



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

Experiences of and reflections on 2023 National Qualifications assessment

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The Optima Building, 58 Robertson Street, Glasgow, G2 8DQ
Lowden, 24 Wester Shawfair, Dalkeith, Midlothian EH22 1FD

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Introduction

This report sets out the outcomes of two strands of SQA's Evaluation of the 2023 Approach to the Assessment of Graded National Courses. The first strand is research into how [learners](#) and [practitioners](#) experienced the 2023 assessment approach. The second is how [senior appointees and SQA Qualification Development colleagues](#) experienced the approach and perceived standards in 2023. Information about the research methodology is available in the [technical appendix](#).

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, in the context of potential reform of Scottish qualifications and assessment, offer considerations for the future of Scotland's qualifications and assessment system in the senior phase.

SQA is extremely grateful to participants (including SQA co-ordinators, practitioners, learners, senior appointees, and Qualification Development colleagues) for their assistance with these important pieces of research.

Context

The global COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the cancellation of exams in Scotland in 2020 and 2021 and the introduction of alternative approaches to certification. Since 2021–22, we have returned to formal external assessment (exams and coursework) in an environment that has nevertheless remained challenging and uncertain for learners, teachers and lecturers. In 2022–23, SQA worked with partners across the education community 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 from the COVID-19 disruption.

Maintaining national standards

SQA has a statutory duty and responsibility to individual learners and to the wider community to maintain the standard of our qualifications. Standards are vital in ensuring the credibility and long-term integrity of qualifications, for those who take them and for end users of qualifications.

Developing the 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 Strategic Group, which comprised 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. Feedback gathered through [SQA's evaluation of the 2022 approach to assessment of graded National Courses](#) was also essential in helping to develop the approach for 2022–23.

As with the approach for 2021–22, it was determined again that a balance needed to be achieved between supporting learners through the continued but 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.

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. The package of support designed for learners, including the approach to standards, was developed in partnership with a range of key stakeholders.

The full range of measures and support services included:

- ◆ Modifications to course assessment (retained from 2021–22) — 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.

- ◆ Confirmation of a sensitive approach to 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.
- ◆ Examination Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service (EECCS) — SQA put the EECCS in place to provide support to individual learners who experience disruption at the time of the timetabled exam, including 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 which benefits learners who find themselves in these circumstances.
- ◆ Appeals 2023 service — Appeals 2023 provided learners (either directly or through their centre) with the opportunity to request a review of their SQA-marked assessment components. This was a free service. Based on SQA's evaluation of the 2021–22 service and extensive engagement with stakeholders, Appeals 2023 was different to the service offered in 2021–22. The key difference was that, primarily for reasons of fairness, alternative assessment evidence was not considered as part of any appeal for 2023.

Learners had access to a range of other resources ahead of the exams to help them prepare, which included the [SQA website](#), a [‘Your Exams’ guide](#) and [SQA's MyStudyPlan](#) app.

Full details of the 2023 approach to awarding are available in the [National Qualifications 2023 Awarding — Methodology Report](#).

Research methodology

Evaluation approach

This section provides an overview of the research methodology. More detailed information is available in the [technical appendix](#).

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

The research into learner and practitioner experiences of the 2023 approach to assessment was split into two separate phases.

Firstly, we surveyed learners and practitioners. These surveys were split into sections corresponding to the various parts of the 2023 assessment diet that learners and practitioners experienced.

For learners, these sections were: communication about the approach, teaching and learning, the EECCS, appeals, and the overall approach to assessment. For practitioners, these were: communication about the approach, teaching and learning, modifications to course assessment, the EECCS, appeals, workload, the overall approach to assessment, and standards.

Secondly, in-depth interviews were carried out with learners and practitioners, which allowed for a deeper exploration of key topics.

In total, survey responses were received from 3,437 learners and 1,237 practitioners from schools and colleges across Scotland. A total of 24 in-depth interviews were carried out with learners and practitioners.

