



Evaluation of the 2023 Approach to the Assessment of Graded National Courses

Summary Report

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Introduction

SQA's Evaluation of the 2023 Approach to the Assessment of Graded National Courses aims to understand how the assessment approach worked in practice, from the perspective of those most closely involved. Its findings provide a record of the reflections of participants and offer considerations for the future of Scotland's qualifications and assessment system in the senior phase, particularly in the context of upcoming reform. This report summarises the range of such evaluation activity that SQA has carried out since the conclusion of the 2022–23 academic session.

It is worth highlighting that the research findings demonstrate that there is no one stakeholder view. Experiences, perceptions, and opinions vary between and within different groups. At times, these positions are contradictory. Some of these positions will be informed by evidence and some are more perception-based. An important aspect of the evaluation is capturing a diverse range of perspectives on the approach, including from learners, teachers and lecturers, and SQA's Qualification Development colleagues and senior appointees. Understanding the benefits and challenges of different arrangements is of vital importance and creates a record and evidence base to inform decisions for the current academic year and beyond.

SQA is extremely grateful to SQA co-ordinators, learners, teachers, lecturers, and SQA qualifications teams and senior appointees for their assistance with and participation in these important pieces of research.

Overview of the assessment approach

After the cancellation of examinations in 2020 and 2021, formal examinations and assessments ran in 2022 and again in 2023 in an environment that has, nevertheless, remained challenging and uncertain for learners, teachers and lecturers. SQA, working in close partnership with a wide cross-section of stakeholders, determined that in 2023 as in 2022, a balance needed to be achieved between supporting learners through the 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 discussions and of our work. SQA developed a revised package of support for learners undertaking National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher course assessments in the 2022–23 session, as shown below. This built on the measures that were in place in 2021–22.

2022–23 package of support

Modifications to course assessment

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 qualifications.

Sensitive approach to grading

Ensuring a range of factors could be considered during the grade boundary process while protecting the credibility and integrity of qualifications through maintaining performance standards.

Exam exceptional circumstances consideration service

Provided support to individual learners who experienced disruption at the time of the timetabled exam.

Appeals

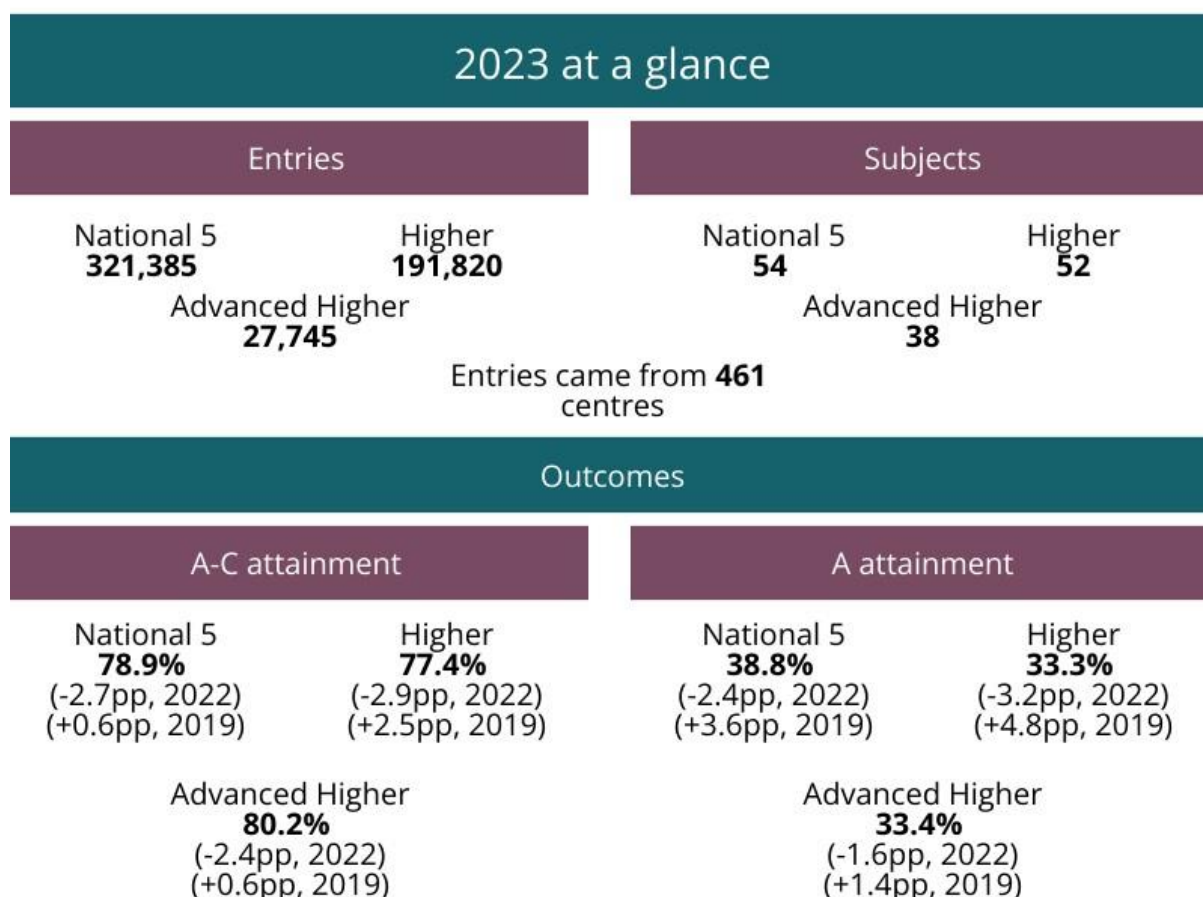
Provided learners and centres with the opportunity to request a free of charge review of their SQA-marked assessment components.

