



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

Learner and Practitioner Experiences

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Introduction

This report sets out the outcomes of SQA’s research into learner and practitioner experiences of the 2022 approach to assessment in Graded National Courses. The 2021–22 session saw formal external assessment re-introduced for SQA’s National Qualifications at National 5, Higher, and Advanced Higher, after two years of COVID-19 disruption. Despite this, circumstances in 2021–22 remained challenging across the country and disruption resulting from COVID continued to affect learners and practitioners in different — and unequal — ways. As such, SQA provided a significant package of support for learners undertaking National 5, Higher, and Advanced Higher course assessments in the 2021–22 session.

This research forms part of SQA’s evaluation of how the 2022 approach to National Qualifications assessment operated in practice. It aims to understand the experience of the 2022 assessment approach from the perspective of learners and practitioners. Its findings provide a record of the reflections of learners and practitioners of these specific experiences and, in the context of reform, offer considerations for the future of Scotland’s qualifications and assessment system in the senior phase.

SQA is extremely grateful to SQA co-ordinators, learners, practitioners, and parents and carers for their assistance with this research.

Context

At the beginning of the academic session 2021–22, the Scottish Government confirmed a return to formal external assessment for National Qualifications at National 5. This came after two years of COVID-19 pandemic disruption, which had required the introduction of certification models based on alternative approaches to assessment.

The 2021 alternative certification model (ACM) was based on demonstrated attainment. Teachers and lecturers collected evidence of learning and skills before using their professional judgement to determine provisional grades for their learners. It was designed and adopted to support learning, teaching and assessment following the Scottish Government's decision to cancel exams on public health grounds during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our evaluation of the 2021 ACM is available on [our website](#).

In 2021–22, the environment for formal external assessments remained challenging and uncertain for learners and for teachers and lecturers. SQA worked in close partnership with the National Qualifications 2022 Working and Strategic Groups, and with stakeholders across the system, to develop a significant package of support for learners undertaking National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher course assessments. This package was multifaceted and designed to help teachers, lecturers, and learners address loss of teaching and learning in the session 2021–22 and previous years, and to support them during periods of ongoing disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was also designed to provide flexibility to deal with a variety of different developments, up to and including a need to cancel external assessments should the public health situation require it.

Developing the 2022 approach

The overall package of support for learners, including the approach to standards, was developed in partnership with a range of stakeholders, with the groups that had informed our approach to assessment in 2020–21 continuing to meet and to provide the key source of ongoing advice to SQA. Internal and external engagement meetings were held in September and October 2021 to explore the unique challenges that awarding bodies faced in relation to standards and outcomes. The views of sector stakeholders, including learners, were gathered to help inform SQA's approach for 2022.

This feedback was essential in helping to guide the decision-making process around planning for awarding. Several options were explored, and following discussion with stakeholders, it was agreed that a balance needed to be achieved between supporting learners and ensuring qualifications remained valued and credible. The importance of ensuring fairness to all learners remained at the centre of the discussions.

The overall policy position that was adopted was informed by the views of stakeholders and learners. It was also discussed with members of the National Qualifications 2022 working and strategic groups, and SQA's Advisory Council and Qualifications Committee, before it was endorsed by the SQA Board of Management.

Setting and maintaining assessment and qualifications standards is a crucial part of any education system, but it sits within a wider context of learning and teaching and curriculum choices at a local and centre level. Through a range of measures, SQA took steps to

address the widespread disruption to learning and teaching in 2021–22 caused by the pandemic.

Package of support measures

In 2022, for National Qualifications, Scotland returned to formal national assessments (exams and coursework). This was supported by a package of measures, as well as wider support from across the education system at a national, regional, local, and school and college level.

The package of support included:

- ◆ Modifications to course assessment, building on the approach taken in 2021. Generally, the modifications were designed to help reduce the volume of assessment and ease teacher, lecturer, and learner workload, creating space for teaching and learning while maintaining the credibility of the qualifications. This was achieved through a range of measures to best fit with the established assessment approach for each subject, such as increased optionality, the removal of course components in some subjects, reducing the volume of evidence to be submitted in coursework, or providing advanced notice of topics that would/would not be assessed. Overall, this aimed to increase opportunities and time for learning and teaching with a view to supporting educational recovery.
- ◆ Revision support, published in March 2022. This made a range of resources available to learners ahead of exams, to help them make the most of their revision time.
- ◆ A more generous approach to grading than in a normal year to allow for the impact of the pandemic on learners when determining grade boundaries, while ensuring fairness and maintaining standards and credibility of qualifications.
- ◆ An Examination Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service for 2022, based on the service previously operated by SQA but with eligibility adjusted to cover COVID-related disruption for learners who were required to self-isolate or stay at home on the day of the exam.
- ◆ A free-of-charge appeals service to allow learners who were eligible (or their representatives) to request an independent review of alternative evidence of demonstrated attainment directly to SQA, or through their school, college, or training provider.
- ◆ More information is available in the [National Qualifications 2022 Awarding — Methodology Report](#).
- ◆ Equality and Children’s Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessments were completed on the arrangements for assessing National Qualifications in 2022. More information is available on [our website](#).

Research methodology

Evaluation approach

This research was split into two separate phases.

Firstly, we surveyed learners and practitioners. The survey was split into sections corresponding to the various parts of the 2022 assessment diet that learners and practitioners experienced: communication about the approach, teaching and learning, modifications to course assessment, revision support, the examination exceptional circumstances consideration service (EECCS), appeals, and the overall approach to assessment. Survey responses were obtained from schools and colleges across all parts of Scotland.

We also surveyed parents and carers of S4 to S6 learners on their views about 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.

Secondly, in-depth interviews were carried out with learners and practitioners, which allowed for a deeper exploration of key topics. Interviews were also held with disabled learners and/or those with an additional support need (ASN) to better understand their experiences of the 2022 approach to assessment. Additional topics, not covered in the surveys and which could be understood more effectively by discussing them in greater detail, were also covered in the interviews.

In total, survey responses were received from 2056 learners (of whom 277 identified as being disabled and/or as having an ASN) and 1029 practitioners from schools and colleges across Scotland. We also received survey responses from 501 parents and carers. A total of 40 in-depth interviews were carried out with learners and practitioners. Four interviews were held with disabled learners and/or those with an ASN.

Public sector equality duty

The Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) requires SQA to have due regard to the need to:

- ◆ eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Equality Act (2010)
- ◆ advance equality of opportunity between people who share a [protected characteristic](#) and those who do not
- ◆ foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not

Due to the changes made to assessment of National Qualifications 2022, SQA included a focus in the evaluation research on the experiences of disabled learners and/or those with an ASN. This information is useful to SQA to ensure it is meeting its Public Sector Equality Duty with regards to disability. SQA is currently developing a code of practice for research that will embed our commitments to equality, access and inclusion (including those resulting

from the Equality Act (2010) and the Public Sector Equality Duty) in all our research activities. This will inform how we gather data we need to ensure our qualifications are accessible and fair to learners.

In future evaluation research, SQA will look at how best to understand the experiences of learners with a range of protected characteristics, as well as other hard-to-reach learner groups.

Survey methodology

The learner and practitioner surveys were developed by researchers in SQA's Policy, Analysis and Standards directorate in the autumn of 2022, based on those used for the evaluation of the 2021 Alternative Certification Model. The surveys were carried out in November and December 2022. This timescale was chosen as it meant that all aspects of the assessment process were complete, including the appeals process and the exam exceptional circumstances consideration service, while also being sufficiently soon after events that experiences were still relatively fresh in participants' minds.

The surveys were primarily distributed through 460 SQA co-ordinators in schools and colleges in Scotland that offered National Qualifications in 2021–22. Co-ordinators were asked to pass on a survey link to learners and practitioners with direct involvement in National Qualifications in 2022.

In total, responses were received from 2056 learners and 1029 practitioners. These numbers are such that, assuming the respondents were typical of the wider populations of learners and practitioners, there can be a high degree of confidence that the results of these surveys are broadly in line with the views of learners and practitioners generally. Of the 2056 learners, 277 were disabled and/or had an ASN. Looking at the differences in results helps us to understand the experience of the assessment process for National Qualifications in 2022 for both disabled learners and/or learners with ASN and learners with no disclosed disability/ASN.

