Evaluation of the 2022 Approach to the Assessment of Graded National Courses

Reflections of Senior Appointees and Qualifications Teams

Contents

Section 1: Introduction

1. Executive summary

This report outlines the results of engagement activities the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) carried out with senior appointees (principal assessors and depute principal assessors) and qualifications teams who support the delivery of National Courses. Qualifications teams comprise of SQA staff who support the development and delivery of qualifications and assessments. Senior appointees join the 15,000 teaching professionals and specialists, who support SQA operations annually. They work closely with SQA's qualifications teams and their professional input defines and supports the development, assessment and quality assurance of our qualifications.

The purpose of this engagement was to contribute to a thorough evaluation of the approach to the assessment of graded National Courses in 2021–22. This report should be read in conjunction with the Learner and Practitioner Experiences and Summary Report that also form part of the evaluation.

The central findings of this report represent a cross section, or sample, of the reflections of senior appointees and qualifications teams. The report contains their reflections on the approach to delivering National Courses, as the education system returned to formal external assessment and examinations for the first time in three years. The report covers several themes including communications, learning and teaching, awarding and grading, understanding of standards and appeals, as well as the impact of the modifications and revision support published in March 2022.

The following sections outline what respondents felt worked well and did not work so well, while also reflecting on broader issues such as fairness and equity. While the findings detail events that occurred during the 2021–22 session, it should be noted that feedback from the evaluation is being used to help inform SQA's planning and approach to 2022–23.

2. Methodology

The research for this report was carried out in three parts. First, a survey was distributed to senior appointees and qualifications teams seeking feedback specifically on the Appeals Service and Exam Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service (EECCS). This survey was distributed in November 2022 and garnered 122 responses.

A second survey was distributed to the same groups in December and garnered 67 responses. This focused more broadly on standards and included questions on the following areas:

♦ Engagement and communication
♦ Learning and teaching
♦ Modifications
♦ Revision support
♦ Awarding and grading
♦ Marker reports

- Standards
- Appeals (evidence)
- Equalities

The third and final phase of the research involved holding structured interviews with senior appointees. Each interview used the completed standards survey response as a basis for discussion. The purpose was to explore four areas in further detail — Modifications/Revision Support, Awarding, Standards and Appeals. A total of 14 interviews were held using Microsoft Teams, covering a range of subjects and levels. The full question set for each survey is included in the appendices of this report.

3. Respondent profiles

The first survey seeking feedback on Appeals and EECCS was distributed to senior appointees and qualifications teams. This can be found in full in Appendix 1. This included principal assessors, depute principal assessors, qualifications managers, officers, and co-ordinators.

The second survey was distributed to the same groups. The responses can be broken down as follows:

- 36 principal assessors
- 6 depute principal assessors
- 13 qualifications managers
- 6 qualifications officers
- 1 qualifications co-ordinator
- 4 subject implementation managers
- 1 qualification development specialist (QDS)

The structured interviews aimed to cover a range of subjects and levels and used a self-selected sample of the 42 senior appointees who completed the standards survey. All survey respondents were offered the chance to participate in a follow-up interview and half (21) signed up. Unfortunately, due to several factors including illness, industrial action and the timing of the interview phase of the research, not all interviews could be held. A total of 14 interviews took place during January 2023.

Subjects and levels

The full sample of responses covered most subjects and levels — the list below includes the full range of subjects covered by a subject-specific response submitted by senior appointees. The asterisk symbol (*) is used to denote those subjects for which interviews were also held:

- Administration and IT (National 5)
- Applications of Mathematics (Higher)
- Applications of Mathematics (National 5)
- Art and Design (Higher)*
- Art and Design (National 5)*

- Biology (Higher)
- Biology (National 5)
- Business Management (Higher)
- Care (Higher)
- Care (National 5)
- Childcare and Development (Higher)
- Classical Studies (Higher)
- Computing Science (Higher)
- Dance (Higher)
- Drama (Higher)
- Economics (National 5)*
- Engineering Science (Advanced Higher)
- English (Higher)*
- English (National 5)*
- Environmental Science (Higher)
- Environmental Science (National 5)
- ESOL (Higher)
- French (Higher)
- Geography (Advanced Higher)*
- Geography (Higher)*
- Geography (National 5)
- Graphic Communication (Higher)
- Graphic Communication (National 5)
- History (Higher)*
- Latin (Advanced Higher)
- Latin (National 5)*
- Mathematics (Higher)
- Mathematics (National 5)*
- Media (National 5)
- Modern Studies (Advanced Higher)
- Music (Advanced Higher)*
- Philosophy (Higher)
- Physics (Advanced Higher)
- Practical Cake Craft (National 5)
- Spanish (National 5)*

Section 2: Evaluation Themes

This section of the report presents the findings of the research. This is organised to follow the same structure as the standards survey, which can be found in full in Appendix 2. Each subsection outlines a summary of the responses to the survey's quantitative questions. Qualitative data is then presented as a number of cross-cutting themes that emerged from the survey responses and interviews.

4. Engagement and communication

The survey asked senior appointees and members of qualification teams a series of questions relating to how published information about the 2021–22 approach to assessment and grading was disseminated to stakeholders. The questions focused on the timing of communications and how well teachers and lecturers understood them.

- 72% (48/67) of respondents agreed (57%) or strongly agreed (15%) that information about the 2021–22 approach to assessment was published early enough in the academic year.
- 67% (45/67) of respondents agreed (58%) or strongly agreed (9%) that information about the 2021–22 approach to grading was published early enough in the academic year.
- 52% (35/67) of respondents agreed (49%) or strongly agreed (3%) that the approach to assessment and grading used in 2021–22 was understood by teachers and lecturers.