Further information is available in the chief examining officer's report, [2023 National Qualifications and Awards Results](#), and [National Qualifications 2023 Awarding – Methodology Report](#).

Outcomes

The headline [statistics and results](#) from 2023 are highlighted below in **Figure 1**. Attainment statistics are presented with reference to attainment in the previous year (2022) and in 2019 (the most recent year prior to the pandemic). The different awarding arrangements in place between 2020 and 2023 mean that it is not possible to compare attainment between these years without full consideration of essential contextual information as outlined in [SQA's attainment statistics background information](#).

Figure 1



Changes in outcomes compared with 2022 and 2019 are given in percentage points (pp). Entry figures are rounded to the nearest five.

Estimates and results

Noted below are the headline statistics and findings on estimated grades in 2023.

Relationship between teacher estimates and results

In 2023, attainment rates were higher than estimated.

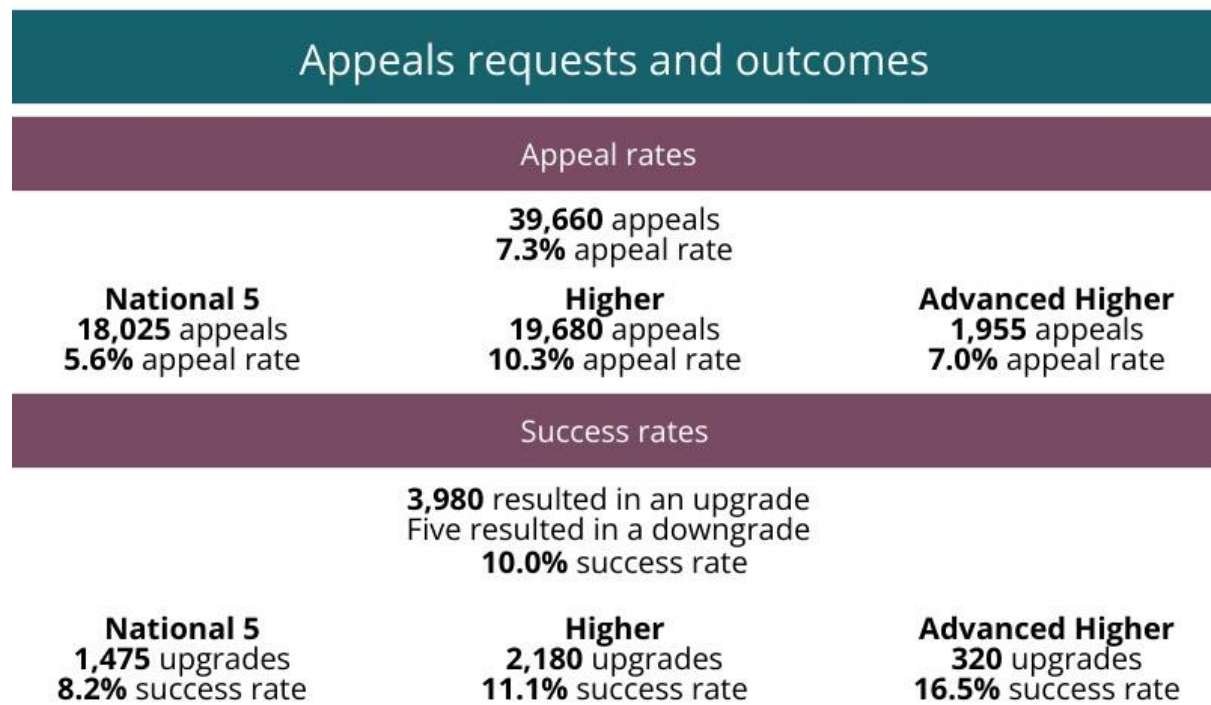
- ◆ Total National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher A–C attainment was 3.5 pp higher than estimated.
- ◆ Total National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher A attainment was 6.1 pp higher than estimated.
- ◆ In total, 49.8% of entries were awarded the same grade as estimated in 2023, while 31.9% were awarded a higher grade and 18.3% were awarded a lower grade.
- ◆ When estimated grades did not match awarded grades, they most commonly differed by one grade.