It is possible, as with any survey activity of this type, that those who chose to respond were motivated to do so by having particularly strong opinions that they wished to share with SQA. It is also possible that the schools and colleges who chose to take part in this research may not have been entirely representative of Scottish schools and colleges as a whole. The more detailed analysis of respondents in the separate learner and practitioner reports indicate that, while there was a good geographical spread of respondents, and a spread of practitioners who taught a wide range of subjects, there was an over-representation of independent school learners and practitioners in the survey respondents, when compared to the proportions of National Qualification entries that SQA receives from independent schools. Almost 87% of respondents studied at local authority schools; this compares to around 91.5% of entries at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher, which come from local authority schools. Numbers of college practitioners are broadly in line with the proportions of National Qualification entries that SQA receives from the college sector, and college learners were under-represented in the survey respondents.

SQA maintains a [pulse survey tool](#) to enable us to engage with different stakeholder groups. A parent and carer pulse survey was developed by researchers in SQA's Policy, Analysis

and Standards directorate in the autumn of 2022. The survey was carried out in November and December 2022, running alongside the main learner and practitioner surveys. Given the likely limited knowledge among parents and carers of the assessment process in 2022, questions were restricted to those concerning modifications to course assessment and appeals.

The parent and carer pulse survey was disseminated through SQA's parent and carer pulse survey panel and was further publicised through SQA communication channels, such as SQA News. A total of 501 responses were received.

Qualitative data

A number of qualitative questions were included in the learner and practitioner surveys, asking participants to, for example, describe parts of the 2021–22 process that they felt worked well or did not work well, to give examples of particular issues they faced, or to expand on answers given using numerical scales. This allowed us to develop a greater depth of understanding of the views of learners and practitioners.

To build on this qualitative data, and to go into more depth on the experience of the 2021–22 process, we interviewed a range of learners and practitioners in late 2022 and early 2023.

There were a number of objectives for these interviews. The first was to develop a fuller understanding of the experiences of learners who sat assessments for, and practitioners who taught and assessed, National Qualifications in 2021–22. Second, the interviews provided an opportunity to explore some of the issues raised in the questionnaire in greater depth. One of the advantages of this approach was that it allowed for a genuine conversation to take place to fully understand the views of participants. Lastly, the interviews gave SQA the opportunity to hear a range of different perspectives directly.

The interviews followed a semi-structured approach, that aimed to allow respondents to freely share their experiences without too much direction, while still allowing the interviews to focus consistently on important aspects of appeals, modifications to assessment and views on the systems used in 2020–21 and 2021–22.

A total of 26 practitioners and 16 learners were interviewed about their experiences of the assessment process in 2022. Separately, four disabled learners and/or learners with additional support needs (ASN) took part in in-depth interviews about their experiences of the assessment process in 2022. They had all volunteered to be interviewed, so were self-selecting. The practitioners and learners interviewed taught and had undertaken a wide range of subjects.

All the interviews were intended to add depth to the survey results and to explore areas that did not lend themselves to survey questions. These were qualitative interviews intended to illustrate a range of perspectives and were not intended to be fully representative of the wider population.

Nonetheless, the interviews provided a range of contexts, education authority and independent schools, and colleges, covering a breadth of situations ranging from those well-

resourced, those less well-resourced, those with high-attaining academic performance and those with more varied learner cohort/intake.

Interviews were recorded and non-verbatim transcribed. Depending on the nature of the discussion, interviews did not always follow the strict order of the questions and some answers were given in different places. Interviewers still sought to ensure that all questions were covered in every interview. Questions were grouped into key topic areas, and so the summaries of responses provided through this report have attempted to re-order the evidence into a coherent form without changing the tone or content of the responses. Direct quotes are given in italics.

Approach to analysis

As this research project used a mixed method approach, it was necessary to analyse different sorts of data in different ways.

Quantitative survey questions, which asked respondents to choose from two or more options or give a rating on a scale, were analysed numerically, with graphs and tables being provided where appropriate. All practitioner quantitative survey questions have been analysed by respondent type — that is, whether they have been an appointee in the past five years or not. This cut-off was chosen to identify those who had been recently involved with SQA's assessment processes. All learner quantitative survey questions have also been analysed by respondent type — that is, whether the learners are disabled and/or have an ASN or not. However, only where there are significant differences in opinion between different respondent groups are these highlighted and discussed.

Significance testing

Chi-squared tests were used to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between the views of disabled learners and/or those with an ASN, and those learners who are not disabled and/or have an ASN. The same approach was taken to determine whether there were statistically significant differences between the views of practitioners who had been appointees in the past five years and those who had not.

In general, we would accept a result where $p < 0.05$ as statistically significant. A test was carried out for each closed survey question. This means that, in total, 35 tests were carried out for learners and 45 were carried out for practitioners.

