



National Qualifications 2023

Awarding — Methodology report

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Contents

Introduction	1
Context	1
Roles and responsibilities	1
Developing our approach	2
Overview of approach to awarding	2
Modifications	3
Sensitive grading	3
EECCS and Appeals 2023	4
2023 Awarding in the rest of the UK	4
SQA's approach to awarding	5
Setting grade boundaries in 2023	5
The 'stepwise' approach to setting grade boundaries in 2023	7
Examination Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service	7
Appeals	9

Introduction

This report outlines SQA's approach to awarding National Qualifications in 2023. This follows a revised approach to awarding in 2022, when exams returned after two years of an alternative certification model due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The approach to awarding in 2023 continues to recognise that the impacts of disruption to learning are still being experienced.

During this academic year, learners have again been supported by a package of measures including course assessment modifications, as well as wider support from across the education system at a national, regional, local and school and college level.

Context

Formal examinations and assessments have been reintroduced over the last two years in an environment that has remained challenging and uncertain for learners and teachers/lecturers. In 2022, the unique circumstances posed several challenges for exam boards and awarding bodies in all parts of the UK, in terms of setting and maintaining comparable standards. For this reason, exam boards and awarding bodies needed to devise and adopt approaches to standard setting in order to account for the unique circumstances of that year. In 2022, SQA adopted a more generous approach to grading National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses than it would do in a normal exam year, to help ensure fairness for learners while maintaining standards. This was in recognition of the fact that those preparing for and sitting exams did so in very different circumstances from those who sat exams in 2019, having experienced disruption to their learning over three academic years. Further detailed information on the approach in 2022 is contained in the [2022 Methodology Report](#).

SQA carried out an [evaluation of the approach to awarding used in 2022](#). Feedback on awarding from senior appointees and qualifications teams was overall positive. In particular, those involved in the awarding process felt that it had allowed for a thorough consideration of all the factors impacting on performance and that, as a result, the final outcomes were fair to learners. SQA was able to incorporate feedback from the evaluation of the 2022 approach in developing the awarding approach for 2023.

This methodology report outlines the approach that SQA used in 2023 for awarding and setting grade boundaries. The report aims to provide a public record of SQA's approach, laying out the objectives, principles and methods used. It places these in the context of the wider package of support measures that SQA and the wider education system put in place to support learners, and of the approaches to awarding used elsewhere in the UK.

Roles and responsibilities

SQA has a statutory duty and responsibility to individual learners and to the wider community to ensure that the standard of our qualifications is maintained. Standards are vital in ensuring the credibility and long-term integrity of qualifications for those who take them and for end users of qualifications. Essentially, maintaining standards ensures the credibility and ongoing value of qualifications over time for all who hold the qualifications.

Setting and maintaining assessment and qualifications standards is a crucial part of any education system, but it sits within a wider system of learning and teaching and curriculum choices at a local and centre level. Through the range of measures outlined in this report, SQA has taken all possible steps to assist centres to address the ongoing impacts on learning and teaching caused by the pandemic, even if the impacts are different to previous years.

Developing our approach

SQA worked in close partnership with a wide cross-section of stakeholders in the development of the 2023 approach to awarding. Key to this was advice from the National Qualifications 2023 Group, which comprised of representatives from the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES), Colleges Scotland, Education Scotland, the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), School Leaders Scotland (SLS), the Scottish Council of Independent Schools (SCIS), the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), the Scottish Government, the National Parent Forum of Scotland and the Scottish Youth Parliament. SQA also worked with its Advisory Council and Qualifications Committee. The package of support designed for learners, including the approach to standards, was developed in partnership with a range of key stakeholders. The views of appointees were gathered through an evaluation of 2021–22 to help inform SQA’s approach for 2022–23. This feedback was essential in helping to develop our approach to awarding. It was determined once more that a balance needed to be achieved between supporting learners through the continued and lessening impact of the pandemic, 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, and is set out later in this report, was informed by the views of stakeholders and learners. It was also discussed and approved by SQA’s Qualifications Committee and by the SQA Board of Management.

