on learners, including improved learner outcomes, focus, engagement and confidence.

One participant also highlighted the benefit for practitioners, in terms of the teaching experience.

Higher Psychology returning to three [topics], I think that is very beneficial ... it allows ... an optional subject to be taught beside the two mandatories. It allows that little bit of personality from the lecturer and the students to shine through ... so it has injected a little bit more interest back into the subject.

Some participants identified that learners should be better prepared for their destination and that colleges and HEIs should now know what skills to expect from learners, because of the return to full course assessment.

Two participants welcomed the increased standardisation and quality assurance that came from the return to full course assessment. This was due to concerns about inconsistent levels of support offered by different centres when the modifications were in place and the potential for learners to cheat on open-book assessments.

A small number of participants stated that the return to full course assessment was advantageous in drawing a line under the modifications and signalling a return to normal.

Disadvantages of the return to full course assessment

College and HEI interview participants were asked to consider the disadvantages of the return to full course assessment in 2023–24. Several participants did not mention any disadvantages.

Those who did identify disadvantages noted an increase in stress and anxiety amongst learners since the return to full course assessment. They believed this was due to many small-scale assignments creating an environment of persistent anxiety for learners, in contrast to what they perceived as the more flexible approach of assessment adopted during, and immediately after, the pandemic.

No, the national test culture is a shock for learners sitting exams now; they needed a softer return; some very bright learners flunked exams, and I believe this is due to nerves and anxiety.

Similarly, some felt the volume of projects put additional pressure on learners, who struggled to keep up and achieve expected grades. Participants noted that this was demoralising for some learners, particularly as they navigated the return to full course assessment.

Students aren't getting As or Bs, which is really demoralising for them. There is a wall that gets put up in their progression because of that.

HEI participants highlighted the change in learner skill sets since the pandemic, which has complicated the teaching and assessment process. They noted that learners now enter higher education with varying levels of preparedness due to the impact of the pandemic on their earlier learning experiences. This often requires practitioners to realign their teaching strategies accordingly.

A participant also emphasised the impact on universities of changes to assessment, such as the implementation of modifications and the return to full course assessment.

... every change that happens at SQA causes universities to have to make big adjustments because the cohort changes in terms of experience and confidence levels as a result.

One college participant thought that the return to full course assessment was necessary, but it should be evaluated alongside the lessons learned from the recent modifications.

... it has also highlighted some areas where there could be some changes made to the design of assessment. Subjects have been assessed in different ways over the past few years and we should evaluate whether there are some things to be learned.

Experience of the return to full course assessment

To explore their experiences, college and HEI participants were asked about their concerns surrounding the return to full course assessment and the value of returning to full course assessment. They were also asked to think about the ways in which it impacted their role and any other practical issues or challenges they experienced.

Concerns

In general, HEI and college participants were in favour of the return to full course assessment; however, a smaller number did not support it. In their subject areas, they felt there was too much content to cover with the re-introduction of assignments and

that exams carried too much weighting. This limited learner engagement with topics of interest and there were ‘missed opportunities’ to be creative.

It impacted on assignments more than anything else and that’s a shame, because that’s where they’re able to shine and add their own personal flair and personal interest. And it just felt very rushed and didn’t add a lot of creativity.

Quality assurance

Two college and HEI participants felt that the return to full course assessment had given them reassurance that standardised measures were back in place, ensuring a fair assessment of learners’ abilities. Some participants also noted an improvement in academic quality, standards and outcomes.

It ensures that what was designed as a course is designed and assessed in the way that it’s supposed to, approved to be ... that everything was assessed in the way that it was designed to be assessed.

The value of practical experience

A small number of college and HEI participants spoke about the value of learners receiving practical experience as a result of the return to full course assessment. Practical activities allowed college and HEI practitioners to fill gaps where learners had experienced ‘de-skilling’ when practical course elements were removed due to the modifications. In addition, participants viewed the inclusion of more practical work as beneficial for increasing learner engagement and socialisation. The return of in-person interactions and the opportunity to visit real world settings were particularly welcomed.

... because our industry is very hands on and very face to face it was really important to get them back into doing practical things in a proper way.

Wider impact of the return to full course assessment

To explore the wider impact, participants from colleges and HEIs were asked if they thought the return to full course assessment was in the best interests of learners. They were also asked if there were any significant issues for their institution in terms of the knowledge and skills of learners who completed the modified NQ courses in place between 2020 and 2023.