Reflections on standards

In line with the approach taken for learners and practitioners, the reflections on standards research was split into two phases.

Firstly, we surveyed senior appointees and SQA qualifications teams. The survey covered the various aspects of the assessment process in 2022–23 that senior appointees and qualifications teams experienced. These were: engagement and communication, learning and teaching, awarding and grading, Understanding Standards, the EECCS, appeals, and equalities.

Secondly, in-depth interviews were carried out with senior appointees and Qualification Development colleagues to allow for a deeper exploration of key topics.

In total, we received survey responses from 47 senior appointees and 27 Qualification Development colleagues. A total of 15 in-depth interviews were carried out; interviewees included seven senior appointees, six Qualification Development colleagues, and two interviewees who worked as both.

Equality

The Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) requires SQA to have due regard to the need to:

- ◆ eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Equality Act (2010)
- ◆ advance equality of opportunity between people who share a [protected characteristic](#) and those who do not
- ◆ foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not

As with 2022's evaluation, there was a focus in the 2023 evaluation research on disabled learners and/or those with additional support needs (ASN). This information is useful to SQA to ensure it is meeting its PSED with regards to disability.

In 2023's evaluation, SQA also sought to understand the experiences of learners with a range of different characteristics. Therefore, as well as a focus on disabled learners and/or those with ASN, we collected data on learner respondents' gender, LGBTQIA+ identity, ethnicity, care experience, and socio-economic status. [Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation \(SIMD\)](#) quintile was used as a proxy for socio-economic status.

Looking at the differences in survey responses for different groups of learners helps us to understand the experience of the assessment process for National Qualifications in 2023 for learners with different characteristics. The full breakdown of learner respondent profiles is available in the learner experiences report. Further, Table 3 in the technical appendix gauges how representative learner respondents were of the wider population.

Key findings

This overview outlines the central findings of this research. For brevity, considerable detail has been omitted from this section. The full [learner](#) and [practitioner](#) findings are analysed in greater depth in two separate reports. The full [senior appointee and SQA Qualification Development](#) findings are also analysed in a separate report.

Note that the proportions of respondents stated as 'agreeing' in the summaries below are a combination of the 'strongly agree' and 'agree' proportions.

Learners and practitioners

Overall, there were 3,437 learner respondents to 2023's evaluation survey, a 67% increase compared to 2022, and 1,237 practitioner respondents, a 20% increase compared to 2022.

Where the same questions appeared in the 2022 evaluation, changes between 2022 and 2023 are given in percentage points (pp) in brackets.

Communication

In general, both learners and practitioners reported that the process for National Qualifications awarding in 2022–23 was communicated to them effectively and that they understood how grades would be determined.

- ◆ 72% (+9 pp) of learners agreed that they received information on how their grades would be determined in 2022–23 early enough in the academic year; 71% (+7 pp) agreed that the assessment process was communicated to them effectively; and 76% (+6 pp) agreed that they understood how their grades would be determined.
- ◆ 57% (+5 pp) of practitioners agreed that they received information on how learners' grades would be determined in 2022–23 early enough in the academic year; 66% (+5 pp) agreed that the assessment process was communicated to them effectively; and 76% (+1 pp) agreed that they understood how learners' grades would be determined.

Teaching and learning

Large proportions of both learners and practitioners suggested that disruption due to COVID-19 continued to have an impact on teaching and learning and, to a lesser extent, an impact on assessment in 2022–23. Respondents, practitioners particularly, believed that the experience of the pandemic has negatively affected teaching and learning in a range of ways.