Overview of approach to awarding

SQA developed a revised package of support for learners undertaking National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher course assessments in the 2022–23 session. This built on the measures that were in place in 2021–22.

While conditions remained challenging and uncertain throughout the year, with the impact of the pandemic on learning and teaching still being experienced, there was greater confidence that delivery of the examination diet would proceed as normal with appropriate support measures in place for learners.

The full range of measures and support services was announced in [November 2022](#) and included:

- ◆ Modifications to course assessment (retained from 2021–22)
- ◆ Confirmation of a sensitive approach to grading
- ◆ Exam Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service (EECCS)
- ◆ Appeals 2023 Service

Each of these is discussed below. It should be noted that the revision support in place for the 2021–22 session was not offered to learners this year.

Modifications

The package of support included modifications to course assessment, which were retained from 2021–22. SQA [confirmed](#) on 28 April 2022 that existing modifications to National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher course assessments would remain in place for the 2022–23 session. A [modification summary](#) document for each subject was made available on the SQA website. Centres were expected to teach full course content to ensure that learners were given the opportunity to develop the required skills, knowledge and understanding to support progression.

Generally, the modifications were designed to help reduce the volume of assessment and ease teacher, lecturer and learner workload, while maintaining the credibility of the qualifications. This was pursued through a range of measures to best fit with the established assessment approach for each subject. Overall, modifications aimed to increase opportunities and time for learning and teaching with a view to supporting recovery.

Examples of some of the modifications adopted at subject level include:

- ◆ Modifying approaches to optionality in some of the question papers to allow centres to focus their available learning and teaching time on a narrower range of topics or content. For example, in a History question paper, instead of mandatory questions, learners could choose one question from two sections of the paper. This supported teachers and lecturers by allowing them to focus on a narrower range of course topics and offered increased opportunities for learning and teaching.
- ◆ The removal of coursework to ensure class time required for planning, organising, and developing an assignment could be used as learning and teaching time for the course. For some subjects (such as sciences) practical or experimental work was removed due to public health restrictions in place at the time.
- ◆ Adjustments to the volume of assessable content. For example, in Higher Art and Design learners could choose to respond to either the Expressive Art Studies or the Design Studies section. This provided learners with choice and teachers and lecturers with more opportunity to focus learning and teaching on one aspect of study, rather than the usual two areas of study.

Sensitive grading

SQA adopted an approach to standard setting that retained the key elements of the well-established awarding procedures, but also sought to provide an extra layer of support to ensure learners were not unfairly disadvantaged. This overall approach to awarding utilised a sensitive approach to grading. This ensured a range of factors could be considered during the grade boundary process while protecting the credibility and integrity of qualifications through maintaining performance standards. Further details of the approach are outlined in Section 5 of this report.

EECCS and Appeals 2023

In addition to this wide range of measures, SQA also recognised that the ongoing impacts on learning and teaching caused by the pandemic would require further support and reassurance for learners. SQA provided [details of the wider package of support](#) on 1 February 2023, including details of the Examination Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service (EECCS), grading and Appeals service (see sections 6 and 7). Both of these services were adjusted from those that ran in 2021–22 to reflect our own and stakeholders' experiences of them.

A range of other resources were made available to learners ahead of the exams, which included the [SQA website](#), a ['Your Exams' Guide](#) and [SQA's MyStudyPlan app](#) to help learners prepare for their exams.

2023 Awarding in the rest of the UK

Despite slightly different approaches to awarding across the UK (see Section 5), all systems are continuing a journey back to pre-pandemic awarding.

As outlined above, modifications to course assessment in Scotland have been retained for this session and will have again helped learners in mitigating the impacts of the disruption over the previous three years.

