



# **Evaluation of the 2022 Approach to Assessment of Graded National Courses**

## **Summary Report**

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# Introduction

During the global COVID-19 pandemic, SQA, in common with education bodies around the world, had to use different approaches to assessment and certification. For academic session 2020-2021, the Scottish Government cancelled exams and commissioned SQA to develop an Alternative Certification Model (ACM 2021) for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher. The system-wide approach was based on teacher judgement, supported by assessment resources and quality assurance overseen by SQA. Our evaluation of that approach, published in September 2022, informed preparations for the 2021–22 academic session.

For National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher National Qualifications in academic session 2021–22, Scotland returned to formal external assessment including national exams, supported by a package of measures (including course assessment modifications and revision support, as well as wider support from across the education system at a national, regional, local, and centre level). These measures were designed to address the ongoing disruption to learning and teaching that young people experienced, while maintaining standards.

SQA's Evaluation of the 2022 Approach to Assessment of Graded National Courses aims to gauge how the 2022 approach operated in practice. Conducting an evaluation helps to identify what worked well and what did not work so well: highlighting areas of success and understanding what lessons can be learned from the experience that can help inform future thinking about education, qualifications and assessment in Scotland and elsewhere.

It is worth highlighting that the research findings demonstrate that there is no one stakeholder view. Experiences, perceptions, and opinions vary between and within different groups. At times, these positions are contradictory. An important aspect of the evaluation is capturing a range of perspectives on the approach, including from learners, teachers and lecturers, parents and carers, and SQA's qualification teams and senior appointees. Understanding the benefits and challenges of different arrangements is of vital importance and creates a record and evidence-base to inform decisions for the current academic year and beyond. This evidence will also contribute to the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessments as Scotland considers what reforms to its qualifications and assessments may be appropriate.

This report summarises the range of evaluation activity carried out by SQA since the conclusion of the 2021–22 academic session. Initial research from this evaluation work informed preparations for and decisions about the 2022–23 academic session. This ensured that the reflections of key system partners, particularly learners and practitioners, were integrated into early planning and decision making where possible.

SQA is extremely grateful to SQA co-ordinators, learners, teachers, lecturers, parents and carers, and SQA qualifications teams and senior appointees for their assistance with and participation in these important pieces of research.

# Assessment of Graded National Courses in 2022: Overview

In 2022, for the first time since 2019, Scotland returned to formal national assessments for graded National Courses at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher. The continued impact of COVID-19 remained challenging and uncertain for learners and practitioners. SQA worked with partners across the education sector to agree a wide-ranging package of support to enable learners to demonstrate what they know, what they understand and what they can do, despite the disruption to learning caused by the pandemic. It was agreed that a balance needed to be achieved between supporting learners through the ongoing disruption to learning and teaching, and ensuring qualifications remained valuable and credible. The importance of ensuring fairness to all learners remained at the centre of the discussions. As part of this approach, SQA implemented modifications to course assessment and revision support to reduce the assessment burden for courses and increase learning and teaching time. The overall package of support is outlined below.

## 2022 package of support

### Modifications to course assessment

Designed to help reduce the volume of assessment and ease teacher, lecturer, and learner workload, creating space for teaching and learning while maintaining the credibility of the qualifications.

### Revision support

A range of resources for learners ahead of exams, to help them make the most of their revision time.

### Generous approach to grading

A more generous approach to grading than in a normal year, to allow for the impact of the pandemic on learners when determining grade boundaries.

### Exceptional Circumstances

An Examination Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service for 2022, with eligibility adjusted to cover COVID-related disruption.

