

Experiences of National 4s, National 5s, Highers and Advanced Highers 2024–25: Methodology

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Note: From 1 February 2026, Qualifications Scotland became fully operational, replacing SQA and becoming the new national awarding body. This document references SQA as the research concerns the delivery of National Courses in the 2024–25 session.

Introduction

In 2024, we conducted the first year of a new annual series of surveys to gauge how perceptions of National Qualifications (NQs) among a range of stakeholders that work with, develop and use the qualifications change over time. These stakeholders include learners, educators, senior appointees and Qualifications Development (QD) colleagues. In 2025, the second annual survey was launched.

Design

The methodology adopted included only respondent groups who had direct experience of NQs in the academic year immediately preceding the research. We intend to ask the same questions in future years, unless Qualifications Scotland's need from this research changes sufficiently to merit changes in the questions or approach. Some of the questions have changed slightly from the previous year as a response to reflections on the survey. We may need to introduce some limited further changes as the survey develops in these early years.

The survey was designed to answer the following research questions:

- What are the perceptions of National 4, National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications reported by learners, educators and SQA staff in 2024–25?
- How did stakeholders perceive the process of assessment, awarding and results in 2024–25?
- How did the legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic impact learners in 2024–25?
- What were the experiences of learners with marginalised characteristics in relation to these three questions, and did they differ from the general population?
- How did perceptions of the themes raised in these four questions change over time?

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

Sampling and recruitment

This research used a non-random sampling technique called self-selection to recruit participants for the survey. We sent participants an initial email on 16 September 2025 inviting them to take part in the survey. We then sent a targeted reminder to various stakeholders with low response rates in the first two weeks of the survey.

The learner and educator surveys were also translated to Gaelic by a third-party agency. An option to complete the survey in Gaelic was included in all recruitment emails. However, we received no responses from the Gaelic versions of the survey.

Learners and educators

We sent the survey by email to SQA co-ordinators in all centres across Scotland that delivered NQs in 2024–25. The email asked SQA co-ordinators to send an invitation email and survey link to all educators who had taught one or more NQs 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
- completed NQs (National 4, National 5, Higher, Advanced Higher) in 2023–24

Due to a low response rate from learners who had studied in S6 in 2024–25, we sent a further recruitment email to learners in S6 in 2024–25 who had signed up for our Your Voice panel.¹ The response rate from learners and educators in several local authority areas was also low (Argyll & Bute, Clackmannanshire, East Ayrshire, East Dunbartonshire, East Renfrewshire, Dundee, Falkirk, Highland, Moray, Na h-Eileanan Siar, North Ayrshire, Perth and Kinross, Orkney Islands, Scottish Borders, Shetland Islands, Stirling and West Dunbartonshire). We sent a targeted remainder email to all SQA co-ordinators in these local authorities.

QD colleagues and senior appointees

We sent an invitation email to colleagues who were employed in a role as a qualifications manager or subject implementation manager, or who held the role of principal assessor, depute principal assessor, principal verifier or depute principal verifier in 2024–25.

¹ The Your Voice panel is a group of learners, educators, parents and carers who have agreed to take part in our research to provide feedback on various topics.

We then sent the same group of contacts a reminder email on 30 September 2025, two weeks after the initial email. Due to a low response rate from QD colleagues, we asked QD heads of service to encourage them to take part.

Data collection

The fieldwork period ran from 16 September 2025 to 7 October 2025. This three-week timescale was chosen because it meant that all aspects of the NQ 2024–25 assessment process were complete, and it was close enough to the events for participants to clearly recall their experiences. 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, we collected 1390 responses from learners. Eleven cases were removed from the dataset, either because they were not eligible or because they failed to engage substantively with the survey. The final number of full responses used in the analysis was 1379.

Overall, we collected 780 responses from educators, and the final number of full responses used in the analysis was 751 after data cleaning.

A total of 64 senior appointees and QD colleagues responded to the survey, and all were retained 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.

We compared responses to questions with the same, or very similar wording, to the responses collected in 2024. Percentage frequency distributions were compared between the two years. The report only included changes over time with at least 8 percentage point differences for learners and educators. For senior appointees and QD colleagues, the threshold was 20 percentage points due to the smaller sample size and therefore larger variability.

Composite satisfaction score analysis

Composite scoring was developed to gauge how respondents perceived a number of different elements of NQ in 2024–25. These were:

- Communications
- National 4
- National 5
- Higher
- Advanced Higher
- The impact of COVID-19 on 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-group analysed was length of time in an SQA appointee role. For senior appointees and QD 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 [technical appendix](#).

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

Ethics

We conducted this research in accordance with SQA's Code of Research Practice. The Code of Research Practice sets out our essential principles for the production of valid and reliable

research. Ethics, equity and sustainability are fundamental to the Code of Research Practice'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. 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 some young people may find the topics of assessment and personal background distressing, we made clear in advance that the survey would ask about these topics 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 wider population.

Due to budgetary and time constraints, a random probability sampling approach was not used to recruit participants. Therefore, we 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 proportionally low response rate from a number of sub-groups such as boys, learners with ASN, learners who studied Advanced Higher, S6 learners, further education learners. We also had a low response rate from respondents who lived in the following local authorities: South Lanarkshire, Fife, West Lothian, Dundee, and Falkirk.

Learners who had studied Advanced Higher in 2024–25 were specifically hard to reach in September 2025 through the recruitment method used. As this group would likely go on to study at university, or move into training or employment, they would not be easily contactable through SQA co-ordinators at their former schools and colleges. As such, we only received 11 responses from this group. Therefore, the data that we collected regarding learners' opinions on Advanced Higher was too small to report, given that the perspective of one respondent would equal around 10% of the proportion.

It was not possible to ensure that every SQA co-ordinator passed on the survey to learners and educators. The survey was also 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. 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).

While we chose a fieldwork period that enabled respondents to reflect on their experiences of studying NQ in 2024–25, the timing of the survey may have influenced how some respondents answered the questions. Answering the questions after receiving their exam results may have changed how learner respondents answered questions about other aspects of NQ, 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.

Finally, this research compared the responses in the 2025 survey to the 2024 survey. While we kept the question wording and order the same as far as possible, there were methodological decisions that limited our ability to confidently compare the responses and measure changes over time. For example, there was a lower response rate in 2025, compared to 2024, and the selected sample was not proportionally representative of the population (see technical appendix), meaning that there were methodological differences between the two datasets. Moreover, we introduced a small number of new questions and removed previous questions, which could have influenced how participants answered the survey.

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.

References

Bethlehem, J. (2010). Selection bias in web surveys. *International Statistical Review*, 78(2), 161–188. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-5823.2010.00112.x>

Elston, D. M. (2021). Participation bias, self-selection bias, and response bias. *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology*, 18. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaad.2021.06.025>