REVIEW OF HIGHER HISTORY FINDS MARKING STANDARD DID NOT CHANGE – INDEPENDENT, EXTERNAL SCRUTINY CONFIRMS CONCLUSION

A review of Higher History has concluded that the marking standard in 2024 did not change and that the marking and grading processes worked as intended. Learners were not disadvantaged and the attainment rate for Higher History accurately reflected their performance.

Independent, external scrutiny of the review by an expert in standard-setting and exams has endorsed the findings and confirmed the evidence supports the report's conclusions.

The review of Higher History was commissioned by Scotland's Chief Examiner on 11th September after a number of concerns were raised about the marking standard, in the media, on social media and directly with SQA.

It 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. They carried out the review independently within SQA and considered a wide range of evidence, including the course specification, question papers and learners' answers, marking instructions, marker reports and feedback, and interviews with both SQA staff and senior appointees, who are all practicing teachers and lecturers, including the Principal Assessor for Higher History.

The 51-page, evidence-led review report concludes that:

"All stages of SQA's normal processes were followed rigorously and robustly, and in accordance with SQA's established processes and procedures. The Higher History exam team acted with integrity throughout this process.

"The standard set in the Higher History assessments…was not higher than that set in previous years that this examination has run.

"Feedback from markers provided in their reports to SQA was overwhelmingly focused on the poor standard of responses provided by learners in this year's examinations."

SQA markers are all teachers and lecturers, the vast majority of whom are still practising in schools and colleges. In their feedback to SQA after marking was complete, 81% of them said that learner performance on the Scottish history exam paper was lower or much lower than in 2023.

Martyn Ware, SQA Director of Policy, Analysis and Standards, said:

"Our review of Higher History has been rigorous and robust with a wide range of evidence gathered and analysed. While the concerns raised by teachers and others were focused on the standard of marking, in practice this is just one stage in the process of standard-setting so the review looked at the full range of processes and procedures relating to marking and grading.

"All of these processes and procedures were followed rigorously and the standard set in Higher History was not higher than in previous years."

Richard Harry, Executive Director of Qualifications and Assessment at WJEC, Wales' largest awarding body, provided independent, external scrutiny of the review. He said:

"On behalf of WJEC, I have undertaken a review of the report produced by SQA regarding their History Higher qualification this summer. I have engaged with those producing the report on the

extent to which the evidence and analysis set out in the report supports its conclusions and recommendations. To this end, I have engaged with the review team on several occasions prior to the publication of the report, and I thank the team for their candour and openness to challenge through this process.

“Any assessment process relies on the judgements of key individuals at each stage, to ensure valid and fair outcomes. In line with the feedback received regarding this summer’s results, the focus of the review was on the marking standard and related processes. I am content that the report’s conclusions are supported sufficiently.

“The report sets out a number of areas for continuous improvement to bolster the marking process, which are supported by the review’s findings. The links between assessment demands, marking standards and performance are an essential consideration of awarding, and the recommendations regarding how to ensure a strong chain between these will also help to ensure appropriate grades for learners in future.”

Shirley Rogers, Chair of the SQA Board, said:

“On the basis of the extensive evidence gathered and analysed, the review has concluded that the marking standard did not change, that the marking and grading processes performed as intended, and that the grading decisions made were the right ones. Learners were assessed and graded fairly.

“I hope the outcome of this review, published today to allow full transparency, will draw a line under the issue and reassure learners, parents, carers, teachers and lecturers – as well as the wider public - that they can have full confidence in SQA’s assessment and awarding processes”

Key points in the review report include:

- This year’s Higher History assessments were set and marked by an experienced and established exam team; the team took no action to change the marking standard
- In response to marker feedback, marking instructions in 2024 included more points of detail to ensure better consistency of marking; this is normal practice, supported by academic research
- Learners were not required to provide more detailed responses to obtain marks than in previous years; specifically, there is evidence of learners being awarded a mark without naming specific individuals
- While some markers provided feedback on the marking standard, the overwhelming feedback was about the poor standard of performance; 81% of markers (56 out of 69) 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 (particularly in humanities subjects such as history which by their nature are more subjective than subjects such as sciences and maths); however, checks and balances identify and control any variations and these were followed fully in 2024 and ensured all marking was on standard
- Analysis of appeals outcomes for Higher History in 2024 shows evidence of greater reliability in marking than in previous years.

The report also makes a number of recommendations, including:

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

Fiona Robertson, Scotland's Chief Examiner, said:

"Given the concerns that were raised about Higher History in the weeks after Results Day, it was important to provide reassurance to learners and teachers and to protect public confidence in the results and the processes that underpinned them. That's why I commissioned SQA's Head of Standards to undertake a comprehensive, evidence-led review and we asked another awarding body, WJEC, to provide independent scrutiny and assurance that any conclusions reached were evidence-based and valid.

"I acknowledge that the review has taken longer than anticipated but, in the interest of learners, it was important to ensure the review was robust and rigorous. It was right that the review looked at the marking standard but in the context of the entire end-to-end process for setting standards. We also had to ensure the external reviewer had sufficient time to analyse, assess and audit the evidence and conclusions. I am very grateful to Richard Harry for the time he has given to provide external scrutiny of the review.

"All of our markers are teachers and lecturers, and we are incredibly grateful for the work they do every year alongside SQA staff to ensure learners are assessed and graded rigorously and fairly. We have a number of checks and balances in place at various stages of our awarding process to do that. Some of these are well-known, such as the setting of grade boundaries and appeals, but there are others which are perhaps not so familiar.

"There are always lessons for us to learn and this report highlights some areas for wider reflection, which I welcome. In particular, we need to improve how we deal with feedback we receive from markers so that they know that their concerns are being listened to and, where necessary, dealt with. We are committed to giving all learners and educators a stronger voice as we transition into Qualifications Scotland."