### Appeals

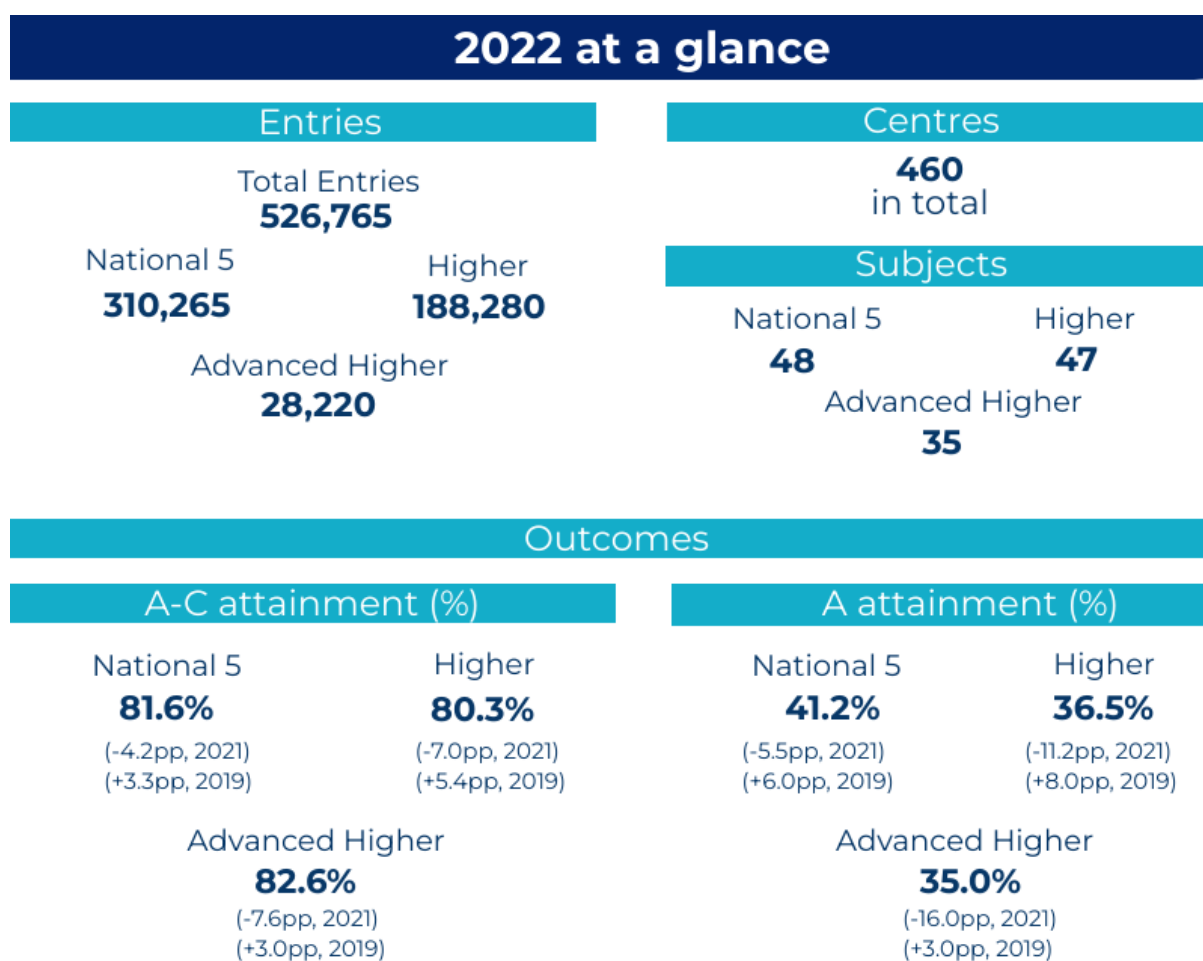
A free of charge appeals service to allow eligible learners to appeal directly or through their school or college.

More information is available in the [NQ 2022 Chief Examining Officer report](#) and the [National Qualifications 2022 Awarding – Methodology Report](#).

# Outcomes

The headline statistics and results from the 2021–22 academic session are highlighted below. Comparisons are given with results from the 2020–21 and the 2018–19 academic sessions. Outcomes from these years are used because 2020–21 is the previous year and 2018–19 is the most recent year prior to the pandemic in which SQA’s external assessments were the basis of certification.

It is important to note that the 2020–21 model used a fundamentally different approach to assessment, grading and certification to that used in 2021–22 and pre-pandemic. Care should be taken when comparing results for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher across recent years. Comparisons of attainment between years should be treated with significant caution and do not allow for any conclusions to be drawn on changes in education performance. Headline statistics for 2022 are set out below.