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, most modifications (or adaptations) to course assessment were removed for the 2022–23 session. However, learners were provided with advance information or advanced notice of content in some subjects. Following a thorough evaluation of the approach to assessment and awarding in 2021–22, SQA made the decision to remove revision support (which included advanced notice of examined content for some courses) as it was deemed to have been less useful to learners and benefitted some groups of learners over others, which raised issues of equity.

In respect to setting standards, England, Wales and Northern Ireland have outlined their expectation that results in 2022–23 will likely fall somewhere between those in 2019 (pre-pandemic) and 2022. [Ofqual](#) will oversee a return to 'pre-pandemic grading' but with protection for learners if exam performance is weaker in 2023. Ofqual has outlined an expectation 'that overall results in 2023 will be much closer to pre-pandemic years than results since 2020. This decision means that results in 2023 will be lower than in 2022.'

In Northern Ireland, [CCEA](#) intends to 'continue the journey back to pre-pandemic standards in awarding its qualifications in 2023 and expects to achieve this by 2024', but does not make a projection for outcomes.

In Wales, [Qualifications Wales](#) has also outlined their intention that 'this year's results will fall broadly midway between the 2019 and 2022 summer results. This signals the next step in our transition back to pre-pandemic outcomes.'

SQA's approach to awarding

Setting and maintaining qualification and assessment standards is complex and technical. In jurisdictions across the globe, and indeed in the different nations of the UK, slightly different concepts of standards are adopted or prioritised, and different approaches and methods are used for alignment.

In Scotland, the tradition of standards maintenance falls under the banner of 'attainment-referenced' — sometimes also referred to as weak-criterion referencing. This means the intention is to maintain performance standards by using expert judgement of assessment performance through the use of qualitative evidence, supported by statistics. This is different from 'norm-referenced' approaches (which seek to maintain the same overall outcomes regardless of individual performance) or 'criterion-referenced' approaches (which seek to prioritise performance standards through consideration of performance against specified criteria).

SQA's approach to standard setting achieves its goal by using a well-established process called 'awarding'. Further details about the awarding process can be found in the [Guide to Setting Grade Boundaries](#), which outlines how the process works — an approach that has been, as far as possible, retained for this year. The key aim of awarding is to ensure that it is no easier or harder to obtain a particular grade compared to the previous year and that standards are maintained. In 2021–22, there was no adjacent comparator year that could be used as an adequate benchmark. This necessitated the policy position adopted in 2022 outlined below.

Setting grade boundaries in 2023

For 2022–23, there remained a requirement to consider the factors that may have affected performance. Modifications to course assessment remained in place, however, revision support was removed. While the ongoing impacts of disruption to learning and teaching were uncertain to an extent, there was an expectation that the effects on the acquisition of knowledge, understanding and skills — and performance — should be less this year.

In 2022–23, the awarding procedure operated using the established procedure as far as possible in order to evaluate whether the course assessment had performed as intended, but additionally, consideration was given to the following factors:

- ◆ The impact of the legacy of disruption to teaching and learning caused by the pandemic
- ◆ The impact of modifications to course assessment
- ◆ The impact of removing revision support

Awarding decisions were therefore sensitive to these additional factors, ensuring that grade boundary decisions again recognised that performance continued to be impacted. This was informed by the full range of qualitative and quantitative data used during awarding, including marker reports. As was the case in 2022, feedback from markers provided senior appointees and awarding panels with valuable insight as they evaluated the performance of the assessments, including the impact of the modifications. Markers were asked to assess performance standards in 2023 to those pre-pandemic (2019) and in 2022 to help monitor the extent of recovery. Awarding meetings could therefore evaluate the performance of the

course assessment and performance standards in comparison to 2022 and pre-pandemic years as key reference points for decision making.

In 2022, there was an explicit policy intention to achieve an intermediary position between 2019 and 2021 at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher levels. However, there was no explicit policy intention this year around outcomes. There was, though, an expectation that 2023 awarding would represent a step towards Scotland's journey back to pre-pandemic standards through less significant adjustments to grade boundaries than in 2022.