- ◆ 63% (-14 pp) of learners agreed that the disruption had a substantial impact on teaching and learning; 49% (-12 pp) agreed that it had a substantial impact on how they were assessed.
- ◆ Likewise, 71% (-6 pp) of practitioners agreed that the disruption had a substantial impact on teaching and learning; 67% (-10 pp) agreed that it had a substantial impact on assessment.
- ◆ 47% of learners agreed that the pandemic continues to have an impact on their learning; 66% agreed that it has had an effect on the development of their skills and knowledge; and 38% agreed that it continues to affect their mental wellbeing.
- ◆ Only 15% of practitioners agreed that the education system as a whole has recovered well from the pandemic. Meanwhile, 87% agreed that many learners continue to be affected by the experiences of COVID-19.
- ◆ When comparing learners to their predecessors prior to the pandemic:
 - 94% of practitioners agreed that many learners are less resilient.
 - 76% agreed that many learners find external assessment more stressful.
 - 84% agreed that many learners are not as well prepared to study for National Qualifications.
 - 90% agreed that many learners have lower levels of focus in class.

Learners were asked for comments about the continuing impact of the COVID-19 disruption on their learning experience. The main themes were around: the removal of modifications to course assessment in 2023–24 and concerns that learners do not have the previous experience required to complete assignments. For instance, this could be related worries about gaps in knowledge and skills due to the modifications to course assessment implemented during the pandemic, and less tangible detrimental effects of the pandemic, such as the impact on mental health.

Meanwhile, the most frequently cited continued impact of the pandemic from practitioners concerned learner attendance. There was the suggestion that some learners now see attendance as flexible, while several respondents linked the decline in attendance to a rise in anxiety and mental health issues. There were also repeated mentions of gaps in learners' skills after the experiences of COVID-19.

Exam Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service (EECCS)

- ◆ 11% (-3 pp) of learners reported that their centre had submitted an EECCS request for them in 2023. Of these learners, 45% agreed they understood the process, 42% (-1 pp) agreed it was fair, and 40% agreed they were satisfied.
- ◆ 52% (-6 pp) of practitioners agreed that they understood the EECCS process in 2022–23. Of those who had used the process for their learners, 54% (+11 pp) agreed it was fair to their learners and 51% (+9 pp) were satisfied with the process.
- ◆ 14% (-6 pp) of practitioners who had used the EECCS process said that the workload for teachers due to EECCS was very substantial and 32% (-1 pp) said it was substantial.

Appeals

- ◆ The following proportions of respondents agreed that they understood the appeals process in 2023: 60% (-3 pp) of the learners who appealed, 57% (-6 pp) of learners who did not appeal, and 71% (+2 pp) of practitioners.
- ◆ Responses on aspects of the approach were less positive. 17% (-15 pp) of learners who appealed agreed the process was fair and 15% (-17 pp) agreed that they were satisfied with the process in 2023. However, those learners who had a successful appeal were more likely to agree the process had been fair and that they were satisfied with it.
- ◆ 29% (-6 pp) of practitioners who had learners who appealed agreed that the process was fair to their learners and 27% (-7 pp) agreed that they were satisfied with the process in 2023.
- ◆ However, only 8% (-24 pp) of practitioners said that the workload for teachers due to appeals was very substantial and 19% (-15 pp) said it was substantial.

Those learners who commented on the appeals process were more likely to have been dissatisfied with it compared to respondents overall. It was particularly common for these learners to say that they found the appeals system in 2023 unfair, especially compared to previous years. This was for two main reasons. Firstly, learners believed that the pandemic-related disruption continued to affect their learning, but the appeals process did not take this into account. Secondly, there was frustration that the appeals process did not take into account alternative evidence as it had in 2022. Comments from learners also highlighted some confusion around the appeals process in 2023. There were calls for an appeals approach to be settled upon so that it is clear and well understood.

As with learners, those practitioners who commented on the 2023 appeals process were more likely to have been dissatisfied with it than respondents overall. While some practitioners did comment that the process was fair or that the practitioner workload was reduced compared to 2022, the most frequent response was that the process was not an appeal, but more of a clerical check. Many respondents who commented felt that an appeals process should include a full re-mark of the exam evidence or should consider alternative evidence. Because of this lack of alternative evidence in the process, several respondents suggested that the 2023 appeals approach was unfair to learners. Some practitioners also thought that the appeals process was not clear enough, either for themselves or for learners, parents and carers.

