



# **National Qualifications Research 2024:**

## **Methodology**

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## Design

Between 2021–23, SQA produced an annual evaluation of the [approach to assessment of Graded National Courses](#), which was carried out in an environment where very substantial changes were made to how Graded National Courses were assessed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was therefore important for SQA to understand how well the modified assessment process had worked, to understand the situation in schools and colleges, and to understand the views of practitioners and learners who had experienced the Graded National Courses.

The approach to assessment has now reverted to one similar to that used until 2019, and it is likely that no significant changes will be made to the assessment of National Qualifications until the implementation of those recommendations from the [Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment \(2023\)](#) that were accepted by the Scottish Government. Consequently, SQA's needs from the current evaluation have changed significantly.

As a result, SQA chose to develop a wave-based quantitative approach to this research. This approach is designed to track changes over time in the views of those who have lived experience of National Qualifications. This approach was influenced by Ofqual's annual survey [Perceptions of A levels, GCSEs and other qualifications](#), but we chose to restrict respondent groups to those who had direct experience of National Qualifications in the academic year immediately preceding the research. We intend to ask the same questions in future years, unless SQA's needs from this research change sufficiently to merit changes in the questions or approach.

The question set used was based on quantitative questions from past National Qualifications evaluation surveys and some questions from Ofqual's survey. We designed a survey that aimed to answer the following research questions:

- What are the perceptions of National 4 (N4), National 5 (N5), Higher (H) and Advanced Higher (AH) qualifications reported by learners, educators and SQA staff in 2023–24?
- How did stakeholders perceive the process of assessment, awarding and results in 2023–24?
- How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact learners in 2023–24?
- What were the experiences of learners with protected characteristics in relation to these three questions, and did they differ from the general population?

The survey was created on Smart Survey and then tested from the point of view of different types of respondents.

## **Sampling and recruitment**

NQ24 used a non-random sampling technique called self-selection to recruit participants for the survey. Participants were sent an initial email on 24 September 2024 inviting them to take part in the survey.

### **Learners and educators**

The survey was sent by email to SQA co-ordinators in centres across Scotland that offered National Qualifications in 2023–24. The email asked SQA co-ordinators to send an invitation email and survey link to all educators who had taught one or more National Qualifications in the last year, and to all learners in the centre who met both the following criteria:

- Currently in S5 or S6, or continuing or new college learners
- Sat National Qualifications (N4, N5, H, AH) in 2023–24

The survey was sent by email to SQA co-ordinators in all centres across Scotland. In an effort to increase response rates the survey link and details were sent via an SQA co-ordinator newsletter later in the fieldwork period.

### **Qualifications Development colleagues and senior appointees**

SQA colleagues who were employed in a role as a subject implementation manager, qualifications officer or qualifications manager, or who had held the role of principal assessors, depute principal assessors, principal verifiers or depute principal verifiers in 2023–24 were sent an email inviting them to take part in the survey.

The same group of contacts were then sent a reminder email on 2 October 2024, a week after the initial invitation email.

## **Data collection**

The fieldwork period ran from 24 September 2024 to 11 October 2024. This three-week timescale was chosen because it meant that all aspects of the assessment process for the NQ 2023–24 cohort were complete, while also being close enough to the events for participants to remember their experiences clearly. This choice of fieldwork period also ensured that

participants from different local authorities had sufficient time to complete the survey, even if their September bank holiday and half-term break fell on different days.

The survey was self-administered by respondents online using the Smart Survey platform. Respondents consented to take part in the survey by proceeding with the survey questions, after reading the consent and data handling information. All questions in the survey were voluntary and respondents were made aware that they did not have to answer any question that they did not want to. Learner respondents were also advised that they could complete the survey alongside an adult if they preferred to.

## **Analysis**

The data were downloaded from Smart Survey to a secure drive and were then cleaned.

Overall, 2381 responses were collected from learners. Thirty-two cases were removed from the dataset as they failed to engage substantively with the survey. The final number of full responses used in the analysis was 2349.

Overall, 1140 responses were collected from educators and the final number of full responses used in the analysis was 1113 after cleaning had taken place. Of senior appointees and QD colleagues, 109 responded to the survey and 105 were included after data cleaning.

The data were initially analysed to identify percentage frequency distributions in order to produce descriptive statistics on the data analysis platform R Studio. This is a way to organise the number of times a specific response to a question occurs, proportionately to the number of participants.

