

REVIEW OF HIGHER HISTORY 2024 – KEY MESSAGES AND Q&A

KEY MESSAGES

The review of Higher History has concluded that the marking standard in 2024 did not change.

The marking and grading processes all worked as intended and the exam team acted with integrity throughout.

Learners were not disadvantaged and the attainment rate for Higher History accurately reflected their performance.

Independent, external scrutiny of the review has endorsed the findings and confirmed the evidence supports the report's conclusions.

The review was ordered by the Chief Examiner in the interest of maintaining public confidence in SQA's assessment and awarding processes, and in particular this year's Higher History results - a number of concerns had been raised about the marking standard for Higher History in the media, on social media and directly with SQA.

The review was carried out by SQA's Head of Standards with support and oversight from the Director of Policy, Analysis and Standards, neither of whom had any prior involvement in the marking or grading of Higher History.

Key points of the review report are:

- The Higher History team was experienced and took no action to change the marking standard in 2024
- Marking instructions in 2024 included more points of detail to ensure better consistency of marking – this is normal practice
- Learners were not required to provide more detailed responses in order to obtain marks than in previous years
- The overwhelming feedback from markers, who are all teachers, was about the poor standard of performance - 81% (56 out of 69) of markers provided feedback saying that learner performance on the Scottish history paper was lower or much lower than in 2023
- Variation in marking is not uncommon but checks and balances identify and control any variations and these worked as intended for Higher History in 2024
- Analysis of appeals outcomes for Higher History in 2024 shows evidence of greater reliability in marking than in 2023.

The report includes some wider reflections beyond the review and identifies some areas for continuous improvement, including:

- Further work to strengthen understanding of the full assessment and awarding process, including the checks and balances which address any variations in marking
- Reviewing how marker feedback is considered and used, and how the feedback loop is closed to ensure markers understand how any concerns have been addressed

Q&A

Q: Why did the review take so long. SQA said it was expected to take a week

A: We acknowledge that the review has taken longer than anticipated and hoped but, in the interest of learners, it was important to ensure the review was robust and rigorous. It became clear early on in the process that the review would have to look not just at the marking standard but at the entire end-to-end process for setting standards, and we also had to ensure the external reviewer had sufficient time to analyse, assess and audit the evidence and conclusions.

Q: Why didn't you listen to concerns from teachers much earlier?

A: We take all concerns from teachers seriously. A few anonymous concerns were first aired in the media. When concerns went beyond being anonymous and were also raised directly with SQA, the Chief Examiner commissioned a comprehensive review to investigate the issues thoroughly. It was important to gather and analyse a wide range of evidence before drawing conclusions. By ensuring a rigorous and evidence-led approach, we aimed to address the concerns effectively and maintain the integrity of the assessment process.

Q: Do you accept that if you'd listened to teachers' concerns earlier, you would have reduced the level of stress for learners?

A: We know that any uncertainty can cause stress for learners, and we empathise with them. However, it was very much in the best interests of learners that we conducted a detailed and thorough review to ensure any conclusions were accurate and evidence-based. The findings of this robust review, backed by an independent expert from WJEC (formerly the Welsh Joint Education Committee), provide learners with the reassurance that they were graded fairly.

Q: How can anyone have confidence in this year's results in any subject—are you doing a comprehensive review of all the results in 2024?

A: The extensive review of Higher History has confirmed that our established marking and grading processes are robust and functioned as intended. These rigorous quality assurance measures are applied consistently across all subjects. While the review focused on Higher History due to specific concerns raised, we are confident in the fairness and accuracy of results across all subjects in 2024.

Q: Is the Chief Examiner considering their position?

A: No. Scotland's Chief Examiner, Fiona Robertson, demonstrated strong leadership and commitment to transparency by commissioning a robust and wide-ranging SQA review. The Chief Examiner also determined that the report's eventual findings should be subject to independent, comprehensive review from an external expert, and that the findings would be published by SQA regardless of their content.

The review concluded that the marking standards did not change and learners were assessed fairly.

Q: What impact could this have on recruiting markers for this year's Higher History?

A: We deeply value our thousands of SQA markers and appointees. They are integral to the assessment process. The review has highlighted the effectiveness of our marking and grading procedures but also provided learning for how we can better support markers through improved

two-way communication and strengthened feedback mechanisms. We aim to have these improved ways of working in place ahead of this year's examination diet.

Q: Will the same qualifications team and Principal Assessor be in place for this year's exam?

A: The experienced exam team and Principal Assessor who oversaw the Higher History assessments have acted with integrity, as confirmed by the review. Decisions regarding appointments are made to ensure continuity, expertise, and the highest standards in assessment.

Q: At Marker Check, there was a significant year-on-year drop in markers being rated 'A' (from 78% to 67%). This drop was only observed on the Migration question. How can you say marking was fair when SQA itself identified a significant drop in the standard of marking for this question?

A: Variations in marker gradings can occur year on year and are not uncommon, especially in social science subjects like history. The decrease in markers graded 'A' reflects slight variations that our quality assurance processes are designed to identify and manage. The marker check and finalisation processes effectively ensured that all marking met the required standards. The review confirmed that these processes worked as intended, and marking was fair and consistent across all questions.

Q: Was that drop because markers were confused about the marking guidance given by SQA?

A: In 2024, we provided more detailed marking instructions through 'exemplification' to enhance consistency. This is standard practice and was intended to support markers in applying the criteria accurately and consistently. The slight decrease in 'A' graded markers represents normal variation that was effectively managed through our established quality assurance measures.

Q: How do you explain that other sections of Higher History did not experience a drop in marker grading, while only the Scottish history section did?

A: Marks for all three components of this year's Higher History assessments were lower than in any year since 2019. No concerns were expressed about the standard set in question paper 1 or the assignment.

Q: Some teachers feel that SQA's lack of responsiveness led to preventable issues. How will you improve communication and responsiveness going forward?

A: We acknowledge the feedback regarding communication and are committed to enhancing our dialogue with teachers and markers. Moving forward, we will implement mechanisms for more effective two-way communication, ensuring concerns are heard and addressed promptly. This includes providing clearer updates and more accessible support materials, as well as further enhancement to our Understanding Standards support, including course reports.