Practitioner workload

When asked if there was anything that SQA could do to help reduce their workload, the most common theme across responses from practitioners was that SQA should reduce content or remove assessments. A considerable number of respondents suggested that assignments should be removed; many stated that they believe that assignments increase workload significantly without benefitting learners. Other respondents suggested that learners are not yet prepared to undertake assignments after the disruption of the pandemic. Many practitioners called for a more general reduction in internal assessment, with suggestions for the introduction of an exam at National 4 and, relatedly, the retention of external assessment at National 5.

Another prominent theme in responses about reducing workload was the suggestion of SQA providing more resources to practitioners. Substantial numbers of respondents called for the provision of standardised and quality assured materials and resources for use in centres across Scotland, including item banks and prelims with marking instructions. This, it was suggested, would ensure a common national standard and avoid duplication of effort.

Furthermore, significant numbers of respondents thought that their workload would be reduced if SQA communicated decisions and information earlier. They expressed that requirements of processes such as appeals and EECCS need to be clear as early as possible. Several respondents also mentioned the assessment arrangements process, that with an increase in ASN learners, this process has become more complex, time consuming, and challenging to navigate¹.

Overall approach to assessment

Substantial proportions of learners and practitioners thought that the overall approach to assessment in 2022–23 had been fair and they were satisfied with it.

- ◆ 58% (-5 pp) of learners agreed that the assessment process was fair for them and 55% (+5 pp) agreed that they were satisfied with it.

¹ A separate piece of SQA research will be published later this year. It seeks to better understand how the provision of assessment arrangements works in practice for disabled learners and/or learners with ASN, for practitioners and local authority staff, and for parents and carers.

- ◆ 50% (-1 pp) of practitioners agreed that the assessment process for 2023 was fair to all learners and 53% (no change) agreed that they were satisfied with it.

Credibility

Overall, 66% of practitioners thought that the grades awarded in 2022–23 were either very credible or credible, compared to 49% who thought the same about the grades awarded in 2021–22, 27% who thought that same about the grades awarded in 2020–21, and 84% who thought the same about the grades awarded pre-pandemic in 2018–19.

Standards

- ◆ 54% of practitioners agreed that the national standard is clearly articulated in the course specification.
- ◆ 78% agreed that they had a good understanding of the national standard.
- ◆ 62% agreed that Understanding Standards provides teachers and lecturers with the resources they need to understand the national standard.
- ◆ 52% agreed that teachers and lecturers are given the opportunity to engage with Understanding Standards resources to enable a strong understanding of the national standard.

Other comments from practitioners on standards were dominated by those about the programme of Understanding Standards, particularly Understanding Standards events. A considerable number of comments about these events concerned the challenges of accessing them, either because they are over-subscribed or that they are inaccessible due to a lack of time, finances, or for geographical reasons. While some responses suggested that holding online events could help to facilitate accessibility and would increase the number of practitioners able to attend, the majority of responses indicated a preference for face-to-face events.

In terms of Understanding Standards content, many practitioners commented on the need for more exemplars and more up-to-date exemplars. Nevertheless, Understanding Standards resources and events were clearly appreciated as an essential resource for many.

Senior appointees and Qualification Development teams

Qualifications Development teams comprise SQA staff who support the development and delivery of qualifications and assessments. Senior appointees are part of the 15,000 teaching professionals and specialists who support SQA operations annually. They work closely with SQA's Qualification Development teams and their professional input defines and supports the development, assessment and quality assurance of our qualifications.

Senior appointees' feedback was based both on their reflections and experiences as teachers or lecturers and on evidence seen through the marking process.