The qualitative feedback for these questions highlighted the following themes:

Timing of communications	The majority of respondents felt information about the approach to assessment was published early enough in the session. However, several highlighted the need to communicate proposed course changes before any teaching commences to ensure centres can plan. A number of centres deliver two-year National 5 courses and early communications are required in order to prepare and plan their teaching with timetables starting in June.
Engagement with documentation	Some felt that the key messages were not received by or disseminated to all practitioners in a consistent way. Sometimes this was due to slow local dissemination, the high volume of guidance issued to support centres, or because teachers and lecturers were not allocated time to engage with the resources.
Understanding of key messages	Respondents agreed that the majority of teachers understood the documentation and the language used was appropriate. However, not all centres demonstrated a full understanding or followed the instructions consistently, but the reasons for this were not always clear. Learners did not seem to understand the approach to appeals, with many under the impression that SQA would award their estimated grade without reviewing assessment evidence.
Accessibility of guidance	The language used in some publications outlining the approach to assessment and the detail of the modifications was thought by some respondents to be inaccessible and 'too corporate'. This created challenges for some subjects in terms of engagement and it generated

additional work for qualifications teams in responding to queries from centres about the resources.

5. Learning and teaching

Questions in this section aimed to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted learning and teaching during the 2021–22 session. With the package of measures (including the course assessment modifications and revision support, as well as wider support from across the education system at a national, regional, local, and centre level) in place for learners, teachers and lecturers, the survey asked respondents about the extent to which pandemic disruption impacted centres. One question asked specifically about the way this may have impacted course delivery and the ability to achieve full coverage of the course content.

Respondents answered these questions based on their first-hand experience in centres or reflected the views of those they had engaged with in the teaching profession in their roles.

♦ 76% (51/67) of respondents agreed (40%) or strongly agreed (36%) that pandemic disruption had a significant impact on learning and teaching in centres in 2021–22.
♦ There were mixed views on whether, in general, centres ensured teaching covered the full range of course content during the 2021–22 session. 34% (23/67) of respondents agreed (30%) or strongly agreed (4%) with this question, and 42% (28/67) either disagreed (33%) or strongly disagreed (9%). The remainder neither agreed/disagreed or answered 'don't know'.

The qualitative feedback for these questions highlighted the following themes:

Substantial pandemic disruption	Even though there were no national lockdowns during the 2021–22 session, the pandemic continued to have a substantial impact on learning and teaching. This impacted centres and learners in different ways and at different times throughout the session. Teacher and learner absences were staggered and intermittent, which created a new set of challenges for centres, compared to the last two years.
Learning loss	Respondents believed that learning loss impacted learners in two main ways. First, through direct COVID-19 disruption — although most absences were limited to a maximum of two to three weeks, learners and teaching staff were often absent at different times. Second, through learning loss carried over from previous years. For example, in some subjects, learners at Higher and Advanced Higher displayed weaker foundations in subject knowledge than previous years. There was also some evidence of gaps in general Broad General Education skills, knowledge and understanding and knowledge carrying through to the senior phase.
Course coverage	This varied between subjects and individual centres and depended on the impact of disruption locally. Respondents gave examples where candidate work provided clear evidence that learners had been taught the full course content. However, some noted that pandemic disruption meant it was challenging for teachers to do so. For this

reason, teaching was focused on the areas where learners would be assessed. Many respondents noted that the teaching profession did their best to cover the full course content, but this was extremely challenging in practice and narrowing (or prioritising) of course content was required in many circumstances.

6. Modifications

The survey contained several questions about the modifications made to course assessment. The modifications were a key component of the package designed by SQA with education system partners to support learners. They were first introduced in 2020–21 to free up learning and teaching time and to ensure learners completed as much of their courses as possible. The first two questions in the survey sought to evaluate their success in achieving those aims:

♦ 75% (50/67) of respondents agreed (39%) or strongly agreed (36%) that the modifications made to course assessment were effective in freeing up learning and teaching time in 2021–22.

♦ 76% (51/67) of respondents agreed (40%) or strongly agreed (36%) that the modifications made to course assessment enabled learners to complete the course in 2021–22.

The survey also asked for reflections on the way the modifications to course assessment impacted learners' ability to acquire key knowledge, skills and understanding, and prepared them for the next stages of their lives:

♦ 70% (47/67) of respondents agreed (49%) or strongly agreed (21%) that the modifications made to course assessments still allowed for rigorous assessment of knowledge, understanding and skills (eg to sample the full range of course content).

♦ 63% (42/67) of respondents agreed (42%) or strongly agreed (21%) that the courses, with modifications to assessment, ensure learners are prepared for future education and employment opportunities.

The modifications made to course assessment were specific to each course. They were designed to support learners while maintaining the standard of the qualification. Therefore, the qualitative responses about the impact the modifications had on the way learners are prepared for the next stages of their education or employment is often subject or discipline specific:

Sciences	The removal of practical assignments/project-based assessments, which was necessary due to public health guidance, resulted in learners having limited hands-on experience in handling apparatus or carrying out experiments. Respondents recognised that learners will be entering the next stages of their education without having been assessed in these skills, which may prove challenging.
Mathematics	There was evidence that certain topics that were not assessed as a result of modifications (eg vectors), were not taught by centres due to pressures on teaching time. Respondents noted that this may

	have an impact on learners as they progress through different education levels and that Higher Education Institutions may find that candidates lack key knowledge in this area.
English	The respondents acknowledged that the removal of the spoken language assessment component means that learners may not be developing oral skills as strongly as in previous years.
Geography	The removal of the assignment at National 5 and Higher impacted candidate performance in the folio and some question paper elements (eg gathering and processing data) at Advanced Higher. Some candidates had not acquired the necessary fieldwork experience and skills in data collection and processing, and this may impact on learners' experiences when they progress into FE, HE or employment.
Languages	The removal of the assignment impacted on the writing skills of individual candidates. The assignment assesses more open writing and its removal meant that this skill was not as fully developed for a number of candidates. This also removed an opportunity for learners to prepare for the Writing Question Paper.

