



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

Practitioner experiences

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Contents

Notes	1
Respondent profiles	2
Communication	6
Teaching and learning	8
Modifications to course assessment	18
Exam Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service	19
Appeals	24
Workload	33
Overall approach	38
Credibility	42
Standards	44
Composite analysis	53

Notes

Please note that, throughout this paper (in charts and in text), percentages may not always sum to 100% because of rounding.

This report gives full results of the research into practitioner experiences of National Qualifications assessment in 2022–23.

Key findings from practitioners, along with those from learners, SQA senior appointees and qualifications teams, are available in the shorter [Experiences of and Reflections on 2023 National Qualifications Assessment report](#).

Moreover, a [Summary Report](#) highlights key themes from across SQA's Evaluation of the 2023 Approach to the Assessment of Graded National Courses.

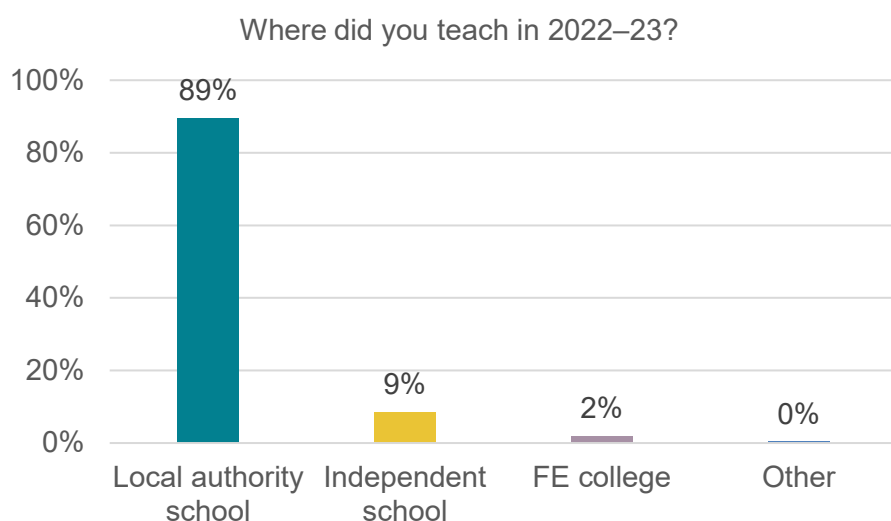
Finally, a [Technical Appendix](#) details our methodology and approach to analysis. In particular, this appendix details how the composite scores were calculated for different practitioner groups.

Respondent profiles

A total of 1,237 practitioners responded to the Evaluation of the 2023 Approach to the Assessment of Graded National Courses survey.

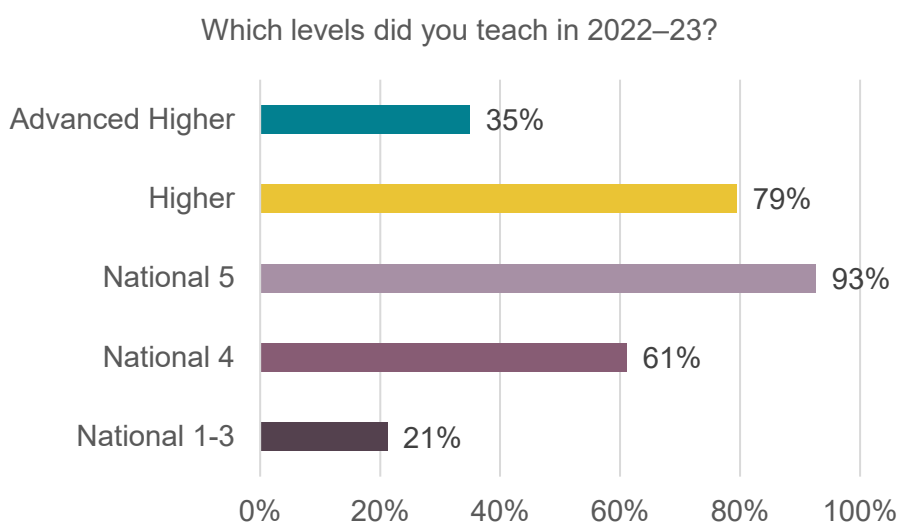
Respondents were asked where they had taught in 2022–23. The majority, 89%, taught in a local authority school, 9% in an independent school, 2% in an FE college, and <0.5% in another centre type.

Figure 1



Respondents were also asked which National Qualifications levels they had taught in 2022–23. They could choose more than one. As shown in the chart below, 35% had taught Advanced Higher, 79% Higher, 93% National 5, 61% National 4, and 21% National 1–3.

Figure 2

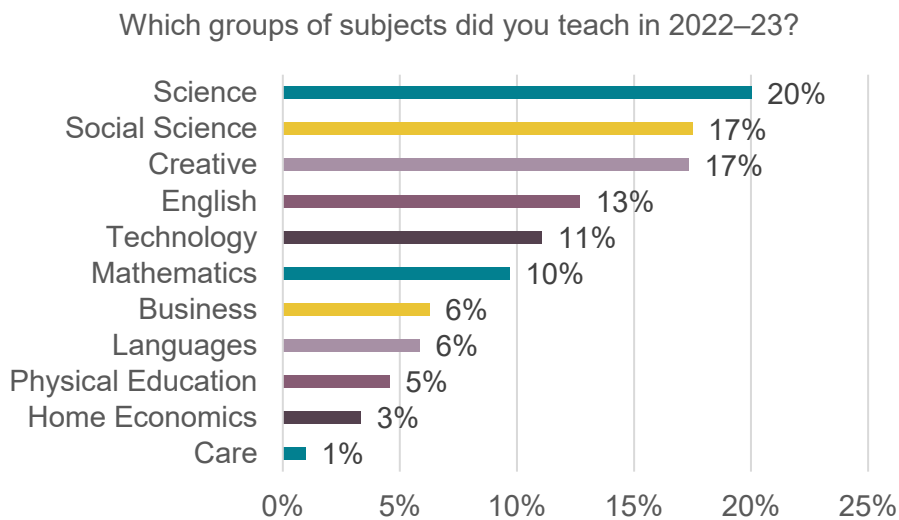


Respondents were asked which groups of subjects they had taught in 2022–23. The groups include the following subjects:

- ◆ Science: Biology, Chemistry, Environmental Science, Human Biology, Physics
- ◆ Social Science: Classical Studies, Geography, History, Modern Studies, Philosophy, Politics, Psychology, RMPS, Sociology
- ◆ Creative: Art and Design, Dance, Drama, Media, Music, Music Technology, Photography
- ◆ English
- ◆ Technology: Computing Science, Design and Manufacture, Engineering Science, Graphic Communication, Practical Electronics, Practical Metalworking, Practical Woodworking
- ◆ Mathematics: Applications of Mathematics, Mathematics, Mathematics of Mechanics, Statistics
- ◆ Business: Accounting, Administration and IT, Business Management, Economics
- ◆ Languages: Chinese Languages, English for Speakers of Other Languages, French, Gaelic (Learners), Gàidhlig, German, Italian, Latin, Spanish, Urdu
- ◆ Physical Education
- ◆ Home Economics: Fashion and Textile Technology, Health and Food Technology, Practical Cake Craft, Practical Cookery
- ◆ Care: Care, Childcare and Development

As shown in the chart below, 20% of respondents had taught Science subjects, 17% Social Science, 17% Creative, 13% English, 11% Technology, 10% Mathematics, 6% Business, 6% Languages, 5% Physical Education, 3% Home Economics, and 1% Care.

Figure 3



Responses to the survey came from across all 32 local authority areas. The highest proportion of responses came from Glasgow (9%) and Edinburgh (9%).

Table 1

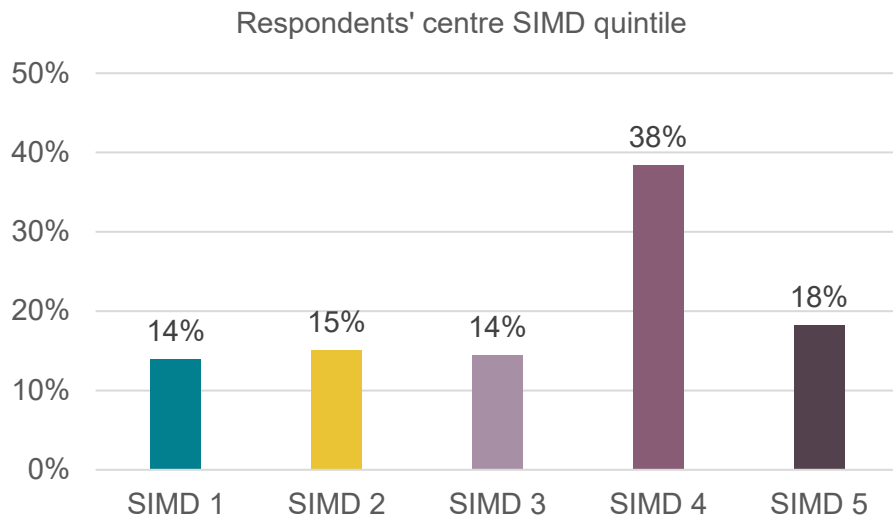
Local authority area	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
Glasgow	111	9%
Edinburgh	105	9%
North Lanarkshire	78	6%
Fife	71	6%
North Ayrshire	68	6%
Renfrewshire	67	5%
Angus	66	5%
South Lanarkshire	66	5%
Aberdeenshire	57	5%
Dundee City	50	4%
Highland	46	4%
Dumfries & Galloway	42	3%
West Dunbartonshire	41	3%
West Lothian	40	3%
Aberdeen City	39	3%
East Dunbartonshire	36	3%
East Ayrshire	26	2%
Inverclyde	22	2%
Scottish Borders	22	2%
East Lothian	21	2%
Falkirk	21	2%
Argyll & Bute	20	2%
Moray	20	2%
South Ayrshire	20	2%
Stirling	18	1%
Clackmannanshire	15	1%
Perth & Kinross	14	1%
Shetland Islands	12	1%
East Renfrewshire	9	1%
Midlothian	3	0%
Orkney Islands	3	0%
Eilean Siar	2	0%

We sent out five different links to the survey. Which one a centre received depended on their [Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation](#) (SIMD) quintile. SIMD quintile 1 represents the 20% most deprived postcodes and SIMD quintile 5 the 20% least deprived postcodes in Scotland. We did this to ensure that the survey had responses from a range of different centres and so that we could analyse the results by relative deprivation.

The chart below shows that 14% of respondents were from centres in SIMD quintile 1, 15% in quintile 2, 14% in quintile 3, 38% in quintile 4, and 18% in quintile 5. However, we know

that the link for SIMD quintile 4 was shared on social media. While we cannot quantify the effect of this, it is clear that there were a disproportionate number of responses from SIMD quintile 4. To reduce the potential of anomalous results, therefore, SIMD quintile 4 has been excluded in the analysis of practitioner responses by SIMD later in this report.

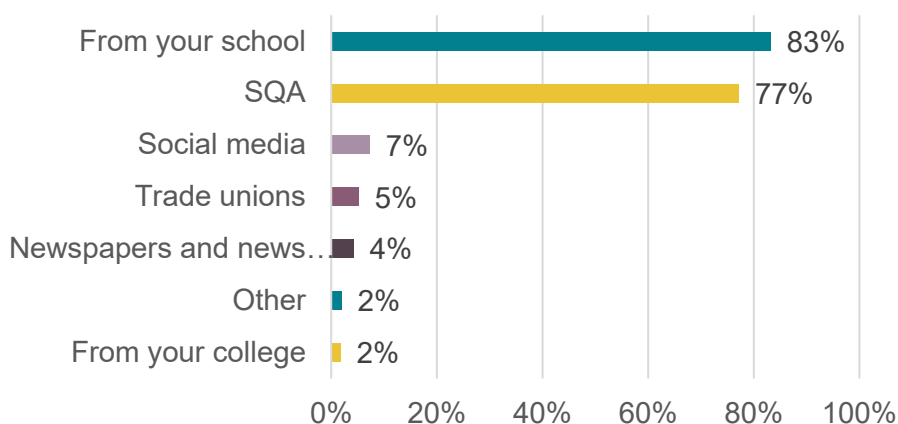
Figure 4



Communication

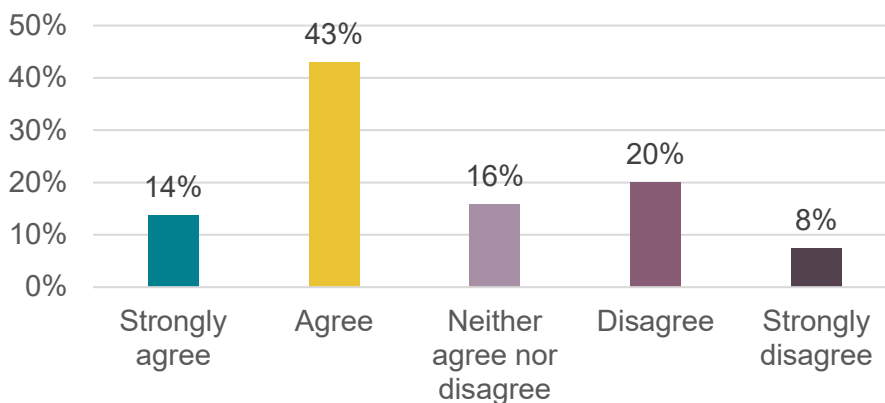
Respondents were asked about where they had received information about how grades would be determined in 2022–23. They could choose more than one option. Most respondents said they had got information from their school or SQA: 83% of respondents said from their school and 77% from SQA. Smaller proportions said social media (7%), trade unions (5%), newspapers and news websites (4%), and from their college (2%). The 2% of respondents who chose ‘other’ here generally suggested that they had got this information through colleagues or professional networks.

Figure 5 Where did you get information about how grades would be determined in 2022–23?



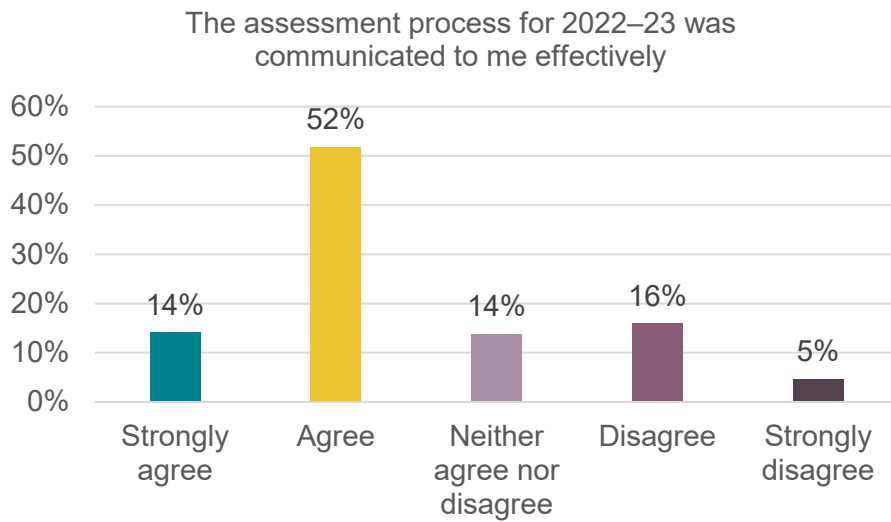
Respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed that they had received information on how learners’ grades would be determined in 2022–23 early enough in the academic year. While 57% strongly agreed or agreed, 27% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 16% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 6 I received information on how learners’ grades would be determined in 2022–23 early enough in the academic year



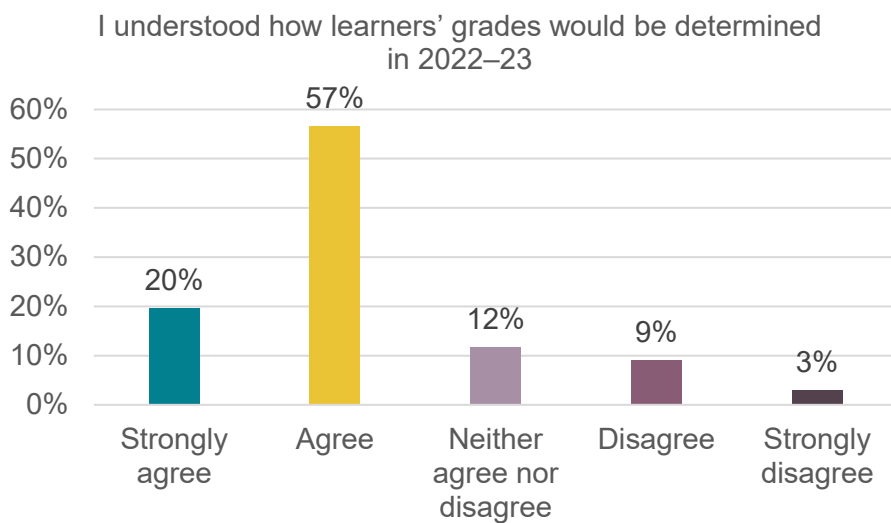
While two-thirds (66%) of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the assessment process for 2022–23 was communicated to them effectively, 21% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 14% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 7



When asked the extent to which they agreed that they understood how learners' grades would be determined in 2022–23, 20% strongly agreed, 57% agreed, 12% neither agreed nor disagreed, 9% disagreed, and 3% strongly disagreed.