Impact on learners

Several participants believed that the return to full course assessment was beneficial for learners. They stated that college and HEI practitioners were able to be more confident in course delivery and that learners were more engaged, noting that learner engagement was a particular issue when courses were being taught online. One participant highlighted other benefits of not being so reliant on technology, including not having to consider learners' home environments and not having to try and replicate practical assessments in an online environment.

However, another group of participants felt that the return to full course assessment was not in the best interests of learners. They asserted that it had a significant impact on learners' mental health and, particularly, their levels of anxiety, which affected their performance in assessments.

I think that with the current mental health crisis that we are seeing ... assessments can be quite challenging for students, especially closed assessments. There's an increasing anxiety around that.

Several participants stated that the return to full course assessment enabled them to teach a broader range of topics and provide a more rounded experience for their learners. This was the case irrespective of whether participants felt that the return to full course assessment was in the best interests of learners or not.

Review of assessment process

Two participants suggested that the assessment process requires further consideration going forward, particularly in relation to learners who need extra support.

One participant reported that enabling technologies, such as voice to text, are critical for many young people during assessments and there are:

a lot of students that benefit from that technology that don't perhaps reach the ... criteria for an illness and for adjustments, but it would be really supportive of learning.

Another participant said that, while they supported the return to full course assessment, SQA should try to learn lessons from the experience and make necessary changes to the design of the assessment process.

Impact of modified courses on knowledge and skills

Most participants either felt unable to comment on whether the modifications had caused issues for their institution in terms of the knowledge and skills of learners, or did not believe there had been any issues.

However, some participants reported that the modifications to NQ courses between 2020 and 2023 did cause issues in terms of the knowledge and skills of learners. The participants said it was more difficult to assume the knowledge and skills of learners during this period, and they had to put far more emphasis on preparing students for entry into the first year of their university degrees.

One participant stated that it was clear that Scottish students were struggling when compared to students who had completed A levels or the International Baccalaureate, particularly in more practical subjects where there may be skills gaps.

I think what we know as an institution at the moment, over the last few years, Scottish qualified students are struggling when we look at them relative to A Levels or International Baccalaureate ... we particularly see them struggling in

the early years of our degree. We see them particularly struggling in practical subjects, things like Chemistry as well.

SQA Operations and Appointee Management colleagues

Advantages of the return to full course assessment

SQA Operations and Appointee Management colleagues who participated in the interviews were asked to consider the advantages of the return to full course assessment in 2023–24. Some did not feel they could comment as this was not related to their roles.

The advantages that participating colleagues identified focused on a perceived benefit to learners of returning to the courses as they were designed to be delivered.

One colleague thought that the timing of the return to full course assessment was right. It had taken appointees time after COVID-19 to settle back into the marking process. Following the re-introduction of exams in 2022, there had been some challenges with recruitment and there had been a period of significant change to navigate before returning to full course assessment.

Disadvantages of the return to full course assessment

SQA Operations and Appointee Management colleagues were asked to consider the disadvantages of the return to full course assessment in 2023–24. A small number of Operations colleagues did not feel they could comment on this element as it was not related to their roles. Those who did provide feedback noted logistical and operational challenges impacting on marking and leading to an increase in workload. The shortage of markers in certain subject areas following COVID-19 and the need for more markers when returning to full course assessment had an impact on related processes.

Colleagues spoke about the challenge of recruiting the required number of markers to deal with the increased volume of scripts that needed to be marked within the required

timeframe, as well as recruiting more appointees to work on writing and producing the returning course elements.

We had to make sure that we had more markers available as they had more materials that needed to be marked within the same timeframe. There were also verification needs. This exposed ... some of the potential underlying issues.

It has meant a huge amount more work for me and my team having to recruit more appointees to primarily mark the external assessments which were brought back, but also other appointees involved in the writing, production, QA [quality assurance] of the returning components.

One colleague highlighted the need to support markers to ensure a high standard of marking, especially during periods of change.

Experience of the return to full course assessment

Operations and Appointee Management colleagues were asked about any challenges they may have faced as a result of the return to full course assessment, including those relating to marking deadlines, malpractice and appointee recruitment. They were also asked if there had been adequate budget and support in place.

Resources and support

Although significant additional resources were put in place, and SQA successfully managed to deliver all parts of the marking and certification process in time, some colleagues felt that they could have had more support to handle the return to full course assessment. Additionally, for colleagues involved in script management, the logistics of moving a larger volume of scripts was challenging at times.