However, there are risks with this approach that, due to the number of tests being carried out, we conclude that there is a difference in the views of different groups when no such difference actually exists. This is known as a Type I error. In such situations, a correction is often applied that results in more stringent p-values being required to demonstrate statistical significance. This can result in what is known as a Type II error. A Type II error would be to state that there was no difference between the views of different groups, when the groups did actually have different views. The application of a correction, therefore, involves a trade-off where a greater number of Type II errors are made in order to minimise the number of Type I errors made. A variety of such corrections can be used, but a Bonferroni correction is probably the most commonly applied. (Cabin and Mitchell, 2000)

On consideration, there is no obvious reason why we ought to be willing to accept an increase in Type II errors to minimise Type I errors. Such an approach increases the potential for results ignoring situations where it is likely that disabled learners and/or those with ASN have different views from the remainder of the learner population. That is, in this situation, we are willing to take the risk of making Type I errors in order to increase the sensitivity of our tests.

As such, while we recognise that some researchers would feel that it was appropriate to use a Bonferroni or similar correction, our judgement is that it is more reasonable in these cases to use uncorrected p-values, and hence we have reported all cases where our chi-squared test gives a result where $p < 0.05$. Appendices 1 and 2 contain graphs for all the quantitative

survey questions and the results of all chi-squared tests. This allows readers to apply a correction themselves should they deem it necessary.

The chi-squared test only tells us whether there is a difference between the views of the two different groups covered by the test. It does not tell us what significant differences there are in their views. Therefore, we need to consider how we analyse the results of our chi-squared testing. We have calculated standard residuals to attempt to determine where there are significant differences in the views of the different groups. Again, we used $p < 0.05$ to determine statistical significance.

Presentation of results

Please note that in charts throughout the reports, percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Qualitative survey questions — which are more open than quantitative questions and ask respondents to explain what they think and why — are analysed using an inductive approach. Researchers analyse these qualitative answers by categorising responses and drawing out themes, producing codes that allow analysis across responses. As with any other approach to analysing qualitative data, the results are contingent on how the coding is carried out. While it would be possible to provide some numerical data on these qualitative questions, there are a number of reasons why this would not be as robust as would be the case with quantitative questions.

Firstly, not all respondents choose to respond to open questions. We cannot therefore know that those who chose to respond are representative of the wider population. Secondly, most respondents focus on one or two main areas in their response. We have no way of knowing what they think about other topics. Thirdly, we cannot quantify the strength of respondents' views in the way that we would in a closed question. Lastly, we are reliant on the coding decisions made earlier in this analysis exercise.

As a result, most analysis of qualitative survey questions will be discursive, and will look to outline the reasons that respondents have provided. In general, the most commonly cited reasons will be discussed first, but the main conclusions that ought to be drawn from this sort of data are that a significant number of respondents take a particular point of view, and then attempt to further understand that point of view.

A similar approach is taken with interview responses. It should be noted that interview participants are not intended to provide a representative sample of learners and practitioners and it would therefore not be appropriate to draw any numerical conclusions from the interviews.

Having outlined some of the potential issues with the qualitative data, it is important also to note its value in providing a detailed picture of the experiences of both learners and practitioners who went through the various processes involved in the assessment of National Qualifications in 2021–22. It provides a much greater level of detail than could be gained from the quantitative survey questions, and the use of interviews allows for a dialogue with learners and practitioners to fully understand their views and experiences.

Key findings

This overview attempts to outline some of the central findings of this research. For brevity, considerable detail has been omitted from this section. For greater depth, the full learner and practitioner findings are analysed in two separate reports. Both of these reports have appendices disaggregating qualitative findings by respondent type.

Any statement regarding statistical significance in the following text implies a chi-squared test result with $p < 0.05$.

Engagement and communication

In general, both learners and practitioners reported that the process for National Qualifications awarding in 2021–22 was communicated to them effectively and that they understood how grades would be determined:

- ◆ 64% of learners agreed that the assessment process for 2021–22 was communicated to them effectively, 63% agreed that they received information early enough in the academic year, and 70% agreed that they understood how their grades would be determined. It should be noted that disabled learners and/or those learners with additional support needs (ASN) were significantly less likely than other learners to agree that they received information early enough (55% compared to 64%) and that they understood how grades would be determined (62% compared to 71%).
- ◆ 61% of practitioners agreed that the assessment process for 2021–22 was communicated to them effectively, 52% agreed that they received information early enough in the academic year, and 75% agreed that they understood how learners' grades would be determined in 2021–22.