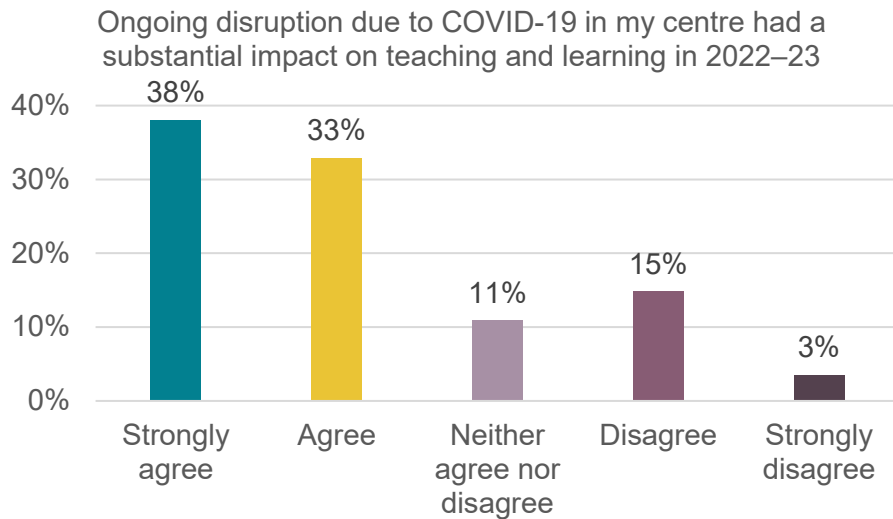
Figure 8



Teaching and learning

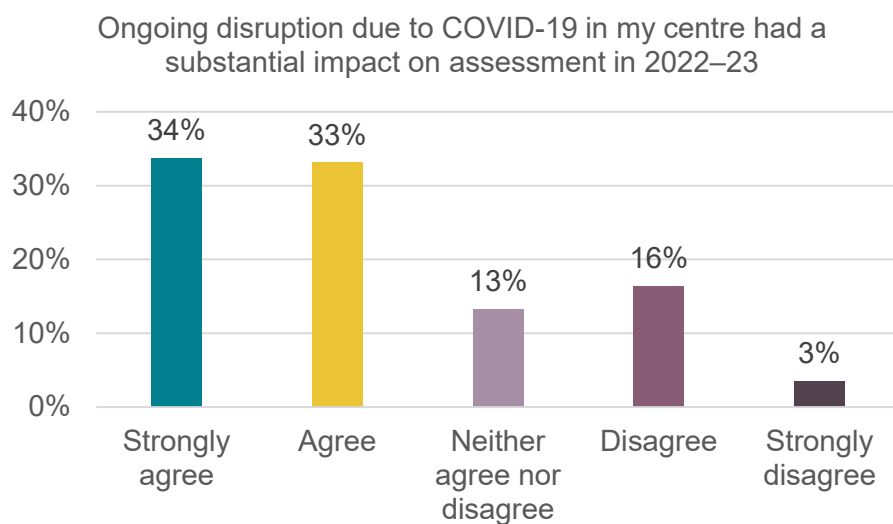
Respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed with the statement *Ongoing disruption due to COVID-19 in my centre had a substantial impact on teaching and learning in 2022–23*. While 38% of respondents strongly agreed and 33% agreed, only 15% disagreed and 3% strongly disagreed. A further 11% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 9



Respondents were then asked the extent to which they agreed with the statement *Ongoing disruption due to COVID-19 in my centre had a substantial impact on assessment in 2022–23*. While 34% of respondents strongly agreed and 33% agreed, only 16% disagreed and 3% strongly disagreed. A further 13% neither agreed nor disagreed.

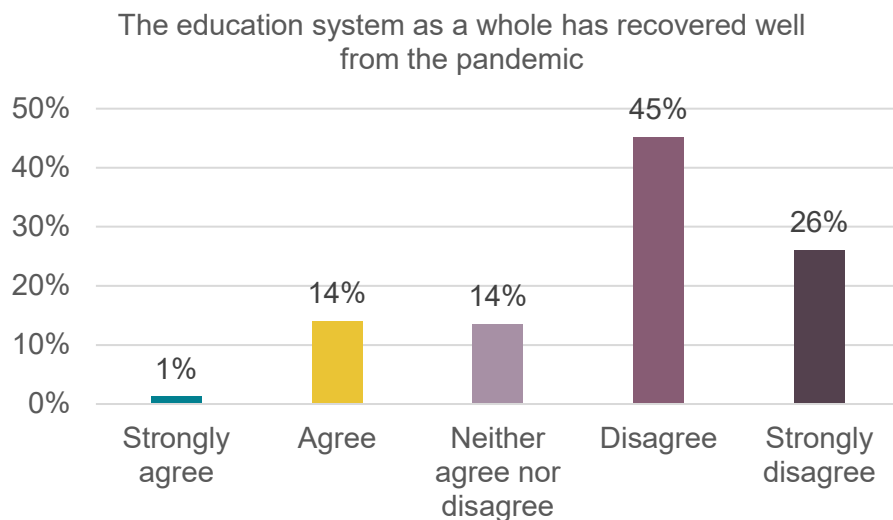
Figure 10



Practitioners were asked the extent to which they agreed with a series of statements on the continuing impact of the pandemic.

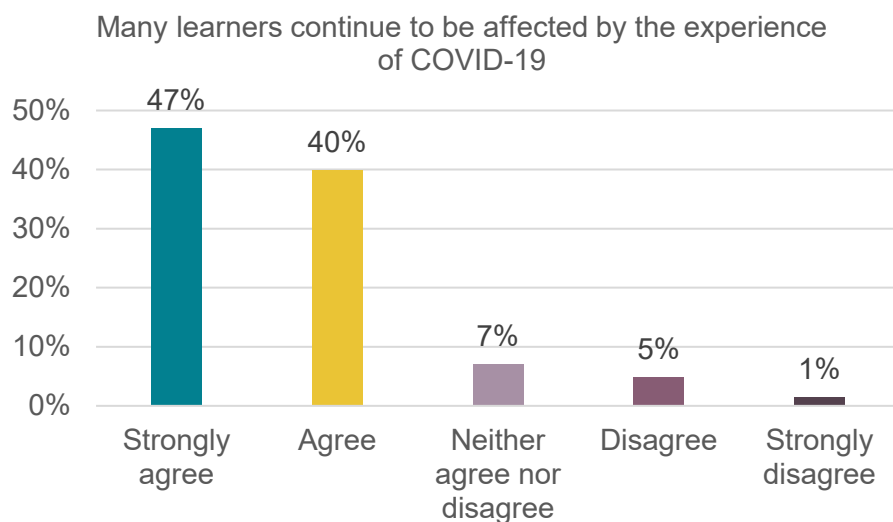
When asked whether they agreed that the education system has recovered well from the pandemic, only 15% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed; 71% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 14% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 11



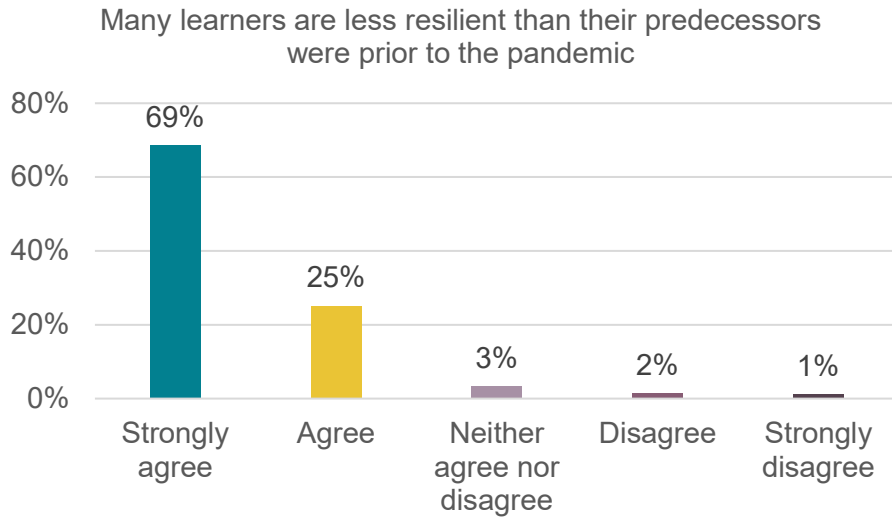
A large majority of respondents – 87% – strongly agreed or agreed that many learners continue to be affected by the experience of COVID-19 and only 6% disagreed or strongly disagreed. A further 7% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 12



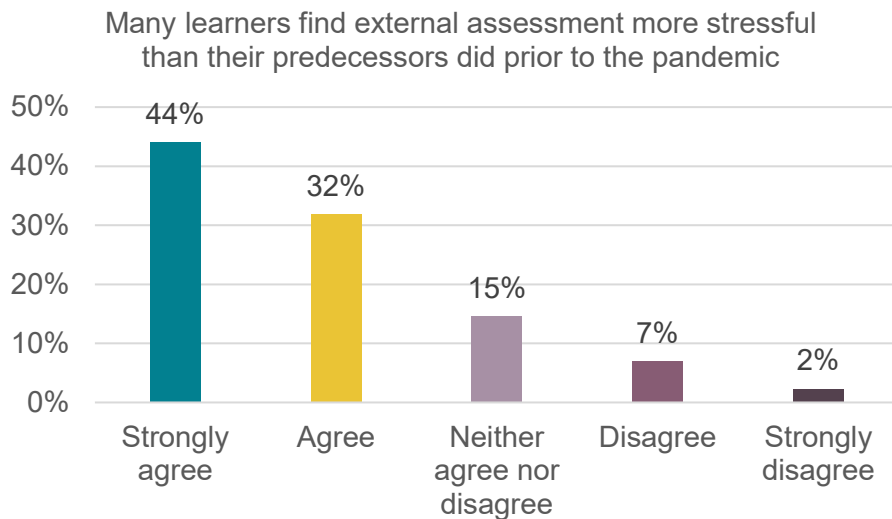
Similarly, 94% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that many learners are less resilient than their predecessors were prior to the pandemic. Only 3% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed and 3% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 13



While 76% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that many learners find external assessment more stressful than their predecessors did prior to the pandemic, 15% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 9% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

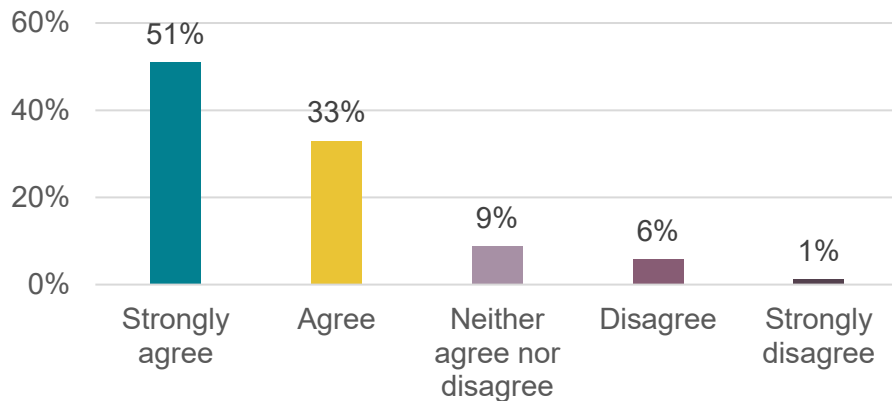
Figure 14



When asked whether they agreed that many learners are not as well prepared to study for National Qualifications as their predecessors were prior to the pandemic, 51% of respondents strongly agreed, 33% agreed, 9% neither agreed nor disagreed, 6% disagreed, and 1% strongly disagreed.

Figure 15

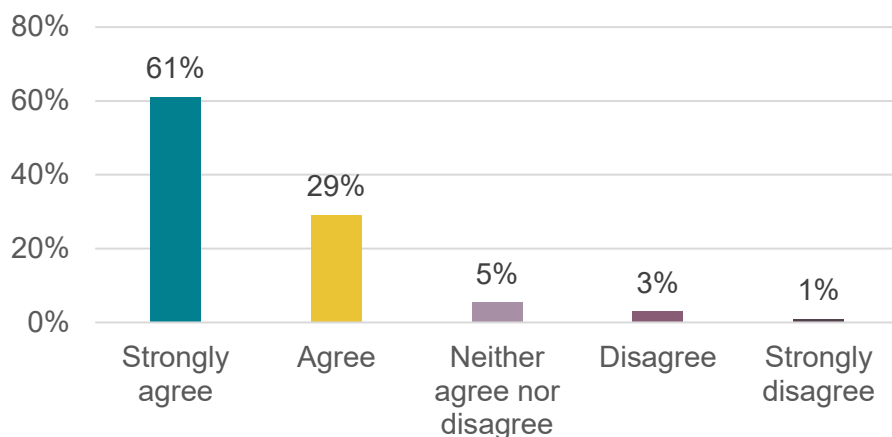
Many learners are not as well prepared to study for National Qualifications as their predecessors were prior to the pandemic



When asked whether they agreed that many learners have lower levels of focus in class than their predecessors did prior to the pandemic, 61% of respondents strongly agreed, 29% agreed, 5% neither agreed nor disagreed, 3% disagreed, and 1% strongly disagreed.

Figure 16

Many learners have lower levels of focus in class than their predecessors did prior to the pandemic



Practitioner survey comments

Respondents were asked if they had any other comments on how the pandemic continues to impact upon some learners. A total of 539 practitioners submitted comments.

Attendance

The most common theme, cited by over 100 respondents to this question, was the significant continued impact of the pandemic on learner attendance. Respondents suggested that attendance is now often viewed by parents and carers and learners as flexible, despite the return to the classroom. According to these practitioners, more learners now simply refuse to attend classes. It was also highlighted that parents and carers may find it more acceptable now to take their children out of school, such as for holidays.

Post-pandemic, pupils seem to think school is a choice rather than mandatory, which is impacting their progress in senior phase.

Absence levels and the culture of acceptability of absence from school has meant a lot more pupils were missing a lot more lessons and struggling to catch up.

A higher number of pupils [are] taking unauthorised leave for holidays – [there is a] perception that it's all flexible and doesn't matter.

Respondents also attributed the decline in attendance to a rise in anxiety and mental health issues.

There are also seriously concerning patterns of decreased attendance caused by mental health issues, including anxiety and depression.

Gaps in life skills

There was repeated mention of gaps in learners' life skills. This included gaps in the ability of learners to demonstrate resilience, to use higher-order thinking skills to overcome problems, to focus, to work independently, to manage behaviour, and to regulate emotions. In relation to emotional regulation, respondents mentioned that more learners were anxious and lacked confidence in the classroom.

Students seem to suffer from much higher levels of anxiety than before.

Many learners who were junior pupils during the pandemic and largely taught online find the process of being in class and communicating with their teachers and peers intimidating.

The consequences of the pandemic are evident in pupils with significantly decreased social skills and capacity for self-regulation in class.

According to some practitioners, the lack of emotional regulation and socialisation during the pandemic lockdown has led to increased behaviour issues. Similarly, practitioners stated that many learners are now experiencing developmental delays in terms of maturity.

I notice that my current S4s are on the whole less mature than previous years ... they also missed out of the social aspect of attending school and this may be the reason that they seem more like S3 pupils in maturity level.

Lack of independence, focus, and resilience were also repeatedly mentioned. Practitioners spoke to the negative impact that mobile phones and social media have on learners' ability to focus. In addition, practitioners felt that learners expect to be 'spoon fed' and lacked resilience for longer, more complex tasks as well as independent study. Practitioners felt this impacted on their own workload, and that they were having to support learners at the expense of covering content.

Pupils are looking to be spoon fed information, seem resistant to complete tasks themselves and have lost confidence in completing tasks.

A lack of resilience and work ethic is pervasive. Many, but not all, learners have a distinct fear of failure or challenge and a lack of independence or sense of personal responsibility.

The severely limited focus is the most negative impact.

Regarding life skills, smaller numbers of respondents commented on a perceived increased sense of entitlement among learners, a lack of critical thinking skills, and a general lack of social skills.

Gaps in learning and skills

In addition to gaps in life skills, respondents referred to gaps in learners' learning, such as lack of foundation knowledge and lack of practical skills and experiences. Many respondents identified a clash between the lack of foundation knowledge and teacher and lecturer workload, as practitioners do not have time to address gaps in foundation knowledge while still covering the amount of content required for a return to full course assessment.

Missed learning in previous years means that gaps in learning continue to become more evident. Time spent addressing this leads to less time to complete the coursework than pre-pandemic classes.

For practical subjects, such as Music, students missed out a great deal on practical activities during the COVID pandemic when learning was remote. This has had a significant effect on the development of their skills and especially their confidence. The impact of not having proper tools at home, such as proper musical instruments, has been vast in both their composing and performing skills.

Practitioners also stated that learners struggle with the application of foundation knowledge, and this is exacerbated by their lack of independence and of commitment to fulfil knowledge gaps through self-directed study.

A lack of practical skills was cited by practitioners particularly in Science subjects, Art and Design, and PE. According to respondents, this lack of practical skills and experiences is also evident in extracurricular activities, in which learners appear to have become less engaged. Similarly, respondents spoke to an increased apathy, or decreased motivation, toward learning. According to some practitioners, many learners no longer see purpose in learning.

A significant number of practitioners also referred to negatively-affected literacy and numeracy skills and the struggle for learners to assimilate back into a classroom learning environment and the typical structure of a school day.

Removal of modifications

In response to the continued impact of the pandemic on learners, considerable numbers of respondents brought up that modifications to course assessments had been helpful. However, in many practitioners' views, lingering low attendance and skills deficits mean that

learners will not be prepared for the return to full coursework in 2023–24. Considerable numbers of practitioners would have preferred a phased return.