A small number of colleagues reported positive experiences of collaborative working within their team and with other teams to facilitate the return to full course assessment.

... we have a good relationship with colleagues in QD ... we all supported each other and ... it went really smoothly and there was a clear understanding of my role and my link to other peoples' responsibilities as well.

Time

Some Operations and Appointee Management colleagues felt that time allocations were tight in terms of marking periods and dates. This was despite the extensive cross-team collaboration and discussions that took place to agree dates and time periods for marking.

Wider impact of the return to full course assessment

To explore the wider impact, Operations and Appointee Management colleagues were asked if the return to full course assessment had impacted their role at SQA. One key theme emerged relating to workload.

Workload

The extent to which the return to full course assessment impacted the workload of Operations and Appointee Management colleagues was dependent on individual roles and responsibilities. However, as mentioned earlier, colleagues noted an increase in overall demand due to the increased volume of scripts being marked, the recruitment of additional appointees, the logistics of moving scripts and materials, and the writing, production and quality assurance of returning components.

Future considerations

Operations and Appointee Management colleagues were asked about the implications of an increase in internal or non-exam assessments, and what factors should be considered to ensure that this change would be practical for SQA.

Processes

Colleagues noted that consideration would need to be given to quality assurance and other operational processes, including the logistics of exam materials and the recruitment and training of markers, as well as those designing the assessments.

A colleague also cautioned against bringing in changes before thinking about the practical and operational implications across business areas.

... sometimes these things can happen and changes go away and are made to the sort of qualification without thinking then about the operational impact, how that's delivered, how that's managed ... so I think it's just around ensuring that [there is] close working between the business areas involved ...

One colleague believed that an increase in internally assessed components could increase workload for their team, depending on the volume of materials, and suggested that digital measures may need to be considered.

... would we need to have, you know, more resource in place to be dealing with getting that volume of marks in or would it be simply not feasible to do it how we do it just now and would there need to be some electronic submissions methods by centres rather than filling out a form? It would all be dependent on volumes around that, definitely.

Resources

Several colleagues highlighted that, depending on the approach, a move towards a larger proportion of internal assessment may require additional resourcing from SQA. It would change the appointee role and training would be required. Additional verifiers would need to be recruited to maintain the credibility of qualifications and ensure that schools were consistently following national standards. SQA would also need to consider recruiting subject experts as well as the schedule of delivery.

What teams would it involve in SQA? I think it's the resource thing, [that's] the biggie for me.

Evidence

Colleagues suggested that various stakeholder groups, including schools, practitioners and teaching unions, be consulted to understand whether internal assessments are perceived to be valuable across the wider education community.

One colleague also called for future assessment approaches to be evidence-based.

It would be good to see whatever approaches that are adopted are actually being backed up by some form of research and data and an evidence-based approach.

SQA Qualification Development colleagues

Advantages of the return to full course assessment

SQA QD interview participants were asked to consider the advantages of the return to full course assessment in 2023–24 and all believed it was a positive development. They thought that it offered learners a broader education and a more thorough assessment of their knowledge and skills, which better reflected the learners' abilities and made the qualifications more valid.

Disadvantages of the return to full course assessment

QD colleagues were asked to consider the disadvantages of the return to full course assessment. As mentioned above, they generally believed that it was a positive development.

Those who highlighted disadvantages identified issues with communication between SQA and practitioners, noting that communication with practitioners could have been clearer on the details of the return to full course assessment. They reported that, despite updating website documents and running Understanding Standards events to

share updates, there remained a lack of understanding amongst some practitioners, particularly those who had not been employed before the pandemic.

You can communicate these things in every way you can, but you can't make people read a document or listen at an event. There was some feedback in the stats that suggested the message hadn't got through in the way that we would have liked it to.

Experience of the return to full course assessment

QD colleagues were asked if the return to full course assessment had any impact on their role, workload and the practicalities of assessment delivery in centres. While key themes are noted below, it should be acknowledged that a small number of QD colleagues said they had not experienced any changes to their role because of the return to full course assessment.

Learner performance

Some QD colleagues were glad to see the return to full course assessment so that learners were assessed on their full ability. One QD colleague noted that writing skills had improved, while another felt that there was a slight negative impact on overall exam performance compared to the years when modifications were in place.

But that said, it wasn't a disaster you know, it was only a slight decrease in performance.

Support for practitioners

A QD colleague voiced that more examples of good marking are needed to better support practitioners. Additionally, they commented on the effect of continuous change,

which they believed has led to an 'unsettled workforce'. They suggested that a timeline of forthcoming changes might be helpful.