Changes in outcomes from 2021 and 2019 are given in percentage points (pp). The number of subjects includes grouped subjects. All figures are rounded to the nearest five.

Noted below are the headline statistics and findings on estimated grades and appeals in 2022. In 2022, more than 80% of entries were awarded either the same grade as they were estimated or a higher grade than estimated. For the remaining 96,000 entries, learners were eligible to appeal. For 60% of those entries, learners appealed with a success rate of 30%. All of these outcomes suggest that most learners did their best work in the SQA assessments.

## Relationship between teacher estimates and results

In 2022, attainment rates were higher than estimated

- Total National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher A-C attainment was 3pp higher than estimated.
- Total National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher A attainment was 5pp higher than estimated.
- In total, 51% of entries were awarded the same grade as estimated, whilst 30% were awarded a higher grade.
- When estimated grades did not match awarded grades, they most commonly differed by one grade.

## Appeals requests and outcomes



### Success rates

National 5 <b>27.5%</b>	Higher <b>33.1%</b>	Education authority centres <b>29.6%</b>	Independent centres <b>32.8%</b>
Advanced Higher <b>24.5%</b>		Further education centres <b>34.0%</b>	

- The vast majority of successful appeals were one grade lower than the centre estimate.



# Evaluation Approach

SQA's evaluation of the 2022 Approach to Assessment of Graded National Courses was split into several project strands. A mixed methods approach was adopted, and a range of research methods used, including primary research, desk research and statistical analysis.



## Learner and practitioner experiences

A detailed research study that aims to understand the experience of assessment in 2022 from the perspective of learners and practitioners, building a picture of how the 2022 assessment approach worked in practice. The research involved two stages — surveys of approximately 2000 learners and 1000 practitioners, followed by a series of in-depth interviews with a smaller group of learners and practitioners.



## Reflections of senior appointees and qualifications teams

A report outlining the results of engagement with senior appointees (principal assessors and depute principal assessors) and internal SQA qualifications teams who support the delivery of National Courses. The purpose of this engagement was to enable a thorough evaluation of the approach to the assessment of National Courses in 2021–22, as the education system returned to formal external assessment and examinations. Feedback from the evaluation was also used to help inform SQA's approach to the 2022–23 academic session.



## Approaches to certification in Scotland and other jurisdictions

A detailed piece of desk-based research placing Scotland's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in a wider context. This covers how assessment and certification in 2020, 2021, and 2022 were undertaken in a range of jurisdictions as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Jurisdiction in this context refers to the level at which summative assessment and certification is organised; this is not always at a national level. The research explores different jurisdictions' approaches to summative assessment, how effectively those systems functioned during the pandemic, and how jurisdictions are returning to pre-pandemic processes and standards.



## Relationship between teacher estimates and results in Scotland

A report examining the relationships between awarded grades and estimates in exam years. SQA collects estimates of attainment from centres every year as part of the procedure for awarding National Courses. This analysis includes 2022 and the three years prior to the pandemic (2017 to 2019) but does not include 2020 and 2021 when exams did not take place.



## **Appeal requests and outcomes**

A report on appeals requests and their outcomes in 2022. The nature of the appeals system has varied fundamentally in each of the last four years due to the need for it to integrate fully with the alternative awarding arrangements that were in place to account for the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of Appeals 2022 was to provide candidates and centres with the opportunity to have an independent review of alternative evidence of demonstrated attainment by a subject expert. Any candidate who had not achieved the grade estimated by their centre in an SQA National Course was eligible to appeal.



## **SQA statistics and commentary**

An analysis of attainment statistics published on results day (August 2022) and post-appeals (December 2022) with the accompanying statistical commentary. These provide an overview of entries and results for National Courses (National 2 to National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher) as well as Skills for Work, Awards, National Progression Awards, and National Certificates, and include breakdowns by subject, sex, and centre type.



# Key Themes

While each project strand explored different aspects of the 2022 assessment approach, several common themes emerged.

