



Evaluation of the 2022 Approach to the Assessment of Graded National Courses:

Learner experiences

Publication date: June 2023

Contents

1	Respondent profiles	1
2	Engagement and communication	5
3	Teaching and learning	9
4	Modifications to assessment	11
5	Revision support	24
6	Exam Exceptional Circumstance Consideration Service (EECCS)	34
7	Appeals	36
8	Overall approach to assessment	55
9	Comparison of 2021 and 2022	58

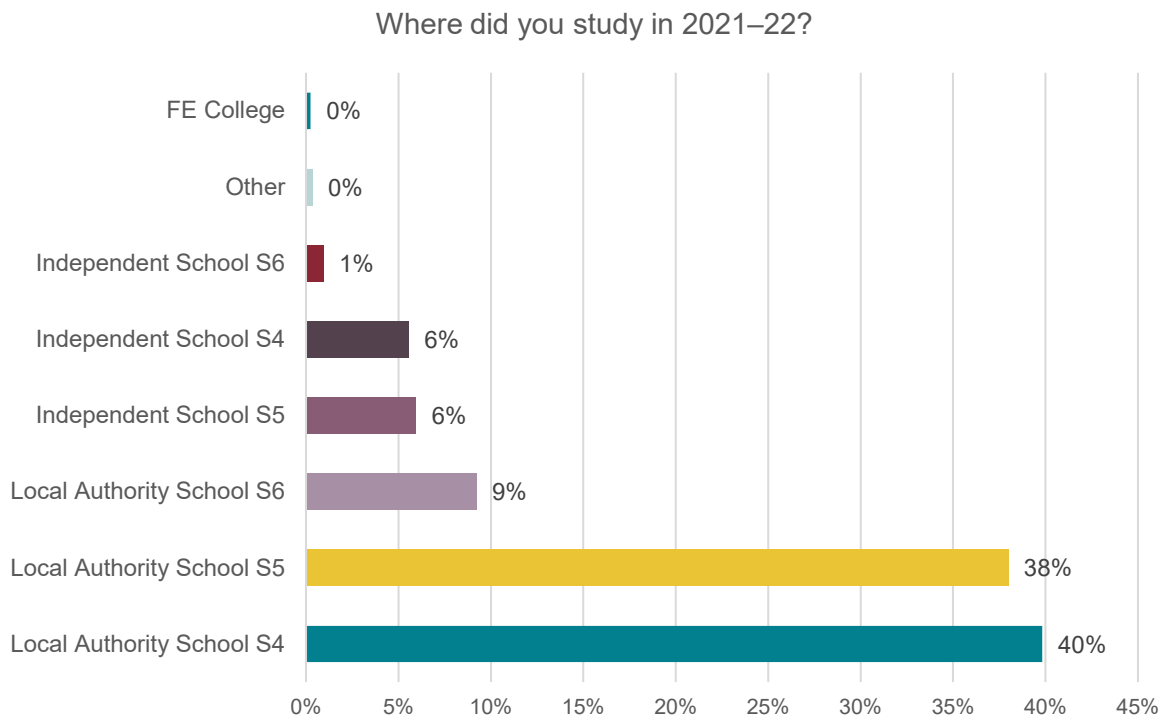
1 Respondent profiles

Please note that, throughout this paper (in charts and in text), percentages may not always sum to 100% due to rounding.

Survey respondents

Learners were asked where they studied in session 2021–22.

Figure 1



As detailed in Figure 1, 40% of respondents were S4 learners in a local authority school, 38% were S5 learners in a local authority school, and 9% were S6 learners in a local authority school, meaning 87% of respondents studied at a local authority school in 2021–22.

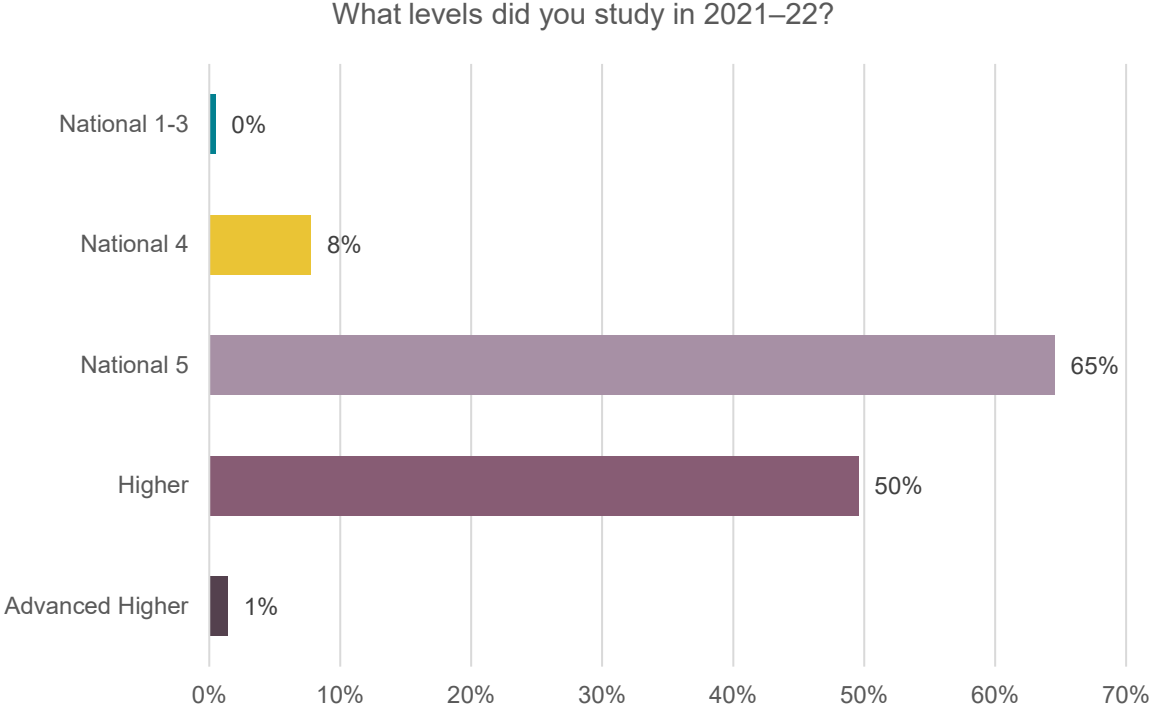
Meanwhile, 6% of respondents were S4 learners at an independent school, 6% were S5 learners at an independent school, and 1% were S6 learners at an independent school, meaning 13% of respondents studied at an independent school in 2020–21.

Fewer than 1% of respondents selected ‘other’ or further education college as their place of study.

Of the 13% of respondents who were disabled learners and/or those with additional support needs (ASN), the majority were in S4 (36%) or S5 (38%) in a local authority school and 6% of respondents were S6 learners in a local authority school. Meanwhile, 7% of respondents were S4 learners in an independent school, 9% of respondents were S5 learners in an independent school, and 1% of respondents were S6 learners in an independent schools. 2% of respondents selected ‘other’ and less than 1% were learners in a FE college.

Learners were also asked what level or levels they studied at in 2021–22, with qualifications available to select ranging from National 1–3 to Advanced Higher.

Figure 2



The majority of respondents were studying either at National 5, Higher, or both, during 2021–22: 65% were studying at National 5, and 50% of learners indicated that they were studying at Higher. In addition, 8% indicated they were studying at National 4, and 1% of respondents were Advanced Higher learners. Only ten learners (less than 1%) indicated they were studying at National 1–3.

These proportions were not markedly different for those learners who reported being disabled and/or having an ASN.

Learners were then asked which local authority area their school or college was in. Table 1 lists the question responses in descending order of number of responses.

Table 1 Which local authority area is your centre based in?

Local authority area	Total number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Falkirk	231	11%
Glasgow	203	10%
Highland	190	9%
Edinburgh	174	9%
South Lanarkshire	157	8%
East Dunbartonshire	96	5%
Fife	74	4%
Renfrewshire	74	4%
Inverclyde	69	3%
Aberdeenshire	68	3%
Perth and Kinross	65	3%
Dumfries and Galloway	57	3%
North Lanarkshire	56	3%
West Lothian	55	3%
Aberdeen	54	3%
Shetland Islands	48	2%
East Ayrshire	44	2%
Angus	40	2%
Stirling	35	2%
Dundee	32	2%
East Renfrewshire	32	2%
Orkney Islands	32	2%
South Ayrshire	29	1%
Scottish Borders	25	1%
West Dunbartonshire	24	1%
Midlothian	23	1%
East Lothian	15	1%
Argyll and Bute	14	1%
North Ayrshire	12	1%
Na h-Eileanan Siar (Western Isles)	11	1%
Moray	1	0%
Clackmannanshire	0	0%

Learners were from across a total of 31 local authority areas. The largest number of respondents were from the Falkirk area (11%) and from the Glasgow area (10%).

Disabled learners and/or those with an ASN were from across 30 local authority areas. The largest number were from the Edinburgh area (13%) and the Glasgow area (9%).

Interview and focus group participants

Fourteen in-depth interviews were held with 16 secondary school learners, and four in-depth interviews were held with disabled learners and/or learners with ASN, two of whom were from secondary schools and two from colleges.

Parents and carers

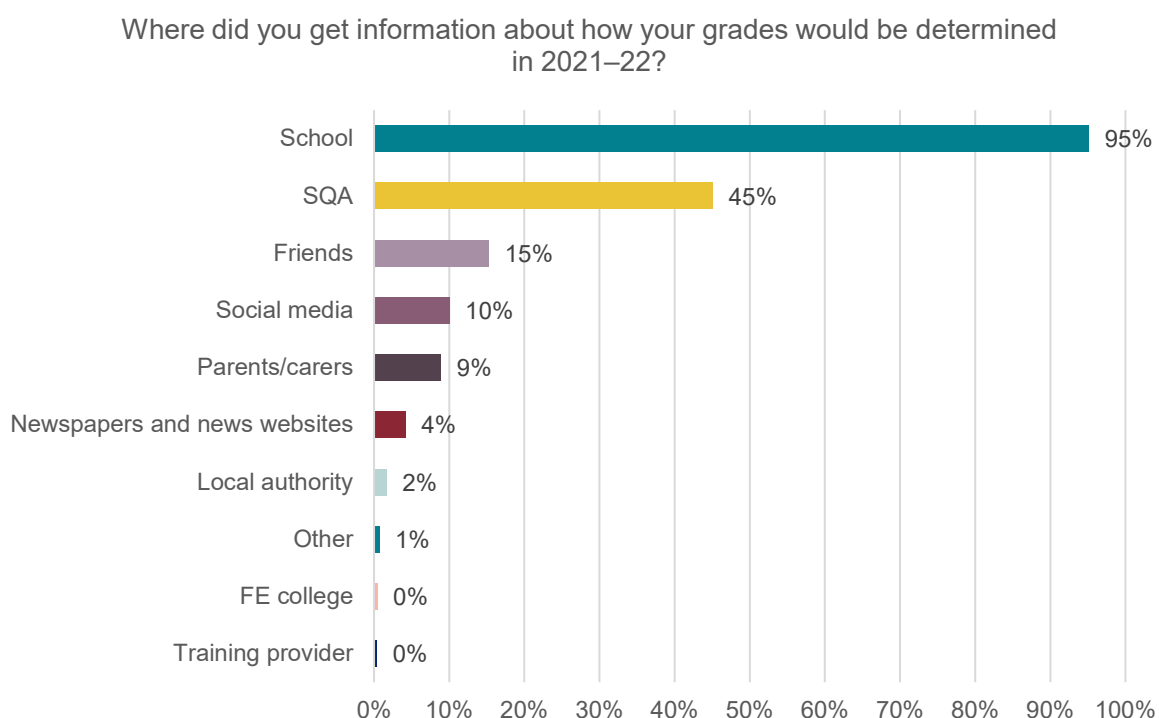
Parents and carers of S4 to S6 learners were also surveyed on their views on the modifications to course assessment and the appeals approach in 2022. We did not ask parents and carers about all aspects of the 2022 assessment diet but sought their insight into those areas they were most likely to have knowledge and experience of, namely modifications to course assessment and appeals.

2 Engagement and communication

This section looks at how learners obtained information about the grading process in 2022. In particular, respondents were asked about sources of information used, the timing of information received, and how well they understood how grades would be determined.

Learners were asked about all the sources of information they used when finding out about how grades would be determined in 2022. They could choose more than one option.

Figure 3

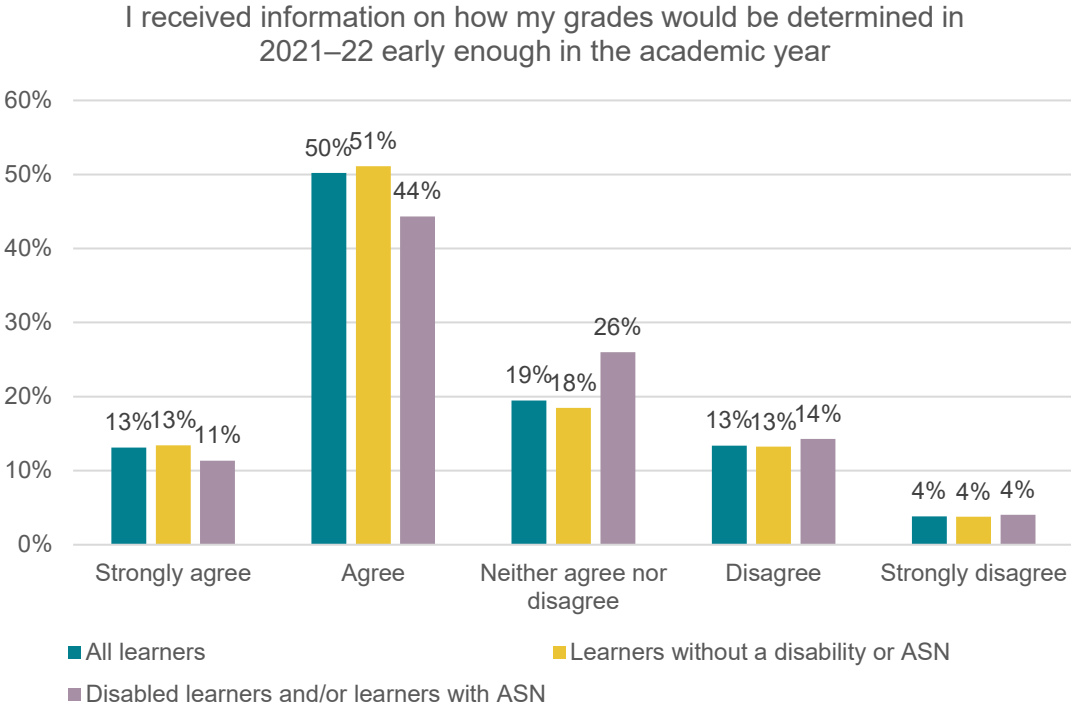


The vast majority (95%) of learners had received information about the grading process from their school, and 45% had received information from SQA. Smaller proportions had received information from friends (15%), social media (10%), parents/carers (9%), and newspapers and news websites (4%). A small number received information from their local authority (2%). Only nine respondents received information from their college, and eight respondents received information from their training provider.

These proportions were not markedly different for disabled learners and/or those with an ASN.

Learners were asked about the timing of information about the 2022 approach to awarding. While 63% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had received information on how their grades would be determined early enough in the academic year, 17% disagreed or strongly disagreed. A chi-squared test revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between the views of disabled learners and/or those with ASN and learners without a disability or ASN. This is explored further below.

Figure 4



$\chi^2 (4) = 10.04, p = 0.04$

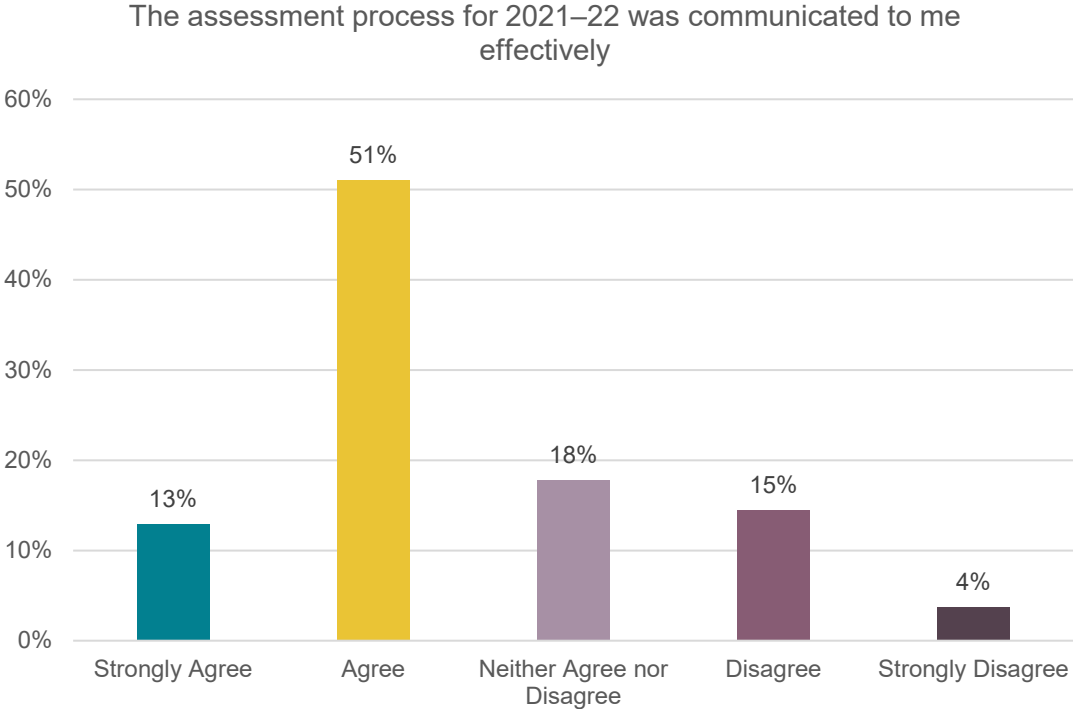
Table 2 Standardised residuals for I received information on how my grades would be determined in 2021–22 early enough in the academic year

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Learner without a disability or ASN or prefer not to say	0.32	0.54	-0.96	-0.16	-0.07
Disabled learner or learners with ASN	-0.81	-1.37	2.44	0.41	0.19

Inspection of the standardised residuals suggests significance is being driven by more disabled learners or learners with ASN than would be expected by chance selecting 'Neither agree nor disagree'. The overall pattern of residuals further suggests that fewer disabled learners or learners with ASN than expected by chance are selecting 'agree', although this is not in itself a major influence on the result.

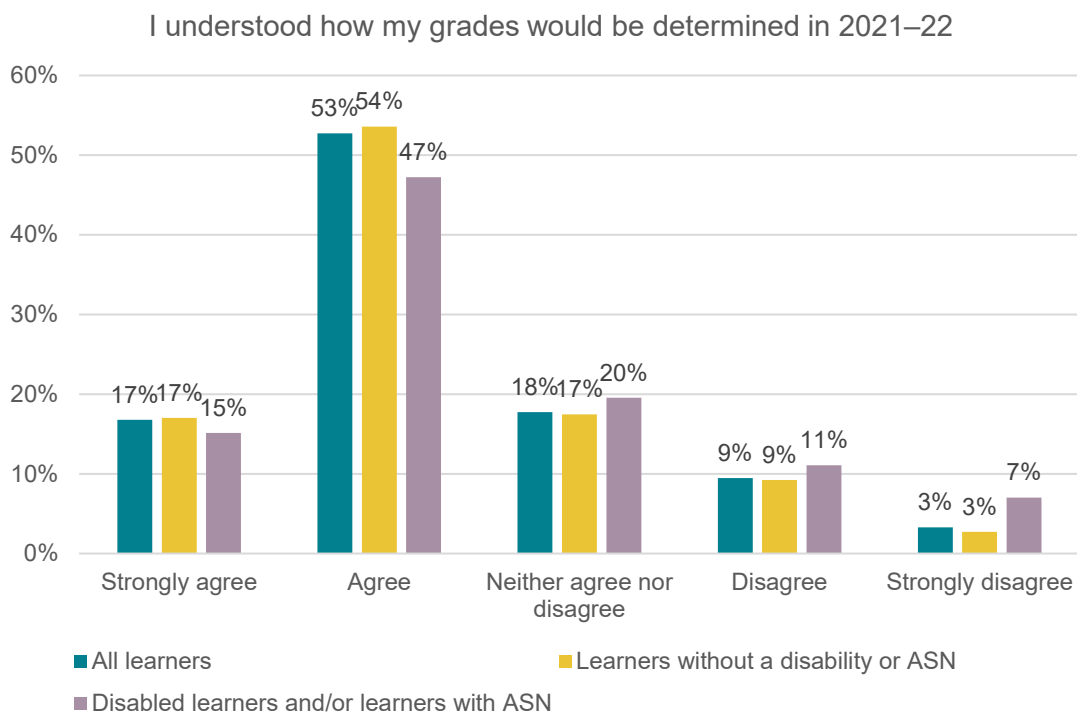
A total of 64% of learners agreed or strongly agreed that the assessment process for 2021–22 was communicated effectively. A smaller proportion, 19%, disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 5



When asked whether they understood how their grades would be determined, 70% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they did, with 12% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. The chi-squared test revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between the views of disabled learners and/or those with ASN and learners without a disability or ASN. This is explored further below.

