



# 2023 National Qualifications and Awards Results

This report reflects my observations, as Chief Examining Officer for Scotland, on the delivery of National Qualifications and Awards in 2023.

In the 2022–23 session, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) has:

- ◆ recognised that while the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic may have been less severe than in previous years, things have not yet returned to normal. We have an approach to assessment and awarding that helps to support recovery of teaching and learning while maintaining the standards and credibility of our qualifications. This has included the continuation of modifications to assessment, freeing up time for learning and teaching and providing *Understanding Standards* materials, as well as other advice and support to help practitioners prepare learners effectively for SQA’s assessments
- ◆ continued to work closely with the education and training sectors, including members of the National Qualifications 2023 and Higher National and Vocational Qualifications 2023 Groups to deliver approaches to awarding all qualifications, ensuring that learners get the results they deserve and have the knowledge and skills they need to progress to further learning, training or work. This includes a new service for appeals, which also draws on our [full evaluation](#) of our approach to awarding in 2022

On 8 August 2023, SQA published the [Provisional Attainment Statistics \(August\) 2023](#) for the National Courses and Awards. It contains attainment information across the National Courses (National 2 to National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher, and the Scottish Baccalaureate), together with Awards, Skills for Work courses, National Progression Awards, and National Certificates.

The different assessment approaches taken for the different qualification types for which statistics are reported in the [Provisional Attainment Statistics \(August\) 2023](#), are summarised below:

## **National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher**

This is the second year following the pandemic that learners in Scotland have taken formal national assessments (exams, in addition to coursework). This has been supported by a package of measures, including course assessment modifications and a more sensitive approach to awarding, as well as ongoing support from across the education system at a national, regional, local and school/college level.

Further information on the approach to assessment and awarding in 2023 is available in the [National Qualifications 2023 Methodology Report](#).

## **National 2, National 3, and National 4 Courses, Scottish Baccalaureate, Interdisciplinary Project, and free-standing units at all [Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework \(SCQF\)](#) levels**

Schools, colleges and training providers submitted unit results based on evidence from completed assessments, and evidence of learners' progress and achievements. In keeping with arrangements in 2021 and 2022, learners did not need to complete the additional assessment for the added value unit in National 4 courses. This was agreed with partners to maximise time for learning and teaching and for assessing other units in these courses.

## **National Certificates, National Progression Awards, Skills for Work courses and Awards**

The alternative assessment approaches developed for vocational qualifications drawing on the advice of the Higher National and Vocational Qualifications Group for the 2021–22 session continued in the 2022–23 session. All results are based on a holistic assessment decision-making process. Find out more in the [Higher National and Vocational Qualifications guidance](#).

Further supporting information is available across a suite of documents, published at 9.30 am on Tuesday 8 August, including:

[Provisional Attainment Statistics \(August\) 2023](#)

[Grade Boundaries 2023](#)

[Component Marks 2023](#)

[Assessment Arrangements 2023](#)

[2023 Awarding: Equalities Monitoring Report](#)

## **Context**

The global COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the cancellation of exams in Scotland in 2020 and 2021 and alternative approaches to certification. Since 2022, we have returned to formal external assessment (exams and coursework). However, it has been clear to SQA that measures continue to be needed to support the recovery of learning and teaching, while maintaining standards. SQA worked with partners across the education community, including teachers, lecturers, learners, parents and carers, throughout the year to agree the approach to assessment. A wide-ranging package of support was also developed. This support aimed to enable learners to demonstrate what they know, understand and can do, within the context of the ongoing recovery.

Every year, SQA's role is to evaluate performance in assessments in an equitable and fair way, while ensuring standards are maintained so that qualifications remain credible — and this year was no different. Learners' demonstrated attainment — evidence of a learner's knowledge and skills in a course measured against the required national standard — is at the core of our approach.

Thousands of practising teachers and lecturers work with experienced SQA staff every year and are at the heart of the awarding process — they set the assessments (exams and coursework), mark and quality assure them. They also play a key role in setting the grade boundaries and in SQA's exceptional circumstances and appeals services.

Building on the collaboration and partnership developed in the last few years, SQA continued to work closely and sought advice from the National Qualifications (NQ) 2023 Group, made up 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 Government, National Parent Forum of Scotland (NPFSS), the Scottish Youth Parliament and Universities Scotland. The NQ 2023 Group was supported by the National Qualifications 2023 Working Group and National Qualifications Partner Communications Group.

The Higher National and Vocational Qualifications Group also continued to review and develop advice and guidance to support assessment for Higher National and vocational qualifications in 2022–23, as well as develop and deliver timely and informative communications. The group is made up of representatives from the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES), Colleges Scotland, the College Vice Principal Forum, Developing the Young Workforce (DYW), Educational Institute of Scotland — Further Education Lecturers' Association (EIS-FELA), the National Union of Students (NUS), the Scottish Funding Council, the Scottish Government, the Scottish Training Federation (STF), and Skills Development Scotland (SDS). The Higher National and Vocational Qualifications Group was also supported by a working group.