Theme	Findings
<b>Return to pre-pandemic approaches</b>	COVID-19 had a profound impact on assessment systems worldwide, but, after large-scale changes in 2020 and 2021, 2022 witnessed a general trend towards, but not necessarily a full return to, pre-pandemic assessment approaches as part of a gradual return to normality. Our research shows that practitioners and learners, in general, appreciated the increased certainty of a return to more conventional and well understood assessment approaches.
<b>Continued disruption</b>	The impact of the pandemic remains a very significant factor that impacts Scottish education in a number of ways. While assessment systems worldwide began to return to pre-pandemic norms, learner and practitioner absences and public health guidance nevertheless continued to disrupt learning, teaching, and assessment processes during the 2021–22 academic session. However, the greater impact may be due to the cumulative effect of lockdowns, learning loss, and the substantially increased levels of stress caused by the pandemic. Research participants reported that learners who are now sitting National Courses do not have the same foundation of skills and knowledge or exam competence that would have been anticipated before the pandemic, and that some learners are less resilient and less able to deal with stress, including that involved in sitting formal external assessments.
<b>Fairness</b>	This research reveals different and complex aspects of stakeholders' understanding of fairness in assessment. Traditionally, fairness in assessment has focused on issues such as ensuring that learners have the same opportunity to show their skills and knowledge, that assessments are a fair test of the course content, and that they are valid and reliable. Our research shows that this conception of fairness remains important. One of the main reasons given by both learners and practitioners for supporting the return of exams was that all learners would be assessed in the same way and under the same conditions and that marking would be undertaken and grades awarded nationally. Senior appointees and qualifications teams also believed that learners were assessed and graded fairly in 2022. However, it has also become apparent that individual fairness, where individual learner circumstances (particularly those as a result of the pandemic) are taken into account, is also important to stakeholders. This was evident in comments around the 2022 appeals process and suggestions that recovery from the disruption caused by the pandemic remains ongoing.
<b>Modifications to course assessments</b>	Many jurisdictions retained some form of modification to assessment in 2022 (including streamlined content, generous grading approaches, increased optionality, and advance notice of content) in order to maximise teaching and learning time and reduce the assessment load.

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In Scotland, the majority of practitioners and learners believed that modifications were helpful in 2021–22, but there were nuanced and complex views on the impacts and potential impacts of different modifications, both in 2022 and in the longer term. Perceived benefits of modifications included that they focused teaching and learning and allowed more time to concentrate on areas of the course that would be assessed. Perceived drawbacks, however, included that modifications had a negative impact on the development of skills and knowledge, the rigour of qualifications, and learner preparation for progression. Many senior appointee and qualification team respondents noted that the teaching profession did their best to cover the full course content in 2021–22, but this was extremely challenging in practice due to ongoing disruption and narrowing or prioritising of content was required in many circumstances, as reported by practitioners.

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**Attainment**

A common feature across jurisdictions has been attainment rates being higher than before the pandemic. The differences between how grades were determined during the pandemic and in previous years means that it is difficult to make meaningful comparisons about standards and student attainment between pandemic and pre-pandemic years. In 2022, SQA set out its expectation in advance of the awarding process that overall outcomes at each level (National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher) would reflect an intermediary position between outcomes in 2019 and 2021. While there has been some fall back in attainment rates across different jurisdictions in 2022, as more conventional pre-pandemic approaches were re-introduced, attainment in jurisdictions that put alternative approaches in place in 2020 and 2021, including Scotland, remains higher than in 2019 and grade distributions remain higher at the top end.

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**Standards**

A major finding of SQA's Evaluation of the 2021 ACM was a concern from practitioners about inconsistent standards being applied due to the flexibility inherent in that model. Our research found that in 2022, stakeholders, particularly practitioners, welcomed a return to a consistent, externally marked approach where all learners nationally are judged impartially to the same standard. A considerable number of respondents suggested that external assessment is important for the integrity and credibility of the qualifications system. Our analysis looking at the relationship between teacher estimates and results shows that, in general, estimated attainment results in 2022 correlated well with results. However, there were concerns from some senior appointees and qualifications teams about the validity and reliability of some of the alternative evidence submitted for appeals. Only around half of these research participants believed that the national standard was consistently understood and interpreted by teachers and lecturers in 2021–22.