Figure 6



$\chi^2 (4) = 17.02, p=0.001$

Table 3 Standardised residuals for *I understood how my grades would be determined in 2021–22*

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Learner without a disability or ASN or prefer not to say	0.26	0.49	-0.28	-0.33	-1.33
Disabled learner or learners with ASN	-0.66	-1.25	0.71	0.85	3.40

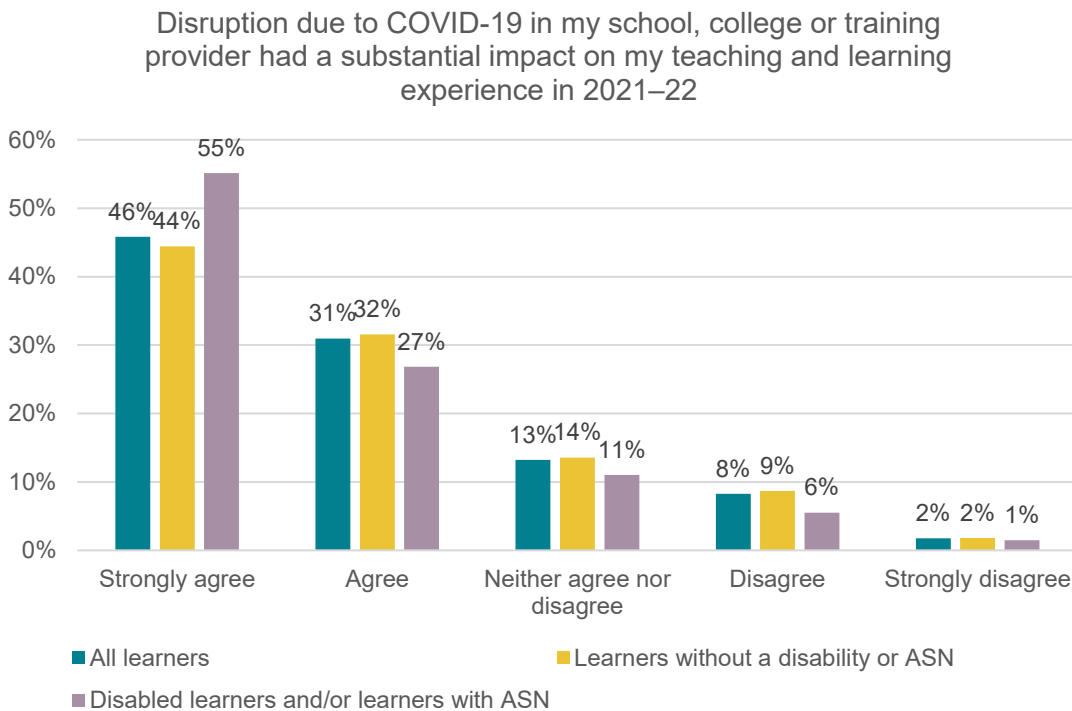
Inspection of standardised residuals suggest significance is being driven by more disabled learners or learners with ASN than expected by chance selecting the option ‘Strongly disagree’. The overall pattern of results further suggests that fewer disabled learners or learners with ASN than expected by chance are selecting ‘Agree’ although this is not in itself a major influence on the result.

3 Teaching and learning

Learners were asked about the effect that COVID-19 disruption in 2021–22 had on their teaching and learning experience and on assessment.

More than three-quarters (77%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that disruption due to COVID-19 had a substantial impact on their teaching and learning experience. Only 10% disagreed or strongly disagreed and 13% neither agreed nor disagreed. The chi-squared test revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between the views of disabled learners and/or those with ASN and learners without a disability or ASN. This is explored further below.

Figure 7



$$\chi^2(4) = 11.78, p = 0.02$$

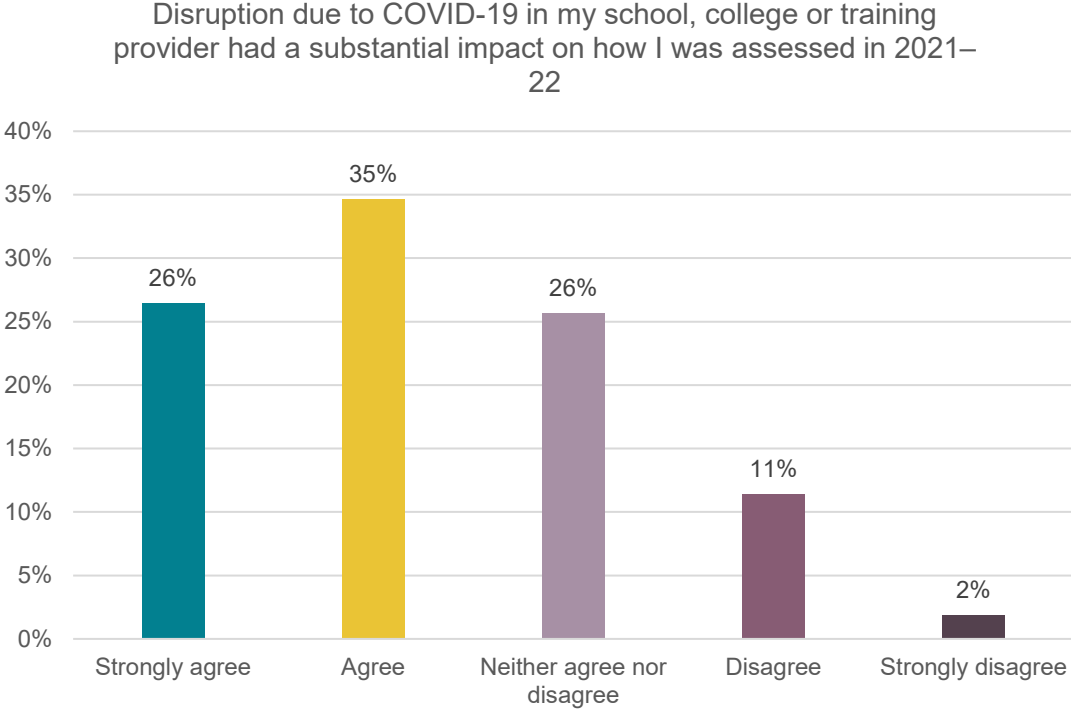
Table 4 Standardised residuals for *Disruption due to COVID-19 in my school, college or training provider had a substantial impact on my teaching and learning experience in 2021–22*

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Learner without a disability or ASN or prefer not to say	-0.89	0.48	0.39	0.61	0.14
Disabled learner or learners with ASN	2.27	-1.22	-1.00	-1.57	-0.36

Inspection of standardised residuals suggest significance is being driven by more disabled learners or learners with ASN than would be expected by chance selecting the option 'Strongly agree'. The overall pattern of results further suggests that more disabled learners or learners with ASN than expected by chance are selecting this option than any other.

Learner respondents generally agreed that disruption due to COVID-19 had a substantial impact on how they were assessed in 2021–22: 61% agreed or strongly agreed, 26% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 13% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 8



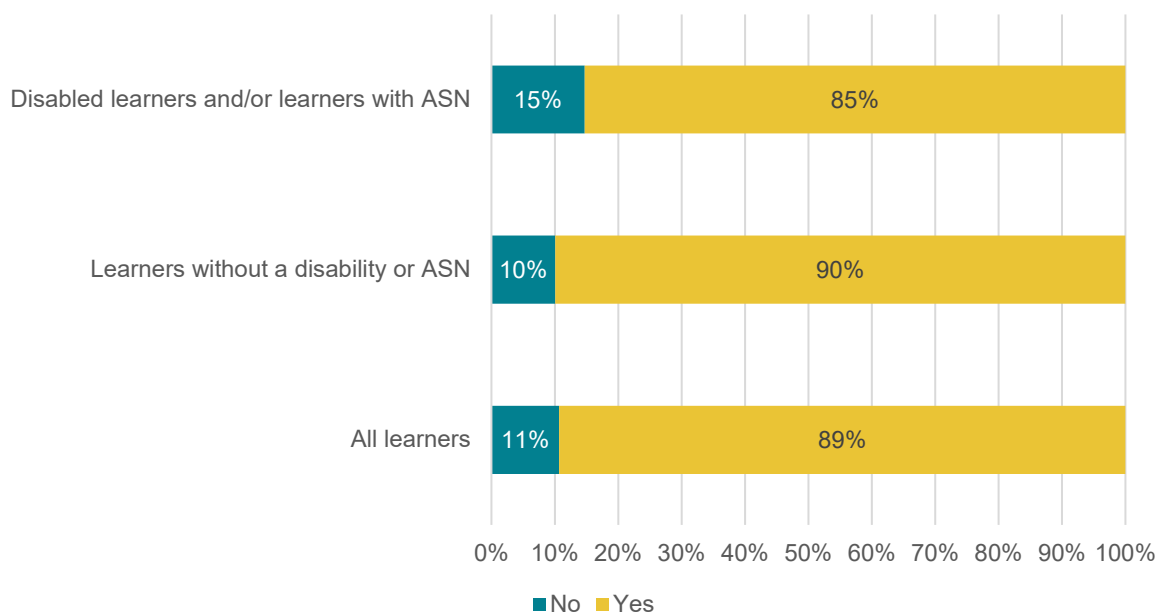
4 Modifications to assessment

Learners were asked their level of agreement with a series of statements on modifications made to the assessment of courses in 2021–22. (More information on modifications is available on [our website](#).)

They were asked whether they were aware that modifications were made to the assessment of their courses in 2021–22 to take into account the COVID-19 pandemic. 89% of learners stated that they were aware of modifications. The chi-squared test revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between the views of disabled learners and/or those with ASN and learners without a disability or ASN. This is explored further below.

Figure 9

Were you aware that modifications were made to the assessment of your courses in 2021–22 to take into account the COVID-19 pandemic?



$$\chi^2(1)=4.85, p=0.03$$

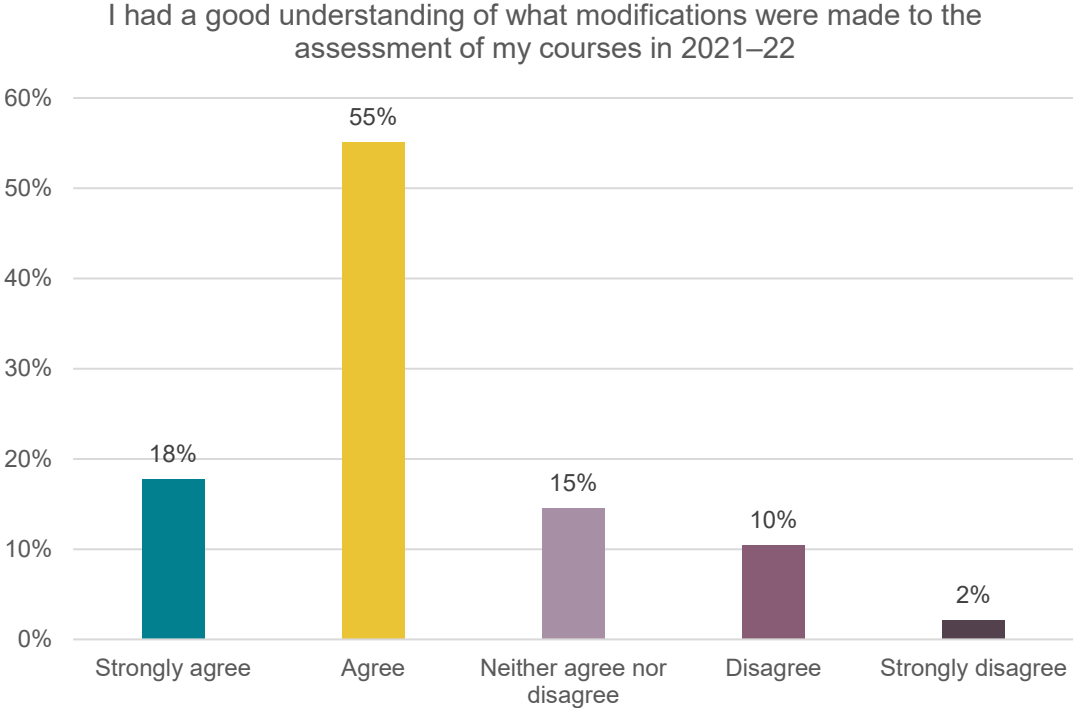
Table 5 Standardised residuals for *Were you aware that modifications were made to the assessment of your courses in 2021–22 to take into account the COVID-19 pandemic?*

	No	Yes
Learner without a disability or ASN or prefer not to say	-0.80	0.28
Disabled learner or learners with ASN	2.03	-0.70

Inspection of standardised residuals suggests significance is being driven by more disabled learners or learners with ASN than expected by chance selecting the option 'No'.

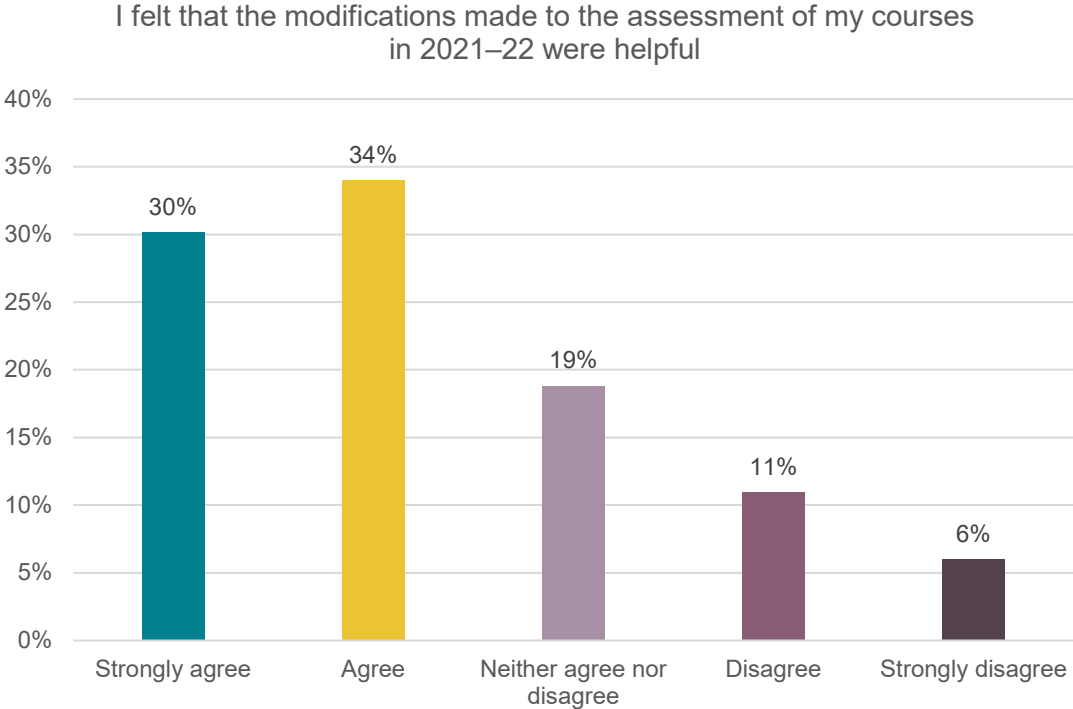
Almost three-quarters (73%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had a good understanding of what modifications were made to the assessment of their courses in 2021–22; only 13% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 15% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 10



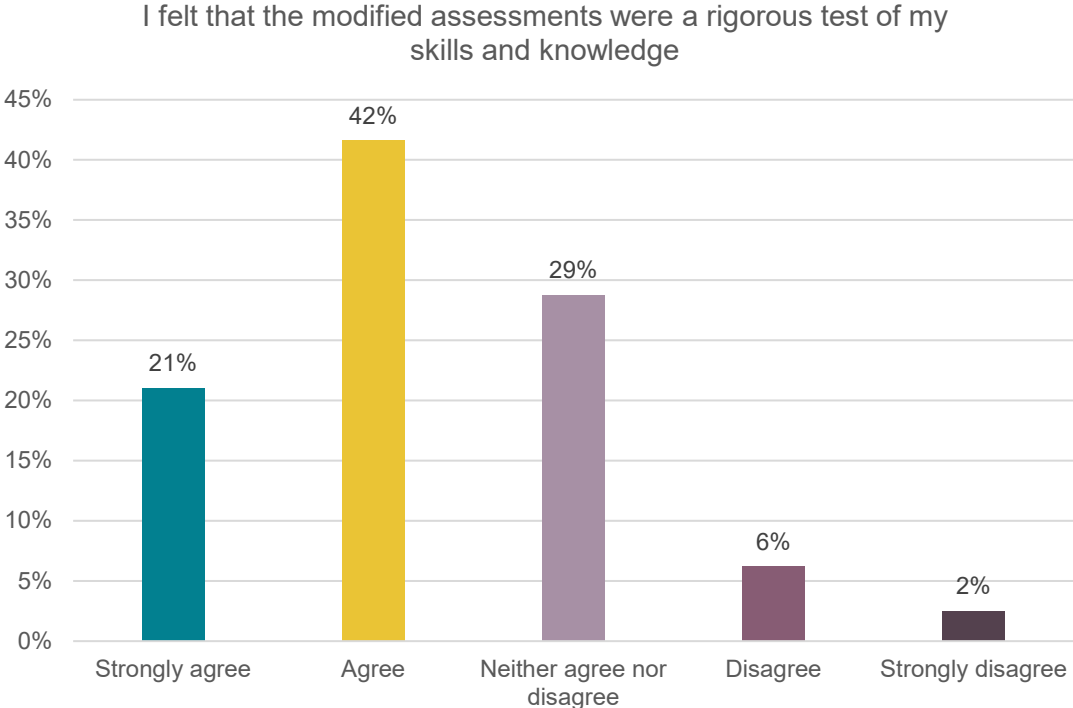
Almost two-thirds (64%) of learners agreed or strongly agreed that the modifications made to the assessment of their courses in 2021–22 were helpful, 17% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 19% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 11



While 63% of learners agreed or strongly agreed that the modified assessments were a rigorous test of skills and knowledge, 8% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 29% of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 12



Modifications that worked well

Learners were asked to share what modifications, if any, they felt worked particularly well. A total of 898 respondents submitted comments, 119 of whom were disabled learners and/or those with an ASN.

Of those learners who responded here, 14 said 'none' and two said they did not know. It should be noted that throughout learner comments on modifications, there was an element of conflation between modifications to assessment and revision support; it was not always clear which they were referring to.

Guidance on exam content

By far the most common response was on the usefulness of knowing in advance what would, and would not, be included in the 2022 exams. Guidance on exam content was viewed as beneficial, offering a reduced workload and an opportunity for more focused study.

The information given about what would be in the exam roughly before the exams was extremely helpful in helping reduce some of the workload for prep and allowed us to focus.

Prior knowledge of outline on exam content allowed me to study more effectively.

Removing the unnecessary information which would not be included in the exam helped me focus my understanding onto those that mattered, that gave me more time to return to the topics I had to learn in isolation and clear up information.

However, a smaller number of learners commented on the potential pitfalls of knowing the contents of the exam in advance.

Telling us what was in the exam was very useful but to be honest I feel like you went way too easy on us and that as a result I feel more nervous for next year and how much harder it will be without those aids.

Amongst the subjects mentioned by learners, including those who are disabled and/or have an ASN, exam guidance issued for English received the most positive comments. There was a strong feeling that being made aware of elements of the English exam in advance had helped boost confidence.

Being told the poem for our English exam really helped compensate for the gaps in our learning prior to this academic year.

I feel that in English knowing the Scottish text poem was particularly helpful as it helped me to focus my studies in a year where it had been difficult to stay focused and work hard due to the disruption caused by the COVID-19 virus.

Similarly, many learners provided comments on the helpfulness of being made aware of the Biology exam essay question and other elements of the assessment.

In Higher Biology, it was also incredibly helpful knowing the essay questions as it saved so much time from having to revise every topic in a lot of detail - so knowing what you were gonna write beforehand helped with securing those marks and workload.

National 5 Biology received a 4-mark question which would appear in the exam.

Although many of the comments on the benefits of knowing exam content in advance were general and did not refer to a particular course, learners did comment specifically on subjects, other than English and Biology, where this guidance had worked well for them. These modifications included:

- ◆ Modern Studies 8-mark question
- ◆ Human Biology extended response question
- ◆ Philosophy Moral Theory
- ◆ History 9-mark question
- ◆ Mathematics
- ◆ Drama – Stimuli

Disabled learners and/or those with an ASN also cited Mathematics and Modern Studies as examples of modifications they found helpful.

Reducing exam content

A substantial number of learners, including those who are disabled and/or have an ASN, thought that reducing the volume of assessment as well as removing individual elements from exams worked well. These included, amongst others, the removal of the music composition from Advanced Higher Music; the removal of vectors from National 5 Mathematics; reducing to one portfolio essay in Higher English; and assessing only one sport in PE. This was believed to reduce stress and workload while assisting with knowledge gaps.

Taking different things out of the exams, it helped relieve stress and made me feel more confident going into the exam.

The removal of composition from the Music exam, as we had not been in school to use any resources to learn such a skill, the removal of it lessened the stress of subject areas [where] we had a gap of knowledge due to COVID-19.

I feel that in Maths the removal of some topics was extremely helpful as a large amount of the National 5 course relies on skills and knowledge from the S3 mathematics course which due to COVID-19 was significantly disrupted.

Reducing course content

Learners, including those who are disabled and/or have an ASN, commented on the usefulness of the modifications reducing course content in 2021–22, noting a reduction in stress and workload when removing some elements of their chosen course of study.

Even though the exams were still incredibly stressful and contained a lot of the course content, removing content certainly helped ease off the stress of studying at home and in a much more difficult situation.

Removing stuff from the course limited stress and helped us get a better understanding of the rest of the course which helps with this following year.

Learners specifically commented on the value of removing content from courses such as: History, Mathematics, Media, Modern Studies, Music, Computing Science, Art and Design, and Business Management.

The removal of certain topics within subjects ... meant that there was less to worry about.

I liked the reduced Media course content, as there was no way we would've been able to get through the normal course in time.

Removal of assignments

Learners, including those who are disabled and/or have an ASN, commented on the removal of assignments from a number of courses. These learners appreciated the decrease in coursework, which they believed reduced stress, supported their learning, reduced teacher workload, and allowed more time to focus on learning.

I believe removal of 'assessments' in Biology, Chemistry and Physics worked well as they allowed for more time to focus on the course content, and I believe would've been difficult to complete if you were absent from school for periods due to isolation.

I appreciate the cut down in coursework, particularly the assignments in most classes because we could barely finish the modified coursework due to teacher absence and just the overall large workload so I wouldn't have finished the course otherwise.

Other suggestions

There were a range of additional learner comments on inclusions to the modifications that were perceived as working well, although these had smaller numbers:

- ◆ lowering grade boundaries
- ◆ including additional optionality in Higher History
- ◆ including additional optionality in Higher Modern Studies

Modifications that did not work well

Learners were asked about modifications that they felt did not work well. More than 600 respondents left comments; 94 of these respondents were disabled learners and/or those with an ASN. Around 10% of respondents to this question merely suggested that modifications had worked well; a small number suggested that none of the modifications had worked well. A small number of respondents also simply replied that they did not know.

We noted a tendency for learners to conflate modifications to course assessment with revision support in the comments here. Around 40 comments specifically related to revision support and in many other cases it was unclear whether all learners were responding about modifications to course assessment or revision support. Moreover, around 50 comments were on more general perceived issues with the 2021–22 approach including appeals, exceptional circumstances, and remote learning.