The survey asked for feedback on aspects of the 2021–22 modifications that worked well and those that did not work so well.

The qualitative feedback for these questions highlighted the following themes around aspects of the modifications that worked well:

Removal of coursework and assignments freed up valuable learning and teaching time	Humanities and Social Science subjects, for example, acknowledged the benefits of removing the assignment. This freed up teaching time and allowed teachers and lecturers to focus learning, which helped to offset some of the impact of pandemic disruption.
Guidance for practical portfolio in Art and Design	Additional advice and guidance provided to centres outlined the minimum requirements for the folio submission. This helped learners to focus on the quality rather than quantity of their submission and alleviated workload for learners and teachers/lecturers.
Reduction in question paper length and exam time benefitted some candidates	In Graphic Communication, it was noted that the shorter exam paper helped some learners to make the transition back to formal exams with more candidates completing or attempting the full paper. In Media, reducing the number of questions in the assignment (from 10 to 8) helped practitioners and learners focus and prepare.
Reduction in the number of English writing folio pieces (from two to one) helped learners to focus	In both National 5 and Higher English, the modifications made to the writing folio helped to free up class time and did not impact performance or the overall standard.
Introducing increased optionality and choice	In some subjects including Philosophy and Modern Studies, introducing the option of choosing one philosopher or a choice of topics helped practitioners to focus teaching time, without reducing the depth of learning in that area.

The qualitative feedback for these questions highlighted the following themes around aspects of the modifications that did not work well or as expected:

Removal of coursework, assignments and projects reduced exposure to key practical skills and hands-on experience	As noted above, several subjects highlighted the negative impact this may have on learners as they progress through the levels of secondary education and beyond into education and employment.
Reduction of marks made question paper design and sampling more challenging	For some courses, where assessed content or total number of available marks was reduced, question paper design and sampling became very challenging. This was particularly the case for Mathematics where the assessment tends to cover the full range of course content. This was also noted as an issue in National 5 Economics.
Some modifications transformed courses into 100% exam assessment	Some subjects recognised that while the modifications were necessary, they effectively created courses with a single high-stakes assessment (eg sciences), which may have increased pressure on learners.
Removal of the writing assignment in Modern Languages	While it was acknowledged that the modifications freed up valuable teaching time, some felt this had a detrimental impact on learners as it removed an opportunity to develop key writing skills in preparation for the question paper.

7. Revision support

The survey asked for feedback on the Revision Support that was published in March 2022. Overall, around half of respondents agreed that revision support was successful and supported all learners equally.

♦ 45% (30/67) of respondents agreed (25.5%) or strongly agreed (19.5%) that the revision support was successful in supporting learners to prepare for course assessments. 25% (17/67) disagreed (21%) or strongly disagreed (4%) with this statement with the remaining 30% (20/67) indicating that they neither agreed nor disagreed.

♦ 55% (37/67) of respondents agreed (37%) or strongly agreed (18%) that the revision support supported all learners equally, including those with a disability or additional support need (ASN). The majority of remaining responses (34%) indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement (19%) or 'didn't know' (15%).

The survey asked about aspects of the 2021–22 revision support that worked well and did not work so well.

Qualitative responses to these questions highlighted the following themes about aspects of the Revision Support that worked well:

Advance notice of content and additional guidance helped focus learning and teaching time	This helped to maximise the use of the available teaching time and offset some of the disruption in the lead up to the exam. It also helped to reduce the revision burden and alleviated some pre-exam pressure on learners.
Advice on exam technique required by learners in 2021–22	Despite some early negative media coverage, many respondents believed the advice on exam technique and preparation helped learners prepare for exams, with most sitting SQA exams for the first time.

The qualitative feedback for these questions highlighted the following themes about aspects of the Revision Support that did not work well or as expected:

Timing and usefulness	Some respondents believed the Revision Support was issued too late for it to be effective. Others felt the resources were poorly received by practitioners and learners when they were perceived to add 'nothing new' or were considered 'patronising' when they believed the information to be at a basic level. Examples given often related to exam technique guidance.
Advance notice of topics supported some learners better than others	In some subjects, including Mathematics and English, providing advance notice of the topics that would (or would not) be assessed gave an additional boost to learners who usually perform well in exam type assessments.
Advance notice of topics that would be assessed resulted in some candidates preparing model answers	In some subjects, there was evidence that candidates had prepared model answers for assessments with essay type questions. This resulted in inflexibility in an exam setting with the use of the pre-prepared answer resulting in poor quality responses that were not relevant to the question being asked.
Notes permitted in exam not always used effectively	In some subjects, including Higher Dance and Advanced Higher English, learners were able to take notes into the exam however in practice, respondents noted that there is evidence that many candidates were unable to use their notes effectively to inform their answers.
Differing approaches between subjects and levels	Some courses outlined what would be assessed, while others outlined what would not be assessed. This and other differences in approach between subjects caused some confusion among practitioners and learners, as well as contributing to perceptions of unfairness.
Providing context for assessing language skills too broad	In Modern Languages, it was felt that providing the specific topic (eg social media, job advert), rather than the more general context (Society, Employability) would have helped learners more when assessing the four language skills.

The survey also asked what additional revision support, if any, could have been provided to support learners in 2021–22. This question elicited the same response from most courses and levels; respondents repeatedly stated that modifications had already gone a long way in providing as much support as possible to learners by adjusting the course assessment arrangements. As a result, in many cases, it was very challenging to do much more when it came to revision support without compromising the assessment. Some suggested that this fact could have been made more explicit in communications to centres and learners. A small number of respondents noted that further guidance could have been provided to learners on how to respond to certain question types or command words like 'evaluate' or 'analyse'.