Teaching and learning

Both learners and practitioners suggested that disruption due to COVID-19 continued to have a substantial impact on teaching and learning and, to a slightly lesser extent, a substantial impact on assessment in 2021–22:

- ◆ 77% of learners agreed that disruption had a substantial impact on teaching and learning, 61% agreed that it had a substantial impact on how they were assessed. Disabled learners and/or those learners with additional support needs (ASN) were significantly more likely than other learners to agree that disruption had an impact on teaching and learning (82% compared to 76%).
- ◆ Likewise, a large majority (82%) of practitioners agreed that disruption had a substantial impact on teaching and learning in 2021–22 and 77% agreed that disruption had a substantial impact on assessment in 2021–22.

Modifications to assessment

In general, learners were aware (89%) of the modifications made to the assessment of their courses (although disabled learners and/or those with ASN significantly less so) and felt that

they had a good understanding (73%) of the modifications made. Almost two-thirds (64%) of learners agreed that the modifications made to the assessment of their courses in 2021–22 were helpful, and the same proportion (63%) agreed that the modified assessments were a rigorous test of skills and knowledge.

In terms of modifications that learners thought worked well, by far the most frequent response was knowing in advance what would and would not be included in the 2022 exams. This information was viewed as beneficial in that it offered a reduced workload and an opportunity for more focused study. Learners also commented on the removal of assignments from a number of courses; they appreciated the decrease in coursework, which they believed lessened stress, supported their learning, and allowed more time to focus during a period of significant disruption.

In terms of what learners did not think worked well, a considerable number were concerned that assignments and projects had been removed. There were concerns that this could adversely affect progression opportunities because of the loss of practical experience and that it put more pressure on the final exam. On the other hand, a number of learners 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 that they did not account fully for the effects of the pandemic on teaching and learning.

Most practitioners (89%) suggested that they had a good understanding of what modifications were made to the assessment of their courses. 61% of practitioners agreed that the modifications were helpful, and 56% of practitioners agreed that the modifications freed up additional time for learning and teaching. When asked if the modified assessments were a rigorous test of learners' skills and knowledge, 60% of practitioners agreed that they were.

Almost a third (32%) of practitioners agreed that modifications could negatively impact on future education or employment opportunities for learners, but 44% disagreed. When asked how modifications had impacted on teaching, almost a third of practitioners (31%) reported not covering areas that were not going to be assessed due to modifications and 25% covered these areas only briefly.

When asked about modifications that worked well, the main themes from practitioners were:

- ◆ Modifications to assessment requirements and course content were beneficial as they allowed more time to concentrate on teaching and learning, which was necessary to help mitigate the impact of COVID-19 disruption.
- ◆ Increased learner choice over areas of coursework and assessment worked well as it enabled more focused teaching and learning.

Conversely, when asked about modifications that had not worked well, the main themes and perceptions were:

- ◆ Modifications had a negative impact, including on the rigour of qualifications, on progression, and on knowledge and skills development.
- ◆ Modifications did not provide enough support given the continuing disruption.

- ◆ Modifications had little effect on teaching and learning as the whole course still needed to be covered, even if aspects of it were not assessed.

Revision support

Learners were less aware of the revision support that SQA published in March 2022 than of the modifications; just over half of learners (54%) were aware, and disabled learners and/or those with ASN significantly less so (48%). Learners were also less enthusiastic about the revision support, with around half of learners (54%) agreeing that the revision support had helped them prepare for their assessments and less than half agreeing that the revision support was clear (45%) and had the right level of detail (39%). Learners felt that having advance notice of exam content was particularly helpful in terms of revision support, while revision support that repeated what they already knew was identified as being unhelpful.

Practitioners had relatively negative views of the revision support, with substantial numbers suggesting that it did not help learners to prepare for external assessment (56%), it was not clear (43%), it was not useful (56%), and did not have the right level of detail (55%). Only a small proportion (7%) of practitioners reported having used revision support to a great extent with their learners. Considerable numbers of practitioners said that the revision support provided by SQA was nothing that subject teachers would not already provide as a matter of course. It should be noted that practitioner criticism of revision support centred on the study guide resources, in the main; support such as advance notice was perceived as more useful. There was also frustration at perceived inconsistencies between the revision support provided for different subjects.