Modifications unclear

The most common theme from learners was that there was a lack of clarity around modifications to course assessment. A significant number of respondents thought that modifications were vague and confusing. Several thought that they had not been communicated clearly enough, and several suggested that topics they believed had been removed from the assessment did come up in the exam.

Modifications were often unclear, lots of confusion on what was/wasn't being assessed.

Some aspects that I thought were removed from the course ended up in the exam because it was not made clear enough what would be included.

Removal of assignments

A considerable number of respondents, including those who are disabled and/or have an ASN, were concerned by the removal of assignments and projects via modifications to course assessment. They indicated that they felt this could adversely affect progression opportunities because of the loss of practical experience, and that the modification put more pressure on the final exam.

I think that while dropping the assignments ... was initially a benefit, it will disadvantage me in future.

Removal of assignments ... because it meant that all of the weighting was on the final exam.

While it did allow more class time to be dedicated to preparing for the exam, I think coursework is an area where lots of people thrive and removing it put too much pressure on the exam itself.

Too many or wrong things removed

A substantial number of learners commented that too many, or the wrong, things had been removed through modifications to assessment. While some respondents framed this in terms of concerns about not covering important content and the associated perceived issues with future progression, a minority believed that the modifications had removed easier content, leaving more challenging topics intact.

The removal of a lot of very useful topics.

I'm now having to catch up on stuff I should have done last year because I'm doing Higher.

All the easy parts of the course were taken out and we were left with all the tough parts of each course.

Feedback from disabled learners and/or those with an ASN mirrored this feedback. Removal of specific content from Mathematics and Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies were cited as having posed issues with progression to a higher level of study.

Removal of vector content from Mathematics, as it is important later in Advanced Highers.

I think removing the dissertations from certain Higher subjects made many people seem less capable than they would have otherwise, furthermore it removed the opportunity to teach and learn a crucial skill. Particularly in Higher RMPS it already fails to prepare you for Advanced Higher which was only made worse by the lack of a Higher dissertation.

Not enough removed

A number of respondents suggested that modifications did not work well because not enough content was removed. These learners believed that the modifications were not sufficient to have an impact and did not account fully for the effects of the pandemic on teaching and learning.

With all the disruptions leading up to my exams it still felt like there was still too much to work on. I feel like there needed to be more assistance as a result of there being a lack of education in 2020 and 2021.

These modifications were not enough, did not provide enough information especially because of the disruption caused by COVID-19.

Inconsistencies

Related to the previous theme, a similar number of respondents, including disabled learners and/or those with an ASN, suggested that there were inconsistencies between different subjects in terms of modifications made to course assessment. There was a perception that some subjects had more extensive or detailed modifications than others and this was deemed unfair.

There was more help in certain subjects than there was in others.

I think the information should be equivalent for all subjects if it is to be given again as some subjects had more help than others which I found unfair.

Timing

A small number of learners suggested that they had been given notice of course modifications too late, when they had already spent considerable time focusing on topics that

would not appear in the exam; comments included those around the 'last minute' nature of modifications. Some of these comments are likely to refer to revision support.

Subject-specific issues

Many learners responded to this question by mentioning specific subjects. The areas that were most frequently cited were sciences, Mathematics, social sciences, and languages.

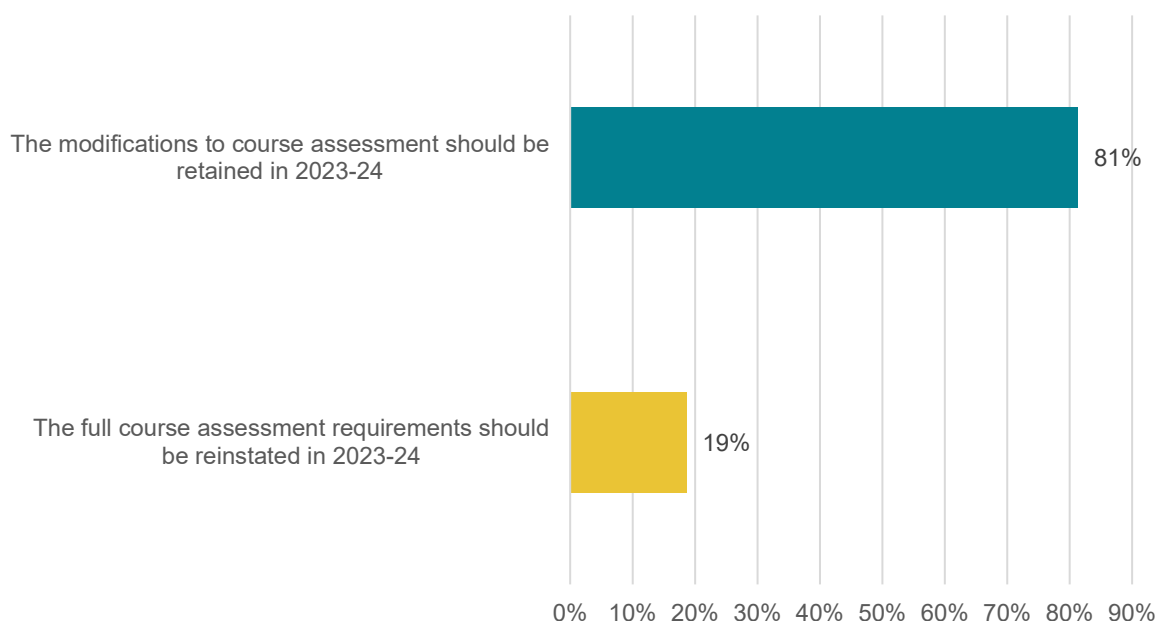
- ◆ Comments on science subjects covered concerns about progression in light of modifications, disappointment at the removal of assignments, and, conversely, a perception that few modifications had been made to science subjects.
- ◆ The most common theme of the responses on Mathematics were that the modifications had not been clear, with confusion about whether topics would or would not be assessed. Several learners mentioned that areas of the course that they were led to believe would not be in the exam were included. Others also expressed concern about gaps in learning possibly affecting progression.
- ◆ While some comments on social science subjects mentioned the removal of assignments and projects as having been detrimental, most respondents suggested that these subjects (particularly History and Modern Studies) had not had the same level of support in terms of modifications as other subjects.
- ◆ Those who commented on language subject modifications generally suggested that the modifications were not clear and had been misleading as to what would appear in the exam.

Modifications in the future

Learners were asked what their preferred option was regarding modifications in the 2023–24 academic year; 81% of respondents thought that the modifications to course assessment should be retained. 19% thought that the full course assessment requirements should be reinstated.

Figure 13

SQA is considering whether to keep modifications for the 2023–24 academic year. What is your preferred option for 2023–24?



Learner interviews

All of the learners interviewed were aware of the 2021–22 course modifications. Whilst a very small number were only aware of them in a general way, most learners gave detailed information about the modifications across their courses. The removal of assignments and the removal of content from assessments were the most cited modifications.

I know that for the sciences, the assignment was taken out and for English as well and we only had to write one portfolio piece. Yeah, they're the ones that I'm aware of.

Mention was made of the removal of content from assessments across a number of courses, however, the most cited modifications by learners were made to Mathematics.

I was aware with Maths from the start we knew that a couple of topics had been removed so vectors and sequences.

So, Maths was a big one, it did aid us slightly because we were working right up until the beginning of study leave, so there was still a lot to get through.

Opinions on the helpfulness of the modifications were mixed, with slightly more learners viewing modifications as helpful. Experiences and views varied not only between learners, but also across their courses.

Well, in Maths there are quite a few things taken out of the course and that was pretty helpful in terms of revision.

For Graphics it was definitely helpful because there was less material to study and therefore less information to memorise so you could do better in the exam.

I kind of had a mixed opinion to be honest. I took four Highers and three out of the four were helpful.

So, I felt there wasn't enough removed this year in Higher Biology and the content heavy subjects.

Some learners suggested it was unhelpful that a number of their courses were not modified in any way.

Some of the courses were unchanged and that was unhelpful.

When asked if continuing with the modifications would be helpful, learners generally thought it would be. A number of reasons were mentioned including allowing more time to learn important topics and focus on exam revision.

I would say that some modifications could be kept on, for example, both years where I've done science courses, the sort of personal project has been removed and I found that more helpful in terms of focusing on the actual exam and in like that sort of area.

Yes, because we had spare time in the year, which I think was useful for everyone because we could go over stuff again and go back to things that were maybe a bit harder in the course and if we'd had to do assignments or extra topics then that probably would have taken us longer, leaving less time.

However, a small number of learners did not want the modifications to continue, particularly in science subjects, highlighting concerns around missing out on critical skills associated with the assignments.

With science though I do think that the assignment helps you with your problem-solving abilities, because a lot of the questions, you'll be presented with an experiment and if you haven't done the practical side of that then and you're not as familiar with some of the techniques, which can sometimes make interpreting the question a bit harder.

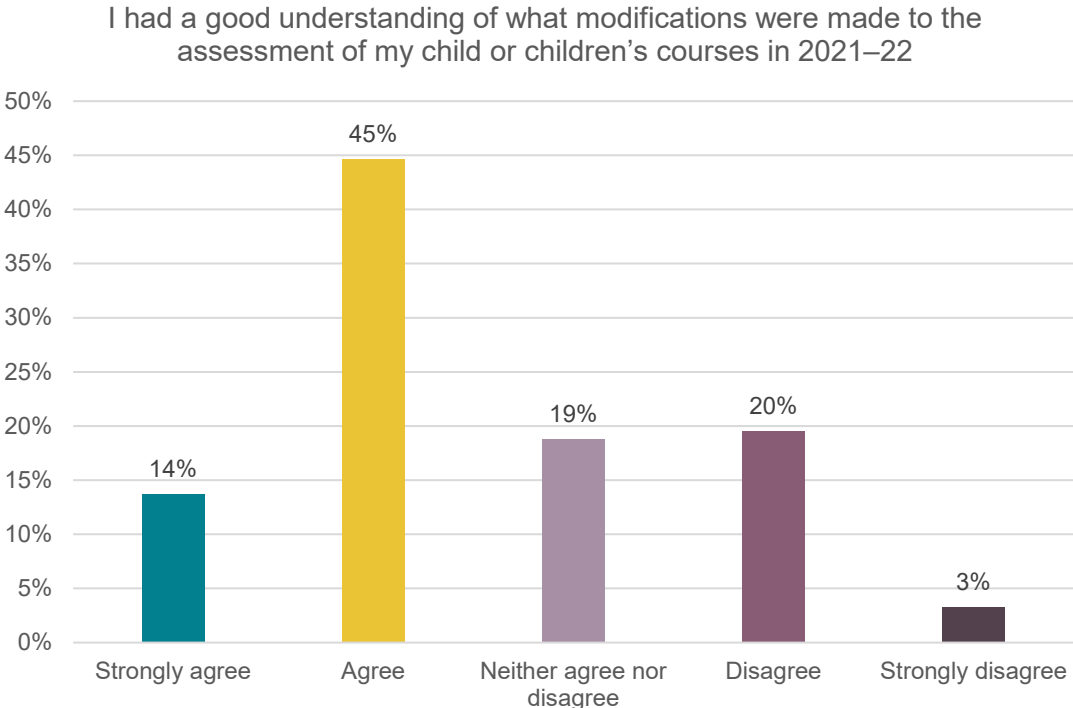
With you know sciences, they should be quite practical, and it would be good to include that [assignment] again in the future if it was my decision.

Parents and carers

Parent and carer respondents were asked about their awareness of modifications made to the assessment of National Courses in 2021–22. While 79% said that they were aware of the modifications, 21% said they were not.

Those respondents who were aware of modifications were then asked to what extent they agreed that they had a good understanding of what modifications were made to assessment of their children’s courses in 2021–22. While 58% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had a good understanding, 23% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Almost a fifth of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed.

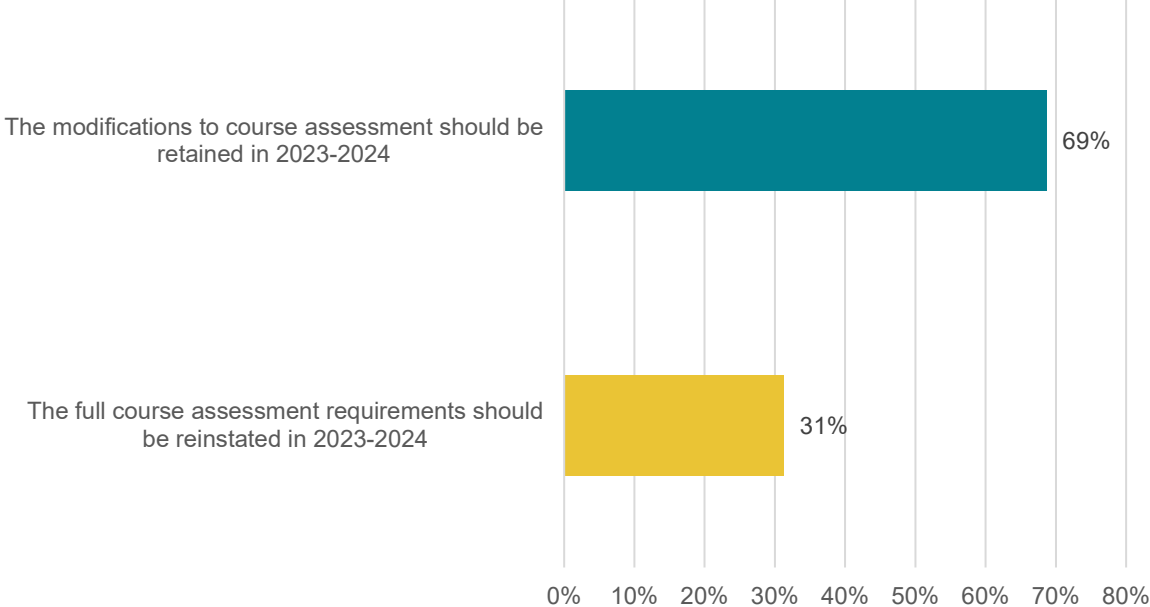
Figure 14



Parent and carer respondents were also asked their preferred option with regards to modifications for 2023–24. Whilst 31% thought that the full course assessment requirements should be reinstated in 2023–24, 69% thought that the modifications to course assessment should be retained.

Figure 15

SQA is considering whether to keep modifications for the 2023–24 academic year. What is your preferred option for 2023–24?



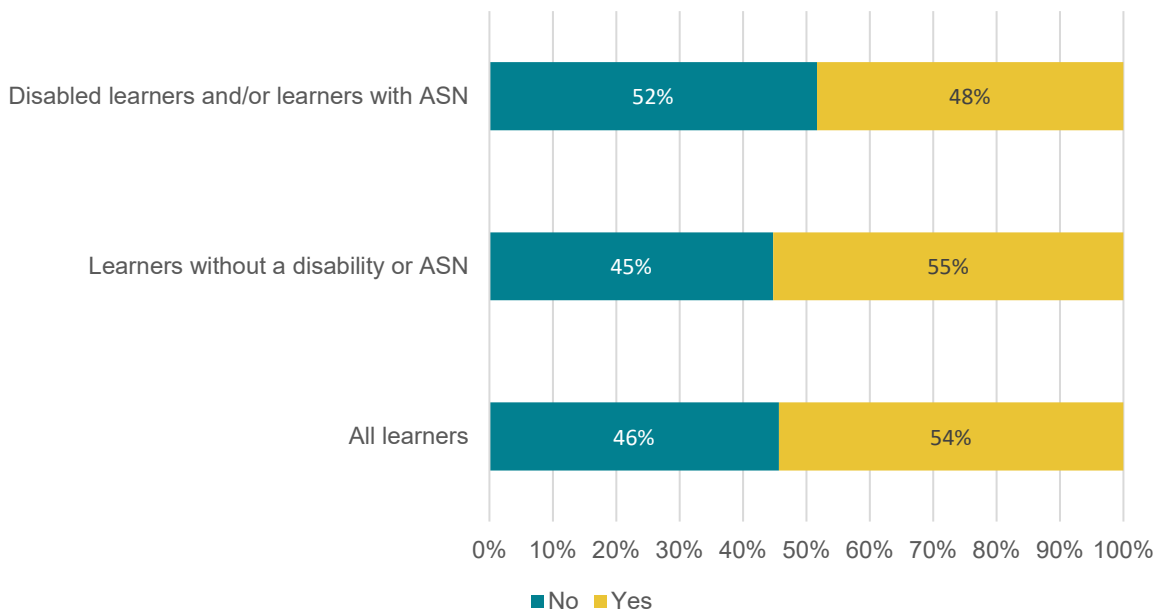
5 Revision support

This section looks at learners' views on the revision support provided by SQA in 2021–22. (More information on revision support is available on [our website](#).)

When asked if they were aware that SQA provided revision support for learners in 2021–22 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, 54% of learners said yes and 46% said no. The chi-squared test revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between the views of disabled learners and/or those with ASN and learners without a disability or ASN. This is explored further below.

Figure 16

Were you aware that SQA provided revision support for learners in 2021–22, due to the COVID-19 pandemic?



$$\chi^2(1) = 4.25, p = 0.04$$

Table 6 Standardised residuals for *Were you aware that SQA provided revision support for learners in 2021–22, due to the COVID-19 pandemic?*

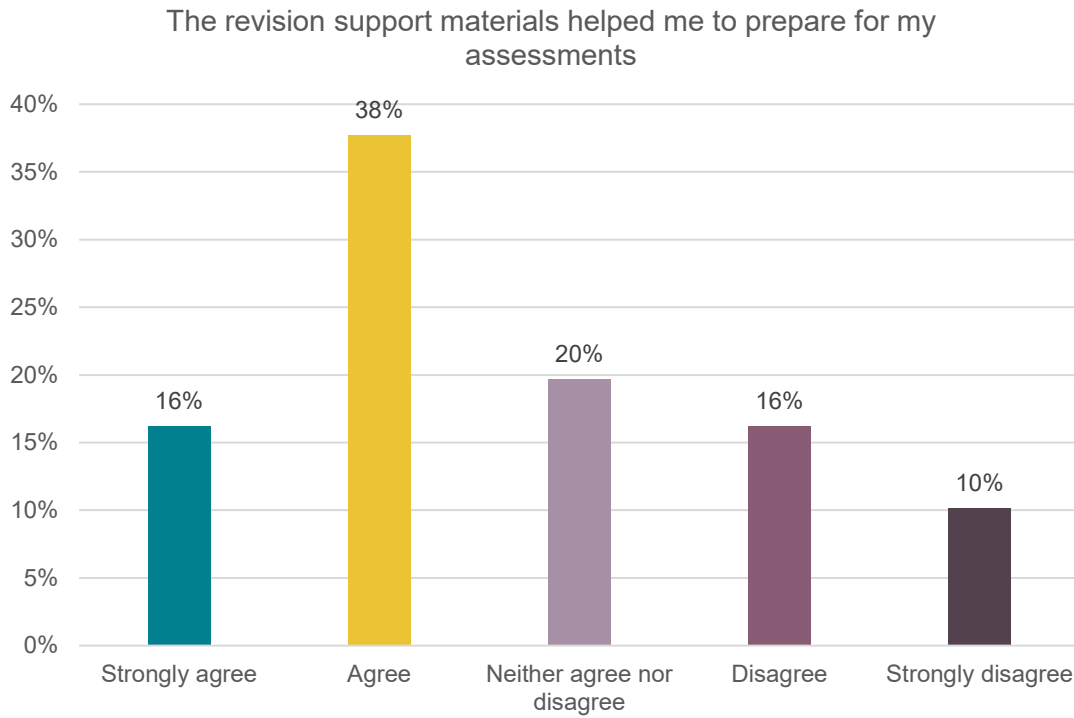
	No	Yes
Learner without a disability or ASN or prefer not to say	-0.58	0.53
Disabled learner or learners with ASN	1.46	-1.34

Inspection of standardised residuals does not reveal any particular cell as driving this effect; however, the overall pattern of standardised residuals suggests that disabled learners or learners with ASN are more likely to select 'No' and less likely to select 'Yes' than expected by chance.

Respondents were then asked their level of agreement with a series of statements regarding revision support.