8. Awarding and grading

The package of support for learners included a generous approach to grading, which was applied during awarding. Awarding takes place each summer following the end of the exam diet and involves the setting of individual grade boundaries (upper A, A and C) for each course. Further information about this procedure is available on our website.

In 2021–22, the approach to grading followed SQA's normal awarding procedure, which involves a thorough evaluation of the performance of the course assessments, as far as possible. The approach in 2021–22 also included a thorough evaluation of the impact on learners' performances as a result of COVID-19 disruption, and the modifications and revision support put in place. These factors were carefully considered during the decision-making process, which ensured grade boundary decisions were generous in considering their impact on performance. All judgements were informed by qualitative and quantitative evidence and the knowledge and expertise of senior appointees, who are also subject matter experts.

The vast majority of respondents (93%) attended awarding meetings in 2021–22. The survey asked several questions about the way SQA's approach to awarding and setting grade boundaries is understood externally. Overall responses suggest that survey participants do not think SQA's approach to grading — or its specific approach to grading in 2021–22 — are well understood externally.

♦ 69% (46/67) of respondents disagreed (60%) or strongly disagreed (9%) that SQA's approach to awarding and setting grade boundaries is generally understood by those outside the organisation.

♦ 48% (32/67) of respondents disagreed (39%) or strongly disagreed (9%) that the 'generous' approach to grading used in 2021–22 was understood by those outside the organisation. The remainder either agreed (24%) or neither agreed nor disagreed (28%) with this statement.

Survey participants were also asked about the extent to which the approach to grading ensured fairness for learners, including those learners who have a disability or ASN:

♦ 75% (50/67) agreed (48%) or strongly agreed (27%) that the overall package of support ensured all learners, including those with a disability or ASN, were assessed and graded fairly in the circumstances of 2021–22.

- 97% of respondents agreed (40%) or strongly agreed (57%) that the approach used for awarding in 2021–22 ensured all relevant factors (eg pandemic disruption, modifications and revision support) were considered when setting grade boundaries.
- 89% of respondents agreed (50%) or strongly agreed (39%) that the approach used for awarding in 2021–22 ensured the grades awarded to learners were fair.

There were several themes that emerged from the qualitative feedback for these questions:

Poor external understanding of awarding	The majority of respondents felt that awarding — the process used for setting grade boundaries — is not well understood outside the organisation. Many felt improving understanding about this key stage in the process would be beneficial for the education system.
Explaining the approach used in 2021–22	Although only a slight difference in responses, some felt the approach used in 2021–22 was more clearly described than in previous years. The reasons given were due to the specific communications released by SQA detailing the approach to grading as part of the package of support for learners.
Terminology	The terms 'intermediary position' and 'generous grading' used to help communicate our approach in 2022 seem to have caused some confusion amongst the teaching profession. Some respondents felt that where there was a criticism of the generous approach, it was as a result of many practitioners and learners assuming that generosity related to marking rather than at the grade boundary stage.
Information about approach to grading was published late	Some respondents felt that information about the approach to awarding and grading was published too late in the session. However, the majority of those who expressed this view acknowledged that this was unavoidable given the circumstances.
Continuous change causing system-wide confusion	Some respondents noted that the pattern of continuous change and the use of different approaches to assessment over the last three years has created some confusion within the teaching profession, particularly in relation to processes, requirements, and responsibilities. An example was given of evidence requirements for the Alternative Certification Model (ACM) used in 2020–21, in comparison to Appeals 2021–22.
Fairness	The vast majority of respondents felt the approach used in awarding meetings was as fair as it could be. Grade boundary decisions were based on evidence and judgements made after careful consideration of all relevant factors.

The survey also asked four questions about awarding meetings, seeking views on what worked well and what did not work well. This covered topics such as access to information and the structure of meetings, and provided space for any additional comments. Comments went beyond the core awarding process and extended to marking, and the outputs from the central marking event and/or marker reports.

Respondents provided the following comments for these questions, outlining the aspects of awarding that they felt worked well:

Discussions took all factors into consideration	Almost all respondents felt all relevant factors were considered during Awarding and that the impact of pandemic disruption, the modifications and revision support on course assessment and candidate performance were given full consideration when making decisions. One example was the impact of restrictions on overseas travel introduced during the pandemic. The fact that learners had not been able to spend time abroad had an impact on learners' acquisition of listening skills in Modern Languages.
Supporting information	The vast majority of respondents were satisfied with the type and volume of information provided to them to support the decision-making process. Statistical packs were considered comprehensive and necessarily detailed to inform the process.
Expertise highly valued	Senior appointees felt their expertise and contributions were highly valued. Support from qualifications managers and statisticians was also considered invaluable before, during and after the process. Having access to the expertise of a statistician in each meeting was highlighted as a vital resource and helpful in interpreting the quantitative data sets.
Thorough, robust and consistent approach	Respondents reflected very positively on the thorough and professional discussions and robustness of the decision-making process. Even when complex and challenging issues emerged, the approach ensured fair outcomes for the cohort, while maintaining qualification standards.
New application (Shiny app) supported access to data	SQA developed and used a new application that supported senior appointees and awarding panel members to review feedback contained in marker reports in 2021–22 — these reports are the main mechanism SQA uses for gathering feedback from appointees who mark external assessments. Overall, feedback from those who used the Shiny App was positive. Many reflected positively on the dynamic format of the information, which made it easier to look across the various marker reports and identify key themes.