There's definitely a sort of edgy feel where people are waiting for change ... they're reluctant — 'Should I start this? Should I not?' ... They're just a bit thrown sometimes if changes are made again.

Time

There was also discussion about the time it takes to cover the full course content and questions raised around the purpose of re-introducing course elements when evidence indicated that it was possible to assess learners without those elements.

Workload

There was an increase in workload for QD colleagues as they put measures in place to support practitioners with the return to full course assessment, such as running more Understanding Standards events and producing more support materials. According to one QD colleague, this was necessary in part due to higher staff turnover during the COVID-19 pandemic.

... over the course of the pandemic, in some centres, there'd been a huge churn of staff ... so in many cases, that staff didn't have the experience of pre-pandemic of how to conduct [assessments]. So consequently, we ran quite a number of Understanding Standards sessions.

Practitioner attitudes towards the return to full course assessment

Some QD colleagues reported having experienced negative practitioner attitudes towards the return to full course assessment.

I think initially there was a bit of negativity from teachers ... but it was from anxiety. People were anxious about it coming back and they were anxious about the [low] attendance in school ...

Alternatively, some QD colleagues had experienced positive feedback from practitioners about the re-introduction of coursework and assignments.

Wider impact of the return to full course assessment

To explore the wider impact, QD colleagues were asked if they believed the return to full course assessment had an impact on standards, academic malpractice or the progression of learners.

Learner progression

Most QD colleagues felt the return to full course assessment had an impact on learner progression and there was broad agreement that the lingering effects of the modifications had made it more difficult for learners. However, there was no consensus on exactly how learners were impacted.

One colleague believed that, due to apparent grade inflation during the period of modifications, learners were unaware of their true ability in subject areas and, as a result, they struggled in Higher and Advanced Higher courses following the return to full course assessment. Another colleague stated that they could see the impact of the modifications on learners taking Advanced Higher courses, for which a high proportion of the grade is achieved through coursework and assignments. This caused difficulties for learners as they had no prior experience of these types of assessment at National 5 and Higher. In addition, another colleague observed that progression was more difficult for some learners because, despite being able to achieve individual units, they struggled to manage the courses overall.

One colleague did not believe that the return to full course assessment had impacted the progression of learners but that grade boundary issues had. They thought that learners' grading was far less rigorous during the period of modifications and that, even after the return to full course assessment, grade boundaries were adjusted more than they had been before the COVID-19 pandemic.

A number of colleagues felt that the return to full course assessment would help learners progress by providing them with reference points for future assessments.

Standards

There was a mixed response from QD colleagues regarding the impact on standards. Some of them noted an impact on standards as a result of lost learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, which meant learners were less prepared for full course assessment. Others were less certain about whether there had been an impact; two colleagues did not think there had been any impact on standards.

Malpractice

When QD colleagues were asked about their awareness of academic malpractice as a result of the return to full course assessment, the majority indicated that they were unaware of any issues. One colleague stated there had been malpractice issues in their subject area, but this was not uncommon and similar to what they had experienced pre-pandemic. They believed the malpractice was due to a lack of engagement with the course reports.

Future considerations

SQA QD colleagues were asked about the implications of an increase in internal or non-exam assessments and what factors should be taken into account to ensure that this change would be practical for SQA. The main issues discussed were centred around practitioner workload and maintaining the credibility and value of assessments. Themes were predominantly similar to those that emerged from discussions with Operations and Appointee Management colleagues.

Standards and processes

QD colleagues highlighted a perceived difficulty with maintaining the standards of internal assessments.

At the end of the day, we need to maintain standards and it is very difficult with internally assessed qualifications.

Colleagues who had previous experience of internal assessment reported inconsistencies with assessment delivery and marking across centres. They also expressed concern about possible grade inflation.

It would need some careful thought around, well, what work can we do to make sure the standard is not just understood but applied?

The issue of verification was raised by several colleagues and some viewed this as potentially costly for SQA.

I think you'd have to do vast amounts of verification to check that it was to standard, which, I mean, if you're trying to save money, that's not really a money saving exercise.

Another colleague suggested that costs could be alleviated in the long term, for example, by having a bank of assessments.

Internal assessment activity should not be an annual issue ... we should have a generic bank of assessments ... centres must pick from that specific bank because that would then save money ... we don't need to produce something every year ...

Workload, resources and buy-in

Similar to some Operations and Appointee Management colleagues, QD colleagues noted that an increase in internal assessment may place significant additional workload on practitioners, and that roles and responsibilities would need to be made very clear.