Exam Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service (EECCS)

Only a small proportion (14%) of learners reported their centre as having submitted an exceptional circumstances (EECCS) request for them. The proportion was significantly higher for disabled learners and/or those with ASN (27%). Of the learners who had an EECCS submitted on their behalf, 43% agreed that the EECCS process was fair but 22% disagreed.

A majority of practitioners (58%) agreed that they understood the EECCS process in 2022. This figure was significantly higher (62%) for those practitioners who had been an appointee in the past five than for those who had not (54%). More than half of practitioners (53%) also thought that the workload associated with EECCS was very substantial or substantial. Whilst 43% of practitioners agreed that the EECCS process was fair to their learners, 41% agreed that they were satisfied with the process. Satisfaction was significantly higher (43%) for those practitioners who had been an appointee in the past five than for those who had not (39%).

Appeals

A majority of all audience groups said that they understood the appeals process in 2021–22; 69% of practitioners agreed that they understood the process, as did 63% of learners who appealed, and 67% of parents and carers who had a child who appealed. However, a theme in respondent comments was that the process had not worked as they thought it would.

Practitioners who had been an appointee in the past five years were significantly more likely to report understanding the appeals process in 2021–22 than those who had not (72% compared to 67%).

Fairness was an overarching theme and major concern from all audience groups. While around a third (35%) of practitioners agreed that the appeals process was fair to their learners, more than a third (38%) disagreed. The figure for those practitioners who thought that the appeals process was fair was significantly higher (39%) for those practitioners who had been an appointee in the past five than for those who had not (32%).

Meanwhile, almost a third of learners who appealed (32%) agreed that the appeals process was fair, but half disagreed (52%). Only a quarter (26%) of parents and carers who had a child who appealed agreed that the appeals process was fair, compared to over half (55%) who disagreed. This issue of fairness encompassed a range of issues including a perceived lack of clarity around the process and evidence requirements, a lack of feedback and transparency, and the perception of inconsistencies in how the process worked and between subjects.

While 34% of practitioners agreed that they were satisfied with the appeals process in 2022, 44% disagreed. The figure for those practitioners who were satisfied with appeals process was significantly higher (38%) for those practitioners who had been an appointee in the past five than for those who had not (30%). For learners who appealed, just under a third (32%) agreed that they were satisfied with the process, but more than half disagreed (55%). Parents and carers who had a child who appealed were the audience group most dissatisfied with the appeals process: while just under a quarter (24%) agreed that they were satisfied with it, 62% disagreed.

Workload was a significant concern for practitioners, with two-thirds (66%) saying that the workload associated with appeals was very substantial or substantial.

When asked about the appeals approach for 2022–23, 50% of practitioners would like a Post Results Service (PRS) type approach and 36% an approach similar to that used in 2021–22. The Post Results Service, in place pre-pandemic, offered a clerical check and/or a marking review of the exam script or coursework where a centre had concerns about a learner's certificated grade. The approach in place in 2021–22 was different in that, where a learner's certificated grade was lower than their estimated grade, appeals could come from the centre or directly from the learner and was based on a clerical check of the exam script or coursework and a review of alternative evidence submitted to support the evidence.

Those practitioners who preferred a PRS approach did so because of the workload impacts in 2022; the perceived issues mentioned above; the 2022 approach disincentivised learners and encouraged speculative appeals; disruption has lessened; the PRS approach is well understood and supports a national standard. Those practitioners who preferred a 2021–22 approach did so because alternative evidence provides a better reflection of candidate ability; it is fairer; and learners continue to be affected by the pandemic.

Of those learners who commented on appeals in the survey, many more learners were dissatisfied with the 2021–22 approach than satisfied. Many perceived the process in 2022 to have been unfair for the reasons outlined earlier in this section. Parent and carer

comments also suggested that the 2022 appeals process was unfair and lacked transparency. Many believed outcomes did not match the evidence provided and that there were discrepancies between the guidance and how the process operated in practice.

Overall approach to assessment

Whilst almost two-thirds (63%) of learners agreed that the 2022 assessment process had been fair to them as individuals, just over a third (35%) agreed that it had been fair to all learners. Those respondents who were disabled learners and/or had an ASN were significantly less likely to report that the assessment process had been fair to them as individuals compared to other learners (53% compared to 64%).