Further information is available in [Relationships between teacher estimates and results in Scotland](#).

Appeals

Noted below in **Figure 2** are the headline statistics and findings on Appeals 2023. Note that the approach to appeals has varied each year since 2019, so it would not be appropriate to compare appeals outcomes in 2023 with previous years.

Figure 2



Further information is available in the [Summary of Appeals Outcomes – 2023](#).

Evaluation approach

SQA's Evaluation of the 2023 Approach to the Assessment of Graded National Courses was split into several project strands. A mixed methods approach was adopted and a range of research methods used, including primary research and statistical analysis.



[Learner and practitioner experiences and perceptions](#)

Detailed research studies that aim to understand the experience of assessment in 2023 from the perspective of learners and practitioners, building a picture of how the 2023 assessment approach worked in practice. The research involved two stages — large-scale surveys, followed by a series of in-depth interviews.



[Reflections of senior appointees and Qualifications Development teams](#)

A report outlining the results of engagement with senior appointees (subject specialist teachers and lecturers) and SQA Qualification Development colleagues who support the delivery of National Courses. The purpose of this engagement was to gather participants' perspectives on how the assessment approach worked in practice, with particular focus on themes relating to standards.



[Relationship between teacher estimates and results in Scotland](#)

A report examining the relationships between awarded grades and estimates in exam years. SQA collects estimates of attainment from centres every year as part of the procedure for awarding National Courses. This analysis includes 2023, 2022, and the three years prior to the pandemic (2017 to 2019) but does not include 2020 and 2021 when exams did not take place.



[Dual entry analysis](#)

In the 2022–23 academic year, there was a sizeable increase in the number of learners presented at both National 4 and National 5 for a single subject compared with recent years. This report explores the entry and attainment profiles of National 5 candidates and examines the impact of dual presentation over the five-year period of 2019 to 2023.



[National 5 Mathematics analysis](#)

A to C attainment across most courses at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher was above pre-pandemic levels in 2023. A notable exception was A to C attainment for National 5 Mathematics, which was below pre-pandemic levels. While a number of factors influence attainment, this report focuses on exploring the impact that dual presentation, double presentation, and learner stage has on Mathematics attainment.

Key themes

While each project strand explored different aspects of the 2023 assessment approach, several common themes emerged.

Theme	Findings
Legacy of the pandemic	<p>The research findings suggest that the direct disruption to teaching, learning and assessment associated with the pandemic lessened in 2022–23 and there was evidence of recovery compared to 2021–22. However, the legacy impacts of the pandemic are still widely perceived to be affecting teaching, learning, and assessment for some learners.</p> <p>Practitioners, in particular, believed that compared to their predecessors prior to the pandemic, National Qualification learners are less resilient, have lower levels of focus, and have less-developed foundational skills and knowledge. This apparent change in learner attitude and performance, combined with declining attendance rates, has resulted in what many practitioners believe to be learners who find external assessment more stressful than earlier cohorts. Senior appointees also cited areas where they believed senior phase learners had not developed the specific skills that would normally have been developed in broad general education. Learners themselves expressed concerns around perceived gaps in a range of skills and knowledge as a result of the impact of the pandemic upon their learning.</p> <p>The research suggests that the issue of the ongoing effects of the pandemic is complex; its effects are difficult to quantify and have varying impacts upon groups of learners and subjects. It is challenging to disentangle the influences of a range of different factors associated with the amended and varied teaching, learning and assessment approaches that have been in place since 2019.</p>
Entries, estimates and outcomes	<p>The data analysis strands of this evaluation research suggest that the pandemic may have precipitated changes in entry patterns and attainment.</p> <p>While the proportion of learners who were dual entered in 2023 (that is, entered for National 4 and National 5 in the same subject) increased after decreasing over the pandemic period, the overall attainment rates of these learners have increased since before the pandemic. This suggests that there may have been a shift in the cohort of learners who are dual presented.</p> <p>The Mathematics analysis also suggests a shift in the dual entry cohort. While the proportion of learners who were dual entered</p>