Communication

- ◆ 86% (+14 pp) of senior appointee and Qualification Development respondents agreed that information about the approach to assessment was published early enough in the academic year.
- ◆ 84% (+17 pp) agreed that information about the 2022–23 approach to awarding and grade boundaries was published early enough in the academic year. There was something of a difference here between the respondent groups: while 94% of senior appointees agreed, it was 67% for Qualification Development respondents.

Learning and teaching

As noted above, senior appointees' feedback was based on both their experiences as educators and their role in the awarding process. Their reflections on learning and teaching in 2022–23 are possibly particularly related to the former.

- ◆ 84% of senior appointee and Qualification Development respondents agreed that the disruption of the pandemic continued to have a significant impact on learning and teaching in centres for 2022–23 for some learners.
- ◆ 49% agreed that the disruption of the pandemic continued to have a significant impact on learning and teaching in centres for 2022–23 for all learners.
- ◆ Nonetheless, 54% agreed that there was evidence of recovery from the pandemic in 2022–23 compared to the 2021–22 session.
- ◆ 52% (+18 pp) agreed that, in general, centres ensured teaching covered the full range of content during the 2022–23 session.

Respondents were asked about the continued impact of the pandemic in 2022–23. They suggested that this impact was most apparent in learners not developing or not having had the opportunity to develop specific skills normally developed in earlier academic years (that is, S1 to S3). Gaps were identified in literacy and numeracy skills, IT skills, general skills, such as self-management and independent thinking, and wider skills development. However, in some subject areas where coursework has been retained (languages, for instance), skills development was noted by respondents as not as markedly reduced compared to other subject areas.

Awarding and grading

Participants reflected positively on their experiences of awarding meetings and particularly on how robust the decision-making process was.

- ◆ 95% (-2 pp) agreed that the approach used for Awarding 2022–23 ensured all relevant factors were considered when setting grade boundaries.
- ◆ 93% agreed that the approach used for awarding in 2022–23 found an appropriate balance between fairness and maintaining the credibility of the qualifications in line with SQA's statutory function.

However, respondents suggested that external understanding of the fair and robust awarding and grade boundary setting processes is limited. Respondents thought that the lack of time in centres for practitioners to engage with materials on the grading process contributed significantly to this and that In-service Education and Training (INSET) days could be used to enhance external understanding.

- ◆ 38% of senior appointee and Qualification Development respondents agreed that SQA's approach to awarding and setting grade boundaries pre-pandemic was generally understood by those outside the organisation.
- ◆ 23% agreed that the sensitive approach to grading used in 2022–23 was understood by those outside the organisation. This compares to 24% of respondents who agreed that the generous approach to grading used in 2021–22 was understood by those outside the organisation in 2022's evaluation.
- ◆ Many senior appointee respondents noted that their own understanding of the sensitive approach was enhanced during the awarding process.

Standards

- ◆ 59% (+8 pp) of senior appointee and Qualification Development respondents agreed that practitioners consistently understood and interpreted the national standard in 2022–23. This compares to 78% of practitioners who agreed that they have a good understanding of the national standard.
- ◆ 82% (no change) of senior appointee and Qualification Development respondents agreed that the national standard is clearly articulated in the course specification. This compares to the 54% of practitioners who agreed.

While most respondents felt that the course specification provides a good overview of the national standard, many senior appointee and Qualification Development respondents suggested that the course specification should not be the only document relied on to articulate the national standard. They highlighted that for effective articulation of the standard, additional materials, including grade descriptors, marking instructions, exemplar material and course reports, should be read in conjunction with the course specification.

In line with practitioner responses, senior appointee and Qualification Development respondents reported that engagement with Understanding Standards resources is a challenge for practitioners, primarily because of time constraints and teaching commitments. Nevertheless, the majority of respondents provided positive feedback on Understanding Standards events, particularly face-to-face events. They described the events as effective and valuable workshops that facilitate professional dialogue and enhanced practitioner understanding of the national standard.