The modifications to course assessments were extremely helpful over the last couple of years and should perhaps be reinstated again before the changes come in a few years' time.

It was already difficult to cover the content in 2022–23. I am not sure we can cope with the extra assignments.

Conversely, several respondents said that what they saw as inflated grades and lower grade boundaries of the past few years will further disadvantage learners in the future.

Changes not only due to COVID

Several respondents felt that changes in learner attitudes and performance were not solely the fault of the pandemic. They suggested that the use of phones and social media has also affected concentration levels. The cost-of-living crisis, and less resilience in society in general, were also believed to be impacting learners. Some respondents voiced suspicions that COVID is sometimes used as an excuse.

The impact of the pandemic cannot be disentangled from the increasing effect of social media and screens in general and the changing media world the students are growing up in.

It is very easy to blame COVID for everything. Many pupils chose not to engage with online classes but were quick to blame the system for their failings.

It [COVID] is a useful excuse.

Widening attainment gap

A number of respondents felt that the isolation and at-home learning of the pandemic widened the attainment gap; the effects of the pandemic were unevenly distributed.

The pandemic has widened the poverty-related attainment gap. Those pupils who did not have a home life [that was] conducive to home-learning are still being negatively affected by the pandemic.

A few respondents added that they have seen an increase in learners with ASN.

The number of pupils needing additional assessment has increased, specifically those learners needing separate accommodation due to anxiety.

Schools [are] still struggling to clear a backlog of diagnosis of autism, ADHD, dyslexia etc and this has impacted additional support requirements.

Practitioner interviews

Interview participants were asked about how well they thought the education system as a whole has recovered from COVID-19. While a couple of practitioners thought that the system has recovered as best it could or recovered to a certain extent, most suggested that the system has not yet recovered.

It's not recovered at all.

It hasn't. It absolutely hasn't.

Most participants thought that, while direct COVID disruption was not a major feature in 2022–23, learners continue to be affected by the experiences of the pandemic. A major theme in the interviews was that learners' skills have not developed to the extent that their predecessors' skills prior to the pandemic would have. Curtailed foundation years have had an effect on the development of both social skills and core skills such as literacy and numeracy.

I think their physical skills, so reading, writing, and maths skills ... I think areas where they missed out have never really been remediated. They moved on in years in school, but they never went back and recovered that work in school that they missed.

I would say that where we're seeing the impact at the minute is that they are behind where we would expect them to be at certain skill levels. So, you know ... core skills, IT skills, people skills, communication skills – they're behind in those.

Not just in their gaps in learning, in their entire attitude towards education.

Several practitioners suggested that this, then, had workload impacts, where they were attempting to cover missed content and skills as well as all the new content they were required to cover. Indeed, most interviewees said that they had not been able to cover (either at all or to any great extent) the parts of the course that were not going to be assessed due to the modifications to course assessment in 2022–23. Others expressed concerns about 2023–24, particularly with assignments having returned.

There's a lot of plates to spin just now, you know, and it's just trying to run around to keep everything spinning and it's a very difficult thing.

Not having this assignment in the last couple of years ... even with that, we've just and no more finished the course in that time. So now with the assignments coming back ... it's like, how?

Having said that, while most interviewees saw the modifications to course assessment as having given them a certain amount of space for teaching and learning, a couple of practitioners expressed concern at the skills, particularly practical, that learners had not developed due to the modifications to course assessment.

Participants cited a range of issues, possibly inter-related, when they discussed how learners have been affected by the experience of COVID-19. These impacts were perceived to be almost universally negative.

Many of the practitioners suggested that learners are less resilient than those before the pandemic.

The kids are definitely less resilient than they were before. They don't take a knock as well as they would have previously.

Their ability to come up against a problem and to not panic or be crushed by it ... That is almost gone.

Most participants reported that attendance continues to be lower than before the pandemic.

Young people, very intelligent young people ... believe that they can still do a qualification without being in class. That is because they have gone through the COVID experience.

We see a much higher absence rate of students ... It's almost like there was permission not to come because we were learning remotely.

Several practitioners suggested that learners are more anxious and stressed about a range of issues, including deadlines, classroom interactions, and assessment.

It's almost like the natural stresses and anxiety that you should feel around things like exams or interviews or whatever ... has been accentuated.

Some practitioners perceived that learners are less likely to take responsibility for their own learning, post-pandemic.

They have very little independence in their learning. They expect everything to be spoon fed for them.

I also think that COVID maybe taught the kids to some degree that we would always be there for them, and we would spoon feed every single last part of everything they need because ... I think we all did try our hardest to facilitate and make things easier for young people.

A few participants thought that learners are less prepared for National Qualifications than their predecessors.

Preparedness. I think they don't really understand how important the exams are and how important the assessments are in terms of their connection to what happens when they leave.

A few also thought that learners are less motivated than learners were before the pandemic.

There's a real lack of commitment to education or prioritising education from both parents and pupils.

A number of interviewees reported that behaviour in class has deteriorated in the past couple of years.

The impact of the pandemic has had a significant negative impact on behaviour.

I guess [with] so much time away from school, [they] are not used to those boundaries being enforced.

A small number of practitioners perceived that learners are less focused and can concentrate less than learners prior to the pandemic.

They find it difficult to work for long periods of time or for extended periods of time.

On this last point, a couple of participants suggested that this was not necessarily solely the fault of the pandemic, but also had to do with societal changes and the prevalence of screens and phones in everyday life.

Several participants highlighted the increase in learners with ASN and who required assessment arrangements, and linked this to the aftermath of the pandemic. One practitioner suggested that COVID had not caused conditions such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia, but had caused learners with these conditions to struggle more throughout remote learning and lockdown.

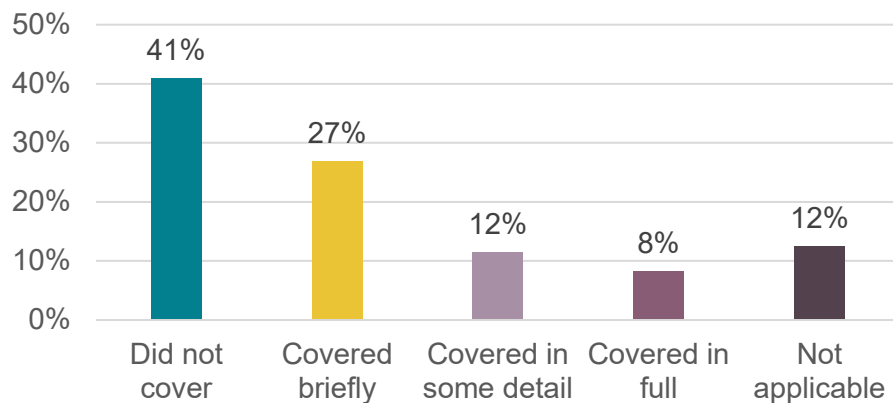
Finally, several practitioners highlighted the uneven impacts of the pandemic on learners, with those from lower socio-economic groups more likely to have been negatively affected and more likely to be affected still.

Modifications to course assessment

Respondents were asked the extent to which they were able to cover those areas that were not going to be assessed due to modifications to course assessment in 2022–23. 41% of respondents stated that they did not cover these areas, 27% that they covered them briefly, 12% that they covered them in some detail, and 8% that they covered them in full. The question was not applicable to 12% of respondents.

Figure 17

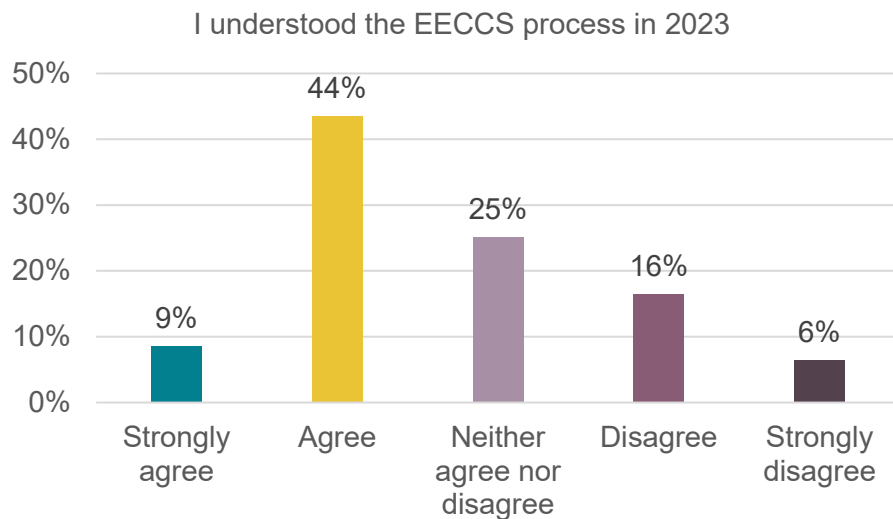
To what extent were you able to cover those areas that were not going to be assessed due to modifications to course assessment in 2022-23?



Exam Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service

Respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed that they had understood the exam exceptional circumstances consideration service (EECCS) process in 2023. While 52% strongly agreed or agreed, 23% disagreed or strongly disagreed; 25% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 18

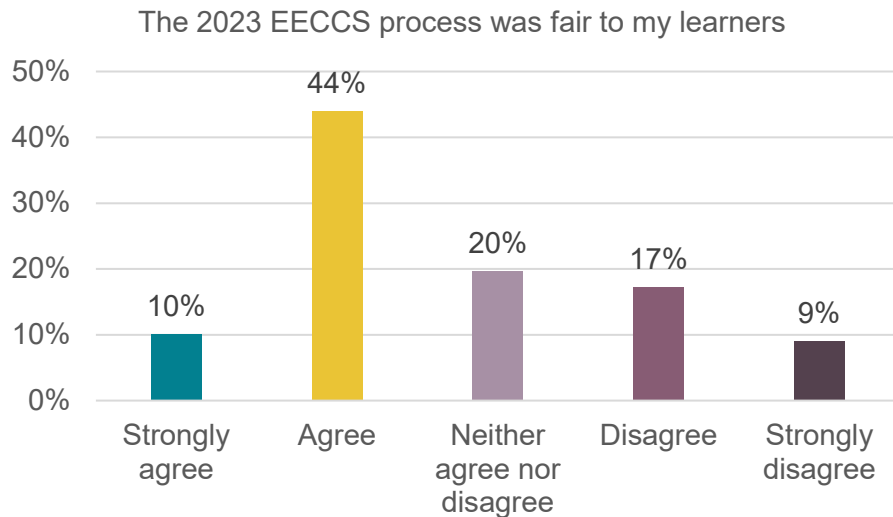


Respondents were then asked if they had needed to use the EECCS for any of their learners in 2023; 31% said yes and 69% no.

Those whose learners had used the EECCS were then asked further questions on the process.

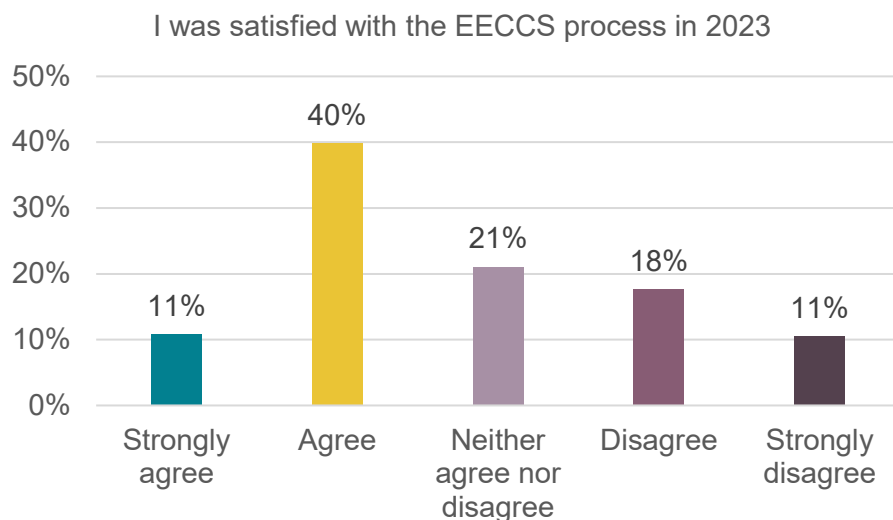
While 10% of these respondents strongly agreed that the 2023 EECCS process was fair to their learners, 44% agreed, and 20% neither agreed nor disagreed, 17% disagreed, and 9% strongly disagreed.

Figure 19



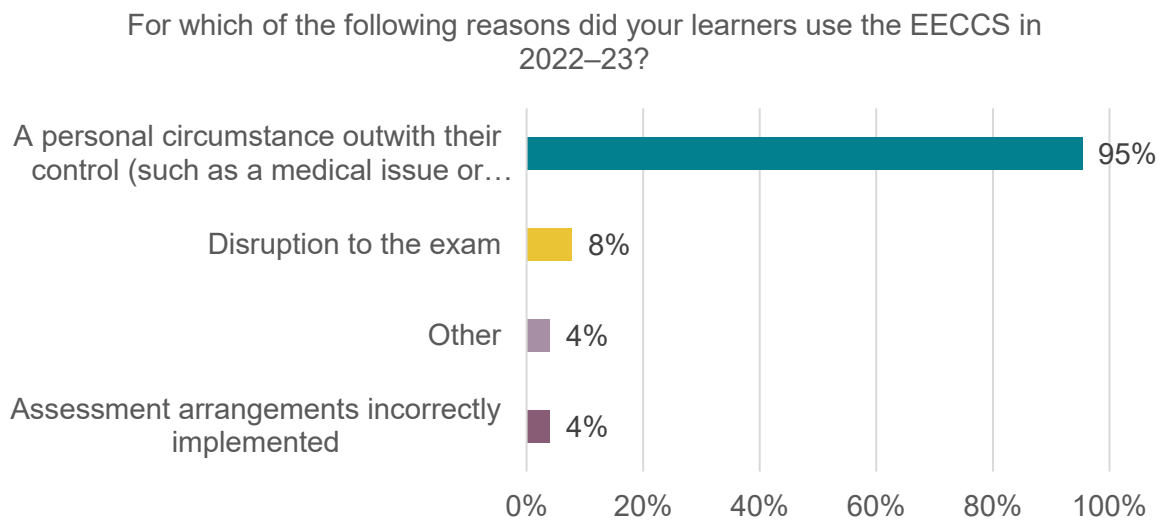
Meanwhile, 51% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they were satisfied with the EECCS process in 2023, 21% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 28% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 20



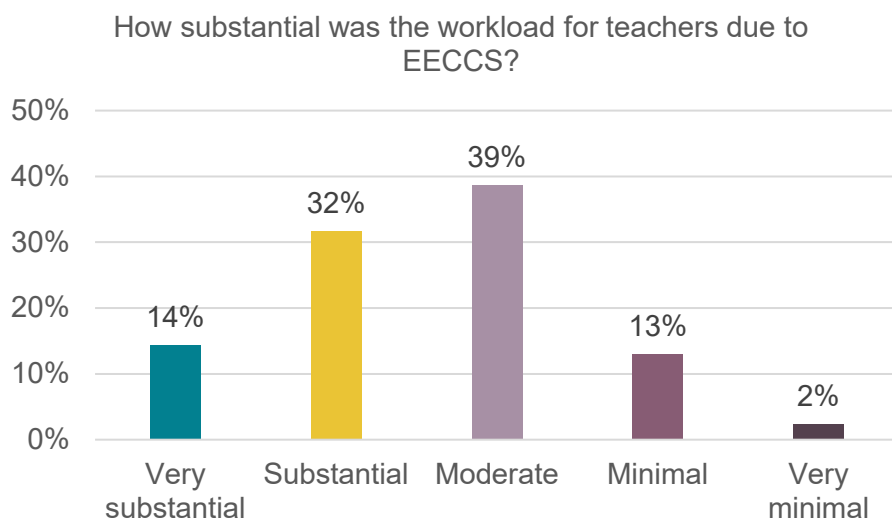
Respondents were then asked the reasons why they had used the EECCS for their learners in 2023. They could choose more than one option. 95% of respondents said learners needed the process for a personal circumstance outwith their control (such as a medical issue or bereavement), 8% said disruption to the exam, and 4% said assessment arrangements incorrectly implemented. Fourteen respondents (4%) chose 'other' for this question, but most of these responses would fall into the above categories. A couple of comments referenced the appeals process, rather than EECCS.

Figure 21



When asked how substantial the workload for teachers was due to EECCS, 14% of respondents said very substantial, 32% substantial, 39% moderate, 13% minimal, and 2% very minimal.

Figure 22



Practitioner survey comments

Respondents were asked if they had any other comments on the EECCS process in 2023. Just over 50 practitioners commented. A number simply stated that they thought the process had worked well.

However, almost a third of those who responded here believed that the EECCS process in 2023 was unfair in some way. Some highlighted that they believed the process is inequitable, with differences between subjects and centres. Others suggested that EECCS evidence is created too early in the year to cover the whole course. Others still thought that their learners were awarded a grade lower than the evidence supported.

The EECCS process varies hugely at a classroom, subject, department, school and local authority level in terms of the types and volume of evidence submitted.

The EECCS evidence was created in January. The pupil's skills had developed greatly since then, but we could not submit evidence for them.

My students were awarded a grade lower than the evidence supported.

Another theme to emerge, from eleven respondents, was that the process had not been clear enough. These comments included concerns that it was not apparent to centres what constituted acceptable evidence.

I just think it needs to very clear what is required.