SQA is committed to engaging with learners and their parents and carers. Our established Learner Panel continued to ensure the views of young people were fully heard in our consideration of approaches to assessment and awarding for 2023. We continued to engage and share messages with organisations representing learners and their parents and carers, including the Scottish Youth Parliament, NPFSS and Connect. SQA also communicated directly with learners through a wide range of channels.

I would like to express my sincere thanks to everyone who played a part in the delivery and awarding of all qualifications in 2023. Once again, the education, skills and training community came together and worked collaboratively to deliver for learners.

## **Developing the approach to certification**

In recognition that recovery from the pandemic remains ongoing within the education system, SQA announced and delivered a package of support for learners, developed in partnership with the wider education community. Revision support was removed, but support remained significant and included:

- ◆ a continuation of the course assessment modifications, building on the approach in 2021–22, that was based on consultation with teachers and lecturers, and welcomed by them, which reduced the volume of assessment to ease learner, teacher and lecturer workload and maximise time for teaching and learning. These either:
  - removed or reduced elements of an exam and/or coursework
  - provided more choice in an assessment
  - removed a topic from an exam
- ◆ an Examination Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service for learners who were unable to attend an exam or whose performance was impacted by personal circumstances

- ◆ a sensitive approach to grading, to help ensure fairness for learners while maintaining standards
- ◆ a free appeals service for any learner who had concerns about a grade — they can appeal either via their school or college or by using SQA's learner direct service. Further details on the appeals service is available at [Appeals service 2023](#).

## Maintaining national standards

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.

As announced in November 2022, SQA has taken a sensitive approach to grading National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses, this year to provide an extra layer of protection for learners while maintaining standards.

Grade boundaries set the minimum marks needed to get an A, B, C, D grade or a No Award. Every SQA assessment, both exams and coursework, includes questions and tasks that provide opportunities for all learners to demonstrate their skills, knowledge and understanding, if they are presented at the correct SCQF level. Our assessments are also designed to differentiate between different levels of performance.

Grade boundaries help ensure assessments have worked as planned and that standards are consistent from one year to the next. Every year we review how each course assessment has performed to set grade boundaries fairly.

Grade boundaries have always been used — in Scotland and elsewhere — when external assessment has taken place, using rigorous, well-established and published procedures. The key difference over the last two years is that grade boundary decisions have been set in recognition of the unique circumstances learners have faced, and ongoing impacts.

Where necessary and appropriate, adjustments to grade boundaries were sensitive to the challenges learners have faced using the evidence and experience of our senior examiners, while maintaining the credibility of the qualifications. These grade boundary adjustments remained larger than in a normal year, to benefit learners, but smaller than in 2022.

Further information on our approach to awarding, including grading, is available in the [National Qualifications 2023 Awarding Methodology Report](#). Information on component marks and grade boundaries is included on [SQA's statistics webpage](#).

## Attainment

The distribution of 2023 attainment by grade is summarised below. Further statistical information about 2023 results is available on [SQA's statistics webpage](#).

Table 1: attainment summary for graded National Courses in August 2023

Counts* per grade							
Award level	A	B	C	A to C	D	No Award	Total
<b>National 5</b>	124,130	71,800	57,145	253,075	37,700	30,585	321,360
<b>Higher</b>	62,945	46,205	38,760	147,915	25,740	18,160	191,810
<b>Advanced Higher</b>	9,145	7,090	5,915	22,150	3,575	2,030	27,750

\*all counts are rounded to the nearest five

Percentage of entries						
Award level	A	B	C	A to C	D	No Award
<b>National 5</b>	38.6%	22.3%	17.8%	78.8%	11.7%	9.5%
<b>Higher</b>	32.8%	24.1%	20.2%	77.1%	13.4%	9.5%
<b>Advanced Higher</b>	33.0%	25.5%	21.3%	79.8%	12.9%	7.3%

A to C attainment in 2023 at National 5 is 253,075 or 78.8%. At Higher it is 147,915 or 77.1%. At Advanced Higher it is 22,150 or 79.8%. This is a strong set of results.

The alternative awarding arrangements in place in 2020 and 2021, the generous approach applied in 2022, and the significantly different circumstances in which exams took place in 2019 and the years before, mean that comparisons of attainment between years should be treated with significant caution and do not allow for any conclusions to be drawn on changes in education performance. However, A to C attainment across most courses at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher are above pre-pandemic levels. This reflects the achievement of learners, combined with the sensitive approach to grading we have adopted in 2023.