### **Composite satisfaction score analysis**

Composite scoring was developed to gauge how respondents perceived a number of different elements of National Qualifications in 2023–24. These were:

- Communications
- National 4
- National 5
- Higher
- Advanced Higher

- Learning and teaching
- Assessment and awarding
- Standards

A composite score is a single variable or data point that represents a combination of information from multiple related variables or data points. The composite scores were then used to compare how different groups of respondents perceived different elements. The sub-groups analysed for learner respondents were gender, SIMD quintile, ethnicity, care experienced status, LGBTQIA+ identity, and additional support needs (ASN) status. For educator respondents, the sub-groups analysed were SIMD for the centre, length of time in an SQA appointee role, and whether the educator had taught ASN learners. For senior appointees and Qualifications Development respondents, the sub-groups analysed were SQA appointee role, the length of time in that SQA appointee role, and the subject responsibility. Using a 1% level of significance, Kruskal-Wallis tests were then used to assess whether the population median score across all sub-groups could be the same value. For a full description of the composite scoring process, refer to the [National Qualifications 2024 Research: Technical Appendix report](#).

Where a finding is statistically significant, this is specifically outlined in the text. All other findings reported should be considered not to be statistically significant.

## Ethics

This research was conducted in accordance with SQA's [Code of Research Practice](#). The Code of Research Practice (CoRP) sets out essential principles for the production of valid and reliable research for everyone in SQA. Ethics, equity and sustainability are fundamental to the CoRP's research framework and the research process. An ethical review process was successfully completed for this research.

Participants were given information about the survey, including what the survey was about and how their data would be used, before they consented to taking the survey. Participants were also assured that their responses would be anonymous.

Data that could potentially identify respondents through the existence of small sample sizes was suppressed in the outputs. Tables with fewer than five respondents are replaced with '(c)'.

As the majority of learner respondents would be under the age of eighteen, care was taken to ensure that participants were protected from harm. The learner survey was designed using the research team's *Guidance for Working with Children and Young People at SQA*. Steps taken included ensuring that guidance given was written in language appropriate for the target sample and assessing this during the testing phase, and participants were advised that they could complete the survey alongside a trusted adult. Care was also taken to ensure that the survey questions would limit distress to respondents. Although the topics of assessment and personal background could be considered to be distressing for some young people, the research team made clear in advance that these topics would be asked about during the survey so that respondents would be fully informed before deciding to consent. Additionally, it was made clear that respondents did not have to answer any question they did not want to.

## Limitations

As with any piece of research, there were a number of limitations in the design of the survey that affected how the results could be interpreted. For this reason, readers should be wary of generalising these results to the rest of the population.

Firstly, due to budgetary and time constraints, a random probability sampling approach was not used to recruit participants. This meant that the research team were limited in the analysis that could be done and the conclusions that could be drawn, such as generalising the results to the wider population with confidence.

Perhaps related to this was a low response rate from a number of respondent sub-groups such as boys, learners with ASN, learners who had studied AH, S6 local authority learners, FE learners and from respondents who lived in specific local authorities including Argyll and Bute, East Renfrewshire, Orkney Islands, Shetland Islands and Stirling Council. Learners who had studied AH in 2023–24 and other leavers were specifically hard to reach in September 2024 through the recruitment method used, as these groups would likely go on to study at university or college, or move into training or employment and would not be easily contactable through SQA co-ordinators at their former schools and colleges. It was also not possible to ensure that every co-ordinator passed on the survey to learners and educators, and the survey was voluntary, so invitees did not have to take part even if they did receive an email inviting them to do so.

As a result, the data in this survey could be affected by self-selection bias. Self-selection bias occurs when participants select themselves to take part in a research study and therefore their views are overrepresented in the results ([Bethlehem, 2010](#)). It is possible, as with any survey activity using this sampling method, that those who chose to respond were motivated to do so by having specific opinions that they wished to share with SQA. Therefore, the respondents who chose to take part in this research cannot be considered to be truly representative of Scottish school and college populations, and the results cannot be generalised with confidence ([Elston, 2021](#)).

Secondly, while care was taken to choose a fieldwork period that enabled respondents to reflect on their experiences of studying NQ in 2023–24, the timing of the survey may have influenced how some respondents answered the questions. For example, when asked, some respondents may have selected the year group or qualifications they were currently studying in September / October 2024, instead of in 2023–24. Additionally, answering the questions after receiving their exam results may have changed how learner respondents answered questions about other aspects of National Qualifications, either positively or negatively, compared to being asked at the time of those events taking place. However, this survey is intended to capture respondents' perspectives at a specific point in time, so this is not necessarily a limitation, though readers should be aware of this when interpreting the results.

Thirdly, this iteration of the survey marked a new approach to assessing stakeholders' attitudes towards National Qualifications. This meant that while most of the questions had previously been tested to ensure respondents interpreted them correctly, they had not yet been used to address the specific aims for this survey nor with its target audience. As a result, some of the limitations with this survey could not be identified until after the data had been collected.

Further iterations of this survey series will aim to address these limitations where possible, while ensuring that data can still be reliably compared over time.