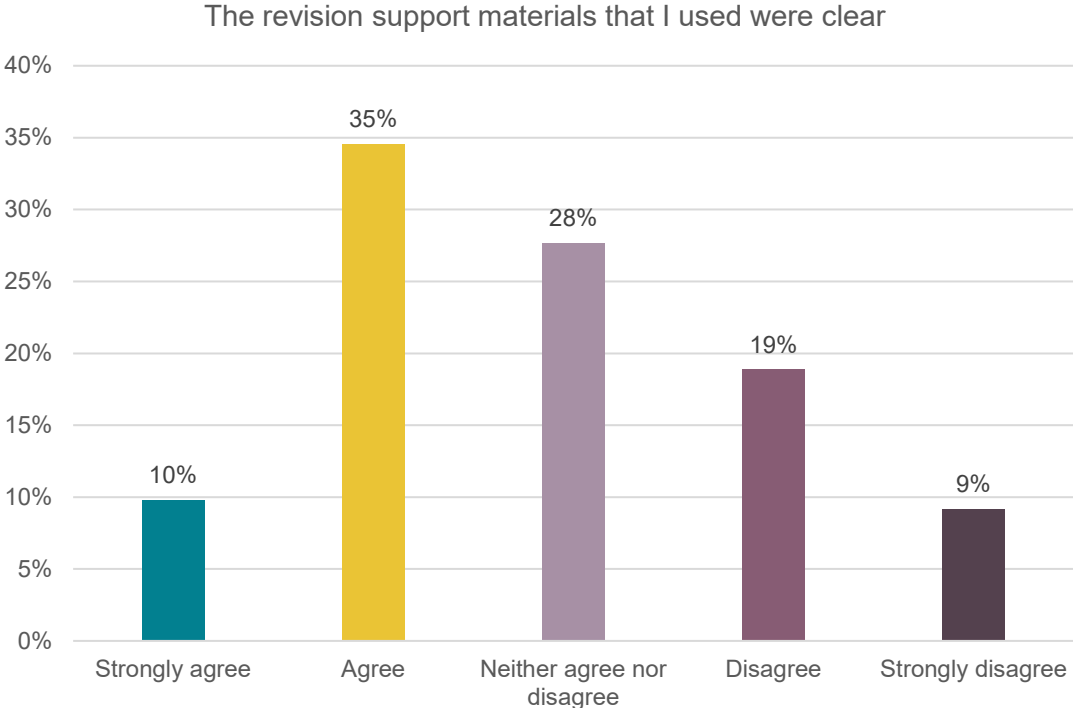
While 54% of learners agreed or strongly agreed that the revision support materials had helped them to prepare for their assessments, 26% disagreed or strongly disagreed. A fifth of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 17



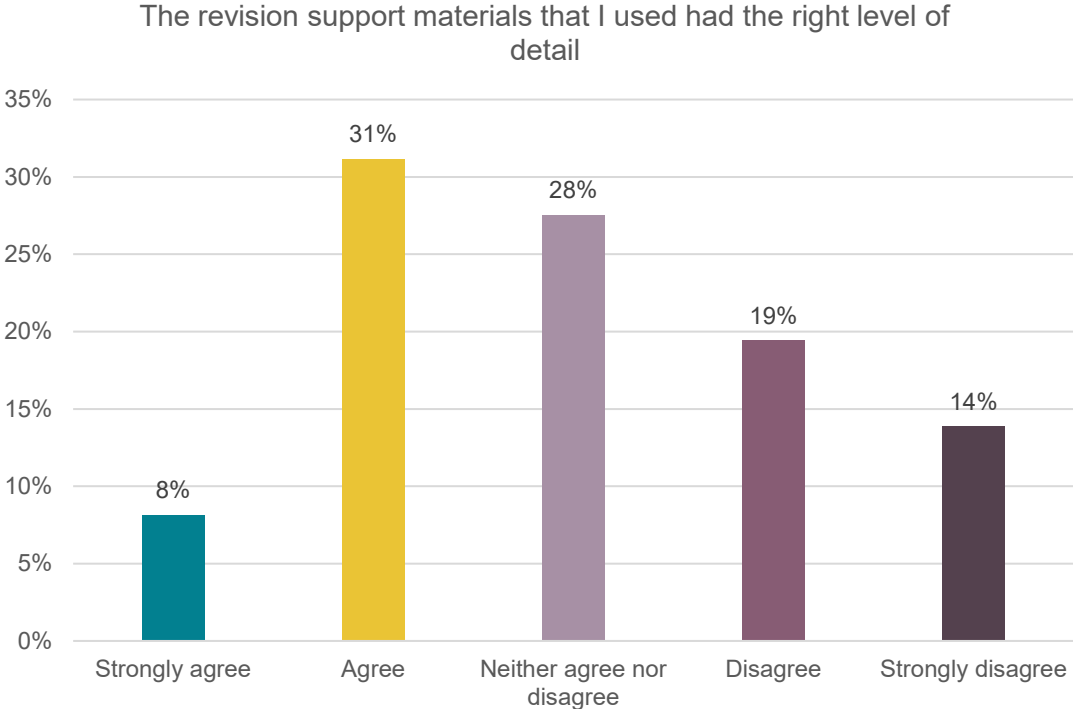
Only 10% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement *the revision support materials I used were clear*; 35% agreed, 28% neither agreed nor disagreed, 19% disagreed, and 9% strongly disagreed.

Figure 18



While 39% of learners agreed or strongly agreed that the revision support materials that they had used had the right level of detail, 28% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 33% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 19



What other support could have been provided?

Learners were informed that any support that SQA provides to learners must be offered or provided in a way that ensures skills and knowledge are rigorously assessed. Given this, they were asked what other support, if any, SQA could have provided. Only 270 learners left comments here, (35 of whom were disabled learners and/or those with an ASN). A number of those said either that they did not know or that there was nothing else that SQA could have provided, and the revision support had worked well.

However, around a third of the comments suggested that SQA's revision support should have provided more detail. Learners, including those with ASN, thought that revision support should have been more specific, with suggestions ranging from more high-level information on the topics that would be assessed to details of exactly what would appear in the exam.

A list of topics that would be assessed and that would not be assessed in the final exam for all subjects.

More specific details of what would be in the final exam.

Related to this, a considerable proportion of respondents to this question argued that the revision support materials should have been clearer.

The support was not helpful as it was difficult to understand therefore not a lot of people used it.

A more detailed instruction on what had and hadn't been removed from the course - it was confusing.

Feedback from disabled learners and/or those with an ASN also cited the need to consider making revision materials more accessible.

Make revision materials or modifications available in various formats (such as audio or word document) or text sizes for everybody to be able to access.

More support should go to people with autism like me, as well as people with ADHD, dyslexia, Down's syndrome, and more.

A significant number of learners also thought that SQA could provide more revision materials and resources, including interactive resources, links to useful websites, subject-specific websites, and past and practice papers. Several respondents recommended exemplars including marking commentary.

More access to examples of how to answer exam style questions and how marks are awarded.

Perhaps they could have provided model answers from students along with the marking scheme.

The issue of perceived inconsistencies across subjects in revision support was raised by several respondents, with calls for all subjects to receive an equal amount of support. A small number of learners also thought that the revision support should have been released earlier.

Smaller numbers of respondents raised other issues including:

- ◆ A perceived lack of support for learners suffering from poor mental health or still suffering the effects of COVID-19
- ◆ Calls for changes to exam timetabling including lengthening exams
- ◆ Issues with the appeals process
- ◆ More general concerns about the current assessment model

Revision support that worked well

When asked for details of any revision support that they thought had worked particularly well, 313 learners commented, a small number just responding 'none'. Thirty-eight of the respondents here were disabled learners and/or those with an ASN.

Having advance notice of what would or would not be assessed in the exam featured in a clear majority of responses. Learners appreciated being able to focus their revision on specific topics; a number thought this reduced stress.

Personally, I think the advanced notice of particular content and/or question types was incredibly useful as it encouraged me to focus more of my time and effort on to these certain topics - this allowed me to feel more calm regarding my exams.

Being told specific topics that would be assessed and what topics would not show up in the exam. This helped learners to focus revision and not waste time studying a topic which would not even appear in the exam.

I feel like the information that told us what was in the exams were extremely helpful as it allowed me to focus more on the topics that were in the exam and touch up on my knowledge better.

These remarks tied in with the subject-specific comments. Subjects that learners, including those who are disabled and/or have an ASN, thought had revision support that worked well were those where they were given advance notice of topics that would or would not be assessed, namely English, Biology, and Mathematics. These subjects, particularly English and Biology, were repeatedly mentioned by learners as having had good revision support.

I felt that some subjects such as English were done incredibly well as it highlighted where our revision should focus.

Knowing what English texts would be assessed.

Biology revision support helped me a lot.

The Biology extended response was clearly stated.

The Maths revision support was highly detailed and instructed students on all of the topics which they needed to revise for the exam and which topics they didn't need to revise.

While a number of other subjects were mentioned by very small numbers of respondents, those that several learners thought had good revision support included Business Management, Computing Studies, Drama, Graphic Communication, and Modern Studies.

On a more general note, a considerable number of learners thought that past papers had worked well as revision, particularly when combined with marking instructions.

Past papers being easily available and having the marking scheme with them was very helpful.

Smaller numbers of respondents mentioned the study guides and the course specifications as having worked well. Likewise, a few learners stated that they thought all of the revision support had worked well.

A substantial number of learners made comments here that were not directly about SQA's revision support. That is, they cited revision resources and strategies that had worked well for them, including e-Sgoil, Scholar, in-centre supported study, and YouTube videos. A small number of respondents mentioned modifications that they thought had worked well, such as the removal of assignments.

Revision support that did not work well

Almost 300 learners commented when asked about revision support that had not worked well. Of these, 43 were disabled learners and/or those with an ASN. While around 20 learners suggested that none of the revision support had worked well, the same number thought all of it had.

The main theme to emerge here was that the revision support, in the main, told learners things that they already knew. Respondents suggested that the support just re-iterated advice and guidance that their teachers had already disseminated or that all learners would be aware of anyway. Accordingly, some learners thought that the revision support was patronising and that the study guides just comprised what they thought of as common sense.

Wording of some of the advice felt condescending despite trying to be well meaning. A lot said things we would hear from our teachers already within class, numerous times, rendering a fair amount of support meaningless.

Even though it was well intentioned, some of the advice given was obvious and came across a bit condescending.

Most of it was pointless and things we already knew.

Similarly, a substantial number of respondents thought that the revision support was unhelpful, generally because it was not clear or not detailed enough. Several learners referred to the revision support materials as vague.

The new revision materials/guidelines provided by the SQA were for the most part unhelpful and unclear or otherwise provided useless tips/advice that was already a given.

Subject-specific revision support that was experienced as working well generally that gave information on topics that would or would not be assessed. Consequently, the revision support that was judged to have not worked well was that where learners felt they did not get any new information.

Chemistry and Physics revision support were highlighted by considerable numbers of learners as not having worked well, generally because the support was perceived to have not been detailed enough; several learners suggested that there was no support to speak of. Similarly, several respondents thought the same about Biology, Geography, History, Modern Studies, and modern languages revision support.

The general advice of science and languages that was generic and not useful.

The science and social science revision supports were more just common sense than what students actually needed to revise and, therefore, weren't much use as revision guides.

A few learners identified what they perceived as a lack of clarity around the Mathematics support, on the basis that it did not make clear the topics that would or would not be assessed.

Maths left confusion; things appeared to have been taken out but appeared in the exam in a different form.

A number of learners compared the revision support provided in different subjects and several suggested that there had been wide inconsistencies in provision, which was not fair.

The fact that revision support varied so much in subjects. In some subjects it was extremely useful but others had little to no help. It felt very inconsistent.

It also could have been more fair across the board as some subjects had more useful resources than others.

Learner interviews

All learner interview participants were aware of the revision support materials provided by SQA in March 2022. Generally, participants knew about the various aspects of revision support provided across their courses.

As with the course modifications, there were varied views on the helpfulness of revision support between learners and across all subjects. Overall more learners found the revision support helpful than not.

Higher graphics we were given past papers. And then we were given individual revision topics.

I took Higher Drama this year. Again, you know, the exam was essay based questions and got a sheet with details of what would be included, which helped whittle it down and that was helpful.

Expanding the amount of choices that we could make on the essays that we would be writing. So, for example in mods [Modern Studies] we were allowed to choose from quite a few different choices of essays to write.

A number of learners commented specifically on the English revision support, and the benefit of knowing and being able to prepare for certain parts of the exam in advance.

It was the English, oh yeah, English specifically they told us what section of the set text was going to come up so that was very helpful so we could plan and prepare and memorise it.

For English it was the same, I was able to basically study off by heart the analysis of that section of the poem and then, just because we knew the section of poem that was going to come up.

The Mathematics revision support was also singled out by several participants as having been beneficial, giving learners the opportunity to focus on areas they knew would be assessed.

For Maths, I think it was really, really helpful as well just because it meant you didn't have to stress about certain topics that you weren't going to be assessed on anyway.

Maths was very long and it detailed what topics ... weren't going to be in the exam...and I think everyone quite liked that. I quite liked that because it didn't tell you what was specifically coming up but you knew that you could rule out these things that you didn't have to think about anymore. So, you learned them but you don't have to revise them or look over them, you can just kind of leave them, which I think was good because the exam was still the same as it would have been but you could target your revision a bit better.

On the other hand, several learners highlighted the confusion surrounding the Mathematics revision support, suggesting the information provided was not clear enough.

... in Maths, it did say that a topic wouldn't be included, but then when it came round to the exam it included a question, which was basically the exact same as what they said was removed.

For the Maths, we were given a list of the areas that were going to be assessed in the final exam and I was quite lucky that my teacher spent some time going through exactly what was written in the list because, on the whole, we kind of felt it was sort of misleading. Some of my friends who go to different schools, they went into the exam thinking particular things weren't going to be in it, but it wasn't that, it was just that a certain area of that entire subject wasn't going to be in it.

The Biology revision support was also mentioned by several participants. While some thought it was useful and appreciated being able to focus their revision on the large-mark

question topics, others suggested that in fact it made the assessment more of a test of memory than anything else.

Those questions would maybe normally be about seeing something and having to think it through, what do you know about that topic, whereas now they were just a memorising exercise because you knew what they were going to ask pretty much.

Similarly, a few learners commented on their perception of poor revision support, generally for the other science subjects, particularly Physics and Chemistry.

Chemistry, we didn't get anything very specific, it was just revision tips and like how to approach questions and stuff but nothing very specific, which a lot of people were a bit disappointed in having had the biology ones or other subjects.

Physics was literally just revise, that was all it told us really. Some of them were really quite poorly handed out.

For more essay-based subjects (Modern Studies, Politics, RMPS, for example), learners commented that revision support generally just repeated the modifications and compared poorly to the support given in other subjects.

With Politics, it just felt like it was being repeated; the revision guide just kind of said the same as the modifications.

For Modern Studies, I honestly did not look at the revision sheet, not even once. I saw it when our teacher showed it to us, then that was it, never again because it really was...there was nothing to look at.

Overall, a small number of learners did not believe the provision of revision support made any difference to the assessment experience.

I found the study guide was of no use at all, it didn't help us at all. Honestly, I don't think it helped any of my peers or me really.

I also felt that some of what we were told was very generalised. And going back to like, I know it's not the volume, but some of them just had nothing in them. So that was very unhelpful.

Others made comment on the inconsistency of support across subject areas.

I know some courses had a bit more input from the SQA and more taken out or they were told more than others, and some were just told how you should be answering the questions rather than anything about the actual topics.

I think the quality in detail and like assistance given by them was quite radically different depending on what subject you were on.

In terms of impact on teaching, some interview participants suggested that they had finished the teaching and learning part of their course by the time revision support was released, so it

had very little impact. Others thought that the provision of revision support clearly changed the focus of teaching when it was released.

It didn't make much of a difference because by March we were already finished most of the units, so it was kind of like too late, I think, to actually impact teaching.

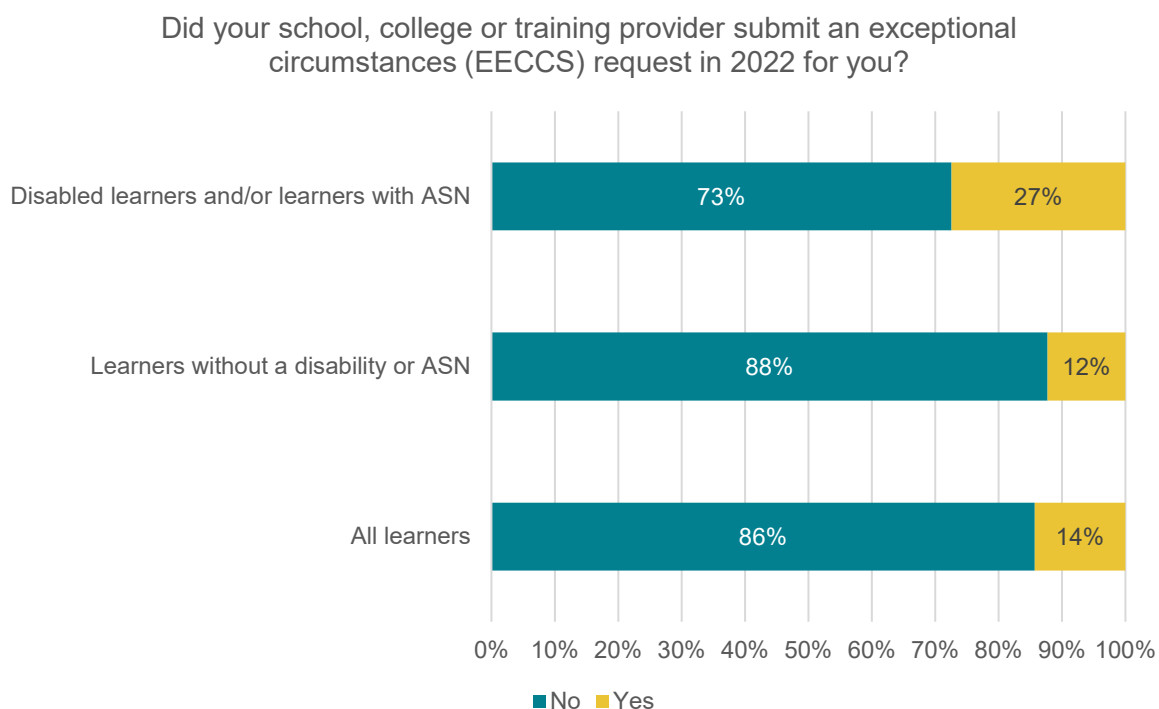
They [teachers] gave us essays and work to do on the topics included. They never asked us to do anything that was not included in the revision guides. So yeah, the teaching was changed.

For Maths, yes, 100%. Our teacher wasn't looking at the topics that weren't being assessed.

6 Exam Exceptional Circumstance Consideration Service (EECCS)

When asked if their school, college or training provider had submitted an exceptional circumstances (EECCS) request for them in 2022, 86% said no. The chi-squared test revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between the views of disabled learners and/or those with ASN and learners without a disability or ASN. This is explored further below.

Figure 20



$$\chi^2(1) = 42.14, p < 0.001$$

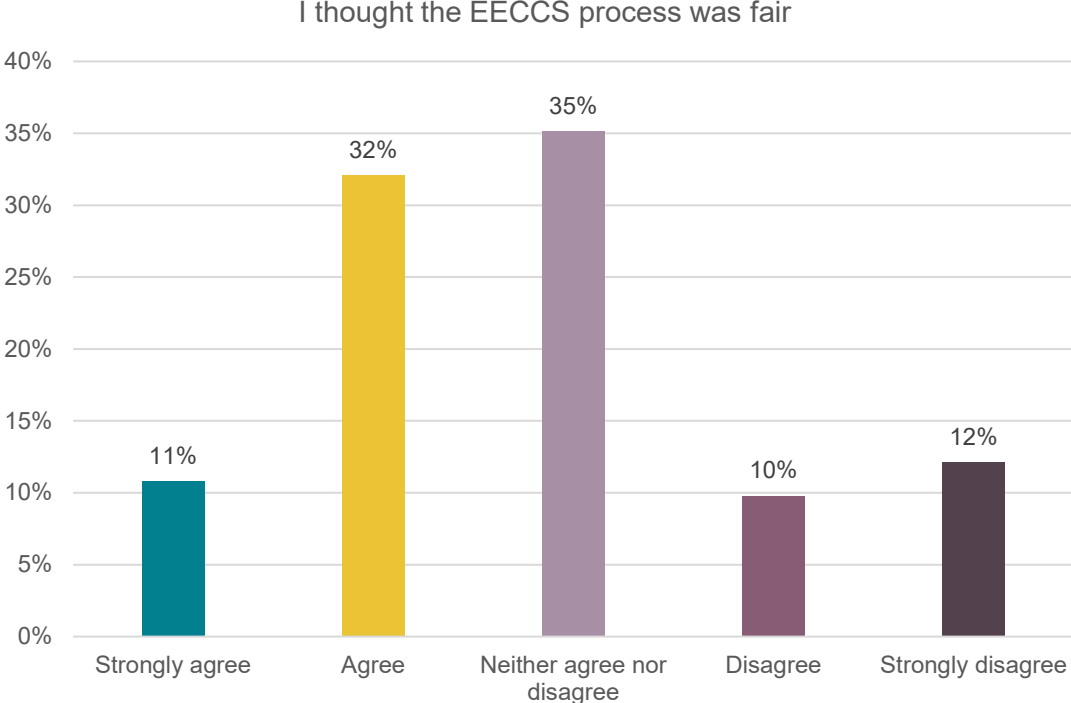
Table 7 Standardised residuals for *Did your school, college or training provider submit an exceptional circumstances (EECCS) request in 2022 for you?*

	No	Yes
Learner without a disability or ASN or prefer not to say	0.91	-2.22
Disabled learner or learners with ASN	-2.32	5.68

Inspection of the standardised residuals suggests that significance is being driven predominantly by disabled learners or learners with ASN being more likely to select 'Yes' here, but also by the same learners being less likely to select 'No' than expected by chance. At the same time, learners without a disability or ASN are less likely than chance would predict to select 'Yes'.

Respondents who had responded 'yes' were then asked the extent to which they agreed that the EECCS process was fair. More than a third of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed, 43% agreed or strongly agreed, and 22% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 21

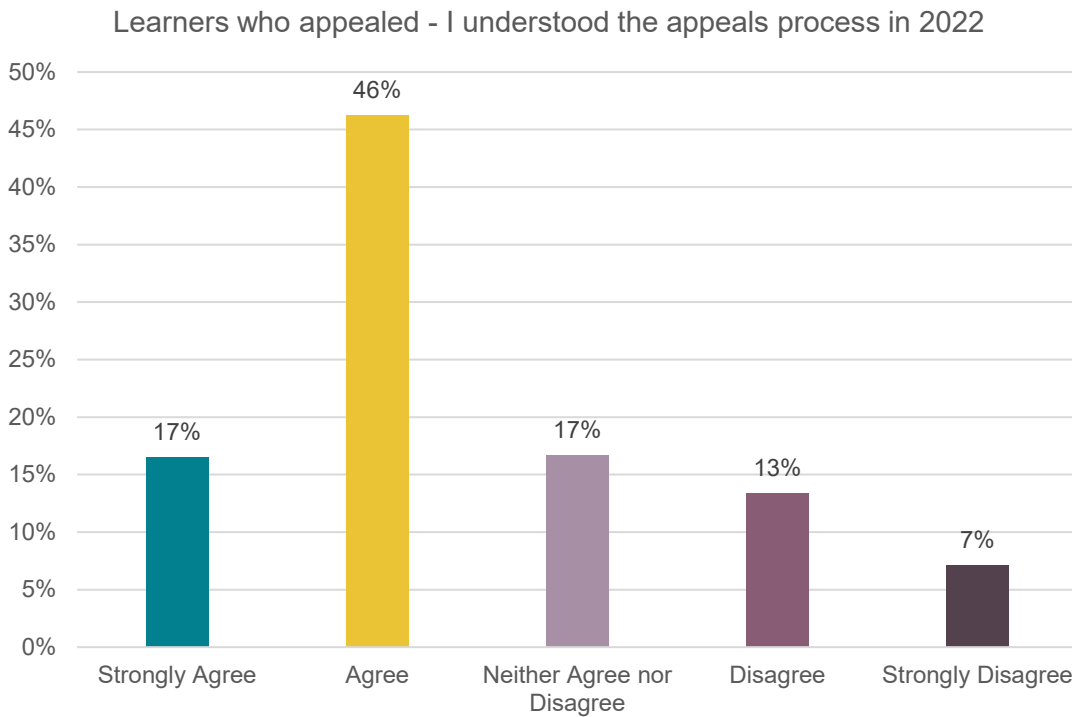


7 Appeals

Learner respondents were asked if they had made any appeals against their grades in 2022; 41% had and 59% had not.