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**Comparing  
2020–21 and  
2021–22**

It is challenging to directly compare the 2020–21 and 2021–22 approaches given the differences between them and the fact that it is difficult to separate out the impacts of the assessment approach from the wider effects of the pandemic on, for example, teaching and learning. However, by a wide margin, practitioners reported preferring

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	<p>the way that learners were assessed in 2021–22 (modifications to course assessment with SQA exams and revision support) rather than 2020–21 (modifications to course assessment with results based on evidence generated from school assessments, quality assured by SQA). This was due to a number of factors, including the workload associated with the 2020–21 approach and the importance of consistent, credible, reliable, and impartial assessment for all learners. Perceived fairness was a key consideration. Learner preference was more evenly split. Of those who said they preferred the 2020–21 approach, the main reasons were that it more accurately reflected their knowledge and learning throughout the year and reduced the stress of a single high-stakes exam. However, a substantial number of learners preferred the 2021–22 approach as they believed it was a more reliable and fairer way of assessing knowledge and skills.</p>
<p><b>Disabled learners and/or those with additional support needs (ASN)</b></p>	<p>Throughout the research, there were a number of different areas where the responses of disabled learners and/or learners with ASN were significantly different from the responses of learners without a disability or ASN. Disabled learners and/or learners with ASN tended to know less about the details of the assessment process in 2021–22. Additionally, disabled learners and/or learners with ASN found both the 2020–21 and 2021–22 assessment approaches to be more stressful than learners without a disability or ASN.</p>
<p><b>Communication and guidance</b></p>	<p>In general, learners and practitioners reported that they had a good awareness of and understood the processes within the 2022 assessment approach. However, senior appointees and qualifications teams suggested that their evidence showed that not all key messages were received by learners and practitioners and not all centres demonstrated a full understanding of the documentation. This was particularly true of the appeals process, where, despite learners and practitioners reporting that they understood the process, a notable theme in respondent, particularly learner, comments, was that the process had not worked as they thought it would. Senior appointees and qualifications teams suggested that such issues may have been caused by the volume of documentation and a lack of practitioner time to engage fully with resources.</p>
<p><b>Comparisons between stakeholder groups</b></p>	<p>The research findings demonstrate that there is no one stakeholder view. Experiences, perceptions, and opinions vary between and within different groups. For example, senior appointees and qualifications teams were considerably more likely than practitioners to report that the 2022 appeals process had been fair. Likewise, while learners marginally preferred the 2021 assessment approach, practitioners overwhelmingly reported that they preferred the 2022 approach.</p>

# Concluding Remarks

There is little doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic created an unprecedented challenge for the education and qualification system in Scotland, as it did elsewhere. Conditions remained challenging and uncertain throughout the 2021–22 academic year. The situation remained unpredictable, with uncertainty in the lead up to and during the exams, over whether public health restrictions or COVID-19 case rates would again lead to their cancellation. A great deal of flexibility was required to support the successful delivery of the examination diet. As external assessments were re-introduced, learners and practitioners came to the assessments having experienced the impact of COVID-19 disruption in different ways.

While there continued to be direct disruption due to COVID-19, through staff and learner absence, the greater impact appears to have been due to the cumulative effect of lockdowns, learning loss, and the substantially increased levels of stress caused by the pandemic. Our understanding of this area will develop over the coming years, as each cohort of candidates for graded National Courses will have been affected by the pandemic in different ways. However, it is clear from this evaluation that, in the shorter term, stakeholders from across the education system, on the whole, welcomed the return to formal national assessments in 2022 and the certainty associated with a well understood, consistent, and reliable approach.

Following on from our [evaluation of the 2021 alternative certification model](#), this evaluation is designed to provide the system with a record of how the 2022 approach worked in practice, drawing on the experiences of those who were involved. In the context of reform to Scottish qualifications and assessment, the reflections of stakeholders in the sector raise further questions. These can help to generate discussion about key topics, including the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to assessment, what we can do to develop a shared understanding of standards, and how we balance competing conceptualisations of fairness in assessment.

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