A notable exception is A to C attainment for National 5 Mathematics which is below pre-pandemic levels. Although many learners continued to perform well, overall performance is weaker this year. Entries for National 5 Maths were 37,560, 735 below 2022 levels, and there are a number of factors to consider including: a significant number of dual entries at National 4 and National 5; significant growth in the number of entries for National 5 Applications of Mathematics, including numbers of dual entries across both courses.

A to C attainment rates are dependent on a range of factors, including the number of learners presented for qualifications. Over the last few years, we have seen significant increases in the numbers of dual entries at National 4 and National 5. In 2023, dual entries at National 4 and National 5 were 30,530, or 9.5% of total entries at National 5. This is a significant increase on pre-pandemic levels, at 13,595 (4.7%) in 2019 and this fell to below 10,000 in 2020 and 2021. Increased entries has impacted on attainment rates at National 5, though the number achieving A to C grades is higher overall.

Finally, I am pleased to see the continuing engagement in the wider qualifications offer across the SQA portfolio. For example, attainment has increased across a range of SCQF levels in Skills for Work courses, Awards and National Progression Awards.

## Equalities considerations

SQA has a duty to ensure that assessment and awarding is fair for all. Throughout the development of the assessment approach in 2023, we have had equalities at the heart of our thinking. We have developed and published equality impact assessments and child rights and wellbeing impact assessments to inform our approaches and decisions, as well as to demonstrate our compliance with our statutory obligations.

SQA marking and awarding procedures take place without information on the characteristics or circumstances of individual learners, to ensure fairness. However, after awarding is concluded, we undertake an equalities analysis and this is published as an [Equalities Monitoring Report](#) alongside results.

Generally, attainment at grades A to C is above pre-pandemic levels for most groups. When focusing on SIMD quintiles and the most deprived (SIMD Quintile 1) and least deprived (SIMD Quintile 5), the difference in attainment between the two groups in 2023, is lower relative to 2019 at grades A to C at all levels. Relative to 2022, the difference in A to C attainment between SIMD quintiles 1 and 5 is higher at National 5 and Higher, but lower at Advanced Higher.

As highlighted above, given the different approaches to assessment and awarding in each year since 2019, comparisons of attainment between years and across different groups should be treated with caution and do not allow for conclusions to be drawn on changes in education performance during this time.

Full tables and analysis are available in the [2023 Awarding: Equalities Monitoring Report](#).

## Observations on how the assessment approach worked in 2023

The modifications to course assessment, designed in the early stages of the pandemic to free up time for learning and teaching, were largely retained in recognition that the impact of the pandemic was still being felt by learners throughout the 2022–23 session. This decision was informed and supported by stakeholders from across Scottish education and by subject specialists.

While it is very difficult to isolate the impacts on learners' achievements from the range of other factors that have influenced their performance over this year, it is clear that in key areas the course assessment modifications have enabled learners to focus on developing key skills, knowledge and understanding.

A range of resources were also made available to learners ahead of this year's exam diet. These included targeted information and support on the SQA website, a ['Your Exams' Guide](#) and [SQA's MyStudyPlan app](#) to help learners make the most of their revision time.

To provide an extra layer of protection for learners, we did not return to normal awarding procedures this year and took a sensitive approach to grading. Using all the evidence and experience of our senior examiners, we considered the impact of the pandemic during the recovery phase to teaching and learning, the impact of modifications to course assessments and the removal of revision support.

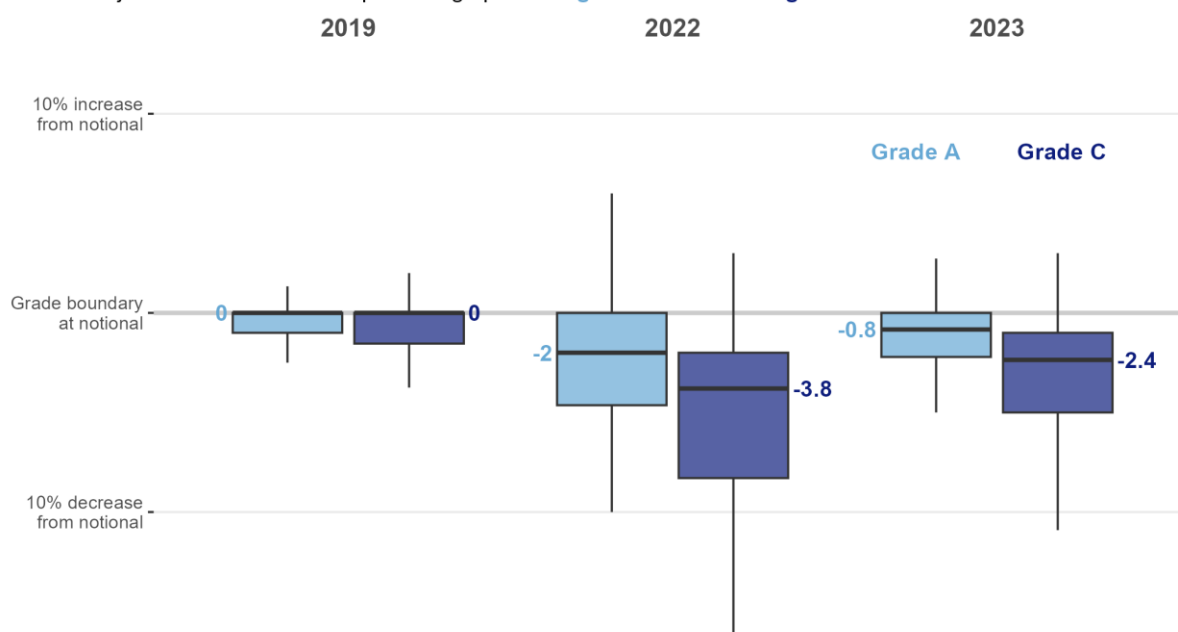
Where we observed specific challenges that learners had faced, using the evidence and experience of our senior examiners, we were able to make appropriate adjustments to grade boundaries.