... make sure that we're not asking too much in terms of internal assessment and I think we also need to make sure everything is absolutely crystal clear, you know, that people know exactly what is required by the assessment.

They also questioned whether practitioners would receive compensation for any additional duties.

Other colleagues commented that significant pressure would fall on SQA to ensure standards are maintained.

There'll be this pressure for us to produce the assessments. On the other hand, at least if we produce them, they'll be of an appropriate standard ... teachers would see that as well, that's not increasing [their] workload and [they'll] know that the assessments have been quality assured.

One colleague stated that SQA, as well as schools, would need to be better resourced before an increase in internal assessment could happen, particularly in terms of technology. They also believed that better structures within SQA were needed, such as more streamlined processes and internal collaboration. Externally, they added, the change would require engagement and buy-in from practitioners and lecturers.

Another colleague suggested that learners may not take internal assessments as seriously as they do external NQ exams. They also questioned whether an increase in internal assessment might lead to further inequalities, highlighting learners who struggle with attendance, for example.

Senior appointees

Advantages of the return to full course assessment

The senior appointee interview participants were asked to consider the advantages of the return to full course assessment in 2023–24. Two did not believe it was a positive development. Some others were uncertain or found it difficult to answer.

Those who identified advantages noted that the return of assignments and practical work was important, and the return to full course assessment brought increased standardisation and rigour.

Disadvantages of the return to full course assessment

The senior appointees were asked to consider the disadvantages of the return to full course assessment. Those who reported disadvantages noted that learners were not prepared for it due to learning loss in core skills, such as literacy.

Rapidity of the Higher course is starkly different from Nat 5 and Advanced Higher for students, and it is very difficult to teach that course. Personally feel that the dent in attainment is really significant; literacy and interpretation skills/abilities, as a result of COVID-19, have been severely impacted.

Senior appointees also noted the pressure that practitioners felt trying to re-introduce assignments successfully alongside fitting additional content into their teaching time.

I think there was a lot of overcompensation, maybe not overcompensating, but a lot of effort went into getting that right for the learners, because it's such a big part, it's almost 30% of their mark. That squeezed the teaching time anyway, but we then also put teaching content back in which squeezed the teaching time again.

As mentioned earlier, SQA guidance recommended that full course content continued to be taught wherever possible despite modified course assessment.

Experience of the return to full course assessment

Senior appointees were asked if the return to full course assessment had any impact on their role, workload and the practicalities of assessment delivery in centres. A small number of senior appointees did not experience any issues or had not been significantly impacted by the return to full course assessment.

Time

The return to full course assessment impacted senior appointees' time. Some stated that assignments took up a significant amount of time, particularly in subjects such as History, while others reported that the limited release time given to undertake their senior appointee role clashed with their teaching commitments.

Senior appointees were tasked with helping practitioners who were not as familiar with the marking standards and this also had an impact on time. Two senior appointees thought that the communication and support could have been better to help increase practitioners' confidence levels.

The markers themselves really struggled with marking ... I did an awful lot more work than I would normally supporting markers ... and that's because the other appointees didn't necessarily understand the standards that we were looking for or have forgotten ... I think the communication could have been an awful lot better ... and there could have been an awful lot more webinars and support for teachers/appointees ...

Workload

Although workload increased for senior appointees with the return to full course assessment, this was viewed positively by some.

It's actually been positive in terms of, yeah, so there's been greater workloads, but that's actually better because it allows me to get a better picture of the national key standard and what we need to do in terms of future assessments.

... so there's a busyness that's there but there's also a feeling of getting back in the saddle ... and sort of being appropriately busy ... and all this collegiate spirit that comes with.

Quality assurance

As noted by several college and HEI participants, a number of senior appointee participants also mentioned that the return to full course assessment brought about improved quality assurance practices and greater consistency between centres.

However, one senior appointee thought that the grade boundary process did not make sufficient allowances for the return to full course assessment.

Another senior appointee reported that assessment delivery was inconsistent across centres and suggested that some practitioners may have been overcompensating, possibly due to a fear of asking for help.

I think teaching staff were way over preparing, giving candidates way too much. We had an issue with one centre where the candidates were producing stuff that we wouldn't even see at Advanced Higher, let alone at National 5, or expect to see ... so yeah, I think there have been issues with the standards and the way in which the coursework has been assessed ...

