

## REFLECTIONS ON HIGHER HISTORY BY PRINCIPAL ASSESSOR AND SENIOR TEAM LEADER

It's fair to say that when we started preparing for the assessment of Higher History in 2024 we never could have imagined what lay ahead over the next 12 months.

There has been much said and written about Higher History in recent weeks. Everyone is entitled to their opinion, of course, and healthy and informed debate is to be welcomed, but much of what we have heard and read is ill-informed at best and plain wrong at worst. We would encourage everyone to read the Higher History Review for themselves, cover to cover, rather than reaching conclusions based on social media noise or anonymous comments in newspapers.

The Review – carried out independently within SQA and then subjected to external independent scrutiny – was clear: the marking standard did not change and learners were not expected to provide more detailed answers than in previous years to gain marks. The Review was based on a careful analysis of evidence of candidate performance this year and of marker feedback, as well as rigorous consultation with those most closely involved in the standard-setting process. A comparison with previous exam performance was also made.

The SQA did not mark its own work. In line with its statutory functions, it used its expertise and experience to extensively stress test the evidence before drawing its evidence-based conclusions.

As the report makes clear, some markers told us that they thought the standard this year was harsher but these views were balanced by feedback from others who said the standard was on point; the important issue, overlooked in all the coverage and commentary we have seen, is that even if this did cause any variation in marking (which is not unusual, particularly where humanities subjects are concerned) then the checks and balances that are built into the system worked as intended and ensured all marking was on standard so that the final grades awarded were fair.

Ultimately the dispute over the Higher History marking standard boils down to a disagreement between teachers. Let's not forget that it's teachers who set, check, mark and grade the assessments, so when we criticise the standard we criticise ourselves. History teachers are a passionate and vocal group but it has been disappointing and unedifying to see the self-harm being done to our profession, and if we are not careful we run the risk of discouraging teachers to sign up as markers next year. We are the lifeblood of assessment and awarding in Scotl.and.

However, what concerns us most of all is the damage this ongoing debate is doing to learners. Thousands of them are studying for Higher History in 2025 and we owe it to each of them to be laser-focused on giving them the best chance of success. There are some very important lessons for us to learn from the 2024 assessments and the significant drop in learner performance, and we'd humbly suggest that our energies should be focused on those rather than on picking away at issues that the Higher History Review has firmly put to bed.

It is not for us – or the rest of the exam team or the SQA – to explain why learner performance fell so dramatically. That is a much wider issue which the whole education community needs to consider and fix. But feedback from teachers provides some pointers – for example, falling standards of literacy, candidates being entered for Higher who are at National 5 level or below, teaching to the test, the ongoing Covid impacts. Let's explore and address those issues, however challenging they may be for us to face up to, and also ask ourselves why Higher History

has been an outlier this year. There are always variances in attainment year-on-year, overall and by subject, and it would be helpful to understand why that might have been the case for Higher History in 2024.

The Higher History course report has now been published which provides useful material to support teachers, and the forthcoming Understanding Standards events will provide a further opportunity for us to move forward together instead of looking back. If we do that then we will get to a better place that serves both the teaching profession and learners well.

If we don't then we risk fundamentally undermining not only the Higher History course but confidence in Scotland's assessment and qualifications system more widely. Surely we can all agree that is a result none of us want.

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