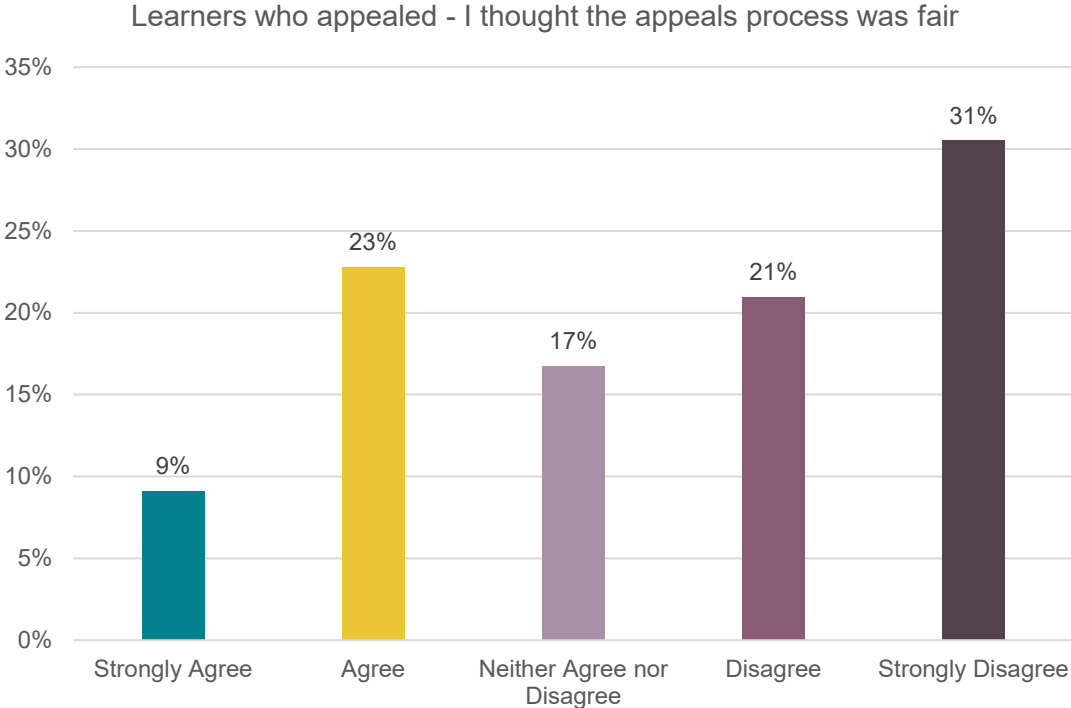
Those learners who had made an appeal were asked the extent to which they agreed with the statement *I understood the appeals process in 2022*. Almost two thirds (63%) either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement and 20% either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 22



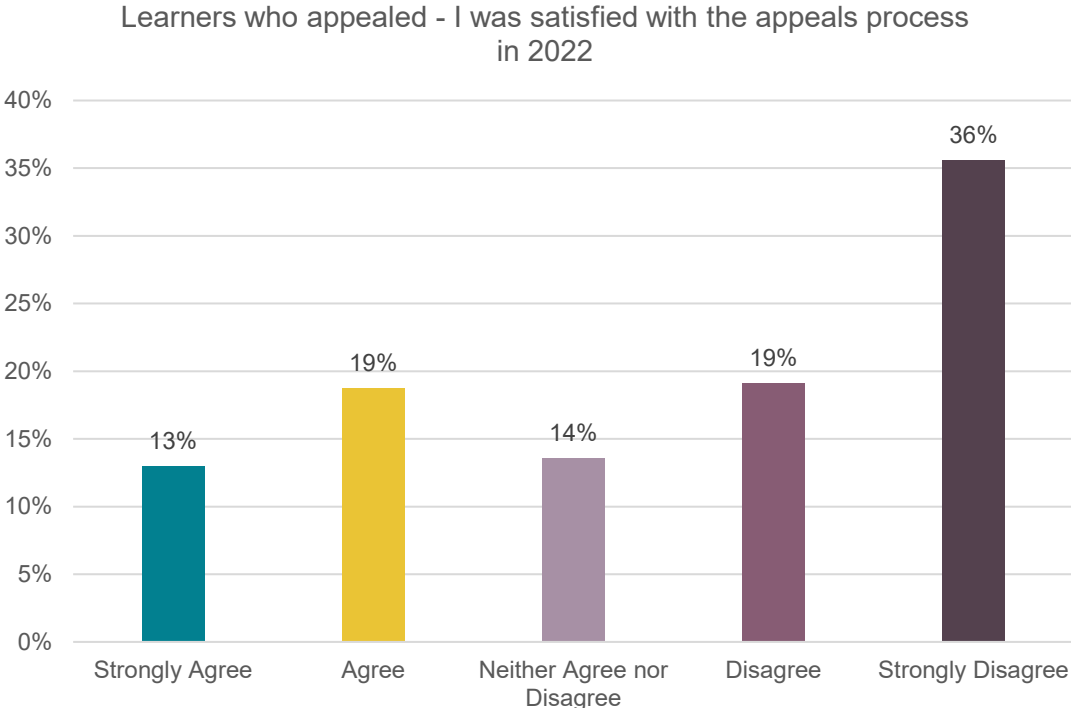
While 32% of respondents who had appealed in 2022 strongly agreed or agreed that the appeals process was fair, 21% disagreed and 31% strongly disagreed. A further 17% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 23



As detailed in Figure 24, 32% of those respondents who had appealed agreed or strongly agreed with the statement *I was satisfied with the appeals process in 2022*. Conversely, 55% disagreed or strongly disagreed. The remaining 14% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 24

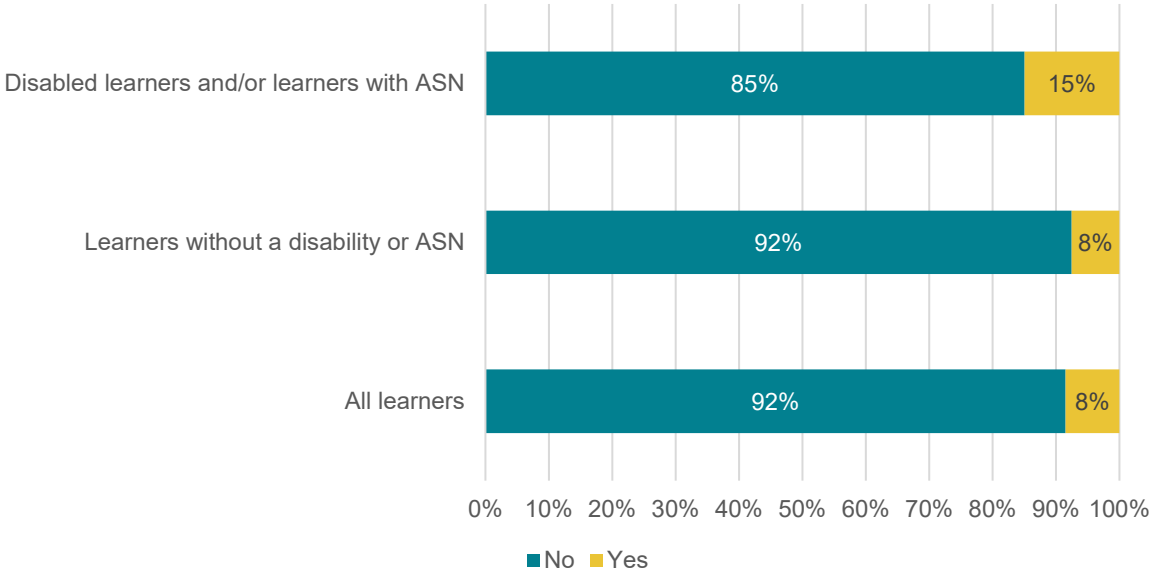


When asked if they had received the results of their appeal, 90% of responding learners said they had.

When asked if they or someone they knew had submitted an appeal on their behalf because of discrimination under the Equality Act (2010) or agreed assessment arrangements not being provided in internal assessments, only 8% of learners who had submitted an appeal said yes, whilst 92% said they had not. The chi-squared test revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between the views of disabled learners and/or those with ASN and learners without a disability or ASN. This is explored further below.

Figure 25

Did you or someone on your behalf submit any appeals because of discrimination under the Equality Act (2010) or agreed assessment arrangements not being provided in internal assessments?



$\chi^2 (1) = 5.68, p=0.02$

Table 8 Standardised residuals for *Did you or someone on your behalf submit any appeals because of discrimination under the Equality Act (2010) or agreed assessment arrangements not being provided in internal assessments?*

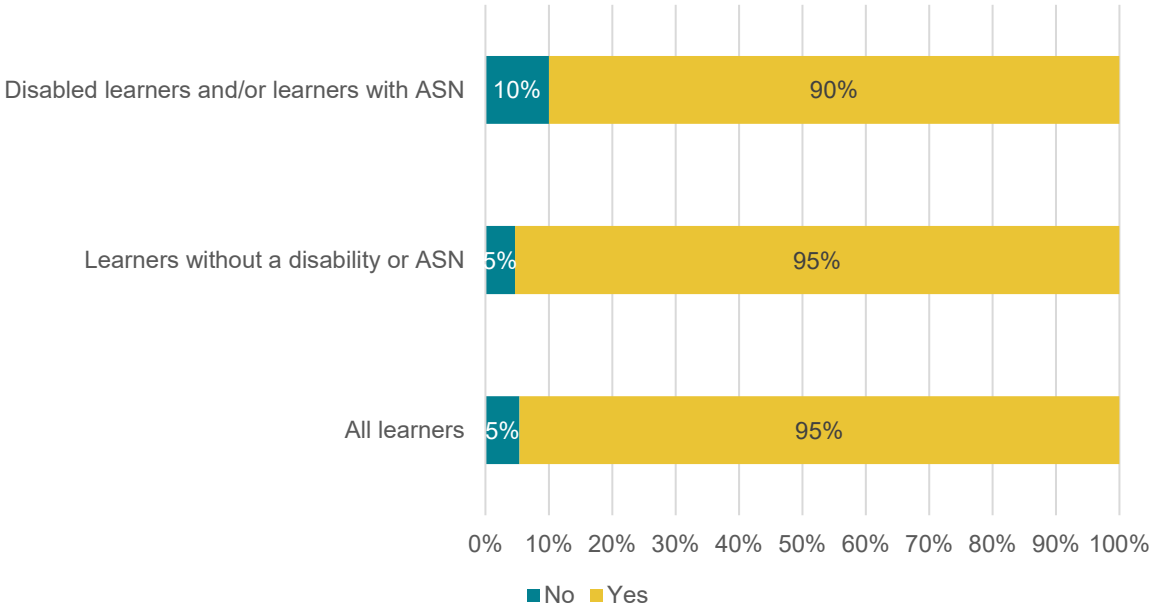
	No	Yes
Learner without a disability or ASN or prefer not to say	0.27	-0.89
Disabled learner or learners with ASN	-0.70	2.29

Inspection of standardised residuals suggests significance is being driven by more disabled learners or learners with ASN selecting ‘Yes’ than would be expected by chance.

A majority (95%) of learners who had not submitted appeals were aware that they could appeal against their results if they did not achieve their estimates in 2022. The chi-squared test revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between the views of disabled learners and/or those with ASN and learners without a disability or ASN. This is explored further below.

Figure 26

Learners who did not appeal - Were you aware that you could appeal against your results if you did not achieve your estimate?



$\chi^2 (1) = 6.76, p=0.01$

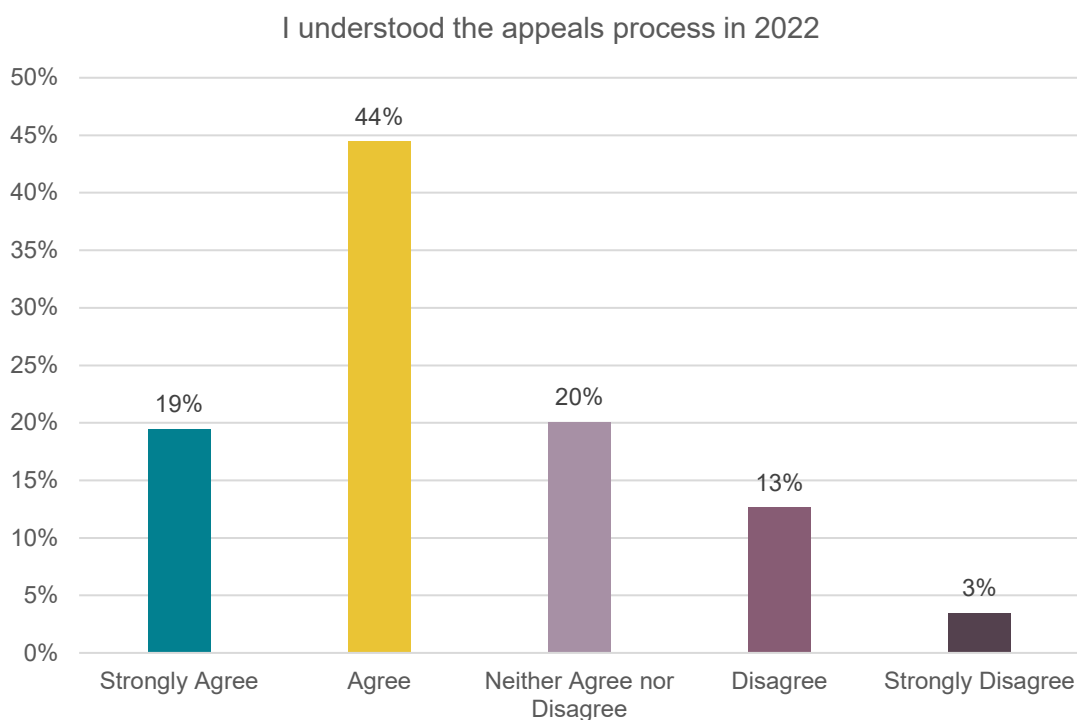
Table 9 Standardised Residuals for *Were you aware that you could appeal against your results if you did not achieve your estimate?*

	No	Yes
Learner without a disability or ASN or prefer not to say	-0.99	0.23
Disabled learner or learners with ASN	2.53	-0.60

Inspection of standardised residuals suggests that significance is being driven by more disabled learners or learners with ASN selecting 'No' than expected by chance.

Learners who had not submitted an appeal in 2022 were asked whether they agreed with the statement *I understood the appeals process in 2022*. Figure 27 shows 63% either agreed or strongly agreed, whilst only 16% either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

Figure 27



Future appeals system

Learners were asked what are the key things that SQA needs to consider in designing a future appeals system. A total of 783 respondents submitted comments (of whom 125 were disabled learners and/or those with an ASN). However, more than 60 of these responses (17 of which were from disabled learners and/or those with an ASN) simply said that they did not know. A further 10 respondents just said that they believed the 2021–22 process had worked well.

While there was a range of opinions expressed, in general terms what learners are looking for in a future appeals systems is:

- ◆ The incorporation of a diverse spread of alternative evidence
- ◆ Clear communication and guidance from SQA on the process and evidence requirements
- ◆ A fair, transparent, and consistent process
- ◆ The consideration of learners' individual circumstances
- ◆ A more lenient approach

Alternative evidence

To an extent, comments on the appeals system reflected what the learners who commented thought a future assessment system, rather than purely an appeals approach, should look like. A full third of comments in this section mentioned alternative evidence: There was a strong feeling that grades should take into account learners' work from across the year and lessen the reliance on a single high-stakes exam.

The SQA need to take into account all the evidence submitted by a pupil so pupils who were high performing all year but who did not do so well in the exam have a fair chance at getting a higher grade which actually represents their knowledge gained throughout the year.

I would recommend using more assessments throughout the year to contribute to the final grade, as this allows for a fuller perspective on how the students' progress through the year and is less likely to badly represent students if they have an off day on the final exam.

There was a range of opinion on what alternative evidence any future appeals process should take into consideration. While some learners suggested only prelims should be considered, others wanted all assessments or class tests to be included. There were also suggestions that coursework and teachers' views should be incorporated. A small number of respondents thought that learners should automatically get the higher of their final or predicted grade.

Several respondents mentioned perceived issues with predicted grades based on their understanding of how they worked, in that they did not believe that these should be based only on prelim performance or that they suggested that learners should be able to appeal even if they had achieved their predicted grade.

Some people get better really close to the exam.

On a related note, a number of respondents suggested that exam scripts should be returned or that scripts should be re-marked, even if a learner has achieved their predicted grade.

Communication and guidance

A considerable number of respondents suggested that there needs to be better communication and guidance around the appeals process. This was a theme that was particularly important to disabled learners and/or those with an ASN, many of whom who suggested communication and guidance should be simpler and easier to understand. This theme encompassed suggestions that SQA should communicate the appeals process and eligibility criteria to learners directly and clearly and, echoing practitioner concerns, that evidence requirements should be more transparent.

Make the system easier to use and understand.

Give out a specific requirement for the amount of evidence needed.

A number of comments suggested a belief that 2021–22's process would lead to an automatically successful appeal if a learner achieved a grade lower than they had been predicted.

From my perspective and from the way my school made it sound, it sounded like I was guaranteed to get my appeal no matter how I did in my exam, this should be clarified that this is not the case.

It was made out it would be straightforward to get a grade increase if school had evidence to support appeal.

Numerous respondents, including some disabled learners and/or those with an ASN, said that they thought that an appeals process should provide feedback on why appeals have been unsuccessful. A number of these learners felt that this feedback would be important for future learning development.

Fairness

A substantial number of learners thought it critical that a future appeals approach be fair. While some simply suggested a fair and equitable system, others provided anecdotal evidence of where they perceived the 2021–22 approach to have been unfair or inconsistent. For these respondents, the issue of fairness was frequently linked with the themes discussed above. For example, some learners believed it unfair that so much rested on a single high-stakes exam, others suggested that they were not clear on evidence requirements or how the process would work in 2022.

Linked to this, a large number of respondents thought that the appeals system should be more lenient. There was a perception that a high number of unsuccessful appeals in 2022 meant that SQA had been unduly strict. Again, this theme linked with that of alternative evidence, with learners asserting that their work throughout the year should carry more weight and had demonstrated that they should have achieved a higher grade. A number of respondents also suggested that in future appeals should not be able to result in a downgrade.

A recurring comment was that learner circumstances should be considered in the appeals process. These comments covered a wide range of suggestions, including the ongoing impact of the pandemic, disabled learners and/or those with ASN, learner mental health, exceptional circumstances, inequitable access to teaching and learning, inequitable access to resources, learning preferences, exam timetabling, and learner home life.

Consider everyone's personal situations.

Several respondents wanted a future system to ensure quicker appeals decisions, particularly for those who need grades for October university application deadlines. The 2021–22 timescales were, on occasion, experienced as stressful and unfair.

Other suggestions

A smaller number of respondents judged a range of other areas to be key in any future appeals system:

- ◆ the appeals approach should be simple and user friendly
- ◆ appeals should be free of charge
- ◆ there should be significant learner input in the process
- ◆ standard grade boundaries should be in place and not changed
- ◆ there should be no appeals process outwith exceptional circumstances
- ◆ course modifications should be clear and consistent across subjects

Other appeals comments

Learners were asked if they had any other comments about the appeals process in 2022. Excluding those who just answered 'no', there were around 320 responses; 88 of these were from disabled learners and/or those with an ASN. While some respondents did think the 2021–22 process had worked well, it should be noted that most of the learners who offered comment here did so because they were in some way dissatisfied. Many were disappointed or disillusioned by their own experiences of the appeals system in 2022.

2021–22 approach worked well

Several respondents suggested that the appeals process in 2021–22 worked well and expressed the hope that the same system would be in place in 2022–23. Support for the 2021–22 process was framed in terms of fairness and learners appreciating the alternative evidence aspects of the approach.

I think having that opportunity available makes a huge, positive difference for students and I think it is a fair process.

My school was great at making my year aware of the appeal system.

I liked how you could send in evidence as it seemed more fair.

2021–22 approach did not work well

Many more of those learners who commented were dissatisfied than satisfied. Several expressed their frustration at what they saw as a poor system without giving too much more detail. A similar number stated that they believed that the system had worked more harshly or had been more rigorous in 2022 than previously, generally citing anecdotal evidence from their centres.

Appeals were quite harsh this year.

You can't say that appealing and marking will be more lenient then give barely anyone appeals.

What's the point of an appeal if they literally don't do anything and very nearly every appeal is denied?

This links to a recurring theme in the comments, mentioned by significant numbers of learners, that the 2021–22 appeals system was not fair. While some simply stated that it had been unfair, others offered more detailed comment, often on their own experience of unsuccessful appeals or perceived inconsistencies in why some appeals were successful and others were not.

I do not think it was fair. Appeals were given to some people and not others with no explanation.

The system was unfair as many students with the same evidence who submitted appeals received different outcomes.

There was a perception that the system had not worked as learners, including those who are disabled and/or have an ASN, thought it would, and this was unfair.

Unfair, wasn't what we were told it would be like.

It got a lot of people's hopes up and led to disappointment.

Responses revealed a level of confusion about the approach, with some complaining that SQA had only re-marked scripts and not looked at alternative evidence, and others arguing that a re-mark should have been part of the process.

This connects to a further theme that communication and guidance about appeals had not been clear. Respondents, including disabled learners and/or those with an ASN, suggested that there should have been more information on the process available to learners, particularly around the evidence requirements. A number of respondents also suggested that they had believed that a successful appeal was almost routine if their predicted grade was higher than their final result. Disabled learners and/or those with an ASN also cited communicating the status of a learner's appeal directly with them as a factor that could make the process better.

There should have been more understanding of evidence and what was expected rather than leaving us all in the dark.

A lot of people got their hopes up because teachers made it seem as if they would get the appeal if they made one.

We were under the impression that if we got a good prelim grade we could almost use that instead of our exam grade if it was bad. This was not the case.

I think that lack of contact leaves you hanging and unsure with what's happening with your appeal. And also they do not communicate why you were graded this way.

Several respondents highlighted the use of alternative evidence in the appeals system. While some just stated how important this was, others questioned how much weight it had carried in 2022, or whether a broader range of evidence should have been considered.

Grades should reflect the student's knowledge and understanding of a subject through the year, not their ability to memorise and write out facts on one day in an exam.