And I think that's down to more than anything this fear factor for the SQA ... some kind of Kafkaesque association that, you know, you can't question and then there's no one there to help you and you mustn't get it wrong.

Course content

Some senior appointees reported that the return to full course assessment had highlighted the need to review the relevance of certain course content.

My personal view is that the value-added units, which are, Higher is the extended essay, Advanced Higher is the dissertation, are very close now to becoming irrelevant.

Wider impact of the return to full course assessment

To explore the wider impact, senior appointees were asked if they believed the return to full course assessment had an impact on the progression of learners, standards or academic malpractice.

Learner progression

The majority of senior appointees were not aware of the modifications having any impact on learners' progression within the senior phase or to HEIs, colleges or employment; however, some identified issues relating to knowledge and skills.

Two senior appointees asserted that learners, particularly those who sat Higher and Advanced Higher, struggled following the return to full course assessment as they had no prior experience of full course assessment. One senior appointee noted difficulties with the Advanced Higher Geography assessment, which includes individual assignments and folios, because of learners' lack of experience in undertaking assignments.

... Advanced Higher learners were really feeling their way in the dark for the last five years because they'd had no exposure to assignment/folio-based work and ... the Advanced Higher Geography is 70% folio work ... I think the Advanced Highers really lost out not having the assignment at the lower levels.

However, some senior appointees felt that learners who sat National 5 would benefit as they will be more prepared for Higher and Advanced Higher.

Yeah, I think in terms of this coming year, it's possibly done the current cohort good because they've now had the experience at National 5. So I think it had to happen at some point, and I think this year's Higher will be better prepared because they've done their assignment at National 5 ... I think that it will be very good for Advanced Higher because ... the progression to Advanced Higher ... is all skills based, it's all assignment based.

Standards

Most senior appointees thought the return to full course assessment had some impact on standards. They highlighted aspects that had been challenging for learners, including written elements of assessment and, particularly for learners sitting Advanced Higher, returning assessment components that they had not experienced before.

I think the standards of practical work ... there is some incredibly strong work in both design and expressive ... There is strong work being submitted ... but you know from the marks ... with the written paper, there are challenges around that ... It's hard to say what the cause of that is ... whether they just can't sustain the length of the exam ...

One participant did not think the return to full course assessment had an impact on standards because any issues would have been resolved during the grade boundary process.

Malpractice

When senior appointees were asked about their awareness of academic malpractice as a result of the return to full course assessment, several participants stated that there had been instances of malpractice during the 2023–24 academic year, including issues with the conditions of assessment, cases of identical work and the use of AI and notes.

Future considerations

Senior appointees were asked about the implications of an increase in internal or non-exam assessments and what factors should be taken into account to ensure that this change would be practical for SQA. The main issues that were discussed centred around quality assurance, workload and opportunities.

Quality assurance and standards

Senior appointees spoke of the practical challenges of ensuring that standards are maintained. They suggested that this would require tighter and more rigorous quality assurance processes and adequate resources for potential invigilators.

I think quality assurance will be very, very difficult ... when we did the quality assurance in [2020–21] we found that mainly teachers had been very, very strict... which is maybe doing the candidates a disservice ... but on the flip side of that ... we've also seen where teachers just want to do the best for their [candidates]. And I understand both sides of it.

Practical challenges

Some senior appointees believed that practitioners would be unhappy with the increase in workload associated with an increase in internal assessment. They also highlighted other issues that require consideration, including timetabling and resources.

... the challenges are practical challenges, timetabling and resources, financial pressures, worse outside of the independent schools; not sure if it's going to be embraced by all.

Opportunity for change

Several senior appointees felt that an increase in internal assessment would be a positive change, particularly for those learners who do not cope well with current exam conditions. However, it was also noted that 'there's a lot of stamina required for continually assessing'.

The young people in my class ... they don't cope well with, 100% on the one day, type of exam.

The fact that we assess everything in an exam hall in a whole makes no sense to me at all.

Some senior appointees thought that an increase in internal assessment would offer an opportunity to adopt more digital and innovative assessment methods. For example, one senior appointee suggested that learners could complete a task requiring the analysis of several sources of information.

They've got these four sources ... and they're expected to ... come to some kind of conclusion about the validity, importance, usefulness of these sources, and what it tells us about [a topic].

However, one senior appointee expressed concerns that technology and AI might exacerbate inequalities in the context of internal assessment.

I think it's a very uneven playing field in terms of internal assessment. And I think that possibly needs a complete rethink about how internal assessment works, particularly with AI.