Teachers believed one thing, but parents seem to have thought something else. Politicians waded in and confused things further.

Related to the clarity of the process, a small number of respondents submitted comments here around appeals and assessment arrangements, rather than EECCS.

Eight respondents mentioned the workload impacts of the EECCS process, with the suggestion that the storing, recording, and verifying of evidence in case it was required took up significant amounts of time. Moreover, if an EECCS request was subsequently submitted, the gathering, packaging, and sending of evidence was also relatively onerous.

Makes a fairer judgement on learner but adds to workload.

A process for submitting electronic versions of some materials would be good and probably less time consuming.

Three respondents highlighted what they believed was inappropriate use of the EECCS process, with concerns about learners not wanting to sit the exam or using it as an alternative to the appeals process.

Finally, a small number of respondents raised other concerns here. Although one was about EECCS timescales and one about SQA's handling of evidence, the rest were not directly about the EECCS process, but about the assessment process more generally and what these practitioners perceived as an over-reliance on a single high-stakes exam.

Practitioner interviews

Relatively few of those practitioners who took part in interviews had needed to use the EECCS in 2023. However, of those who did, views were overwhelmingly positive, with participants stating that the process had worked well, was straightforward, and is well understood within centres. One practitioner commented on how fair they thought the process was.

From the school's perspective, it was very simple, very easy to send the materials with lots of different ways of doing it.

Was really straightforward. It was just sending all the evidence that we had and to be fair, it's a simple process.

The guidance ... from the SQA was clear enough.

Exceptional circumstances actually works quite well because generally centres totally understand how that should work, you know ... the schools in Scotland understand the ECs pretty well.

A couple of participants suggested that the process was particularly painless due to their centre having an organised SQA co-ordinator.

Participants also thought that the workload associated with EECCS requests was acceptable, possibly because such requests are relatively few in number.

For me and my circumstances, I found it not very time consuming at all. I had the work all there, ready to go.

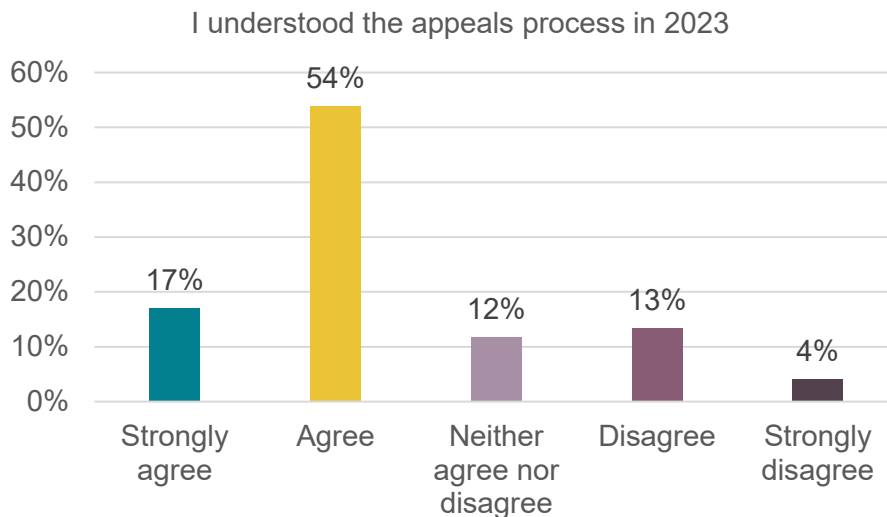
*I think they found it manageable because we did not have many to put in.
I think if we had had more than that would have been a different story.*

There're so few in number in my centre that it's actually very, very straightforward.

Appeals

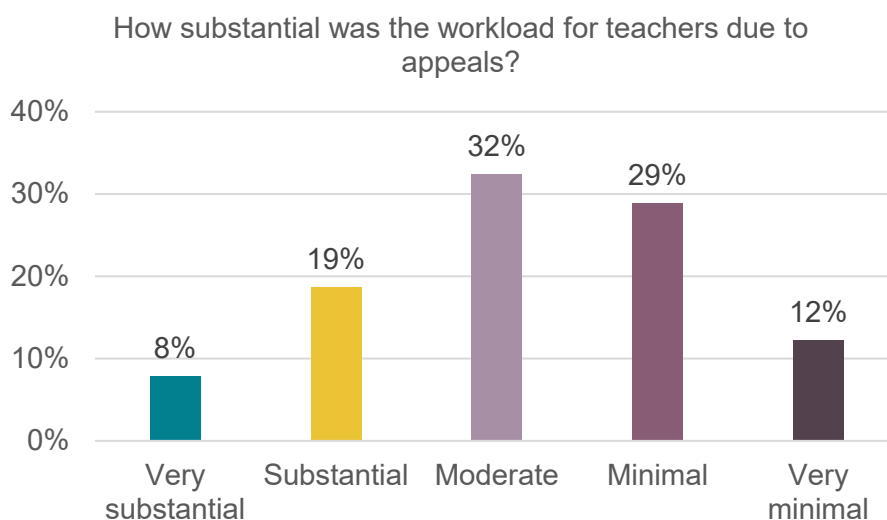
Respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed with the statement *I understood the appeals process in 2023*. While 71% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they understood the appeals process, 17% disagreed or strongly disagreed. A further 12% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 23



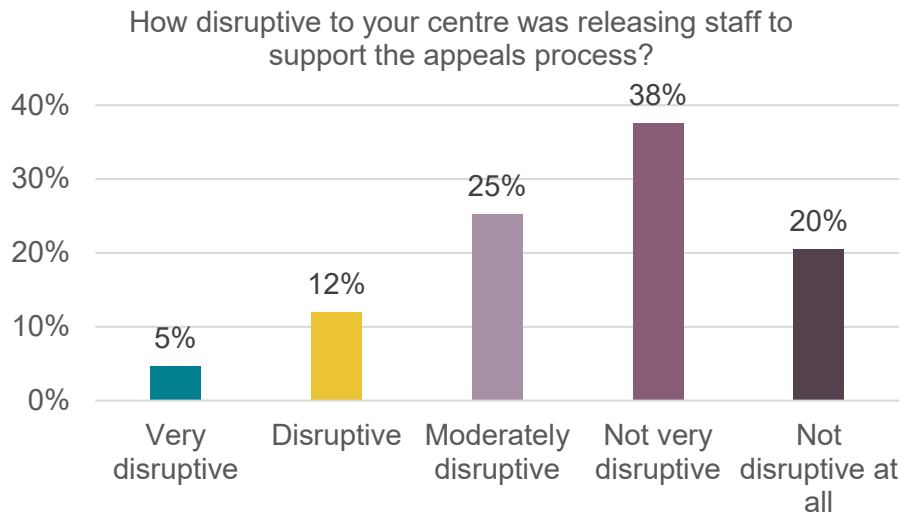
When asked how substantial the workload due to appeals was, 8% of respondents said very substantial, 19% substantial, 32% moderate, 29% minimal, and 12% very minimal.

Figure 24



Respondents were also asked how disruptive to their centre releasing staff to support the appeals process was. 5% said very disruptive, 12% disruptive, 25% moderately disruptive, 38% not very disruptive, and 20% not disruptive at all.

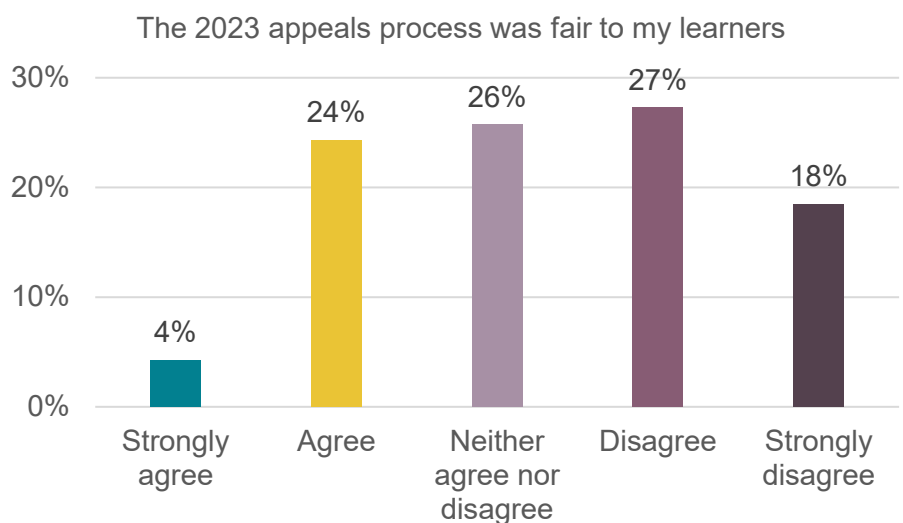
Figure 25



When asked if any of their learners made any appeals, 71% of respondents said yes and 29% no. Those respondents who had answered yes were then asked about the perceived fairness of the process and their satisfaction with it.

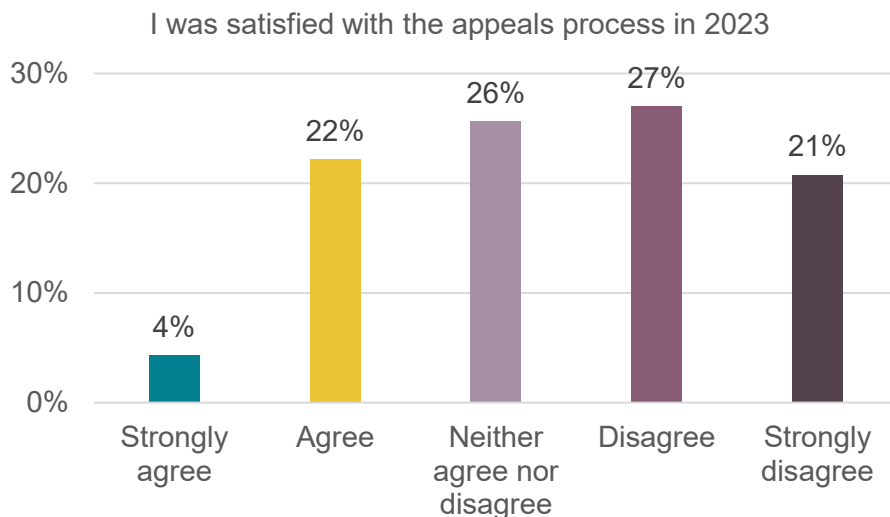
While 29% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the appeals process was fair to their learners, 46% disagreed or strongly disagreed. A further 26% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 26



Similarly, 27% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement *I was satisfied with the appeals process in 2023*, but 46% disagreed or strongly disagreed. 26% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 27



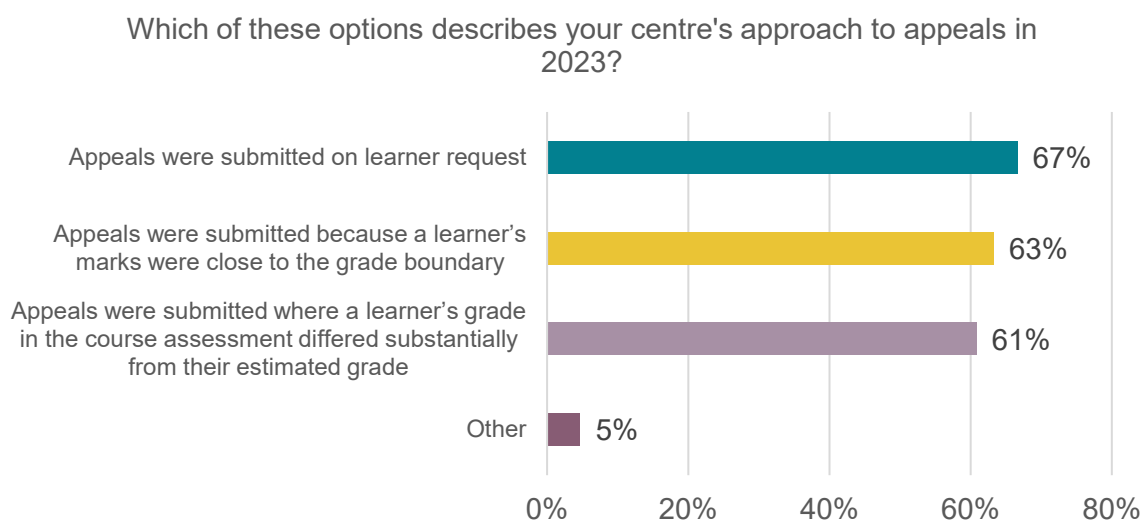
While 65% of respondents said that their learners had received the results of their appeal(s) at the time that they completed the survey, 35% said that they had not.

All respondents were then asked about their centre's approach to appeals in 2023. They could choose more than one option.

- ◆ 67% of respondents said that appeals were submitted on learner request.
- ◆ 63% of respondents said that appeals were submitted because a learner's marks were close to the grade boundary.
- ◆ 61% of respondents said that appeals were submitted where a learner's grade in the course assessment differed substantially from their estimated grade.

Most of the 5% who chose 'other' here suggested that they did not know, that they had not submitted appeals, or that learners submitted appeals themselves.

Figure 28



Practitioner survey comments

Respondents were asked if they had any other comments on the 2023 appeals process. A total of 280 practitioners submitted comments covering a wide array of topics. However, 39 of those responses simply stated either 'no' or that the question was not applicable.

It should be noted that those respondents who commented on appeals here were more likely to have been negative about the process in earlier questions than those who did not comment.

Appeals process

The most frequent response from practitioners about the appeals process was that the 2023 approach was not an appeal, but rather a clerical check.

To call the process an 'appeal' was misleading and disingenuous. Reducing the process to a clerical check, rendering any and all supporting evidence produced by schools redundant made it impossible for students to have their attainment considered in the same way as that of students under pre-COVID arrangements.¹

Many practitioners argued that the appeals process should consider additional evidence or that markers should undertake a full re-mark of exam evidence.

Stop calling them 'appeals'...this is a lie. It is not an appeal. There is no re-mark or consideration of previously completed assessment work to appeal against the final score achieved [...] It is simply an administration effort to check that marks were correctly added up and correctly entered into the system.

Several practitioners suggested that they felt disheartened by appeals process.

It was dispiriting because the process was simply an addition check rather than a substantial and personal assessment of marking correctness.

When an appeal is simply a clerical/marker check, it is almost pointless.

Alternative evidence

The second most prominent theme in the responses to this question was that alternative evidence should be considered in the appeals process. These practitioners advocated for a return to an appeals process which allows for the consideration of prelims, for example.

To not take into account prelim grades as an appeal defeats the purpose of having prelims and places too much pressure on the final exam without that mitigation in place.

¹ It is worth noting that the approach used immediately prior to COVID-19 did not include the consideration of alternative evidence. These arrangements were in place prior to 2014.

Not asking for evidence was a reduction in teacher workload, but I'd rather have had the additional work and sent in proof of my learners' attainment, and had their appeals upheld. A simple re-mark is not fair on staff or learners.

It still remains a 'lottery'. A learner who has simply had a 'bad day' has very little back up, especially in the case of those who have performed well throughout the year. Teacher input isn't considered at all.

In addition, some respondents felt that SQA not considering alternative evidence in the appeals process demonstrated a lack of trust in practitioners.

[...] it indicates that you do not trust professional teachers to do their jobs.

Another practitioner remarked that only offering a recount of marks suggested that not all of the examinations were marked to a national standard.

Appeals should take into account candidate evidence. Offering re-marks of assessments suggests that they were not marked to national standard in the first place.

However, not all respondents to this question thought that the appeals process should encompass alternative evidence. One practitioner argued that the inclusion of additional evidence increased workload while decreasing rigour:

I agree with not using prelims as part of the evidence which was administratively burdensome and unreliable as many schools' processes lack integrity [...] If COVID showed anything, it was that many schools could not be trusted to self-assess and this is driven by the pressure to improve results [...] External exams are the only foolproof means of retaining educational integrity.

Fairness

Related to the theme above, considerable numbers of respondents stated that they believed the 2023 appeals process was unfair. These practitioners argued that it is not fair to learners to not consider alternative evidence. They stated that this puts too much emphasis on a single high-stakes exam, where learners may underperform due several factors.

A simple re-mark is not fair on staff or learners.

The system for appeals was massively unfair this year. I had learners who performed well in the prelim but did not perform well in the exam due to a variety of factors — stress etc. It was unfair that I could not put in an appeal for them. I had the evidence from the prelim and other timed work done under exam conditions, but that meant nothing when only exam work was being looked at again. We need to go back to the previous system. Yes, it will mean more work for teachers, but it is worth it.

It felt unfair that evidence of pupil achievement during the course ... could not be submitted. Pupils with genuine mental health issues whose performance day-to-day cannot be consistent missed out on qualifications there was evidence for.

However, a small number of respondents stated that the 2023 appeals process was fair.

I think that the awarding of grades and the appeal process was fair. The appeal process, now streamlined, appears to be very functional.

Clarity

Some respondents felt that the 2023 appeals process lacked clarity for both learners and practitioners. Several practitioners felt that, despite going through the appeals process and receiving information from SQA, they still did not fully understand it. These comments implied that this was due to a lack of clear information from SQA.

The appeals process was very opaque from an outsider's perspective. I admit that I still don't fully understand it now. If I, as a highly experienced practitioner do not understand it, what hope do we have of communicating it to parents and pupils in a clear, concise manner?

The appeals process was not well described, I went to SQA training on it, and this contradicted what was said on the website and through SMT.

When submitting an appeal due to the mark being close to the boundary, the process for which the paper/grade is reconsidered is very murky and seems to be very behind closed doors and not open at all.