More than half (51%) of practitioners agreed that the assessment process for 2022 was fair to all learners, but almost a third (31%) disagreed. Practitioners who had been an appointee in the past five years were significantly more likely to state that the assessment process was fair to all learners than those who had not (54% compared to 49%).

Whilst 53% of practitioners agreed that they were satisfied with the overall design of the assessment process for 2022, 28% disagreed. Practitioners who had been an appointee in the past five years were significantly more likely to state that they were satisfied with the assessment process than those who had not (56% compared to 49%). The two principal areas of reported dissatisfaction were the appeals process and the perceived inconsistencies between subjects in terms of modifications and revision support.

Comparison of 2021 and 2022

The approaches to the assessment of Graded National Courses in 2021 and 2022 were fundamentally different. The 2021 alternative certification model (ACM) was based on demonstrated attainment. Teachers and lecturers collected evidence of learning and skills before using their professional judgement to determine provisional results for their learners. In 2022, Scotland returned to formal externally-assessed national exams for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses, with a package of support measures.

Those learners who had entered for National Qualifications in both 2020–21 and 2021–22 were asked which approach they preferred: 43% said 2020–21, 38% said 2021–22, and 19% said they did not know.

Of those who said they preferred the 2020–21 approach to assessment, many said it was fairer for learners, as it was based on a number of assessments, and more accurately reflected their knowledge and learning throughout the year. A considerable number of learners who preferred the 2020–21 approach also did so because of a reported reduction in stress compared with a single high-stakes exam.

Those who preferred the 2021–22 approach did so because they thought it was less stressful, primarily as there were fewer assessments. Some learners considered the pressure of increased workload due to ongoing assessments in 2020–21 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. A substantial number of respondents preferred the 2021–22 approach as they believed it was a more reliable and

fairer 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 as comparing favourably with the approach in 2021.

On the whole, learners reported that the 2021–22 approach was more stressful than the 2020–21 approach had been: 42% said that the 2020–21 approach was stressful or very stressful; 67% said that the 2021–22 approach was stressful or very stressful. It is also notable that disabled learners and/or those with ASN indicated that they found both the 2020–21 and 2021–22 approaches more stressful than other learners: 50% found that 2020–21 approach stressful or very stressful compared to 41% of other learners; and 71% found the 2021–22 approach stressful or very stressful compared to 64% of other learners.

Learners also reported that the 2020–21 approach was fairer than the 2021–22 approach, both to them as individuals and to learners across Scotland as a whole. While 60% of learners thought that the 2020–21 approach was fair to them as an individual, 48% thought the same about the 2021–22 approach; while 49% thought that the 2021–22 approach was fair to learners across Scotland, 42% thought the same about the 2021–22 approach.

Learners also reported having a higher workload in 2021–22 than in 2020–21. While 23% of respondents thought that their workload was unreasonably high in 2020–21, 41% thought the same about 2021–22.

By a wide margin, practitioners reported preferring the way learners were assessed in 2021–22 rather than 2020–21: 73% preferred the 2021–22 approach, compared to 18% who preferred the 2020–21 approach.

Many of those practitioners who commented on why they preferred the 2021–22 approach mentioned the workload and stress associated with the 2020–21 process. However, although workload was a major factor for the disinclination towards 2020–21, this was not the only reason practitioners preferred the 2021–22 approach. Many respondents reported that external assessment and exams in particular have value or worth in and of themselves. Other than workload, most themes identified in support of the 2021–22 approach relate to the importance of a credible, reliable, and impartial assessment for all learners.

Of those who said they preferred the 2020–21 approach to assessment, more than half did so on the basis that it was better or fairer for learners, particularly in the context of COVID-19 disruption. These practitioners felt the approach was less stressful for learners and provided a better opportunity to demonstrate their attainment. These respondents suggested that without the pressure of an external exam, learners' results better reflected their efforts and that practitioners could take a holistic view of learners' achievement.

In general, practitioners thought that the grades awarded in 2021–22 were more credible than those awarded in 2020–21, but less credible than those awarded in 2018–19: 90% of practitioners said that 2018–19 grades were very credible or credible, compared to 34% who said the same about 2020–21 grades and 70% who said the same about 2021–22 grades.