Respondents also outlined the aspects of awarding that they felt did not work well or as expected:

Pre-meetings to discuss qualitative data	A small number of senior appointees felt that while data was provided in advance, they needed more time and support to review the statistical information ahead of awarding meetings. Some suggested an additional physical pre-meeting the day before the full awarding panel met would have been useful. However, most noted this already occurred virtually or in-person when schedules allowed.
Timing of Marker Report completion	Several senior appointees noted that ensuring markers completed their reports before leaving the central marking event was critical for ensuring high completion rates and linking to themes emerging on the day of awarding.
Format of Marker Report feedback	Some either had issues accessing the Shiny App or found the traditional spreadsheet format of marker feedback challenging to navigate. A small number of respondents highlighted an issue with the form. Markers could not see the full question set at the start and

tended to include substantial detail in their answer to the first question, before adding 'see above' or 'see before' in their answers to subsequent questions. Some senior appointees felt that this made it challenging to understand what question/topic they were referring to and it was suggested that advance sight of the full question set would help to address this issue.

9. Understanding Standards

This section of the survey included questions on how standards are articulated, interpreted and applied. While the majority felt the standard was clearly articulated in course specifications, only half agreed that the standard was consistently understood and interpreted by practitioners:

♦ 82% (55/67) of respondents agreed (52%) or strongly agreed (30%) that the national standard is articulated clearly in the course specification/s.
♦ 51% (34/67) agreed (48%) or strongly agreed (3%) that the national standard was consistently understood and interpreted by teachers and lecturers in 2021–22. 22% disagreed (19%) or strongly disagreed (3%) with this statement with the remaining indicating they neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement.

A small number of questions aimed to gather qualitative feedback on these questions, which highlighted several themes:

Defining the national standard	The majority of respondents felt the course specification effectively articulated the national standard for the course, although some (eg performance-based subjects including Drama and Dance) felt the standard was better articulated in exemplar material or in course reports. This highlighted a need for clear articulation of the standard across the specification and Understanding Standards materials. Some subjects including National 5 English noted that significant development work had been undertaken in recent years to ensure the specification clearly articulated the standard. Most respondents felt further work at a national and local level would be required to increase understanding of the national standard through Understanding Standards.
Established and effectively-led teams	Several senior appointees reflected on the importance of a strong and established team that is confident in applying a consistent standard, particularly during marking. Building marker confidence through clear communication and support was considered vital to success.
Development of qualifications	During the discussions with senior appointees, some took time to explain the long-term changes to courses and course assessment and the way these adjustments had affected the standard. For example, changes introduced under Revised National Qualifications and changes to question paper structures that had taken place before the pandemic. Some felt standards needed to be considered within this longer-term context.

Building confidence among practitioners is essential	It was noted that Understanding Standards helped to exemplify the standard to the teaching profession. However, more support was needed to build confidence over time. This was particularly true for those new to the profession, who may need tailored resources and/or targeted support.
Standards over time	Performance standards were closely monitored and maintained during awarding. Some courses highlighted areas where work would be required to ensure standards remain comparable and fair over time. For example in listening and reading for some Modern Languages and for compositional skills in Advanced Higher Music, resources may need to be redesigned to help practitioners rebuild confidence in understanding the standard.

Understanding Standards resources are developed by SQA to support practitioners in interpreting and applying the national standard for each course. The survey asked respondents about the currency and effectiveness of these resources:

♦ 94% (63/67) of respondents agreed (39%) or strongly agreed (55%) that Understanding Standards, generally provides teachers and lecturers with the resources they need to understand the national standard.

The qualitative feedback highlighted the following themes:

Resources could be more accessible	While the majority felt the Understanding Standards resources were strong and effective for their subject, some felt there are still challenges with access and engagement. Some felt the content could be made more engaging, succinct, and accessible. There were suggestions of bitesize learning and 'learner friendly' resources, podcasts or other audio/visual content, and guidance written in language that is less 'corporate' in style. The Understanding Standards website was not considered to be very user friendly.
In-person versus online events	Several participants reflected on this theme. Most felt a mixture was necessary but recognised that while in-person events increased the quality of engagement by generating discussion, holding events online ensured more people could attend (although it was noted places are limited). A common concern was ensuring equity across subjects and suggestions were made about how to achieve that equity including a forward rolling programme of in-person events.
New teachers and those in single person departments	A large number of participants highlighted these two groups as needing tailored Understanding Standards resources and additional support in interpreting and applying the national standard. A small number of senior appointees suggested that providing new teachers an opportunity to observe central marking events would be beneficial to their professional development as well as helping to generate greater understanding of standards.
Centres value opportunities to	Some participants noted that centres rarely have an opportunity to meet internally or externally to discuss candidate work or share

discuss candidates' work	practice. Opportunities to do so through SQA events would be welcomed.
Dedicated CPD time for standards needed	Several participants noted that practitioners are rarely allocated time for engaging with Understanding Standards materials or events – some felt that this should be a national priority if national standards were to be understood and applied consistently.
Thematic sessions in 2022–23	A number of subjects noted that they were using feedback from the diet and the appeals process to design thematic Understanding Standards events. A number noted that events had been organised for this session focussing on the design of a valid prelim assessment.

10. Appeals

Appeals was covered by two surveys as outlined in the introduction of this report. Both surveys sought to gather views on a range of topics including understanding of the system and the validity and reliability of evidence submitted as part of the appeals process.

In the dedicated appeals survey, respondents were asked about fairness as well as the validity and reliability of evidence. Overall, the majority of respondents agreed that the appeals service was fair, however, this was contingent on the evidence submitted to support an appeal:

♦ 65% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed the appeals service was fair in providing a safety net to all learners; 67% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the service helped ensure a fair approach to assessment and qualifications in 2022.

♦ 54% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed when asked if they thought the evidence submitted to support an appeal was valid. 24% neither agreed/disagreed with this statement.

♦ When asked the same question about reliability, only 35% disagreed or strongly disagreed (almost 40% agreed or strongly agreed).