We were told the SQA would look at the work we did all year in the subject we were appealing for. I do not believe this happened.

A number of respondents noted that they received no feedback on their unsuccessful appeals, possibly heightening their sense of grievance.

Feedback should be provided to children who did not receive their appeal, to explain why.

Provide information on how you re-mark the exam or if you re-mark the folio piece and say what evidence given to you by teachers you have taken into account when a grade has changed or not.

More than 20 learners, including two disabled learners and/or those with an ASN, suggested that the timescales for appeals were too long, causing stress to some and affecting progression plans.

It's quite hard to switch your choice of subjects when you've already missed a very large chunk of content being taught during all of those weeks.

Having to wait months for appeals results was very stressful.

The only other theme mentioned by significant numbers was that of learner circumstance. Some of these mentioned the continuing impact of the pandemic, and the perception that SQA had not considered the attendant disruption enough, but more highlighted their individual circumstances, such as issues with teaching or mental health struggles.

Very small numbers of learners also made suggestions that:

- ◆ appeals should remain free of charge
- ◆ standard grade boundaries should be in place and should not change
- ◆ appeals should be automatic where a final grade is lower than a predicted grade

Learner interviews

During the interviews, learners were asked how they found the appeals process in 2022 and what they thought SQA should consider when designing a future appeals process that is fair to all learners.

Experiences of the appeals process

There was a mixture of positive and negative responses when learners were asked how they found the appeals process in 2022. Some had not submitted appeals personally but commented based on what they had heard and observed about the appeals process more generally.

In terms of positive responses, some learners reported that the process seemed fair, straightforward and provided 'a bit of security' if things did not go well in the final exam.

I think the process of how it worked was really clear.

However, others offered a contrasting view, stating that the process lacked clarity and effective communication, specifically in relation to the process timescales and the evidence that would be considered. One learner found this 'quite stressful'.

Well, you were uncertain on how long it was going to take, you were unsure of what sort of evidence was being sent off, we weren't really told explicitly what was being examined in reference to then what was going to impact your final result. It was just really confusing in total.

For some learners, the fact that appeals were handled by the school seemed to add to the confusion and, as one learner stated, it felt like 'we weren't really in control of what was happening'.

Learners also mentioned the appeals outcomes being surprising in many cases, for example, when large numbers of appeals came back unchanged or learners who provided evidence of achieving at higher grades or exceptional circumstances were not awarded their appeals.

For Art, which is what I submitted [my appeal] for, we submitted, it was like 30 appeals for Higher Art and none of them got moved at all.

I for one felt that my appeal for Business should have at least gone to B, if not an A, and I was given nothing. Whereas my English, which I was happy with, was given back and I didn't expect that. It almost felt as though the SQA had sort of just chosen appeals at random.

He got a C in the final exam in English and then it got bumped up to an A, even though all of his coursework was B standard.

Future appeals process

When learners were asked what SQA should think about when designing a future appeals process, their responses focused on clearer communication and consideration of a wider range of evidence.

Regarding communication, some learners expressed a need for clear information about what evidence will be taken into account during the appeals process and a specific date that appeals outcomes will be available, to help minimise stress.

I think that it needs to be clear on what actual evidence they're looking into.

I think that they need to set a firm deadline instead of saying an approximate date because having an approximate date was really stressful. It meant that during those couple of weeks you were constantly in fear and stress of what's actually the outcome.

Some learners believed that SQA should consider a wider range of appeals evidence, including coursework, in future and should provide an explanation of how appeals outcomes have been decided.

I just feel it's important to kind of view the paper as a whole but as well the coursework and performance throughout the whole year because if someone has a bad day when they sit their prelim then that might not be an accurate reflection of how they are as a student.

. . . when we finally got our appeal results, we weren't given any sort of information about why. We were just given the same sheet that everybody else was and I think a bit more context would be a lot more sort of clarifying.

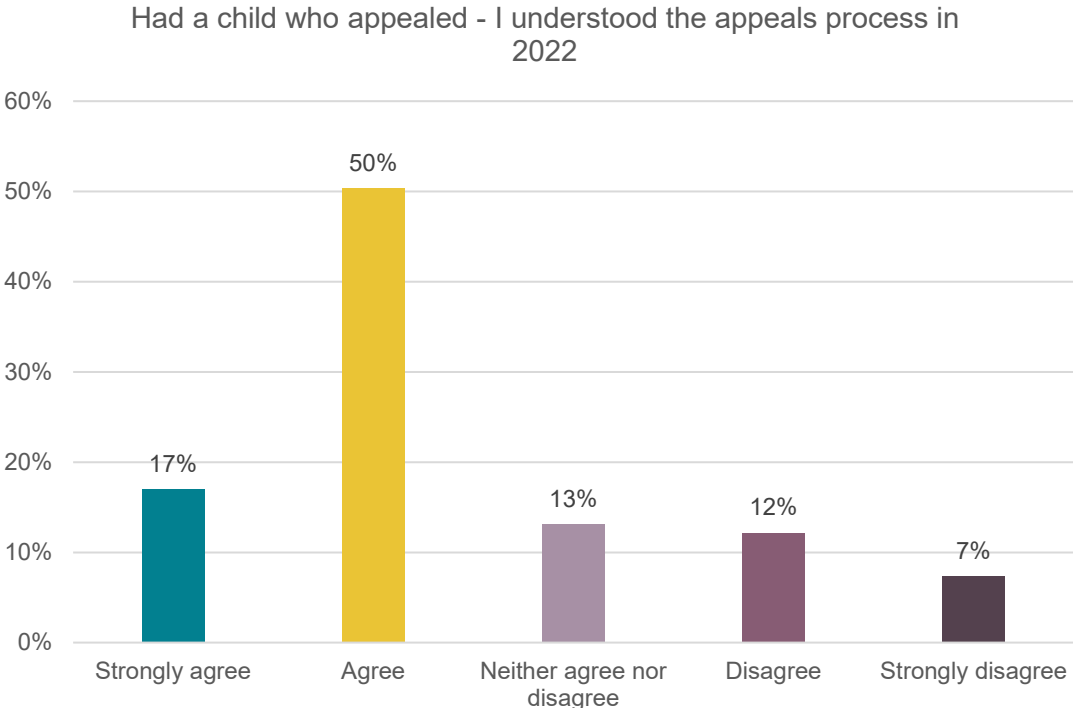
Parents and carers

When parent and carer respondents were asked if any of their children had appealed against any of their National Qualification grades in 2022, 62% said yes and 38% said no.

Those answering yes were then asked the extent to which they agreed with a series of statements about appeals.

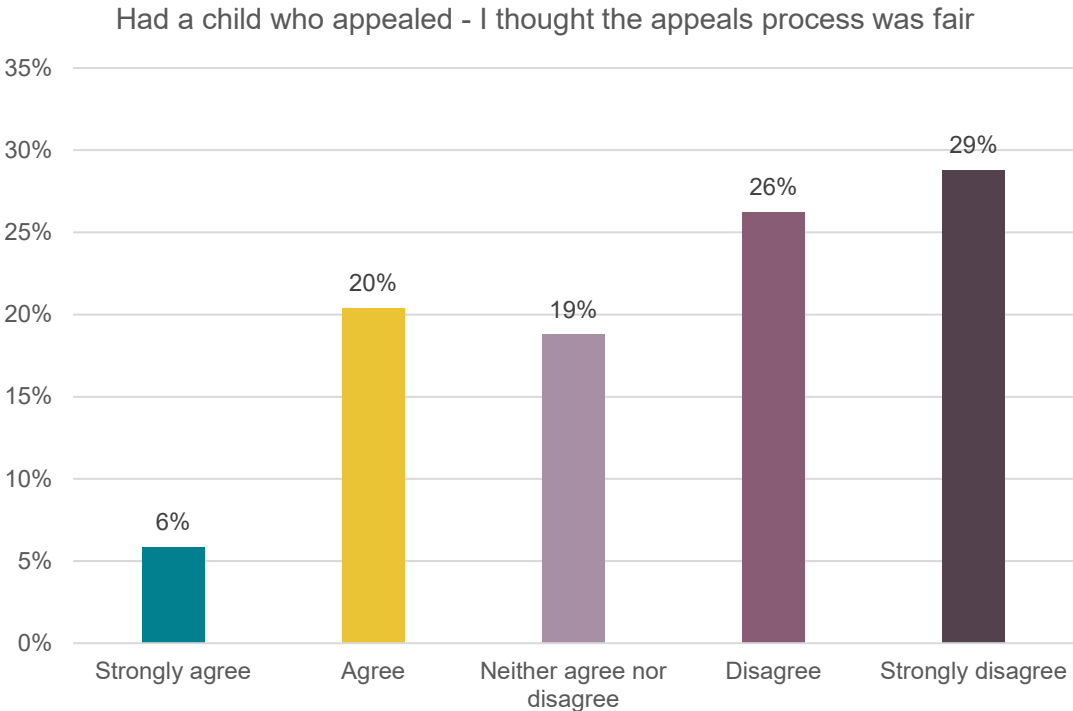
While 67% of respondents whose children had submitted appeals agreed or strongly agreed that they had understood the appeals process in 2022, 20% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 13% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 28



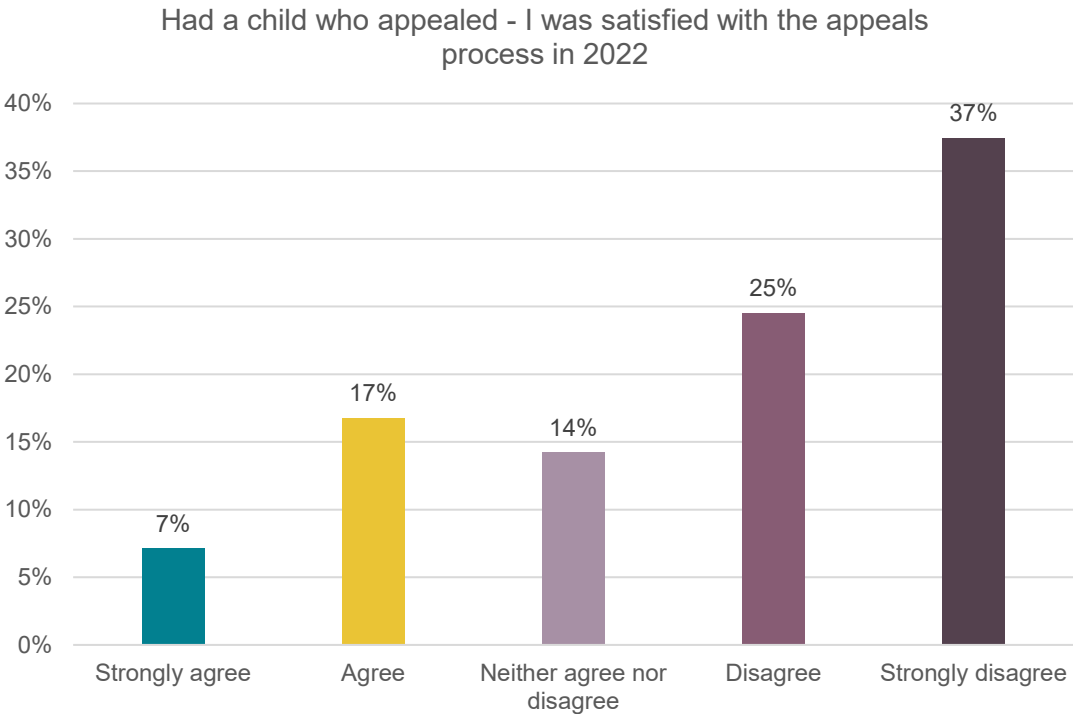
Just over a quarter of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the appeals process was fair, but 55% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Almost a fifth neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 29



Responses suggest that parents and carers were not satisfied with the appeals process in 2022; 37% strongly disagreed that they were satisfied with the process, 25% disagreed, 14% neither agreed nor disagreed, 17% agreed, and only 7% strongly agreed.

Figure 30

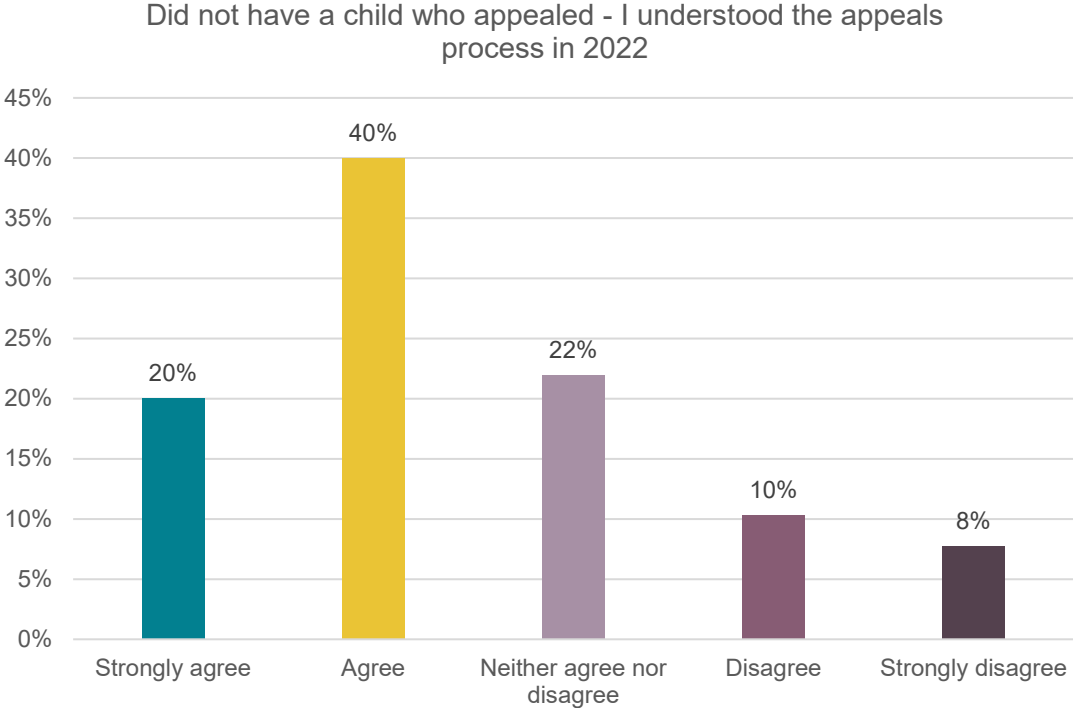


Of those respondents who have a child who had submitted an appeal in 2022, 91% reported that their child had received the results of all their appeals, 9% said that they had not.

Those respondents who said that they did not have a child who had submitted an appeal in 2022 were asked if they knew that their child or children’s results could be appealed if they did not achieve their estimates; 91% said they did know, 9% said they did not.

Those respondents who said that they did not have a child who had submitted an appeal in 2022 were asked if they had understood the appeals process in 2022; 60% agreed or strongly agreed that they did, 22% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 18% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

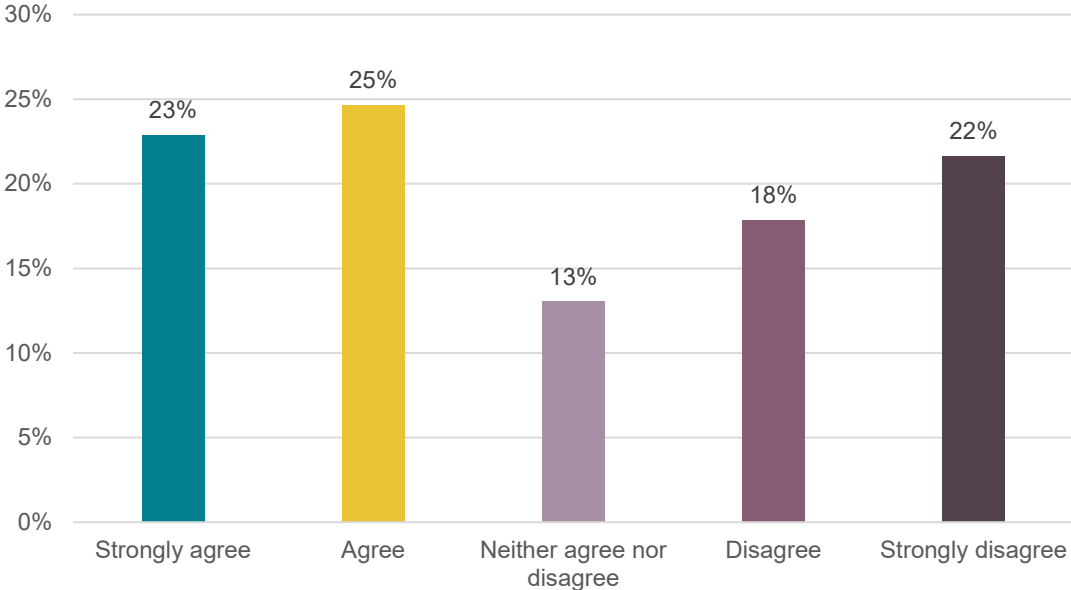
Figure 31



All respondents were then asked to what extent they agreed that having an appeals process in place in 2022 provided a safety net for learners who had suffered severe disruption to learning. Responses were split, with 48% agreeing or strongly agreeing, 39% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing, and 13% neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

Figure 32

Having an appeals process in 2022 provided a safety net for learners who had suffered severe disruption to learning during 2021–22



Key things to consider in an appeals system

Parents and carers were asked about the key things that SQA needs to consider in designing a future appeals system; 372 respondents submitted comments.

Communication

A persistent view was that communication around appeals needed to be better. This covered a number of areas. The need for clear guidance, for example on what types of evidence were acceptable and on which extenuating circumstances would be considered, was highlighted repeatedly.

Some parents and carers thought the appeals process was too slow and called for a quicker decision-making process, especially for those learners with early university application deadlines.

Another common view was that there needed to be feedback on the reasons for unsuccessful appeals — not simply notification that the appeal had been unsuccessful. A number of respondents also felt that outcomes should be communicated directly to learners, rather than via their centres.

There was also a view among parents and carers that the appeals process was not implemented in the way expected from communications about it.

The initial documentation the SQA put out was extremely misleading. Students were led to believe they would be awarded the higher mark out of the result on the exam script or the teacher's estimate. Why in 70% of cases did this NOT happen?

Alternative evidence

A very common view was that more weight needs to be given when determining final grades to learners' coursework from across the academic year and to teacher evidence, rather than decisions being based principally on exam results.

If a child is working regularly throughout the year at A standard, according to their teacher, yet received a D grade in an exam then something is not right.

Individual circumstances

Respondents felt that more consideration needed to be given to the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic — both the disruption to learners in 2022 and the disruption that, in their view, would likely continue into the future. Mention was made of the difficulties of online learning, teacher absences, and disruption to face-to-face learning. Moreover, some respondents suggested that different types of disruption are common and need to be considered in any year, not just in a year affected by a pandemic.

A related view was that the appeals process should be more cognisant of learners' individual circumstances — such as ill health, family bereavements, and other personal issues — and how these can affect examination performance.

Another recurring viewpoint was that the appeals system should have given more consideration to the fact that, for many learners, 2022 was their first experience of formal exams. In addition, respondents felt the system should be more mindful of the stress and anxiety that exams can cause learners and how this can affect performance.

Fairness

Related to the theme above, many parent and carer respondents felt that, in general, the appeals system should be fairer and more consistent across all subjects, for all learners, and for all centre types. There was a perception from some respondents that appeals are variable across subjects, in that some subjects awarded higher numbers of successful appeals than others.

When discussing the fairness of appeals, other factors mentioned by respondents were the evidence requirements for appeals; eligibility to appeal; the cost of appeals; the quality or consistency of marking; and subject-specific issues. There was a consensus that appeals should be free of charge.

A more specific view was that fairness should extend to those who do not perform well in exams. Respondents felt the system should be fairer to those who provide strong evidence and that the body of evidence should not be limited to just the prelim exam.

Suggested changes

When discussing changes needed to the appeals system, parent and carer respondents mentioned a number of factors. It was generally felt that the process should be easier to use and that evidence requirements need to change.

On this latter point, views were mixed. Some felt that inappropriate evidence had been submitted in 2022 and that there needed to be a common standard for evidence provided. Others felt that appeals were based too much on prelims.

Other concerns about the system were: the fear of being downgraded after an appeal, which was perceived as off-putting and unfair; that the system needs to be more learner-centric; and that more consideration of disabled learners and/or those with ASN is required.

Appeals could be more understanding about neurodiversity.

Having a process of knowing children who have additional needs, mental ill health/impact of trauma and...making adjustments for those children.

It is possible that some parents and carers may not be fully aware of the assessment arrangements process and how this makes adjustments to assessments to ensure that disabled learners and/or those with ASN are not disadvantaged.

What worked?

Some parent and carer respondents felt that having a process at all was good, and it was described as a safety net against disruption and something that should exist every year. Another view was that no changes were required to the 2022 system; it should remain the same going forward. Other relevant, though less widespread, views were that the guidance was helpful, that the estimate system had improved, and that the system had been fair.

Other appeals comments

Over 200 parents and carers provided an answer when asked if they had any other comments to make about the appeals process in 2022.

The main themes emerging from the comments were:

- ◆ The appeals process in 2022 was unfair, with four key reasons identified:
 - Appeal outcomes did not reflect the evidence provided
 - There were discrepancies between the guidance issued and the actual appeals process
 - Disruption caused by the pandemic was not taken into account
 - The assessment model and appeals process should consider more than just exam results

- ◆ The appeals process should be more transparent and post-appeal feedback is central to this

Fairness

Many respondents made general comments expressing dissatisfaction with the 2022 appeals approach and the perceived unfairness of the process. However, the majority of comments under this theme related to appeal outcomes not being reflective of the evidence and estimated grades provided as part of the appeals process.

Parents and carers reported feelings of anger and disappointment that evidence appears to have been ignored, resulting in appeals being rejected, particularly when they were led to believe it would be considered.

I could not be more disappointed or dissatisfied with the appeals process and decision making. My child missed a B grade by one mark and was awarded a C. They were predicted an A grade and consistently produced A grade work though the year... yet their appeal was unsuccessful. How can this be justified?

Respondents highlighted that early communication about the appeals process suggested it would provide a safety net for learners, taking into account school evidence, predicted grades, and prelim results. Parents and carers were then left confused when appeals were rejected even though they appeared to meet the criteria set out by SQA.