Principal Assessors were asked to indicate whether they thought intended grade boundaries would be at notional, previous year or moving towards notional. Notional grade boundaries are set at 50% of total marks for the course assessment for C, 70% for A and 85% for upper A. SQA's assessments are developed with these notional or near notional grade boundaries in mind. They are therefore the starting point for discussing the final grade boundaries for most courses in any year. Any adjustments are made from this starting point.

The focus of awarding meetings was therefore on maintaining standards and on judging how much progress had been made on the journey back to pre-pandemic standards. Three key questions guided discussions and decision-making:

- a) Has the course assessment functioned as intended?
- b) How does candidate performance in 2023 compared to pre-pandemic (2019)?
- c) Has candidate performance improved in comparison with 2022?

The performance of candidates in each course assessment component was compared to that of the 2022 cohort, as would be the case in a normal awarding year, and pre-pandemic. Decisions were underpinned by a thorough evaluation of qualitative and quantitative evidence.

Following the approach in 2022 for 2023, an updated 'stepwise' approach was developed to support the decision-making process. This was used after an initial evaluation of the course assessment and helped to guide awarding panels in their evaluation of candidate performance, with particular attention paid to the extent of recovery with respect to performance standards:

The 'stepwise' approach to setting grade boundaries in 2023

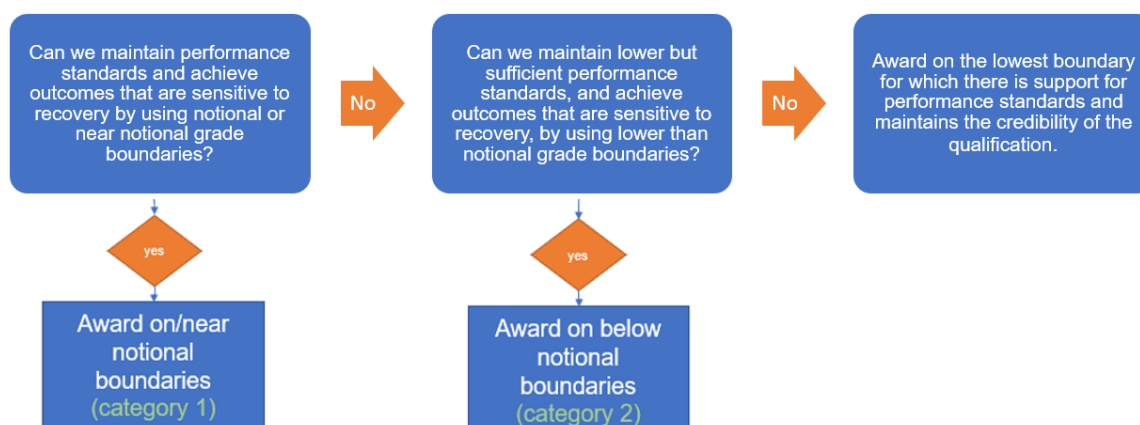


Figure 1: The 'stepwise' approach to setting grade boundaries in 2023

SQA is removing the majority of modifications made to course assessment from the 2023–24 academic session. It should be noted that restoring full course assessments, particularly where whole components have been removed, will improve the validity of assessments and should further facilitate the move back towards normal awarding. Careful consideration will be given to our approach to awarding in 2024, given the return to full course assessment. Full details of the outcomes of the awarding process can be found at the [SQA Statistics](#) section of the SQA website, where the outcomes for the 2022–23 session are published. The SQA website also includes details of how SQA met its statutory duty to consider the equalities impacts of its awarding activities in 2023. This includes the Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) and Children's Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment (CRWIA) of this year's approach, and an Equalities Monitoring Report.

The Chief Examiner's Report provides further detail on some of the themes that emerged from Awarding 2023. Further details of themes at course level will be made available in the course reports produced for each NQ subject, published from September 2022 on the [SQA website](#).