The following responses were received through the standards survey, which focused primarily on evidence and the generation of estimates. Overall, less than half of all respondents agreed that the appeals evidence was, in general, valid and reliable:

♦ 37% (25/67) of respondents agreed (34%) or strongly agreed (3%) that the assessment evidence submitted in support of appeals was, in general, valid, for their subject(s). 43% (29/67) disagreed (36%) or strongly disagreed (7%) with this statement.

♦ 40% (27/67) of respondents agreed (39%) or strongly agreed (1%) that the assessment evidence submitted in support of appeals was, in general, reliable, for their subject(s). 40% (27/67) disagreed (31%) or strongly disagreed (9%) with this statement.

In respect of the candidate evidence submitted to support appeals, it should be noted that respondents had no knowledge of estimates or the grade awarded during the appeals process. However, respondents were asked for their views on what basis estimates appeared to have been made based on the evidence that was reviewed:

- ◆ Mostly demonstrated attainment: 28% (19/67)
- ◆ Mostly inferred attainment: 28% (19/67)
- ◆ About equal: 20% (13/67)
- ◆ Don't know: 24% (16/67)

Again, the questions across both surveys aimed to gather qualitative feedback on these questions, which highlighted the following themes:

Invalid evidence created unfairness	A large number of respondents recognised a lack of consistency across the evidence submitted to support appeals. Some noted examples of centres setting assessments that were insufficiently challenging, marking leniently, or applying low cut-offs (or a combination of these). An invalid assessment therefore reduced the likelihood of a successful appeal, and this created unfairness for learners. However, respondents firmly believed that most centres did the best they could in the circumstances. Many centres had taken a lot of care in creating prelims, marking and cross-marking scripts to ensure that their learners were assessed fairly and accurately.
Fairness of appeals review procedure	Respondents believed the process used by SQA to evaluate the evidence submitted was applied consistently and 'was robust and fair to all candidates' — particularly the blind review of evidence. In that respect, respondents believed the Appeals approach was only fair to those 'candidates who had sufficient appropriate evidence of demonstrated attainment throughout the year' — as noted above, many candidates were let down by evidence that was not consistent with the national standard.
Further training and support required	Some believed this highlighted a need for further training and support in understanding and applying national standards. Most respondents felt enhanced support and guidance is needed to ensure centre-generated evidence is robust and quality controlled. It was suggested that definition of 'valid evidence' must be reviewed and clarified to centres, with some suggesting subject-specific guidance could provide additional support to practitioners in some subjects.
Communications	Some felt communication in the lead up to the diet was sub-optimal (eg evidence requirements not communicated to centres until March), although it was noted that evidence requirements were set out at the start of the session in course arrangements and Understanding Standards materials, and in estimate guidance available in the autumn term.

Section 3: Concluding remarks

This report captures the reflections and observations of senior appointees and qualifications teams involved in the delivery of graded National Courses in 2021–22. The themes emerging from the research suggest that, while the assessment arrangements used during the 2021–22 session were effective in supporting learners make the transition back to formal external assessment, it remained a challenging and uncertain year for Scotland's education system, which was still feeling the effects of pandemic disruption.

Over three-quarters of respondents felt the COVID-19 pandemic continued to have a substantial impact on learning and teaching, which impacted the delivery of National Courses in several ways. In general, modifications were felt to be effective in supporting learners to complete their courses. However, thought should be given to how learners can be supported in the next stages of their lives. The impact of revision support is less clear and conclusive.

The procedure for awarding was considered effective and provided a robust framework for evaluating the impact of the modifications and pandemic disruption — further work is needed to ensure this process is understood externally. In general, the articulation of national standards was supported by resources, including those provided through Understanding Standards. Reflecting on how these resources were used in 2021–22, respondents suggested ways they could be enhanced to support practitioners and learners in the future.

When considering fairness, although most respondents felt the overall approach used in 2021–22 was fair, there were caveats. The majority of respondents believed that the approach to appeals was fair to learners by providing them with a safety net. However, most also felt a lack of consistency in the validity and reliability of some candidate evidence submitted to support appeals created unfairness.

This evaluation is designed to provide the system with a record of how the 2021–22 approach worked in practice, drawing on the experiences of those who were involved. In the context of reform to Scottish qualifications and assessment, the reflections of stakeholders in the sector raise further questions. These can help to generate discussion about key topics, including the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to assessment, what we can do to develop a shared understanding of standards, and how we balance competing conceptualisations of fairness in assessment. SQA hopes that the findings contained in the evaluation can contribute to future work and research in this area and will help support the work of the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment, led by Professor Louise Hayward.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Appeals Survey — questions

Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements, with some questions asking for qualitative feedback on specific topics.

1. The EECCS was fair to all learners who engaged with the service.
2. The EECCS helped ensure an overall fair approach to qualifications and assessment in 2022.
3. The 2022 Appeals Service was fair, in providing a safety net to all learners.
4. The 2022 Appeals Service helped ensure an overall fair approach to qualifications and assessment in 2022.
5. The overall approach to appeals was understood by centres.
6. The overall approach to appeals was understood by learners.
7. The criteria for eligibility for appeals was understood by centres.
8. The criteria for eligibility for appeals was understood by learners.
9. Have you previously been involved in post-results services?
10. On average, it took the same amount of time to review an individual appeals submission in 2022 compared to a marking review submission as part of the 2019 Post-Results Service.
11. Overall how did the time spent on appeals in 2022 compare to the 2019 Post-Results Service?
12. On average, the assessment evidence submitted to support an appeal was valid.
13. On average, marking and judgements on evidence submitted was reliable.
14. What changes, if any, could be made to improve the quality of evidence (please specify)?
15. What system should SQA use for appeals in 2022–23?
16. Do you think learners should be able to appeal directly?
17. Do you have any other comments on the approach to Appeals or EECCS used in 2021–22?

