Higher History Review 2024

Summary Version

After concerns were raised about the standard applied to the marking of the 2024 Higher History exam (and in particular Question Paper 2, Scottish history), a review was commissioned by SQA's Chief Examiner.

The review was carried out by SQA's Head of Standards with oversight from the Director of Policy, Analysis and Standards.

Independent, external scrutiny of the review was provided by an expert in standard-setting and exams: the Executive Director of Qualifications and Assessment at WJEC, Wales' largest awarding body. He has endorsed the review report and conclusions.

This is a summary version of the review report and findings.
The full report is available on **SQA's website**.

Conclusions

As marking is only one stage in a process of standard setting, the review considered the entire, end-to-end process of setting and marking the Higher History exam, not just the marking standard. The review concludes that in 2024:

- SQA's normal, established process was followed rigorously and robustly, and the Higher History exam team acted with integrity throughout

- The standard set in Higher History was not higher than in previous years

- All of the questions asked across both Higher History question papers were valid based on the course specification

- The marking instructions for Higher History were intentionally more detailed than in 2023 to help ensure consistency of marking - this approach is supported by academic research and is normal practice

- Teachers were not aware of the more detailed Higher History marking instructions at the time of the exam because the instructions were developed in parallel with the question papers and only finalised following the exam, as is normal practice; the marking instructions have now been shared as they are every year after the awarding process is complete.

- Higher History learners were not expected to be more specific when answering questions, in order to gain marks, than in previous years

- Markers could provide feedback to the exam team in a number of ways: at the markers' meeting; with exam team leaders during the marking process; and/or in the reports they submitted after completion of marking

    - the Higher History Principal Assessor felt that the markers' meeting had run as expected and team leaders did not note concerns from markers at the meeting about the standard they were being asked to apply
    - feedback which Higher History markers provided in their reports after the completion of marking was overwhelmingly focused on the poor standard of responses provided by learners, especially for the Scottish history question paper

- Discussion at the Higher History grade boundary meeting focused on the poor standard of learner performance; it also included a wide-ranging and robust discussion of the standard of the assessment

- The marks from both Higher History question papers and the coursework assignment confirmed marker feedback on the poor standard of learner performance

- Recruitment of markers for Higher History is challenging in any year; however, SQA was able to recruit sufficient markers in 2024 to ensure all assessments were marked and quality assured in line with established processes

- SQA's processes for the quality assurance of marking are designed to ensure any variations in marking are identified and controlled; these processes were followed fully and rigorously for Higher History this year.

Scope and methodology

Marking any assessment is only one part of standard setting. Therefore, to address all the concerns raised and in the interests of transparency, the full end-to-end process was considered from question paper and marking instruction development, through marking and post-exam procedures, to grade boundary decisions and appeals.

The following sources of evidence were considered by the review: the 2024 Higher History course specification; the Higher History question papers and marking instructions from 2019 to 2024; the Higher History course reports for 2022 and 2023; the Higher History Understanding Standards materials issued in 2023; a random sample of learner responses from the 2024 Higher History Question Paper 2, Scottish history; information and data on a range of the 2024 post-exam procedures for Higher History, including quality assurance of question papers and marking instructions; qualitative and quantitative information that supported the 2024 Higher History grade boundary process, including marker reports for 2023 and 2024; correspondence from Higher History markers; interviews with senior Higher History appointees, including the Principal Assessor, and SQA staff.

Key points from the review of the end-to-end process

1 Setting standards for National Qualifications

- Setting and maintaining standards, and ensuring a shared understanding, is a complex task
- Within any group of teachers of a particular subject, there will be a range of views about what the standard should be; SQA's role is to set and maintain the standard, drawing on this range of views and other sources of information
- It is recognised, among both teachers and academics, that setting standards for humanities subjects, and applying standards to the marking of them, is challenging due to their subjective nature
- Detailed marking instructions support markers and improve marking reliability.

2 Communication of the Higher History standard

- Following feedback from teachers, the course specification for Higher History was updated and published in May 2023 to clarify the description of content in the Scottish history section and to ensure consistency across the areas of study
- There was no intent to change the course content
- A specimen question paper and specimen marking instructions were published in September 2023 to reflect the updated course specification and to exemplify the standard.

3 The role of SQA's exam teams

- Exam teams are led by a Principal Assessor (PA), an SQA appointee who is an experienced teacher or lecturer; they are supported by other appointees, including a Depute PA, Senior Team Leaders and Team Leaders, and work closely with the SQA Qualifications Manager (QM)
- The Higher History PA is a practising senior teacher and an experienced examiner; the Higher History QM is a former history teacher

- The exam team oversees the development of each year's question papers. A number of quality assurance checks are undertaken to ensure the question papers are of the correct standard
- Marking instructions are developed in parallel with the question papers – to ensure tight alignment – and go through robust quality assurance checks.

4 Development of Higher History question papers and marking instructions

- The 2024 Higher History question papers and marking instructions were developed in line with the established process
- The exam team and QM agreed that the question paper and marking instructions were in line with the updated course specification; the marking instructions contained detailed content to support markers.

5 Comparison of Higher History question papers and marking instructions 2019 to 2024

- Comparison of marking instructions from 2019 (when the Scottish history question paper was introduced) to 2024 shows that more detail was added each year to exemplify the standard and support markers
- The inclusion of further detail has also been at the request of history teachers to support them in broadening their teaching
- The questions in 2024 were valid as they were consistent with the course specification
- An analysis of a random, representative sample of learners' answers shows that learners did not have to be more specific to gain marks in 2024

6 Management and quality assurance of the marking process

- The markers' meeting for Higher History included robust discussion as intended, with markers taking the opportunity to seek clarification; the exam team felt the meeting had been successful and the majority of feedback from markers was positive

- A small number of markers provided less positive feedback but this was not judged to be sufficient or sufficiently strong for the PA to further clarify the marking instructions
- The 'marker check' process provides quality assurance by randomly sampling markers' papers; any markers who are marking outwith the agreed tolerance have their papers remarked
- Additional quality assurance is provided at the 'finalisation' stage to further address any variability in marking and to adjust marks where necessary so that learners are awarded the correct grade
- There were no concerns raised by the PA or the QM about the standard of marking this year.
- Whilst there was a larger number of Higher History appeals in 2024 than in 2023, a smaller percentage was successful.

7 Feedback from markers

- The strongest theme in the feedback from markers was the poorer performance of learners; 81% felt that the performance in Scottish history was lower or much lower than in 2023
- There was mixed feedback on the marking instructions
- Most markers, while familiar with their own experience of marking, will not be familiar with the post-marking quality assurance processes described above that address any issues with marking variability; these processes were followed fully and rigorously for Higher History this year.

8 The Higher History grade boundary meeting

- The grade boundary meeting discussed the feedback from markers on the lower standard of performance of learners. It also included thorough and robust discussion of the standard of the question papers and the coursework assignment; the panel concluded that the assessment was on standard and that there had not been a different approach to marking this year.

Wider reflections

While beyond the immediate scope of the review, some wider reflections have emerged during the review process. There are areas for continuous improvement which could strengthen the way the education community works together. These include:

- Reviewing the way marker feedback is considered and used, and how markers are informed about actions taken to address any concerns raised

- Seeking feedback immediately after markers' meetings rather than at the end of the marking period

- Ensuring changes to course specifications, and the intended consequences, are clearly understood by teachers

- Build a stronger understanding across the education community of the end-to-end operation of the exams system.