Examination Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service

As part of the wider package of SQA support, we put in place an Examination Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service (EECCS) to provide support to individual learners who experience disruption at the time of the exam — those who are unable to sit an exam or who are affected by an exceptional circumstance that impacted their ability to perform on the day of the exam. This is a longstanding SQA service and is of benefit to learners who find themselves in these circumstances.

EECCS is a service unique to Scotland in which alternative evidence can be submitted by schools, colleges and training providers on behalf of their learners. In 2023, learners were eligible for EECCS consideration if:

- ◆ they had experienced a valid exceptional circumstance
- ◆ they had completed all the compulsory non-question paper components
- ◆ an estimate had been submitted for them
- ◆ alternative evidence for the impacted exam components was available

The service opened on 24 April 2023 and was made available for all exams that appear in the exam timetable. Non-question paper components were not eligible for this service. A closing date was set 10 working days after the exam for which the request was being made and there was no charge for this service.

Learners who believed they were eligible for this service could contact their school, college or training provider who then submitted requests on their behalf. Requests submitted directly from learners or parents/carers could not be accepted.

The EECCS involved SQA appointees — practising teachers and lecturers — reviewing all assessment evidence available, including alternative assessment evidence for the question paper component of the relevant qualification. If the learner has undertaken part or all of the exam components, these are considered as well as the alternative evidence. A range of evidence could be considered and guidance was issued to centres to ensure it was valid and reliable, covering important aspects of the specific skills, knowledge and understanding requirements of the course.

All academic evidence submitted in support of EECCS requests must have been generated **before** the date of the timetabled exam. The following are examples of the types of learner evidence that could be considered under this service:

- ◆ Prelims or mock exams
- ◆ End of topic assessments
- ◆ Performance recordings
- ◆ Classwork
- ◆ Folios of work

Schools, colleges and training providers sent the evidence to SQA. This evidence was then reviewed by SQA appointees who were provided with the learner's estimate, alternative academic evidence, any relevant non-question paper component candidate materials (for example, a folio or project), and any attempted question papers (in cases where a learner has started but been unable to complete an exam) related to the request.

Examiners then reviewed the academic evidence and determined a result subject to the following conditions:

- ◆ Where the learner has not managed to attend and/or complete any parts of the timetabled exam and therefore only alternative academic evidence is available, any grade awarded will be at the lowest band point available; for example A2, B4 or C6.
- ◆ Schools, colleges and training providers were asked to inform SQA if a learner has a conditional offer from university that required an A1 band. In these cases, by exception, should the learner's alternative evidence justify a grade A, the examiner will also determine the appropriate band.

Full details of the [EECCS service](#) were made available on the SQA website.

Appeals

The 2023 Appeals service provides learners and centres with the opportunity to request a review of their SQA-marked assessment components. Based on SQA's evaluation of the 2021–22 service and extensive engagement with stakeholders, Appeals 2023 is different to the service offered in 2021–22. The key difference is that, primarily for reasons of fairness, alternative assessment evidence will not be considered as part of any appeal for 2023.

This year, learners can request a marking review of the materials that were submitted to SQA for marking if the result is unexpected and they believe that an error may have occurred with either the totalling of marks or the marking, and this has resulted in the wrong grade being awarded. This service is heavily based on the post-results service operated by SQA before 2019.

Appeals 2023 is free of charge and opens on Tuesday 8 August at 9 am for learners or their representatives to request a review directly to SQA, or through their school, college or training provider (centre). Appeals can be prioritised if the learner has a conditional place at university or college, or for training or employment that depends on their grade. Grades can go up, stay the same or go down as a result of an appeal. Therefore, the learner's consent must be provided before any requests are submitted by a centre or learner representative.

Further information about [Appeals 2023](#) has been provided on the SQA website and in information sent directly to every learner this year.