Consequently, respondents felt that the guidance had been misleading and had unfairly raised expectations that an appeal was likely to be successful if the school provided suitable evidence to support a higher grade. Indeed, a number of parents and carers emphasised the significant impact on learners of having their hopes raised and then being left disappointed and demoralised, with some stating that the process in 2022 had failed learners who had already suffered enough as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I feel that the process this year didn't follow the SQA's own guidance. Both her school and myself are struggling to understand why her appeal was unsuccessful given that she met all the criteria for a successful appeal according to SQA's own guidance.

The whole promise was a complete lie to children [whose] futures depend on these results and who have battled through severe covid disruption only to be let down by a system they were told was [there] to protect them.

Respondents thought that the appeals process should have taken into account the significant disruption caused to learners by the pandemic, such as periods of home learning, no prior experience of examinations, and resulting mental health issues, which they did not believe it had.

A number of parents and carers also identified that the assessment model itself is intrinsically unfair as exams are not the best method of assessment for many learners. An assessment model and appeals system that considers more than just exam results, such as the results of continuous assessment, was thought to be fairer for learners.

Transparency

Respondents proposed that the appeals process should be more transparent and interactive. Suggestions included:

- ◆ Offering online and offline options for an appeal
- ◆ Providing updates on the progress of an appeal
- ◆ Providing a named contact for any queries relating to an appeal

However, the most consistently reported suggestion was that SQA should provide post-appeal feedback, to increase transparency and, as a result, fairness in the appeals process. Parents and carers reported being left baffled by unsuccessful appeal outcomes, along with learners and practitioners, yet had no way of finding out the reasons for the decisions.

It will take my daughter - and us as a family - a long time to put this cruel, unfair system behind us. After relying on teachers' opinions for the last two years, you have completely disregarded them this year. How can teachers at school mark a folio piece 14/15 but the SQA marks it 9/15, but then says they won't comment on individual appeals? The SQA has no accountability for the damage inflicted on young people by this unfair system and casually destroys young people's lives, with no consequence. There should be far more transparency about the appeals process.

Respondents claimed that an explanation of how appeals decisions were reached is necessary for various reasons, including:

- ◆ To support learners' mental health – it is unfair to have no explanation as to why an appeal was rejected when the evidence suggested otherwise
- ◆ Feedback is important for learners to understand how to improve
- ◆ Feedback is important for schools to identify if the evidence provided was sufficient
- ◆ To ensure SQA is accountable and to increase trust in the system

Timescales and communication

Parents and carers raised two other notable issues with the appeals process in 2022. Firstly, the turnaround time of appeal results was thought to be too long, with some highlighting that this could impact university places and subject progression or re-sits at school.

Secondly, respondents called for better information on the appeals process. Linking with the transparency theme above, parents and carers stated that it should have been made much clearer what evidence should be submitted for an appeal and what evidence was actually going to be taken into account when an appeal was considered.

If 30% of appeals were successful it means 70% were not. Therefore, the evidence provided by the vast majority of teachers was inconsequential, ignored and not valued. If this is the position moving forward be honest about it to teachers, parents but most importantly our young people.

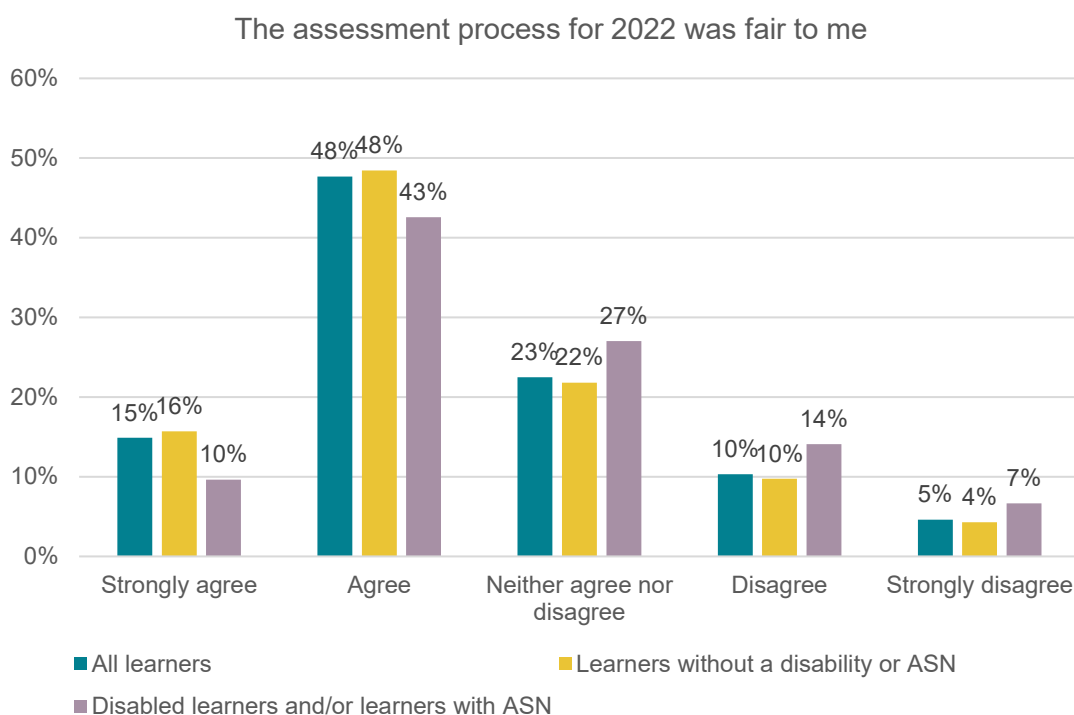
A number of parents and carers also expressed a desire to be more involved in the appeals process, with some reporting that they knew nothing about the process. Some specifically mentioned having received poor support and communication from their child's school. However, it should be noted that a small number of respondents did comment on the clear communication they had received regarding the appeals process.

8 Overall approach to assessment

Learners were asked the extent to which they agreed with a series of statements on the overall approach to assessment in 2022.

While 63% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the assessment process in 2022 had been fair to them, 23% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 15% disagreed or strongly disagreed. The chi-squared test revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between the views of disabled learners and/or those with ASN and learners without a disability or ASN. This is explored further below.

Figure 33



$$\chi^2(4) = 17.38, p = 0.001$$

Table 10 Standardised residuals for *The assessment process for 2022 was fair to me*

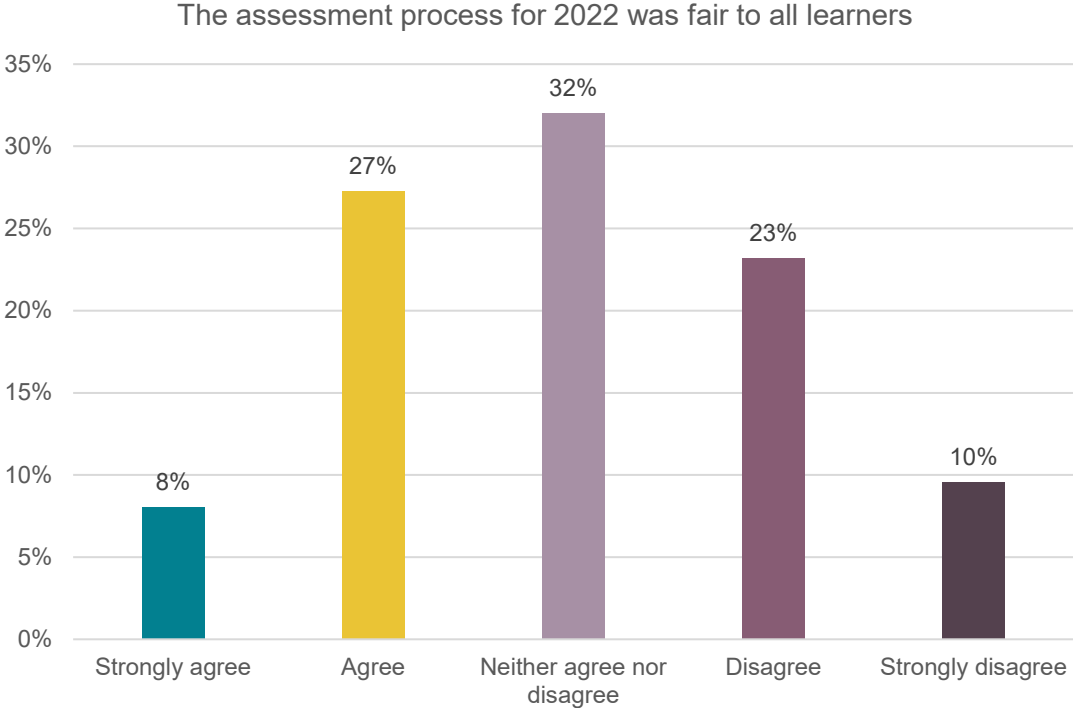
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Learner without a disability or ASN or prefer not to say	0.88	0.47	-0.61	-0.75	-0.61
Disabled learner or learners with ASN	-2.24	-1.21	1.57	1.92	1.57

Inspection of the standardised residuals suggests significance is being driven by fewer disabled learners or learners with ASN selecting 'Strongly agree' than expected by chance. The overall pattern of standardised residuals suggests disabled learners or learners with

ASN are less likely to select either 'Strongly agree' or 'Agree' than expected by chance overall, and more likely to select either 'Neither agree nor disagree', 'Disagree', or 'Strongly disagree' than chance would predict.

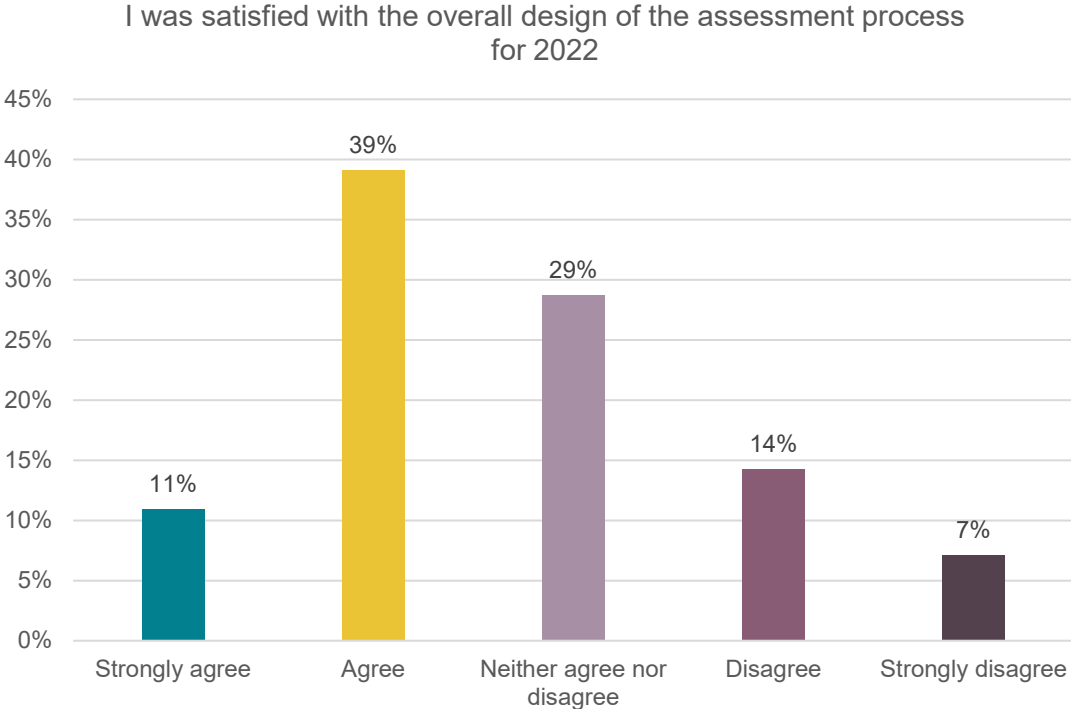
Learners were asked the extent to which they agreed with the statement the assessment process for 2022 was fair to all learners (rather than to them as individuals, as above); 35% agreed or strongly agreed, 32% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 33% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 34



Half of learners agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the overall design of the assessment process for 2022, 29% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 21% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 35



9 Comparison of 2021 and 2022

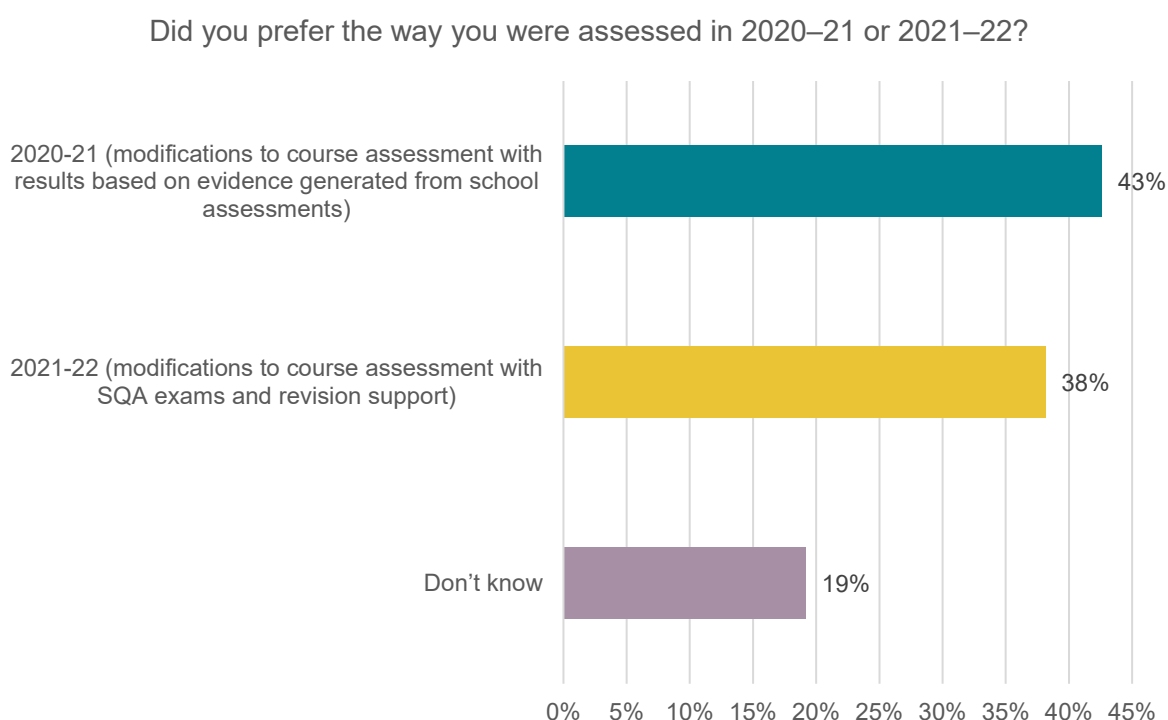
Learner respondents were asked if they were entered for National Qualifications courses in both 2020–21 and 2021–22; 58% said they were and 42% said they were not.

Those who had been entered for National Qualifications courses in both years were then asked a series of questions comparing the approaches.

Preference

Overall, 43% of these learners said that they preferred the way they were assessed in 2020–21 (modifications to course assessment with results based on evidence generated from school assessments) and 38% said that they preferred the way they were assessed in 2021–22 (modifications to course assessment with SQA exams and revision support). However, almost a fifth said that they did not know which approach they preferred.

Figure 36



When asked why they had chosen the approach they did, 587 learners (95 of whom were disabled learners and/or had ASN) responded to a question asking them to explain their preference. These explanations are explored in the following sections. Of those 587 learners who responded, 53% preferred the 2020–21 approach, 42% preferred 2021–22, and 5% said they did not know.

Preferred 2020–21

Of those who said they preferred the 2020–21 approach to assessment, around half said that basing the approach on a number of assessments made it fairer for learners, and more accurately reflected their knowledge and learning throughout the year. There was comment on the consistency of assessments taking place throughout the academic year, which

encouraged ongoing learning and mitigated loss of learning as a result of disruptions experienced due to COVID-19.

It shows a fair and consistent evaluation of the work over the course of the year.

Takes into account how the individual performs all year long. Individual may have stress at home/other concerns that may affect the final exam. Tests throughout the year show how consistent the individual is in working.

The assessment process was much more fair and considerate on the challenges faced by young people during COVID.

On a similar theme, a considerable number of learners, including those who are disabled and/or have an ASN, who preferred the 2020–21 approach did so because of the reduction in stress of ongoing assessments, compared with a single high-stakes end-of-year exam. Respondents commented on the potential of having a bad day, making mistakes, and not being on top form as factors contributing to exam stress. Disabled learners and/or those with an ASN also mentioned that the 2021–21 approach allowed them to better demonstrate what they have learned across smaller assessments rather than a final 'big' exam.

SQA exams only allow the people who can deal with stress to succeed rather than people who could and should pass the exam.

Was less stressful and evidence was gathered across the year and not a single day which could go drastically wrong.

A smaller number of respondents, including those who are disabled and/or have an ASN, who preferred the 2020–21 approach appreciated the role of their teachers in the assessment process, noting the importance of teaching staff awareness of learner performance and achievement throughout the year.

Allows a more appropriate grade to be assigned by the people that actually know the candidate.

My final grade wasn't all down to the one exam day, and teacher estimates were good as they've seen me all year in class and know how I've been working.

The reason I prefer the 2020–21 is because my teachers had a good understanding of the level I was working at.

A small number of learners who said that they preferred the 2020–21 approach did so because they believed it was easier to provide evidence with ongoing assessments, whilst others thought it was easier to achieve the grades they wanted with a number of opportunities to do well across a range of assessments for each subject.

Preferred 2021–22

A smaller proportion of learners preferred the 2021–22 approach to that used in 2020–21. Around a third of those who submitted comments on why they preferred 2021–22 said it was less stressful, primarily due to there being fewer continuous assessments. Learners,

including those with ASN, considered the pressure of increased workload due to ongoing assessments as contributing to greater levels of stress, compared with a single end of year exam, where they were given time to prepare and study in advance with revision support.

Continual assessment is very stressful. Exams are fairer.

Less stressful for us students, you had time to revise at home or in school, and could prioritise the ones you needed to, and you weren't being assessed every period like in 2020–21.

Although a result based on year-round performance felt logical, I preferred being able to refine and prepare myself for a single end-of-course exam where I could show my best effort regardless of early-course struggles.

A substantial number of respondents preferred the 2021–22 approach as they believed it was a more reliable and fair way of assessing knowledge and skills. Learners mentioned the fairness of a consistent, externally marked approach across all schools, where they are all judged to the same standard.

More fair and systematic.

It was more fair across the board as everyone sitting that exam got their results based on the same assessment.

It made my exams actually worth something rather than the easiness previous years during covid had it with estimated grades.

Similarly, respondents, including those with ASN, commented on the robustness and credibility of the results with the 2021–22 approach, with fewer opportunities to 'game' the system.

I prefer this approach because I believe it to be less subject to bias and cheating.

Lots of people in 2020-2021 cheated on their assessments, so when they went to do the exam in 2021-2022, they didn't know anything.

Exams were leaked over social media in 2021. This was very unfair. Formal exams [are] more fair as all schools [are] on [an] even playing field.

A number of respondents commented positively on the modifications and revision support included in the 2021–22 diet, which provided them with study guidance and made the formal exam process not only more manageable, but also helped with knowledge gaps.

The SQA was fair with the exams and the modifications helped with certain subjects.

I felt I was more supported.

I felt the extra advice given was really helpful when preparing for exams.

A smaller number of respondents highlighted the importance of gaining experience of sitting end-of-year exams. It was suggested that the formal process helped learners prepare for further study.

It allowed for students to gain experience of how to take exams.

It prepared me for university life and gave me the ability to push myself further.

In a similar vein, a small number of respondents commented on the value of returning to a 'normal year of study' in 2021–22, with fewer disruptions and changes to the standard academic approach to assessments as happened in the 2020–21 approach.

Exams that were national made it more like previous years.

I preferred this approach, because as we reinstated the normal school protocol for returning back to normal post pandemic. I believe that we should go back to how the exams were.

A few of the respondents noted that the 2021–22 approach was easier for them compared with the 2020–21 approach; the reasons they gave included study leave, more structure throughout the year, and greater clarity as to what was expected of learners.

It was explained more clearly.

Because it was easier and not complicated.

We got exam leave and time to prepare for our exams rather than having multiple assessments and constantly revising throughout the year.

Don't know

Very few learners who said they did not know which approach they preferred left reasons as to why.

Some noted that both approaches were stressful.

Both were good but I think having the actual exams added a lot more unnecessary stress than the year of just assessments but having more continual assessments at random points was also very stressful.

I felt stressed either way.

Others commented positively on both approaches and were unable to decide which they preferred.

I liked the school assessments approach as you have to work consistently well throughout the year (2020–21). But I liked the exam environment in 2021–22.

Stress

Overall, learners reported that the 2021–22 approach was more stressful than the 2020–21 approach had been. The chi-squared tests looking at the results for both the 2020–21 and 2021–22 approaches revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between the views of disabled learners and/or those with ASN and learners without a disability or ASN. This is explored further below.

- ◆ 42% stated that the 2020–21 approach was stressful or very stressful, compared to 67% who said that the 2021–22 approach was stressful or very stressful.
- ◆ 31% said that the 2020–21 approach was somewhat stressful, compared to 24% who suggested the same about the 2021–22 approach.
- ◆ 26% said that the 2020–21 approach was not very stressful or not stressful at all, compared to 8% who said the same about the 2021–22 approach.