Moreover, some practitioners stated that parents and carers and learners were also confused about what the appeals approach.

I don't think pupils fully understand how the process works and that it is up to them.

As it was so vastly different to the two previous years, learners and parents were confused and upset. This put even more burden on teachers to be the 'go between' between SQA and parents.

Timing

A number of practitioners commented on the timing of appeals process and timing of information about the process. A couple of respondents stated that the appeals submission deadline was too close to the return to school after the summer break. Others remarked that appeals take too long to be returned.

The deadline for appeals was close to the return to school after the summer break. Some of my students who could have appealed didn't, as they were not aware their grades meant that they could have tried to appeal. Had I had a chance to see them, then I would have suggested they submitted an appeal.

Took a long time for appeals to be returned. Pupils started courses in August and were waiting for results of an appeal to know whether they were continuing on that course or had to change. 31 October is far too late to be receiving that information and having to change course.

Other themes

There were several issues raised by smaller numbers of practitioners. Examples of these included comments about tolerance boundaries, perceived issues with inconsistent marking, and that feedback was needed on – particularly unsuccessful – appeals submissions.

Practitioner interviews

Most of the practitioners who took part in interviews had had learners who submitted appeals in 2023. There was a range of views on the process. While a couple of participants pointed out that they thought that the service should have been labelled as a clerical check rather than an appeal, several stated that the process had worked well.

Of those who praised the process, a couple of practitioners suggested that the 2023 appeals approach ensured that results were reliable across the cohort, while others appreciated the smaller impact on practitioner workload compared to 2022.

I think that's great. I think that's how it should be. I don't think you should be able to ... appeal on the basis of a prelim, because those are all of a different standard of quality from different schools and there's different standards and qualities in terms of marking.

As a practitioner, there's no workload whatsoever really.

It was easy, much easier because we didn't have to submit any evidence.

Having said that, a few participants suggested that although their workload was smaller than in 2022, they would have preferred an appeals process that incorporated alternative evidence, even if this did involve more work for practitioners.

We moan about the workload, but actually you want the young person to have the outcome that they deserve.

It's fairly minimal ... but I would rather there was more, and we felt like it was a more positive experience.

Indeed, workload issues aside, several interviewees expressed some frustration with the appeals approach in 2023 and thought it would have been fairer for learners if it had allowed for the consideration of alternative evidence. Some of these comments were perhaps not solely about the appeals process, but wider comments about the balance of exams and other types of assessment within the system.

You would like to think that a grade should be more a kind of a holistic look at how good that child is in that subject rather than a snapshot of one single day.

There was some merit in the system ... where we could submit evidence of, you know, prelims and the timed class assessments and stuff, because it does give the SQA a true understanding of that young person across the board. I know that goes into the exams-versus-no exams debate.

One practitioner was disappointed that a learner who had been ill for a significant period of time throughout the 2022–23 academic year was unable to use the exceptional circumstances service and instead had to appeal (unsuccessfully). The practitioner judged this to be unfair because the learner was disadvantaged, but not only on the day of the exam.

When discussion turned to the reasons why appeals were submitted, there was no clear theme. Generally, participants suggested that appeals were submitted for a range of reasons: when learners' grades were close to a grade boundary, when learners' final grades were lowered than estimated, and where a learner (or perhaps a parent or carer) wanted to appeal.

Very often, practitioners said that they — or their centre's SQA co-ordinator — discussed the issue with learners, but ultimately the decision rested with the learner.

It's a child's choice (or their parents' choice) whether they appealed or not, and the school gave advice.

On occasion, participants suggested that, because there was no fee associated with appeals, centres were happy to appeal large numbers of learner grades, even though they were almost sure that these would be unsuccessful.

What do we have to lose? We just need to click that box beside that name and just submit and it's not going to cost us anything. We don't need to dig out any materials, we just need to tick that box and actually send it off.

Our head teacher's quite keen on appeals, so he ... just put it in anyway. We knew they weren't [going to be successful]... Most subjects have a tolerance, so if they're only a couple away and there's a tolerance, it's never going to happen and if you're far away from a boundary that's not going to happen either, because there's no way you're going up 10 marks.

On a related note, a few participants highlighted that they believed that the appeals process for 2023 was not well understood, amongst learners or centres, and this had led to large numbers of inappropriate appeals. However, as mentioned above, it was noted that there was no disincentive to submitting appeals that were unlikely to be successful.

The problem we have in centres is that they [centres] don't have a full understanding really of how an appeal should work and why it's there, you know? An appeal is there for an injustice.

I don't think the learners quite understood ... and so we've got pupils who want it because they know they got 69% and want to get an A, but we'd say, 'Well, the SQA have checked that anyway'.

It was super simple, but I think there was confusion across Scotland of what actually constituted an appeal.

Interview participants were also asked if their centre's experiences of appeals in 2023 would affect how they acted with regards to the appeals system in 2024. While a couple suggested

they may be more cautious and submit fewer, most suggested that as long as the process remained the same, their centre would act in the same way. Moreover, several practitioners mentioned that the decision to appeal was not in their hands but generally a combination of learner choice and school policy.

Workload

Respondents were asked if there was anything that SQA could do to help reduce their workload. A total of 280 practitioners submitted comments, with a range of suggestions.

Reduce content or remove assessment

The most common theme, cited by just under half of respondents to this question, was that SQA should reduce content or remove assessments to ensure that courses are deliverable in the time available. While some respondents linked this perceived requirement to the ongoing effects of the pandemic on teaching and learning, others suggested that the streamlining of courses should be permanent, to better allow learners to build skills and knowledge.

Reduce content to be covered in the course and allow us to focus on teaching a reduced quantity of content in greater depth.

A considerable number of respondents suggested that assignments should be removed. Many stated that assignments increase workload significantly without benefitting learners. Some respondents believed that assignments are not undertaken on a level playing field, with some learners receiving more support than others, either at home or in school or college. Other respondents again suggested that learners were not yet prepared to undertake assignments after the experience of the pandemic. Several practitioners put forward what they saw as more suitable assessment approaches.

Remove the assignments from all levels — they add nothing and increase stress on both pupils and staff.

Assignments are too time consuming for very few marks.

The skills assessed in the assignments can easily be assessed in the exam.

These do nothing to close the attainment gap.

While comments on assignments came from across subject areas, science assignments, the English and modern languages folios, and the composition element of Music were all cited relatively frequently.

On a similar note, several respondents thought that the Added Value Unit (AVU) at National 4 should be removed. Again, those who responded believed that the AVU increased workload without benefitting learners, particularly those still catching up after COVID-19. Moreover, a few respondents thought that AI will increasingly threaten the validity of assignments and AVUs.

Remove the assignments and Added Value Unit. The pupils are ill prepared to complete these tasks, which means far more hours than are allocated are required to get them to a point where they can actually have an attempt at completing them to a decent standard.

Remove the AVUs — this process is going to become dominated by the influence of AI ... and is no longer the useful exercise it once was.

In more general terms, around 100 respondents mentioned the effect on workload of the removal of modifications to course assessment. Around half of these comments suggested that modifications should have been retained, with the other half indicating that modifications should have been removed gradually, possibly level by level. Practitioners suggested that learners are not yet ready for pre-pandemic assessment measures — particularly those having to complete assignments at Higher and Advanced Higher level without having previously done this at National 5 — and this was putting a strain on practitioner workload.

I think that re-introducing components that were removed during COVID is massively increasing workload and stress for teachers and young people.

If the SQA can judge student performance on reduced exam requirements ... why not stay with this?

Assignments and coursework could have been reintroduced one level at a time to support teachers in reintegrating this back into the curriculum for pupils who still are not as experienced or at the same level as prior to the pandemic.

While a small number of respondents thought that increased internal assessment and coursework assessed throughout the year would reduce workload, many more felt that reducing internal assessment would help. Again, a couple of practitioners cited the perceived threat of AI to internal assessment and coursework components.

Scrap internal assessments.

Move all assessed coursework over to end-of-year exams.

Particularly in light of influence and reach of ChatGPT and similar ... if you want writing assessed then it will need to be completed under exam conditions and externally marked.

A number of respondents suggested that an exam for National 4 should be introduced and a small number that this should also be the case for National 3. Respondents who suggested exams at these lower levels did so on the basis that they would reduce practitioner workload, but also that they would increase the rigour and credibility of these qualifications. A small number cited Standard Grades as having been a more equitable and credible qualification.

An external exam at N4 would remove much workload.

National 4 qualifications to externally assessed ... The current National 3 and 4 qualifications are not valued by external agencies because they are assessed by teachers who are doing the teaching and the assessing.

Similarly, in light of the reform agenda and the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment, a number of respondents expressed their concern about the potential removal of external assessment from National 5.

I think end-of-year examinations must stay in place to allow pupils to be assessed in a formal, summative way and prepare them for their futures. Taking this away and relying on teacher judgements for pupils would increase workload and stress significantly.

Please do not place all of the burden of marking on teachers and get rid of external assessments.

Resources

Another prominent theme in responses about reducing workload was that of SQA providing more resources to practitioners. Substantial numbers of practitioners called for the provision of standardised and quality 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.

Provide a bank of basic resources for each subject.

Because there are no centralised materials to refer to, schools appear to be doing widely different things which seems like a poor use of teachers' time.

I do not understand why the SQA does not produce a Scotland-wide prelim for each subject instead of teachers' workload being increased by all doing the same job every year.

Create banked end of unit assessments/prelims that are moderated/come with marking instructions.

Similarly large numbers of respondents also called for more up-to-date exemplars and clarity in course specifications. There was a perception that practitioner workload is increased by moderation or evidence discussions caused by vague or unclear expectations.

We need to have much clearer guidelines if we are going to mark effectively.

Clearer exemplification from SQA on assessment standards.

Considerable numbers of practitioners also suggested that in-person Understanding Standards events are extremely useful, but are challenging to access, either because of limits on the number of attendees per centre or local authority, or because they are generally held in the central belt. A number of respondents believed that accessible Understanding Standards materials need to be updated and clarified. Finally, a small number of respondents expressed the view that a full understanding of the standard should be possible without having to become an SQA appointee.

Many of the issues highlighted here are discussed further in the section on Standards, below.

Communications and engagement

Significant numbers of respondents thought that their workload would be reduced if SQA communicated decisions and information in a timely manner. There was considerable frustration expressed that updates are issued part way through the academic session, well after course teaching has begun.

Exam content, timing, coursework should be released prior to the previous summer in order to allow for effective planning.

Often changes come in October; this is too late and leads to stress and workload.

On a related note, several respondents called for consistency and an end to what they see as constant unnecessary changes in course requirements.

A number of practitioners also suggested that their workload would be reduced if SQA listened more to the profession. This was particularly with reference to the decision to remove modifications to course assessment.

Acknowledging and acting on teacher recommendations re assessments, especially appeals and removal of modifications.

Smaller numbers of respondents suggested improvements to the website to make it easier to navigate, more use of digital technologies including for evidence submission, and for a rethink of submission or deadline dates where these can cause extra work by clashing with exam dates, for example.

Processes

A substantial number of respondents mentioned specific SQA processes when discussing their workload. Tying in with the themes on communication and engagement, there was a feeling expressed that requirements of processes such as appeals and EECCS need to be clear as early as possible to ensure that practitioners do not waste time on collecting evidence that will not be required. A couple of respondents suggested that practitioners should not be involved in appeals or EECCS processes and this should solely be the responsibility of the learner.

Several respondents also mentioned the assessment arrangements (AAs) process. There was a perception that this process has become more complex and time-consuming and is challenging to navigate. While one of the reasons for the increase in workload is the increase in learners with ASN, practitioners also believed that SQA's evidence requirements and the requirement to collect evidence annually are onerous and unnecessary.

The process of gathering evidence to support alternative assessment arrangements has considerably added workload on to us, so this needs to be reviewed.

Manage the additional arrangements. We now have over a third of our students with additional arrangements.

More generally, several respondents simply stated that there was too much administration and paperwork associated with SQA processes.

Alignment between levels

A smaller number of practitioners thought that courses at different levels should be aligned to allow for different levels (National 4 and National 5, particularly) to be taught together but assessed at different levels. Comments suggested that these levels are often taught together as it is, but with an increase in complexity and practitioner workload because the content does not align.

Many learners are taught in tri-level classes within schools and the current qualification structure does not account for this.

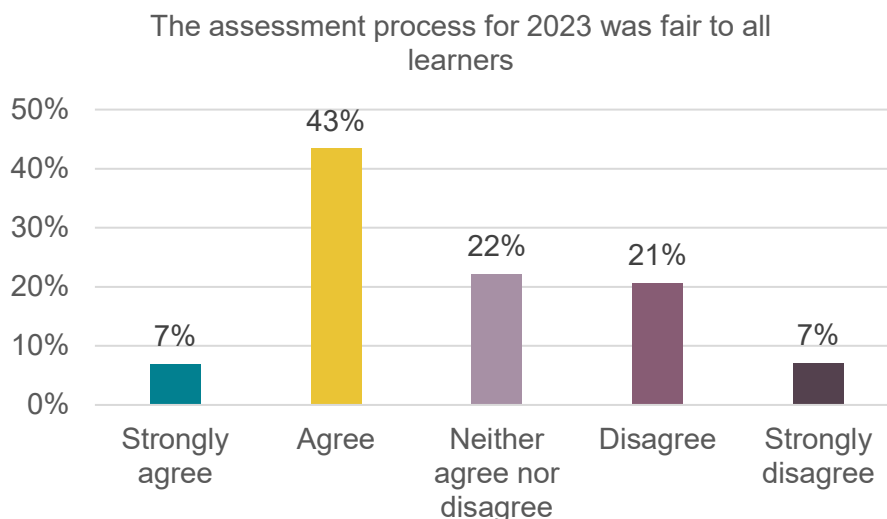
No matter how much the SQA say bi-level shouldn't happen, it does.

Related to this, a couple of practitioners suggested that SQA issue guidance to centres on its position on dual entry and using National 4 as a fallback.

Overall approach

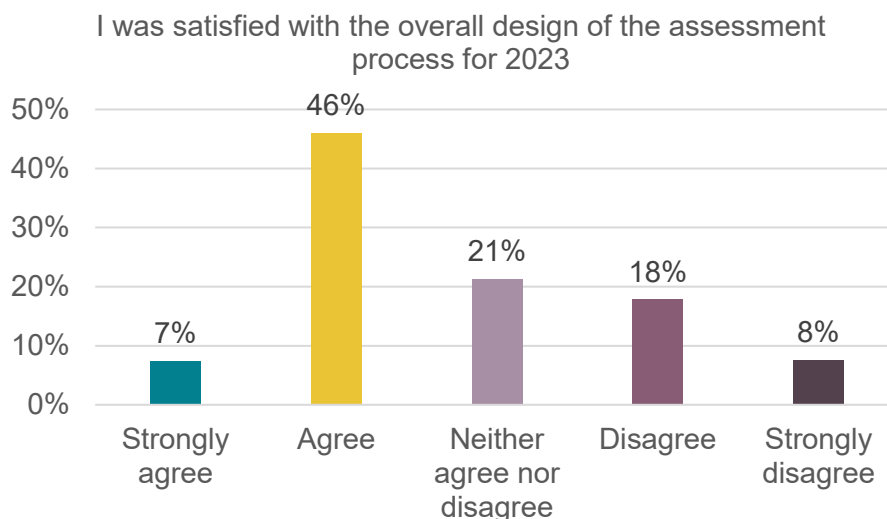
Practitioners were asked for their views on the overall assessment approach. Half of respondents (50%) strongly agreed or agreed that the assessment process for 2023 was fair to all learners, while 22% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 28% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 29



Meanwhile, just over half of respondents (53%) strongly agreed or agreed that they were satisfied with the overall design of the assessment process for 2023, while 21% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 25% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 30



Practitioner survey comments

Respondents who had chosen 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' when asked whether they were satisfied with the overall design of the assessment process for 2023 were asked why they were dissatisfied. A total of 245 practitioners submitted comments with a range of reasons.

Inconsistency

Many practitioners raised the issue of perceived inconsistency, both between subjects and with previous years, as being unfair to learners. Perceived inconsistencies between subjects were generally cited in relation to the modifications to course assessment that had been made in some subjects when compared with others.

Some of the modifications made were not consistent across subjects, resulting in it being easier to gain qualifications in some subjects versus others.

Communications

Considerable numbers of respondents thought that guidance from SQA lacked detail or was provided too late. There were many mentions of guidance, clarifications, and changes, being released part-way through the academic session once teaching plans had been created and teaching had begun. This was perceived to have had negative impacts on the coherence of teaching and learning.

I don't believe the course spec/specimen papers provided for my subject were detailed enough. The questions asked of my pupils in the final exam were unlike any questions outlined in these documents.

I think there was a lack of communication between SQA and schools that made teaching very complicated. The children had no chance of following the changes (some of which were sent through very late in the day).

On this point, practitioners also reported that prompt and clear communication would mean that workload and stress would be reduced for both practitioners and learners.

Webinars contradicted course guidelines and gave extra information that is not on any other form of paperwork/example — this is grossly unfair to learners and teachers.

Other practitioners reported that webinars and other communications were useful, but that accessing these was an issue (see the Standards section below for more information). They felt if neither they nor their colleagues had been able to attend, crucial information would have been missed.

Appeals

As noted earlier in the section on Appeals, a substantial number of practitioners had issues with the appeals process in 2023. Many thought that the process should have stayed the same as in 2022, with learners able to submit work completed throughout the year to support their appeal. Thus, several respondents felt that the process was unfair to learners.