Appendix 2: Standards Survey — questions

National Courses — 2021–22 Evaluation: Standards

1. Overview

This survey is being distributed to SQA qualifications teams and senior appointees to gather reflections on the 2021–22 approach to assessment and standards for National Courses.

Information gathered from responses will be used for research purposes and will inform an evaluation of the approach to National Courses in 2021–22 being undertaken by SQA's Policy, Analysis and Standards Team. By completing this form, you are agreeing to any responses being used as part of the evaluation. All evidence used as part of this research will be anonymised.

We are very grateful to you for taking the time to complete this survey.

2. Please tell us about yourself

1. What is your role at SQA? *

- ☐ Qualifications Manager
- ☐ Qualifications Co-ordinator
- ☐ Qualifications Officer
- ☐ Principal Assessor
- ☐ Depute Principal Assessor
- ☐ Other (please specify):

2. What subject/s are you completing this survey for? *

- ☐ Accounting
- ☐ Administration and IT
- ☐ Applications of Mathematics
- ☐ Art and Design
- ☐ Art and Design (Design)
- ☐ Art and Design (Expressive)
- ☐ Biology
- ☐ Business Management
- ☐ Chinese Languages
- ☐ Care

- [ ] Chemistry
- [ ] Childcare and Development
- [ ] Classical Studies
- [ ] Computing Science
- [ ] Dance
- [ ] Design and Manufacture
- [ ] Drama
- [ ] ESOL
- [ ] Economics
- [ ] Engineering Science
- [ ] English
- [ ] Environmental Science
- [ ] Fashion and Textile Technology
- [ ] Food, Health and Wellbeing
- [ ] French
- [ ] Gaelic (Learners)
- [ ] Geography
- [ ] German
- [ ] Graphic Communication
- [ ] Gàidhlig
- [ ] Health and Food Technology
- [ ] History
- [ ] Human Biology
- [ ] Italian
- [ ] Latin
- [ ] Mathematics
- [ ] Mathematics of Mechanics
- [ ] Media
- [ ] Modern Studies
- [ ] Music
- [ ] Music Technology
- [ ] Music: Portfolio
- [ ] Philosophy
- [ ] Photography

☐ Physical Education

☐ Physics

☐ Politics

☐ Practical Cake Craft

☐ Practical Cookery

☐ Practical Electronics

☐ Practical Metalworking

☐ Practical Woodworking

☐ Psychology

☐ Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies

☐ Sociology

☐ Spanish

☐ Statistics

☐ Urdu

☐ Other (please specify):

[   ]

3. Please indicate the subject level/s you are completing this survey for: *

☐ National 5

☐ Higher

☐ Advanced Higher

☐ Other (please specify):

[   ]

4. How long have you worked in your current role?

[   ]

3. Engagement and communication

This section focuses on the way SQA communicated its approach to assessment and grading to the education system in 2021–22.

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:

5. Information about the 2021–22 approach to assessment was published early enough in the academic year: *

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

☐ Neither agree nor disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly disagree

6. Information about the 2021–22 approach to grading was published early enough in the academic year: *

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

☐ Neither agree nor disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly disagree

7. The approach to assessment and grading used in 2021–22 was understood by teachers and lecturers: *

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

☐ Neither agree nor disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly disagree

8. Please use this space if you would like to comment on any of your answers about the approach to assessment and grading:

4. Learning and teaching

This section seeks to gather feedback on the impact of the pandemic on learning and teaching.

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:

9. Pandemic disruption had a significant impact on learning and teaching in centres in 2021–22: *

- [ ] Strongly agree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Neither agree nor disagree
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Strongly disagree
- [ ] Don't know

10. In general, centres ensured teaching covered the full range of course content during the 2021–22 session: *

- [ ] Strongly agree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Neither agree nor disagree
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Strongly disagree
- [ ] Don't know

Please comment on the reason for your rating for this question:

5. Modifications to National Course assessment requirements (published August 2021)

This section aims to gather feedback on the intentions and outcomes of the course assessment modifications published in August 2021, and the way they supported learners during 2021–22. The next section will cover Revision Support.

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:

11. The modifications made to course assessment were effective in freeing up learning and teaching time in 2021–22: *

- [ ] Strongly agree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Neither agree nor disagree
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Strongly disagree

12. The modifications made to course assessment supported learners to complete the course in 2021–22: *

- [ ] Strongly agree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Neither agree nor disagree
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Strongly disagree

13. The modifications made to course assessment still allowed for rigorous assessment of knowledge, understanding and skills (eg, to sample the full range of course content): *

- [ ] Strongly agree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Neither agree nor disagree
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Strongly disagree

Would you like to comment on your rating:

```



```

14. The courses, with modifications to assessment, ensure learners are prepared for future education and employment opportunities: *

- [ ] Strongly agree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Neither agree nor disagree
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Strongly disagree

Would you like to comment on your rating:

```



```

15. Which aspects of the 2021–22 modifications worked particularly well? (please specify)

```



```

16. Which aspects of the 2021–22 modifications did not work well/as expected? (please specify)

```



```

17. Based on your knowledge of the modifications to course assessment, please select one of the following options regarding the future of modifications beyond 2022–23: *

☐ The modifications to course assessment requirements should remain in place for the 2023–24 session

☐ The full course assessment requirements should be reinstated for 2023–24

☐ Full course assessment requirements should be reinstated in 2023–24, but with some minor refinements to course assessments in some subjects, where there is strong evidence to support such refinements, eg a positive outcome from the modifications

Please provide a brief summary of the reasons for your selection:

6. Revision support (published March 2022)

The following section aims to gather feedback on the revision support published in March 2022, and the way it supported learners during 2021–22.