Figure 37

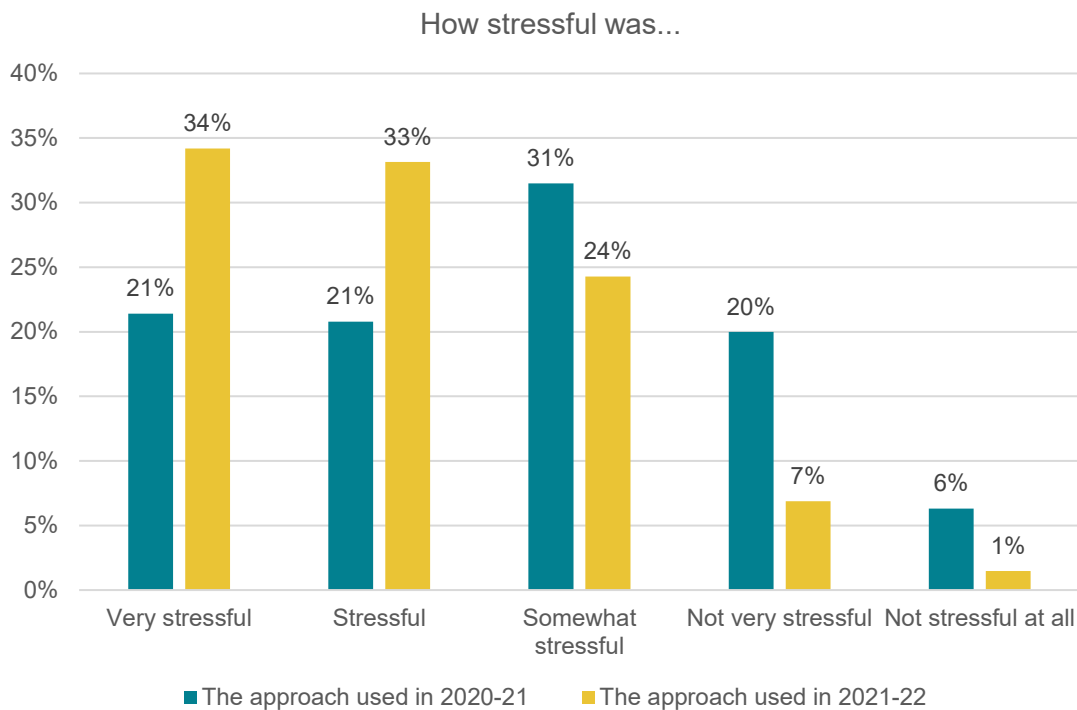
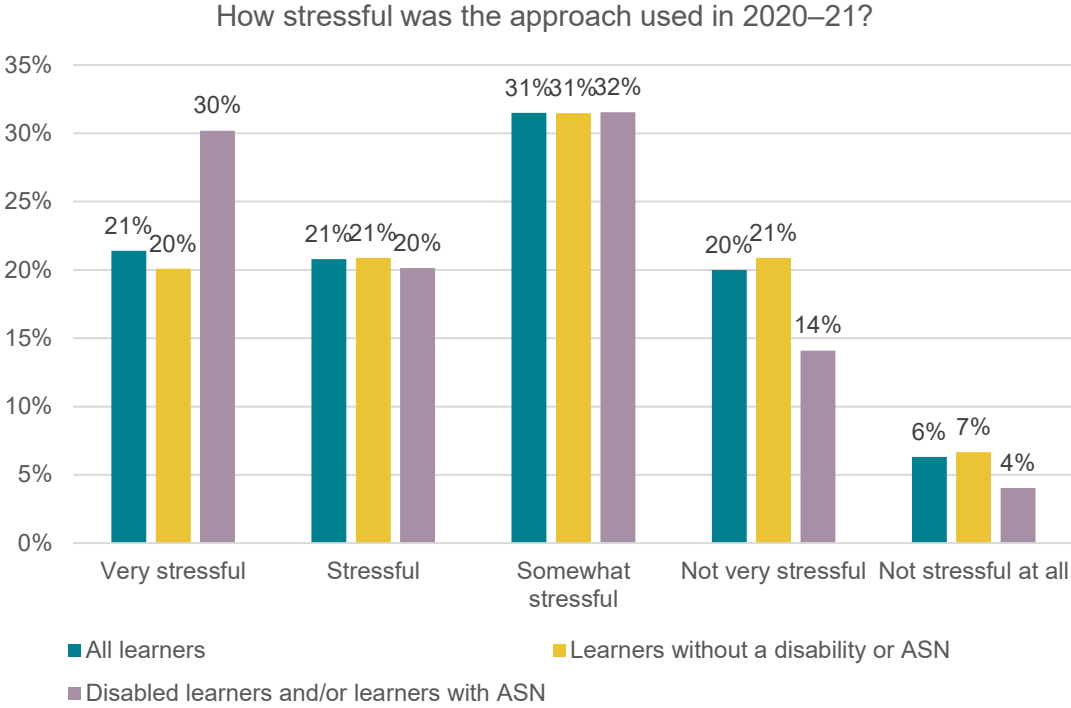


Figure 38



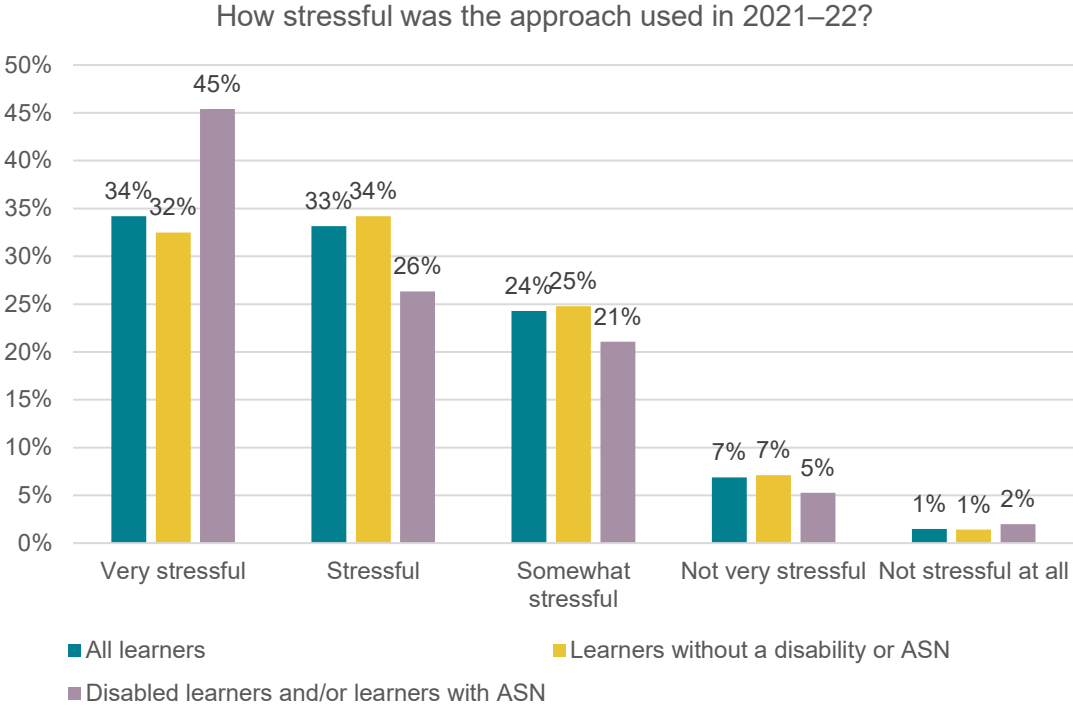
$\chi^2(4) = 10.65, p = 0.03$

Table 11 Standardised residuals for *How stressful was the approach used in 2020–21?*

	Very stressful	Stressful	Somewhat stressful	Not very stressful	Not stressful at all
Learner without a disability or ASN or prefer not to say	-0.90	0.07	0.00	0.63	0.43
Disabled learner or learners with ASN	2.32	-0.18	0.01	-1.61	-1.11

Inspection of the standardised residuals suggests significance is being driven by disabled learners or learners with ASN being more likely to select ‘Very stressful’ than expected by chance. The overall pattern of standardised residuals further suggests that disabled learners or learners with ASN are less likely to select ‘Not very stressful’ or ‘Not stressful at all’ than chance would predict, but these effects are not in themselves significant.

Figure 39



$\chi^2(4)=10.59, p=0.03$

Table 12 Standard residuals for *How stressful was the approach used in 2021–22?*

	Very stressful	Stressful	Somewhat stressful	Not very stressful	Not stressful at all
Learner without a disability or ASN or prefer not to say	-0.92	0.57	0.32	0.30	-0.20
Disabled learner or learners with ASN	2.36	-1.47	-0.81	-0.76	0.50

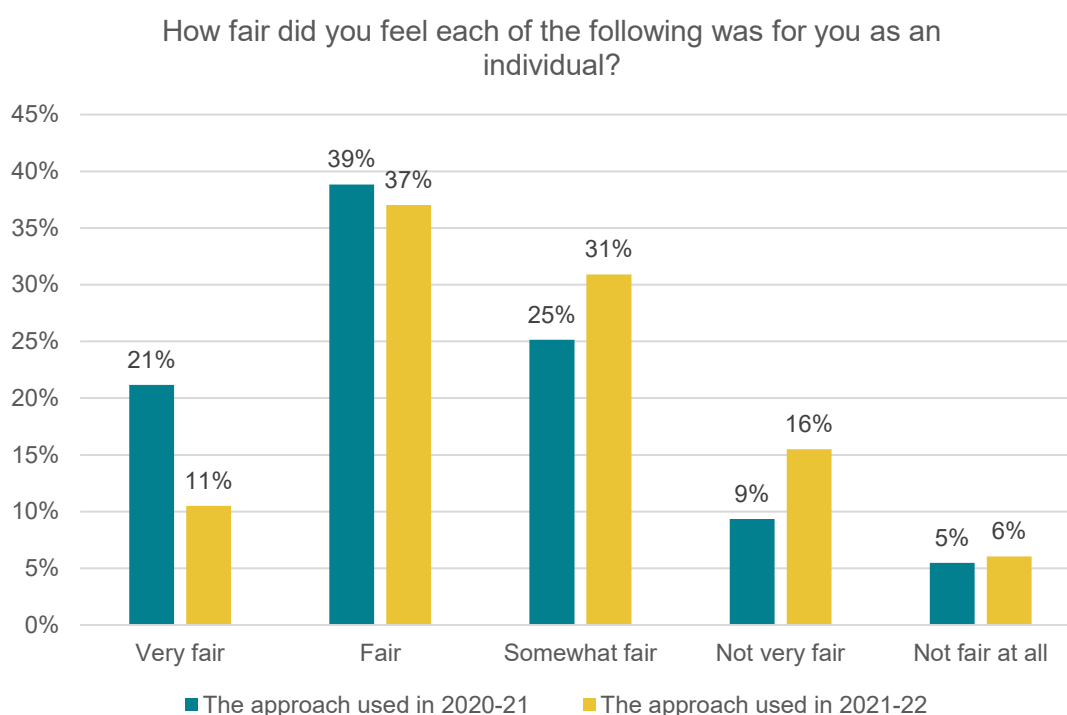
Inspection of the standardised residuals suggests significance is being driven by more disabled learners or learners with ASN selecting ‘Very stressful’ than expected by chance. The overall pattern of standardised residuals further suggests that disabled learners or learners with ASN are less likely to select ‘Stressful’ than chance would predict, although this is not in itself significant.

Fairness

When asked about how fair they felt the different approaches were to them as an individual:

- ◆ 21% thought the 2020–21 approach was very fair, compared to 11% who thought the same about the 2021–22 approach.
- ◆ 39% thought the 2020–21 approach was fair, compared to 37% who thought the 2021–22 approach was fair.
- ◆ 25% thought the 2020–21 approach was somewhat fair and 31% thought the 2021–22 approach was somewhat fair.
- ◆ 9% said that the 2020–21 approach was not very fair, compared to 16% who said the same about the 2021–22 approach.
- ◆ 5% thought the 2020–21 approach was not fair at all and 6% thought the 2021–22 approach was not fair at all.

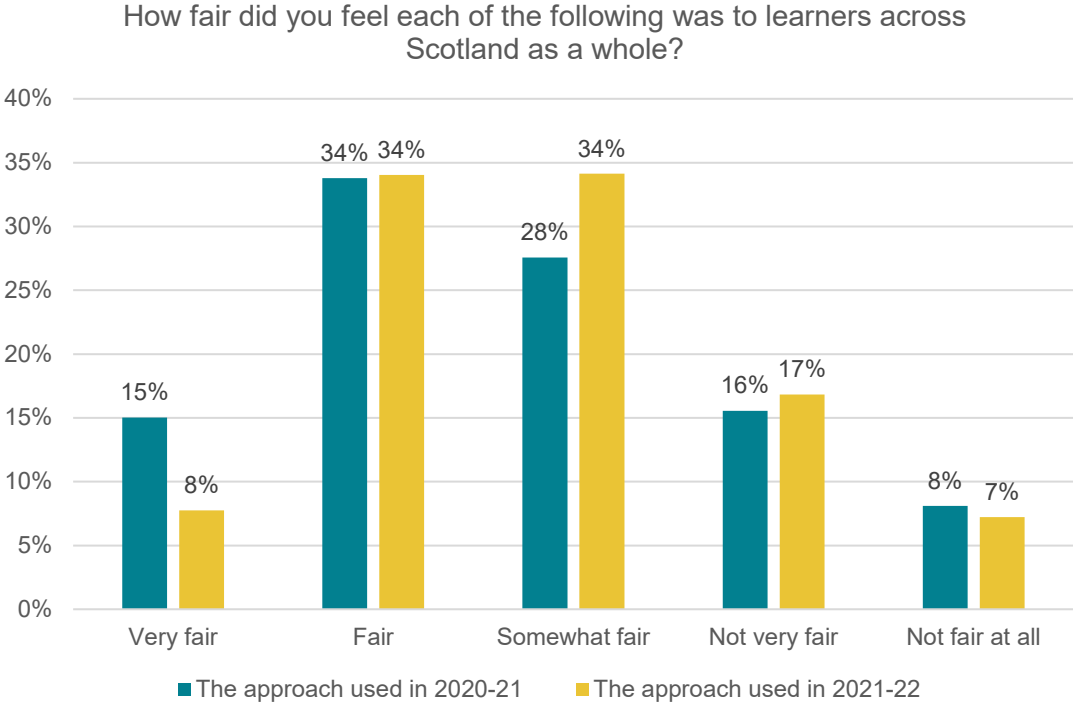
Figure 40



Learners were also asked about how fair the different approaches were to learners across Scotland as a whole. Across both years, learners were less likely to think the approaches were very fair or fair when looking at learners across Scotland as a whole, rather than from an individual point of view.

- ◆ 15% thought the 2020–21 approach was very fair, compared to 8% who thought the same about the 2021–22 approach.
- ◆ 34% thought the 2020–21 approach was fair and the same proportion thought the 2021–22 approach was fair.
- ◆ 28% thought the 2020–21 approach was somewhat fair and 34% thought the 2021–22 approach was somewhat fair.
- ◆ 16% said that the 2020–21 approach was not very fair, compared to 17% who said the same about the 2021–22 approach.
- ◆ 8% thought the 2020–21 approach was not fair at all and 7% thought the 2021–22 approach was not fair at all.

Figure 41

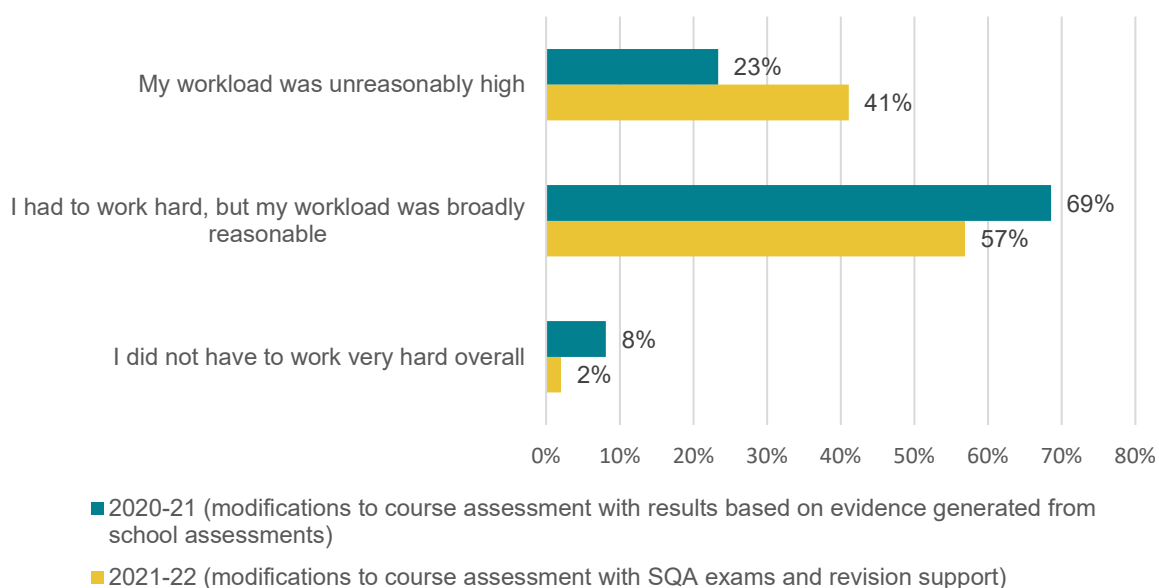


Workload

Learners were asked about their workload across the two years. While 23% of respondents thought that their workload was unreasonably high in 2020–21, 41% thought the same about 2021–22. Meanwhile, 69% of learners thought their workload was reasonable in 2020–21, compared to 57% who said the same about 2021–22. Finally, 8% of respondents said that they did not have to work very hard in 2020–21, compared to 2% who said the same about 2021–22.

Figure 42

Thinking about the National Qualifications courses you were studying in each year, please select the statement that you think best describes your overall workload in...



Learner interviews

During interview, learner participants were asked to compare their experiences of and opinions on the different approaches to assessment taken in 2021 and 2022. Questions covered the relative advantages and disadvantages of the different approaches and how fair, stressful, and rigorous learners thought them.

Fairness

While some participants thought that the 2021 alternative certification model (ACM) was a fairer approach, more frequently learners thought that the 2022 approach was fairer. These different viewpoints generally reflected the two different aspects of fairness — for individuals and across the whole cohort of learners.

Those learners who thought that the 2021 approach was fairer did so because it took into account the disruption that learners had faced and gave learners a second chance, if necessary.

Like the driver's test, you know... you don't just get one and then you're told 'wait a year', you can like you can take it as many times as you want until you pass it.

On the other hand, several participants thought that the 2022 approach was fairer because, in contrast to the diverse models used across centres in 2021, everyone undertook the same assessment under the same conditions.

We all sat the same paper, we all sat at the same time, and it was fair.

You know that everyone across Scotland has sat this exam, and you know it's fair.

A number of participants were concerned about the inconsistencies inherent in the 2021 ACM and their effect on fairness. Moreover, several also highlighted what they saw as apparent grade inflation as a result.

[Other schools' experiences were] not as controlled as ours was, so I think it was a little bit unfair because they were getting to see their papers and ... and we had to do it like a real exam, so maybe they were getting grades that they didn't work as hard for as we did.

I just feel like people get grades that they maybe shouldn't have.

I would say for me personally ... I would say the grade that I got was probably more because of the system of being able to pick and choose the test I did the best in.

Nonetheless, a couple of learners did recognise the tensions between the different concepts of fairness.

2022 isn't necessarily fair for everyone because some people don't perform very well in exams, but at least everyone's in the same sort of situation, so it's fairer in that respect.

Stress

Participants' views on how stressful the different approaches were varied. Several learners suggested that the lack of one high-stakes exam in 2021 reduced stress and enabled learners to produce their best evidence, with the support of their teachers.

I was less stressed; the anxiety wasn't quite there as much because I knew they could submit whichever bit of assessment blocks that ... gave me the best grade.

There wasn't a lot of pressure put onto it and teachers were angling to get you the best grade possible.

Moreover, those learners who found the 2022 approach stressful emphasised that they had never sat external exams before, and this increased pressure.

Having one exam, it's a lot more pressure and it's quite stressful as well, especially if you haven't done them really before.

On the other hand, those who found the 2022 approach less stressful than 2021's generally framed this in terms of the over-assessment of 2021. A number of participants suggested that facing one high-stakes exam was preferable to having a number of different assessments for each subject in a short space of time without study leave, as happened in 2021.

I realised that I would I'd much rather get it all done in a single day than have it spread out across multiple days.

The perceived lack of clarity about the approach was also thought to have increased stress around the 2021 model. A couple of participants stated that they thought the ACM approach may have been less stressful without the uncertainties around COVID-19 disruption, but, as it was, learners felt unprepared and that assessments were sprung on them at the last minute.

I suppose the main thing is the uncertainty wasn't great. We didn't really know what was going on.

Assessment method

Discussions with learners revealed conflicting perspectives on assessment methods. A number of interview participants suggested that they preferred the way they were assessed in 2021 because it took into account a wider, more holistic range of evidence, including coursework, rather than relying on a single high-stakes exam. A small number of learners also mentioned the flexibility of the model and appreciated being able to take assessments more than once.

I quite liked how they were done in 2021 being that ... it wasn't one big exam that you had to do well in the exam or that would be you.

As a result, these learners believed that the 2021 ACM was both less stressful and a better reflection of ability.

Conversely, several learners thought a benefit of the 2022 approach was the re-introduction of exams. This was thought beneficial for several reasons, including that learners thought they had missed out on the exam experience in 2020 and 2021, that exam experience would be useful for progression, that exams add credibility to results, that national exams are fairer, and that the return of more conventional approaches to assessment brought certainty and clarity.

There wasn't a wee extra test to get them that grade or a wee extra test to give them another chance. These are my results, and this is what I've got.

The feeling that you're back to normal and when I get my results card, the feeling that I did an exam, and I did it normally and I have earned these results.

That's what always been expected of us for our entire lives that ... we'd sit our SQA exams in that sort of style.

We knew we were going to sit exams from the very start of the year, we knew when the exams were ... You could be totally prepared for that.

Rigour

While a number of participants thought that the 2021 approach was a more effective and rigorous test of skills and knowledge, because it allowed learners to fully demonstrate what they knew and could do, more thought that the 2022 approach was a more effective and rigorous assessment of skills and knowledge. Comments on why this was the case were relatively limited, but these learners thought an unseen examination was a more effective and fairer way to gauge learner knowledge.

2021 was quite effective because I could definitely demonstrate what I knew and I could do that in a way that worked very well and my teachers knew me already very well and they could take my work and they could judge that and they could send away what they needed to send away which feels like they were taking a better view of what my work was like as a person, so like they knew what my ability was and they had evidence for that.

[The 2022 approach was better] because it was being marked by the SQA. There were no teachers making things up for other kids or changing their grades...We kind of did that too...they took our best critical essay, our best textual analysis and everything. The SQA wasn't going to do that for us.

Other

A small number of learners thought that a drawback of the 2021 process was that it demotivated learners. They thought that learners did not take internal assessments as seriously as they would SQA exams. Furthermore, some thought that learners became fatigued by the number of assessments they had in a short timeframe in 2021.

Other perceived advantages of the 2022 approach highlighted by a number of learners were the appeals process and modifications and revision support. The 2022 appeals process was appreciated as a safety net and some learners thought that modifications to course assessment and revision support offered support and enabled focused learning and revision.