I don't think the appeals process is fair — papers don't even get re-marked and prelim performance is not given any consideration.

I felt that the appeals service disadvantaged pupils who under performed on the day of the exam and there was no ability for them to show that by submitting previous work.

A number of respondents also expressed negative views of the decision not to fully re-mark papers that had been appealed, stating that this was not a full appeals process and more akin to an administrative process.

Modifications to course assessment

A number of practitioners felt that modifications to course assessment had disadvantaged learners. Some practitioners expressed the view that modifications to course assessment in 2022–23 meant that there was too much pressure on a single high-stakes exam, which they suggested was not a suitable or equitable assessment method. A smaller number of respondents raised concerns that this especially disadvantaged learners with ASN.

The fact the courses became 100% exam was enormously stressful to them. It all came down to on-the-day performance and any evidence across the year that gave a broader indication was ignored ... Had assignments come back last year it could have been in a modified form and a reduction in the exam content. What irked me was the 100% exam approach and no absolute way to show true potential.

On a related note, some respondents also saw the lack of coursework as a disadvantage to learners, as certain skills were not being fully developed.

Continued impact of COVID

Several respondents reported the continued impact of COVID-19. As covered earlier, these responses noted that absences are still impacting learners and behaviour is an issue that has affected learning and teaching. Some practitioners raised that the lack of experience, resilience and exam readiness of learners meant that many struggled with exams.

Many pupils still had massive disruption due to COVID over the past few years and were unprepared for the exam. The mitigations given for this were minimal.

Several practitioners felt that the impact of COVID was not considered enough in designing the assessment approach for 2022–23 and some practitioners made the point that a lowering of grade boundaries showed that the exams were too challenging for this pandemic-affected cohort.

Practitioner interviews

During interview, practitioners were asked if they thought the 2023 assessment process was fair to all learners. Several participants stated that the process was fair, or as fair as it can be — although one did express the wish that coursework accounted for more of a learner's final grade than is currently the case.

I don't think you can get anything more fair than just an external exam. Everyone's in the same situation. It is what it is. Everyone could have a good or bad day. That's not what it's about. It's about everybody having the same opportunity, and everyone does.

So, we have no issue with having the exam at the end of year. We need to have that, but could it be a [smaller] percentage of your overall grade.

A range of issues relating to fairness were brought up by small numbers of participants. This included a couple of practitioners who were concerned about the removal of modifications to course assessment in 2023–24 and thought that this may be unfair on learners still affected by COVID. On a related note, while one interviewee mentioned that they believed the modifications in place in 2022–23 enhanced fairness for learners, another argued that the modifications had had a detrimental effect on rigour and credibility.

Other schools have kept the reduced amount of text they're covering at Nat 5 and Higher, which I think is a shame... You know, there's no nobody tells us how much we have to teach, so we're sort of narrowing it and narrowing it for the assessments.

A couple of subject-specific issues were raised in interview, where participants thought that a particular paper or topic had been especially challenging in 2022–23.

One participant was particularly concerned about their perception that learners' opportunities to succeed depend on their socio-economic status. However, they accepted that this unfairness was more of a societal issue than one necessarily linked to SQA or the assessment process itself. Similarly, a few mentions were made of learners with ASN or English as an additional language and the potential barriers to learning they faced. There were concerns around whether the assessment process was — or could be — fair to them.

Related to this, several mentions were made of the assessment arrangement (AA) process. Concerns around this encompassed both the increasing number of learners with ASNs who require AAs, and the perception of increased rigour and bureaucracy in SQA's AA processes. One participant was particularly critical of what they saw as the duplication within the system.

I feel like the kind of more and more years I do this, there's more students with more specific learning difficulties and needs, and I know our school really struggles with that.

SQA has become a lot more stringent about the evidence required to activate the additional support ... that is a far greater workload than anything to do with the ECs and appeals ... and if you had an additional support need, I would have to go to every one of your teachers and get evidence from every single one of them, even though it's the same skill, it's writing [where] they need extra time.

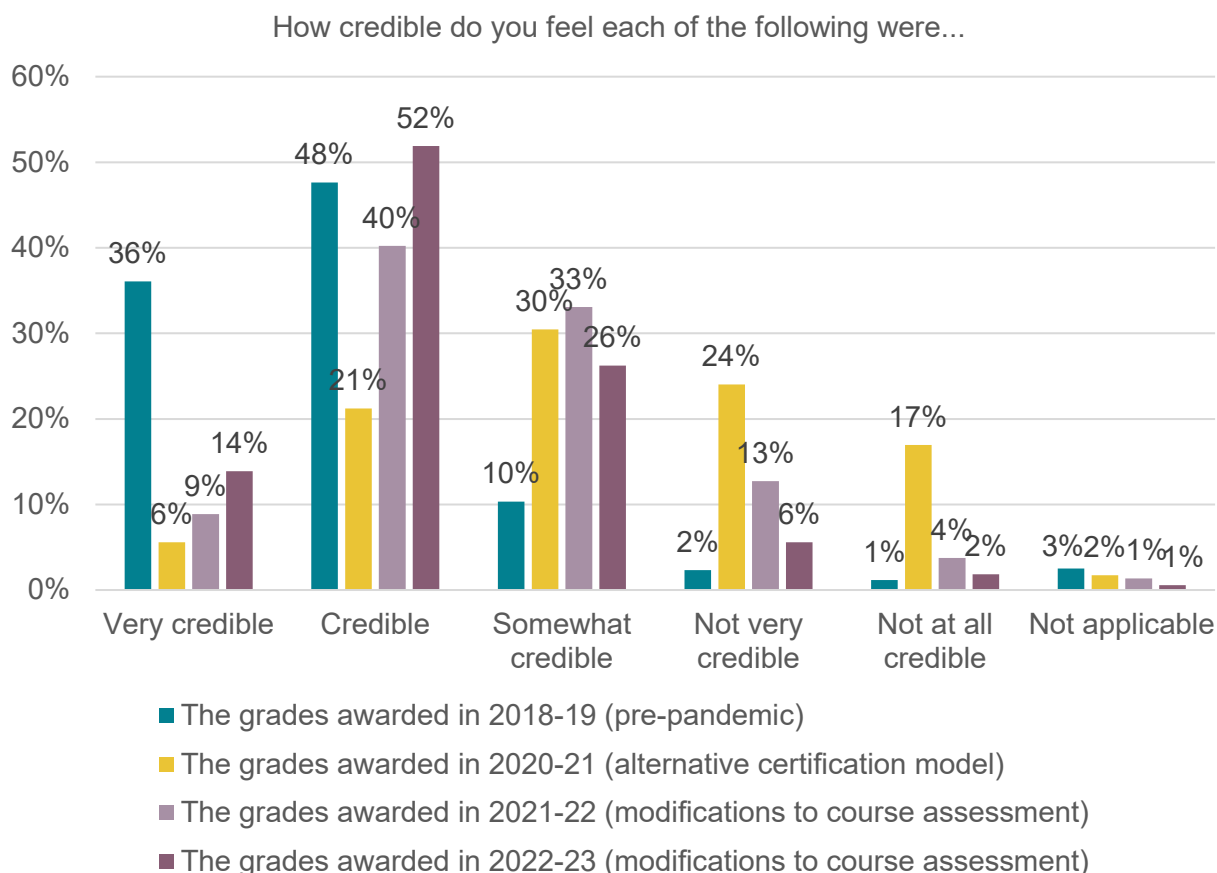
However, it is worth noting that a couple of participants suggested that the AA process worked well in providing fairness to those learners with ASNs.

We evidence that all year and make sure that everything is in place so that everybody has the extra time or the digital or whatever it is that they need to be able to access the qualification exam at the levels I think so. I think it seems fair.

Credibility

Respondents were asked how credible they felt the grades awarded in each of the last four years were. 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.

Figure 31



Practitioner survey comments

Those respondents who had indicated that they believed the grades awarded in 2022–23 were not very credible or not at all credible were asked why they thought this; almost 60 practitioners commented.

A wide range of topics that practitioners believed had affected the credibility of 2022–23 grades was raised. Perceived issues each mentioned by a few respondents included subject-specific concerns, questions over marking, and, more widely, misgivings over the appropriateness of an assessment system based on exams.

However, there were two main — and contrasting — themes in response to this question. Firstly, several respondents suggested that the 2022–23 grades were not credible because

the assessment approach did not fully take into account the ongoing effects of COVID. Assessment was too challenging in the circumstances.

The rush to get back to normal dismissed a year group still finding their feet from a pandemic.

On the other hand, several respondents thought that 2022–23 grades lacked credibility because the assessment approach was less rigorous than pre-pandemic. Concerns here included that grade boundaries were set too low and that it was too easy to achieve grades at the top end. A couple of practitioners suggested that this had led to some learners progressing inappropriately.

Easier for them. Not challenging enough.

The examination experience was easier for students than those who undertook the exams prior to the pandemic, and also because the grade boundaries were set to be half-way between what they were pre-COVID and the obviously inflated grades that were accepted for 2020.

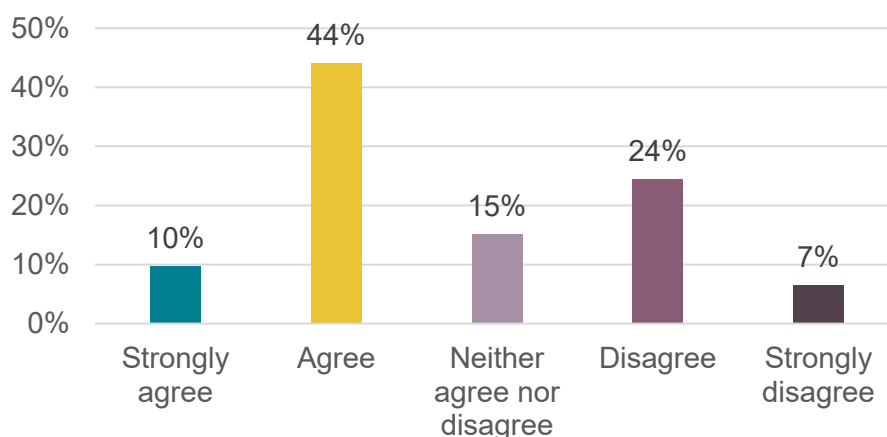
A small number of respondents mentioned the 2023 appeals process as having affected credibility. Some believed that learners had not been informed of the appeals process early enough, others that the process was unfair and should have incorporated alternative evidence.

Standards

Respondents were asked a series of questions on standards. While 54% strongly agreed or agreed that the national standard is clearly articulated in the course specification, 31% disagreed or strongly disagreed and 15% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 32

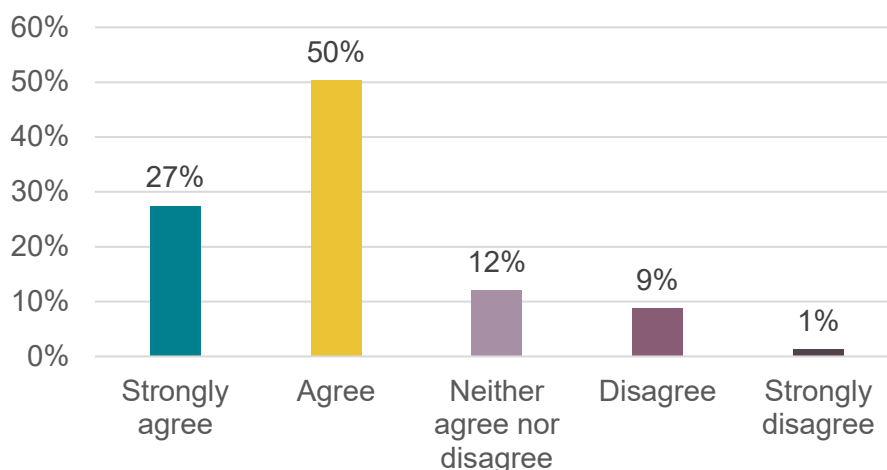
The national standard is articulated clearly in the course specification



More than three-quarters of respondents (78%) strongly agreed or agreed that they had a good understanding of the national standard. Only 10% disagreed or strongly disagreed and 12% neither agreed nor disagreed.

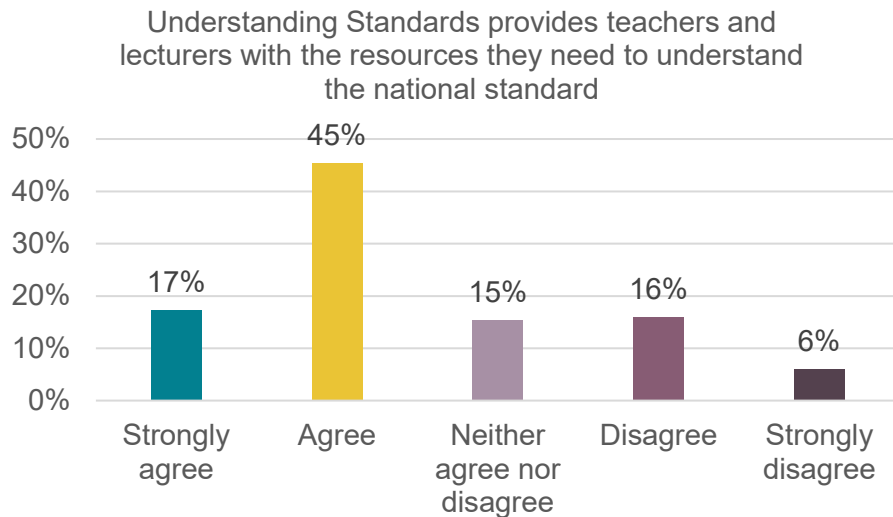
Figure 33

I have a good understanding of the national standard



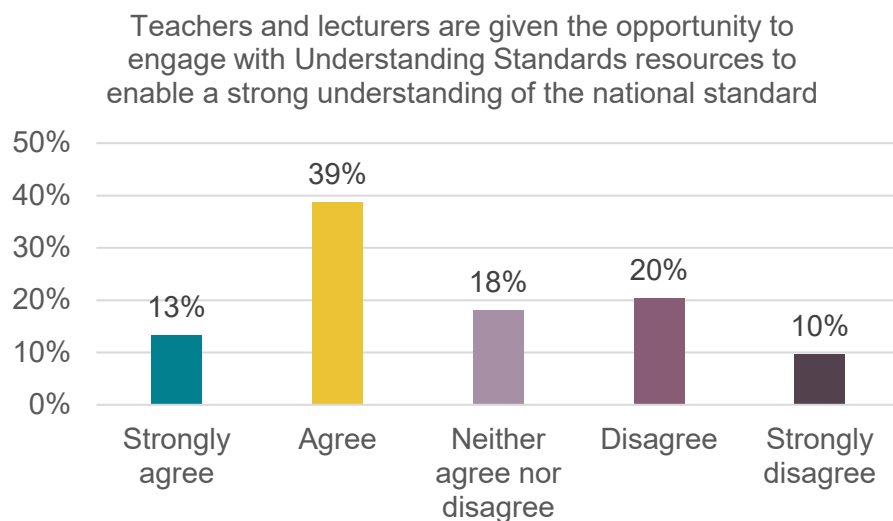
When asked the extent to which they agreed that Understanding Standards provides teachers and lecturers with the resources they need to understand the national standard, 17% of respondents strongly agreed, 45% agreed, 15% neither agreed nor disagreed, 16% disagreed, and 6% strongly disagreed.

Figure 34



While 52% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that teachers and lecturers are given the opportunity to engage with Understanding Standards resources to enable a strong understanding of the national standard, 30% disagreed or strongly disagreed; 18% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 35



Practitioner survey comments

Respondents were asked if they had any further comments on standards or Understanding Standards. Of the 447 practitioners who submitted comments, 71% had previously agreed or strongly agreed (at the earlier question) that they have a good understanding of the national standard. However, this appeared somewhat at odds with the comments here, which were somewhat negative, with themes of standards being applied inconsistently, standards being difficult to understand, or information being hard to find.

Positive sentiment

Responses were categorised as generally positive if they used positive language (such as 'great' or 'fantastic') and indicated few or minor problems. There were relatively few respondents who left generally positive comments. Nonetheless, some positive comments focused on the 'excellent' Understanding Standards events, while others commented on the Understanding Standards resources and materials.

SQA Understanding Standards is an invaluable resource. The candidate scripts and commentary are most useful. I use these resources regularly with N5, Higher and Advanced Higher. They are very informative and user friendly for pupils and teachers.

Generally positive respondents also commented on areas for improvement. For example, while describing the resources and materials as very good or a great resource, some suggested that accessing them was difficult or that they add to workload. A couple of respondents who were positive about Understanding Standards were negative about others' understanding of the standard.

Working with partner schools over the period of COVID-19 recovery, it is abundantly clear that many teachers have not or will not engage with Understanding Standards materials, and so are not assessing or estimating in line with the required standards. I do not trust the assessment of other colleagues, sometimes to the detriment of my own candidates who have not been awarded as generously as candidates in other schools.

I definitely benefit from these events and courses — I wish there were more! However, last year was my first year as a visiting assessor and it was clear to me through professional dialogue with other VAs on the training day that there were some VAs (who have been VAs for some time), who are out visiting schools with incorrect knowledge and understanding of standards, which is highly concerning.

Events

Responses about Understanding Standards events made up the large majority of responses to this question. A large number of comments about these events were about the difficulty of accessing them. Although these comments were not positive in the same way as those noted above, it could be argued that there is a large degree positivity towards these events, and a general desire to access them.