Respondents suggested that there is scope for the development of additional Understanding Standards resources; examples suggested included guidance and support for prelim assessment, guidance to improve newly qualified teachers' understanding of the national

standard, and focused and targeted support material for teachers in smaller or remote departments.

Exam Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service (EECCS)

- ◆ 96% of senior appointee and Qualification Development respondents agreed that they understood the EECCS process in 2023.
- ◆ 66% agreed that practitioners understood the EECCS process.
- ◆ 89% agreed that the EECCS process in 2023 found an appropriate balance between fairness and maintaining the credibility of the qualifications in line with SQA's statutory functions for learners, including disabled learners and/or learners with ASN.

While most agreed that practitioners understood the EECCS process, some senior appointee and Qualification Development respondents highlighted that some centres would benefit from improved understanding of the EECCS process, and that there was variable interpretation of the process by centres in 2023.

Appeals

- ◆ 86% of senior appointee and Qualification Development respondents agreed that the appeals process in 2023 was a fair process for learners, including disabled learners and/or learners with ASN.
- ◆ However, some respondents highlighted that calling the service 'appeals' was confusing and misleading. They thought that a more appropriate title for the service would have been 'marking review'.

Equalities

84% of senior appointee and Qualification Development respondents agreed that learners with assessment arrangements in place were provided with an equal opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding and skills while balancing credibility of the qualifications.

Respondents highlighted the importance of effective communication and collaboration between centres and SQA colleagues in ensuring fair adjustments and in the consideration of protected characteristics in question papers writing. However, some respondents noted the challenges for centres (particularly around resources) arising from the increase in numbers of learners requiring assessment arrangements.

Principal themes

Continuing effects of the pandemic

The research shows that participants believe that the effects of the pandemic lessened somewhat in 2022–23, particularly the direct disruption associated with the early stages of COVID-19. Senior appointee and Qualification Development respondents cited evidence of recovery compared to 2021–22. However, the after-effects of the pandemic are still widely perceived to be impacting the teaching and learning experience.

Practitioners, in particular, highlighted that compared to their predecessors prior to the pandemic, 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 and who are less prepared for National Qualifications than earlier cohorts. Consequently, many practitioners throughout the research expressed their concern about the return to full course assessment in 2023–24 and the effect this will have on learners.

Appeals

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.

Traditionally, fairness in assessment has focused on 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 are both valid and reliable. It is clear that this perception of fairness remains important to stakeholders. However, it is also clear that, for many, taking individual circumstances into account is also an important part of fairness.

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, other practitioners, senior appointees and SQA Qualification Development colleagues responded that they thought the appeals process was fair to all learners. These respondents highlighted the fairness and reliability of appeals decisions based on the same quality assured and standardised SQA assessments, rather than alternative evidence.

The practitioner findings on the appeals process over the past two years reveal a complex picture. In 2022's evaluation, the majority of practitioners who responded suggested that they would prefer an appeals approach that did not include alternative evidence. The main driver for this was practitioner workload, but there were also concerns about inconsistencies and learners not being judged using the same valid, reliable and robust assessment instruments.

In 2023's evaluation, the proportion of practitioners who agreed that the appeals process was fair to their learners decreased by six percentage points and the proportion who agreed that they were satisfied with appeals process decreased by seven percentage points.

However, the proportion of practitioners who said that the workload for teachers due to appeals was very substantial or substantial decreased by 39 percentage points.

Moreover, any concerns about the appeals process in 2023 should also be viewed in the context of the overall views on the assessment process and the credibility of the grades awarded. While the proportions of practitioners who thought that the overall assessment approach was fair and that they were satisfied with it remained very similar to 2022, the proportion of practitioners who viewed the grades awarded as very credible or credible in 2023 was 66%, compared to 49% who said the same about the grades awarded in 2022.

Communication and guidance

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 2022–23, the same was not necessarily true of processes such as appeals. There was an element of frustration from practitioners that guidance and clarifications were issued after the beginning of the academic year.

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.