Typically, fewer than half of all grade boundaries are adjusted (up or down) from expected or notional boundaries and, on average boundaries are notional. In 2022, consideration was given to the impact on grade boundaries of course assessment modifications (for example, the removal or reduction of coursework) and revision support. The impact of disruption on this year’s learners, specifically how this has impacted acquisition of skills and knowledge, was also considered. Taking all of this into account, grade boundaries were adjusted. In many cases, where appropriate, these adjustments were on average more significant than in a normal exam year but only in so far as the credibility of qualifications was maintained. The median adjustment is usually around zero but in 2022 was -3.8 percentage points at grade C and -2.0 percentage points at grade A.

In 2023, the median adjustment was -0.8 percentage points at grade A and -2.4 percentage points at grade C, as shown below. These median adjustments are smaller than in 2022, reflecting the continuing recovery in skills, knowledge and understanding on the part of learners and a sensitive approach to grading.

#### Adjustments to Notional Boundaries for Grades A and C.

Median adjustment in 2023 is -0.8 percentage points at **grade A** and -2.4 at **grade C**.



*The boxplots do not show outliers (which are extreme values that are a long way beyond the location of half of the grade boundaries).*

Despite a strong package of support, further adjustments needed to be made to respond to the challenges learners have faced. However, I observed strong engagement by learners across all their SQA assessments and qualifications.

I would conclude that this is a strong set of results and demonstrates a further step forward along the road to recovery and normal awarding.

## **Wider issues**

### **Foundation Apprenticeships**

SQA qualifications are also being taken as part of Foundation Apprenticeships, in a range of subjects including engineering, financial services, information technology, and social services. There are twelve Foundation Apprenticeships available.

Foundation Apprenticeships are one of the work-based learning opportunities available to many senior phase learners. They provide opportunities for learners to engage with employers in various ways, to support their learning and skills development throughout. Learners may be working towards a Foundation Apprenticeship alongside their other qualifications such as National 5 and Highers.

This year has seen 1,065 Foundation Apprenticeships achieved.

### **Wider achievement**

In addition to the graded National Courses, SQA provides a wide suite of qualifications that play a critical role in meeting a range of learners' interests and abilities. These include awards in areas such as leadership, employability, and personal finance, as well as a range of Skills for Work courses, Awards, National Certificates and National Progression Awards. These are part of a broadening of the curriculum and support a range of initiatives such as the Developing the Young Workforce programme.

This year we have seen increasing engagement and attainment of some of these qualifications at SCQF levels 3, 4, 5 and 6, particularly in areas such as Employability, Mental Health and Wellbeing, Computer Games Development, Engineering Skills, Hairdressing, Cyber Security and Digital Media.

Working with the Higher National and Vocational Qualifications 2023 Group, SQA retained the alternative assessment approaches and subject-specific guidance for the 2022–23 session, to support recovery. These arrangements had been put in place for these qualifications in response to disruption caused by the pandemic. Learners can be certificated for vocational qualifications throughout the year, once assessment is complete.

This wide range of qualifications will help young people reach their full potential as they progress from their broad general education through to college, university, apprenticeships, other learning, training and employment.



## **Final remarks**

I remain very grateful, as Scotland's Chief Examining Officer, to all of Scotland's thousands of teachers and lecturers, SQA staff, SQA co-ordinators including markers and assessors, school and college support staff, local authorities, professional associations and national organisations who have collectively delivered for learners in difficult circumstances.

Most importantly, I wish to record my continuing admiration for Scotland's learners, who have shown great resilience and worked exceptionally hard to achieve their best. The results that they receive today reflect their achievements and should allow them to progress to further study, training or employment.

**Fiona Robertson**

Scotland's Chief Examining Officer

8 August 2023