Comments regarding the inability to book events took three forms. The first was having problems with booking due to over-subscription or a lack of spaces on the events. The second was more infrastructural, with respondents highlighting the inability to book onto events due to SQA criteria. And third was regarding accessibility, where practitioners expressed an inability to attend events due primarily to a lack of time, finances, or geography.

Accessibility about time primarily had to do with events being outside work hours, although one practitioner mentioned that not all subjects had an Understanding Standards event on a weekend, which they thought was unfair. Accessibility due to finances was sometimes tied to this. Financial accessibility was described as not being able to attend because it was unpaid,

or because they would need to pay in order to travel or secure childcare. Lastly, geographical accessibility concerned the perceived lack of events outside the central belt. Sometimes respondents only described one accessibility problem, but sometimes respondents describe more than one problem existing for them.

Understanding Standards events do not need to be in-person. This discriminates against centres in rural locations who require additional time and expense to attend your events invariably held in the central belt.

Overall, the volume of these three types of responses about Understanding Standards events was similar. Besides difficulties booking, other responses regarding events had to do with the time of year that events were scheduled, with several practitioners commenting that the date that events were held was too late to be useful for the school year.

In addition, there were many comments on face-to-face versus online events. Some responses suggested that holding online events could help to facilitate accessibility and that online events would increase the number of practitioners able to attend. However, the majority of responses about online versus face-to-face preferences indicated a preference for face-to-face events in particular, with some practitioners describing face-to-face events as more valuable compared to online events.

Now that the pandemic is well and truly over, I expect that there will be much more of an increase in Understanding Standards events that can be attended by practitioners in person. I do not believe that the online events are as helpful.

Make places available for every school and get rid of half-day sessions and webinars. These are not in-depth enough for developing a robust understanding.

Resources

Many responses about Understanding Standards focused on resources and materials, with some practitioners submitting suggestions about what content was useful and clear. Although there were some positive comments that described the resources as essential, these were in the minority.

In terms of content, many practitioners commented on the need for more exemplars. This included more practical examples (particularly from practitioners in the creative subject area) and more examples for a range of grades. In addition, several practitioners described the content of materials as being dated. Other frequently-occurring comments about the content of materials were that the resources were wordy, obscure, vague (or similar) indicating that they were difficult to understand.

Transparency

There was also a notable volume of responses related to transparency. Several practitioners described the feeling that a lack of clarity in standards was deliberate on the part of SQA, and that essential information was kept private or only privy to certain actors. This may also explain the number of responses asking for more resources and more information.

Teachers need more information rather than SQA keeping things to themselves.

There is still a bit of a sense of secret information. That standards are set at markers meetings that are never communicated to teachers.

Understanding Standards resources are helpful, but as someone who has created them there is quite a lot of red tape around what can be included and how it is presented.

Related to this, there was a large volume of responses which mentioned the benefits of being an SQA marker in terms of understanding the standard. Whether this was viewed positively or negatively often depended on whether or not the practitioner commenting had experience as a marker.

The SQA documents are never clear. I only became confident through practice and through my role as SQA marker and verifier.

Some standards are only available to markers who attend the marker briefing.

Inconsistency

A considerable number of responses commented on perceived inconsistency. Such perceived inconsistencies took broadly four common forms in the responses.

Sometimes, inconsistency was interpreted as being between how other practitioners and centres interpret standards:

I feel that Understanding Standards documents can still be open to interpretation and I sometimes feel that different teachers in different schools interpret things very differently. This does not equate to a standard that is 100% consistent across Scotland.

Other practitioners perceived inconsistency in standards across time:

Having attended many US sessions over the years I leave thinking I know what is expected and when marking I use the resources provided by the SQA and yet every year the results are often not as expected and what would have got a set grade the year before then does not a year later ... Inconsistency is affecting the morale of staff.

I understand the advice given at Understanding Standards, however, there is still so much debate over where marks are awarded and with some answers being accepted some years and not others.

Other practitioners recognised inconsistency between results and materials, suggesting an unclear standard:

The exemplifications in Understanding Standards are used in this department as benchmarks when putting in estimates. The returned final marking never translates to what is published.

Lastly, inconsistency was perceived in the level of support between subjects and the number of materials, access to events, or support they receive:

Markers' reports for modern languages provide very little detail; compare them with the detailed reports given in some other subjects!

Communication

How information is shared and disseminated was also cited relatively frequently. In particular, many comments were about the Understanding Standards website.

I am fairly confident of national standards due to participating in SQA folio marking at one particular level. Had it not been for this I would be less confident. The SQA website is not clear or concise.

The coursework shown at the training in previous years is of a higher standard than what is shown on the website.

Website [is] a nightmare to navigate for materials.

In addition to previous points around transparency and accessibility, some comments asked why there was not more information on the webpage. This was echoed by other responses, which described frustrations with getting information in a timely manner or described not knowing if information existed or not. Additionally, several practitioners commented on the ineffectiveness of cascading information as a method of facilitating understanding. For example, some practitioners explained that standards are better understood through experience, or that some practitioners felt others were more in the know.

These should be made available to all. Rather than relying on one member of staff cascading in-school.

Practitioner interviews

All of the practitioners who took part in interview suggested that they had a good understanding of the national standard in their subject or subjects. Several were or had been SQA appointees. However, one practitioner explained that they used to think they had a good understanding of the standard, but realised this understanding was incorrect once they became a marker.

I went to do marking and I had my eyes opened to things that I've been teaching ... I think at least five years, maybe six, there were assumptions or things I had been told by senior members and departments across multiple schools. And then I went to do marking and I was like ... that is not what the SQA is looking for.

Similarly, a few participants mentioned that the experience of being a marker had enhanced their understanding of standards. Another highlighted the importance of professional networks in this regard.

I think one of the things I've found most beneficial is being a marker.

I do marking and I've been involved in exam review processes and ... they are really enlightening.

On the other hand, several practitioners expressed concern that there are nuances or intricacies to do with the standard that are shared at markers' meetings and are not available to those who cannot, or do not want to, become SQA appointees.

It tends to be that markers' meetings are hugely, fantastically useful for people to understand exactly how to get marks ... But a wealth of information is given out at those markers' meetings which is not written down.

You're kind of penalising the people that either can't or don't want to be markers.

Not everyone is able to mark ... so should their pupils be penalised because they are not able to go there?

Having said that, on several occasions, participants mentioned how useful course reports are in disseminating the national standard, but there were nevertheless concerns that teachers and lecturers do not access these enough. Some thought that ensuring better engagement with course reports should be an area of focus for SQA.

Not enough people access the course report that comes at the end of each diet ... it's a very, very good document.

I don't know if they promote well enough how good the course reports, how well they're actually explaining to people.

I think it'd be nicer to find a way to actually have that course report emailed directly to every ... teacher in Scotland.

On a related note, while the interviewees were confident in their own understanding of the national standard, there was a perception that others' understanding of standards was not as robust. It was suggested that this was the case for newly qualified teachers, for teachers in small or remote departments, for those who do not engage with Understanding Standards, and for those who do not keep up to date with evolving standards.

I think they've maybe looked at a standard six years ago ... teach it every year and then they tend to stagnate around that. I don't think what they do is then try and upgrade their understanding of the standard the following year when there's new materials there.

Teachers don't engage with it [Understanding Standards] in the way that they should be.

I think it's probably a combination ... maybe some people not knowing that the resources are there, maybe it could be a workload issue, particularly in a in a small department where you're maybe trying to, you know, spin plates.

A couple of times, the experience of the 2021 alternative certification model was cited, where participants felt that standards in other centres compared poorly to their own. Likewise, a small number of practitioners suggested that there were inconsistencies in interpretation of the standard or that information in marking instructions, for example, is not precise enough. However, some participants thought that this might be inevitable.

I just I suppose that when you have multiple markers marking the written work there always will be a difference of opinion.

The stuff on Understands Standards is good, but then there's degrees of how people interpret that.

When asked about Understanding Standards specifically, practitioners were generally very positive about the range of materials and resources available and about how useful they were.

Materials are always really well presented and really useful.

There are lots of excellent resources that can guide practitioners.

However, one practitioner thought that the Understanding Standards website is challenging to navigate and that it created an obstacle to accessing these quality materials. Moreover, some participants called for more subject-specific resources, more materials, more detailed information, more rationales, or more exemplars of where evidence is borderline. On the subject of materials, however, one interviewee commented:

It is to do with a standard and it is to do with an assessment. The SQA's job is not to give us teaching materials. It's not there to teach us how to teach, you know, that's for other organisations to deal with that.

Conversely, one interviewee called for more materials directed not just to practitioners but to learners as well; for instance, instructions to learners on how to write a good essay or how to access marks.

On the whole, participants thought that Understanding Standards events are extremely useful. However, while most thought that these events should be in-person, to facilitate better engagement and discussion, some others thought that online events better promoted accessibility for a range of practitioners in different parts of Scotland.

I think the in-person events that we had prior to the pandemic, where we got a chance to actually go and network and physically mark papers and ask questions, were useful. It's a lot different to try to do that on Teams. Having that kind of professional dialogue in person and meeting others across Scotland was so valuable.

I think there needs to be more options. So that more people can join when suits them. Definitely online.

Finally, access to Understanding Standards events — be they in-person or online — was cited a number of times as an issue.

Sometimes people can't take advantage of Understanding Standards because their centres won't release them due to cover issues, and I feel like quite a lot of time there's not awful lot spaces available on the actual courses themselves.

Not everybody can go to it because not everybody can get out of school.

Composite analysis

Composite scores were calculated for each practitioner by taking the average of key questions relating to assessment processes for 2023. Key questions were all answered on five-point Likert scales from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. These were converted into numerical responses from 1–5 before analysis.

We focused on six process areas: communications, teaching and learning, exam exceptional circumstances consideration service (EECCS), appeals, overall process, and understanding standards. We chose a composite approach to minimise the number of significance tests we carried out. Carrying out multiple tests has the potential to increase Type I errors. These are errors that suggest a result is indicative of a real (population level) effect, when in fact it exists only in the sample by chance.

In the subsequent analysis, we looked for differences across practitioner characteristics: whether or not they had been an appointee in the past five years and their centre's SIMD quintile. However, as noted earlier and explained in more detail in the Technical Appendix, SIMD quintile 4 had to be dropped from this analysis due to a disproportionate number of respondents using that link to complete the practitioner survey; it is very unlikely that all of these respondents were from centres in SIMD quintile 4 areas.

A fuller explanation of the composite scores and how they are derived and tested is available in the Technical Appendix.

Communications satisfaction composite analysis

In the communications satisfaction composite, low scores indicate that a respondent did not find SQA's communications in 2022–23 satisfactory, while high scores indicate they did.

1,227 practitioners had a communications satisfaction score calculated. The composite had an overall average of 3.5 (slightly below an 'agree' response).

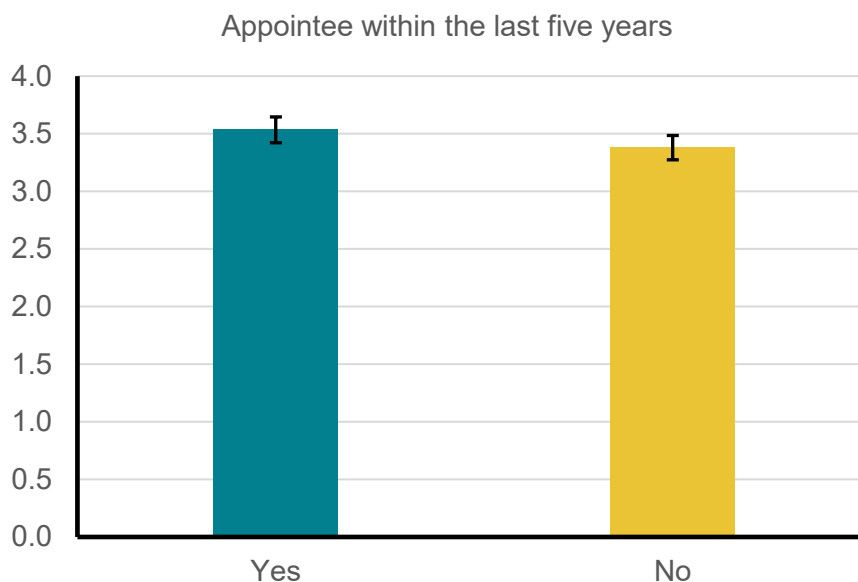
Appointee status

Table 2

Appointee within last five years?	Respondents	Mean communications satisfaction score
Yes	564	3.5
No	663	3.4

While practitioners who had been appointees within the last five years had slightly higher communications satisfaction scores on average than those who had not been appointees (averages of 3.5 and 3.4, respectively), this difference was not statistically significant. This indicates that there was no difference in satisfaction with SQA's communications in 2022–23 based on appointee status.

Figure 36



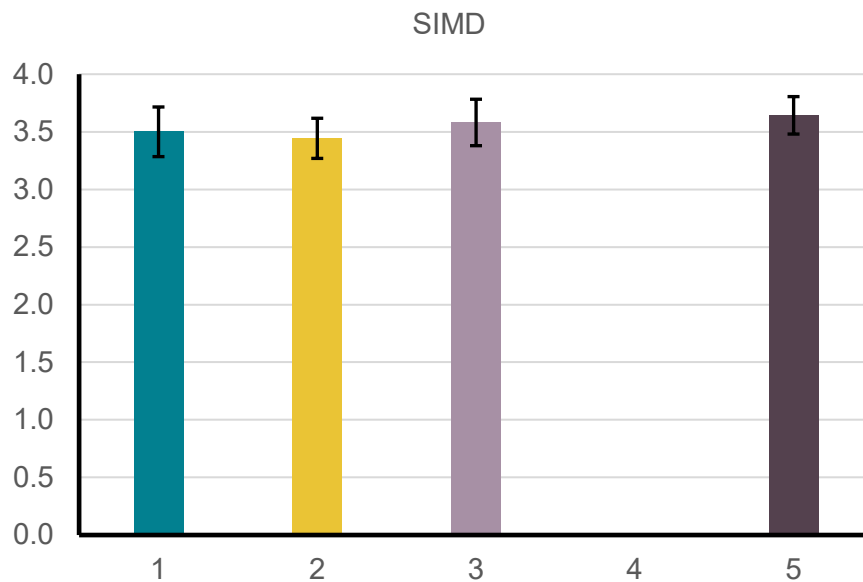
SIMD

Table 3

SIMD quintile	Respondents	Mean communications satisfaction score
1	170	3.5
2	185	3.4
3	179	3.6
4	469	-
5	224	3.6

While the average communications satisfaction score varies between them, there is no significant difference between any of the practitioners' centre SIMD quintiles. This implies that the centre SIMD quintile had no impact on the practitioner satisfaction with SQA's communications in 2022–23.

Figure 37



Teaching and learning disruption composite analysis

In the teaching and learning disruption composite, low scores indicate that a respondent did not feel the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted teaching and learning experiences in 2022–23, while high scores indicate they did.

1,138 practitioners had a teaching and learning disruption score calculated. The composite had an overall average of 4.2 (slightly above an ‘agree’ response).

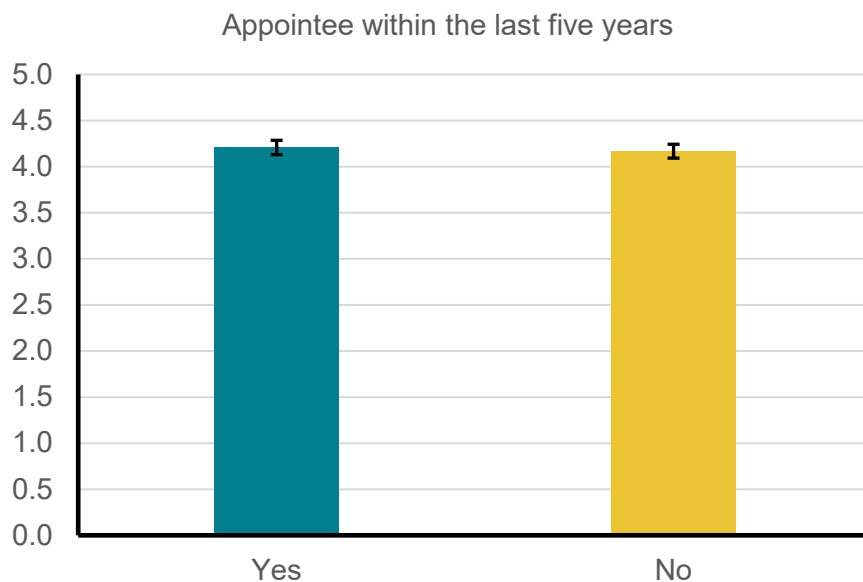
Appointee status

Table 4

Appointee within last five years?	Respondents	Mean teaching and learning disruption score
Yes	527	4.2
No	611	4.2

Average scores for the two groups were the same (4.2). Consequently, there was no difference between appointees those who have been an appointee in the past five years and those who have not in terms of whether they feel the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted teaching and learning in 2022–23.