Perceptions of standards

The proportion of senior appointees and Qualification Development colleagues who believe that practitioners have a good understanding of the national standard has increased since 2022's evaluation, pointing to an enhanced understanding of the standard. However, this is still substantially lower than the proportion of practitioners who believe they themselves have a good understanding of the national standard.

Senior appointees and Qualification Development colleagues suggested further practitioner engagement with Understanding Standards events and resources to enhance understanding of the national standard. Responses from practitioners suggested a strong desire to build on their understanding of the standard, but this was caveated with concerns about the time and resources available to practitioners to do this.

Differences in experiences

We analysed learner and practitioner evaluation survey responses by a range of different characteristics.

Learners

As with the 2022 evaluation, there were a number of areas where the views of disabled learners and/or learners with ASN were statistically significantly different from other learners. Disabled learners and/or learners with ASN were less satisfied with communications about the 2022–23 assessment process. They reported experiencing more disruption to teaching and learning in 2022–23, and were less satisfied with the overall assessment process in 2023 than other learners.

The views of learners who identified as part of the LGBTQIA+ community were, at times, statistically significantly different from learners who did not identify as part of the community. This group of learners indicated that they were less satisfied with communications about the 2022–23 assessment process, reported experiencing more disruption to teaching and learning in 2022–23, and were less satisfied with the overall assessment process in 2023 than other learners.

There were also some statistically different views depending on respondent gender. Men/boys reported experiencing less disruption to their teaching and learning in 2022–23 than women/girls or non-binary learners; they were also more satisfied with the overall assessment process in 2023 than other learners. Women/girls were less satisfied with the appeals process than men/boys.

It should be noted that care experience and ethnicity had no statistically significant impact on learner views.

While average scores by learner SIMD quintile varied, there were relatively few areas where views were significantly impacted by learner deprivation.

- ◆ Learners from SIMD quintile 1² reported experiencing more disruption to their teaching and learning experience in 2022–23 than learners from SIMD quintile 4.
- ◆ However, learners from SIMD quintile 1 were statistically significantly more satisfied with the appeals process than learners from SIMD quintile 4.

Those learners who said that their National Qualification results in 2023 fell below their expectations were statistically significantly less satisfied with communications about the assessment process, and reported experiencing more disruption to teaching and learning than other learners. They were also less satisfied with the appeals process, and less satisfied with the overall assessment process in 2023 than other learners.

On the other hand, those learners who said that their National Qualification results in 2023 exceeded their expectations were statistically significantly more satisfied with communications about the assessment process. They were also more satisfied with the appeals process, and more satisfied with the overall assessment process than other learners.

Practitioners who had been an SQA appointee in the past five years were statistically significantly more satisfied both with the EECCS process and with the overall assessment process in 2023 than those practitioners who had not been appointees. They were also more likely to agree that the national standard is well articulated and that they understand it than other respondents.

Finally, practitioners from centres in SIMD quintile 5 felt there was less COVID-19-related disruption to teaching and learning in 2022–23 than those from SIMD quintile 1.

² SIMD quintiles each cover a fifth of Scottish postcodes. SIMD quintile 1 is the most deprived 20% of postcodes and SIMD quintile 5 is the least deprived 20% of postcodes.

Concluding remarks

This evaluation is designed to provide the system with a record of how the 2022–23 approach worked in practice, drawing on the experiences of those who were involved.

It is worth highlighting that the research findings demonstrate that there is no one stakeholder view. Experiences, perceptions, and opinions vary both between and within different stakeholder groups. At times, these positions are contradictory. Different individuals place more or less emphasis and importance on different aspects of the assessment process, depending on their perspective and experiences. Considering and weighing these different perspectives and positions, while maintaining standards and fairness, is a central role of an awarding body.

In the context of reform to Scottish qualifications and assessment, the reflections of stakeholders can help to generate discussion about key topics. These include 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 of the evaluation can contribute to future work and research in this area.