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:

18. The revision support was successful in supporting learners to prepare for course assessments: *

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

☐ Neither agree nor disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly disagree

19. The revision support supported all learners equally, including those with a disability or ASN: *
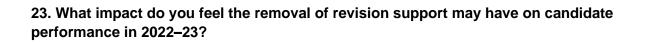
☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

☐ Neither agree nor disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly disagree

☐ Don't know

Please use this space if you would like to comment further:

20. Which aspects of the revision support do you feel worked particularly well? (please specify)

21. Which aspects of the revision support do you feel did not work well/as expected? (please specify)

22. What additional revision support, if any, could have been provided to support learners in 2021–22?

23. What impact do you feel the removal of revision support may have on candidate performance in 2022–23?

7. Awarding and grading

This section aims to gather your feedback on the awarding process, including awarding meetings, where the grade boundaries are set.

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:

24. SQA's approach to awarding and setting grade boundaries is generally understood by those outside the organisation: *

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

25. The 'generous' approach to grading used in 2021–22 was understood by those outside the organisation: *

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

26. The overall package of support ensured all learners, including those with a disability or ASN, were assessed and graded fairly in the circumstances of 2021–22: *

- [ ] Strongly agree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Neither agree nor disagree
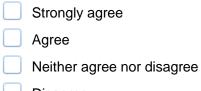- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Strongly disagree
- [ ] Don't know

27. Did you attend Awarding meetings in 2022? *

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No

28. The approach used for awarding in 2021–22 ensured all relevant factors (eg, pandemic disruption, modifications and revision support) were considered when setting grade boundaries:

- [ ] Strongly agree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Neither agree nor disagree
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Strongly disagree

Please provide a brief summary of the reasons for your rating:

29. The approach used for Awarding in 2021–22 ensured the grades awarded to learners were fair:

- [ ] Strongly agree
- [ ] Agree

☐ Neither agree nor disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly disagree

Please provide a brief summary of the reasons for your rating:

30. Which features of awarding meetings worked particularly well in 2021–22? (please specify)

31. Which features of awarding meetings did not work so well/as expected during 2021–22? (please specify)

32. Do you feel you had access to the information you needed before and/or during the Awarding meeting?

33. Do you have any other comments about the awarding process (eg agenda or decision-making process)?

[blank box]

8. Marker report and Shiny app

This section asks for specific feedback in relation to the electronic marker reports and the Shiny app used in 2021–22 to display feedback from these reports.

34. Did you make use of the new application (Shiny app) to review feedback contained in marker reports? *

☐ Yes

☐ No

35. The application made it easier to access the contents of marker reports:

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

☐ Neither agree nor disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly disagree

Please provide a brief summary of the reasons for your rating:

[blank box]

36. The application made it easier to interpret the contents of marker reports:

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

☐ Neither agree nor disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly disagree

Please provide a brief summary of the reasons for your rating:

```

```

37. Do you have any other comments on the Shiny app or marker reports more generally?

```

```

9. Standards

The section aims to gather feedback on how standards are understood and applied by teachers and lecturers, while also exploring how they have been maintained in the context of 2021–22.

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements about standards:

38. The national standard is articulated clearly in the course specification/s: *

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

☐ Neither agree nor disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly disagree

Would you like to comment on your rating:

39. Understanding Standards, generally provides teachers and lecturers with the resources they need to understand the national standard: *

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

☐ Neither agree nor disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly disagree

Would you like to comment on your rating:

40. Please use this space to comment on how you think Understanding Standards resources could be improved and enhanced: *

41. The national standard was consistently understood and interpreted by teachers and lecturers in 2021–22: *

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

Would you like to comment on your rating:

42. Do you have any further comments on standards or Understanding Standards?

10. Appeals (evidence)

This section aims to gather subject-specific reflections on appeals evidence and builds on the Appeals Survey that was recently distributed to Qualifications Teams and Principal Assessors.

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements on appeals:

43. Were you involved in reviewing appeals evidence in 2021–22? *

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No

44. The assessment evidence submitted in support of appeals was, in general, valid, for my subject/s: *

- [ ] Strongly agree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Neither agree nor disagree
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Strongly disagree

Please use this space to comment (eg variations, differences between subjects):

45. The assessment evidence submitted in support of appeals was, in general, reliable, for my subject/s: *

- [ ] Strongly agree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Neither agree nor disagree
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Strongly disagree

Please use this space to comment (eg variations, differences between subjects):

46. In respect of the candidate evidence submitted to support appeals for your subject/s, do you feel that estimates were predominantly based on:

- [ ] Mostly demonstrated attainment
- [ ] About equal
- [ ] Mostly inferred attainment
- [ ] Don't know

Please provide a brief summary of the reasons for your rating:

47. Do you have any further comments on appeals evidence or estimates?

11. Equalities

The final section focuses on gathering feedback on equalities and includes questions on assessment arrangements.

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:

48. Learners with assessment arrangements in place were provided with an equal opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding and skills:

- [ ] Strongly agree
- [ ] Agree

☐ Neither agree nor disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly disagree

☐ Don't know

Would you like to comment on your rating:

[ ]

49. Assessment arrangements were provided for disabled learners and/or those with additional support needs without compromising the integrity of the qualification:

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

☐ Neither agree nor disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly disagree

☐ Don't know

Would you like to comment on your rating:

[ ]

50. Were you involved in reviewing candidate scripts as part of the referral process (ie PA Referral or PA Correspondence) for learners with assessment arrangements? *

☐ Yes

☐ No

51. Are there any aspects of this process that you would like to comment on?

[ ]

12. Final summary

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. This section gathers any final reflections you may have on the approach used for National Courses in 2021–22.

Please use the space below to add any final feedback, before submitting.

52. Is there anything else you would like to comment on in relation to the approach to assessment or standards and National Courses in 2021–22?