Figure 38



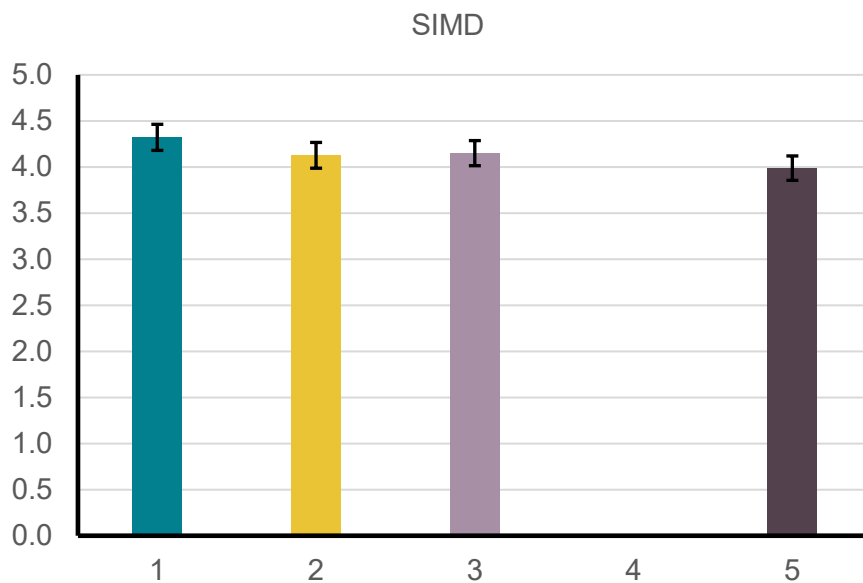
SIMD

Table 5

SIMD quintile	Respondents	Mean teaching and learning disruption score
1	153	4.3
2	173	4.1
3	163	4.2
4	444	-
5	205	4.0

Practitioners whose centres are in SIMD quintile 5 have significantly lower teaching and learning disruption scores on average than those in quintile 1 (averages of 4.0 and 4.3 respectively, $p < 0.01$). This implies that practitioners from centres in SIMD quintile 5 felt that the COVID-19 pandemic caused less disruption to teaching and learning in 2022–23 than those from SIMD quintile 1, specifically. No other significant difference between SIMD quintiles was identified.

Figure 39



EECCS satisfaction composite analysis

Low scores on the EECCS satisfaction composite indicate that a respondent did not find the 2023 EECCS process satisfactory, while high scores indicate they did.

351 practitioners had an EECCS satisfaction score calculated. The composite had an overall average of 3.3 (which is slightly above a 'neither agree nor disagree' response). This subsample included only practitioners who had submitted EECCS requests for their learners in 2023.

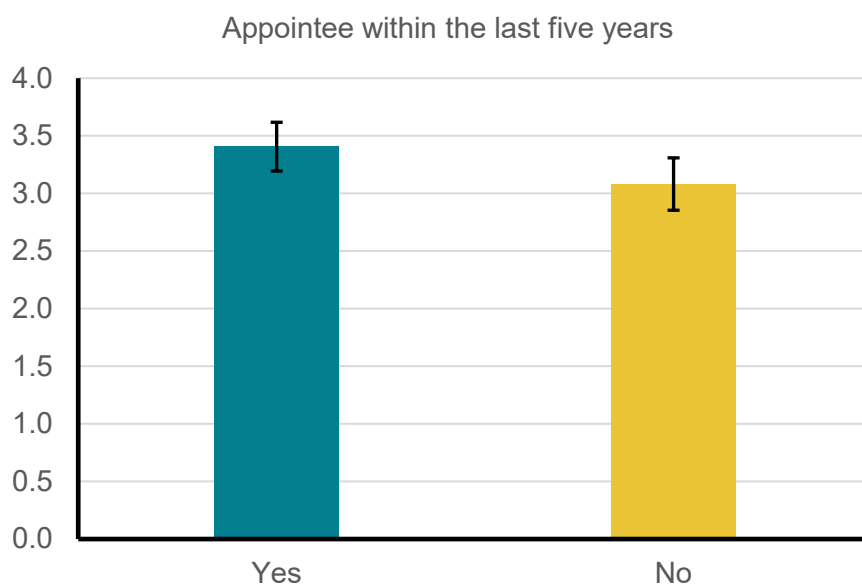
Appointee status

Table 6

Appointee within last five years?	Respondents	Mean EECCS satisfaction score
Yes	191	3.4
No	160	3.1

Practitioners who had been an SQA appointee within the last five years scored higher on the EECCS composite than those who had not been (averages of 3.4 and 3.1, respectively). This difference was statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), indicating that those who had been SQA appointees in the past five years were more satisfied with the EECCS process in 2023 than those who had not been appointees.

Figure 40



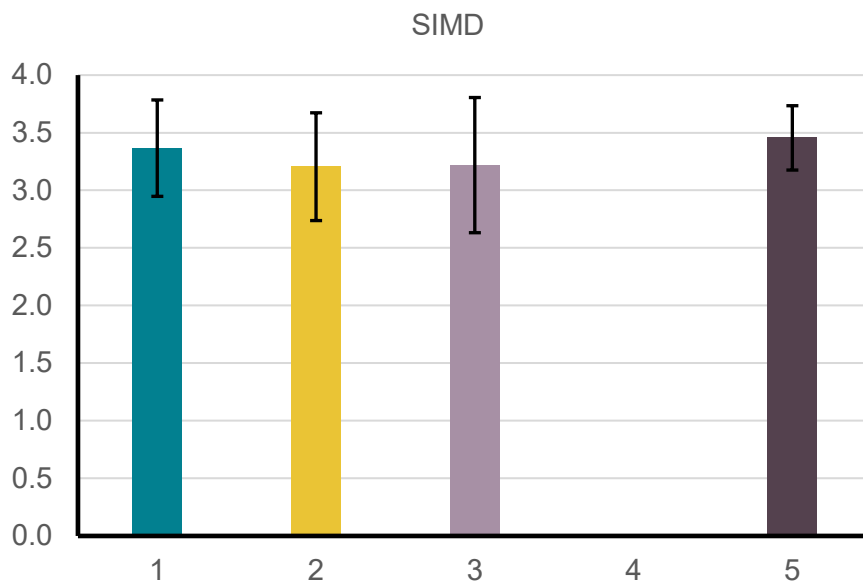
SIMD

Table 7

SIMD quintile	Respondents	Mean EECCS satisfaction score
1	56	3.4
2	39	3.2
3	32	3.2
4	146	-
5	78	3.5

While the average EECCS satisfaction score varies between centre SIMD quintile, there is no significant difference between any particular quintile and any other. This suggests that there was no impact of centre SIMD on practitioner satisfaction with 2023's EECCS process.

Figure 41



Appeals satisfaction composite analysis

Low scores on the appeals satisfaction composite indicate that a respondent did not find 2023's appeals process satisfactory, while high scores indicate they did.

760 practitioners had an appeals satisfaction score calculated. The composite had an overall average of 3.0 (a 'neither agree nor disagree' response). This subsample included only practitioners who had learners who had made an appeal in 2023.

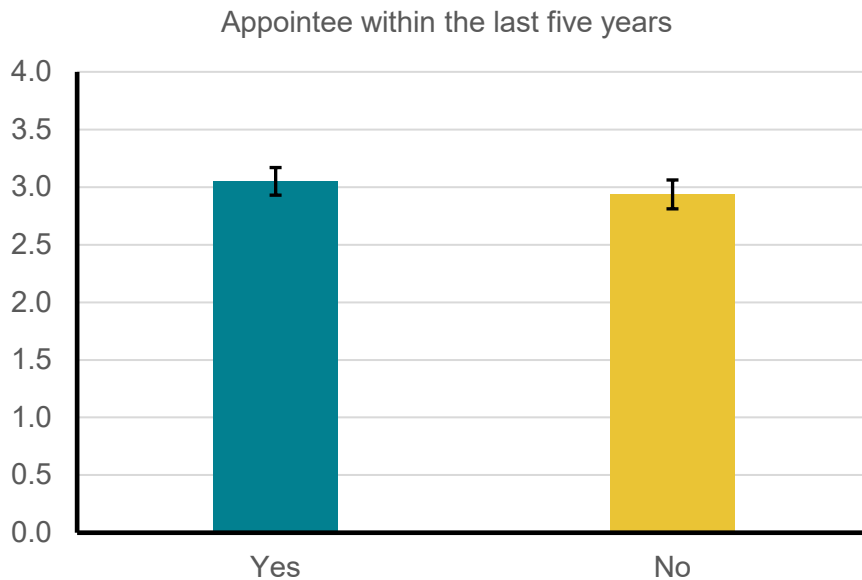
Appointee status

Table 8

Appointee within last five years?	Respondents	Mean appeals satisfaction score
Yes	383	3.0
No	377	2.9

While practitioners who had been appointees within the last five years had slightly higher appeals satisfaction scores on average than those who had not been appointees (averages of 3.0 and 2.9, respectively), this difference was not statistically significant. This indicates that there was no difference in satisfaction with 2023's appeals process based on appointee status.

Figure 42



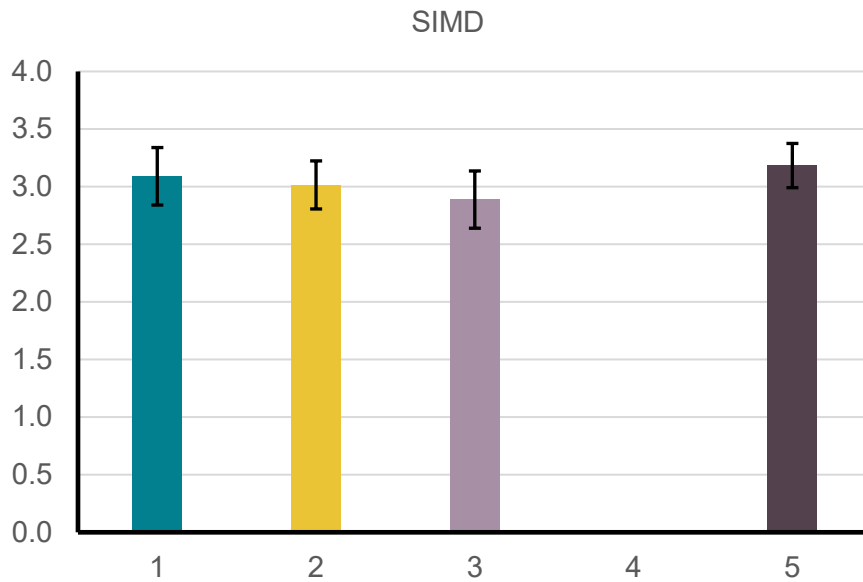
SIMD

Table 9

SIMD quintile	Respondents	Mean appeals satisfaction score
1	100	3.1
2	111	3.0
3	101	2.9
4	306	-
5	142	3.2

While the average appeals satisfaction score varies between them, there is no significant difference between any centre SIMD quintile and any other in terms of appeals satisfaction score. This suggests there was no impact of centre SIMD on satisfaction with 2023's appeals process.

Figure 43



Overall process satisfaction composite analysis

Low scores on the overall satisfaction composite indicate that a respondent did not find 2023's overall assessment process satisfactory, while high scores indicate they did.

1,052 practitioners had an overall satisfaction score calculated. The composite had an overall average of 3.3 (slightly above a 'neither agree nor disagree' response).

Appointee status

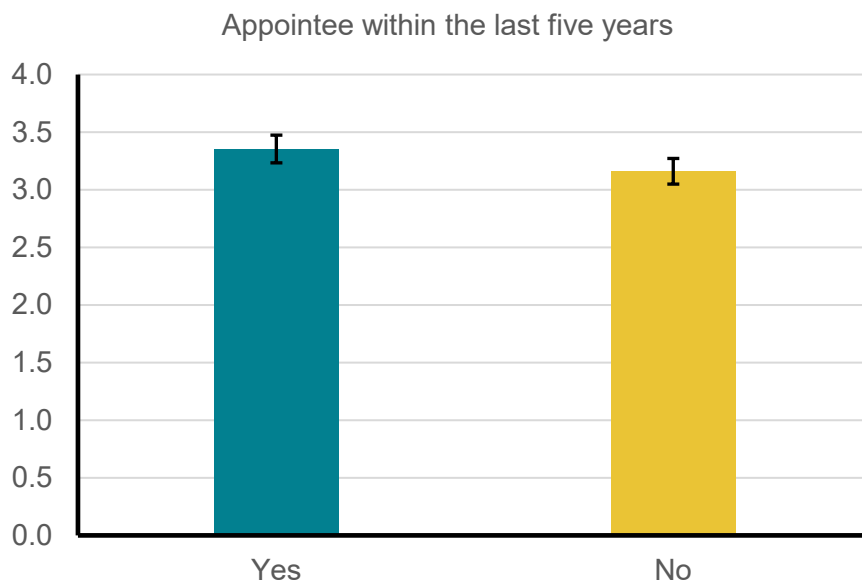
The sample size for this comparison drops to 1,051 owing to a single practitioner who did not indicate whether or not they had been an SQA appointee in the last five years.

Table 10

Appointee within last five years?	Respondents	Mean overall satisfaction score
Yes	496	3.4
No	555	3.2

Practitioners who had been an appointee within the last five years had higher overall satisfaction scores on average than those who had not been (averages of 3.4 and 3.2, respectively). This difference is statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), indicating that non-appointees were less satisfied with the overall assessment process in 2023 than practitioners who had been appointees within the last five years.

Figure 44



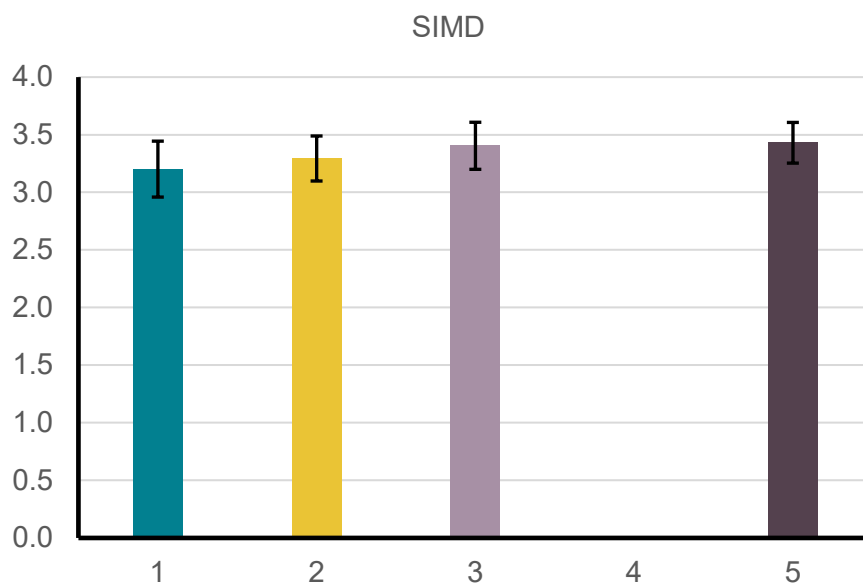
SIMD

Table 11

SIMD quintile	Respondents	Mean overall satisfaction score
1	139	3.2
2	155	3.3
3	156	3.4
4	409	-
5	193	3.4

There was no significant difference between centre SIMD quintiles in terms of overall satisfaction score. This implies that centre SIMD had no impact on practitioner satisfaction with the overall assessment process in 2023.

Figure 45



Understanding assessment standards composite analysis

High scores on the understanding assessment standards composite indicate that practitioners felt the national standard was clearly articulated by SQA and that they understood it, while low scores indicate they did not.

1,009 practitioners had an understanding assessment standards score calculated. The composite had an overall average of 3.5 (slightly below an 'agree' response).

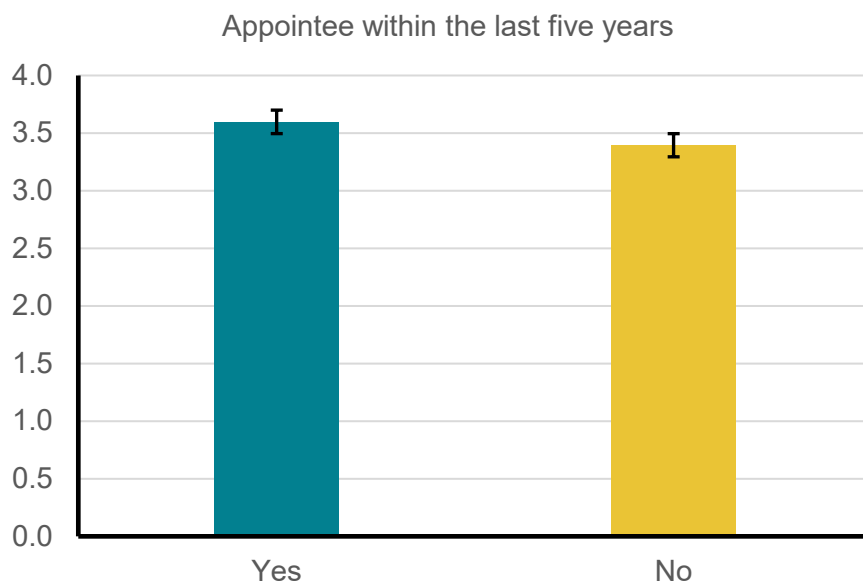
Appointee status

Table 12

Appointee within last five years?	Respondents	Mean understanding assessment standards score
Yes	480	3.6
No	529	3.4

Practitioners who had been appointees within the last five years had higher understanding assessment standards scores on average than those who had not been (averages of 3.6 and 3.4, respectively). This difference is statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), indicating that those practitioners who had been appointees felt they had higher levels of understanding assessment standards than practitioners who had not been appointees within the last five years.

Figure 46



SIMD

Table 13

SIMD quintile	Respondents	Mean understanding assessment standards score
1	133	3.6
2	148	3.5
3	149	3.6
4	396	-
5	183	3.6

There was no significant difference between centre SIMD quintiles in terms of understanding assessment standards score. This implies that centre SIMD had no impact on practitioner understanding of standards.

Figure 47