On balance, practitioners thought that the approach used in 2021–22 was fairer than that used in 2020–21 to both their own learners and learners across Scotland as a whole. More than two-thirds (68%) of practitioners suggested that the approach used in 2021–22 was

very fair or fair to learners, compared to 50% who said the same about the 2020–21 approach. While 64% of respondents thought that the 2021–22 approach was very fair or fair to learners across Scotland as a whole, 36% thought the same about the 2020–21 approach.

On 2021–22 workload, 39% of practitioners said it was higher or much higher than in 2020–21 and 55% said it was higher or much higher than in pre-pandemic years. On the other hand, 36% of practitioners said that their 2021–22 workload was lower or much lower than in 2020–21 and 10% said it was lower or much lower than in pre-pandemic years.

On stress, 37% of respondents said they had much higher stress or higher stress in 2021–22 than in 2020–21 and 53% said they had much higher stress or higher stress in 2021–22 than in pre-pandemic years. However, 36% of respondents said they had much lower stress or lower stress in 2021–22 than in 2020–21 and 12% said they had much lower stress or lower stress in 2021–22 than in pre-pandemic years.

Overarching themes

In addition to the detailed findings reported above, there are also a number of overarching themes and findings that emerged across the research.

Pandemic disruption

Overall, the impact of the pandemic was perceived as being a very significant factor that impacts on Scottish education in a number of ways. While there continues to be direct disruption due to COVID-19, with increased levels of staff and learner absence, the greater impact appears to be due to the cumulative effect of lockdowns, learning loss, and the substantially increased levels of stress caused by the pandemic.

They also reported that learners who are now sitting National Qualifications do not have the same foundations of skills and knowledge that would have been anticipated before the pandemic, and that some learners are less resilient and less able to deal with the stress that is involved in sitting formal external assessments.

Practitioners also reported that the effects of the pandemic had not impacted equally across the country.

Perceptions of fairness

This research also reveals more about learners and practitioners' understanding of fairness in assessment. Traditionally, fairness in assessment focused on issues such as ensuring that all learners had the same opportunity to show their skills and knowledge, that assessments were a fair test of the course content, and that assessments were both valid and reliable. This research shows that these perceptions of fairness remain important. One of the main reasons given by both learners and practitioners for supporting the return of exams was that all learners would be assessed in the same way and under the same conditions.

It has become clear that taking individual learner circumstances (particularly those as a result of the pandemic) into account is an important part of fairness. This individual fairness was evident in suggestions that there is still a need for some modifications to course assessment due to the ongoing disruption and cumulative impact of the pandemic.

It was also apparent that the appeals system used in 2022 was perceived as being unfair. However, the reasons given for this varied. For example, some participants identified a failure to take into account a wide enough range of evidence as being unfair, while others felt learners were not being judged using the same valid, reliable, and robust assessment instruments. Tensions such as these perhaps illuminate the increasing focus on fairness in assessment and the challenges of defining precisely what this means.

The views of disabled learners and those with additional support needs

SQA was also able to analyse the views and experiences of disabled learners and/or learners with ASN. There were a number of different areas where the responses of disabled learners and/or learners with ASN were significantly different from the responses of learners without a disability or ASN. These are discussed more fully in the learner report, but it should be noted that, on several occasions, disabled learners and/or learners with ASN were less likely to know details of the assessment process, such as around appeals, modifications to assessment and revision support.

Additionally, disabled learners and/or learners with ASN found both the 2020–21 and 2021–22 assessment processes to be more stressful than learners without a disability or ASN.

Concluding remarks

In Scotland, as elsewhere, the COVID-19 pandemic created an unprecedented challenge for the education and qualification system and its effects continue to be felt. Conditions remained challenging and uncertain throughout the 2021–22 academic year — the situation remained unpredictable, and a great deal of flexibility was required to support the delivery of the examination diet. As external assessments were re-introduced, learners as a cohort came to the assessments having experienced the impact of COVID disruption in different ways.

Following our [evaluation of the 2021 Alternative Certification Model](#), this evaluation is designed to provide the system with a record of how the 2022 approach worked in practice, drawing on the experiences of those who were involved. In the context of reform to Scottish qualifications and assessment, the reflections of learners and practitioners can help to generate discussion about key topics, including the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to assessment, what we can do to develop a shared understanding of standards, and how we balance competing conceptualisations of fairness in assessment.

SQA hopes that the findings contained in the evaluation can contribute to future work and research in this area and will help support the review work being led by Professor Louise Hayward.

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