Theme	Findings
	<p>was similar in 2023 compared to 2019, the overall A to C attainment was almost five-fold higher in 2023 compared to pre-pandemic years.</p> <p>Analysis of teachers' estimated grades also suggests a change. Between 2017 and 2019, when looking at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses combined, for grades A to C, estimates were around one percentage point higher than results, but there was a gap at grade A, where estimates were typically between six and seven percentage points lower than results. In 2022 and 2023, attainment rates were higher than estimated: A to C attainment was between two and four percentage points higher than estimated. Grade A attainment in 2023 was around six percentage points higher than estimated. Note, however, that the context in which teachers estimated grades differed over the period, with different approaches to awarding in place.</p>
Fairness	<p>The earlier evaluations of 2021 and 2022 revealed tensions in — and possibly the contradictory nature of — stakeholders' understanding and perceptions of fairness. This was evident again in 2023.</p> <p>Traditionally, fairness in assessment has focused on issues such as ensuring that all learners have the same opportunity to show their skills and knowledge, that assessments are a fair test of the course content, and that assessments were both valid and reliable. It is clear that this perception of fairness remains important to stakeholders. However, it is also clear that, for many, an approach that takes learners' individual circumstances into account is also an important part of fairness.¹</p> <p>In 2023, the tension in the differing notions of fairness was most evident in the research findings around appeals. A theme emerging from the responses of some learners and practitioners was that the appeals process was unfair because it did not take alternative evidence from throughout the year into account. However, findings from other practitioners, senior appointees and SQA Qualification Development colleagues suggest that they thought that the appeals process was fair to all learners, with decisions based on the same quality assured and standardised SQA assessments, rather than alternative evidence.</p>

¹ It should be noted that an appeals system based on alternative evidence was removed in 2013 as it was deemed not to be fair. It also led to significant additional work for learners and practitioners to generate evidence in case the learner needed an appeal.

Theme	Findings
	<p>Indeed, 95% of senior appointees and SQA Qualification Development respondents thought that the approach used for awarding in 2022–23 found an appropriate balance between fairness and maintaining the credibility of the qualifications, compared to half of practitioner respondents and around 60% of learner respondents who thought that the overall assessment approach was fair.</p>
Standards	<p>A high proportion of practitioners believe that they have a good understanding of the national standard. The proportion of senior appointees and Qualification Development colleagues who believe that practitioners have a good understanding of the national standard is lower but has increased since 2022, pointing to an overall improvement in understanding of the standard in 2023.</p> <p>Senior appointee and SQA Qualification Development respondents recommended further practitioner engagement with Understanding Standards resources and events to enhance their understanding of the national standard. Practitioner responses indicate that many would be supportive of this, with a caveat around time and resource constraints.</p> <p>The experience of being an SQA appointee impacts positively on the understanding of standards. It is notable that those practitioners who had also been SQA appointees in recent years were significantly more likely than other practitioners to agree that the standard was articulated clearly in course specifications, and that they understood the standard. These practitioners were also more positive about aspects of the assessment approach.</p>
Communication and guidance	<p>There was a clear desire from stakeholders for early communication of decisions from SQA across a range of areas. While research participants believed that they had received information on how grades would be awarded early enough in the academic year in 2022–23, the same was not necessarily true of processes such as appeals. There was an element of frustration that guidance and clarifications were issued after the beginning of the academic year.</p> <p>Related to this, it was a common theme for respondents to call for processes and approaches to remain consistent from year to year, allowing them to become well understood across the system. As the various changes that were made to the assessment system to respond to the pandemic have now largely been removed, there is an opportunity for greater consistency and stability moving forward.</p>

Theme	Findings
Learners with different characteristics	<p data-bbox="456 282 1334 427">In looking at the views of respondents with different characteristics, it is notable that care experience and ethnicity had no statistically significant impact on learner views, and there were few areas where learner SIMD quintile had an impact.</p> <p data-bbox="456 472 1283 651">At times, there were differences in learner views depending on gender, with men/boys tending to be more positive. However, disabled learners and/or learners with additional support needs and LGBTQIA+ learners had less positive views in a range of areas.</p> <p data-bbox="456 696 1297 835">Finally, learners whose results were worse than they anticipated had more negative views than other learners across a range of areas. Conversely, learners whose results exceeded their expectations were more positive.</p>

Concluding remarks

The evidence gathered for this evaluation indicates that the legacy effects of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to impact on teaching, learning and assessment in Scotland to some degree and for some groups of learners. However, the disruption associated with the pandemic has greatly lessened as the education system moves into a post-pandemic period.

Following on from our evaluations of the [2021](#) and [2022](#) assessment approaches, this evaluation is designed to provide the system with a record of how the 2023 approach worked in practice, drawing on the experiences of those who were involved. In the context of upcoming reform to Scottish qualifications and assessment, the reflections of stakeholders in the sector 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.